

## SPECIAL ISSUE: WISDOM

### Wisdom: An Introduction to Special Issue



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If philosophy has anything to do with wisdom there's certainly not a grain of that in *Mind*, & quite often a grain of that in the detective stories.

(Ludwig Wittgenstein, quoted in Malcolm 2001, p. 32)

This special issue of *Philosophy East and West* is dedicated to the topic of wisdom. It might appear to be a paradoxical endeavor to think about wisdom on the pages of an academic journal. As Ludwig Wittgenstein pointed out a long time ago in his somewhat peculiar, quixotic style, philosophers in the setting of modern academia are not necessarily in the best position to make meaningful contributions to the question of what it means to be wise. We do not really know what was going on in Plato's academy, or whether the conversations there had much, if anything, to do with what we read in his dialogues. But we are inclined to believe that philosophy was for the ancients a way of life, and that wisdom was something important to search for, cultivate, and pass on from generation to generation. Thus, wisdom, we believe, had its place in the *original* academy. It no longer has this status in contemporary academics. There are good reasons why this is the case.

Modern academics search for knowledge, not for wisdom. They aim to develop professions, rather than cultivate a certain way of life. A wise person is not the sort of person who is forced to continually chase honors and institutional recognition (by means of peer review, academic excellence clusters, etc.), but is, instead, a person who simply lives his or her life wisely and quietly. This is why wise people are not typically accepted in the modern academy. Even today, reading detective stories, like the ones by Norbert Davis (which Wittgenstein loved) or Dashiell Hammett (which he

may have liked), may cure unnecessary worries more quickly than reading academic journals, or, even more problematically, submitting papers for review to top peer-reviewed journals. The wise person usually simply remains silent, or perhaps talks to a friend, but will hardly feel the necessity to publish his wisdom.

But is this as simple as that? There is an ongoing, lively philosophical debate about wisdom. Philosophical encyclopedias, such as the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, have entries on wisdom. These entries show that philosophers try to define wisdom (e.g., as epistemic humility) and argue about theories of wisdom. But they do not try to spread wisdom. How could they, before they knew what wisdom is? Thus, as with many other topics, philosophy has become a *meta-inquiry* here as well. To try to teach wisdom straightforwardly would probably be considered by most professional philosophers to be an inappropriate attempt to interfere with other people's lives. Modern enlightened people do not like to be guided by philosophical gurus anymore. And being taught wisdom seems for most of us to boil down to the attempt to be told by a philosophical guru how to live. So, you either produce a theory *about* wisdom or you fall into the *guru trap*.

Is there nothing more than this to be said about wisdom? At the origin of Western and European philosophy, in the very Greek word "philosophy" (*philosophia* φιλοσοφία), there is an imperative: love wisdom, that is, acquire something that is deeper than merely knowing that things are a certain way (Sassi 2018). For a very long time the topic of wisdom has occupied a central place in the history of Western thought. Presocratic aphorisms; many passages in Plato's dialogues; side remarks in Aristotle's ethics; the works of Epictetus, Lucretius, Seneca, and Marcus Aurelius—just to name a few—all appear as *manifestations* of wisdom and not just as a way of thinking about the concept of wisdom. They are all part of the Western philosophical canon. And, as Justin E. H. Smith has demonstrated most recently, philosophers around the globe have played many divergent roles in their long history: the Natural Philosopher, the Sage, the Gadfly, the Ascetic, the Mandarin, and the Courtier (Smith 2016).

The academic who participates in scholarly debates plays only one role. Although it is the most common role assumed today by people who call themselves "philosophers," maybe it would be wiser not to take this self-understanding to be the norm for the past or the future of philosophy. In fact, we do believe that in thinking about wisdom many questions arise that could be better answered if philosophers based in the West would try to learn from other philosophical traditions. After its modern emancipation from Christian theology, the Western tradition forged a deep alliance with the explanatory sciences and has from this point on become obsessed with "the problem-solving business," as Ian Hacking calls it (Hacking 2002). By supposedly solving the mind-body problem, the hard problem of consciousness,

the problem of the existence of the external world, or whatever it may be called, academic philosophy has since turned its back on one of the most fundamental ancient problems: is a “philosophical” life possible and what would it include? What does wisdom mean to us today, and what would the life of a wise person look like in a globalized world? These are questions that run against the current of the disciplinary regimes of present-day academic philosophy. But this need not be a bad thing. Also, in our global age, it has become increasingly important to listen to other voices beyond one’s own tradition. This could mean that we become receptive once again to the relation between philosophy and wisdom, but that we become receptive to this against the background of a globalized understanding of philosophy.

If we look at school education, and leave the university aside for a moment, another perspective on the topic of wisdom opens up: children are not the only ones to be educated by use of certain cultural methods such as reading, writing, and calculating. Schools should also be, along with the household, a place where humans learn how to live together, as well as a place where students can make use of their knowledge. The English mathematician and philosopher Alfred North Whitehead suggested in 1922 that education should follow a *rhythm*: half of the time in school should be devoted to the “drill” or “disciplined exercise” in techniques, languages, and the acquisition of facts. But the other half of the time should be dedicated to “free creativity” and the free application of acquired skills and knowledge (Whitehead 1929). Whitehead called this other half of education the education of wisdom. For him wisdom does mean to know what to do with the skills and knowledge you have gained. Whitehead believed that the schools of his time treated children too much like containers to be filled with skills and knowledge. But according to him, there is no value in skills and knowledge as such. We have to know what to do with it so that our lives can become *good* lives and our communities can flourish. Perhaps things have not changed so much since 1922. Nowadays, we have the ability to do even more, and we also know many more facts than in Whitehead’s time. But do we really know what kind of life we should lead on the basis of all these skills and factual knowledge?

When we organized the workshop “Philosophy and Wisdom: A New Perspective?” at the ETH Zurich in July 2018, which led to this special issue, we were looking for contributors who could address this topic in a philosophically interesting and philologically sound way. Subsequent to our workshop, we asked all contributors to revise their papers. In order to broaden the scope of our inquiry, we also invited two more scholars to join our group, namely Susan Babbitt and Nadja Germann. We would like to thank Victoria Laszlo for her help with organizing the workshop, Nahum Brown for his help with the manuscripts, and the editorial staff of *Philosophy East and West* for their assistance. Finally, we would like to express our

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