

# Wisdom and the Quest for Meaning

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## What's it all about?

There was a man once - and he typifies many others - he sought wealth, power and wisdom. In a sense he sought immortality in what he did - and he was very successful and became a king over his own country and he was widely acknowledged for his understanding of the world - but then he realised that as he got older he would suffer the same fate as the poor and foolish and that all his striving might have been futile - and he came to himself and exclaimed - 'All is vanity!' (or Vanity, Vanity, all is Vanity - Ecclesiastes, 1 v.2). Perhaps this is one of the most famous passages from the Bible - it comes from what is known as the Wisdom literature in the Old Testament - a literature which explores some of the questions that we will be raising here.

And so why are we here? - What's it all about?

Ultimately there are a multitude of questions hidden in this one question - but two, perhaps demonstrate the width of the problem - What is creation about and why am I here? This, then, is the quest for meaning? In many ways it is quite fundamental to us as people - as I have always maintained (Pastenak 2007) suggests that it is one of humankind's distinguishing features) - and perhaps of our educational system. But as Mackler (2009), Schwartz (2011) and many of us recognise that this human quest has been abandoned by our universities: they seek to teach knowledge and skills and to prepare people to work and succeed in a neo-liberal, materialist world. Perhaps this is also why there have been so few papers on the Wisdom of the Elders in the journal *Educational Gerontology* but see Ardel (2000) and Parsi (2009). Mackler, however, focuses on meaning and Schwartz on wisdom - both of which are the keys to this presentation because they overlap and are entwined with each other. From the outset of this paper I want to argue that wisdom lies in devoting time in seeking to understand our human life and in living it for the common good.

What makes us human? A number of books have recently sought to answer this question (Gaita, 1998; Clark, 2002; Vardy P 2003; Janicaud D 2005; Pastenak 2007,

*inter alia*) - especially as we are learning so much about the ability of other animals in the animal kingdom (MacIntyre, 1999). Significantly, there is no agreement between these scholars although the quest for meaning (see also Pasternak, 2007) is crucial to it but we can begin to see the problems when we understand how science has tried unsuccessfully to put our humanity into numbers: indeed, Galileo is reputed to have said that the book of nature is written in mathematics (cited in Gaarder, 1995, p.157).

The human genome project, for instance, has endeavoured to do this: the human genetic code contains about six billion letters grouped around 25,000 genes. We share more than 95% of our genes with chimpanzees and around 30% with bananas - but nematode worms which grow to about one millimetre long have a similar number of genes to us. What a fascinating set of facts about the human being, albeit a very small set – but, even if we could print out all six billion letters around our 25,000 genes what would it tell us about us as human beings? Actually, with the proper training it would tell us a lot about our physical bodies and our evolution, but it would tell us nothing about our humanity or what it means to be human. Our humanity cannot be reduced to numbers! Here then is a major difference between knowledge, information and meaning. Information is the facts - in this case the number of genes and the six billion letters; knowledge is when we have learned these facts and when we can interpret them so that they tell us a little more about the constitution of the human being and how we evolved; neither of these, however, can tell us anything about what it means to be human. We can reach similar types of conclusion when we look at the cosmos through the technological marvels of telescopes – we can understand a little of its content and something of how the cosmos reached this stage in its creation but it tells us nothing about the reason for the cosmos.

But we are faced with this more general problem that facts have no meaning and yet both the cosmos and human existence are facts – but they appear to have no meaning. Does this mean that our existence is meaningless? Is it just absurd? And is the cosmos meaningless – some form of cosmological accident? Some scientists talk of chance - is this just a chance event? Of course there is no apparently intrinsic meaning in the fact of our existence – in this sense it is meaningless – or absurd and it matters not how much we know, we still know that we will never understand the reason for the cosmos or for humanity, if there is one. But this is contrary to our common sense view of the world. We want to believe that it is not absurd and we keep on asking, ‘What’s it all about?’ Many religious and philosophical texts are based on thoughts that scholars and sages have had in response to this question. But we might go one step further and ask whether the quest itself to discover meaning is absurd because we know that in all probability we will never discover that meaning - if there is one. Perhaps there is no ultimate meaning - and this would be the position of some prominent scientists, but it is also contrary to our inclination which is to believe that this is not all absurd, meaningless or accidental. It seems contrary to the potential of our humanity – which seems to be on a perpetual quest – to discover and answer the question, ‘What’s it all about?’ What does it mean? What is this thing called wisdom?

## Part 1: Definition of Wisdom

Despite frequent references to it, there have been few books about wisdom - but see (Sternberg, 2003; Ford, 2007; Tisdell and Swartz, 2011), or papers in journals like *Educational Gerontology* and elsewhere (Ardelt, 2000; Stanford, 2006; Ryan, 2007; Parsi *et al*, 2009). Yet this lack of studies about wisdom perhaps reflects the age in which we have been living - it is the age of science - not just as academic disciplines but as being exclusive and powerful in the Western world especially. In a sense it has been an arrogant age because science has tried to reduce all phenomena to the material so that they could be studied empirically, but if they were not reducible, they were just neglected - as, for example, Sheldrake (2012, pp.255-257) records in an encounter with Richard Dawkins who only wanted to debunk the non-material in an uncompromising manner, rather than to debate it. Indeed, the knowledge society never used the whole spectrum of knowledge - focusing almost entirely on the sciences and technology. But we are beginning to see this dominance attacked - see, for instance Clark, 2002, Tallis, 2011, Sheldrake 2012, and in a recent issue of the Academy of Social Science's journal *Contemporary Social Science* (2012). And so we may be emerging from this rather intellectual dark age, and wisdom may well become a topic for study once again - especially amongst the elderly - although it may never assume the pre-eminence that it had in days of old.

And so what is this elusive phenomenon? Tisdell (2011, p.8), following Aristotle, suggests that there are two distinct forms of wisdom - *Sophia*, which is transcendental and the highest form of knowledge and *phronesis* which is practical knowledge. She makes the point that these two forms are hard to separate as they are part of 'the interconnecting web of wisdom of the universe itself' (p.8). Flynn (2007) also distinguished between practical wisdom and an intellectual dimension which also contains critical acumen. In contrast, Ardelt (2000, pp. 771-789) distinguished between wisdom-based knowledge and intellectual knowledge in six domains of living - goals, approach, range, acquisition, effects on the knower and in relation to ageing. Her comprehensive analysis is contained in a full table showing the differences that she perceives between each of these types in each of these domains of living, although many of the differences she records need much more discussion and evidence. Having developed this, she went on to develop a three dimensional assessment scale - cognitive, reflective and affective domains - although there might have been a greater place for the practical. Parsi *et al* (2009) also developed a model of wisdom having both individual and experiential factors and social domains: they then argue that older people have that wisdom which can be used to work with younger children. In a similar manner Sternberg (2003, p.147) has a relatively broad approach to wisdom in his balance theory between his six components of reasoning ability, sagacity, learning from ideas and environment, judgment, expeditious use of information and perspicacity. This he regards as a form of successful intelligence:

...the application of successful intelligence and creativity as mediated by values toward the achievement of the common good through a balance among (a) intrapersonal, (b) interpersonal, and (c) extra-personal interests over (a) short and (b) long terms, in order to achieve a balance among (a) adaptation toward existing environments, (b) shaping existing environments, and (c) selection of new environments. (Sternberg 2003, p.152)

Sternberg omits both age and experience, focusing rather on developed intelligence, practical wisdom and the common good. Ryan (2007, p.9) also accepts the difficulty in viewing wisdom as a unitary phenomenon and seeks to describe it as being found in a person who has extensive factual and theoretical knowledge, knows how to live well and does it successfully, and has few unjustified beliefs. For her, wisdom is a combination of knowledge, ethics, practice and critical awareness. Other approaches cover much the same ground as we have included here and from this brief overview it is clear that whatever wisdom is, it is ubiquitous.

I want to change the focus slightly in seeking to build on these definitions: in the above definitions, wisdom is something already learned - but I want to emphasise that it is the quest that is fundamental to our humanity and not the answers. This quest involves seeking to understand - to give meaning to the cosmos and all that is within it, including our own lives. In doing this, we look back at all the intellectual and contemplative endeavours of those who have gone before us, and we seek to learn from them. Ford (2007) suggests that Christian wisdom, for instance, is the sum totality of Christian theology - a belief system that helps throw light on the meaning of creation and on our everyday actions, but Christian theology, which is the product of only one of the major religions, consists of a wide variety of answers and omits some of the fundamental questions. But looking back is not the whole story of creation - in trying to understand it, we must also look forward and to realise its meaning also lies in the future - a future that we can affect by our actions. Its meaning needs to be realised in what governments do, what schools do and what people do! We have to play our part wisely in the continuing to build this world.

Wisdom, then, is in undertaking this quest: it is the process of constructing an interpretive belief system that gives meaning to the mysteries of creation including our own lives and to our own actions. It is a lifelong learning process because we build on our experience - enriching our biography - so that we can both understand and contribute more meaningfully to the world in which we live.

## **Part 2: Wisdom lies in the Seeking**

In contrast to those thinkers discussed briefly above, wisdom does not lie in the answers - the knowing or the believing, neither does it lie in the knowers' intellect or critical acumen although these are all contributory factors to the wise life. Wisdom lies partly in the quest itself and also in acknowledging that we will never know but that we must keep trying. Wisdom lies in the seeking to understand, seeking a meaning, to the cosmos - even though we know we will almost certainly never find the ultimate truth: we must keep on trying, understanding that the answers which we hold are neither ultimate nor timeless. But life is not only about the past: the cosmos and the social world in which we live continue to change and we know that we can also act in that world to help sustain and improve it and so wisdom also lies in actions we take because of our beliefs. In this sense, wisdom lies in acts of doing - consciously endeavouring to understand the world in which we live since we live in a state of disjuncture, and seeking to sustain and improve our environment for the good of everybody which is a state of desire. Underlying all learning are two states: disjuncture and the need to understand, desire and the need to do good. Herein lay the foundations of wisdom - in the desire to learn and to do good. But these are the foundations of living itself and so wisdom is about living well. Wisdom is a

ubiquitous concept because it can be discovered in every walk of life and in all of them it is about seeking understanding and seeking to contribute to the common good: this approach to wisdom may also be found in Bassett's (2011, p.36) definition of wisdom - 'wisdom is about human flourishing; it is having sufficient awareness in various situations and contexts in ways that enhance the common humanity'. However, we have adopted the concept of meaning rather than awareness since it conveys more about the timeless quest of humanity itself. Bassett also suggests ways by which wisdom can be taught (see also Sternberg, 2003) but wisdom lies in the process rather than the product - in the learning rather than the teaching - and the doing: to be even more precise wisdom lies in the desire to understand (learn meaning) and to contribute to the common good.

All learning starts with questions - Why? How? What for? - reflecting humanity's quest - as I (Jarvis, 1987, 1992, 2006, 2009, 2009b *inter alia*) have argued in many places. The questions arise because of disjuncture or desire - it is the gap between my recalled experience from my life or my desired state in the future and my perceived experience in the current situation. Meaning, however, is only apparent in responses to the Why?, although responses to the other questions might yield answers that can contribute to our quest for meaning.

Learning is:

The combination of processes throughout a lifetime whereby the whole person – body (genetic, physical and biological) and mind (knowledge, skills, attitudes, values, emotions, meanings, beliefs and senses) – experiences social situations, the content of which is then transformed cognitively, emotively or practically (or through any combination) and integrated into the individual person's biography resulting in a continually changing (or more experienced) person. (Jarvis, 2009, p. 35)

And so, the more that we question the more we learn but paradoxically the more we will become aware of the unanswerable problem of meaning. But thus far we have not tried to explore the meaning of meaning! It is a difficult concept to define but I want to offer a number of different approaches, which I have used elsewhere in my writing (Jarvis, 1992, 2009a, 2009b): metaphysical, socio-cultural, personal and subjective.

### **Part 3: In Seeking Meaning**

The quest for meaning shows itself in the many 'why?' questions we ask about almost everything in creation. Perhaps it is most clearly seen when shall children - about 4-5 years old keep asking, why? It is a problem to parents and to teachers and we frequently hear of teachers seeking to divert the questions and parents getting exasperated by them - but every time teachers, parents or significant others fail to respond to the a question the child's humanity is in some way denied. Our questions range from the metaphysical, the socio-cultural and the personal; they are about the cosmos, life, relationships and practicalities; they are profound and mundane - they are the foundation of all knowledge and belief; every academic discipline and every system of meaning; every desire to learn. As we pointed out above, meaning can be socio-cultural and personal and subjective. However, there is one dominant and

profound difference between the answers reached to this vast array of life's questions - some are about knowledge and some about belief.

*Questions that demand a knowledge-based answer* - These seek to understand the truth based on evidence, which may be rational, empirical or pragmatic. The answers have led to the academic disciplines within the fields of science and technology, and the social sciences - they are answers that are apparently relevant to the whole of creation or humankind universally. Knowledge is an essential component in understanding our world but it tells us nothing of its meaning. But those questions that demand a belief-based response seek answers that contribute to our understanding of the mysteries of the cosmos without claiming universal truth and are based on rational or pragmatic or intuitive (see Sadler-Smith, 2010) responses. Herein may be found the arts and humanities: they can contribute a great deal towards our understanding of the world but can also contribute to our beliefs about the meaning of creation - but they cannot provide definitive answers. There is considerable overlap between the two rather than a sharp division. Here we are confronted by the enormous paradox of our existence - seeking meaning lies at the heart of our humanity and yet we know we will never discover it - but in not seeking meaning we effectively deny our humanity! In one sense, wisdom lies in this paradox.

*Meaning and Culture:* As we have seen, as a result of our evolution humans are born with a propensity to seek meaning but science has in recent times effectively ignored it. Bruner (1990), for instance, was concerned that the sciences being unable to provide an answer did just this and ignored it. Assuming a narrow view of culture as relating to the arts and humanities, Bruner (1999, p34) wrote, '...it is culture, not biology, that shapes human life and the human mind, that gives meaning to action by situating its underlying intentional states in an interpretative system'. Throughout human history humankind has devised myths and legends about pre-history, about how the world was created and how human beings emerged - interpreting these myths and legends has sometimes been a very difficult intellectual exercise which has not always had enlightening outcomes, as biblical fundamentalism illustrates. Consequently, it is necessary to be critically aware of the answers that these myths and legends purvey. Individuals and cultural groups have all devised their own responses to the question, 'What's it all about?' Few, if any, cultural groups have not engaged in this quest. Many of these answers have not proven acceptable to the peoples to whom they were offered and they never gained socio-cultural acceptance, whereas others have dominated the world of religious thought for generations - some have been much more universal than others which have survived only within minority cultures. Nevertheless, answers have been given to these fundamental questions by religious and other metaphysical systems of belief but none can ever be definitive.

Belief systems incorporate academic knowledge but their foundation does not lay in the empirical evidence but in rational thought - and while they are social and cultural, they are also personal and subjective. It will be recognised that the way in which I am using 'meaning' up to this point relates very closely to Aristotle's understanding of philosophic wisdom, which is 'intuitive reason combined with scientific knowledge' (Aristotle, VI.7). But for Aristotle, wisdom 'is the most finished of the forms of knowledge' (Aristotle, VI.7) but the idea that wisdom is a finished form of knowledge is disconcerting for two reasons - firstly, whilst we are alive, we are still learning and, secondly, people who have a great deal of knowledge, such as scientific knowledge,

do not necessarily have a highly developed meaning system and nor are they necessarily wise. At the same time, such knowledge might be used in constructing one's personal system of meaning.

*Meaning as Personal and Subjective:* Everybody is exposed to the socio-cultural system of their birth: we know that from the very earliest age babies are exposed to the cultures into which they are born through interaction with their significant others. Babies experience the external world, remember their experiences and develop a shared sense of meaning. Nelson (2007, p.110) suggests that 'making-sense processes derive meaning from experience, relating elements of current experience to self-interest and goals and to past experience conserved in memory'. Everything that is remembered is, in some way or another regarded as significant to an individual, or as Nelson (2007, p.113) suggests, 'memory is a conservatory of meaning'. From the outset of conscious life, we store memories that are significant to us as individuals and they constitute the elements of our own personal construction of meaning, which always inter-relate with that which is discovered in the life-world. All the questions about 'What's it all about?' get a personal and subjective answer - it is a combination of memory, experiences of living and the thought and feelings about those experiences.

*Meaning and Intention:* Meaning has another explanation - it is about personal intention: referring to the past, individuals seeking to explain past acts can say what their intention was (I meant...). The reasons for my actions are to be found both within our value system and our wider belief system about meaning itself. Intentions, like other aspects of the belief systems are not knowledge-based, but are grounded in our own experience, previous learning and our own rational thought. Meaning is a belief system which embodies both knowledge about the world and an understanding of human values.

Meaning, then, is a belief system that is being learned and modified through the experience of living - it is our response to the human quest: it is a fundamental element of lifelong learning. It is a life-time's quest - although we will never arrive at the destination. The novelist Evelyn Waugh once commented: 'Only when one has lost all curiosity about the future has one reached the age to write an autobiography' (in Pasternak's 2007, p.130). Perhaps we would be wise to never consider writing one! In this sense the quest relates both to our being and becoming - and also to wisdom.

#### **Part 4: Wisdom and Meaning**

Our humanity lies in our response to the human quest - just what is it all about? It lies in our seeking to understand what creation is and our place within it. From time immemorial humankind has embarked upon this quest and it has resulted in a highly developed body of academic knowledge in all the disciplines and also to a wide variety of belief systems. Many scholars have sought to locate wisdom in either the body of knowledge or the system of meaning but by so doing they would disbar those who have not had the opportunity to learn these things from being recognised as wise. But understanding meaning is a universal potential because it is culturally based. Only those who fail to embark upon the human quest are excluded. Wisdom lies in the desire to understand life and living and in the process of being we will learn from

our experiences of life itself and continue to become - from both the primary experiences of life and also the secondary. Wisdom lies in the manner in which we use these experiences in order to learn from every situation in which we find ourselves. For example, in our busy lives in which we often have little time to think, we tend to act pragmatically and instrumentally upon our initial understanding of a situation whereas, if we spent longer we may see richer and deeper meaning than we saw initially. Crawford (2005) shows how we can enrich our experiences through reflection and contemplation and also by being fully attentive to and concerned about the other actors with whom we interact. This can lead to a new understanding of the world - or an enriched meaning system. Honore (2004) has also argued that we can enrich our experiences of life by spending more time on them which will result in a different and richer meaning system. At the same time we have to be critically aware of the validity of all that we learn from our lives. Wisdom, then, is not just seeking to respond to this human quest - it is how we respond to it. In this sense, wisdom is about practical living.

As we live and learn, so we can become more aware of the opportunities in life to learn and share life's experiences and the more we understand the more we will create and use these experiences. It is upon these experiences that we can learn more about our human quest and appreciate even more the wonder and the mystery of the cosmos and life itself and the beauty of sharing our understanding of it with others. Aristotle (VI.8:148) regarded experience as the basis of practical wisdom whereas I would argue that wisdom lies in creating and learning from all the experiences of life and in this sense it is practical. To become an expert, Ericsson (cited from de Wiel *et al* 2011) has argued that the practitioner has to undertake about 10,000 hours of deliberate practice - as we age, we all have more than these 10,000 hours in the practice of life and so we appreciate even more the mystery of creation, develop our own meaning system and increase our desire to share our understanding with others. But we cannot assume that merely because we have grown older that we have automatically developed a sophisticated understanding of existence or the desire to share the fruits of their learning with others because we may have used the time in our lives unwisely and so we have not developed as we might have done.

## **Conclusion**

Wisdom, then, is our practical response to the human quest throughout our lives - in so doing we learn to appreciate the mystery of being and develop our own belief system which we are happy to share with others our response to the questions that underlay our existence. There is no empirical evidence that allows us to measure wisdom since it cannot be reduced to a material entity - it is a mental product. While we may assume that its development is related to the ageing process, there is no age at which wisdom begins or ends. Indeed, some who think that they have developed wisdom may be deluded and others who think that they have not achieved wisdom may not have done so. However, those who have achieved it may not know that they have done although their wisdom will be recognised by others.

Life is a quest for meaning and wisdom is the way in which we respond to it.

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