

# Would it Be Wise to Study Wisdom?

## *A Comment on the Chicago Institute of Practical Wisdom*

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On hearing the news, a few years ago now, that there were plans to open an Institute for Practical Wisdom attached to a major university my heart sank. The title gives the game away. It has a number of problems.

It conveys the notion that wisdom may sometimes be impractical, but is this the case? Whether an item of wisdom is practical in some particular situation is a matter of circumstance, as it is for a screwdriver, but a screwdriver can never be called impractical. In any case, the suggestion that wisdom may sometimes be impractical seemed to be jumping the gun, for the Institute had yet to establish this result or even itself. So, why the phrase 'practical wisdom' in the title and not just 'wisdom'?

Had the title been announced as the Institute for the Acquisition of Wisdom it would have seemed uncontroversial and an idea well behind its time, but in an academic context the study of wisdom implies a quite different project. It suggests the evermore pernicky intellectual dissection and theoretical elaboration of an elusive subjective phenomenon whose existence we only know about because we all possess a portion of it and for which there is already a vast literature. It suggests not the acquisition of wisdom but the study of how to have a theory about it. The word 'practical' in its title seemed to imply that the new Institute was planning to adopt the strategy of modern 'scientific' consciousness studies, which is to employ qualifiers in their titles to make clear they are not going to study wisdom or consciousness in any depth, God forbid, for this would require a study of metaphysics and mysticism, but just the respective merits of various non-reductive and non-empirical conjectural theories.

Conducted enthusiastically a study of wisdom, like a study of consciousness, is bound to require an investigation of metaphysics, mysticism and religion. If, as its chosen name implies, the new institute was not going to require its members and students to go on this adventure then what would prevent wisdom studies from becoming a practically useless and

barren area of scholarship that cannot define what it studies and trivialises its subject matter in the manner of scientific consciousness studies? I decided to investigate further.

The Cambridge Dictionary entry for 'wisdom' gives the initial definition, 'The ability to use your knowledge and experience to make good decisions and judgements'. This ability could never be called impractical and may as well be called common sense, but is this really what wisdom is? A young child with minimal knowledge and experience may nevertheless have the ability to make excellent decisions relative to their ignorance and inexperience, but we would not normally consider them to be wise so much as sensible. We normally associate wisdom with knowledge and experience. So wisdom is more than this definition suggests. But what is it exactly?

To the extent we have the ability to make good decisions in everyday life on the basis of our knowledge and experience we may be wise, but we cannot expect to make good decisions while having only a poor grasp of our situation and circumstances. Wise businesses conduct regular analyses of their strengths weaknesses, opportunities and threats in a global context, and this means establishing what their global context is. A person who wishes to understand wisdom would be profoundly unwise not to study metaphysics and mysticism, therefore, for these are the only disciplines that investigate the global context for our decisions and judgements and the only methods for revealing it. In the same way as the phrase 'scientific consciousness studies' the phrase 'practical wisdom studies' implies a reluctance to conduct such a study, and this omission would surely be as unwise as a decision by a commercial enterprise not to incorporate a regular SWOT analysis into its planning process. I was led to wonder whether it would be wise to study wisdom and how one would go about it. Would it even be possible?

The Institute has been in business a few years now and the situation has become clearer. Its stated mission is 'to deepen our scientific understanding of wisdom and its role in the decisions and choices that affect everyday life.' This is a worthy cause. But, again, what does the phrase 'scientific understanding' mean? What role is played by the qualifier in this sentence? Is a 'scientific' understanding of wisdom an understanding of the science of wisdom, as opposed to an understanding of wisdom? This cannot be right, since this science has only just been invented and as yet there is nothing to understand. Is it scientific virtue signalling employed to avoid the risk of appearing to show an interest in metaphysics and mysticism and losing credibility in the grant system? This would make sense. 'Practical'

wisdom, it turns out, is wisdom that plays a role in our everyday choices and decisions. The suggestion seems to be that not all wisdom plays such a role, although this would be impossible to prove. Can it really be a coincidence that this is the very opposite of what the mystics tell us about wisdom?

The mission is also to ‘connect scientists, scholars, educators, and students to initiate wisdom research & disseminate findings to the public.’ This was my fear at the start. The public cannot expect this mission to do more than confuse them. The impact of the literature of scientific consciousness studies demonstrates the effects on the public of disseminating the confusion of researchers who speculate on topics about which they know little because they do not, in fact, investigate it scientifically but by speculation. This literature makes a significant contribution to our post-truth and almost-past-caring-about-truth society and it does not seem a wise idea to add to it. No doubt we will soon see the title ‘Wisdom Explained’ in book shops to help the general public fail to understand it.

It is surely obvious that this new area of study is a small part of a much larger territory, and that little sense can be made of it when it is divided up into discrete parts divorced from the whole. The muddle in scientific consciousness studies shows that when we study deep features of the world without consideration for metaphysics and the discoveries of mysticism we end up with a muddle of competing speculative theories none of which work. How will taking this approach to wisdom assist the public in their choices and decision-making? In what sense can this approach be called scientific? Will this sort of limited analysis help the public in any way whatsoever? Consider these extracts from articles circulated in one of the Institute’s email newsletters.

You don't have to be old, gray (sic) and perpetually peaceful to be wise, according to the new science of wisdom.

Old age brings creaky bones, memory lapses, and lower energy levels, but, according to science, going gray has its consolations. On average, the older we get, the happier and more self-confident we become. And, of course, according to just about all the world's philosophical traditions, the wiser we grow.

But according to a recent surge in the scientific study of wisdom, this important but hard-to-define quality isn't something that magically appears

Perhaps it was slow news week. The first sentence is a classic in the popular journalistic genre ‘scientists announce...’. There cannot be many people unaware that we do not have to be old to be wise so why mention it, let alone announce it as a scientific discovery? And which member of the Institute has proved that we can be wise but not peaceful, or that wisdom does not bring peace? Is peacefulness not one of the critical markers for wisdom? Whoever heard of an angry and irritable wise person?

For an adult audience it is quite unnecessary to announce that growing old has its consolations and unsurprising that these are the same consolations that everybody always thought they were, despite having no scientific understanding of wisdom. And what does the phrase ‘according to the new science of wisdom’ mean? There is no new science of wisdom. There is no new science of wisdom for the same reason there is no new science of consciousness. There only ever was one way to study these things and if scientists want to study them then they will have to bite the bullet and do it the same way as everybody else. They will have to acquire their own wisdom or examine their own consciousness. As for the recent ‘surge in the scientific study of wisdom’ mentioned here, this is hyperbole. The surge may be explained by noting that this science has only just been invented.

Apparently, as we age ‘this important but hard-to-define quality we call wisdom is not something that magically appears’. Are we quite sure about this? There must be something a little magical about it if top experts in the new science dedicated to its study are unable to define it. It is not as if ‘wisdom’ is a new word. And is it not just a little magical that the fundamental nature of reality, its ultimate aspect from which the cosmos arises, is capable of evolving to become a multitude of conscious human beings capable of recognising, discussing and even acquiring wisdom? Is it a coincidence that the new science of consciousness is also unable to define its subject matter, also rejects mysticism as magic and also closes its eyes to the idea that an explanation for consciousness would require a study of metaphysics. Are these really sciences? Not if we share the views of Karl Popper. The newsletter includes a book description.

Chapter summary: Psychological wisdom is a growing and flourishing field of research. However, despite several promising efforts to systematically conceptualize and operationalize this construct, no consensus exists about the definition of wisdom....

An Integrative Framework to Study Wisdom - By Le Vy Phan, Laura E. R. Blackie, Kai T. Horstmann, and Eranda Jayawickreme

Clearly, the language is developing fast and may be expected to do so without end. It has already developed as far as the phrase ‘psychological wisdom’. What could this be? Is there such a thing as non-psychological wisdom? At least it is made clear here that all attempts at a scientific definition of wisdom have so far failed. They will never succeed while researchers feel it necessary to place qualifiers such as ‘scientific’, ‘practical’ and ‘psychological’ in front of their ideas and in this way limit their thinking. The use of this language betrays an ideology antithetical to the subject of study.

When we try to pin down the quality we call wisdom and trace it to its source we are forced to investigate consciousness and reality, thus metaphysics and mysticism. If we see a scientific approach as excluding these areas of study then we will adopt a narrow and superficial approach that skirts around the main issues. We are following the lead of scientific consciousness studies and burying the central issues under a deep layer of complex and fast-developing language. This becomes clear as the chapter summary continues.

...We argue that there is a need for integration of wisdom models to forward the field as a whole. For this purpose, we use a comprehensive framework, the Nomological Lens Model Network (NLMN; Rauthmann, 2017), to systematically review and categorize major models of wisdom. The NLMN is a combination of a nomological network (Cronbach & Meehl, 1955), a lens model (Brunswik, 1956), and the 4 Ps (Person, Presses, Products, and Processes) as derived from creativity research (Rhodes, 1961). The nomological network and the lens model provide a perspective that allows for a diagnostic evaluation of wisdom models...

How is one to respond to such language? If all we want is a model then ‘a perspective that allows for the diagnostic evaluation of wisdom models’ must be a good idea, but having so many models that such a system is required betrays a certain befuddlement. Anyway, what would be the point of having a well-diagnosed model of wisdom? Would we not rather be wise? Would it not be profoundly unwise to make decisions in daily life guided by a well-diagnosed theory of wisdom rather than wisdom? There may come a day when the general public are so confused about wisdom they will hardly dare utter the word unless they have a doctorate in Wisdom Studies from an expensive university.

So what exactly is wisdom? Is it not the case that as we become more knowledgeable, by whatever means we choose, what we usually think of as wisdom begins to look more and more like well-informed common-sense? Is wisdom something additional to well-informed common-sense? Not according to the definition quoted above. The literature of mysticism is

known as the 'Wisdom' literature, yet as we acquire knowledge and experience we find it boils down to knowledge and common sense. I once asked a Buddhist to characterise Buddhist teachings and in a flash he answered, 'Enlightened common sense'. After all, if we have sufficient knowledge and experience then what else would be required for wisdom but common-sense? At no point on a journey to acquire knowledge and experience would a person require a theory of wisdom. They would not even need a theory of common-sense. A theory is exactly and precisely what they would not require, for it might lead them wildly astray. No wise person would judge the wisdom of a decision, action or teaching on the basis of a theory of wisdom, since not doing so might be a minimum condition for common sense.

There is a large and wonderful book by Whittall N. Perry entitled *A Treasury of Traditional Wisdom* containing tens of thousands of extracts and quotations from hundreds if not thousands of contributors to the Wisdom literature sourced from all continents, cultures and ages. They are systematic, such that there is no disagreement between any two of them as to the nature of reality and 'what is the case'. This implies wisdom, and yet the title may be misleading. If we assume this unanimity arises because its contributors were well-informed, this being the only plausible explanation, then it contains knowledge and not, as its title might suggest, a distinct substance called wisdom. In mysticism wisdom simply is knowledge and the word is usually used as a noun in this sense. It seems correct to call this book a collection of wise sayings since it is well-informed and full of common-sense, and certainly it contains no examples of impractical wisdom, but where quotations describe reality they are either true or false and where they contain advice and guidance they are simply well-informed common-sense. Consider the second-century Buddhist master Nagarjuna's famous text widely known today as *Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way*, one of the most important books in the literature of mysticism. His original title was *Fundamental Verses on the Middle Way*, since from his point of view there was nothing wise about these verses. The word 'wisdom' is a later addition used to indicate their truth, profundity and importance, not to denote some magical substance called 'wisdom' that can be extracted and studied scientifically. His text is a logical proof and either it is valid and sound or it is not. As such it cannot be judged wise or unwise, albeit perhaps his decision to construct and circulate it might be judged one or the other.

Let us examine a case of practically wise decision-making. Suppose on a car journey we become lost and arrive at a fork in the road where one fork leads over a cliff and the other

leads to town, and town is where we want go. It would be no more than common sense to take the road to town. If we are not sure which road leads to town then common sense would be enough to cause us to stop and check the map. But we could say it would be wise to stop and check the map, for we are being wise relative to our knowledge. Within the limits of our knowledge our wisdom is coincident with our common sense. Inevitably, however, our common-sense will only be reliable if we are wise enough to recognise the extent of our ignorance. But again, to take account of our ignorance is just common-sense. If we think we know which road leads to town, perhaps because we have a well-diagnosed scientific theory, then we will not look at the map and our seemingly wise and common sense decision to take the road to town may see us driving off a cliff.

Perhaps, then, one item of practical wisdom related directly to our decision-making would be to remember the extent of our ignorance. Descartes notes that an awareness of our own ignorance is an important part, perhaps the most important part, of our knowledge. Only when we are aware of our ignorance we will be able to behave as wisely as our knowledge and common-sense allow. Thus the importance of what in Zen is 'beginner's mind', for this is said to be the beginning of wisdom. We may be wise while being poorly-informed, but only to the extent that we know we are poorly informed. Not to be aware of this would be unwise, and not to take account of it would be idiotic. Would it be wise, then, to adopt beginner's mind? Or would it be just a matter of common sense? At what point does ordinary common sense become practical wisdom?

It might be argued that most people from time to time act in a manner contrary to common sense while being sufficiently well-informed to know they are doing so, thus that common sense is not enough for wise behaviour. But this assumes a limit on knowledge. The mystics say that if we could see the big picture and understand the meaning and consequences of our actions we would immediately, as a matter of common sense, stop acting unwisely. A Buddhist would say that the wisdom of the Buddha consisted in his knowledge and intelligence, not in a further mysterious quality worthy of separate study. Perhaps the Institute feels it can ignore such profound matters for being unscientific or impractical, but the question remains of how practical and useful a science of wisdom can be if it does not bother to study the global circumstances under which human beings make decisions.

It must be wise to study the world in order to better understand better our situation, enlighten our common sense and improve our ability to look ahead with clarity when making practical

decisions. In this case the word 'wise' still has a meaning and we have not quite explained it away. But why would it be wise to do this? What do we mean by saying it would be 'wise' to study our circumstances before making decisions? We can only mean it would be in our own best interest to do so, and no more than common sense.

The problem with not understanding the global context within which we make decisions is that while they might seem wise to us when we make them they may be profoundly unwise in a wider context. They may be unwise even from our own personal perspective. How can we judge that our decisions are in the best interests of ourselves or anyone else unless we have some understanding of our situation as a human being? This complication entails that a study of wisdom must overlap with a study of metaphysics. Often it would be unwise to do what is in the best interest of our ego and its interests. Thus well-educated and intelligent people may be seen making unwise decisions almost everywhere one looks, for they consider it wise to pursue their own interests. Even altruism is dangerous when unformed, for it may well do more harm than good. How is the Institute going to distinguish between wise and unwise decisions unless it looks beyond short-term selfish interests to the wider context for human behaviour? Kant argued that it would be wise to act in the best interest of everybody, but how can we do this unless we know what would be in their best interests? How can we know this unless we study the nature of reality and human life? Would it not be best for everybody if we all tried to understand our place in the Cosmos a little better, in order that our common sense is better informed? It seems certain to be in the best interests of everybody if even one person does this. Is the new Institute going to help us in this respect? Only if it studies how the world works and what is, in fact, best for us. How can the Institute going to discover this if all it does is create speculative wisdom models? Of what practical use will be its work?

Would it be wise to study wisdom, then, and if so how would one go about it? I see no point in studying it and no way to do it. Better that the Institute study and encourage the development and application of well-informed common sense, where 'well-informed' implies an understanding of the global context for our decisions and actions. If we have little knowledge of this then we will be unable to distinguish between wise and unwise decisions for we will have insufficient understanding of their consequences. If the new Institute can persuade the public to take up this study then this will undoubtedly help to make the world a better place. If it decides to avoid the acquisition of knowledge and experience for the sake of a 'scientific' understanding of something it cannot define called wisdom then it will suffer the



same fate as academic consciousness studies, which is to say stagnation, pointlessness, a hopelessly and needlessly confused general public and a lot of words signifying nothing.

No doubt this could be judged an arrogant and much too casual comment, but is it a wrong one? And is it arrogant or wise? Or both? Or is it just common sense? Would we have to become an expert in the science of wisdom to judge which of these it is, or just become wise? Or should we ignore science and not worry about wisdom and judge on the basis of ordinary commonsense? The reader must decide, but I suspect this one of those everyday practical decisions the general public are capable of making without any help from the new science of wisdom.