Some thoughts on the relationship between knowledge and wisdom

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“But wisdom is justified of her children” (Matthew 11:19, King James Bible)

Introduction: a portrait of wisdom

A piece of art which I often return to is an oil painting from the first decade of the 16th Century (Figure 1). It is often called The Three Philosophers and is ascribed to the Venetian painter Giorgione. In this beautiful and enigmatic picture, three men are seen in the foreground in a landscape with hills above a plain or a valley, illuminated by a setting sun. Some bare and leafed trees are also in the foreground, as well as a dark cave or a caved rock wall which dominates the left part of the picture. Two men stand on the right side, one an elderly bearded man who seems to be speaking while explaining a chart with some zodiacal symbols and letters. He carries an elaborate golden gown. Next to him stands a middle-aged man in a turban and a beautiful dress with a dominating red colour. He appears to be thoughtfully listening. On his other side, in the centre of the picture, a third man is sitting. He is dressed in a dalmatic tunic in bright white and green. He holds a square and compasses in his hand, but seems to be mentally detached from the other two, absorbed by looking into the cave.

The picture, the original of which is on display in the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna, has been frequently discussed. While some have suggested that the painting pictures the three Magi in front of Jesus’ grotto [1], others have seen Plato and two pupils at the philosopher’s famous cave, some have thought of the three great monotheistic religions [2], while yet some others have traced the Middle ages (or possibly Antiquity), the Arabic expansion age and the Renaissance. In some interpretations such identifications have been concrete. For instance, the figures have been identified as Aristarchus, Pythagoras, Averroes, Leonardo da Vinci etc., or painter contemporaries to Giorgione himself. For a modern viewer it is tempting to see Knowledge and Research, represented by the old and the young man, respectively, while the middle-aged person with his thoughtful (but not necessarily approving) attention might symbolize men and women of responsible action in the society. This then leads us to the study of how these different persons in the painting interact. Or, in the world around us, how do knowledge and research interact, and still more significant, how are they used to promote wise actions?
Definitions and characterizations of wisdom often relate to knowledge, such as the classical statement that wisdom consists of making the best possible use of existing knowledge ([3]; for further definitions of wisdom, see http://wisdomcenteredlife.org/definitions.aspx). Already here one action aspect (‘use’) and one value-related concept (‘best’) are at focus. This is often the case when wisdom is referred to or needed: decisions have to be made on how to act, a common metaphor is that a choice has to be made between several possible roads, and so available knowledge has to be consulted and applied. The choice made has to be ‘good’ or even ‘best possible’, which requires that some evaluation takes place according to some value scale. There are serious problems as regarding the selection of such ‘best roads’. The situations are often complex with many different aspects to consider. Solving them in a wise way requires a broad inventory of relevant knowledge, which in turn suggests that surveys with several different perspectives are needed. To take one example, in order to give a wise solution to a societal problem, like how to diminish the number of traffic accidents, one has to integrate factual knowledge (on technical aspects of motor vehicles and transportation systems, on medical aspects on how different types of traffic injuries are generated, on economical aspects

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of transportation needs and financing, as well as of the significance of motor industry, on psychological aspects of individual and collective needs of safety and independent mobility, on political aspects of resistance or support among lobby groups and electorates, etc.). A first severe problem is to judge the quality of all this knowledge. This is particularly problematic as the quality criteria of different scientific disciplines differ, sometimes widely. Already here one finds complex sets of values mixed in the process. An acquaintance intimate enough with the relevant fields to judge and compare the different data is necessary. Next, a major problem remains: how should one give the various aspects proper weight? No doubt, that balancing act will be partly dependent upon what values are adopted and how significant they are considered to be, in particular when they are mutually contradictory, which often happens. Is the saving of individual human lives an all-over dominant principle? Are economic growth and average wealth relevant factors? Is political support at the next general election very significant? Are demonstrations of short-term results more valid than long-term visionary solutions? And so on. Wisdom could be considered to be the ability to carry through such balancing processes in a good way. Certainly, this immediately raises the issue of what is meant by ‘a good way’ and whether this characterization is dependent on values that are not generally accepted. If they are generally accepted one may, perhaps, take them for granted, at least momentarily. The evaluation of what is ‘good’ here is certainly not only a matter for scientists. In a democratic state such a judgement must involve a wide participation of different societal interests and of citizens in general. We shall not dwell on that complex issue, but just pragmatically and with no attempt to be precise define ‘a good way’ as ‘a way that gets approval also after a while’.

Could a wise decision-making process be rationalized, be made more or less mechanical, even by using an algorithm where certain relative measures are ascribed to the significance of various values that play a role in analysing a particular type of problem? This seems highly questionable, not least as the description above is vastly oversimplified. The values in a process towards wise decision-making are namely (as was pointed out earlier) not only inherent in the weighting of various circumstances against each other, but also in the individual evaluation of the various facts assembled. This difficulty is, in practice, often solved by letting the setting of the various weights, as well as the very evaluation of the quality of the individual facts on which the choice is based, be a highly intuitive process. This is formulated in a often reproduced statement ascribed to the theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer:

“To understand reality is not the same as to know about outward events. It is to perceive the essential nature of things. The best-informed man is not necessarily the wisest. Indeed there is a danger that precisely in the multiplicity of his knowledge he will lose sight of what is essential. But on the other hand, knowledge of an apparently trivial detail quite often makes it possible to see into the depth of things. And so the wise man will seek to acquire the best possible knowledge about events, but always without becoming dependent upon this knowledge. To recognize the significant in the factual is wisdom.” [4]
Thus in order to be wise it is not enough for an individual or a group of individuals (say a committee or a government), to have access to and master the relevant knowledge. In addition, one must be able to evaluate the individual facts and their significance for the problem under discussion, and also be able to blend the various aspects of this knowledge together, a process that is value-dependent. As Bonhoeffer [4] suggests, this may be a highly intuitive approach. A fully conscious control of this process requires that the values involved are clear to the decision-makers themselves. Often this is not the case, not even for individuals or groups that are considered wise. Many authors have noted a significant intuitive component of wise decision-making. An interesting question is then whether a democratic society, which requires openness and external control of the managing of power, requires more of consciousness of values, value transparency and communicability.

Returning to Giorgione’s painting: we would need to know what is going on in the head of the silent hesitant decision-maker, the man of action in the turban, before he is allowed to execute his decisions. As long as human cultures were reasonably uniform these values could be hidden without too much open questioning. This was a time with strong value-setting authorities, such as central churches, oligarchies or isolated societies with collective well-established rules that were regarded almost as laws of nature by nearly all citizens. However, in a democratic and multicultural society this seems more difficult. In order to legitimize decisions that heavily depend on values in complex matters, the values need to be openly shown. It seems probable that the surge of interest in recent years in trying to specify the value basis of different societal activities (e.g. in governmental and local authorities, in companies) can be partly seen as a response to this need.

One may ask then if wisdom cannot be promoted and taught by first developing methods to survey and handle complex assemblies of knowledge, and then to discuss and clarify value systems involved. By examining examples one could also illustrate how these value systems are blended with the knowledge assemblies. However, we shall soon argue that such a procedure is not enough. In fact it misses one of the most important aspects of wisdom as it is often envisaged.

**Wisdom and the unknown**

In Giorgione’s painting the young person seems to explore the nature of the dark cave in front of him, albeit with rather inadequate scientific instruments in his hands. However, he does not appear to be part of the discussion between the old philosopher and the middle-aged decision-maker. Regarding the latter, it may seem trivial to argue that a wise person of power today who prepares to make a decision in an important societal matter should not only listen to the experts that master knowledge, but also consult with those at ‘the research frontier’ in order to acquire some understanding or feeling for what may come next. Such consultations often do take place. However, in practice this is not always so easy; it may require considerable knowledge about contemporary research, courage to listen to semi-speculation and willingness to evaluate it, as well as enough naiveté
to extrapolate into the future. Such an extrapolation is not by its very nature safely ‘evidence-based’, to use a contemporary term. Yet it is indeed an important component in traditional wisdom. Wise men and women in mythologies, sagas and in many religious practices are often expected to make more or less well-founded statements about the future. The elderly man in Giorgione’s painting has astrological symbols on his chart. Even if most of us do not wish to refer to old methods in producing authoritative statements about the future, the very ambition to look ahead is still expected from wise people. It is even required for them. As George Bernard Shaw is said to have put it:

“We are made wise not by the recollection of our past, but by the responsibility for our future.” [5]

However, any attempts to evaluate the significance of unknown or hypothetical circumstances will be strongly affected by values. Perhaps it is possible to analyse these values and make them explicit. However, the results of the process will also be coloured, and profoundly so, by more fundamental mental states, whether individual or shared through culture. This is even more difficult to rationalize. Simple examples of such states or moods are pessimistic and optimistic attitudes. Other examples may be convictions, in everyday life expressed as ‘nothing is new under the sky’ or ‘the world is constantly changing’. It is to be expected that statements about uncertain circumstances and, not the least, corresponding actions by wise persons are deeply coloured by such moods.

An alternative to allowing such ‘irrational’ colouring could be to restrict the meaning of wisdom. One might claim that in our scientific era wise statements on the future have to be evidence-based. They should essentially contain different scenarios carefully labelled with certain probabilities ascribed to them, somewhat similar to the ensemble of IPCC (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change) scenarios for climate development on Earth. If such probabilities are properly set, and the set of values is well defined, it could then be theoretically possible to select a good (i.e. wise) line of actions. A question is then whether, if ever, these conditions are fulfilled. In addition, if they were fulfilled are the probabilities so well established that they can be used in politics to find an optimal way? It could be that recommendations resulting from such a procedure are experienced as theoretical constructs with too little relation to reality, or products from the scientific ivory tower based on hidden values of scientific self-interest. Therefore, is the relation between the young man in Giorgione’s painting, and the man of action, now more detached than ever in spite of the role of scientific advice in contemporary policy making? Is wise policy at all possible in the traditional meaning of the word if it is only the result of a rational scientific process with conscious and publicly announced values involved in it?

Teaching wisdom

A simple Google-type search shows that the word ‘information’ gets almost one order of magnitude more hits on World Wide Web than ‘knowledge’ which, in
turn, gets yet another order of magnitude more hits than ‘wisdom’. In a most optimistic mood one might see this as a kind of purifying process; tons of the rough ore are initially processed, some kilograms of the metal are produced and these are refined to some intricate jewel. However, inspection of the ‘wisdom’ sites found does not support this view: among the sites found many contain quotes of very mixed quality and very numerous reproductions with no further references. There are also a growing number of courses presented where wisdom is said to be taught, sometimes even at universities. One tradition in which such courses are a focus is the so-called ‘positive psychology’ where wisdom is seen as the ‘co-ordination of knowledge and experience’ and ‘its deliberate use to improve well-being’ (e.g. [6]). This idea of wisdom may in fact be seen as a combination of Aristotle’s two concepts of theoretical and practical wisdom (see [7] for an illuminating discussion). After a superficial inspection of various course plans and curricula my personal impression is, however, that the didactics in this area are often not very well developed. In addition, the difficulties in any mechanical approach towards wise decision-making, as discussed above, seem to be rarely considered carefully. Instead a rather schematic picture is presented. First a value basis is laid without much analysis (if any) and then facts are found. From this construction of ‘wisdom’ conclusions are claimed to be possible. The demand from the students to acquire quick and simple recipes or manuals, so typical not only for young people in these times, seems to venture some basic components in all teaching of genuine abilities and skills, namely time for both training and reflection.

Wisdom is certainly one of the oldest subjects in the history of learning and teaching. Famous is Confucius’ statement that wisdom can be learnt in three ways: by reflection (considered the noblest), by imitation (the easiest) and by experience (the toughest). One path relates to the latter two ways and suggests a way around the difficulties discussed above for the procedure to take wise decisions on rational grounds: watch the fruits of suggested wise behaviour. One might analyse decisions and actions that were taken in complex situations. If they had the aim to promote good results and developments, and also are found to fulfil this aim, they might be considered wise. This follows the traditional interpretation of the enigmatic quote from the Bible, which was presented at the start of this work. It is often explicated as ‘wisdom is proved right by its actions’. The path may be followed in didactics.

I have taken part in different course experiments where a series of societal, ethical or research dilemmas of cross-disciplinary character (more or less fictional) were discussed (for short cases used in courses in research ethics, see [8]). First, relevant facts from different fields were assembled and combined by the class and various possible solutions and actions were considered. Then, in the next stage, the values involved in the various suggested solutions were analysed in some detail. Questions regarding whether the facts had been coloured and how their selection had been affected by non-conscious values or presumptions were also scrutinized. Finally, one or two particular solutions were selected and various scenarios were put on to the stage with students in acting roles as decision-makers or advisors, where more or less expected outcomes were elaborated and discussed. The class was divided into several groups with shifting roles as proponents, sceptics, opponents, reporters etc., with the writing of short reports and summaries as important steps in
the process. In particular, in the attempt to clarify hidden values and suppositions, our experience is that such presumptions are easier to clarify in the writing process than simply by conversation. These courses were highly appreciated by the students. Hopefully, they developed some wisdom. Similar attempts have been made and developed in several places (see, e.g. [9–13] for examples from different disciplines) at universities, but also in different educational situations. Although accounts of such efforts have been made in certain sectors of the pedagogic arena, it would be a good idea to try to summarize and further analyse the outcomes from these widespread attempts.

**Wisdom and science**

Today the old idea about a wizard-like wise man, a Magus, is hard to maintain or live up to. The authority in terms of value formulation and interpretation is no longer a privilege of the leadership and their advisors, or of any elite. However, scientists still have the possibility, indeed an obligation, for promoting wisdom in the society in a more modest sense. Although a high degree of specialization is necessary for a modern disciplinary research career, integration of knowledge, as well as application of it to societal problems, is still a very important mission for scientists in all fields. This requires considerable attempts to bridge gaps between different disciplines. It also necessitates reflection on values as needed by anybody trying to make judgements in difficult matters. As scientists we also have the obligation to teach our students and, not least, to promote their practical abilities to handle complex problems where wisdom is required. We should not abstain from these challenges.

The introductory quote from Matthew 11:19 has been interpreted in various ways. One alternative way, which has been suggested on partly linguistic grounds, is to read it as a bitter complaint addressed to the contemporaries on the lack of response and the separation of wisdom from those in charge [14]. Let me finish in this somewhat biblical tone by stressing that we, as scientists, should conceive our most noble mission to be to assist and advise those in the world who need the results of our efforts, not primarily to make money, but to do good.

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**References**


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