

Wisdom: A Selective Annotated Bibliography

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Dennis Whitcomb

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INTRODUCTION

The word “philosophy” stems from “philo” and “sophia”, Greek terms often translated as “love” and “wisdom” respectively. Yet there is very little contemporary philosophical work on wisdom. There is plenty of historical work on the matter, and as it happens, there is a large body of work on wisdom in contemporary cognitive psychology. As far as contemporary philosophy goes, the work on wisdom is confined mainly to ethicists and epistemologists attempting to broaden their domains of theorizing. It is interesting that this work is growing rapidly and for good reason: wisdom is intimately associated with numerous issues epistemologists and ethicists have been interested in and working on for a long time. Work on wisdom outside of philosophy is rapidly growing as well. As one testament to all this growth, it is worth noting that the University of Chicago is currently implementing a \$2 million research grant for an interdisciplinary project titled “Defining Wisdom”.

GENERAL OVERVIEWS

Ryan (2007) is a good overview of philosophical work on wisdom. Birren and Svensson (2005) is a good overview of psychological work on wisdom. Philosophers and psychologists often work with very different unarticulated background beliefs. This makes it hard for them to understand each others’ work, and can make them suspect one another of deep confusion. Some of these suspicions can be avoided by clearly understanding the differences across philosophers and psychologists in background beliefs about the nature of concepts. Most philosophers work with a classical, necessary-and-sufficient conditions model of the wisdom concept, whereas most psychologists work with one or another prototype or exemplar model of that concept. On these models of concepts see Margolis and Laurence (1999).

Birren, J.E. and C.M. Svensson. (2005). “Wisdom in History”, *A Handbook of Wisdom: Psychological Perspectives*, (eds.) R Sternberg & J. Jordan. Cambridge University Press.

[A review of past work on wisdom and a very nice review of recent psychological work on wisdom. The review of psychological work goes from William James to 2005.]

Margolis, E. and S. Laurence. (1999). “Concepts and Cognitive Science”, *Concepts: Core Readings*, (eds.) E. Margolis and S. Laurence, MIT Press.

[A classic literature review on the nature of concepts. Useful for philosophers and psychologists trying to understand each others' work on wisdom. Reviews the exemplar and prototype models of concepts used (often tacitly) by most psychologists, and also reviews the necessary-and-sufficient-conditions models used (often tacitly) by most philosophers.]

Osbeck, L.M. and D.N. Robinson. (2005). "Philosophical Theories of Wisdom". *A Handbook of Wisdom: Psychological Perspectives*, (eds.) R Sternberg & J. Jordan. Cambridge University Press.

[A good introduction for psychologists to historically influential philosophical work on wisdom, particularly Aristotle's work. Not a substantive piece of history or philosophy, but nonetheless a good introduction for those with psychology backgrounds.]

Ryan, S. (2007). "Wisdom", *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, (ed.) E. Zalta, <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/wisdom>.

[Reviews recent philosophical work on wisdom, especially the epistemology-driven work. Briefly discusses ethics-driven work on the topic, and also discusses some historical work.]

HISTORICAL WORK

Wisdom is featured in the writings of Plato and Aristotle, the medievals who followed them, and the moderns who followed them in turn. In the *Apology*, Plato seems to suggest that wisdom amounts knowing the facts about what one does and does not know, since he takes Socrates to be the "wisest man of all" on the grounds that he alone has this metaknowledge. In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle distinguishes two states, *phronesis* and *sophia*, the words for which are translated by most scholars as "practical wisdom" and "theoretical wisdom" respectively. *Phronesis* is, roughly, knowledge of how to live well. *Sophia* is, roughly, deep theoretical understanding. This notion of *sophia* runs through medieval philosophy and into modern philosophy, where it is taken up by Descartes, who identified (something like) *sophia* with the aim of philosophy. Historians sometimes discuss these veins of material, and their interpretive work can be helpful. Taylor (1990), for instance, nicely makes the point that there are interpretive difficulties associated with translating Aristotle's term "*sophia*" as "wisdom", or even as "theoretical wisdom". Collins (1962) is a helpful discussion of Descartes on wisdom.

Aristotle. 1999. *Nicomachean Ethics, Books 6 and 10*. In *Aristotle: Nicomachean Ethics, 2nd Edition*, trans. T. Irwin, Hackett.

[Book 6 theorizes about the intellectual goods, two of which are "sophia" and "phronesis", which scholars often identify with theoretical and practical forms of wisdom respectively. Book 10 argues that the best life is filled with "theoria", the exercise of one's wisdom through contemplation.]

Collins, J.D. (1962). *The Lure of Wisdom*. Marquette University Press.

[A helpful historical lecture on notions of wisdom in the Renaissance and early modern philosophy, especially in Descartes. Also has some discussion of Aristotle and Aquinas on wisdom, as well as some critical and substantive remarks on the phenomenon.]

Descartes, R. (1931). *The Principles of Philosophy*. In Haldane and Ross, (eds), *The philosophical works of Descartes, corrected edition, volume I*. Cambridge University Press.

[In a letter that the editors reprint as an introduction to the *Principles*, Descartes takes wisdom – understood as something like Aristotelian *sophia* – to be the ultimate aim of philosophy and “the mind’s true source of nourishment”. See especially pp. 203-209.]

Plato. (1997a) *Republic, Book 4*. In J. Cooper (ed), *Plato: Complete Works*. Hackett.

[Claims that there are three parts of the soul: the rational, spirited, and appetitive parts. A person is wise just in case the rational part rules the soul as a whole, making its decisions. Wisdom is the rule of the soul by reason.]

Plato. (1997b). *Apology*. In J. Cooper (ed), *Plato: Complete Works*. Hackett.

[Socrates learns that he is the wisest of all men; he does so by learning that, unlike his interlocutors, he does not take himself to know what he in fact fails to know. The implicit suggestion here may be that being wise amounts to knowing the facts about what one does and does not know; see Ryan (2007)]

Taylor, C.C.W. (1990). “Aristotle’s Epistemology”, *Companions to Ancient Thought 1: Epistemology*, (ed.) S. Everson, Cambridge University Press.

[A helpful beginner’s guide to interpretive issues concerning Aristotle’s epistemology. Claims that it is at best uninformative and at worst misleading to translate Aristotle’s term “sophia” as “wisdom”.]

CONTEMPORARY PHILOSOPHY

Contemporary philosophical work on wisdom has two lines of motivation. The first of these lines of motivation comes from ethics, where virtue-theoretic approaches that were largely absent for most of the 20th century have been flourishing for several decades. In this literature, wisdom is often taken to be a virtue amounting to something like phronesis or the capacity for good judgment (Zagzebski 1996). The second line of motivation for theorizing about wisdom in contemporary philosophy comes from epistemology. Philosophers of this motivation often take it that wisdom is a particularly high-end epistemic state. It is like understanding or knowledge, but even better, epistemically speaking. Using the method of definition and counterexample that was employed with particular intensity by 20th century epistemologists, these theorists have offered up numerous conceptual analyses of wisdom (see Lehrer et al 1996). They have also situated wisdom within the currently expanding theory of epistemic value, the theory of those states that are our epistemic aims (Greco 2002). Several philosophers straddle the line between the ethics motivations and the epistemology motivations, seeming to be driven by both of them (Zagzebski 1996, Roberts and Wood 2007).

CONTEMPORARY ETHICS

Godlovitch (1981) is an early statement of the need for theories of wisdom within virtue-theoretic accounts of ethics generally. John Kekes developed numerous versions of this approach which culminated in (Kekes 1995). For work related to Kekes’ project, and several relevant references, see Nielsen (1993). A more recent ethics-driven approach to wisdom comes from Tiberius (2008), who focuses on what she calls “reflective wisdom” and several virtues she takes to be parts of it. Tiberius argues that the best way to pursue the good life is to try to live in accordance with these virtues.

Godlovitch, S. (1981). “On wisdom”, *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 11: 137-55.

[Views wisdom as a moral virtue. The account is fairly underspecified, but its basic idea is that wisdom is knowledge and appreciation of platitudinous truths about the human condition. It is a form of enlightened common sense.]

Kekes, J. (1983). "Wisdom", *American Philosophical Quarterly* 20: 277-286.

[Argues that "wisdom is to arrange one's life so as to aim to satisfy those wants that accord with [one's] ideals, while paying due regard to human limitations and possibilities in general, and [one's] own limitations and possibilities in particular".]

Kekes, J. (1995). *Moral Wisdom and Good Lives*, Cornell University Press.

[Argues that there are many kinds of wisdom, one of which is moral wisdom, which is itself a virtue that, roughly, consists in knowing the morally good means and ends and reliably acting so as to bring them about.]

Nielsen, Kai. 1993. "Philosophy and the Search for Wisdom", *Teaching Philosophy* 16/1: 5-20.

[Pushes the idea that to be wise is both (a) know general truths about the human condition and how to live well in it, and (b) appreciate their import for one's own life.]

Tiberius, V. 2008. *The Reflective Life: Living Wisely Within Our Limits*, Oxford University Press.

[Takes practical wisdom to have at least two parts, namely moral wisdom and reflective wisdom. Explores four constituent virtues of reflective wisdom: perspective, attentional flexibility, self-awareness, and optimism. Argues that the best way to pursue the good life is to try to live in accordance with these virtues that constitute reflective wisdom.]

CONTEMPORARY EPISTEMOLOGY

There are numerous attempts to analyze the concept of wisdom, giving necessary and sufficient conditions much like the necessary and sufficient conditions 20th century epistemologists sought for the concept of knowledge (Ryan 1999). There are also attempts to illuminate the nature of wisdom in a perhaps less precise way; these attempts often situation wisdom as one of many particularly high-end epistemic goods at which virtue epistemologists have recently pointed their gaze (Greco 2002). Some of this work attempts to ally itself with historical and psychological writings on wisdom (Whitcomb 2007), although the connection to psychology is still very underexplored.

Greco, J. (2002). "Virtues in Epistemology", *The oxford handbook of epistemology*, (ed.) P. Moser. Oxford University Press.

[A survey of virtue epistemology. Claims that the "responsibilist" tradition of virtue epistemology is best-suited for theorizing about high-end states like wisdom, whereas the "reliabilist" tradition is best-suited for theorizing about lower-end states like knowledge.]

Lehrer, K. et. al. (eds). (1996). *Knowledge, Teaching, and Wisdom*. Kluwer.

[A collection of essays from an NEH summer seminar by the same name. Contains several papers on the nature and teaching of wisdom; the papers by Sharon Ryan and Richard Garrett are especially useful.]

Ryan, S. (1999). "What is Wisdom?", *Philosophical Studies* 93: 119-139.

[A re-working of a paper by Ryan in Lehrer et al 1996. Updates Ryan's account of wisdom and adds new arguments. Ends up settling on the view that to be wise is to know how to live well while appreciating the true value of living well.]

Ryan, S. (2007). "Wisdom", *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, (ed.) E. Zalta, <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/wisdom>.

[Reviews recent philosophical work on wisdom, especially the epistemology-driven work. Briefly discusses ethics-driven work on the topic, and also discusses some historical work.]

Taylor, R. (1968). "Dare To be Wise", *The Review of Metaphysics* 4: 615-629.

[Claims that wisdom is sagacity or perspicacity, or perhaps the exercise thereof. Claims that *this* thing is what philosophy is really a love of, and that it is what makes greats like Hume and Leibniz shine so brightly.]

Whitcomb, D. (2007). *An Epistemic Value Theory*. PhD Diss, Rutgers University.

<http://hdl.rutgers.edu/1782.2/rucore10001600001.ETD.16794>

[Includes a chapter that critically reviews the literature on wisdom and argues for the broadly Aristotelian view that wisdom comes in two varieties, the practical and the theoretical.]

APPROACHES COMBINING ETHICS AND EPISTEMOLOGY

Several people who theorize about wisdom seem to be motivated both by ethical theory and by epistemology. In some cases, these theorists explicitly deny that the two branches of thought can be usefully separated (Zagzebski 1996, Roberts and Wood 2007). In other cases, the theorists simply discuss wisdom as one among many philosophically important phenomena (Nozick 1989).

Nozick, R. (1989). *The Examined Life*. Touchstone Press.

[Includes a chapter arguing that wisdom amounts to "what you need to understand in order to live well and cope with the central problems and avoid the dangers in the predicament(s) human beings find themselves in". Makes many helpful points and helpful side remarks.]

Roberts, R. and J. Wood. (2007). *Intellectual Virtues: An Essay in Regulative Epistemology*. Oxford University Press.

[A wide-ranging exploration of intellectual virtues such as firmness, humility, autonomy, and the love of knowledge. Gives wisdom a central place among these virtues while rejecting the Aristotelian distinction between practical and theoretical wisdom. Devotes a chapter to illuminating wisdom by describing its relationships to other virtues and by exploring several detailed examples of wise people in action.]

Wood, W.J. (1998). *Epistemology: Becoming Intellectually Virtuous*. InterVarsity Press.

[An introduction to epistemology from a virtue-theoretic point of view. Contains a chapter on wisdom that gives a historically and religiously informed discussion of the phenomenon. Emphasizes the contrast between wisdom with foolishness, as do (Sternberg 2003) and (Whitcomb 2007).]

Zagzebski, L. (1996). *Virtues of the Mind*. Cambridge University Press.

[An influential book that briefly theorizes about wisdom as a high-end epistemic state. Distinguishes practical and theoretical wisdom, taking the former to be something like Aristotelian *phronesis* and the latter to be the species of theoretical understanding that "is a matter of grasping the whole structure of reality".]

CONTEMPORARY PSYCHOLOGY

There seem to be three main strands of motivation for this large body of work. The first strand derives from developmental psychology (Kunzmann and Baltes 2005). Cognitive developmental psychologists in the tradition following Piaget, and personality-centered developmental psychologists in the tradition following Erikson, both sometimes theorize about wisdom as a particularly high-end characteristic obtained late in life by people who have properly risen through all of the developmental stages. This work takes wisdom to be, as it were, a pinnacle of psychological development, be that development either of the particularly intellectualized variety with which cognitive theorists are concerned, or of the more whole-person variety with which the personality theorists are concerned. The second strand derives from work on the nature of intelligence. A variety of intelligence researchers have found traditional psychometric work, the sort of work which focuses on the very formal sorts of operations with which traditional intelligence tests are concerned, to presuppose an over-intellectualized view of what intelligence amounts to (Sternberg 2003). Some researchers have responded to this dissatisfaction by theorizing about other more practical phenomena as well. Paramount among these other phenomena has been wisdom. The third strand has to do with the recent movement in favor of “positive psychology”, that is, psychology that deals with positive states like happiness or well-being as opposed to negative states like mental illness. One of the positive states that these researchers focus on is wisdom. Psychologists coming to wisdom from this positive psychology route (as well as all the other routes) tend to give theoretical accounts of what wisdom is, and they also tend to do empirical work on the matter (Birren and Svensson 2005). Some psychological work on wisdom is quite similar to the recent flurry of experimental philosophy on e.g. the concepts of knowledge and intentionality (Takahashi and Overton 2005).

Bluck, S. and J. Gluck. (2005). “From The Inside out: People’s Implicit Theories of Wisdom”, *A Handbook of Wisdom: Psychological Perspectives*, (eds.) R Sternberg & J. Jordan. Cambridge University Press.

[Reviews psychological research on implicit theories (roughly what philosophers call “folk theories”) of wisdom. Useful for its discussions of methodology as well as its discussions of results.]

Jordan, J. (2005). “The Quest For Wisdom In Adulthood: A Psychological Perspective”, *A Handbook of Wisdom: Psychological Perspectives*, (eds.) R Sternberg & J. Jordan. Cambridge University Press.

[Summarizes empirical work on relationships between wisdom and age after the age of 18. The central conclusion is that, with a few interesting sorts of exceptions, people do not tend get either wiser, or less wise, as they age in adulthood.]

Kunzmann, U. and P. Baltes. (2005). “The Psychology of Wisdom: Theoretical and Empirical Challenges”, *A Handbook of Wisdom: Psychological Perspectives*, (eds.) R Sternberg & J. Jordan. Cambridge University Press.

[A good summary of the Berlin program, which was headed by Baltes (until his recent death) and, along with Sternberg’s (1998, 2003) approach, is one of the two most thoroughly empirically worked-out approaches to wisdom.]

Sternberg, R. (ed.) (1990). *Wisdom: Its Nature, Origins, and Development*. Cambridge University Press.

[An early collection of essays by psychologists on wisdom. Summarizes the state of psychological research on wisdom at the time.]

Sternberg, R. (1998). "A Balance Theory of Wisdom", *Review of General Psychology* 2: 347-365.

[Argues for a phronesis-style, ethically driven, empirically confirmed view about wisdom according to which being wise amounts to properly balancing various goods and interests against each other in one's thought and action.]

Sternberg, R. (2003). *Wisdom, Intelligence, and Creativity Synthesized*. Cambridge University Press.

[Theoretically and empirically argues for the balance theory of Sternberg (1998). Relates wisdom to intelligence and creativity in light of Sternberg's influential work on these phenomena. Discusses relationships between wisdom and foolishness, and explores applications of these views aimed at reforming school curricula.]

Sternberg, R. and J. Jordan (eds.) (2005). *A Handbook of Wisdom: Psychological Perspectives*. Cambridge University Press.

[A replacement for Sternberg (1990), which by 2005 was obsolete due to the intervening explosion of psychological work on wisdom. Surveys all the main psychological perspectives on wisdom as of 2005]

Takahashi, M. and W.F. Overton. 2005. "Cultural Foundations of Wisdom: An Integrated Developmental Approach". *A Handbook of Wisdom: Psychological Perspectives*, (eds.) R Sternberg & J. Jordan. Cambridge University Press.

[Surveys an empirical literature suggesting that our views about wisdom are partly determined by culture and social class. Comparable to the well-known experimental philosophical work claiming that our views about knowledge are similarly determined.]