



Words to the “Whys”: Sagacity Revisited

A Review of

A Handbook of Wisdom: Psychological Perspectives

by Robert J. Sternberg and Jennifer Jordan (Eds.)

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What is wisdom? How can it be measured? How does it change developmentally across the course of one's life span, across cultures, and across the course of history? How does it differ from intelligence? What is the relation between wisdom-related knowledge and wise actions? Can one design interventions that increase the likelihood of the development of wisdom? In 13 well-written, scholarly, and thoughtful chapters, the 26 contributors to *A Handbook of Wisdom: Psychological Perspectives* provide the reader with a wealth of material from which to begin forming answers to these questions.

This book is loosely organized around four themes—theories of wisdom, developmental changes in wisdom across one's lifetime, individual differences in wisdom, and societal applications of wisdom. A last section of the book puckishly addresses the topic of foolishness and then attempts to integrate the previous chapters.

As is often the case for collaborations of this sort, this book suffers from much redundancy of materials presented in other chapters. Nonetheless, this is an important book to read and to refer to for some of the best and deepest thinking about the nature of wisdom. Each chapter ends with a summary, conclusions, and, where appropriate, suggestions for future research.

Chapter 1 presents readers with a clear, concise, yet comprehensive overview of how the concept of wisdom has been interpreted throughout history, from the time of the Sumerians until the present. Useful tables summarizing historical and contemporary definitions are provided. Much of this material is repeated in a second chapter that examines wisdom from a cultural perspective.

Chapter 3 elucidates philosophical conceptualizations of wisdom (e.g., those of Homer, Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, and Descartes) in a remarkably lucid manner that is both thought provoking and germane to present-day experience. A more contemporary psychological analysis of wisdom is presented in Chapter 4, as the contributors consider people's implicit

theories of wisdom and describe methodologies and findings from empirical investigations of wisdom. This chapter is particularly successful in providing thoughtful interpretations about the state of such research. The concluding chapter in this section describes in considerable detail one of the most developed research programs investigating wisdom, the Berlin Wisdom Paradigm (Baltes & Smith, 1990).

Several interesting conclusions are suggested by the studies examined in the section dealing with developmental aspects of wisdom across one's life span. One line of evidence described suggests that adolescence is a key period for the development of wisdom. A second finding supported by data presented in these chapters is that wisdom is not inevitably (linearly) associated with aging. The consensus of the authors in this section is that wisdom behaves more like crystallized intelligence and maintains itself from early childhood until old age, *ceteris paribus*. Thoughtful speculation is devoted to the kinds of interventions that might improve wisdom-related knowledge for young adults. Among the suggestions for factors that may facilitate the expression of wisdom in older adults are providing them with opportunities for engaging in moral reasoning, implementing certain kinds of professional training, and creating or maintaining interactions with valued others.

What is the relation between wisdom and personality? What role do emotions play in the development of wisdom? Two chapters in this handbook deal with these fascinating questions. In the case of the former question, the contributors find it useful to make a distinction between personal wisdom (self-knowledge) and general wisdom (insights about life). They then attempt to summarize what is known about the antecedents for each. In answering the latter question, the contributing authors present an evolutionary analysis of wisdom and then focus on the purported intrinsically rewarding feeling of engagement (joy, serenity, happiness) that individuals feel when practicing wisdom.

The last four chapters, dealing with the place of wisdom in society, fit least well with the other work. That is, they read as if they were written for another work. Two of the chapters, however, do provide fascinating case study data of individuals who meet the contributors' particular conceptualization of wise leaders or individuals who embody the generative wisdom that contributes to enhancing the welfare of succeeding generations.

This handbook serves the important function of revisiting the topics of Robert J. Sternberg's (1990) earlier, seminal edited book on wisdom. The concluding chapter of this handbook succinctly, candidly, and accurately summarizes the strengths and weaknesses of the current state of wisdom research and theorizing—and points out some areas that have been ignored or underinvestigated. Subsuming the different kinds of wisdom under the categories of appreciative wisdom, discernment, common (and uncommon) behavioral wisdom, communal wisdom, transcendent wisdom, and virtue, contributor Warren S. Brown rightly concludes that we are a long way from a unified theory of wisdom. Nonetheless, this handbook provides a valuable compendium of the current state of knowledge about wisdom. It is a worthwhile read, and the conscientious reader will be more knowledgeable if not wiser.

References

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