

Cambridge University Press

0521541824 - A Handbook of Wisdom: Psychological Perspectives

Edited by Robert J. Sternberg and Jennifer Jordan

Excerpt

[More information](#)

PART I

THEORIES OF WISDOM ACROSS TIME,
CULTURE, AND PEOPLES

1

Wisdom in History

James E. Birren and Cheryl M. Svensson

Wisdom is not a new concept that originated in the technologically advanced information age of today. Rather, wisdom bears the connotations of “ancient” and seemingly transcends time, knowledge, and even culture. All peoples, whether primitive or civilized, have sought to pass their *wisdom* on to following generations by means of myths, stories, songs, and even cave paintings that date back 30,000 years. Will Durant (1935) defined civilization as a social order that promotes cultural creation and that contains four elements: economic provision, political organization, moral traditions, and pursuit of knowledge and the arts. Civilizations and the written records thereof will be the basis for our explorations as we trace the concept of wisdom throughout history. This is not a definitive review of wisdom since that has been well documented by previous authors (Bates, 1993; Brugman, 2000; Csikszentmihalyi & Rathunde, 1990; Robinson, 1990). Rather, it is a brief overview of the ways in which the concept of wisdom has been interpreted over time and its relevance to contemporary studies of wisdom.

Even though wisdom is an ancient topic, our perceptions and definitions have not remained static and unchanged over the years. This chapter begins with the early references to wisdom and explores how the definitions and understanding have evolved over the ages. Next, we consider the history of wisdom in the psychological sciences. Following that, we explore the development of empirical studies of wisdom beginning in the late 1970s. Finally, we examine new research on wisdom and suggest directions for the development of wisdom research in the future.

Ancient History

Among the oldest known civilizations are the Sumerians, who lived along the fertile valley of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers in an area then known as Mesopotamia, now Iraq. More than 5,000 years ago, the Sumerians set up organized states, built cities, and invented writing (Durant, 1935). Sumerian writings were preserved on clay tablets and formed the basis of the earliest “wisdom literature.” The wisdom literature consisted of philosophical reflections, such as, “We are doomed to die; let us spend,” and “He who possesses much silver may be happy” (Readers Digest Association [RDA], 1973). In this context, wisdom referred to practical advice for daily living. The Sumerian culture was the foundation for the Greek and Roman cultures. The transfer of culture and “wisdom” is evidenced by the fact that in one of the Sumerian epic tales, “Gilgamesh,” king of Uruk, met the survivor of a “great flood.” One passage of this tale is so similar to the story of Noah and the flood told in Genesis in the Old Testament of the Bible that it is believed that the writers of the Old Testament may have drawn upon these ancient Sumerian texts (Kramer, 1959).

The Egyptian civilization flourished from 3200 B.C. to 300 A.D. Some of the earliest written teachings on wisdom are attributed to the Egyptians. Ptah-hotep in the 5th dynasty of the Pharaoh of Issi (2870–2675 B.C.) wrote texts on wisdom that concerned proper behavior (Brugman, 2000). The Egyptian wisdom literature contained universally popular precepts for good behavior and wisdom such as “Be not puffed up with thy knowledge, and be not proud because thou are wise” (RDA, 1973). It is believed that these and other writings from the early Egyptians were a source of Hebrew wisdom familiar to many Christians and Jews in the books of the Old Testament.

Of all the ancient philosophers, the Greeks, the “lovers of wisdom,” are best known to modern man. They were the first philosophers who sought to understand the world by using reason rather than by relying on religion, authority, or tradition (Magee, 1998). This was a major step forward in the intellectual development of mankind and formed the basis for rational thinking. One of the early Greek philosophers, often referred to as the father of philosophy, was Thales, active in the 6th century B.C. Along with his followers, he started the Milesian school (Magee, 1998). Thales was advanced in his thinking and believed that everything in the world was reducible to one element, but he mistakenly believed that element to be water. There were a number of other important philosophers prior to Socrates, but they all shared the common goal of

Cambridge University Press

0521541824 - A Handbook of Wisdom: Psychological Perspectives

Edited by Robert J. Sternberg and Jennifer Jordan

Excerpt

[More information](#)

understanding the nature of the world and to what all things could be reduced (Durant, 1926). Wisdom did not refer to precepts for living but, rather, to an investigation into the laws and constituents of the natural world. These broad theories from the early Greek philosophers paved the way for our later attempts to understand how our world functions.

Socrates (470–399 B.C.) was born in Athens. Following the *Sophists*, traveling teachers of wisdom, he changed the focus of the questions from what we need to know regarding the natural world to what we need to know to conduct a “good life” (Durant, 1926). Socrates focused on questions such as: “What is good?” and “What is just?” The answers to these questions would have a profound influence on how people lived. His method of questioning became known as the “Socratic method” and usually showed that those who thought they knew the answer to a given question did not. He taught people to question everything. Certain fundamental beliefs underlie Socrates’ teaching and one of those is that no one knowingly does wrong. That is, if a person fully understood that it was wrong to do something, then he or she would not do it. If, however, someone did it, then it was because that individual had not fully and completely grasped that it was the wrong thing to do (Magee, 1998). For Socrates, the wise did not seek wisdom, but the lovers of wisdom were somewhere between the wise and the ignorant. He believed only God to be wise and refused to call any man wise, rather, men could be “lovers of wisdom” (Adler, 1952).

Socrates left no written records, but his pupil Plato (428–348 B.C.) did and these have survived intact. Plato believed that Socrates was the best, most wise, and just of all men (Magee, 1998). Plato’s early dialogues concerned the problems of moral and political philosophy as well as problems of the natural world. Two primary components of his philosophy concern his belief that the only real harm that could be done to a person is harm to his soul and also that people should think for themselves and never take anything for granted (Magee, 1998). For Plato, wisdom was the virtue of reason and not only contemplated the truth but also directed conduct (Adler, 1952). Thus wisdom was concerned with the ultimate meaning of life and the nature of both the physical universe and mankind.

Aristotle (384–322 B.C.) was a student of Plato, and like him, considered wisdom to be one of the most basic human virtues (Adler, 1952). According to Aristotle, wisdom belonged to philosophical knowledge, especially to the speculative brand of theology. Thus, a distinction was made between “practical” and “speculative” wisdom; practical

Cambridge University Press

0521541824 - A Handbook of Wisdom: Psychological Perspectives

Edited by Robert J. Sternberg and Jennifer Jordan

Excerpt

[More information](#)

6

James E. Birren and Cheryl M. Svensson

wisdom was referred to as “prudence” and speculative wisdom as simply “wisdom.” For Aristotle, wisdom connoted the highest form of knowledge and was thus more aptly applied to speculative rather than to practical wisdom. The writings of Plato and his students continued to dominate philosophy in the West for 600–700 years.

It is believed that the Hebrew people migrated from Ur in Sumeria to Palestine in about 2200 B.C. (Durant, 1935). The Hebrews added a theological component to the Greek’s treatment of wisdom and wisdom became a divine enlightenment and revelation of truth from God (Bates, 1993). References to wisdom abound in the Bible’s Old Testament, particularly in the books of Job, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes. The Bible is a model for behavior for many contemporary people. The book of Proverbs includes statements about wisdom that are intended as guides to behavior.

Proverbs 8

1. Does not wisdom call,
and does not understanding raise her voice?
10. Take my instructions instead of silver
and knowledge rather than choice gold
11. For wisdom is better than jewels,
and all that you may desire
cannot compare with her.
12. I, wisdom, live with prudence and discretion.

Proverbs 9

1. Wisdom has built her house,
she has hewn her seven pillars.
9. Give instructions to the wise, and
they will become wiser still;
teach the righteous and they will
gain in learning.
10. The fear of the Lord is the
beginning of wisdom,
and the knowledge of the
Holy One is insight.
(Proverbs 8: 1, 10–12, and
Proverbs 9: 1, 9–10. *Holy Bible:
New Standard Revised Version*)

In these selections from Proverbs we see several important elements. Wisdom is referred to as “she,” presumably a legacy from the

early Greeks, who designated Athena as the goddess of wisdom. These Proverbs also describe qualities of wisdom, including the fact that “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.”

With the emergence of Christianity, a clearer distinction was made between earlier philosophic wisdom as human wisdom at its highest, and the concept of religious wisdom as a gift from God. For the Jewish people, wisdom arises from a relationship with God (Bates, 1993). King Solomon, in the 9th century B.C., was considered wise and his wisdom was thought to be a Divine gift from Yahweh, an exercise of justice, political wisdom, technical wisdom, intelligence, and knowledge (Brugman, 2000). Yahweh promised Solomon wisdom that surpassed all men before and after him (1 Kings 3:12).

After the fall of the Roman Empire, Christianity ruled for a thousand years. The writings of the Greek philosophers were carefully analyzed to make certain they fit in with the Christian doctrine. St. Augustine (354–430 A.D.) was one of the first religious men to blend classical philosophical teachings into a theological setting based on an all-powerful and all-knowing God (Cottingham, 1996). He divided intelligence into two parts: wisdom, or “sapientia,” which is timeless and eternal, and “scientia,” or knowledge of the material world. Wisdom was considered to be moral perfection and without sin. Because mankind is prey to sin and thus hindered from reaching the highest wisdom of God, wisdom seekers isolated themselves from worldly concerns to live in the spirit (Bates, 1993).

Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274) synthesized Western philosophy and Christian beliefs and maintained the distinction between philosophy and religion, or between reason and faith. He proposed three habits of the speculative intellect: wisdom, science, and understanding. He believed that science depended on understanding, a virtue of a higher degree, and that both depended on wisdom, which he considered the highest point. Wisdom judges all things and sets them in order. Wisdom is a type of science that judges not only conclusions but also first principles. Thus, it was a more perfect virtue than science. Wisdom, according to Aquinas, considered the highest causes (Aquinas, 1267/1952, pp. 36–37).

Eastern Wisdom

The Eastern traditions must not be overlooked as we explore the Western references to wisdom in history. It should be noted that while Europe was mired in the Dark Ages, some civilizations in Asia were

at the height of their development. Mohenjo-daro, on the banks of the Indus River in India, is considered one of the oldest civilizations known to man. Its reign has been placed between the fourth and third millennia B.C. (Durant, 1935). The oldest known religion of India was animistic and totemic worship of spirits found in animals, stones, and nature. Through the “Vedas” we learn of ancient India. Veda means “knowledge” or wisdom; thus, literally, Veda means the Book of Knowledge and refers to all sacred early lore. Only four have survived: Rig-veda, knowledge of hymns of praise; Sama-veda, knowledge of the melodies; Yajur-veda, knowledge of sacrificial formulas; and Atharva-veda, knowledge of magic formulas.

The Upanishads, 108 discourses composed by various saints and sages representing the opinions and lessons of the many authors, were originally transmitted orally and were not written until 800–500 B.C. (Durant, 1935). The Upanishads sought to explain the unintelligible of this world that is not accessible to the intellect. Thus, wisdom diverged from the knowable, sensory world we live in to a vaster, more intuitive understanding of the nature of life and death. The Upanishads remain today a revered creed.

Prince Siddhartha Gautama (563–483 B.C.) was born in India. He left his privileged life at age 29 to search for a higher truth (Dyer, 1998). After his enlightenment, he became known as the “Buddha” or Awakened One. His teachings form the basis of Buddhism and he taught through conversations, lectures, and stories. These were summarized into “sutras” or threads to prompt memory (Durant, 1935). The sutra of the Four Noble Truths is basic to Buddhism: (1) all life is suffering; (2) suffering arises from desire; (3) wisdom lies in stilling all desire; and (4) the eightfold path is the way to the cessation of suffering. The Buddha focused on conduct rather than theology, ritual, or worship. He taught, “Do not believe in authority or teachers or elders. But after careful observation and analysis, when it agrees with reason, it will benefit man and all, then accept it and live by it” (Dyer, 1998, p. 5). Thus, wisdom meant “knowing” something by personal observation and experience.

The exact age of Chinese civilization is unknown but it is estimated to be 7,000 years old. China has never been one homogenous nation but, rather, a “melting pot” of humanity from diverse origins, each with their own distinctive language and culture (Durant, 1935). China is the home of humanistic, nontheological philosophy. Lao-tzu was the greatest of pre-Confucian philosophers. The *Tao-Te-Ching*, or *Book of the Way and Virtue*, is attributed to Lao-tzu, but authorship of ancient texts is

Cambridge University Press

0521541824 - A Handbook of Wisdom: Psychological Perspectives

Edited by Robert J. Sternberg and Jennifer Jordan

Excerpt

[More information](#)

considered symbolic rather than historical (Cleary, 1991). The *Tao-Te-Ching* is one of the most important texts of Taoist philosophy. Literally translated, Tao means *the way* and teaches: "Sages minimize their affairs, which are thus orderly. They seek to have little, and thus are sufficed; they are benevolent without trying, trusted without speaking. They gain without seeking, succeed without striving" (Cleary, 1991, p. 26). Lao-tzu rejected reason and believed intuition and compassion were the path to wisdom (Bates, 1993). For him, the secret of wisdom was in obedience to nature and refusal to interfere in the natural course of things (Durant, 1935).

Confucius (551–479 B.C.) wrote five volumes known as the *Five Ching*, which along with four books written by his pupils makes up the collection known as the *Nine Classics* (Durant, 1935). The chaos in China when Confucius lived forced him to focus on morality and right living. Confucianism stood for rationalized social order based on personal cultivation (Yutang, 1938). The goal was for political order based on individual moral order. Therefore, wisdom began with the individual rectifying his own heart. From self-development followed social development. Confucius said, "To know what you know and know what you don't know is the characteristic of one who knows" (Yutang, 1938, p. 138). The Eastern traditions replaced the focus of wisdom from the physical world to an enlightened understanding of the relationship between the natural world and the Divine. It should be added that Asian concepts of wisdom, although well developed, did little to influence the emergence of empirical science in the West and psychology as a field of study.

The Renaissance

During the Renaissance, the concepts of wisdom and virtue became intertwined. Montaigne (1533–1592) felt that practical wisdom implied that life should be lived in accordance with nature, self-knowledge, knowledge of world, and self-management (Brugman, 2000). Wisdom included a critical attitude and the truly wise person was always aware of his ignorance. He believed that to assume knowledge from others without total understanding and to make it one's own was inadequate for wisdom; "... for though we could become learned by other men's learning, a man can never be wise but by his own wisdom" (Montaigne, 1580/1952, p. 58).

Francis Bacon (1561–1626), both a politician and a philosopher, was born in Elizabethan England. In *Essays* (1597), he wrote short treatises on major issues of life that became the precursor to social psychology

(Durant, 1926). Bacon is most often remembered for his book *Novum Organum*, or *New Methods*, which placed him on the cusp of the modern scientific age (Cottingham, 1996). He placed science as the point of highest order and introduced the concept of the scientific method. The very essence of science was written by Bacon in *The Advancement of Learning*, "... for we are not to imagine or suppose, but to *discover*, what nature does or may be made to do" (Eiseley, 1959, p. 179). Bacon proposed that man is subjected to four idols or obstacles to true knowledge: (1) "idols of the tribe," or human nature to mistake surface appearance for the true nature of things; (2) "idols of the cave," or personal pre-occupations and obsessions; (3) "idols of the marketplace," or illusions stemming from language or the human tendency to rely on labels; and (4) "idols of the theater," or the fact that man gives power to the false system of traditional philosophy (Bacon, 1620/1996, p. 307). Thus, a wise man uses strict inductive reasoning along with systematic scientific inquiry to discover even the "underlying" forms or processes for all observed phenomena. For Bacon, "Knowledge is power" (Russell, 1945).

The Period of Enlightenment

Rene Descartes (1596–1650) was the first modern rationalist. He believed the sole basis of knowledge to be self-evident propositions deduced by reason, which arose from a doubting mind (Magee, 1998). According to Descartes, man should doubt everything until he reached the first principles that could not be doubted. The one thing he said he could not doubt was, "cognito ergo sum," "I think, therefore I am." Wisdom was attainable as cognitive knowing by using reflection, reason, and ethical deliberation. Religious wisdom, however, was based on faith and revelation from God (Bates, 1993).

The English philosopher John Locke (1632–1704) is best known for his book *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, and as the founder of the empirical school of philosophy. Locke believed that sensory experience is the source for all of our ideas and that knowledge arose from reflection on, and abstraction from, the original sensory input (Cottingham, 1996). The basis for this understanding rested on the doctrine of primary and secondary qualities. Primary qualities are those that are inseparable from the body and are classified as solidity, extension, figure, motion or rest, and number. Secondary qualities referred to everything else, for example, color, smell, sounds, and so on. Primary qualities reside in bodies, whereas secondary qualities are *only* in the

Cambridge University Press

0521541824 - A Handbook of Wisdom: Psychological Perspectives

Edited by Robert J. Sternberg and Jennifer Jordan

Excerpt

[More information](#)

perceiver (Russell, 1945). For Locke, reason consisted of two parts, an inquiry into what we know with certainty, and an investigation of propositions that we are wise to accept, even though they are only probable and not certain (Russell, 1945). When testing probability, we use our own experience or the assertion of another's experience. In Locke's writings, references to wise and wisdom are made in context with knowing God. In the *Essay*, he stated that the truest and best notions of God are acquired by thought and meditation. The wise and considerate man lives by a right and careful use of his thoughts and reason (Locke, 1690/1952).

Immanuel Kant (1724–1804), born in East Prussia, is often regarded as the one of the most outstanding philosophers since the Greeks. His propositions included the concept of two worlds: the phenomenal world, where knowledge is possible, and a noumenal world, which is transcendent and to which there is no access. For Kant, morality was founded on reason (Magee, 1998). Kant based his definition of philosophy on the ancient philo-sophia, or the desire for and love of the exercise of wisdom (Hadot, 1995). Kant believed philosophy to be the doctrine and exercise of wisdom. He wrote that men did not possess wisdom but only felt love for it. Wisdom remained the idea, the model, never to be attained but only to be sought after. Kant wrote: "The Idea of wisdom must be the foundation of philosophy, just as the Idea of sanctity is the foundation of Christianity" (Hadot, 1995, p. 267). Kant posited two ideas of philosophy, the scholastic concept and the worldly concept. The scholastic concept remained as pure theory, whereas the worldly concept was more cosmic. The cosmic philosophy of Kant referred to the search for wisdom, personified as the ideal philosopher or sage. The essential qualities of the sage were based on the laws of reason. For Kant, wisdom was in accordance with his categorical imperative, "Act only on that maxim whereby thou canst at the same time will that it should become a universal law" (Hadot, 1995, p. 269).

Arthur Schopenhauer (1788–1860) wrote the *World as Will and Idea* in 1818. He stated that in the noumenal world all beings are one, whereas in the phenomenal world we express ourselves as separate. He came into contact with Buddhist and Hindu texts that paralleled his beliefs (Magee, 1998). Schopenhauer felt that the empirical world was nothing and that one should not be taken in by it (Brugman, 2000). For Schopenhauer, genius was the highest form of will-less knowledge. The more a person knew his own desires, the less he was controlled by them. This allowed an objective view of the world without subjective bias (Durant, 1926).

