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Not knowing

Knowledge is learning something new every day. Wisdom is letting go of something every day.

—Zen proverb

The fool doth think he is wise, but the wise man knows himself to be a fool.

—William Shakespeare

Not knowing

According to Plato, the renowned Greek philosopher Socrates went to this temple of Apollo in ancient Thebes and asked the Pythia, the Oracle, 'Who is the wisest person in Athens.' The oracle replied, 'It is you.'

'That is impossible,' said Socrates, 'because I am aware that I know nothing.'

'That,' said the Oracle, 'is exactly why you are the wisest person in Athens.'

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Socrates recognized that there was so much he did not know. Knowing this, however, may have been precisely the reason that made him wiser than all the others. It was this awareness of his own ignorance that differentiated him. Thus, in a rather paradoxical way, Socrates expressed that he knew nothing except that he knew that he knew nothing – in short, he recognized the many unknowns in his world. However, does the possession of wisdom imply knowing that you don't know? Is it the acceptance of your own ignorance? Thus, the greatest wisdom may very well lie in the explicit recognition that one is not all knowing.

Hopefully, you have entered a stage of life when you realize how little you know. Of course, you may think, somewhat nostalgically, about your younger years when you thought that you knew everything, but if you are truly in pursuit of wisdom, these thoughts will be fleeting. Only when you realize how little you really know will you make the effort to continue trying to understand what the world has to offer. Eventually, like Socrates, you may have figured out that knowledge is infinite, that knowledge changes at all times, and that all knowledge is transient as it is linked to the world around it. Therefore, knowledge is subject to change as the world is ever in the process of changing. It is for exactly this reason that Socrates felt compelled to continue searching for new knowledge and to understand things even better. This never-ending pursuit of knowledge may have been undertaken with the hope that wisdom eventually would be within reach. To attain it, however, was going to be another story. Wisdom has this infuriating tendency to always remain untouchable.

A wise old man, a guest of the king, spent his days dressed magnificently, eating the greatest delicacies at the king's table. The advisers sought his advice and the powerful laughed heartily at his jokes, while the relatives of the king showered him with gifts.

A party of young, arrogant noblemen met the old man one day amidst the lush trees within the royal garden and challenged him about his wisdom: 'Now tell us Seeker of the Truth, given all the things you know, how many grains of sand would fit in this bucket?'

'My apologies, your fine noblemen, I haven't the faintest idea.'

'Well, how disappointing! But let's ask you something else. Can you tell us this simple thing: Why can you see in a mirror your right and left eye and ear reversed in the reflection but not your face upside down?'

'If I only knew, you priceless offspring of your eminent fathers.'

But the young noblemen didn't know how to stop pestering the wise old man. 'Then, tell us at the least, what is the meaning of life?'

'As far as that's concerned, I only know that I don't know, your very honorable people.'

At this point, the young noblemen exclaimed: 'You don't know this, and you don't know that! Why then are you, silly, old man, fed and dressed and honored at the royal tables as if you were the wisest of all people?'

'Oh, your noble people,' replied the old man, 'I am dressed in silk and fed with good food only for the little that I know. For if I were to be rewarded for what I don't know, all the treasuries of the world put together would not be sufficient.'

Defining wisdom

Socrates did not really define what wisdom meant to him and what would be its various components. Frankly speaking, defining what wisdom is all about is difficult. Wisdom

is of a rather ethereal nature. It cannot really be taught; it cannot just be mere knowledge. It is not just intelligence. Although we recognize that when referring to wisdom, knowledge and intelligence may play a role and we also realize that wisdom is a much more complex entity.

Generally speaking, we feel compelled to acquire knowledge as a way of trying to control the chaos that is life. To gain knowledge can be seen as part of our efforts to make sense of things. In many instances, it is knowledge that we search for when looking for deliverance from our human predicament. We have the hope that knowledge will give us clear answers to existential questions. Frequently, however, knowledge can also be used to mask our biases and to disguise our value judgments. Sadly enough, much of the knowledge we acquire may be misleading, irrelevant, and inaccurate. In the end, it may prove incapable of helping us make sense of whatever difficult challenges we have to deal with. Moreover, the world we live in is now full of factoids or alternative facts that are often presented as knowledge – in other words, 'knowledge' that turns out to blatantly false. We may also have discovered that making wise decisions in the 'real world' necessitates often something more than just possessing raw knowledge. As the Roman poet Horace would point out, 'wisdom is not wisdom when it is derived from books alone.' To be wise implies having the ability to interpret and act on complex situations, aided by whatever knowledge we have acquired. Unfortunately, resorting merely to knowledge does not necessarily make for wise decisions and actions.

Switching from the concept of knowledge to that of intelligence, we are faced with a similar conundrum. All too often, highly intelligent people can be seen acting in remarkably

unintelligent ways. What this tells us is that mere intelligence – like knowledge – may not be enough to decipher the puzzle that is wisdom. As the Russian writer Fyodor Dostoyevsky once said, 'Intelligence alone is not nearly enough when it comes to acting wisely.'

Perhaps a better way of looking at the wisdom conundrum is to define it more as the appropriate, more discerned application of whatever knowledge we possess – the ability to judge complex problems correctly and to subsequently follow the best course of action based on the knowledge that we have available. In other words, having wisdom also includes the anticipation of consequences of our actions – it being a reflection of how well we are dealing with a specific situation.

Actually, taking a somewhat more 'rational', scientific approach, we could define wisdom as being an advanced cognitive and emotional developmental state that is experience driven and, when applied, always takes the common good into consideration. Although this definition may sound forbidding, what I am suggesting is that wisdom seems to be composed of three structural components: a talent in cognitive and emotional integration that helps to solve complex issues, the ability to take the appropriate actions, and the concern that whatever actions are taken will have a positive effect on others and also ourselves.

Hopefully, a better understanding of what wisdom is all about is beginning to materialize. I imagine, however, that there is still somewhat of a confusion given our tendency – at least in general discourse – to use the terms being knowledgeable, being intelligent, and having wisdom, somewhat interchangeably. Thus, it does not always make it easy to distinguish one from the other. Far too often, knowledge, intelligence, and wisdom seem to be intertwined.

In an attempt to further unravel this conundrum, I should add that you are not born with knowledge. On the contrary, you acquire knowledge. In other words, being knowledgeable is an experiential phenomenon, meaning that knowledge is what you know. You should view it as the sum of everything that you have learned over the years. Clearly, knowledge will grow and change along with you.

In contrast, intelligence can be described as a measure of how much you understand. It refers to your intellectual or mental capacity. In other words, if you are intelligent, it will be relatively easy to learn new skills, solve problems effectively, as well as comprehend complex ideas. Thus, a large part of intelligence (being really smart) is the result of genetics. I should add, however, that intelligence also has a developmental component. The kind of learning experiences provided to you while growing up also plays a role. How well you use your intelligence very much depends on the interplay of nature and nurture. To recapitulate, in making a comparison between intelligence and knowledge, it is important to note that you can be very intelligent and still not know very much, while you can be very knowledgeable and still be mostly unintelligent.

Wisdom, by contrast, is a very different entity. Though related to knowledge and intelligence, it is more abstract and subjective. While knowledge and intelligence can be measured to some extent, wisdom is not really quantifiable. It has more of a qualitative nature. It pertains to a subjective measure of the quality of your insights.

What I am also suggesting is that mere knowledge onto itself can be a very sterile proposition. Furthermore, having acquired much knowledge because you happen to

be intelligent does not necessarily make you wise. In comparison, it is wisdom that will bring you into a very different orbit. As the philosopher Alfred North Whitehead puts it quite nicely: 'Knowledge shrinks as wisdom grows.' Wisdom pertains to other ways of knowing or other ways of being intelligent. Unlike knowledge, which is acquired, wisdom comes from within. With the danger of sounding overly simplistic: wisdom has to do with using your common sense to an uncommon degree. It has to do with your talent in judging appropriately the truth and the validity of your accumulated knowledge.

Wisdom implies that you have the power of discernment, that you can judge properly as to what are the right or wrong things to do. It pertains to your ability to pair your accumulated knowledge and synthesize this knowledge using your moral understanding of the situation. Furthermore, wisdom is knowing what to do with your knowledge – how to use your understanding wisely – as well as recognizing the limits of your knowledge. Thus, another way to define wisdom is the ability to see into the future the consequences of your choices in the present – to know when to take action and when it is useless even to try. It makes knowledge the child of (frequently difficult) experiences.

> *Once upon a time there was a king who offered an award to the artist who could create the painting that would best symbolize the idea of wisdom. Not surprisingly, the competition created great excitement in the kingdom. Many artists were eager to submit their works. When the day arrived to exhibit all the works, the king looked carefully at each of the paintings. After much thought, he selected two paintings as the finalists. Having seen the paintings, his subjects wondered which one of the two he was going to choose.*

One painting portrayed a peaceful lake surrounded by beautiful green meadows and framed above by a perfectly blue sky. At first sight, everyone really liked this painting. It gave all the viewers a very tranquil, reflective feeling. The serenity of the study put people's mind to rest. Most people felt that the scenery portrayed in the painting was a very nice way to symbolize wisdom.

The other painting was totally different. It portrayed a windswept, rainy landscape, overcast with stormy clouds, the scenery further divided by a raging river that, due to the storm, was overflowing its banks. There was nothing restful about this imagery. But to everyone's surprise, after giving it much thought, the king selected this painting.

Everyone was wondering why? When asked, the king told his subjects to look very closely. When they didn't see what he wanted them to see, he pointed out that in the corner of the painting there was a small rainbow to be seen. Under the rainbow was a little cave – and if you looked very, very carefully, you saw that, beside the cave, a mother bear and her two cubs were peacefully at rest.

The king explained, saying that wisdom doesn't emerge from a place where there is no noise, no trouble or no challenges. Wisdom derives from knowing how to keep your cool in the midst of a storm.

Acquiring night vision

As I am suggesting, many very knowledgeable and highly intelligent people lack wisdom. Clearly, to acquire knowledge as opposed to wisdom requires very different methods of exploration. Of course, you can study many books to attain greater knowledge, but to study books to attain wisdom will be much more of a challenge. As the German-Swiss novelist Hermann Hesse explains, 'Knowledge can be communicated,

but not wisdom. One can find it, live it, be fortified by it, do wonders through it, but one cannot communicate and teach it.' To acquire wisdom, you must be willing to observe, experience and act, using the best of your judgement. That is the reason any effort to obtain a modicum of wisdom necessitates a very different curriculum, as the story of the king and the painting illustrates. To read books, helpful as such an activity may be, would not be sufficient.

Wisdom also implies acquiring a degree of 'night vision', meaning having the ability to see what is not so obvious and not to be fooled by superficialities. Many people imagine that they see. In truth, however, they do not really observe. As a result, they do not understand. Generally speaking, people do not see beyond the surface of things; they are used to judging a book by its cover. However, while doing so, they do not see what is happening beneath the surface. What I am trying to say is that wisdom is not increased by acquiring more information, but rather by increasing the capacity of your seeing.

Sadly enough, many people do not understand the root causes of behaviors and actions. They remain blind to the fascinating world of unconscious phenomena. They do not know how to decipher the subliminal signs. However, there are ways to go about it. In the Preface of this book, I have already mentioned the psychodynamic-systemic lens that I use to add another dimension to the understanding of complex phenomena – in being able to observe things better. For the wisdom equation, such a lens may be a *sine qua non*.

Clearly, to acquire wisdom, you need to be able to see not only what is on the surface, but also what is beneath it. Unfortunately, as I have mentioned before, most people only

see the obvious. Of course, they may have become quite knowledgeable about various subjects by reading, researching and memorizing facts. They may even be able to spout knowledge. Being able to do so makes them seem intelligent. It makes them look clever. However, what should be kept in mind is that people who have all the answers are not necessarily wise. In spite of being perceived as knowledgeable, they may be totally blind to many things. In contrast, wise people are less certain about what is going on in their lives. They may have their doubts in trying to make sense of what is happening around them. As the Persian poet Jalāl ad-Dīn Muhammad Rūmī said, 'Sell your cleverness and buy bewilderment.' They very much realize that there is so much that they do not know. There are so many mysteries that need to be deciphered, but it is exactly this particular state of mind that makes them curious to want to learn more. Therefore, it should not come as a surprise that in their wanderings through life, they keep on registering a sense of wonder and bewilderment.

Sometimes, I wonder whether our wisdom tends to grow in proportion to our awareness of our ignorance. After all, like Socrates, only when we realize that we know so very little will we continue to be searching for greater knowledge. It is exactly the acknowledgement of our ignorance – of all these unknowns – that might motivate us to search for more. In reflecting on this search for more, a Zen story about a Zen master and a prospective student comes to my mind:

> *A visitor went to see a Zen master to request him to impart spiritual knowledge to help him to become wise. The Zen master asked him to sit down to have a cup of tea. After he had placed the cup in front of*

the visitor, he started to pour. Quickly the cup filled up, but the Zen master didn't stop. He kept on pouring, causing the tea to spill out.

Seeing what was happening, the visitor became increasingly agitated, to finally cry out: 'Please stop, the cup is full. Don't you see that the tea is running out of the cup?'

The Zen master replied, 'Why don't you look at the cup as a metaphor of your mind. The way you spoke to me, it seems like your cup is already completely full. But how, when you think that you already know everything, can you become receptive to new knowledge? How could I ever help you to become wise?'

As this Zen story suggests, wisdom does not come to people who believe that they have nothing more to learn. After all, you cannot really explore the universe if you think that you are the center of it. If you desire to grow and develop, you should have a never-ending need for a greater understanding of what is happening around you. In particular, if you are looking for wisdom, it is important to always remain curious. You should never let go of this compelling need to find out more about all the unknowns.

Personal qualities

Having wisdom also suggests the possession of an array of personal qualities that will vary in relevance. Among the ones often cited as part of the wisdom equation are compassion, empathy, authenticity, open-mindedness, flexible thinking, humility, judgement, emotional intelligence, courage, curiosity, love of learning and kindness. Obviously, some of these qualities will be more important than others – as I will show in the subsequent discussion. Generally speaking,

however, what these qualities suggest is that wise people are quite perceptive in making sense of the human dilemmas faced by themselves and other people. They quickly understand the issues that they are struggling with and are able to give well thought through action recommendations.

What should also be added is that wise people appear to be less interested in going after purely hedonistic pursuits. What is more top of mind, is the pursuit of the common good, meaning activities that also would benefit other people besides themselves. As they like their actions to transcend their self-interests, they are guided by a strong moral compass in whatever actions they undertake. Generally speaking, wise people possess a strong set of values. They possess a true-north moral compass. In other words, wise people try to do what they think is right, not what is going to be easy. As the Roman statesman Cicero said quite simply, 'The function of wisdom is to discriminate between good and evil.'

Furthermore, given their sense of curiosity about the world, people wanting to pursue wisdom are more likely to engage in cerebral activities. Self-reflection, self-knowledge and personal growth will be important to them, and while they are learning from experience, they try to acquire a rich understanding of how the world they live in really functions. In fact, the way they display their wisdom often invites admiration and encouragement.

While further reflecting on the story of the king and the stormy painting, keep in mind that storms can purify the atmosphere, enabling you to have a much clearer sight afterwards. What is more, quite frequently – as the king in the story recognized – often it is wisdom that turns out to be the child of these storms. In fact, without experiencing internal

storms, it will be difficult for you to obtain the calmness of wisdom. Only by making sense of intense life experiences will wisdom come your way. However, it does not completely explain the ultimate motivation to search for wisdom. Why do we experience this need to know all these unknowns?

The 'stealth motivator' that is death

As far as unknowns are concerned, death can be viewed as the final unknown. Death can be considered the ultimate mystery. However, given its mystifying nature, the knowledge of the inevitability of death may be an explanatory factor in your desire to acquire wisdom. Thus, at a certain point in your life, you may come to realize that the greatest mystery of your life is that it ends. That being so, it could well become the driving force for greater exploration.[1] You may decide that whatever you are doing deserves greater scrutiny. As Socrates said very astutely, 'The unexamined life is not worth living.' When you are aware of endings, the fear of living an unlived life will become more pressing. If you have lived your life in such a manner, it will begin to feel like the last thing that you would like to happen. Therefore, could it be that the need to pursue wisdom is driven by the will to live life in such a way that you are prepared to face death when it comes? Could it be that your preoccupation with wisdom is based on the wish to unveil life's ultimate mystery?

[1] Manfred F. R. Kets de Vries (2014). Death and the executive: Encounters with the "stealth" motivator, *Organizational Dynamics*, 43 (4), 247–256.

The ever-presence of death may also lead you to question what you really want out of life. What would make your life truly meaningful? The reminder that you are mortal may even tempt you to ask the tough questions about your life such as, 'Who am I?' 'Why am I here?' 'What drives me?' 'Is this the kind of life I want to live?' 'What would I like to accomplish in the life that I have left?' If you are prepared to address these questions – if you do not want to live an unexamined life – you might find yourself walking on unexplored, but interesting paths. Also, in trying to deal with these questions, you may be forced to become more honest with yourself about the way that you are living. It may even motivate you to ask yourself, 'What would you consider a life, well-lived?' and 'What changes, sacrifices and actions are you prepared to make to be able to live a fully lived life?'

It could very well be that once you realize the finality of life, you liberate yourself from letting life merely pass by. No longer will you live under the illusion that you have an infinite amount of time; that you can put off until some future date the need to understand what is bringing significance to your life. Instead, the inevitability of your impending death may teach you many things about the wise use of your time – about the various challenges that warrant your attention.

Most likely, given the statement, 'Dust thou art, and to dust thou shalt return,' many of us would like to fill our lives with meaningful activities. In fact, it is quite paradoxical that as soon as we become truly aware of the fact that life has an ending, we begin to appreciate what life has to offer.[2] Once more, death anxiety encourages us to explore what our life is

[2] Manfred F. R. Kets de Vries (2021). *Quo Vadis? The Existential Challenges of Leaders*. London: Palgrave.

all about. Thus, knowing that there may come a day when our life will be flashing before our eyes, we want to make sure that whatever passes by is going to be worth watching.

Of course, some people may be obsessed by the idea of an after-life. It becomes their way to alleviate their anxiety about death. In the meantime, however, it is wise to explore what is happening in *this* life. Hopefully, in the pursuit of wisdom, they may find what is meaningful to them. Their challenge will be to realize what is really important – how to direct their energy – before they approach their end. Otherwise, they may end up living a life of regrets.

Looking for answers

If you possess this attitude of not knowing, you will also be better equipped to deal with situations whereby you do not know the answer to a question. Wise people accept it as something to look forward to, seeing it as yet another learning opportunity. Consequently, wise people astutely take advantage of difficult questions. They will truly welcome questions to which they have no answers. It forces them to reflect on what is being said. As I have learned from experience, it is exactly these questions that contribute to new insights. In fact, the people who are truly experts – the ones respected by other experts – are the first to admit how much there is yet to be discovered. Thus, what may need repeating, recalling Socrates' remarks, is that true wisdom is found in your admitting to not knowing. It also has to do with your ability to see – and to see what is beyond the obvious. In that respect, a true sign of wisdom is to constantly wonder about

things, to take nothing for granted, and to be less sure that you understand the challenges that come your way.

Wise people always keep in mind that nobody has a monopoly on the truth. In fact, they are more like passengers in a train, travelling within the landscape of wisdom, trying to catch an occasional glimpse of what could be an insight. While travelling through this landscape, they know that there are many forces trying to pull them in different directions, but they also realize, while on this journey, that the best they can do is to be tolerant of these forces. Confusing as it might be, they also know that these forces reflect what the universe has to offer. However, even though these forces will create moments of paralysis, wise people also realize that they cannot let it be. The images glanced at during this train journey should be translated into action. Wise people know that there will be times when they have to take a stand, to do what they think is right.

While pursuing wisdom, you can look at your life as a book with many chapters. This book of life will also contain much data; it will have many facts. However, your challenge will be to discern the lessons that are embedded within all the facts that can be found in your book of life. In your search for wisdom, will you be able to untangle among these many facts the stories of success and failure, of joy and sorrow? Can you make sense out of them? Have you learned something from the stormy moments that you went through? Are you able to see any patterns? Does what you have learned, given these stormy experiences, help you in making wise decisions? Are you engaged in any activities that go beyond the self? Are you following Albert Einstein's admonition: 'Only a life lived for others is a life worthwhile.'

Furthermore, wise people, in aiming for the common good, will not be afraid to raise their voice for honesty and truth and compassion against the forces of injustice, selfishness and greed. If such behavior was to become contagious – if people all over the world were prepared to share their values – it could change the world. In other words, a country's greatest treasure could be the presence of citizens that possess wisdom. This begs the question of what leaders can do to imbue more wisdom into society. How can they prevent ignorance from gaining the upper hand? Unfortunately, as I mentioned in the Preface, looking at the present state of our world, the future of humankind seems to be dependent on the outcome of the race between the growing power of our technology vis-à-vis the wisdom of how to use it. How we can ensure that wisdom will 'win' will ultimately be our real challenge.

Thus, my question to you, the reader, is what have you done recently with respect to the wisdom equation? What activities are you involved in – even if it is only baby steps – towards the pursuit of wisdom? If you are in a leadership position, what are you doing presently to improve people's lives in the organization/community/society you are working in? Furthermore, in trying to make your contribution towards a more liveable world, what are *you* doing to make sure that wisdom is going to 'win'?