

# Studies of Wisdom: A Special Issue of Integral Review

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Wisdom is radiant and unfading,  
and she is easily discerned by those who love her,  
and is found by those who seek her....  
To fix one's thought on her is perfect understanding,  
And one who is vigilant on her account  
will soon be free from care.

*The Wisdom of Solomon, 6:12, 15.*

Across cultures and centuries, wisdom has long been regarded as one of the greatest of all virtues. Yet in recent centuries wisdom largely disappeared from Western awareness, and the *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy* laments that “the concept of wisdom has come to vanish almost entirely from the philosophical map.” So much has it disappeared that when one of us (RW) became interested in the topic and asked the chair of the University of California philosophy department what to read, he replied “Well, we made a great start 2,500 years ago, but things have gone downhill from there.”

Why it disappeared is an intriguing question awaiting an integral analysis, but that it disappeared is a tragedy. For like the sorcerer's apprentice, humankind now possesses enormous knowledge, awesome power, and little wisdom, and that imbalance is a recipe for disaster. As Robert Sternberg (2003), former president of the American Psychological Association lamented, “If there is anything the world needs, it is wisdom. Without it, I exaggerate not at all in saying that very soon there may be no world (p. xviii).” Humankind is now in a race between sagacity and catastrophe.

Fortunately, there is now growing interest in wisdom in psychology, where publications—which only forty years ago were virtually nonexistent—increased seven fold from the 1970s to 2008 (Meeks & Jeste, 2009). Reviews are now available on general wisdom (Baltes, 2004; Baltes & Staudinger, 2000; Brugman, 2000; Staudinger & Glück, 2011; Sternberg & Jordan, 2005) as well as on the varieties or subtypes of wisdom (Trowbridge & Ferrari, 2011; Walsh, 2011, 2012) including personal and practical wisdom (Ferrari & Westrate, 2014; Küpers & Pauleen, 2013; Staudinger, 2014). Measurement scales have been compared (Gluck et al., 2013) and diverse perspectives have been applied to sagacity studies such as cross-cultural (Walsh, 2014; Yao, 2006) philosophical (Cooper, 2012; Curnow, 1999), and integral (Walsh, 2012). There have also been reviews of the implications of wisdom for aging (Sternberg, 2005) and psychotherapy (Germer & Siegel, 2012), for transmission across cultures (Walsh, 2009), and for education (Bassett, 2011; Ferrari & Potworowski, 2008; Maxwell, 2014; Steele, 2014; Trowbridge, 2007).



But the wisdom being researched is far from the kind of wisdom that was historically valued. What is usually studied by experimental measures is practical wisdom, or what was traditionally known as *phronesis*. That's important, of course. However, it is also far removed from the deeper transrational wisdom sought in the world's religious and contemplative traditions, a wisdom variously known as *prajna* (Buddhism), *jnana* (Hinduism), *gnosis* (Christianity), *ma'rifah* (Islam), or *chokmah* (Judaism). This wisdom is not only transrational, but also soteriological, i.e. capable of bringing enlightenment, liberation, or salvation. As the Hindu sage Shankara put it, "Just as there is no cooking without fire, so freedom cannot be accomplished without wisdom" (Freke, 1998, p.56).

But of course transrational wisdom – or transrational anything – doesn't fit into the conventional mainstream psychological framework, and can't be easily measured. What gets researched is what does fit within that framework, and what can be measured. Measurement and qualitative experiments are enormously important, but they are also partial. For not everything that matters can be measured, and not everything that counts can be counted. The result is that the deeper dimensions of wisdom are being overlooked. As Wittgenstein (1953) warned, "The existence of the experimental method makes us think we have the means of solving the problems which trouble us; the problem and method pass one another by" (p. 232). No wonder Richard Trowbridge (2011) titled an article "Waiting for Sophia."

In addition, current psychological research is little informed by philosophy or cross-cultural studies. For example, *The Handbook of Wisdom* (Sternberg & Jordan, 2005) has only two pages on "Eastern wisdom" despite the fact that Eastern philosophical-religious-contemplative traditions have focused on wisdom for millennia.

What is needed is an intellectual framework comprehensive enough to situate and integrate all forms of wisdom: rational and transrational, psychological and philosophical, religious and contemplative, Eastern and Western. Today there are various theoretical approaches emerging from diverse sources that address this need for a comprehensive, integrative meta-framework that can encompass such a range of approaches to phenomenon. Integral theory as developed and articulated by Ken Wilber, with its encompassing synthetic conceptual framework, seems ideally suited for this kind of comprehensive integrative approach. This special issue of *Integral Review* represents a first small step in bringing Wilberian integral theory<sup>1</sup> and wisdom studies together.

The confluence of wisdom and integral studies offers several potential benefits. The first is simply to encourage the renaissance of interest in wisdom. The second is obviously to begin to integrate these two fields for their mutual enrichment. The third potential benefit is to clarify the relationship between wisdom and development. Many researchers assume that wisdom is associated with higher stages of development, but the nature of this association remains vague. With a deep interest in development and its implications, integral studies may have much to offer here.

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<sup>1</sup> We will write 'integral theory' in its generic form for convenience and it is to be understood that we are referring more specifically to Wilber's articulation of the term.

Wisdom has been a worldwide pursuit throughout history, and religious-philosophical systems such as Judaism, Confucianism, and Daoism, as well as psychologies such as yoga and Buddhism, have explored wisdom for thousands of years (Walsh, 2014; Yao, 2006). With their long term interest in cross-cultural studies, integral researchers are well situated to adopt and encourage a more global approach to wisdom.

This issue offers a variety of integrally informed studies of wisdom. While drawing on the work of seasoned wisdom researchers, we particularly wanted to highlight the work of younger researchers who recently completed their theses. These include Drew Krafcik, Sharon Spano, Jonathan Rowson, and Juliane Reams.

Drew Krafcik and Sharon Spano both studied a topic of great interest to both wisdom and integral researchers. Their central questions were, “Is wisdom intimately related to psychological development, and especially to postconventional or transpersonal development? If so, what is the nature of that relationship?”

Drew Krafcik did a much needed and all too rare kind of study. He examined – not average people, who have been the usual subjects of wisdom studies – but rather wisdom exemplars, i.e. people viewed by their peers as exceptionally sagacious. Moreover, he performed both qualitative and quantitative studies – in-depth interviews as well as a variety of standard psychological measures of personality and performance, including the Washington University Sentence Completion Test (WUSCT). The result is an exceptionally rich study of exceptional people.

Sharon Spano also focused on questions of development. However, her work used business leaders to look for a relationship between wisdom and ego development as measured by the SCTi-Map (Susanne Cook-Greuter’s version of the Sentence Completion Test). She also examined nuances between and within developmental stages and reflective, cognitive and affective dimensions of wisdom. Both her study and Krafcik’s found only modest evidence for a straightforward relationship between wisdom and developmental stages.

Jonathan Rowson is an intriguing polymath who has been a grandmaster and British chess champion, a student of diverse topics ranging from philosophy and psychology to culture and spirituality, and has written on topics as diverse as chess, climate change, and spirituality. The interview with him by Jonathan Reams (who also provides a brief overview of Rowson’s (2008) dissertation as background) is similarly wide-ranging and beautifully demonstrates an integral mind at work. It also begins to enter into some of the less researched territory noted above by bringing questions of soul and spirituality into the conversation about wisdom.

One of the crucial questions of our time is whether we can find ways to cultivate wisdom. This was the central question for contemplatives and philosophers throughout most of history. Juliane Reams approached this question by studying students in a nontraditional educational format which included an emphasis on happiness and wellbeing. Juliane was intrigued by the possibility that this curriculum might also foster wisdom and sought to understand how the seeds of wisdom might be sown in such a setting. This is a vitally important question because if we are

to foster wisdom in the culture at large, it will have to be through wide-spread approaches such as the education system and practices such as meditation.

Caroline Bassett has contributed several fine reviews of the literature and in her present article she focuses on the link between wisdom and development. She uses several of the leading theories to view wisdom through their respective lenses. She synthesizes these and her own ideas in her emergent wisdom model.

Roger Walsh has had a long term interest in integral studies and more recently an interest in wisdom studies. One idea which lies at the heart of both topics is that perspectives – how and where we look at things from – are enormously important determinants of wellbeing, maturity, and wisdom. This article therefore focuses on perspectives, and the kinds of perspectives associated with wisdom and maturity.

Jonathan Reams has a long term interest in integral studies, as demonstrated by his editorship of this journal. However his interest in wisdom is more recent, and at this point I (JR) wish to say a few words to describe the impact of immersing myself in these the process of editing these articles and encountering the wisdom literature.

While the notion of cultivating wisdom has always been a part of my spiritual practice, it is only in the last few years that I have also encountered research in this field. Thus to me it was only natural to look for and be drawn to the less tangible aspects of wisdom, those facets not amenable to measurement. At the same time, I have found it interesting to see how researchers drew on the construct of wisdom in various ways in order to make it more tangible. I saw, as mentioned above, that bringing what has perennially been the domain of religion or contemplative practice into the academic domain has occupied modern researchers in a pursuit guided by the rules of engagement of their domain of inquiry. Thus the application of scientific method to the study of wisdom can be seen as an attempt to update, upgrade or extend wisdom into the modern world.

At the same time, I cannot help but feel a slight disappointment at the ways in which this move can get caught up in a reductionistic trap inherent in a central notion at the heart of method – the need to define the object of study. In this I note Rowson's (2008) wrestling with this tension by saying that it might be the case that to define wisdom is unwise. I find this to be a healthy tension and one necessary to hold. We need to hold something in hand and mind in order to study wisdom, yet we constantly need to remember that that which we are holding is not wisdom itself.

Thus it appears to me that to get at the heart of a phenomenon or construct like wisdom requires an integral approach; integral in that it can integrate the religious, contemplative, spiritual or transrational dimension along with the rational, measureable and observable dimension. It should also be able to link with the practical domain of wise acting, enabling us to find modern ways to cultivate the wisdom we are clearly in need of today.

Encountering the works presented in this special issue through working with the authors on bringing their more extended research work into this format and audience and reflecting on the intersections, overlaps, diversities and insights they bring, I find myself holding a mixed feeling. On the one hand I know a lot more about how wisdom is understood today, as well as more about how it is not understood – it is not a direct equivalent of cognitive or ego stage development, even though we might not be able to help seeing some threads in common. From this, I have this urge to use this knowledge in service of acting in wiser ways in the world.

On the other hand I notice that there is much uncertainty about wisdom – the more one learns about a subject, the more s/he realizes how little they know about it. This uncertainty sits within me in a manner similar to the urge noted just above, but instead evoking a doubt that I could ever really know if my action is truly wise.

It is from this place of having gone through our own journeys in relation to wisdom that we invite you to encounter the offerings presented here. We have drawn these pieces together and guided them through the editorial process because we feel that they can contribute something to today's need for the jewel of wisdom.

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