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Chapter 6

Wisdom: Reflections and Problems of Current Theoretisation – Injustice of Value-Based Hierarchies

Eeva K. Kallio[246]

Introduction

Human development and change are always twofold: they include both progress and regress, forward and backward going. However, generally, development is assumed to progress towards higher and higher stages and levels, and it is also assumed to be hierarchical, advancing gradually towards the 'better'. Wisdom is especially labelled as one of the highest attainments of optimal human development – an ideal and the ultimate goal of all development. However, these terms are not often analysed or reflected further to understand their problems and hidden assumptions, especially regarding unethical claims of 'better', 'advanced' and 'more developed'. From a certain viewpoint, these kinds of claims can be seen as discriminative, even racial, and unjust, as seldom have the criteria of ranking been explicated. Who determines which developmental level or stage is considered better or more developed, and on what ideological, worldview-based and axiological assumptions are such determinations based?

'To progress forward' is indeed the most used, common-sense definition of human development and change, at least in our *Zeitgeist* since the birth of biological evolutionary theory, though the idea of hierarchical progress traces back to history.[247] By its basic definition, wisdom is linked to the term philosophy, which literally means love for wisdom – so is it philosophy's task to define what optimal developmental goal is?

Empirical sciences have had considerable interest during the last three decades in defining what wisdom is. The study of adult development is of special interest here as it focuses on the highest reaches of individual

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[247]Lovejoy, A. (2017). *The great chain of being: A study of the history of an idea*. Routledge.

progress.[248] Ideally, human development leads to wisdom and a higher level of understanding.

In Western civilisation, its most original form, the quest for wisdom development, is already seen in the Socratic dialogues. The method of philosophical enquiry using deep discussion sought to guide towards a broader and deeper understanding of various issues. This journey of discussion leads ideally to the development of wisdom. In other cultures, various other methods were used, such as constant cultivation of the body and mind, e.g. in yoga or in taiji/qigong training in ancient cultures of India and China. Thus, methods to achieve wisdom have been verbal, discursive and social or/and bodily cultivation methods. Every high culture has its own ways to express and name it.[249] Lately, there have been publications that tackle this question of the cultural heterogeneity of wisdom claims. It has been found that certain differences exist between, for example, Western and East Asian conceptions of wisdom. According to Takahashi and Bordia,[250] the former focuses on knowledge and rationality, and the latter on intuitive and emotional features as assumptions of wise behaviour. In recent years, the discussion has been spread wider to include indigenous cultures besides other less-known cultures.[251]

Advanced Thinking

During the last decades, adult cognitive development – i.e. how adult thinking develops – has been defined in terms of highly advanced thinking, based on the longstanding theoretisation of scholars.[252] According to

[248] Alexander, C. N., & Langer, E. J. (Eds.). (1990). *Higher stages of human development: Perspectives on adult growth.* New York USA: Oxford University Press.

[249]Curnow, T. (1999). *Wisdom, intuition and ethics* (Avebury series in philosophy). Aldershot, England: Ashgate.

[250]Takahashi, M., & Bordia, P. (2000). The concept of wisdom: A cross-cultural comparison. *International Journal of Psychology*, *35*(1), 1–9. https://doi.org/10.1080/002075900399475

[251]Intezari, A., Spiller, C., & Yang, S. Y. (Eds.). (2020). *Practical wisdom, leadership and culture: Indigenous, Asian and Middle-Eastern perspectives*. Routledge.

[252] Perry, W. G. Jr. (1999). *Forms of intellectual and ethical development in the college years: A scheme* (Jossey-Bass higher and adult education series). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass; Labouvie-Vief, G. (2015). *Integrating emotions and cognition throughout the lifespan*. New York, NY: Springer; Commons, M. L., &Kjorlien, O. A. (2016). The meta-cross-paradigmatic order and stage 16. *Behavioral Development Bulletin, 21*(2), 154–164.

Kramer,[253] they follow more or less the progression from absolutism to relativism and, beyond that, to dialectical thinking. There is a strict hierarchy of levels in all developmental models, and they are assumed to be qualitatively different from each other. The claimed lowest level, *absolutistic* thinking, is parallel to causal, natural scientific thinking. Thus, thinking ends up with true–untrue statements in closed systems – there cannot be anything else but one right or wrong answer to a question. The transition to *relativistic-dialectical* thinking means the contrary: assumption of the non-absolute nature of knowledge, i.e. knowledge relativism and integrating contradictions into a new synthesis. At the same time, knowledge formation is an open process, as new viewpoints and results emerge and one reconstructs one's understanding constantly. Regarding these terms used in adult developmental literature, there have been some critical analyses[254] – for example, adult development scholars claim that relativism is part of adult cognitive development and does not imply that truth in itself is relative. It only shows that the majority of adults see knowledge as relative. Thinking also becomes more exhaustive as one understands that contexts, such as culture, beliefs, and worldview, among many things, have an effect on thinking processes – there is no 'neutral, ideology-free' thinking.[255]

Adult thinking is supposed to overcome the limitations of causal logic with multiple logics – for example, with the logic of emotion, intuition or demands of social life. It widens the boundaries of thinking by flexibility, avoiding being stuck in given thinking routines. Flexible logic makes it possible to consider the subjective side of thinking: reflection is open, and arbitrary and contextual things are pondered as intermediate possible 'variables' in interpretation. Different psychological models differ from each other; however, the extent to which these non-rational factors are considered varies.

Most of these scholars derive themselves from research on pure logical thinking and include notions like evaluative thinking in their models. Most

[253] Kramer, D. A. (1983). Post-formal operations? A need for further conceptualization. *Human Development, 26*(2), 91–105.

[254] e.g., Tuominen, M., & Kallio, E. K. (2020). Logical contradiction, contrary opposites, and epistemological relativism: Critical philosophical reflections on the psychological models of adult cognitive development. In E. K. Kallio (Ed) *Development of Adult Thinking* (pp. 208–229). Routledge.

[255] Kincheloe, J., & Steinberg, S. (1993). A tentative description of post-formal thinking: The critical confrontation with cognitive theory. *Harvard Educational Review, 63*(3), 296–321.

importantly, they also include factors other than cognitive factors. Thinking is contextualised and understood to manifest in certain circumstances and societies. There cannot be ideology-free thinking (except possibly in formal logic), as we are subjects who are taught under cultural–environmental influences. Therefore, thinking cannot be studied separately from other processes and domains, such as those comprising emotional,[256] socio-cultural,[257] system theory[258] or even religious and spiritual elements or higher states of consciousness[259] (see also the chapter by Peltonen in this book). Mature thinking is understood as the ability to reconcile contradictory viewpoints to reach a synthesis.[260] In particular, a strong tendency to claim developmental hierarchies is connected to some esoteric spiritual movements, like theosophy and anthroposophy. The latter has created a world-claimed educational system called Waldorf- or Steiner-pedagogy, praised for its artistic-emotional innovations and holistic education approach. However, there has been critical discussion as to whether the ideological assumptions of racial hierarchies are part of the Waldorf–Steiner school system as well, and at least in the assumption of human beings included in its educational philosophy.[261] This hierarchical thinking refers to the assumption that the 'Aryan' white race is the latest and highest development in the world, viewing the 'Yellow Asian' and 'African' races as being at lower levels of human development.

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[256]Labouvie-Vief (2015).

[257] Kincheloe & Steinberg (1993).

[258] Sinnott, J. D. (1998). *The development of logic in adulthood: Postformal thought and its applications* (The Plenum series in adult development and aging). New York, NY: Plenum Press.

[259] e.g., Wilber, K. (2001). A Theory of Everything: An Integral Vision for Business, Politics, Science, and Spirituality. Boston: Shambhala Publications; Alexander & Langer (1990).

[260]Basseches, M. (1984). Dialectical thinking and adult development. Norwood, NJ: Ablex.

[261]Staudenmaier, P. (2014). Between Occultism and Nazism: Anthroposophy and the politics of race in the fascist era. Brill.

The difference between single- and multi-perspective thinking[262] has also been defined as closed vs. open-logic thinking.[263] Multi-perspective thinking refers to the ability to abandon egocentric orientation and distance oneself from a problematic situation. At its best, it brings along intellectual humility, as one realises complexity with no straightforward, one-sided solution to problems – and Socratic uncertainty of knowledge.[264]

In itself, there are some serious critics of developmental psychology from the viewpoint of reductionism, especially regarding the logical-developmental theory of Piaget.[265] It has been claimed to be the universal theory of cognition. Kincheloe and Steinberg,[266] however, claim that Piaget's theory is based on a Cartesian–Newtonian mechanistic worldview that is caught in a cause-effect, hypothetico-deductive system of reasoning, and present that so-called postformal thinking could be the highest advancement after formal thinking in Piaget's theory. They are right in underlining the need to analyse political, power, gender, and race issues; i.e. context-dependency is needed. Their critique is very relevant, but, at the same time, they assume new developmental stages as hierarchically 'better' (i.e. postformal thinking) without analysing if stage assumption is necessary at all and questioning who determines whether certain thinking is better or not.

Wisdom as an Ideal Goal

The highest forms of adult development have also been called reaching of wisdom. However, it is crucial to remember that there are plenty of other definitions of wisdom, and many approaches, methods and disciplines

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[262]Grossmann, I. (2017). Wisdom in context. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, *12*(2), 233–257; Kallio, E. K. (2020). From multiperspective to contextual integrative thinking in adulthood: Considerations on theorisation of adult thinking and its place as a component of wisdom. In E. K. Kallio (ed.) *Development of Adult Thinking: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Cognitive Development and Adult Learning*. London: Routledge.

[263]Ståhle, P., Mononen, L., Tynjälä, P., & Kallio, E. K. (2020). Systems thinking and adult cognitive development. In E. K. Kallio (Ed.), *Development of adult thinking: Interdisciplinary perspectives on cognitive development and adult learning* (pp. 191–207). Routledge.https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315187464-12

[264]Virtanen, A. & Kallio, E. K. (2024 manuscript to be submitted): "Critical thinking approach" as a Neo-Socratic dialogue, a way to wisdom and inner development?In J. Stevens-Long & E.K. Kallio, *International handbook of adult thinking and wisdom*. NY: Oxford University Press.

[265] Kincheloe & Steinberg (1993).

[266] Kincheloe & Steinberg (1993).

focus on its understanding and cultivation.[267] Integrative multi-perspective thinking has been claimed to be part of the construct of wisdom.[268]Multiperspectival cognition considers separate, ideologically different viewpoints, each as true by itself to its proponent, as is the case with worldviews. It means humbleness to accept this stand, and humility is certainly one of the key features of wisdom. Also, in this kind of advanced thinking, several other components have been added to wise personality and wise behaviour. These traits include positive connotations, such as empathy, compassion and socio-emotional abilities.[269] Moreover, wisdom entails a strong ethical-moral component. A wise person must strive for the common good, i.e. to manifest self-transcendence, to reach the goal of equal opportunities for everyone. Briefly, wisdom has indeed been understood as a culmination and achievement of successful social-psychological development, not only the development of oneself egotistically.[270]

Perhaps the best way to define wisdom is the following: it is the *ideal* aim of advanced human development and learning.[271] Scholars have not discussed much of this, and only philosophically minded researchers have pointed this out. It may be something that is out of reach in 'typical' human life, but, at the same time, it is something that may be shown in everyday life in special circumstances. It has been closely connected to tacit and expertise knowledge as a form of *phronesis*, skilful professional abilities, or other competencies based on deep experience in any field. Often, these abilities can also occur in complex and problematic life situations. Wisdom has a close connection to the Aristotelian (and other Hellenistic philosophical schools) term *eudaimonia*, which originally referred to a

[267] Curnow (1999); Curnow, T. (2010). Wisdom in the ancient world. A&C Black; Curnow, T. (2015). *Wisdom: A history*. London, England: Reaktion Books; see also Aka Firowz A. & Mohammed A. and Peltonen, H. in this publication.

[268] Baltes, P. B., & Staudinger, U. M. (2000). Wisdom: A metaheuristic (pragmatic) to orchestrate mind and virtue toward excellence. *American Psychologist, 55*(1), 122–136.

[269] Sternberg, R. J., & Glück, J. (Eds.) (2019). The Cambridge handbook of wisdom. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.

[270] see e.g., Kallio, E. K., Tynjälä, P., Paananen, E., Virtanen, A. S., Ek, T., Virolainen, M., Isomäki, H. & Heikkinen, H. L. T. (2024, manuscript to be submitted). An Inquiry into the Concept of Wisdom: Towards a Holistic Wisdom Model.

[271] Swartwood, J., & Tiberius, V. (2019). Philosophical foundations of wisdom. In R. J. Sternberg & J. Glück (Eds.), *The Cambridge handbook of wisdom* (pp. 10–39). New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.

'good life', well-being or flourishing.[272] As stated before, it means a good life for everybody in all societies and cultures. Taking all these features together, it is obvious that wisdom is a difficult phenomenon to study (and achieve) because it is very complex, elusive and multi-dimensional.

Problems a Priori

Here, it may be sufficient to define wisdom shortly as an ideal goal of human development[273] and a 'value term embedded in cultural context'.[274] If wisdom is basically an attempt to question 'What is good for human beings?' it traces back to values that society has in certain historical eras and periods. There is always political diversity and hierarchies, as it is currently between rich North countries vs. South ones, and similar contradictions have been throughout history. So far, the definition of wisdom has been human-centred, but there has been discussion of its boundaries regarding global challenges. Is eudaimonia only for humans' benefit, or should we include nature in it? What kind of rights do animals have in this scenario created by human beings? Should we wisely count eudaimonia to globally involve our environment, not just humans?

It is thus strange that psychologists and other scholars from various fields have not considered any theoretical or philosophical analyses so far. Wisdom is a value-based term, and implicitly there is a need to judge values if the term is used.[275] There are only some notable exceptions[276] who ask, 'ethical reflective practice requires coaches to question theories of adult development and the cultural and epistemological assumptions, or knowledge and truth criterion, they are built upon, noting that even the concept of development itself is culturally situated and may be problematic'. Garrett[277] has claimed that all attempts to justify claims

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[272]Law, A., & Staudinger, U. M. (2016). Eudaimonia and wisdom. In the *Handbook of eudaimonic well-being* (pp. 135-146). Springer, Cham.

[273] Swartwood & Tiberius (2019, 20).

[274]Assmann, A. (1994). Wholesome knowledge: Concepts of wisdom in a historical and cross-cultural perspective. In D. L. Featherman, R. M. Lerner, & M. Perlmutter (Eds.), *Life-span development and behavior, 12* (pp. 187–224). Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.

[275] See also Peltonen, H. in this publication.

[276] e.g., Smith, S. & Bretherton, R. (2023) Ethics, wisdom and adult development in coaching. In W-A Smith, J. Passmore, E. Turner, Y-L Lai & D. Clutterbuck (Eds.), *The ethical coaches' handbook. A Guide to Developing Ethical Maturity in Practice*. Routledge.

[277]Garrett, R. (1996, 225). Three definitions of wisdom. In K. Lehrer, B.J. Lum, B.A. Slichta, & N.D. Smith (Eds.), *Knowledge, teaching and wisdom* (pp. 221–232). Dordrecht: Springer Netherlands.

about wisdom 'must sooner or later make various assumptions about metaphysics, about values (both moral and prudential) and about epistemology (especially about what it is to have a justified belief)'. There is also a problem if consensus regarding such values and assumptions can be reached at all, as it seems that wisdom refers to different things in different cultures[278] – although, at the same time, one must note that, e.g. so-called 'Golden Rule', ethical reciprocity, seems to be included in various major philosophical systems and religions.[279] These contradictions and difficulties may lay a shadow for the attempts to create a 'universal' wisdom model: there may be similarities, but there also may be differences. Lack of extensive cross-cultural research also seems to hinder research in the field, besides the already-mentioned lack of theoretical analysis of values implicitly assumed.[280] Also, McKenna[281] sees problems in developmental hierarchies, criticising possible (too) universalist claims, implicit ideological assumptions and sequential-linear development claims.

The second problem in theoretisation seems to be difficulties in clarifying how traits and features linked to wisdom have been traced. The first claim in modern psychology's history was Erikson's[282] claim that wisdom is closely linked to old age as a fruit of lived life and reflections of it. Later empirical research has not, however, given support to this claim. Wisdom, in its various forms, can be found mainly in any phase of adulthood and even in young adults. The results may hint at many things – for example, it can be suspected that wisdom as an elusive concept is defined too loosely and thus it fits any behaviour at any age. However, from another viewpoint, this may indicate that wisdom is not as rare as commonly assumed.

The third interesting question in wisdom research, again linked to the mentioned ones, is its close connection to philosophy. As we know, philosophy as a term refers to the 'lovers of wisdom'. Is it philosophy, or philosophy's aims and goals, which should be taken more seriously in

[278]Nisbett, R. E., & Miyamoto, Y. (2005). The influence of culture: holistic versus analytic perception. *Trends in cognitive sciences*, *9*(10), 467-473; Takahashi & Bordia (2000); Assmann (1994).

[279]Fischer, A. (2015). Wisdom. The answer to all the questions really worth asking. *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science*, *5*(9), 73–83.

[280]Walsh, R. (2015). What is wisdom? Cross-cultural and cross-disciplinary syntheses. *Review of General Psychology*, *19*(3), 278–293.

[281]McKenna, B. (2017).Embodying a wise graduate disposition in business school education. In W. Küpers& O. Gunnlaugson (Eds.). *Wisdom learning: perspectives on wising-up business and management education*. UK, London: Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315547039

[282] Erikson, E. H. (Ed.). (1978). Adulthood. New York, NY: Norton.

wisdom research? This again brings many problems. Is there any common definition of philosophy, and are there cross-cultural differences? It is worth noting that one of the latest histories of philosophy books explicitly starts from the idea that so-called 'Western' philosophy is just one of the many possibilities, as there exist similar philosophies in Africa, Asia and various subcultures not before counted.[283] Should we start a metaphilosophical discussion of what philosophy is – is it just a theoretical academic subject, or more fundamentally a way of life, deeply practical philosophy,[284] as it has been, e.g. in Daoism and Buddhism (which are counted in the West as 'religions' instead of 'philosophies')?

Very important late criticism of developmental stages, levels and hierarchies has been put forward by Evans.[285] He discusses the New Age and other human developmental movements, which mentioned the hierarchical development of less and more 'progressed' human beings. He claims that there are four kinds of risks in these movements: danger of spiritual narcissism, risk for selective social Darwinism, and kinds of spiritual eugenics and liberal utopian politics. He traces back this thinking tradition to the 18th-century ideas of human improvement and betterment, and so. For example, Hegel can be counted into the group among many other examples. Although Darwin did not count any value-based conception in his evolution theory, it has been an inspiration for many to include evolutionary ideas similar to their hierarchical, but also value-based, claims to progression. Evans[286] lists an impressive number of scholars who have tended to see human progress and change as value-based betterment and reaching of higher tiers and levels, e.g. Rudolf Steiner, Abraham Maslow and Ken Wilber, to name a few. The human development movement has been popular for over one hundred years, at least, and it seems to still have strong proponents and practical projects today. Besides evolution, philosophically this movement seems to have its roots also in ancient Greek thinkers (Plato, Aristotle) as well in some later philosophers (Plotinus, pseudo-Dionysius) – as said, with some hints to evolution theory, though interpreted in value-laden ways.[287]

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[283]Baggini, J. (2018). How the world thinks: a global history of philosophy. Granta Books.

[284]Hadot, P. (2002). What is ancient philosophy? Harvard University Press.

[285] Evans J. (2023, March). 'More evolved than you': Evolutionary spirituality as a cultural frame for psychedelic experiences. *Frontiers in Psychology, 14*. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2023.1103847

[286] Evans (2023).

[287] Evans (2023).

There is an assumption that 'Human evolution is an ongoing process, which can be guided to higher and better forms'.[288] In itself, reaching for development is not the problem: we rank students in the schools and universities, and for practical purposes, we categorise them by numbers or like to give an indication of what has been learned and interiorised so far. For the most part, these learning result aims are based on politically agreed upon decisions of educational institutions, however. These ideal outcomes of education are known, and they are realistic. However, the outcomes of the mentioned evolutionary spiritual movements are often determined by very idealistic outcomes like 'self-actualisation', a kind of '*Ubermensch*' as if there is some kind of essence in human beings that reaches some kind of end developmental point. The question of whether there is separate, different, non-unilinear progress to different goals is not considered (either individually and/or culturally), and there is no discussion as to why some endpoint of development is preferred over another.

In itself, an optimistic conception of human beings is a huge value: these scholars underline the *possibilities* of human beings, *the best* that can be reached. Without a positive image of the aims of education, it could be impossible to arrange education, as it indicates nothing can be done – a very pessimistic and a sombre picture of human development indeed. These intellectual traditions stress heavily the potential of human beings, but it is not said if the values attached to the potential's 'best version' are cross-culturally accepted or even accepted inside one culture. All of this critique mentioned above is also implicit in current wisdom theoretisation. Existential rudeness of reality fights against the naive idealism of wisdom theories and models, which assume that it is the general endpoint of optimal development in ontogeny without questioning the contexts and other conditions. Shortly, we must acknowledge that there is progress; otherwise, we cannot judge and compare societal progress. At the same time, we must keep an eye on how the intentions and far-reaching goals are defined or assumed. The fact that we are successful in creating intentional change with education (as well as with psychotherapy and any training methods) is a definitive argument that there is progress from point A to B, with some trusted tools and methods. However, it is another matter that defines the far-reaching goals of intentional change.

A serious problem in current wisdom research is, indeed, how weak relationships between empirical claims and their hidden assumptions and values are clarified.[289] Empirical scientists seem to neglect the theoretical understanding of values *a priori* for their peril. As we now witness just the beginning of wisdom research, we can hope these things are taken more seriously in future research.

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[288] Evans (2023, 2).

[289] Kallio et al. (2024, manuscript to be submitted).

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Baltes, P. B., & Staudinger, U. M. (2000). Wisdom: A metaheuristic (pragmatic) to orchestrate mind and virtue toward excellence. *American Psychologist, 55(1*), 122–136.

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Index

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The book presents the recent acceleration of human-introduced impact on the Planet Earth, which challenges the conceptual and theoretical frameworks of all disciplines, and their relations. This is especially the case in the exclusively human, society and culture-centered social, human, and educational sciences, and the political agendas they promote. The authors of the book problematize their dependence on the concept of development – as sustainable development or green industries - in education, governance, politics, and technology, and their isolation from natural sciences.

Although the book is aimed at an academic audience, it also opens to the general reader. The authorsmake visible the contradictions of environmental care and social progress between the Global South and North credibly and authentically.

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