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Seeking Wisdom

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I was out working in the garden this morning when I heard a couple of crows cawing. I don't know the crow language well, but I knew something was going on. I looked up. Sure enough, two crows were cawing incessantly and flying around in all directions—the way they do when first spotting a hawk. In a minute, the rest of the flock had joined them. I looked up higher in the sky and saw not one but two red-tailed hawks circling far above; too far for pursuit, actually, and before long the ruckus of eight or nine annoyed crows all cawing at once died down.

Crows don't like to fly high, and these red-tails were circling high enough to be nonthreatening. One hawk was a large adult and the other appeared to be a juvenile, maybe half the size. I watched awhile. The adult circled again and again without once flapping its wings. The juvenile flying above it attempted to match its movements with the same effortless ease, but it just couldn't. After almost every turn the young one had to flap its wings a number of times before catching the updraft. I watched them until they were out of sight, then went back to my gardening.

The Ancients were interested in wisdom—much more than we are. They would be unlikely to attribute wisdom to creatures other than humans, but what both of these crows and hawks demonstrated was a kind of wisdom, a practical application of knowledge plus experience. Is that really wisdom? As soon as we contemplate the parameters of wisdom we begin to have difficulty. If I go to my big Random House Dictionary I see that “wisdom is the quality of being wise; discernment of what is true or right coupled with just judgments as to action.” Trying to comprehend what the dictionary is saying about wisdom requires a bit of wisdom.

Heraclitus speaks to the matter in a number of his fragments:

Wisdom is one thing. It is to know the thought by which all things are steered through all things (frag. 19, Burnet trans.). The wise is one only. It is unwilling and willing to be called by the name of Zeus (ibid., 65).

The Stoic sage is said to be perfect in wisdom, which Heraclitus says is impossible for all but Zeus—or whatever name you choose for your god. Nevertheless, that is exactly what we Stoics are asked to be. Margaret Graver says in *Stoicism and Emotion* (Chicago, 2007, p. 51), “The perfected human would resemble Zeus in goodness, though not in comprehensiveness....” Pierre Hadot takes this thought even further in *The Inner Citadel* (Harvard, 2001, p. 76) when he writes “...the Stoic sage is the equal of God, since God is nothing other than universal Reason, producing in self-coherence all the events of the universe.” And, again we find the same god-like description of the Stoic sage by Edelstein in *The Meaning of Stoicism* (Harvard, 1966, p. 9), “Like God the sage has the power to will and not to will, to desire and to reject, in short to master his thoughts. He has in his possession the true nature of good and evil. The sage is like God and distinguished from Him only by his mortality....”

Most of us are not god-like, of course, and at best we may only soar as high as the Stoic philosopher. That in itself is no mean accomplishment. And it is an accomplishment, an *individual* effort. We have little reason to believe that the human race as a whole has gotten wiser, but individuals *can* increase in wisdom, and some do. Wisdom can be taught and practiced. It must be practiced in order for us to consider someone wise. This is easy to overlook when reading what Diogenes Laertius says about the Stoic definition of wisdom. “And wisdom they [the Stoics] define as the knowledge of things good and evil and of what is neither good nor evil....(*Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, vol. II, book VII, ch. 89 (Harvard, 1991).”

But, *knowledge* is not enough. Wisdom implies more than knowing. It includes acting upon what one knows. Thus, Stoic wisdom should be defined not as DL says it is, but as knowledge of things good and evil and indifferent, and a life based upon this knowledge. If knowledge alone were the criteria of wisdom then an alcoholic who *knows* she should not get drunk everyday and abuse her children could be called wise. Knowledge *must* be followed by action and incorporated into a way of life in order for a person to be truly wise.

We have accumulated considerable knowledge in every field of inquiry *except* wisdom. In addition, it's important to recognize that the knowledge we have accumulated can and has been misused repeatedly. Every terrorist misuses knowledge every time a bomb is hurled. Every white collar crime, every malfeasance, every abuse of power is a nefarious use of knowledge. One of the chief characteristics of wisdom, that which makes it a cardinal virtue, is that it cannot be misused.

British philosopher Nicholas Maxwell states that “academia ought to alter its focus from the acquisition of knowledge to seeking and promoting wisdom, which he defines as the capacity to realize what is of value in life, for oneself and others.... [and] the application of knowledge to attain a positive goal by receiving instruction in governing oneself (Wikipedia, *wisdom*, 2014).” This is and always has been our focus at the College of Stoic Philosophers. We want our graduates to practice the theory they acquire here as it relates to the experience of living. This is why we call Stoic philosophy a *wisdom* philosophy.

Aristotle would not agree with us. He thought that wisdom and knowledge were more nearly synonymous. Unlike Stoics, and others, who consider wisdom and prudence interchangeable as one of the four cardinal virtues, Aristotle believed that wisdom entailed knowing the *cause* of things. He thought wisdom was a virtue only in the manner of intellectual, not moral, excellence. Because prudence was a moral virtue, wisdom in practice, he believed that this would necessarily place it below speculation. Aristotle considered speculation regarding the causes of things the highest form of knowledge, and therefore the only subject worthy of the name, wisdom. Philosophy departments in the academic world would agree with him.

Be that as it may, there is one thing upon which all philosophers can agree. Wisdom to the philosopher is quite different from the wisdom of theologians. The wisdom of theologians begins with articles of faith, whereas the wisdom of philosophers begins with axioms of inquiry. Theologians know, whereas philosophers want to know, which means the wisdom of theologians begins with fear while the wisdom of philosophers begins with wonder. My reference for making this comparison and contrast is from the *Great Books of the Western World, A Syntopicon II* (Chicago, 1952).

(The theologians spoken of in the above reference specifically referred to the Semitic faiths, the followers of the Bible, but the same can be said for other religions as well. If you substitute reincarnation for heaven and hell, as would be appropriate for various Asian theologies, then wisdom still begins with fear; in this case, the fear of incarnating up or down.)

The Psalmist plainly states that “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom (Psalms 111:10).” Augustine wrote of this fear when he points out that it is the fear of God that motivates us to know what He wills, and thus avoid the horrors of everlasting hell fire. Aquinas wrote (pp. 1106-7), “The wisdom of the philosopher and the wisdom of the religious both consist in knowledge of divine things, but wisdom as we look at it is considered not only as being cognizant of God, as it is with philosophers, but also as directing human conduct.... and in this way fear is the beginning of wisdom, yet servile fear is one way and filial fear is another.” Apparently Aquinas was unaware that wisdom for Stoic philosophers *also* directs human conduct.

Aquinas identifies the two kinds of fear the religious must know in order to be wise. Servile fear causes us to seek wisdom on how to avoid sin so that we will not be punished by God, and in so doing we are “thus fashioned for the *effect* of wisdom.” Filial fear is what he calls the first effect of wisdom, which a man experiences when he fears God and submits to Him. He then goes on to discuss three types of worldly wisdom that are to be avoided. When we become wise in externals we acquire *worldly* wisdom; when we gain wisdom in the way of the senses we know *sensual* wisdom; finally, when we acquire skills of excellence in any art or craft we have *devilish* wisdom, “because it imitates the devil's pride.”

Wisdom can be found in other ways and perspectives. Wikipedia states that “A basic definition of wisdom is the judicious application of knowledge.” Confucius said that we can learn wisdom in one of three ways: reflection, which he thought was the noblest; imitation, which was the easiest; and, by experience, which was the most painful. In Taoism, the wise follow charity, simplicity, and humility. According to the Inuit, native Americans commonly referred to as Eskimos, the wise Elder sees what needs to be done and does it without being told. There's beauty in the simplicity of this perspective.

Margaret Graver often refers to the wisdom of the Stoic sage in *Stoicism and Emotion*. One key passage describes our infallible sage in this way:

Consistency of belief is an essential requirement for knowledge and is what guarantees the infallibility and impassivity of the wise. If asked to state in just a few words the difference between the ordinary person and the person of perfect understanding, the answer one should give is that the person of perfect understanding has established relations of logical harmony among all his or her judgments and beliefs, while the ordinary person has not (pp. 134-5).

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Crows do not like hawks and will chase them either alone or as a flock (commonly referred to as a “murder” of crows, which I consider an unfortunate term when used to describe a community of the

most intelligent of all known birds). They are fearless except when the hawk flies too high. Crows apparently do not like great heights and seem to have the “power of discerning and judging properly as to what is true or right” when they know a hawk is higher than they want to go. They are in all other respects fast and agile wind walkers.

Hawks do not like crows and will avoid them by either flying away or flying higher. If what I saw this morning is typical, young red-tailed hawks learn to soar to great heights by observing the adult directly beneath it lifting and turning on the invisible currents of the air. Practice. The juvenile who learned the basics of flying when it was a fledgling, must now learn to soar. Can we call this “the judicious application of knowledge?” Is this wisdom? Is there wisdom in nature in all the living things we can see and know? Are we the only creatures that can be wise?

Wisdom is one thing. It is to know the thought by which all things are steered through all things. The wise is one only. It is unwilling and willing to be called by the name of Zeus.

God is Nature, and nature is God. Every act, every movement, every change in the cosmos is the unfolding of Nature's wisdom, “the thought by which all things are steered through all things.” Only humans question it, because that is our wisdom. We discern and we practice in our way just as all the other creatures do in theirs. The wise is “unwilling and willing to called by the name of Zeus,” or any other name you wish to give it. It doesn't care. Wisdom is in the air, the sea, the earth, the stars, the cosmos. Wisdom is in all things everywhere.

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