WHAT CONSTITUTES WISDOM?

AN ENQUIRY ON ITS PRAGMATIC COMPONENT

by

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ABSTRACT:

This essay explores the multifaceted nature of wisdom, integrating philosophical insights with cognitive science perspectives. It begins by differentiating "wise truth" — a pragmatic, experience-based understanding — from absolute truth. Using Laozi's proverb "A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step" the paper illustrates how wisdom speaks to the emotional faculty rather than purely logical reasoning.

Cognitive science concepts, particularly Vervaeke and Ferraro's account of the theory of self-organizing criticality, are introduced to explain the brain's adaptive processes. These processes facilitate shifts in mental stability, crucial for the development of wisdom. The essay argues that wisdom involves the purposeful cultivation of self-organizing cognitive styles like active open-mindedness, mindfulness, and Sophrosyne.

By aligning philosophical and scientific views, the essay highlights wisdom as a dynamic interplay between experiential insights and cognitive adaptability, essential for navigating life's complexities.

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Introduction

It seems necessary for a wise person to know the truth of things, why would she otherwise be wise? Wisdom comes with experience, and experience usually gives understanding to where it was lacking. Yet it's not quite that simple. For while truth is a component of wisdom, it is not its entirety. Furthermore, one often finds that the truth found in wisdom is not of an absolute, objective or universal nature, but a pragmatic one.

A different kind of truth?

Wise truth is what I will be calling the component of truth found within wisdom henceforth. This wise truth is not concerned with finding ultimate answers, and instead manages to focus on the navigation of human experience. It is a type of truth that primarily acts as a beginning of venture for what the real purpose is. Let's take a look at one of Laozi's famous proverbs to exemplify.

A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step.

Firstly, notice that it is factually true in an ordinary sense, any journey begins with a first step[1]. Secondly, one instantly understands that this is not what is meant to be conveyed. If the reader sets aside the impulse to analytically dissect the proverb and rereads it the message clicks with more ease. This I take as an indication that wisdom is not preoccupied with crafting persuasive argumentation through logic as much as it is concerned with directly speaking to our hearts, to the emotional faculty.

Reading that a journey starts with a first step doesn't help us in any rational way to navigate our experiences better. Realising that every goal must be accompanied by a humble beginning does however help us change the way we emotionally react to this factual truth. Having established that wise truth is simply a springboard to the actual message, we can also see how this underlying wisdom is only truly understood by connecting experience to it. This in some sense generates new experiences for the reader, for when memories of the past

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[1] Unless one starts her journey in a vehicle of some sort, but these are details of no importance.

are reinterpreted in a different language, they are no longer the same memories. The shift that wisdom accompanies a shift in interpretation in the widest sense.

Through the lens of cognitive science

To understand how the brain sorts gathered input — which can result in both intelligent[2] and foolish[3] behaviour — Vervaeke and Ferraro (2013) introduce the concept of *self-organizing criticality*. This manages to explain the brain's remarkable ability to adapt and learn, while also acknowledging its potential to become entrenched in maladaptive patterns of thought and behaviour. The concept was originally used to describe the self-organizing behaviour of physical systems such as sandpiles.

> Consider a pile of sand that has a stream of sand falling onto its apex. The causal constraints of gravity and friction enable the sand pile to organize itself into a cone shape. This cone shape channels the sand in such a manner to reinforce the cone. So we see a feedback loop in which the shape of the pile directs the sand, which helps to further shape the pile. For a period, the feedback loop maintains the system's stability. However, at some point, the sand pile becomes too tall for its base, and there is an avalanche. This is a period of instability and a loss of integrity for the system. However, this instability makes possible a wider base for the sand that then starts to constrain the placement of the sand, and the whole system has now reorganized into a newer, more stable one (Vervaeke and Ferraro 2013, p. 33-34).

In the same way as the sand pile organizes itself, the authors argue that our brain does too. Similarly, in the brain, changing inputs or challenging situations can disrupt the stability of existing patterns, leading to a period of instability and reorganization. The process of shifting between these stable states is referred to as *emergent activity switching*. The instability which occurs during emergent activity switching, while chaotic in nature, is actually crucial for adaptation. Returning to the exemplification this process through the

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[2] Intelligence, in this context, is described as the brain's ability to adapt to a constantly changing environment by dynamically recognizing and utilizing relevant information (Vervaeke and Ferraro 2013, p. 33).

[3] Foolishness is instead described as maladaptive behaviour, not stemming from lack of knowledge or intelligence, but rather from the brain getting stuck in counterproductive feedback loops. This "parasitic processing," as they call it, occurs when the normally adaptive self-organization becomes hijacked by rigid, self-reinforcing patterns of thought and behavior that diminish a person's ability (Vervaeke and Ferraro 2013, p. 34-35).

sand pile, notice how for each instance of instability, the sand pile returns to stability with a larger base at the end. Just as the avalanche allows the sandpile to reconfigure itself with a wider, more stable base, these periods of instability in the brain create opportunities for new connections to form and new patterns of activity to emerge.

A cognitive process intricately linked to leading a good life

Having explained these underlying mechanisms of cognition, Vervaeke and Ferraro (2013, p. 30) propose that wisdom should be understood as being centred around purposeful cultivation of self-organizing processes that enhance depth insights[4] and rationality, counteracting foolishness. Just as I hinted toward earlier, the authors say that wisdom goes beyond a value-neutral stance of expertise and scientific knowledge. It prioritizes the practical application of knowledge to maximise the chances of achieving a good life[5].

This leads — again, similar to what I contended earlier — to them arguing that factual knowledge does not help overcome foolishness, because the issue does not lie in lack of information. Instead, what causes foolishness is the misframing of problems and situations. While factual knowledge is of great importance for problem-solving in other contexts, overcoming the underlying *parasitic processing-pattern*[6] requires skills in construal[7], self-awareness, and self-regulation that allow for the reframing of problems. The primary focus needs to be on the way the information is sorted, not what type of information is gathered.

Having a self-organizing process which prioritizes the right type of information through a healthy construal is what constitutes the wise person. It is this very ability which needs to be constantly refined and maintained in order to generate the wisdom we seek. This is why the authors spend a great deal of time explaining why certain cognitive styles act as prerequisites for wisdom. These are: (1) active open-mindedness, (2) mindfulness and (3) a

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[4] Depth insights are a special kind of insight central to the concept of wisdom, according to the authors. They involve the ability to see beyond superficial appearances and into the deeper underlying reality of a situation, particularly when it comes to understanding one's own cognitive processes. In short, they help us see through illusion and clarify what is truly important.

[5] Vervaeke and Ferraro (2013, p. 30) explain this in a more precise manner: "… it stand to reason that wisdom must centre upon the procedural knowledge that realizes the important information that affords one the ability to intervene in the causal processes of self-transformation and the construction of a good life. However, this is not to say that propositional knowledge will play no role.".

[6] See footnote 3 for further elaboration of the concept.

[7] Construal involves the cognitive processes through which people make sense of events, actions, and information, often influenced by their own beliefs, emotions, experiences, and social context.

special kind of cognitive meta-style, which they call *Sophrosyne*. I recommend reading into this part of their theory for practical ideas on how to generate wisdom yourself.

Conclusive thoughts

Exploring the nature of wisdom from the perspective of cognitive mechanics is enlightening to say the least. It grants a detailed understanding that is hard to get at only through philosophizing. I maintain that wisdom largely consists of a certain pragmatic truth, i.e. *wise truth*, and luckily it seems that the research being done supports rather than contradicts this. Vervaeke and Ferraro (2013) employ concepts of cognitive psychology to explain the process of wisdom in more detail. Specifically, they insist that wisdom is mainly concerned with procedural knowledge[8], which seamlessly aligns with a pragmatic approach to life that places great importance on experience.

Many questions remain regarding the nature of wisdom, but some have finally been answered. At the same time, I believe the wise sage is mostly repelled by the idea of static knowledge, and instead applauds dynamic and open-ended understandings. So, to follow the words of the wise: For the moment we have arrived at a satisfactory explanation, but it is necessary to continually develop and reinterpret, for acquiring knowledge is in itself a never-ending process.

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[8] Procedural knowledge refers to the knowledge of how to perform tasks or activities. It involves the ability to execute a series of actions to achieve a specific goal and is often gained through experience and practice.

References

Vervaeke, J. and Ferraro, L. (2013) 'Relevance, Meaning and the Cognitive Science of Wisdom', in Ferrari, M. and Weststrate, N.M. (eds) *The Scientific Study of Personal Wisdom*. Dordrecht: Springer Netherlands, pp. 21–51. doi:10.1007/978-94-007-7987-7_2.