Chapter 11
Wisdom As A Moral Virtue

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Some years ago, RJS gave a graduate student really rotten advice. This graduate student had received two job offers, one from a very highly prestigious academic institution and the other from a less prestigious one. The second one was well known, but the first one was near the top of the academic pecking order. The graduate student asked RJS which job offer he thought she should take.

The answer might seem straightforward: Why not take the more prestigious offer? But it was not straightforward. The reason is that the kinds of interests the student had seemed to fit the somewhat less prestigious institution better than they fit the more prestigious one. In particular, she liked teaching quite a bit, and the second institution seemed to emphasize teaching more than the first one.

RJS was young and naïve at the time—and out of his 20s—and foolishly told her to take the more prestigious offer. She did, and it proved to be a mistake. She did not fit in. She did not value what the school valued, and the school did not value what she valued. Several years later, she left, and eventually ended up in a place that particularly values innovative teaching.

About the same time, RJS needed some advice. He was being considered for tenure at Yale, and it came to his attention that the university was receiving letters that questioned why it would want to give tenure to someone in such a marginal and unprestigious field as intelligence. RJS sought advice from a senior professor, Wendell Garner, telling him that perhaps he had made a mistake in labeling his work as being about intelligence. Indeed, RJS could have done essentially the same work but labeled it as
being in the field of "thinking" or of "problem solving," fields with more prestige. Game’s advice was that RJS had come to Yale wanting to make a difference in the field of intelligence. RJS had made a difference, but now he was afraid it might cost him his job, and he was right. But Game maintained that there was only one thing RJS could do—exactly what he was doing. If this field meant so much to RJS, then he needed to pursue it, just as he was doing, even if it meant losing his job. RJS is still at the university.

At the time of these events, RJS realized that Game had in simple supply something he pretty much lacked. It was not age; it was not experience, exactly. It was wisdom. RJS was determined to understand the nature of wisdom, but it is not until exactly that he has made any serious headway.

When we speak of wisdom here, we are speaking of it as a moral virtue, but not in the narrow sense of morality that one learns when parents or other authorities tell one what to do. Rather, wisdom is a moral virtue in the sense of having a compass for making judgments, a set of guidelines that recognizes that moral principles, however useful, need a set of guidelines for their application. Wisdom supplies such a set of guidelines. In the absence of wisdom, morality can be severely distorted, as when terrorists and saboteurs describe their work in moral terms; however, terrorism is not moral, and it certainly is not wise.

The Nature of Wisdom

Wisdom is defined here as the application of intelligence and creativity as mediated by values toward the achievement of a common good through a balance among intrapersonal, interpersonal, and extrapersonal interests over the short and long term in order to achieve a balance among adaptation to existing environments, shaping of existing environments, and selection of new environments (Figure 1-1). Sternberg (1991, 1998) offers more detail.

Thus, wisdom does not simply concern maximizing one’s own or someone else’s self-interest. It also concerns balancing various self-interests (intrapersonal) with the interests of others (interpersonal) and with various contextual aspects (extrapersonal) such as one’s city, country, environment, or even God. In wisdom, one seeks a common good, realizing that this common good may be better for some than for others.

Some may argue that the definition of common good is morally relative. We disagree. Although differences in values and beliefs may mediate alternative definitions of right and wrong, tremendous consensus exists across religious, cultural, and geographical with regard to some basic principles that may be used to define the common good. These fundamental
principles include honesty, reciprocity, sincerity, integrity, and compassion. Although morality impacts the fine distinctions between right and wrong in particular circumstances, wisdom is broader in scope.

Clearly, however, the constructs of wisdom and morality overlap. The degree to which an individual is a wise decision maker is heavily influenced by his or her moral functioning. A person with a strong moral sense is more likely to adhere to most of the universal principles that define the common good within the framework of wisdom; however, morality in itself does not always lead to wise decision making. For example, people who bomb abortion clinics often justify their behavior on moral grounds, yet the decision may not be wise in the sense of balancing intrapersonal, interpersonal, and extrapersonal interests in a way that achieves the common good. (Chapter 4 provides some other examples of the ways that morality and caring can go awry and lead to decisions that may be moral but unwise.)

Problems that require wisdom always involve at least some element of each of intrapersonal, interpersonal, and extrapersonal interests. For
example, a minister might decide that it is wise to take a new position in a different location, a decision that seemingly involves only one person. But many people are typically affected by an individual’s decision to take a job, including parents, friends, and even the congregation. Not only will the minister and his friends be impacted, but the institution itself may also be impacted by the loss of a charismatic leader. Furthermore, wise decisions always have to be made in the context of the whole range of available options. Thus, people must be aware of the options and what they mean.

What considerations might be included under each of the three kinds of interests? Intrapersonal interests include the desire to learn more, increase one’s spiritual well-being, enhance one’s popularity or prestige, make more money, increase one’s power, and so forth. Interpersonal interests might be quite similar, except as they apply to other people rather than oneself. Extrapersonal interests include contributing to the welfare of one’s school, helping one’s community, contributing to the well-being of one’s country, serving God, and so forth. Different people balance these interests in different ways. At one extreme, a power-hungry corporate executive might emphasize his own personal power and wealth; at the other extreme, a workaholic physician may emphasize only seeing others while neglecting her own family and health.

Wisdom involves a balancing not only of the three kinds of interests but also of those possible courses of action in response to this balancing: adaptation of oneself or others to existing environments, shaping of environments in order to render them more compatible with oneself or others, and selection of new environments. In adaptation, the individual tries to find ways to conform to the existing environment that forms his or her context. Sometimes adaptation is the best course of action under the circumstances. But typically, one seeks a balance between adaptation and shaping, realizing that fit to an environment requires not only changing oneself but changing the environment as well. When an individual finds it impossible or at least implausible to attain such a fit, he or she may decide to select a new environment altogether, for example, a job, a community, or a marriage.

Suppose, for example, that a particular teacher is committed to the importance of moral education. The teacher is then faced with his first job as a school. As the year progresses, he begins to understand that the administration within his school is obsessed with test scores and the school primarily focuses on the development of children’s cognitive abilities. The development of morality is not valued. The teacher has some choices about
how to proceed. He can adapt to the situation by staying with the school and learning to appreciate the value that is placed on test scores within the school. Or he can attempt to shape the attitudes of the administrators and the community by attending school board meetings and trying to convince people of the importance of moral education. Or he can look for a job at a different school, one that emphasizes moral education. Most likely, however, the wisest solution will involve some kind of balance of the three approaches. A wise teacher might make some modifications to his instructional approach in order to accommodate the push for cognitive achievement while at the same time engaging the administration in conversations about the importance of moral education. In the meantime, perhaps the teacher could also choose to teach in another environment (e.g., an adult-school program, Sunday school) that is more in line with his views of moral education while at the same time keeping his full-time teaching position.

Wisdom also involves a balance of short- and long-term thinking. For example, research has shown that punishing and rewarding children is effective in getting them to comply with requests in the short term, but it often tends to undermine children’s levels of intrinsic motivation in the long run (Kohn, 1999). Consequently, although a particular solution may be good in the short term, it may not always lead to the desired consequences in the long term.

Wisdom manifests itself as a series of higher order processes that are typically cyclical and can occur in a variety of orders. These processes include recognizing the existence of a problem, defining the nature of the problem, representing information about the problem, formulating a strategy for solving the problem, allocating resources to the solution of the problem, monitoring the solution of the problem, and evaluating feedback regarding that solution. In deciding about a teaching job, for example, one first has to see both taking the position and not taking it as viable options (i.e., recognize the problem), then figure out exactly what taking or not taking the position would mean for oneself (i.e., define the problem), then consider the costs and benefits to oneself and others of taking the position (i.e., represent information about the problem; Sternberg, 1990, 1998, 2001).

**Wisdom-related Skills**

Wisdom requires many distinct skills. First, wise judgments require knowledge regarding the topics about which one has to make judgments. This knowledge is of two kinds. Formal knowledge is the kind of
knowledge one learns in school and through books. Informal knowledge is the kind of knowledge that is picked up through experience.

Second, wisdom requires analytical thinking. However, this is not the kind of analytical thinking that is typically emphasized in schools or measured on tests of academic abilities and achievements. Rather, it is the analysis of real-world dilemmas in which clean and neat abstractions often give way to messy and disorderly concrete interests. The kind of abstract analytical thinking that may lead to outstanding performance on a test such as the Raven Matrixes, which presents figural reasoning items, is of some but not much use in complex real-world dilemmas such as how to define the conflict between Israelis and Palestinians.

Third, wise thinking must be creative to some extent because it generates a novel, problem-relevant, high-quality solution involving a balancing of interests. Novelty and appropriate quality are two hallmarks of creativity. However, a solution can be creative (e.g., solving a mathematical problem) but have no particular characteristics of wisdom. A mathematical proof involves no balancing of interests and no search for a common good; it is simply an intellectual problem that involves creative thinking.

Fourth, practical thinking is closer to wisdom than are analytical and creative thinking, but again, practical thinking is not the same as wisdom. Practical thinking enables one to solve everyday problems or apply knowledge in a useful context. However, applying one's knowledge of physics to fix a broken automobile does not necessarily exhibit any characteristics of wisdom, for example. Practical thinking may help one fix the car, but it will not help perform the decision about whether to go home to one's family or out with one's friends for the evening.

Fifth, wisdom also seems to be related to constructs such as social and emotional intelligence. However, differences also exist. Social intelligence can be applied to understanding and getting along with others, to any ends, for any purposes. Wisdom, on the other hand, seeks to obtain a common good through a balancing of interests. Thus, a salesperson who figures out how to sell a worthless product to a customer might do so through using social intelligence to understand the customer's wants, but the salesperson has not applied wisdom in the process. Emotional intelligence involves understanding, judging, and regulating emotions. These skills are important components of wisdom. But making wise judgments requires going beyond the understanding, regulation, or judgment of emotions. Instead, making wise decisions requires processing the information to achieve a balance of interests and formulating judgments that make effective use of the information to achieve a common good.

Perhaps the most salient difference among constructs is that whereas wisdom is applied toward the achievement of ends that are perceived
as yielding a common good, the various kinds of intelligence may be applied deliberately toward achieving either good ends or bad ones, at least for some of the parties involved. Furthermore, whereas the opposing constructs are not necessarily driven by an underlying moral framework or values system, wisdom is intrinsically bound to, and mediated by, values.

Interestingly, the conception of wisdom proposed here is substantially closer to Chinese conceptions of intelligence than to American ones. Indeed, one of the words used in Chinese to characterize intelligence is the same as the word used to characterize wisdom.

**Foolishness**

Foolishness is the absence of wisdom. Smart people can be foolish and, indeed, are sometimes especially susceptible to foolishness. This is especially true when they find themselves in positions of leadership. Power can be quite seductive. Those in positions to significantly influence policies and the lives of others must be especially vigilant to guard against four fallacies in thinking that most often trap foolish people.

The fallacy of egocentrism occurs when an individual starts to think that the world centers on him or her. Other people are, in this case, merely as tools in the attainment of one’s goals. Why would smart people think egocentrically, when one would expect that egocentrism would be a stage out of which they would have passed many years ago? We believe that the reason is that conventionally smart people have been so highly rewarded for being smart that they lose sight of their limitations. However, wisdom requires one to know what one does and does not know. Smart people often lose sight of what they do not know, leading to the second fallacy.

The fallacy of omniscience results from having available essentially any knowledge one might want. With a phone call, a powerful leader can have almost any kind of knowledge made available to him or her. At the same time people look up to the powerful leader as extremely knowledgeable or even close to all knowing. The leader may then come to believe that he or she really is all knowing. His or her staff may believe the same thing, as illustrated by Irving Janis (1972) in his analysis of victims of groupthink. In case after case, brilliant government officials made the most foolish of decisions, partly because they believed they knew much more than they did.

The fallacy of omnipotence results from extreme power. In certain domains, powerful leaders can do essentially almost whatever they want to do. The risk is that these individuals will start to overgeneralize and believe that this high level of power applies to all domains.
The fallacy of invulnerability comes from the illusion of complete protection, such as by a huge shield. Powerful people, especially leaders, seem to have many friends ready to protect them at a moment’s notice. The leaders may shield themselves from individuals who are anything less than psychotic. As soon as things turn bad, many of the individuals who once seemed to be friends prove to be anything but. Harry Truman said that high-powered leaders who want friends should buy themselves a dog.

In terms of the balance theory of wisdom, foolishness always involves interests going out of balance. Usually, the individual places self-interest way above other interests. An exception can be found in the example of Neville-Chamberlain, who may truly have believed he was doing the best for Great Britain. But ignoring the interests of all the other countries that were being crushed under Hitler’s brutal son, Chamberlain ignored the common good and the long-term good of his own country.

Similarly, people occasionally sacrifice everything for another individual, only to be crushed by their own foolishness. The “classic” case is that of the prolonged war between Greece and Troy. Was Helen of Troy worth the war? Many wars have started over slighter or humiliations, and the interests of the slighted or humiliated have taken precedence over the interests of the thousands who have been sacrificed to avenge the slight. For example, some believe that the war in Chechnya resulted in part from the humiliation suffered by the Russian army in the earlier war in Chechnya. Certainly, post-World War I events contributed to Germany’s humiliation after that war, thus contributing to World War II.

Wisdom involves a balancing not only of the three kinds of interests but also of three possible courses of action in response to this balancing: adaptation of oneself or others to existing environments, shaping of environments in order to render them more compatible with oneself or others, and selection of new environments. Foolishness is reflected in action that represents poor use and balance of these processes.

Placing undue emphasis on shaping the environment can result in foolish decisions. For example, individuals elected to Congress are sometimes more concerned with garnering power for their political party than in seeking the common good. In an effort to increase their party’s power, they may vote to revoke peculiar programs that have been shown to be effective, simply because the programs were initiated by the opposing party. By revoking the effective program, they are shaping the environment, but they are doing so in a way that does not necessarily demonstrate a balance of interests or possible courses of action (e.g., creating supplemental programs that can be credited to their own party, making their own mark with new programs).
Egoism does not only derive from inappropriate shaping of the environment; one can also adapt to a tyrannical environment to save one's own skin, only to find oneself paying the ultimate price. An example of this principle is shown in the quotation by Pastor Martin Niemöller:

In Germany they came for the communists and I did not speak out—
because I was not a communist.

They came for the Jews and I did not speak out—
because I was not a Jew.

They came for the trade unionists and I did not speak out—
because I was not a trade unionist.

They came for the Catholics and I did not speak out—
because I was a Protestant.

They came for me—
and there was no one left to speak out for me.

Finally, an overreliance on selecting new environments can also be foolish. For example, a person who leaves his or her work environment every time the going gets tough will soon acquire a reputation for being an unreliable vagabond. By constantly selecting new environments, the person may eventually have trouble finding a permanent position.

**Developing Wise Thinking in Children and Adults**

The development of wisdom is critical to the healthy functioning of society. Wisdom is clearly required of leaders, but it is also advisable to plant the seeds of wisdom in students, who are future parents and leaders, and are always part of a greater community. Similar to adults, children benefit from learning to judge rightly, soundly, and justly on behalf of their communities.

If the future is plagued with conflict and turmoil, this instability does not simply reside "out there somewhere"; rather, it resides and originates in us. For these reasons, we endorse teaching students not only to recall
facts and to think critically (and even creatively) about the content of the subjects they learn but also to think wisely about it.

It is impossible to speak of wisdom outside the context of a set of values, which combine to lead to moral stages or, in Kohlberg's (1984) view, stages of moral development. The stages are: (a) the primary concern is obedience to authority in order to avoid punishment; (b) the primary concern is to conform to social norms in order to gain rewards; (c) the primary concern is with behaving appropriately in order to gain approval from others; (d) the primary concern is with acting in a way that is moral; (e) morality is seen as a social contract, decided arbitrarily by group consensus; and (f) decisions are made on the basis of universal moral imperatives or one's own guiding principles. Stage six is purely theoretical; for practical purposes, the theory consists of only five stages.

Practical intelligence is a function of what is valued in a societal or cultural context. Values mediate how one balances interests and responses, and values collectively contribute to how one defines a common good. The intersection of wisdom with the moral domain can be seen in the overlap in the notion of wisdom presented here and the notion of moral reasoning as it applies in the two highest stages (i.e., stages 5 and 6) of Kohlberg's (1984) theory. Wisdom also involves caring for others as well as oneself, along the lines suggested by Gilligan (1994). At the same time, wisdom is broader than moral reasoning. It applies to any human problem that involves a balance of intrapersonal, interpersonal, and extrapersonal interests, whether or not moral issues are at stake.

Characteristics of Wise People

One of the most important characteristics of wise people is their capacity for dialogical thinking. Dialogical thinking involves the ability to take on the perspectives of others, to understand significant problems from multiple points of view, and to understand that others could legitimately conceive of things in different ways. Tannen (1998) has stated that we currently live in an "argument culture." We are constantly faced with tremendously complex issues (e.g., abortion, gun control, the death penalty) on which we are expected to take one side or the other. These issues are frequently presented to us in terms of a dichotomous argument. This kind of myopic approach to the exploration of ideas is the antithesis of dialogical thinking. Few issues can be discussed in either/or terms, yet this attitude prevails in the popular media today. Wise people are able to see beyond apparent dichotomies and look for new solutions. An example is the tale
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of a young Zen student in search of enlightenment. Along the path he is walking, he encounters a Zen master who says, “If you move, I will beat you with this stick. If you do not move, I will beat you with this stick.” When faced with this seemingly perilous situation, the wise Zen student recognizes that there is another choice. He raises out, grabs the stick, and breaks it. Everyone is faced with seemingly dichotomous choices on a daily basis. The characteristic feature of wise thinkers is that they learn to see beyond the dichotomy and explore a wider range of possible options than those that are presented to them.

A second important characteristic of wise thinkers is their capacity for dialectical thinking. This kind of thinking involves understanding that ideas and the paradigms under which they fall continually evolve, not only from the past to the present but also from the present to the future, as noted by Georg Hegel (1807/1931). Dialectical thinking entails an active attempt to integrate the key elements of what may seem, on the surface, to be disparate ideas. Wise people understand that few ideas are completely worthless; they know that most ideas have some elements that are worthwhile and that can at least be combined with other ideas to form new, more interesting ideas. Wise thinkers consistently pursue new ways of synthesizing the most useful portions of disparate ideas.

Third, wise people recognize that almost everything can be used for better or worse ends. Policy recommendations can be manipulated, words can be twisted, and intentions can be undermined. Wise people realize that the ends to which knowledge is put do matter, and they are vigilant in attempting to anticipate and clarify potential misinterpretations of their ideas.

Conclusions

The importance of nurturing morality and wisdom is not merely academic musings. Wars and terror currently plague our world, as they have throughout human history. We urgently need wise strategies for resolving conflicts and for guiding our behaviors. To nurture wisdom and morality, we must begin with ourselves. Wise thinkers are role models in that they practice what they preach. They are open to new ideas and seek to actively synthesize disparate points of view. They look to balance their own interests, the interests of others, and the interests of larger institutions in both the short and long terms. They attempt to balance the extent to which they adapt to, shape, and select their environments. Our efforts to nurture morality and wisdom must be aimed at all people in all societies, not just a select few.
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References


