

WISDOM

In the ancient world the 'philosopher' was distinguished from the 'sage'. While the sage propounded wisdom, and demanded respect for it, the philosopher only claimed to *love* wisdom, and not to possess it. Philosophy was born in humility and doubt. Nevertheless, if we think of the wisest members of each generation in the ancient world, it tends to be the philosophers who come to mind. They shifted the image of wisdom, and those who claimed direct access to deep truths were replaced at the pinnacle of wisdom by the philosophers, precisely because the latter showed that they could doubt what was obvious, and question what everyone else assumed to be true.

The aim of wisdom for the ancients concerned what you *are*, as well as what you *know*. Since wisdom is the noblest and most impressive of human attributes, you need to be an impressive person to aspire to it. The key quality seems to be a sense of detachment, of which the hallmark is control of the emotions. Wisdom has a moral aspect, because it seems inconceivable that someone might achieve pure wisdom, and yet fail to show personal virtue, or justice in social leadership. Knowledge is required for wisdom, of the natural world, and of the principles of living, but even there the knowledge must be focused on what has high value. The idea that objective truth has its own special value emerges with philosophy, and mathematics offers the idealised model. Above all, wisdom aims at understanding, and that requires a deep fund of true explanations.

Even in the ancient world there was a backlash against this image of wisdom. The main doubts concerned whether action was more important than mere understanding, and whether book-learning was the only route to wisdom. There was always a tension between the wisdom acquired by a thinker's own efforts and insights, and wisdom acquired by revelations from higher powers, and the sacred texts that revealed them. From a religious perspective, home-made wisdom looked like mere vanity. The great sages were good communicators, but the philosophers, pursuing their difficult questions, gradually became more obscure, and only comprehensible to their elite and wealthy pupils. Hence philosophical wisdom could become a theatrical joke, and less educated people often turned elsewhere for guidance.

With the Renaissance revival of philosophy, the concept of non-spiritual wisdom came once again to the fore. This time, though, there was a shift of emphasis, and the nature of the thinker became as much of a problem as the topics of the thought. Ancient philosophers had often spurned dreams of wisdom, but the new ideas undermined any simple picture of the philosopher as working away on truth, knowledge, values and just action, and thus progressing slowly but obviously towards becoming wise. Now we are less certain that there is a distinct reality to be grasped, that there is a distinct person who can achieve the wisdom, that any certainty can be achieved about the components of wisdom, that two contradictory views cannot both be wise, and that the very language in which wisdom is expressed is actually up to the job. Eventually the deepest foundations of ancient wisdom had to face challenges, when geometry, physics and logic threatened to become dependent on cultural or arbitrary viewpoints. The picture of humanity as evolved animals, rather than aspiring demi-gods, further reduced the prospects of attaining what could be described as true 'wisdom'.

In that climate, it is not surprising that many philosophers repudiated the aspiration to achieve broad wisdom, and chose rather to focus on narrower issues, where some clarity might be achieved, or a more modest picture of how we might live and think could be given. Perhaps the biggest challenge the lovers of wisdom faced was the rise of empirical science, which seemed to open up more reliable paths to broad understanding than armchair philosophy could explore. Hence in recent years any debate about the nature of wisdom has been marginalised by a more pressing debate about the very nature of philosophy. It is common now for great thinkers to deflate the ambitions of philosophical thought, reducing it to expertise in sharpening the tools for scientists, or telling stories about cultural undercurrents, or curing ourselves of self-inflicted delusions. Even seen from the loftiest perch of broad wisdom, the character of philosophical thought is often seen as prey to unquestioned prior values, of a chauvinistic, linguistic, economic, biological or emotional kind. The religiously inclined still doubt the prospects for humane philosophy, but the non-religious have also despaired of philosophical methods ever offering a satisfactory replacement for religion.

If such pessimism is unsurprising, in the face of the huge range of difficulties, it is also not surprising that some philosophers are trying to fight back. Philosophers look askance at the rather simplistic spin which many scientists put on their own findings, and wade into the various sciences, to see whether some objectivity and stability might not be found within scientific or mathematical or logical techniques, and whether a coherent and philosophically 'wise' overview might be constructed from plausible interpretations of physics, chemistry, biology, psychology and sociology. In addition to the philosophies 'of' the various sciences, there is also a keenly contested confrontation over the status of the distinctively philosophical discipline of 'metaphysics'. One view says that metaphysics is a futile and vacuous enterprise, and its elimination should take dreams of wisdom with it. A second view takes metaphysics to be a highly abstract extension of the sciences, which is answerable to empirical findings, but has an organisation role at its own level, with a dream of articulating the wisdom which slowly emerges from the laboratories. The third (and most ambitious) view of metaphysics is that, despite powerful critiques from within philosophy, and from beyond it, the subject still survives, with genuine subject-matter and a meaningful set of concepts, allowing pursuit of a distinctive mode of truth. Given the highly general nature of independent metaphysics, any successes it achieves would seem to qualify as 'wisdom', in just the sense that the more optimistic ancient thinker intended it.

A measure of the place which wisdom now occupies in our culture is the respect accorded to those persons who seem to be wisest. Do their statues occupy our public squares, and their tombs the most prominent public locations? Is anyone now famous just for being wise? Singers, comedians and sporting heroes now seem more likely to occupy those niches, and whimsical self-mockery commands a bigger audience than solemn wisdom, but among the learned the greatest philosophers are still, I think, seen as having a distinctive aura, and the penetration of their thinking might best be described as 'wise'.