

Wisdom

In the days of Socrates, Plato and Aristotle philosophy was concerned with the search for wisdom and the search for an understanding of how each individual should live. Today, in a postmodern world, 'wisdom' is an unusual word to find in a philosophy book, but this was not always the case. The ancient Greek philosophers were occupied with the search for wisdom and this search precisely represented the possibility individuals have, as human beings, to be more than can be contained in any physical description. It is the omission of this possibility that is such a damaging part of the state of human beings today.

The motto of the Greek God Apollo, 'Know yourself' is, perhaps, the hardest task any human being can face. Wisdom and knowledge of ourselves do not come from learned philosophic journals. The professional philosophers that inhabit university departments may be cleverer than others but few of them are wiser. Wisdom requires the integration of a whole range of disciplines and does not come from intellectual study alone. It is the child of experience, adversity and failure. It demands integration of many elements which make up the life of a fulfilled human being.

Perspicuity

It is so easy to judge others, to impose one's own conceptions on the lives of others. Some so-called religious people are experts at this, branding as 'sinners' those who do not conform to their own simplistic rules. Perspicuity recognises human complexity and understands that judging other people is almost always done with inadequate understanding and information. Jesus condemned those who judged others and for good reason as judgement is always made with inadequate information. It fails to understand complexity and lacks perspicuity. Those who have wrestled with the complexity of life, who have lived serious lives seeking to wrestle with the difficulty of the human condition, know that simple judgements are almost always inaccurate and lack wisdom.

Seriousness in itself is part of the search for perspicuity but it is not the same as perspicuity. It comes from the recognition of the absolute demand made on each person to become a self, to fulfil his or her potential, to become what every human being is capable of being. However, insight is required to understand what this is and the radical consequences of being mistaken.

Perspicuity and wisdom are not things that merely happen to anyone. They are achievements, and many people who seek them for most of their lives may never attain them. Wisdom has the peculiar feature that the more it is sought, the further the person seeking may appear to be from the object of their search. Socrates felt that he knew nothing and, when the Delphi Oracle described him as the wisest man in Athens, he was so sure that this was an error that he set out to prove the Oracle wrong. In a similar way the great saints of the Christian tradition often acknowledged themselves as the greatest of sinners. This is not perversity, still less a glorifying in contradiction, but rather a recognition that the more individuals understand themselves, the more they achieve wisdom and a perspicuous understanding of what it is to be human, the further they realise they are from the ideal.

Perspicuity enables human beings to probe the complexity of what it is to be human. Wisdom may be the child of the search, but understanding ourselves in itself will not bring wisdom. It will only be a beginning of the path. The achievement of wisdom demands something more, and there is a key ingredient which has to underlie any ethical system and any idea of what it is to be fully human. This ingredient is accountability.