



# ON WISDOM

FLUIDITY AND ILLUSIVENESS

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## Introduction

What comes to mind when I ask for what truth is? Most would respond “something which correctly depicts reality is true”. In other words, they point toward the *Correspondence theory of truth*. A statement is true if it matches or reflects the actual state of affairs, meaning that truth is simply a matter of how accurately beliefs correspond to reality.

What if I ask the same question about knowledge? Here it already gets more complicated. Traditionally most thinkers have defined knowledge as *Justified True Belief*<sup>f</sup>. There are three parts to what makes knowledge according to this answer: justification, truth and belief. To have knowledge about something a person must then be (1) justified in believing it, (2) the belief must be true and finally (3) the person has to hold that very belief of course.

Having temporarily solved the issue of what truth and knowledge is, one might be inclined to think that the next question is another abstract concatenation of these aforementioned concepts. But they would be wrong.

## What is wisdom?

When one starts reading about the different proposed definitions of wisdom it quickly becomes clear that this is a completely different beast to tackle. Socrates appealed to the idea that wisdom begins with recognizing one’s own ignorance. For him humility and openness to learning seems to have been key aspects. Notice how these are characteristic traits, qualities of a person if you will. This definition of wisdom already challenges the notion that it is only a matter of what one believes, it also seems to revolve around how one acts.

And surely it is the most blameworthy ignorance to believe that one knows what one does not know. It is perhaps on this point and in this respect, gentlemen, that I differ from the majority of men, and if I were to claim that I am wiser than anyone in anything, it would be in this, that, as I have no adequate knowledge of things in the underworld, so I do not think I have (Plato 2002, p. 33).

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<sup>1</sup> Multiple objections and critiques have appeared since Gettier-problems surfaced regarding this definition. To the interested reader I suggest starting with Linda Zagzebski’s excellent paper on relevant issues: <https://doi.org/10.2307/2220147>.

This is but one example of the additional layers of complexity that may be introduced when enquiring on the nature of wisdom. When it comes to wisdom, the question of “what it is” is no longer a matter of definition, but of experience. We will find wisdom not in propositional logic, but in living it, in the experience of acting upon it.

A classical wisdom is the saying “actions speak louder than words”. Firstly, I believe most intuitively understand that the main message that is being communicated is not that of how actions speak louder than words do, because that does not make any sense in the literal way. Actions can not speak, and neither can words. A person can use words to speak, not actions.

How can one approach this nugget of wisdom then? By pondering its underlying message. One interpretation of the meaning begins by understanding that actions entail something is actually being done, while simply saying one is going to do something introduces the possibility of them not doing it. Hence a person has an easier time to believe in something when observing a “happening” compared to simply trusting the word. In this case these words of wisdom are directly pointing toward the value of experience in the art of communication.

The above explanation only covers one dimension of this wisdom. Another layer that could be analysed is its motivational aspect. Hearing “actions speak louder than words” motivates to action, since it de-values *saying* and lifts *acting* in general. And this leads to yet another layer, the shift of perspective in regard to one’s world view that often accompanies being exposed to wisdom.

To conclude, my point is that wisdom is not yet another logical puzzle to be solved, but an experience in the waiting to be had. It is only natural that wisdom comes with age, for it is inextricably entangled with experiencing. If one wishes to become wise, the first step is to prioritize experiencing; to actively pursue, to take risks, to feel alive. Not objective observation of phenomena, as a scientist would have approached it<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> I am not saying that science is useless, I am commenting on how to come closer to wisdom by using scientific observation as an opposite to illustrate clearly what I mean. However, this does warrant a thorough discussion on the tension between science and wisdom in the near future. In the meantime, I point to my article discussing wisdom from the perspective of cognition, which does briefly touch on this issue: [What constitutes wisdom?](#).

## References

Plato (2002) *Five dialogues*. 2nd ed. Translated by G.M.A. Grube. Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Pub. Co.