



What is Wisdom?

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Introduction

Information technology defines the progression of data analysis through the prism of how each data state evolves to a more useful level. For this essay: I define data as:

1. Factual information (as measurements or statistics) used as a basis for reasoning, discussion, or calculation
2. Information output by a sensing device or organ that includes both useful and irrelevant or redundant information and must be processed to be meaningful
3. Information in numerical form that can be digitally transmitted or processed usage

For clarity, I prefer to use a simplified definition that “data” essentially is nothing more than 0s and 1s. Binary numbers, remain useless until they become information.

Information is:

1. The communication or reception of intelligence that can justify the construction of physical or mental meaning
2. A quantitative measurement of value based on experimentation and outcome performance that leads to the production of knowledge

Knowledge is:

1. The fact or condition of knowing something with familiarity gained through experience or association
2. The sum of what is known...the body of truth acquired by humankind over time.
Knowledge critiqued becomes wisdom

Wisdom is:

1. Accumulated philosophic or scientific learning
2. The ability to discern inner qualities and relationships that lead to “right” and ethical action
3. The power of judging rightly and following the soundest course of action, based on knowledge, experience, understanding, etc.

(Definitions derived from Merriam-Webster 11th Collegiate Dictionary)

Purpose

This essay was written in order to help the reader understand what is meant when a person is deemed by their peers as “wise”. Wise managers and leaders are usually cherished but in short supply. Understanding wisdom should help lead to better evaluation of those who “lead” us thus insuring a robust society. Generally, categories of wisdom fall into the following:

- Implicit Wisdom
- Explicit Wisdom
- Practical Wisdom (Phronesis)

I will explore each.

Implicit Wisdom

Greek philosophy mediated by the Platonic dialogues noted three types or “senses” of wisdom. These are: *sophia*, contemplative living designed to seek truth; *phronesis*, practical wisdom displayed by statesmen, judges, Legislators, etc.; and *episteme*, wisdom derived from the use of the scientific method.

In contrast to these ancient approaches to understanding, modern theorists survey (Clayton, 1975, Sternberg 1990) and report the characteristics of an implicitly “wise” people. They use this information to understand that implicit (unexpressed) wisdom is composed of *heightened reasoning ability, acknowledged sagacity (farsighted judgment), the ability to learn from one’s environment, the ability to incorporate new ideas, expeditious use of information and perspicacity (acute mental vision or discernment...being shrewd)*. Thus, implicit wisdom is the product of living one’s life and acting well.

Explicit Wisdom

Explicit wisdom presupposes that the wise person demonstrates a balanced approach to understanding her/his world through the application of balanced cognitive (thinking, reasoning, remembering), reflective (thoughtful deliberation), and affective (emotion) domains (Sternberg, 1998). Wisdom then becomes a personal dialogue with one’s self in which the process outcome is a re-transformation of experience into that which society determines as “wise”.

Varied researchers have also defined wisdom as “expert knowledge in the fundamental pragmatics of life that is transmitted from one generation to the next” (Ardelt, 2004). Wisdom thus can be interpreted as the interplay of professional, personal, and educational attainment, which manifests itself through written or verbal communication. I believe that in order for any person to be considered “wise” society, as a whole, must value that person’s knowledge, and communicate it broadly. It then should be willing to act upon it. Unacknowledged wisdom becomes lost, acknowledged wisdom becomes part of our cultural heritage.

Practical Wisdom (Phronesis)

Phronesis can be defined as:

The ability to “take counsel, to judge the goods and evils and all the things in life that are desirable and to be avoided , to use all available good finely, to behave rightly in society, to observe due occasions, to employ both speech and action with sagacity, to have expert knowledge of all things that are useful” (On Virtues and Vices...attributed to Aristotle).

This form of practical wisdom (Kronman, 1986) is at its heart a deliberative process focused on defining and applying a course of action that actualizes the “good” required by any society for productive living. It evaluates pragmatically (factually) given situations through weighing conflicting goals and aspirations to find a suitable fit between one’s intellectual capabilities and the facts presented to the “wise” person.

Critical thinking and deep questioning ground phronesis. This method of critique requires understanding of the given particulars of a problem, sympathy for the stakeholders involved, imagination to place oneself in the situation of others, and a studied detachment that lessens emotional biases. The virtuous decision maker behaves with courage in the face of adversity, remains impartial when challenged by others, incorruptible to external influences, and intelligent throughout the management process.

Conclusion

Wisdom is an evolving concept that is of interest to a wide range of researchers and professions. Being wise is an attribute that many of us seek to possess it. The study of wisdom and the application of its utility to society is a never-ending evolutionary process that reflects the needs of the society we live in.

References

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