

10-1-2010

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### Recommended Citation

Evans, Stephen (2010) "Wisdom As Conceptual Understanding: A Christian Platonist Perspective," *Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers*: Vol. 27 : Iss. 4 , Article 1.

Available at: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy/vol27/iss4/1>

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# WISDOM AS CONCEPTUAL UNDERSTANDING: A CHRISTIAN PLATONIST PERSPECTIVE

C. Stephen Evans

This article argues that Platonism provides a plausible account of wisdom, one that is especially attractive for Christians. Christian Platonism sees wisdom as conceptual understanding; it is a “knowledge of the Forms.” To be convincing this view requires us to see understanding as including an appreciation of the relations between concepts as well as the value of the possible ways of being that concepts disclose. If the Forms are Divine Ideas, then we can see why God is both supremely wise and the source of all human wisdom. The account of wisdom provided helps explain the relation between wisdom and knowledge, the connection between wisdom and emotion, and much about how wisdom is acquired. The view also helps explain why someone who lacks extensive propositional knowledge can still be wise, and it helps us see why an understanding of the Biblical narrative and participation in the life of the Church can be important aids in the development of wisdom.

Although every introduction to philosophy text informs us that the word “philosophy” derives from Greek words meaning the love of wisdom, contemporary philosophy has had surprisingly little to say about wisdom, in proportion to the quantity of writing about such topics as knowledge, justification, and moral obligation, not to mention the usual things discussed in contemporary metaphysics. And I suspect that an individual who perused the contemporary philosophical journals or attended a contemporary meeting of one of the divisions of the American Philosophical Association might well wonder if contemporary philosophy *is* actually a quest for wisdom inspired by love. Not only is there usually very little explicit discussion of wisdom; the observer of the contemporary philosophical scene might well wonder whether the things that are discussed even have much relevance to wisdom, and whether the discussions that take place help either the philosophers doing the discussing or anyone else to make progress towards becoming wiser. Are contemporary philosophers, as a group, wiser than other people? I am not sure that we are; some of us are surely smarter and cleverer than most folks, and undoubtedly many of us are learned and knowledgeable about many things. But it is not clear that the kind of knowledge most of us possess makes us wise.

What is the relation between knowledge and wisdom? Well, of course, it might make a difference what conception of knowledge we are operating



with. Contemporary epistemology, by and large, operates with a conception of knowledge in which the object of knowledge consists of propositions. Knowledge is justified true belief, or reliably produced true belief, or true beliefs that are the achievements of an excellent cognitive agent, or something like one of these things plus some further condition that must be added to rule out Gettier cases. In virtually all of these cases, the things that count as knowledge are beliefs, and the contents of the beliefs are propositions. There is, however, an older conception of knowledge, found in the Greeks and present throughout the middle ages, surviving at least until such early modern philosophers as Locke, in which knowledge is a kind of *seeing*, a direct vision of something. (The ancient and medieval philosophers tended to see this “seeing” as a direct encounter with reality itself, while the moderns typically saw the object of knowledge as an “idea” or mental representation of reality.) It is arguable, I think, that this conception of knowledge as awareness continues in our ordinary concept of knowledge even today, though it is not prominent in philosophical theories of knowledge.

I will return to this older conception of knowledge as a kind of direct seeing in due course, but I want first to work with the familiar contemporary philosophical concept of knowledge as propositional knowledge. In this propositional sense of knowledge, I take it as a datum that knowledge and wisdom are not the same thing, even though they may be connected. We all know people who know lots of facts but who are not very wise. Some of us have been privileged to know uneducated people, people who do not know very many things, who are nonetheless very wise. So whatever else wisdom might be, it is not simply knowing a great many propositional facts.

I suspect that the aridity of some recent philosophical work on wisdom is due to the assumption that wisdom must be understood in terms of propositional knowledge. If one looks, for example, at Sharon Ryan’s *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* article on wisdom, Ryan considers four possible views of wisdom: (1) wisdom as epistemic humility, knowing what one does not know; (2) wisdom as epistemic accuracy—knowing what one knows and what one does not know; (3) wisdom as knowledge—either extensive empirical knowledge or “knowing how to live well”; and (4) wisdom as knowledge and action—knowing how to live well and actually doing so.<sup>1</sup> Ryan concludes that there is some truth in all four views and puts forward the claim that a person is wise if and only if the person has extensive factual and theoretical knowledge, knows how to live well, has succeeded in living well, and has few unjustified beliefs. This seems more a hodge-podge of conditions than a well-thought-out understanding of wisdom. I suspect the problem is that the conception of knowledge Ryan is operating with for at least three of these four conditions seems to be propositional knowledge.

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<sup>1</sup><http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/wisdom/> (2007).

Besides being a bit of a hodge-podge, Ryan's view just does not work. It is not clear that all of these elements are necessary for wisdom: Would someone really argue that Gandhi or Gautama (the Buddha) were not wise people because they lacked "extensive factual and theoretical knowledge?" And suppose it is true that St. Francis of Assisi had a good number of unjustified beliefs. Would that disqualify him from being wise?

I don't mean to suggest that there is no connection between wisdom and propositional knowledge. One characteristic I would expect to find in a wise person is an understanding of the value of propositional knowledge. As some of the views that Ryan discusses imply, perhaps the wise person does not value all kinds of knowledge equally, but recognizes that some kinds of knowledge possess a special value: the wise person knows what it means to live well and perhaps how to do so. However, perhaps in addition to paying attention to what the wise person knows, we need to take account of how the wise person knows what he or she knows. In talking about the "how" of knowledge I don't mean to speak primarily about the way the person gained this knowledge, but rather about what we might call the mode of understanding that the knowledge includes.

Let me try to unpack this somewhat cryptic remark by looking at the structure of propositional knowledge. To really know some true proposition of the form "S is p," the knower must have an understanding of the relevant concepts "S" and "p." To know that snow is white, I must have an understanding of what it is to be snow and what it is to be white. To turn to a more interesting example, if it were true that "property is a form of theft," as Proudhon asserted (though I assume this is in fact false), to know this is true one would have to have an understanding of the concepts of both property and theft. We might use the term "knowledge" to describe this understanding, and say that the individual in this case knows what property is and knows what theft is, but if so, I think we are using it more in the ancient sense of knowledge as a kind of seeing, rather than in the modern propositional sense. And we might think that the knowledge that this understanding embodies must involve a reference to truth, since we would undoubtedly say that the person must have a true understanding of property and theft in order to know this proposition. But this again does not seem to be the contemporary sense of truth, in which truth involves a correspondence relation between a proposition and reality, since the "correspondence" in this case, if that is the right term, seems to be between concept and reality. Though I am far from a Heidegger scholar, perhaps it is something like this sense of truth that Heidegger is getting at in *Being and Time*, where he argues that there is a more primordial kind of truth than correspondence truth, the truth of "uncoveredness" or "disclosedness" or "revelation."<sup>2</sup> For when we do have a grasp of some concept, it is as if that concept in some way discloses or uncovers some aspect of reality

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<sup>2</sup>Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), 256–273.

for us. And that is not surprising, since a concept is simply a possible way of being.

It is, I think, a striking feature of this kind of conceptual understanding that it comes in degrees. Two individuals can both know some proposition to be true, but one can know it in a deeper way because that individual has a deeper understanding of the relevant concepts. It is for this reason that Kierkegaard is fond of saying, somewhat paradoxically, that “to understand and to understand are two different things.”<sup>3</sup> He means that one can know a truth but have a very superficial understanding of what one knows. Such a person might be able to answer a true-false question about the proposition in question, and perhaps even translate the proposition into a foreign language. So in one sense the person understands the relevant concepts and therefore the proposition, but the understanding can be a kind of purely verbal understanding, divorced from any connection to reality. In *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, Kierkegaard (I am going to ignore issues of pseudonymity in this paper) gives several examples of the kinds of things that can be known in a deep way or a superficial way, depending on the kind of understanding that is an ingredient in the knowledge.<sup>4</sup>

We all know, says Kierkegaard (speaking to his nineteenth-century Danish contemporaries), that “I should thank God for the good he gives me.”<sup>5</sup> That gratitude towards God is good is something that everyone knows, or at least something that every Christian is supposed to know. Nevertheless, not everyone, not even every Christian, has a deep understanding of what it means to be grateful to God. Does it mean that I should thank God only for the things that I see as good? Ought I to be thankful for things that do not appear to be good, at least to most people, things such as trials and sufferings? What, exactly, does it mean for me to be grateful and to live with gratitude? What is the nature of the God to whom I should be grateful and how do I properly express my gratitude? Without answers to such questions as these, my “knowledge” of the truth of the proposition may be quite superficial.

Furthermore, to have a really profound grasp of what it means to be grateful to God, I need to be able to answer these questions in relation to the concrete circumstances of my own life, so that I know what gratitude means *for me, in my situation*. What is needed for a deeper and more profound knowledge is not more propositional knowledge, but a deeper understanding of the relevant concepts, including a sense of how the concept bears on the individual’s own life. And it does seem that the individual who has this deeper kind of knowledge is thereby at least a little wiser.

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<sup>3</sup>Søren Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), p. 90.

<sup>4</sup>Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments*, Vol. I, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton University Press, 1992), pp. 165–188.

<sup>5</sup>*Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, pp. 178–179.

Let me therefore say, as a first stab at understanding wisdom, that wisdom is simply conceptual understanding, or knowledge of concepts, in the sense of knowledge in which knowledge is not necessarily propositional. The wise person is not simply the person who knows a lot of facts, but who has a deep understanding of the concepts we employ in stating those facts. We might say, following Plato, that wisdom is a knowledge of the Forms. Here I am not ashamed to associate myself with the long and distinguished tradition of Christian Platonism, a tradition that goes back at least to Augustine and includes such distinguished contemporary philosophers as Robert Adams.

Since concepts, on this view, disclose reality to us, the person who has knowledge of the Forms does not merely know concepts. The person who has this kind of understanding can recognize those concrete realities that *fall under* a concept. To put it paradoxically, conceptual understanding is not purely “conceptual,” but includes an ability to recognize things as what they are. This is not a genuine paradox; someone who understands a concept has the ability to recognize things as they are, because a concept is a possible way of being. The wise person understands in a deep way what it is to be good, what justice is, what courage is, and thus can recognize instances of goodness and justice.

On this Christian Platonist proposal, the wise person understands Goodness, Beauty, Justice, and whatever other Forms there may be. And here a knowledge of the Forms is not merely a knowledge of what is the case, but of what might possibly be the case as well as what must necessarily be the case. To understand the essence of beauty is to know the different ways beauty might possibly be encountered, rather than simply to know what things are beautiful, and of course it involves an understanding of relations that hold between the Forms. The person who understands the beautiful deeply must also understand the ugly, and have some grasp of the relations that hold between the beautiful and the good and the true.

To this modal knowledge of what is possibly and necessarily true, we might plausibly add that the kind of understanding that constitutes wisdom also includes knowing what would probably be the case in some specific situation when some quality is present. Thus, a wise person not only knows what forms courage can possibly take and what courage must necessarily include, but also knows, assuming that the requisite knowledge of human nature is also present, that a human person who is courageous is not likely to turn and run in the face of some particular threat.

Recently Jonathan Kvanvig has written, in his book *The Value of Knowledge and the Pursuit of Understanding*, about understanding, which he also distinguishes from knowledge in the ordinary sense.<sup>6</sup> Kvanvig writes that

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<sup>6</sup>Jonathan L. Kvanvig, *The Value of Knowledge and the Pursuit of Understanding* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003). The attention given by Kvanvig and others recently to the role of understanding in epistemology is an important development that, if this paper is right, pushes contemporary epistemology in a direction that brings questions about wisdom to the foreground.

“understanding requires, and knowledge does not, an internal grasping or appreciation of how the various elements in a body of information are related to each other.”<sup>7</sup> I think that conceptual understanding in my sense is certainly related to what Kvanvig has in mind by “understanding,” for understanding a concept is partly a matter of seeing the relations between that concept and others, and the person who sees those relations will be able rightly to see the relations between the elements in a body of information. Kvanvig distinguishes understanding that is propositional in character (“understanding that p”) and conceptual understanding that is “objectual” in character. The latter kind of understanding he describes as “quasi-factive” in nature, since it may be directed to “chunks” of information, but it is not clear that such understanding must be propositional in character. The key idea is that understanding requires a recognition of the connections and relations between the objects in the region of understanding. If it is not identical to conceptual understanding in my sense, this kind of understanding is at least a central part of conceptual understanding.

Conceptual understanding in my sense, while an ingredient in propositional understanding, seems to me to be something more elemental, since its focus is on concepts, conceived as instruments whereby reality is uncovered or revealed to us. One might think that conceptual understanding is essentially propositional after all; it is just that to understand a concept is not only to know what is in fact true, when some predicate actually applies to some substance, for example, but what could possibly be true and what is necessarily true concerning that predicate (and perhaps what is probably true). However, I am inclined to think that this gets things upside down. We don’t understand a concept because we know the truth values of its modal instances, but we know the truth value of the modal instances because we have an understanding of the concept.<sup>8</sup>

This initial suggestion that wisdom is linked to conceptual understanding may look somewhat unpromising, since it does not appear to capture the practical dimension of wisdom. Surely, Robert Nozick is right, when, in his book *The Examined Life*, he maintains that “wisdom is practical; it helps. *Wisdom is what you need to understand in order to live well and cope with the central problems and avoid the dangers in the predicament(s) human beings*

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<sup>7</sup>Kvanvig, *The Value of Knowledge*, pp. 192–193.

<sup>8</sup>One might think, as one reviewer of the article suggested might possibly be the case, that in the end conceptual understanding reduces to propositional knowledge after all, if one includes in this body of knowledge such propositions as “knowing that form C is more important than D and less important than E,” “knowing what is the appropriate emotional response to instances of C,” “knowing what is possible for C-ness,” and so on. However, I think this suggestion faces several problems. One is a “which comes first, chicken or egg” problem. It is true that at least much of what we call conceptual understanding can be expressed propositionally. However, it seems equally true that propositional knowledge itself seems to presuppose conceptual understanding, for the Heideggerian reason discussed above. A second problem is I think more serious: The grasping of possibilities or seeing that includes understanding and appreciating the value of possible ways of being and their relations with other possible ways of being represents an *engagement* with the Forms that is not reducible to propositional assent.

*find themselves.*"<sup>9</sup> How does conceptual understanding connect with this practical task? Does not my initial definition of wisdom appear to be too theoretical to fulfill the role Nozick says wisdom must satisfy?

To deal with this problem, I must expand on what I mean by conceptual understanding. I have already said that the understanding in question is a kind of seeing, a direct awareness of something. To use the Heideggerian metaphor, the concept is what uncovers or reveals some aspect of reality. What must be added at this point is that the seeing must be thought of as including an "appreciating" or "proper estimating" of what is seen. The person who genuinely understands gratitude is the person who not only sees what gratitude essentially is but also grasps the value and importance of gratitude. If our minds are steeped in the Humean fact-value distinction, this claim may seem puzzling, but that may say more about this Humean picture of reality than about how things are. After all, Plato himself thought that the person who had a knowledge of the Forms would also be the person who knew how to live well, and even would know how to direct a society. Plato's theory of Forms, even if not itself Socratic, grows out of the Socratic quest to understand such things as courage, friendship, and justice. To make sense of the value Plato attaches to the Forms, we must not think of the seeing involved in understanding as simply a knowledge of propositional facts, but as an awareness of the true nature of something that includes a proper appreciation of its value. The person who can say what beauty is, and even what things may possibly be beautiful, but who does not see that what is beautiful is something to be savored and enjoyed does not really understand beauty, just as the person who can say what our moral obligations are, but fails to see that an obligation is something that must be fulfilled does not really understand the nature of moral obligation.

Once we see that conceptual understanding has this valuational dimension, we can also deal with a second possible objection. One might think that wisdom could not simply consist in conceptual understanding *per se*, but rather understanding of what is really important. After all, no one, with the possible exception of Kermit the Frog, thinks that a deep understanding of "greenness" is a crucial element in wisdom. Surely, the wise human person is mainly concerned with understanding those concepts that bear in a crucial way on human existence.

The objection seems to be on target; not all concepts are equally important from the perspective of the wise person. However, if understanding contains the valuational dimension I have suggested it does, we can see why this is so. To understand a concept deeply is also to grasp the relative importance of what that concept discloses. The wise human is not so concerned about understanding the concept of greenness precisely because this person perceives that greenness is, in the great scheme of things, not

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<sup>9</sup>Robert Nozick, *The Examined Life* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1989), p. 267. Italics original.



centrally important to human life. If a person is red-green color blind, as I in fact am, this may impair his life to some degree, but it will not prevent such a person from living a rich and significant life. To be morally blind, on the other hand, to fail to grasp the nature of justice and to see its importance in human life, would be a significant barrier to a rich and flourishing human existence. Justice is simply far more important than greenness.

Implicit in this reply is an important distinction I need to make: the distinction between divine wisdom and human wisdom. Such a distinction is crucial for any form of Platonism that wants to be Christian, and perhaps it is crucial for any form at all. It is worth recalling that Socrates himself, at his trial, is credited by Plato with the claim that “real wisdom is the property of God.” If we think of the Forms, as Christian Platonists have traditionally done, as Ideas in the Divine Mind, then we can see why true wisdom must be identified with God’s wisdom. God himself, with perfect self-knowledge of the Forms which exist in the Divine Mind, understands all possibilities, including in this understanding an appreciation of their relationships to each other and their relative value. God understands all concepts, and also understands and properly appreciates all of them in their relative significance. Human wisdom will be an understanding of those concepts, possible ways of being, that bear significantly on human existence, and will especially be an understanding of those Forms that are most important for human life.<sup>10</sup>

Both divine and human wisdom, on the account I am sketching, are importantly linked to love. No less an authority than Thomas Aquinas maintains that God’s wisdom is identical to his love,<sup>11</sup> and I think we can see why this must be so.<sup>12</sup> To love something or someone is to appreciate the value of what is loved, and to will the flourishing of that something or someone, will that it fully realize the good of which it is capable. God’s wisdom, as I am conceiving it, includes an appreciation of the value of every possibility. This gives God a reason to create a good world, and it also means that God will relish those possibilities he has chosen to

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<sup>10</sup>The recent development of “virtue epistemology” seems likely to be one that will direct increased attention to wisdom, since wisdom is traditionally seen as one of the central virtues. See, for example, the discussion of practical wisdom in Robert C. Roberts and W. Jay Wood, *Intellectual Virtues: An Essay in Regulative Epistemology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), pp. 305–324. Other virtue epistemologists, such as Linda Zagzebski, also argue that virtue epistemology does a better job of focusing proper attention on wisdom, and she sees wisdom as linked to understanding. See her *Virtues of the Mind: An Inquiry into the Nature of Virtue and the Ethical Foundations of Knowledge* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 43–50.

<sup>11</sup>For a clear discussion of Aquinas’s view of wisdom, see Thomas Hibbs, “Wisdom Transformed by Love,” in *Where Wisdom is Found: Christian Reflections* (Baylor Center for Christian Ethics, No. 30, 2009), pp. 38–45.

<sup>12</sup>In referring to Aquinas, I don’t mean of course to claim that Aquinas would fully endorse the Platonist account I am giving in this paper. Although Aquinas’s account of wisdom has Platonist elements derived from Augustine, Aristotle is the most significant influence. For an account of Aquinas on wisdom (focusing mainly on wisdom as a human virtue), see Eleonore Stump, *Aquinas* (London; New York: Routledge, 2003), pp. 339–360.

actualize. God's creation is itself a manifestation of God's wisdom, and we can understand why St. Paul should affirm that the "divine nature," presumably including the divine wisdom, can be "clearly seen" from the things that God has made.<sup>13</sup> It is thus equally true to see creation as a manifestation of divine love and divine wisdom, for the two qualities in God are not distinct.

Human wisdom shows a similar linkage. Wise human persons have a special concern for those concepts that bear centrally on human life, and their understanding of these possibilities, like God's understanding, is a kind of seeing that includes appreciating and savoring the value of what is seen. The wise person not only understands but loves the good in each thing, and specially loves those goods that are essential for human flourishing. Such a "seeing" is not merely theoretical in character. Rather, to understand and appreciate the possible ways of being just, and merciful, and kind, and the relation between such concepts, is to have a kind of insight into how to live, as well as to have the motivation for living rightly. Human wisdom in this sense will include an understanding not just of these concepts as general human possibilities, but of the particular forms these possibilities may take in relation to a person's own particular situation.

The preceding is of course only a very rough and preliminary sketch. Let me now try to develop it just a bit by attempting to spell out some of the implications of the view I am proposing. It has, I believe, many of the features one would want in any account of wisdom, and has particular features that commend it to Christians who want an account of wisdom that is faithful to the Biblical revelation.

1. The view proposed incorporates the Biblical view that in some way God is not only wise but is Wisdom itself (e.g., I Corinthians 1:24, "Christ the wisdom of God"), since ontologically God is perfect understanding of the Forms and the Forms that are known are part of the Divine Being.

2. Since God himself is both Wisdom and supremely wise, we can understand why it can be true that God is the source of human wisdom, so that James writes that if anyone lacks wisdom, he should ask God, and it will be given to him (James 1:5).

3. We can also understand why the Christian community has always taught that the Biblical revelation itself is a source of human wisdom. If the Scriptures are a true revelation from God, we would expect that revelation to reflect and reveal God's character; if God is wisdom, then his revelation will be a source of wisdom. This point should remind us that we should seek from the Bible not merely propositional knowledge but also understanding in the special sense I have given it in this essay, especially understanding that is directed to those concepts that are central to human life.

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<sup>13</sup>Romans 1:20.

4. We can also understand why wisdom, though not identical to propositional knowledge, is linked to this kind of knowledge. Since God's wisdom is manifest in his creation, it is logical that knowledge of that creation should foster wisdom, or least make wisdom possible. It is also reasonable to think that a wise person will understand propositional knowledge itself as a possibility and properly appreciate and value knowledge.

5. One important feature of wisdom as I have described it is that, in contrast to propositional knowledge, it is something that comes in degrees. As I have already noted, conceptual understanding can be superficial or deep, and it is possible for an individual to gain more and more understanding of the possibilities embodied in a concept and the relations between that concept and others. This seems like the right result, since wisdom is the kind of thing that one can acquire in degrees.

6. On the view I have sketched, we can understand why human wisdom can be something that relatively uneducated and simple people may possess. Such people may lack an understanding of many concepts; they might, for example, not grasp the notion of "supervenience," nor understand what a quark is. However, they might have a deep understanding of the concepts that bear most centrally on human life, including such concepts as friendship, love, honesty, courage, truth, and fidelity. Perhaps, most vitally, they understand what it is to be a human being because they understand God. The Scriptures say that "the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom" (Psalm 111:10). Perhaps this means that it is crucial to understand human life in relation to God and God's purposes in order to be wise.

One might object that what we have in this case must include propositional knowledge, since the person must know such propositions as "God exists" and "God has created all things, including human beings." I think that this is right, and thus a wise person will have some propositional knowledge. So let me revise my initial account of wisdom as conceptual understanding, and say that wisdom is conceptual understanding plus that propositional knowledge that is essential to a deep understanding of oneself, one's world, and God. However, I am inclined to say that the propositional knowledge is not the basis of the wisdom, but that the propositional knowledge that is an ingredient in wisdom flows out of the kind of "seeing" I described earlier. The person who really understands God will certainly know that God exists, but the person knows that because he or she is simply aware of God's reality.

Maybe this is in fact the true basis of Anselm's ontological argument: the person who really understands God has a kind of awareness of God's reality that makes it possible to know that God exists. In any case it is certainly true that a person who understands those concepts central to human existence, and thus knows how to live well, is wise, even if such a person does not have a great stock of propositional knowledge.

7. The claim that "the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom" can profitably be pushed a bit further. One might think that fear is a negative

and unworthy emotion, one that would play little role in the character of a wise person. However, I think that the Biblical view here is right. One might say that the wise person is not a person who lacks fear, but who has learned to fear the right things. To “fear the Lord” is to fear displeasing God, to fear breaking my relationship with God and making it impossible for me to become a friend of God. The wise person has a proper fear for this kind of thing, and perhaps less fear of the things that typically dominate a person’s outlook. We humans fear all kinds of things: we fear losing our jobs, we fear becoming ill. Students fear that they will fail a test or do poorly on an assignment. Such fears are human and they are often reasonable. But a person who has the fear of the Lord will not allow such fears to become excessive. She knows that God will not desert her even if she loses her job. She knows her life will still be meaningful even if she becomes ill. She knows that even death will not separate her from the love of God in Christ, for she has a deep understanding of that love.

8. The last point can be linked to a point about emotions. Robert Roberts has argued convincingly that one of the characteristics of a wise person is that such a person responds emotionally in the right ways to the right things. If wisdom is a kind of understanding that involves a direct awareness of some possibility, and if that awareness includes a proper estimation of the value of that possibility, then we can see why this should be so. On Roberts’s account of an emotion, an emotion is itself a kind of perception or seeing, and if it springs from virtuous dispositions of caring and thinking, it will include a proper appreciation of the value or disvalue of what one perceives.<sup>14</sup> We can thus understand both why it is that wise people manifest their wisdom partly through their emotional responses, and also why it is that the development of proper emotions is part of what is required to become humanly wise. This means that part of the knowledge that is essential to wisdom can be acquired through emotions; to use the language of the medievals, it is a “connatural knowledge.”

9. How does a person become wiser? How is wisdom acquired? If wisdom is conceptual understanding of the kind I have described, this question reduces to the question as to how one gains a genuine grasp of concepts. Perhaps Wittgenstein can be of help here. We gain an understanding of a concept by learning to play the language game in which that concept is embedded. And we learn to do that by participating in a “form of life,” since “to imagine a language is to imagine a form of life.”<sup>15</sup> Wisdom is gained through living, particularly living in association with others who are wise.

If this is correct, then we can understand why the acquisition of wisdom is linked to experience, and why so many cultures (with the possible

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<sup>14</sup>See Robert Roberts, “Emotions in the Epistemology of Paul the Apostle,” in *Claremont Studies in the Philosophy of Religion*, ed. I. U. Dalferth (Palgrave Macmillan, forthcoming). For Roberts’s account of emotions, see his *Emotions: An Essay in Aid of Moral Psychology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

<sup>15</sup>Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 3rd ed., trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (New York: The MacMillan Col, 1958), #19, 8e.

exception of our own, which glorifies youth) have viewed older people with respect, as people more likely to be wise. Though wisdom does not come merely through years and the accumulation of experiences, those who have years of life experience have had more opportunities to acquire wisdom.

From a Christian perspective, the Church may be seen as a community that inculcates wisdom. The Church is founded on the examples and teachings of Old Testament saints and prophets, New Testament apostles, and pre-eminently Jesus himself. Christianity sees wisdom as something that participation in this communal form of life can foster and encourage, since it is a community founded by God himself, who is both Wisdom and supremely wise. The Church as a community helps its members acquire a proper understanding of God, themselves, and the world in which they live—helping them acquire a proper appreciation and love for what is valuable and a proper fear for what is dangerous.

10. In conclusion I want to say something about what I would call the perspectival character of Christian wisdom, or what might properly be called its polemical character. If one asks what the differences are between Platonism *per se* and Christian Platonism, a crucial part of the answer lies in the Christian teaching that humans are sinful. Plato, so far as I can see, has nothing comparable to this Christian doctrine. To be sure, the incarnation of the immortal soul into a body is a kind of fall for Plato, and this fall seems to entail that the struggle for truth will be a difficult one. But this seems quite different from the Christian teaching that humans are sinful, with sinfulness being understood as a kind of spiritual rebellion on our parts. I take it that the Christian doctrine of sin has implications for our lives as knowers and that it implies something about our attitude towards wisdom.

If we are sinful creatures, this implies that there is an ambivalence in our stance towards truth and our stance towards wisdom. To be sure, wisdom and truth may be what we desire and what we are seeking in some sense, but they also may be what we fear and what we are fleeing. The acquisition of true wisdom may then be painful, and require a fundamental transformation in our character. Those who have not been so transformed, and perhaps this is all of us to some degree or other, may therefore find that genuine wisdom is not what we expected it to be. Perhaps we will in fact think it is foolishness.

This at least seems to me to be what Paul is saying in I Corinthians 1, from verse 18 through 30. The Christian message is, says Paul, “foolishness to those who are perishing.” Paul asks rhetorically, “Where is the wise man? Where is the scholar?” implying that genuine wisdom cannot be found simply through the intellectual efforts of untransformed, sinful humans. Paul implies that a simple, uneducated follower of Jesus may be wiser than a revered scholar, if that revered scholar has not been transformed by the love of God. Though in reality Christ is himself true wisdom, the wisdom of God, this wisdom appears to be foolishness to what may be called “worldly wisdom.”

And so it does. Worldly wisdom says that it is smart to seek riches and power; it says that a wise person seeks to get the attention and favor of those with money and power. Those who follow Christ's way and Christ's teaching must be willing to love the unlovable, to love one's enemies, and to be willing to give up any earthly riches or position for the sake of God and God's kingdom. From the point of view of God, this worldly wisdom, which might better be called worldly shrewdness, is anything but wise. It reflects a shallow understanding of the value of many things. The worldly wise person values things highly that are not very valuable; fears things greatly that are not so fearful. Becoming truly wise then is not merely acquiring true understanding; it is also unlearning false understanding, freeing oneself from the grip of a false conceptual picture.

This polemical side of wisdom is both true and important. Nevertheless, I think we should not see the contrast Paul draws between God's wisdom and human wisdom as a necessary one, but as a descriptive comment of what will generally be the case. After all, in Plato's *Apology* Socrates seems to capture some themes that are part of Biblical wisdom, affirming that it is much worse to do evil than to suffer at the hands of evil-doers, and that ultimately nothing can harm a truly good person, for God does not allow this.

In *The Last Battle*, the concluding volume in C. S. Lewis's *Narnia* series, all of the characters from earlier books find each other in the "true Narnia," the place which is their true home. They come to understand that they loved the old Narnia just because of its resemblance to the real Narnia. The old Professor from the first volume, as he recognizes the true Forms of all the things he loved in Narnia, sums up the message: "Plato was right all along." Perhaps the Professor was right and Christians can find wisdom in a Platonic account of wisdom.

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