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# NOT PARTS, BUT HOLISTIC TOTALITY. Comment on Streib's “xenosophia”

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[journals.sagepub.com/home/pst](https://journals.sagepub.com/home/pst)**Eeva K. Kallio** 

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## Abstract

Recent research shows that there seems to be some preliminary agreement of the definition of wisdom. Two main strands of wisdom research can be identified. On the one hand, it is suggested that wisdom is attained through life experience and self-reflection as a deep self-understanding. On the other hand, multi-perspective openness, flexibility, and orientation toward others are signs of wisdom. Thus, both external and internal realms of the mind are included in the definitions. Streib (2023) emphasizes the latter, as perspective-taking, intellectual humility, moral concern for others are the characteristics of wisdom, and he calls it “xenosophia.” I argue that it is impossible to define wisdom in this way alone, since psychological self-understanding is necessarily required. If there is no inner human change, there can be no outer social change. Both dimensions are necessary in a holistic understanding of wisdom.

## Keywords

General wisdom, holism, personal wisdom, psychological wisdom research

Wisdom as a subject of study is far from simple; it is itself an ill-defined, complex problem. Wisdom is inexhaustible, containing multiple dimensions and layers of meaning. It comes from different historical periods, cultures, religions, and philosophies, and includes modifications and variations in its manifestations. One perspective is to try to understand it from a psychological point of view, as has been done in recent decades. Wisdom is an individual, but also a collective phenomenon, and important as a tool to try to solve the global polycrisis, as the world is in a downward spiral and the tools used so far to solve it seem to be limited. Understood against this background, wisdom could indeed be understood as *xenosophia*, being toward others, as Streib (2023, p. 6) elegantly suggests: “because wisdom includes so many key concepts concerning the self-other relationship, such as perspective-taking, intellectual humility, moral aspiration, or concern

for others.” Given the nature of the current polycrisis, Streib’s analysis of some of the basic necessities of wisdom is certainly welcome and important.

Although it has been discussed that there is no common consensus in psychological wisdom research, recent research shows the opposite (Glück & Weststrate, 2022; Grossmann et al., 2020). There are commonalities, but more conceptual-theoretical rigor is needed in further studies (Kallio et al., submitted). Based on the above studies, two main strands of wisdom research can be defined. On the one hand, it is suggested that wisdom is attained through life experience and, in particular, through self-reflection. On the other hand, multi-perspective

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openness, flexibility, and orientation toward others are signs of wisdom. Thus, both external and internal realms of the mind are considered to be included. Also, the perspective of values, ethics, and the moral component in wisdom cannot be overlooked in any model of wisdom. Although wisdom scholars may pretend not to touch philosophy in their models, they are always considering values, since they are calling something wiser (and thus more valuable) in comparison to other phenomena (Kallio, 2023).

There are some questions that need to be considered before wisdom can be defined solely as a form of xenosophia, as Streib does. I argue that alongside wisdom toward others, xenosophia, there must be *sapientia sui intellectionis*. It is based on the philosophical-anthropological analysis of the basic ontological categories of the human being. Thus, what must be included in human being, since wisdom is fundamentally a human phenomenon?

### **Image of (wo)man: Subject acts as a whole**

I argue that all human phenomena under study should be constructed with a holistic perspective. Scientific studies often focus on reductionist, analytical, and part-based understanding, as “atoms” like variables and their relationships, especially in quantitative studies. Wisdom has also often been understood as a collection of components. However, the human being is a whole in multimodality, which is a well-argued alternative view of human ontology. I base this view of human being on the model of the Finnish philosopher-psychologist Lauri Rauhala (1914–2016), an existential humanist who worked extensively on the holistic interpretation of human being (based on the philosophical anthropological tradition, see e.g., Cahill et al., 2017). Human beings are always ontologically grounded in these three essential presuppositions: as (a) physical embodiment; as (b) person with a mind/consciousness aspect (primary basic consciousness and secondary meta-, self-, and value-consciousness); and (c) existence in multiple

contexts as intertwined systems (Rauhala, 1990, 2005). These, however, do not exist in isolation from each other, but on the contrary are in a constant “situational regulatory circuit,” that is, all these components are in continuous dynamic interaction. The human being exists ontologically in plurality, but acts in oneness, as a single entity. Rauhala’s ontological conception is dualistic in the sense that the human being exists as a physical, matter-bound subject, but also as a phenomenologically intentional, meaning-making subject, in interaction with the physical realm, but ontologically distinct from it. It is the integration of these different ontological modes that constitutes the human being as a totality.

### **Reflective experience as the dawn of wisdom**

Wisdom and its study may be a reverential, even sentimental, concept to some. It encompasses such lofty ideals that an ordinary citizen is unlikely to achieve (as is often the case with ethics and morality). The current, modern conceptualization of psychological wisdom is the starting point here (e.g., Glück & Weststrate, 2022):

- Wisdom manifests itself in challenging and difficult life situations, such as crises and difficult decisions.
- Wisdom encompasses a broad and deep reservoir of direct and indirect knowledge and experience.
- Wisdom involves thinking from multiple perspectives and embracing uncertainty, as our decisions are often based on limited information.
- Wisdom is oriented towards a broader ethical good that applies universally to all people.

In this context, let’s focus on the second point: the deep reservoir of knowledge and experience. It presupposes metacognitive abilities, as the capacity for self-reflection based on deep experiential knowledge; these are crucial components

of wisdom, although Streib (2023) has obviously focused on points 3 and 4. However, the question remains as to the role of the subject in the process of “xenosophia” (see also Ardel, 2024). In itself, through mechanisms of decentration and orientation toward others, the subject is of course involved. However, it may be asked whether this is enough in terms of subject. One might ask to what extent the subject’s conscious and volitional reflection has given way to orientation toward others (i.e., in Rauhala’s vocabulary, the metaconsciousness). Secondly, experiential learning based on rich life knowledge and/or in a specific field also accumulates as tacit knowledge. Expertise and tacit knowledge are part of wisdom constructs in some major models (e.g., Sternberg, Baltes). In general, the position of the subject in xenosophy remains unclear; Streib does not place much emphasis on the role of the subject to grow wise subjectively through life experiences.

Fundamentally, wisdom is about one’s own capacity for self-reflection and self-understanding (Ardelt, 2024; Glück & Weststrate, 2022). The human being is a conscious subject and has the ability to reflect, evaluate, and think about things, even about oneself, in order to optimally direct one’s actions toward common values. This is seen as an essential factor, especially in personal wisdom studies. Experientially, we cannot escape our developmental history and experiences and reflecting on these experiences can lead to profound self-knowledge and self-awareness, and thus to wisdom. There have been various methods of achieving this throughout history, with philosophical or religious backgrounds (e.g., self-cultivation practices in Eastern traditions such as meditation and practical philosophical exercises), and the same interest is definitely part of current psychotherapies, coaching, and counseling methods.

### **Self-understanding as “Sting of Alien”**

Self-reflection and self-understanding may sound like simple tasks, but in reality they are not. As already mentioned, it has been the

focus of many traditions throughout history. If humanity had really achieved it, the world would be a much easier place to live in, but on the contrary, there seem to be more or less fatal existential threats in near future.

I claim that “the Other” is also inside us, not just outside, as Streib claims. There is “the Sting of the Alien” inside us too. Do we really have a deep understanding of ourselves? For example, I can’t help but think about how potential climate change, desertification, and land degradation in Africa could become a reality in the future. Yet this awareness doesn’t stop me from continuing to consume in ways that, on a wider systemic level, could contribute to these very changes. Why do I go to online stores and buy sensual items out of greed, even when I don’t really need them? Why do I keep repeating this pattern? How can I gain a deeper self-understanding of the motive, my own greed? As Krishnamurti (2010) states, direct perception of our own motives and understanding them is absolutely necessary for change. People haven’t changed during history, and progress has been in technical and mechanical progress, not in human development. *This* is the “Sting of the Alien” in us. It is difficult to perceive, understand, and see one’s real motives, vices, and powerlessness. Considering that this has been a centuries-long project in humanity, there hasn’t been much progress.

But how deeply can a person really understand themselves? And do we have the motivation to change ourselves as a result? The paradox is that the notion of complete psychological self-observation is quite impossible. The human mind evades self-observation in order to protect itself; this insight lies at the heart of psychodynamic theory. However, there is a surprising association with Streib here. It is noteworthy that in some methods, such as psychotherapy, another person, the therapist, acts as a mirror and aid to honest reflection. Our own self-assessment is only one possible perspective on ourselves, but not the only one; others can see our blind spots better (Grossmann et al., 2020). Acknowledging our

own limitations is part of wisdom: it's wise to listen to others' assessments and remain humble in the process. We need other people as mirrors, reflecting a new narrative about ourselves. Self-understanding, then, is a complex process that requires multiple perspectives. But the nagging question remains—do we really want to change because of deep self-understanding?

In the philosophical tradition, alongside psychology, philosophy was initially conceived as a practical action for deep self-transformation. It served as a form of soul therapy, involving “spiritual exercises” for change (Hadot 1995). The re-emergence of these ancient philosophical tools also has links to psychology, as the methods used in the ancient Stoic school of philosophy have also been modified and re-used in current cognitive psychotherapy (Robertson, 2018). In the latter, these methods are merely used as tools for mental training. However, these historical traces show how acute and long-standing the urge for self-reflection has been in history.

## The other and the self are embedded

I argue that being wise necessarily involves both orientation to the external (other) and to the internal (self). We cannot forget the subject and the inner transformative action in any model or theory of wisdom. This is also in keeping with Rauhala's holistic view of the human being. If a person doesn't develop inwardly, it is not enough in wisdom to focus only on the relationship with others. It is an essential factor, but only part of the story. Even if we take into account the subject's need for self-reflection and self-understanding, there is still the question of how to achieve the necessary subjective change. Perhaps we should change our view of human nature a little: experience shows that deep human change requires great effort, takes a long time, and may have limits. From the dark side of human nature, the famous Finnish writer Mika Waltari pessimistically said: “It has always been this way, and it will always be this

way.” In order not to be so gloomy, *sapientia sui intellectionis* is urgently needed, along with xenosophia, even if it will take a long time.


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