

Wisdom in Western Philosophy

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This essay concerns the concept, history, and practice of wisdom in the Western philosophical tradition. It issues from its author's conviction that the ideal of wisdom was prominent at the dawn of Western philosophy but modern and contemporary philosophers have generally denied its significance. Despite this neglect, this essay claims that the ideal of wisdom is nevertheless worthy to be reestablished as the source and goal of philosophy. This retrieval can be accomplished by a clear characterization of wisdom, by exemplars of wisdom throughout the history of Western philosophy, and by affirming philosophical practices that can lead to wisdom.

The Concept of Wisdom

The concept of wisdom is complex and controversial both because it has evolved over many centuries and because wisdom itself is probably not accessible at ordinary levels of inquiry and discourse. Like drivers, teachers, and lovers who claim to perform above average, not all claimants to wisdom deserve to be so regarded. Nor is it obvious that wisdom resides primarily in philosophy—though given its name (*philo* meaning love and *sophia* meaning wisdom), as well as its origin and early history, it clearly ought to be wisdom's primary source and exemplar. The last section of this essay discusses some wise thinkers who are not counted as philosophers by mainstream philosophy.

This essay is a rather traditional endeavor—neither analytic nor postmodern. It finds wisdom most convincingly when Platonic and Aristotelian, European and American,

idealist and practical, religious and secular elements, and other philosophical polarities are rendered complementary.

The effort to find wisdom in Western philosophy requires some initial agreement as to what to look for. On the basis of select philosophers and the overall history of Western philosophy, this essay proposes that wisdom holds in harmony the three primary components of philosophy—metaphysics, epistemology, and ethics—and further that it manifests a mutuality among them. To the extent that each leads to the other two, wisdom can be realized regardless with which component one begins—depending, of course, on the value (whether truth, ethical, aesthetic) of each of the three strands. These three disciplines are essential for a full philosophy, that is, for a complete articulation of a loving (*philo*) relationship to wisdom (*sophia*). These three components of philosophy, and of wisdom, warrant a characterization:

Metaphysics, the study of what exists, both as one reality (fundamental and ultimate) and many realities (single thoughts, cells, grains of sand). It includes the relations among unity and particularity, the ways that whatever exists (whether one or many) comes to be and passes away, and whether such processes have a meaning and a goal. The primary content of metaphysics is ontology (*ontos*, being; *logy*, study, knowledge).

Epistemology (*episteme*, knowledge), or how one knows, and the criteria by which persons and groups know whatever they claim to know; if there are various ways of knowing, might some be more reliable than others?

Ethics, the study of morality; which thoughts and actions are moral, and by what criteria; how might philosophy evaluate human behavior?

Here is the working characterization of wisdom for this essay:

Wisdom is knowledge that is derived from a deep source and leads to right action. Right action in turn leads to a deeper ontological experience and the advancement of knowledge. All three components are mutually implicating.

METAPHYSICS/ONTOLOGY

“Deep source” is deliberately vague because philosophers do not at all agree on the nature, or description, of a source that serves, or might serve, as a foundation for wisdom. Claims for this foundational reality include the Good according to Plato, Being (as well as Uncaused Cause) according to Aristotle, the One according to Plotinus, God according to Christian thinkers such as Augustine, Boethius, and Aquinas, and the Absolute as variously affirmed by a series of ontological monists, including Spinoza (seventeenth century), Hegel and Emerson (nineteenth century), and Josiah Royce (twentieth century). In the Indian/Hindu tradition the fundamental reality is called Brahman; in Buddhism, Buddha nature; in the Chinese tradition (for both Daoism and Confucianism), Dao. Some philosophers, such as William James and John Dewey, insist that there is no single substance or absolute unity but rather a radical pluralism or network of relations, all in process, each relating to all of the other relations but with no unifying or encompassing reality.¹ This essay presupposes that these diverse metaphysical/ontological claims do not eliminate each other but rather point to an ultimate reality irrespective of which names most adequately describe it.

EPISTEMOLOGY

Wisdom clearly has to do with knowledge, and particularly extraordinary knowledge, or knowledge attained by an extraordinary capacity. By definition, it is not commonly shared. Philosophical statements sometimes resemble proverbs in that they appear at first view to be wise until they are contradicted by an equally attractive perspective, by which process both philosophies reveal their incompleteness. In the face of contradiction, a deeper knowing is needed. Plato's entire philosophy, especially in his early and middle dialogues, argues for and exemplifies a deeper and broader kind of knowing, the kind that, if sustained, could qualify as wisdom.

Remarkably, Plato himself, in his later dialogues, powerfully critiqued his own earlier knowledge claims. In the end, he showed himself to be wise in two respects, for the intuitions in the early and middle dialogues and for brilliant scrutiny of those intuitions in his later dialogues. Both metaphysics and epistemology are needed for wisdom, and ideally lead in tandem to ethics. A moral decision, or deed, presupposes, enlists, and helps to fashion and refine both metaphysics and epistemology. The entire Anglo American analytic movement that has dominated philosophy since the 1920s has specialized in criticism. Philosophic wisdom, however, also depends on speculation. Both criticism and speculation are necessary for wisdom, ideally in balance.

While scientific knowledge might be important on the way to wisdom, it does not constitute wisdom itself because without the collaboration of philosophy it does not typically issue from a deep source or aim at right actions. The great scientific philosophic geniuses of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Galileo, Descartes, Newton, and Leibniz, are intellectually brilliant but because they did not develop the ethical dimension, they are not less likely to be considered wise than

philosophers whose contributions include ethics. Einstein surely seems wise but mostly because in addition to being considered the greatest scientist since Newton, he pronounced brilliantly on human nature, society, and peace. The greatest scientist since Einstein, Steven Hawking, is clearly in a class by himself as a physicist, with an amazing knowledge of the cosmos (and applauded for his ability to cope with an extremely debilitating illness), but because he does not write on ethical questions, he is not a prime example of wisdom.

Alfred North Whitehead exemplifies wisdom not particularly on the basis of his mathematical or scientific knowledge but because of his philosophical knowledge, and specifically his learned and eloquent philosophical imagination. Like Whitehead, Karl Jaspers qualifies as a wise philosopher precisely because his philosophy includes but is not limited to science. Whitehead and Jaspers, like James and Dewey, speculate but not without criticism, and also have a constant eye on the relevance of their critical speculative philosophy for individuals, groups, cultures, civilizations, and the future of humanity.

ETHICS/RIGHT ACTION/VIRTUE

Wisdom is here defined in terms of scope and depth of knowledge and truth, and of equal importance, on the side of virtue, practical relevance, as well as social and historical significance. Wisdom is precisely the knowledge most worth having, often after a lifelong search, and consequently extremely valuable. In this sense, wisdom is deep or uncommon knowledge essential for living and a foundation for right action. A wise virtuous person² knows right action from wrong, and further, is able to act on the side of right. However, contrary to Plato who thought that true knowledge leads automatically

to right or moral action, there is often a split between knowing what is right and doing it. A person who seems to know and to espouse right action but does not act accordingly is rightly accused of inconsistency, or worse, of hypocrisy, or caught in a psychological limitation such as fear or a complex. The Christian tradition, following St. Paul and Augustine, admits of internal conflicts between knowledge and virtue. Shakespeare's characters put dramatic, and tragic, flesh on these theological bones. Then Freud showed that instincts, unconscious drives, and fears often overwhelm fragile knowledge, even knowledge considered wise. Since Freud, wisdom must include psychological insight, or knowledge of one's many layers of motivation. This, of course, requires a person to possess deep knowledge of the unconscious. C. G. Jung's concept of individuation refers to the ideal integration of conscious and unconscious dimensions of the self.

Josiah Royce, William James's younger colleague at Harvard, and a great historian of philosophy as well as the creator of a vast metaphysical system, emphasized the practical import of even the most contemplative metaphysical speculation:

The reflective play of one age becomes the passion of another. Plato creates utopias and the Christian faith of Europe afterwards gives them meaning. Contemplation gives birth to future conduct, and so the philosopher also becomes, in his own fashion, a world builder.³

The History of Wisdom

Philosophic wisdom is perhaps most frequently associated with Greek and Roman philosophy, and secondly with medieval Christian philosophy and theology, and with the exception of German idealism, scarcely at all with modern or contemporary philosophy. In this light, it would almost be accurate to have entitled this essay, "the loss of the love of wisdom in Western philosophy."⁴ Fortunately, this loss, though significant, is not total: there are some genuinely wise modern Western philosophers, including a few explicitly committed to the ideal of wisdom.

From the perspective of originality and complexity, the history of wisdom in the West can be seen as an evolutionary process, from broad generalizations seen to be naive from later perspectives, to highly nuanced, self-conscious, well-argued positions. With respect to the ideal of intelligence, argumentation, and clarity, Western philosophy is surely progressive. In important (though not all) respects, Whitehead is an advance on Plato, Dewey is similarly an advance on Aristotle, Aquinas an advance on Augustine, and Steiner and Teilhard an advance on Aquinas. In each comparison, the later philosophers are more informed concerning history and science, and more efficacious in application. This is progress. By other criteria, specifically concerning wisdom, however, modern Western philosophers, and thinkers generally, might not be wiser and they might be less devoted to wisdom.

If this perspective, and approach, is at all valid, and illuminating of wisdom, then it would seem right to proceed to the beginning of philosophy, when it was, or certainly was understood to be, the love of wisdom. For Plato, wisdom is the object of the lifelong desire of the philosopher.⁵ Before Plato, there was Socrates, and before Socrates there was cosmological thinking mixed with mythic figures such as Apollo, the god of reason.⁶

Prior to Socrates, Wisdom/Sophia in the Greek tradition, and Hokhma in the Hebraic tradition, were assumed to be real beings, with an existence independent of whether human beings ever thought of them. By his insistent thinking and inquiring, Socrates successfully challenged that assumption. He started his career by a consultation with the Delphic Oracle, a source of wise advice, and finished his career, as he was about to drink the hemlock ordered by a politically corrupt jury, by affirming the value of thinking but little else in the way of conclusions. It was Socrates who introduced this kind of

questioning as an ultimate value, the indispensable source of wisdom in the West.

As a result of the depiction of Socrates in Plato's *Apology*, *Crito*, and *Phaedo*, Socrates is regarded as the primary source of philosophic wisdom in the West. Pythagoras and Parmenides, of course, are important precursors of Socrates, but note that Socrates is never referred to as a Pythagorean or a Parmenidean; they are referred to as Presocratic. Since the time of Plato's dialogues, Socrates has been seen as the model of calm in the defense of reason and of integrity in the face of life-threatening danger (in his case, impending unjust execution). In this specific respect, he is the precursor of Boethius in the Christian Middle Ages—as well as Simone Weil who died of tuberculosis and malnutrition during World War II, and Karl Jaspers who calmly resolved to face death should his Jewish wife be a victim of the Holocaust.

The narrative of Western philosophy typically begins with Socrates the dialogical questioner, followed by his student Plato, the dramatist of ideas, and then by Plato's student Aristotle, the systematizer of all knowledge at that time into disciplines, methods, guiding principles, and brilliant outcomes. Although there are several subsequent periods of explosive genius in the West, particularly the 130 years that includes the scientific achievements of Copernicus, Kepler, Galileo, Descartes, Newton, and Leibniz, as well as the emergence of German genius in the early nineteenth century that includes Kant, Goethe, Schiller, Fichte, Schelling, and Hegel, it is the combination of Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle that clearly stands out for its philosophical originality and comprehensive influence.

Many introductory lectures on the history of Western philosophy introduce the importance of Plato by quoting the comment of Alfred North Whitehead, "The safest

general characterization of the European philosophical tradition is that it consists of a series of footnotes to Plato.”⁷ The reply of Aristotelians is less well known but equally apt: “Yes, and Aristotle wrote all of the footnotes.” This history is more complicated and interesting in that Plato reemerged through Plotinus and Neoplatonism, through Augustine and the entire arc of Christian thought, and the modern Western idealist and Romantic traditions. Each subsequent version of Platonism strives to advance Plato’s verticality while variously trying to manage Aristotle’s more horizontal, empirical approach. Appropriately, in Raphael’s “School of Athens,” Plato points up, Aristotle down, and both are in the center, the indispensable alternatives. Together they represent the two halves of Western philosophic wisdom, and behind them both, Socrates, the embodiment of the philosophical ideal of honest questioning and persistent dialogue.

It takes a significant effort, and help from historians of Greek philosophy such as W. C. K. Guthrie and F. M. Cornford, for a modern, and particularly postmodern person to take seriously the reality of Apollo or Sophia—or Isis, the dominant divine figure in the Mediterranean world for three thousand years. It would be equally implausible to a contemporary educated person to consider that Socrates, the progenitor of Western philosophy, and Plato, the first to create sophisticated methods of argument, could have regarded Sophia, the concept of wisdom, as anything but a metaphor, and certainly not as a real being, an active source of insight. Yet in the *Symposium*—a masterful dialogue from the middle, i.e., the peak, of Plato’s philosophic powers—we read that a wise woman, Diotima of Miletus, revealed to Socrates the most profound meaning of love.⁸ What was behind this device, and what did Plato’s contemporaries make of it?

The difference between regarding Isis or Sophia as a being or a concept can be considered the difference between mythos and logos, or the difference between mythic and rational thinking. After more than three hundred pages of careful argumentation on the nature of the self and the state, Plato concludes his *Republic*, his most ambitious and most confident dialogue, with “The Myth of Er,” an account of justice in the afterlife. In all subsequent dialogues, however, the mythic is absent. The transition from mythos to logos was realized in the course of several of Plato’s dialogues. In three generations, Western philosophy evolved from a Socratic mix of myth and inquiry to Platonic dialectic with only occasional appearances of myth, to Aristotelian analysis and argument without myth.

If this essay were focused on wisdom in the West without a specific focus on philosophy, a substantial portion would be given to the Abrahamic religions. However, as this volume includes essays on wisdom in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, this essay, except for its final brief section, focuses on wisdom in Western philosophy. Philosophy and religion in the early centuries of the West, as in all other traditional cultures, were entwined. The Hebraic tradition gives the West some of its most beautiful descriptions of Wisdom as the source of divinely inspired human knowledge and virtue. These texts are generally in contrast with Socratic dialogue, Plato’s unrestrained inquiry, and Aristotle’s disciplined pursuit of core principles and their rightful application. At approximately the same time as Socrates, in the Hebraic tradition, an entirely different idea of wisdom emerges, one that is mythic rather than philosophical, closer to the Greek idea of Sophia than to the ideal of wisdom according to Plato and Aristotle.

As with the entire Judaic tradition, the relation between the human and divine is intensely personal. And so it is with Wisdom, particularly in the five Wisdom books: Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Ecclesiasticus, and Wisdom. The Book of Wisdom, which was written in Greek during the last century BCE, uses the name *Sophia* instead of the Hebrew term *Chokhmah*. Subsequently, in the first century CE, Philo Judaeus wrote on, and to some extent fused, the Logos of the Greek tradition and Sophia of the Hebraic tradition.⁹

Following Philo as well as the New Testament writers, the early Christian tradition developed a variety of theological explanations concerning the relationship between Logos who is one with the Father/Creator, and Sophia, the mediator between the Logos/Christ and humanity. For the Christian tradition generally, the Incarnation of Christ and Wisdom/Sophia are entwined, as are the Love that is Christ and the Wisdom that is Sophia.¹⁰

WISDOM OF THE STOICS

Histories of Western philosophy tend to proceed from Aristotle to Descartes and the seventeenth century. They usually give only fleeting attention to Roman, and specifically Stoic philosophy, as well as to the entire history of Christian ethics which can be characterized as a creative blend of Stoicism with the Incarnation of Christ as depicted in the New Testament. By so doing, they neglect one of the world views that forms, along with Plato and Aristotle, the foundations of Christian, and more broadly, Western thought and culture.¹¹ Stoicism, and particularly their conceptions of wisdom and virtue, exercised a profound influence on the major thinkers of the Roman empire, including: Epictetus (ca.50–135 CE), a former slave who founded and directed a school

for Stoic ethics; Seneca (4 BCE–63 CE), a tutor of Nero and a high official in Nero’s administration (it was at Nero’s direction that he committed suicide); Cicero (106–143 BCE), a Roman senator; and Marcus Aurelius (121–180 CE) the Roman emperor from 169–180 CE, during which time he was frequently in battle throughout Europe, and during which time he wrote his enduring *Meditations*.

By the definition of wisdom guiding this essay—the commingling of epistemology, metaphysics, and ethics—the Stoics are surely contributors to the lineage of Western philosophical wisdom. In contrast to most Western philosophies, however, Stoicism contributed more significantly to ethics than to either epistemology or metaphysics. Briefly, the core claim of the Stoics is both profound and slightly unclear. Starting with Zeno (334–362 BCE), the founder of the early Stoa (paths for walking between two rows of columns while philosophizing), and continuing until the death of Marcus Aurelius more than five centuries later, the Stoics based their ethics on a conception of Nature that was both fundamental and epistemologically vague. More importantly, the same can be said of Stoic ethics: it is difficult to establish just what the Stoic philosophers meant by their two essential terms, Nature and human nature. A lack of clarity concerning these complementary terms makes it difficult to know the extent to which and ways in which, one is (or is not) cooperating with Nature or realizing (or not) what is best in human nature.

One characteristic of the Stoic conception of Nature is absolutely clear: it is deterministic; all natural events are determined—while at the same time, in a decisive claim, human beings are not determined in how they might react to determined events. In effect, the *amor fati*, love of fate, in so many religious documents is precisely this Stoic

conviction: love what you cannot change. It is also at the core of the life and writings of Simone Weil, the mid-twentieth century philosopher, and the essential point of the triad known as the Serenity Prayer first formulated by Reinhold Niebuhr, the mid-twentieth century Protestant theologian: “Lord grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.”

By way of summary, the inspiring writings of the most prominent Stoics, Seneca and Cicero in Latin, and Epictetus and Marcus Aurelius in Greek, offer a deep and compelling case for serenity in the face of pain and death. Wisdom is virtue, and virtue is wisdom, both based on the knowledge of the perfect unity of Nature and human nature, both revealed by the virtuous person. The difficulty, of course, lies in the circularity of these terms which can be broken only by locating a model virtuous person. Seneca was calm in the face of adversity, including his *amor fati* suicide, but in other respects, particularly his wealth, he seems to have lived at variance with his Stoic ideals. Fortunately, Zeno, Epictetus, Cicero, and Marcus appear to have been candidates for this status. As Stoicism was taken up very significantly by Christianity, particularly once it united with Rome, the life of Christ and the early saints assumed this function, so that wisdom and virtue were identified with the life depicted in the New Testament and in the individuals whose lives were devoted to the imitation of that singular life.

CHRISTIAN WISDOM

If Wisdom lost some, or perhaps all, of its transcendent status as the source of knowledge after Aristotle, it was restored and enhanced by the Christian revelation, especially in the Gospel of John and the Epistles of Paul. The Prologue to John’s Gospel reads:

In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God, all things were made through Him and without Him not anything was made that was made.¹²

This text claims that the Word (the English word for the Greek word *logos*) is one with God the Father and as such was and is the instrument of all creation. The Logos of John's Gospel presents Light, Love, and Wisdom as synonymous, rather like the eternal Ideas—Truth, Beauty, the Good—that Plato affirmed in his *Republic*. Logos represents a new law characterized by love (*agape*). John writes: "For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ."¹³

Paul, a Jew, a Roman citizen, and a convert to Christianity, contrasted the wisdom of both Jews and Greeks with the wisdom and grace bestowed on believers by Christ:

For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written,

I will destroy the wisdom of the wise,

And the cleverness of the clever I will thwart. (Isaiah, 29:14)

Where is the wise man? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe. For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to the Jews and folly to the Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ is the power of God and wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men.¹⁴

If one wishes to find wisdom in the Christian tradition it is well to call on guides such as Bruno Barnhart,¹⁵ a Benedictine monk and expert of Sapiential Christianity, or William Johnston,¹⁶ expert on Christian and Buddhist spirituality, or Raimon Panikkar,¹⁷ philosopher and theologian of Asian and Western traditions, all authors of important writings on Christian wisdom. Bruno Barnhart writes:

Central to the experience of Christians was a new consciousness, a new understanding. Jesus himself was the divine Wisdom come into the world, a fullness of light now shared by the believer. Christian writers of the early centuries, on the basis of the Johannine Prologue, developed a theological vision centered in Christ as the divine Logos. This incarnate Word was understood as the Bridegroom of the Church, participated in through a unitive knowledge (an intimate personal relationship with Christ), and was seen as the sun of understanding. This Logos was recognized as the one key to penetrating the mysteries both of the cosmos and of the biblical history of salvation. In the Greek patristic tradition, it is Jesus Christ as Logos that illuminates the whole of reality.¹⁸

With wisdom identified with Christ, who in turn is identified with the Father, the infinite and eternal Creator, the challenge for Christian theologians and philosophers was to restore some of the prestige of reason. To the extent that they were able to do so, it was significantly with the help of Plato and Aristotle. In general, Augustine in the fifth century absorbed the Platonism of Neoplatonic philosophers, especially Plotinus and Porphyry. In the thirteenth century Thomas Aquinas absorbed and Christianized the philosophy of Aristotle.

Early in his career as a professor of rhetoric in North Africa, Augustine was influenced by Cicero's *Hortensius*, an exhortation to philosophical wisdom. He then studied Manichaeism, and as he narrated in his *Confessions*, his classic autobiography—which is also the first autobiography in world literature—he converted to Christianity and emerged as the single most influential thinker of the early Christian centuries. Augustine identified wisdom with the divine archetypes, or the ideas in God's mind. He developed an epistemology of two levels of knowledge, intellect and intuition, a distinction characteristic of Romantic thinkers. According to Augustine, it is only by intuition, an illumined mind that one can know the divine. Such knowledge requires a combination of epistemological effort and the grace of Christ dwelling in the human soul.

True happiness is to rejoice in the truth, for to rejoice in the truth is to rejoice in you, O God, who are the Truth, you my God, my true Light, to whom I look for salvation. This is the happiness that all desire.¹⁹

Thomas Aquinas defined wisdom as the source of all true knowledge and of moral action.²⁰ Similarly, for the fourteenth century German mystic, Meister Eckhart, wisdom is the basis of the knowledge of God and “the ‘birth’ of God in the soul.” Nicholas of Cusa, a Roman Catholic Cardinal and diplomat as well as a mathematician, theologian, and philosopher, saw wisdom “on all levels of spiritual being and as the principle and goal of all spiritual activity.”²¹

In the middle of this survey of theological statements concerning wisdom is the inspiring figure of Boethius, a devoted student of Plato, Aristotle, and the Stoics, imprisoned after being falsely accused of treason. By his lone work, *The Consolation of Philosophy*, which he wrote in prison awaiting execution, he bequeathed to his

contemporaries and all interested in wisdom and justice thereafter a remarkably dramatic affirmation of the Christian love of wisdom. With echoes of Job's experience of the Voice from the Whirlwind that reveals the wisdom of God's ways, and the calm, resolute embrace of falsely accused Socrates when forced to drink hemlock, or the suicide of Seneca under pressure from the emperor Nero, Lady Philosophy convinces the ill-fated—and increasingly equanimous—Boethius that even his execution can be understood in the light of divine wisdom. Petitioned by Boethius, Lady Philosophy vividly revealed herself to be an inspiring image and presence in the mind and heart of the imprisoned and doomed Boethius. She provided wise consolation that Boethius would presumably not have been able to generate without her influence. Boethius in conversation with Lady Philosophy would seem to provide a convincing example of Wisdom—knowledge from a deep source—Lady Philosophy Herself—leading to right action—calm in the face of death.

THE ENLIGHTENMENT AND ROMANTICISM

While no sensible modern Western person would want to live in a culture not yet transformed by the humanistic genius of the eighteenth-century European Enlightenment, neither would we want to live in a culture guided solely by Enlightenment ideals. It is right to bow to the genius of Locke, Hume, Diderot, and Kant, and other Enlightenment thinkers. It might be even more obvious to bow to their American followers, the Founders—Washington, Franklin, Jefferson, Adams, Hamilton, and Madison—but the history of thought is sufficiently progressive that even they were surpassed three-quarters of a century later by Emerson and Lincoln, and they in turn were surpassed in enlightened thinking by John Dewey and the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther

King Jr.

Such intellectual progress is due at least in part to critique and opposition, to vigorous dialectic. The dialogical opposition to the Enlightenment is Romanticism. Both of these worldviews have contributed many positive influences, but only the Romantic worldview honored and aspired to wisdom as such. We might say that the Enlightenment offered a great advance in the use of intelligence, particularly in science and social sciences, namely, instrumental reason; the philosophical Romantics, including Goethe, Coleridge, and Emerson, advanced the use of intuition, particularly in relation to the arts.²² In the context of this essay, it would seem justified to view Romanticism as dedicated to wisdom, that is, to an experience of a deep source, whether Nature or the Absolute, or in the twentieth century, the unconscious, by a deep way of knowing, usually imagination or intuition, and leading to right and creative action. In general, twentieth century philosophy is closer to science than to art, and so relies on rational argument, shunning the possibility of knowledge from a deep source and the method of imagination/intuition that might lead to it.

The Cultivation and Significance of Philosophic Wisdom in the Twentieth Century

This section offers very brief introductions to twentieth century philosophers whose works are examples of wise thinking and thinking as a way to wisdom. The first part briefly introduces the classic American philosophical tradition during the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century: Ralph Waldo Emerson, William James, Josiah Royce, John Dewey, and Alfred North Whitehead. The second part discusses the contributions of three European philosophers at mid twentieth century: Simone Weil,

Martin Buber, and Karl Jaspers.

CLASSICAL AMERICAN PHILOSOPHY

Wisdom with an American accent tends to be very practical as evidenced by the predominance of American philosophy generated in lectures and essays written in response to pressing social and cultural concerns. James was a sophisticated thinker and writer in several disciplines and several languages but in *Pragmatism* his purpose was to make it possible for the nonphilosopher to make sense of his or her own experience. Similarly, Josiah Royce explained that in his teaching and writing philosophy he sought to give his students a place to stand.²³ John

Dewey's philosophy of democracy is explicitly a philosophy of "the common man." As Dewey wrote:

Philosophy recovers itself when it ceases to be a device for dealing with the problems of philosophers and become a method, cultivated by philosophers, for the problems of men.²⁴

Given the history of the twentieth century, what could be more important than Dewey's philosophy of democracy, the enemy of National Socialism and other expressions of totalitarianism? From the Founders to Lincoln to James and Dewey, to Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., the American religious, political, and philosophical traditions represents a commitment to the integration of metaphysics, epistemology, and especially ethics. "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal" was not applied when articulated, nor was it intended to be, but in its depth and clarity, in its ability to raise consciousness and to exercise practical cultural and political behavior, it stands at the base of American wisdom, the fruit of the first cluster of wise Americans.

A broad review of the philosophic wisdom of the classical American philosophical tradition must begin with Ralph Waldo Emerson, America's sage, for it is Emerson who provides the richest language, and most exemplifies the transformative power of philosophical reflection. In language that is later echoed in the writings of the pragmatists (Peirce, James, and Royce), and religious philosophers such as Weil, Buber, and Jaspers, Emerson proclaims the transformative power of the active soul, the person who thinks freshly and honestly, with devotion to the challenges of individual and social life. He wrote: "Why should not we also enjoy an original relation to the universe?"²⁵ This relationship involves both the individual and the Absolute: "I could not be, but that absolute life circulated in me, and I could not think this without being that absolute life."²⁶ Emerson's ethical judgments and moral behavior follow typically from his solitary reflection and his conversations with past representatives of wisdom and with contemporaries equally devoted to "an original relation to the Universe." His essays and journals stand out as an inexhaustible source of wisdom. His life and his writings exemplify his conviction that "The one thing in the world, of value, is the active soul."²⁷

As the Founders represent the first convergence of political genius (as well as courage and vision that proved historically momentous), a second cluster of genius emerged three quarters of a century after the Founders, in the Concord of Ralph Waldo Emerson and in the presidency of Abraham Lincoln. In his essay, "Self Reliance" (1836), Emerson declared a second declaration of independence from England and Europe—not political independence, but intellectual. In his Gettysburg Address and Second Inaugural Address, Lincoln in effect joined deep insight, eloquent argument, and inestimable practical historical import, each an integral component of wisdom. Emerson and Lincoln, each of

whom suffered the death of a child, acknowledged divine immanence and transcendence, both exhibited epistemological clarity and caution, and both spoke with impressive insight concerning the moral claims needed at that time, and at the present.

A third such cluster of genius occurred in early twentieth century philosophy departments: William James, Josiah Royce, and A. N. Whitehead at Harvard and John Dewey at Columbia. In psychology, philosophy, and the study of religion, as well as three decades of research concerning psychological experience,²⁸ James showed a genius for original insight. He practiced philosophy as “a habit of always seeing an alternative.”²⁹ From beginning to end, James’s convictions remained open to revision.

One of Josiah Royce’s many original, wise insights is his ethical theory, “loyalty to loyalty.”³⁰ We might approach this contribution by noticing that contemporary writers on wisdom, most of whom are psychologists, seem to offer characterizations of wisdom that include some wise individuals but they do not exclude scoundrels and truly evil individuals such as Hitler.³¹ Royce’s loyalty to loyalty would seem to offer an ingenious solution to this stubborn problem. By being loyal to Hitler’s genocidal “final solution,” Germans, Austrians, and others were disloyal to the loyalties of the Jews, Gypsies, gays, and others whom the Nazis considered unworthy to participate in the Third Reich. Hitler’s absolutely evil project deliberately denied these others the opportunity to practice their own loyalties. Jesus and Buddha certainly did not violate the loyalties of others, nor did the actions of Gandhi, King, and the Dalai Lama, but the actions of Hitler and all tyrants, as well as the actions of intolerant religious leaders, clearly do violate the loyalties of their intellectual opponents and their political enemies. Royce’s loyalty to loyalty, based on the reality of the Beloved Community as the holder of all ideals

(including lost causes) as well as individual responsibility, would seem to be a strong candidate for wisdom.

While the classical American philosophical tradition does not end with Dewey and Whitehead, the two major philosophers working primarily from the original insights of William James, it does climax with them. Alfred North Whitehead had three great careers: as a mathematician at Cambridge University; as a philosopher of science at University of London; and as a comprehensive philosopher at Harvard, where he built on the philosophy of William James. In response to the deepest ontological question—How did the Universe come about?—Whitehead introduced and expanded the concept of creativity as the source of the Universe. He also contributed an ingenious solution to the problem of theodicy: How can an all knowing and all powerful God be the creator and guide of so much evil and suffering? Extending, and rendering systematic, James's conception of God as finite,³² Whitehead proposes that God should be understood to have two natures, Primordial, or the pure potential of existence, and Consequent, or the history of the Cosmos. Within the context of this solution, Whitehead proposes that the Primordial nature of God is all good but, as evidenced by God's Consequent nature, neither all knowing nor all powerful. According to Whitehead, God does not directly control human events and does not know the future. For traditional adherents of any one of the three Abrahamic religions it might seem painful, and a contradiction of the nature of God, to deny God's foreknowledge, but to do so would seem to be an example of philosophical wisdom.

John Dewey, the philosopher of common knowledge and "the common man," entitled his one book on religion "A Common Faith."³³ Thoroughly Aristotelian, Dewey's

philosophy runs in reverse order from Plato's: he focuses primarily on social and ethical problems and works back to metaphysics, to the extent possible. His great strength is in his epistemology, methodology, and ethics, specifically his development of the method of scientific rationality and shared intelligence, and their application to "the problems of men," including education, social justice, institutions, and peace among nations. Compared to philosophers such as Plato and Aristotle, or Spinoza and Hegel, Dewey's metaphysics might appear flat and restrained. He preferred, and clearly trusted, practical intelligence over metaphysics because he was convinced that claims for and against a particular metaphysics have often led (and continue to lead) to all manner of misdeed. For this reason, he begins with the crises and precariousness of daily life and proceeds to an appropriate epistemology, and then, as he deems possible, he articulates an ontology—not of the Absolute, or the One, or God, or the Unconscious, but of nature and experience.³⁴

Dewey's devotion to solving the major problems of his day, and the extraordinary versatility of his thinking, enabled him to generate a philosophy that is vast, deep, honest, and helpful—not at all common. For Dewey—who was wise in his ability to protect, reconcile, and advance the worthy causes of individuals and groups—wisdom consists in reasoning together, rather like the free debate typical of the town hall meeting of his native Vermont. Given the violent horrors of the last century, and the ecological horrors almost certainly awaiting humanity and Earth in the twenty-first century, Dewey's method of intelligence might be as close to wisdom as philosophy in the West, on its own, can attain at the present time.

SIMONE WEIL (1909–1943)

Albert Camus referred to Simone Weil as “The only great spirit of our time.”³⁵ Andre Gide referred to her as “the most important spiritual writer of this century.”³⁶ T. S. Eliot referred to her as “a kind of genius akin to that of a saint.”³⁷ While Camus and Gide put saint first, Eliot was careful to put genius first and saint second. In fact, Weil is equally genius and saint. Although a German name, Weil is pronounced *Veh* because she lived in the French section of Alsace and definitely considered herself French above all. Clearly a pure soul who inspired deep admiration, Weil was also frustrating. Of course, the combination of genius and saint, as well as self-proclaimed outsider, could not have been otherwise than confusing, and occasionally infuriating, for her colleagues and friends. It is no easier for us to understand her now.

Although Weil was Jewish by birth, she was fiercely anti-Hebraic. Intellectually she was devoted to classical Greek thought and culture, and fiercely opposed to everything Roman. She referred to Hebraism and Romanism as “the beast.” Spiritually, Weil converted to Catholicism in its French expression but because of its association with the Roman Empire she vigorously criticized and refused to join the Roman Catholic Church. Perhaps it would be most accurate to classify her as a gnostic: she was entirely independent in her method of attaining and her mode of explaining her spiritual knowledge. More precisely, she was in the tradition of the Cathars, a community, or movement, of gnostics, mostly women, in twelfth and thirteenth-century France who were persecuted by the Catholic Church as heretics for their anti-institutional teachings and for their opposition to matter, including the human body, both in general and their own bodies in particular.

In terms of her contribution to wisdom, Simone Weil contributed a profound body of thought perfectly fused with a brief but remarkable life, both developed very deliberately in service of integrity and nonviolence. As with Socrates and Boethius, her manner of facing death crystalized the union of her life and thought. As her solidarity with all outsiders kept her from baptism as a Catholic, her devotion to the French soldiers behind enemy lines during World War II led her to eat no more than they did, which, in combination with tuberculosis, led to her starvation and death. Her life defining solidarity plus *amor fati* (love of fate) led to her death, not so much as an intentional suicide as a result of her fundamental commitment to those who suffered.

Epistemologically, Weil learned by intense introspection, study, work (including work in a Renault factory and in a vineyard), prayer, and strenuous opposition to her own ego; metaphysically, she affirmed divinity as love. She experienced human love as a process of returning to God what God gives as existence and expects in return from human beings. Ethically, she was devoted to peace and love as the way of uniting with both God and humanity. She taught and exemplified the Christian way, and wisdom, of the cross.

Whether despite or because of her opposition to the Catholic Church, to dogma and to prescriptions, she was profoundly Christian, a new kind of saint, a patron of all outsiders. Her wisdom issues from and returns us to suffering and love. Her wisdom cannot and should not be ignored and yet is too radical, too demanding to endure. Only a few of us, or perhaps not even a few of us, can accommodate the way of this new kind of saint.

MARTIN BUBER (1878–1965)

Although Martin Buber is seldom antagonistic, he was certainly against Gandhi's opinion that the Jews should respond nonviolently to the Nazis. Not surprisingly, he was equally

opposed to Simone Weil's detestation of everything Hebraic. Clearly, wisdom comes in many forms, especially when generated and embodied by highly evolved singular personalities. Simone Weil's wisdom focuses on interiority and living as an outsider in an alienated culture; Buber's wisdom focuses on dialogue and relations. Although they both aspire to love, Weil writes of love between lonely individuals. For Weil as for Kierkegaard, only the individual is authentic; the crowd is a lie.³⁸ For Buber, truth lives in community, the ideal between Kierkegaard's (and Weil's) individualism and Marx's collectivism.

Buber's and Weil's Jewishness is completely opposite: Buber was assimilated in nineteenth and twentieth century German and largely Christian thought and culture; although Weil was born Jewish, and faced extermination by the Nazis on that account, she considered herself intellectually Greek and spiritually Christian (in accordance with the New Testament, and not with the Catholic Church). They were both sympathetic to the life and teachings of Jesus, but for Weil this influence led inexorably to sacrifice, suffering, and "the way of the cross"; for Buber it led indirectly to the ideal of dialogue and relationship between the humanity and a personal God.

Martin Buber's *I and Thou* is a masterpiece of philosophic prose, and very nearly philosophic poetry, filled with insight about human relations. It essentially articulates the preconditions for an individual person to attain personhood, a task that, in Buber's view, is not easily achieved or sustained. It is not only possible but usual for a person to fail in this one essential endeavor. In terms developed by mid twentieth century existentialist philosophers, especially Jean Paul Sartre, a person can exist and not realize his or her potential personhood. Only an "I" can achieve a unique and authentic

nature, or individual human essence—which, significantly, is temporary until the next self-defining moment, the next response, relation, or affirmation.

Buber's epistemology, metaphysics, and ethics are all based on his conception of relation, and more precisely, the "between." In his classic text, *I and Thou*, all reality, and especially human reality, is represented by the hyphen, I-Thou. Reality is between God and humanity (particularly the individual human), between person and person, person and community, and between person and nature. Accordingly, his epistemology—and his contribution to philosophic wisdom—focuses on knowing the terms of "betweenness," the conditions and effect of genuine or authentic relations, by affirming another without preconditions, without boundaries, and without a reduction of the other's mystery.

KARL JASPERS (1883–1969)

In a way comparable to Simone Weil and Martin Buber, Karl Jaspers generated a large body of wise thought and also practiced wisdom, though like Buber's middle way of wisdom and not at all like Weil's radical way. Weil, Buber, and Jaspers share a conviction similar to the medieval concept *adaequatio*, namely, that the apprehension of reality (or divinity, which is true reality) requires that the knower be adequate to this task, that is to say, to think with a pure, selfless, loving mind, capable of transcending the rational intellect. Jaspers makes this point very clearly in his *Way to Wisdom*:

Philosophical thought begins at the limits of this rational knowledge.

Rationality cannot help us in the essentials: it cannot help us to posit aims and ultimate ends, to know the highest good, to know God and human freedom; this inadequacy of the rational gives rise to a kind of thinking which, while working with the tools of understanding, is more than

understanding. Philosophy presses to the limits of rational knowledge and there takes fire.³⁹

Karl Jaspers is both an expert interpreter of many significant philosophers and an original philosopher whose scholarly rationality leads him to “take fire.” Jaspers is the author of *The Great Philosophers*, the magisterial four volume study of approximately twenty great philosophers, ancient to modern, Asian and Western. He also wrote several volumes on the practice of philosophy.

In a philosophical tour de force, *The Great Philosophers* offers Jaspers’s interpretations of, and perhaps more accurately, inspiring dialogues with, several Presocratic cosmologists, four paradigmatic figures (Confucius, Buddha, Socrates, Jesus), Plato, Aristotle, Augustine, Cusa, Descartes, Kant, Hegel, Kierkegaard, and Nietzsche, and Weber. Jaspers’s *Way to Wisdom* argues that philosophic wisdom can and should serve as the foundation of the individual lives of philosophers and nonphilosophers alike, as well as the source of defining cultural ideals. Jaspers aims to restore philosophy, and particularly philosophical wisdom, to metaphysical depth, epistemological clarity, and virtuous action. For such knowledge to be possible, the philosopher must serve both the source and goal of philosophy. Furthermore, Jaspers insists that one’s philosophy, including its validity and significance, are inseparable from one’s character and one’s way in the world. One can imagine that in writing the following passage in 1952, Jaspers, whose wife was Jewish, might have had in mind his former friend Martin Heidegger, an unapologetic Nazi:

Philosophical ideas cannot be applied; they are a reality in themselves, so that we may say: in the fulfillment of these thoughts the man himself lives;

or life is permeated with thought. That is why the philosopher and the man are inseparable (while man can be considered apart from scientific knowledge); and that is why we cannot explore philosophical ideas in themselves but must at the same time gain awareness of the philosophical humanity which conceived them.⁴⁰

The philosopher's character, for good and ill, will unavoidably affect both the acquisition and expression of ordinary (mainstream) knowledge, and perhaps more decisively influence a philosopher's relation to a deep ontological source and the service to which insight is applied. Should anyone suspect that Jaspers, the author of highly sophisticated technical philosophical texts, would be unable to enter decisively into the press of a historical situation, the following 1942 journal entry should offer adequate evidence to the contrary:

May 2. If I cannot protect Gertrude [his wife] against brute force, I, too, have to die—this is simple human dignity. But that is not decisive and not enough.

My heart speaks quietly and reliably from its depths: I belong to her. It is God's will that if the will of man (and not nature) strikes one of the two of us with destructive force, both are struck together. One cannot separate in life by force those who are bound together for eternity, who are born for each other from one source....

To become one in death is the fulfillment of love—it is like a kindly fate⁴¹ that permits us to die together, while mere nature, when it causes death, forces the survivor to go on living.

My philosophy would be nothing if it were to fail at this decisive point. Somewhere, fidelity is absolute or it is not at all....

Each of us will always want to protect the other's life until the moment when—so I hope—worthy of each other and fundamentally at one—wedded to each other for eternity—we shall die calmly....⁴²

Clearly, Socrates, Boethius, and Weil survived in Jaspers.

As this ideal in our postmodern culture is obviously daunting, and to some extent dangerous, it is small wonder that the quest for wisdom is infrequently undertaken and even less frequently considered successful. As the last line of Spinoza's *Ethics* wisely states, "All things excellent are as difficult as they are rare." This is especially so of the excellence that is wisdom: it is difficult because it must issue from a personal relationship with a deep ontological source and must overcome psychological and ethical challenges in a world shot through with confusion and complexity. Karl Jaspers is exemplary in all of these respects: his life and writings reveal moral character, sound judgment, deep learning, and intense attention to the affairs of the world, including the horror of National Socialism.

Sources of Wisdom on the Periphery of Philosophy

RUDOLF STEINER, PIERRE TEILHARD DE CHARDIN, C. G. JUNG, HIS HOLINESS
THE DALAI LAMA

Beginning in the twentieth century, philosophizing has required knowledge of diverse cultures, many personality types, cosmic and atomic processes, and a variety of disciplines, but the philosophy profession represents an even greater challenge to philosophic success. By its control of appointments and research opportunities,

professional philosophers impose a flatland and alienated paradigm, one in which the human is separated from the divine, from the cosmos, and from inner realities. Philosophers who actively oppose this paradigm, or try to work outside of it, are generally considered irrelevant. Except for James, classical American philosophers tend to be ignored by European philosophers—and more incredibly but incontestably, by American philosophers who teach primarily European and British philosophers. The few philosophical positions, schools, or approaches in which wisdom appears to be both a value and a goal are associated with religious commitments, and consequently not “real” philosophy. In short, in the modern and contemporary Western philosophical tradition, wisdom is considered an illegitimate, or not serious, philosophical presupposition, assumption, focus, and goal.

Although philosophy courses continue to be an essential component in college curricula, shelves in bookstores, online book sales, and periodical book reviews all suggest that the American public reads less and less philosophy. There are, however, at least a half dozen spiritually impressive individuals whose books continue to sell, and whose ideas are widely admired and discussed as examples of wisdom. The thought of Rudolf Steiner, Teilhard de Chardin, C. G. Jung, and the Dalai Lama reach far beyond their respective communities. Each of these four religious thinkers warrants a brief introduction.

At age twenty one, Rudolf Steiner was appointed editor of the national edition of Goethe’s scientific writing. At twenty five, he published a book on Nietzsche. He subsequently created the Waldorf approach to education, biodynamic agriculture, and extensive contributions to various arts (including the new art form of eurythmy),

sciences, research concerning Krishna, Buddha, and Christ, economics, and psychology.

The most important contribution of Rudolf Steiner toward wisdom would seem to be the directions he left for others to develop his intuitions—and their own. Steiner wrote his primary philosophy book, *Intuitive Thinking as a Spiritual Path*,⁴³ in 1894, six years before beginning his esoteric career. His basic esoteric book is entitled *How to Know Higher Worlds*.⁴⁴ We might note that his work exemplifies wisdom's three components: he drew from high and deep realms of spirit, he practiced and taught advanced stages of intuition, and he addressed his powers to the ethical concerns of contemporary thought and culture. He called his spiritual discipline anthroposophy: *anthropos*, the ideal human, and *sophia*, divine feminine wisdom.

Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, a French Jesuit priest, was a world class paleontologist and Catholic mystic. Teilhard joined his two commitments, science and spirituality, in an exquisite synthesis so that his study of the earth and evolution was simultaneously for him an act of adoration. He brought to both endeavors an unflinching optimism concerning Christendom and concerning the goal of human evolution that he referred to as the Omega Point. Following our three part conception of wisdom, Teilhard drew deeply from the Christian conception of divinity, and most particularly from his humble yet confident experience of Christ. By his active prayer and meditative life, and his devotion to the Roman Catholic sacraments, especially the Eucharist, he felt that he was able to see deeper into the natural world than would otherwise have been possible. Teilhard did not develop a philosophical ethics but his entire life, thought, and writings reveal an inspiring life of the highest moral ideals. Clearly, by any measure, Teilhard is an exemplar of wisdom.⁴⁵

By virtue of his ability to access the deep levels of the psyche and intuitive powers in service of the conscious and unconscious dimensions of both self and society, Carl Gustav (C. G.) Jung would seem to be among the foremost candidates for the wisdom award. Ironically, Jung's courageous work with archetypes and symbols, and his many contributions to spiritual and esoteric research, run counter to his apparent commitment to the limits to knowledge set by Kant. He frequently insisted that he was not writing philosophy, but it might have been better if he had assumed responsibility for a coherent philosophical position, one consistent with the levels of knowledge which he attained, particularly in the last decades of his life.

Although he consistently eschewed philosophy as such, he ingeniously exhibits the three components of wisdom, namely, ontology, epistemology, and ethics. In that many of his most original and significant insights focus on the wise and powerful activity of archetypes that he considered to be the foundational structure and activity of consciousness, Jung's analytic psychology could as accurately be called archetypal psychology. In countless examples drawn from his therapy sessions, sacred texts, and arts from many traditions, Jung showed that archetypes such as the Mother, Wise Old Man, Descent into Hell, Mandala, Self, and Shadow are active in the unconscious, and it is essential that individuals and cultures come to know the ways of myths, archetypes, symbols, and images.

Using the definition of wisdom introduced in this essay, His Holiness the Dalai Lama would seem to be the very essence of wisdom. He lives in relation to Buddha nature, the deepest Buddhist conception of reality as Emptiness/Fullness, and beyond this dichotomy and all other dichotomies. He knows this level of existence by a direct intuitive

awareness made possible by rigorous training in Tibetan Buddhist philosophy and hours of daily meditation. In the ethical realm, the Dalai Lama stands out in the contemporary world as the foremost exponent and exemplar of nonviolence and peace, not in a general or vague sense but in detailed response to the Chinese government that continues to destroy Tibetan land, language, culture, and religion. Anyone who has studied the Dalai Lama's life, writings, and influence, or has had the privilege of his presence, is inclined to regard him as not only wise but as the embodiment of wisdom. As the fourteenth Dalai Lama, Tenzin Gyatso mysteriously embodies the bodhisattva *Avalokiteswara*, the spiritual being that endures as wisdom and compassion over many life times, perhaps eternally.

Conclusion

Philosophical Wisdom—knowledge from a deep source that leads to right action, and back again—seems to require that a philosopher work these three fields in harmony. Whether one begins with Platonic or Christian metaphysical conviction and works toward applications, or an Aristotelian Deweyan cautious attention to the specifics of experience back to generalized conviction, both are needed complementarily. The Platonic approach is more bold and more prone to error; the Aristotelian approach tends to be safer in practice but limited in metaphysical assertion. Whichever of these approaches, or combination of approaches, a philosopher follows, it is important for him or her to work in collaboration with other disciplines. In this regard, Jaspers and the classical American philosophical tradition are especially successful, and the insights of spiritually efficacious, deep thinking individuals such as Steiner, Teilhard de Chardin.

C. G. Jung, and His Holiness the Dalai Lama are especially important at this time.

In sum, we have worked with the components of wisdom: metaphysics, epistemology, and ethics, and we have seen the importance of these three in mutuality. We have also seen that wisdom resides in Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, in Augustine, Boethius, and Aquinas, in the nineteenth century Romantic tradition, in the classical American philosophical tradition, and some twentieth century European philosophers such as Karl Jaspers. With all of this before us we might venture an answer to question, in the terms made famous by William James, “What difference does it make?” The difference would seem to be, in another Jamesian concept, relationality: thinking is a way of relating, and thinking wisely is a way of realizing a life sustaining relationship, offsetting the pain of opposition, loss, fear, and death. Socrates, Boethius, and Jaspers calmly facing death is a sign of wisdom, as is the courage of Washington, Lincoln, and King. There is also wisdom in the courage of thinking a new thought—Plato reaching for true Ideas, Augustine seeking to illumine his mind so as to grasp the nature of the divine revealed in Christ. As Bertrand Russell noted, philosophy renders the mind great.

Through the greatness of the universe which philosophy contemplates, the mind also is rendered great, and becomes capable of that union with the universe which constitutes its highest good.⁴⁶

What Russell refers to here as the universe, Plato refers to as the Good, which is “the cause both of truth in speculation and rectitude in action.”⁴⁷ Philosophical thinking, and wisdom, which is its fruit, restores us to the cosmos, to the earth, and to the entire human community. By studying, contemplating, and imitating the wisdom of Plato and Aristotle, Emerson and Jaspers, we too can think wisely. We begin by thinking their thoughts, and

eventually by thinking as they did, and then by thinking our own wise thoughts, until wisdom becomes a habit. We can habitually apprehend sources of meaning and truth, see deeper than the senses can reveal, and realize our oneness with all other realities—human, earthly, and divine. By this practice, we too can have a wise original relation to the universe.

Endnotes

The author is grateful to Roger Walsh and Matthew David Segall, as well as to two anonymous reviewers, for suggesting improvements to this essay.

1. Irrespective of what his final ontological perspective might be, James does affirm a transcendence “through which saving experiences come,” but he steadfastly resists a unity that might diminish the significance of the many. See William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature*, intro. Martin E. Marty (New York: Penguin, 1982), pp. 508 and 515.
2. According to virtue ethics, a virtuous person is wise by definition and, less convincingly, a wise person is virtuous by definition.
3. Josiah Royce, *The Spirit of Modern Philosophy* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin/Riverside Press, 1892), p. 12.
4. My reading of the history of philosophy has been deeply influenced by Rudolf Steiner’s and Owen Barfield’s account of the gradual separation of the human from the divine, and the corresponding evolutionary increase in human intellect and individuality.

5. *Phaedo*, 68a, trans. Hugh Tredennick, in *The Collected Dialogues of Plato*, ed. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns (New York: Random House/Bollingen Foundation, 1961).
6. See F. M. Cornford, *Principium Sapientiae: A Study of the Origins of Greek Philosophical Thought*, ed., W. K. C. Guthrie (New York: Harper & Row/Harper Torchbooks, 1965).
7. A. N. Whitehead, *Process and Reality, Corrected Edition*, ed. David Ray Griffin and Donald W. Sherburne (New York: Macmillan/Free Press, 1978), p. 39.
8. For Diotima, see Plato, *Symposium* 201–212, in Hamilton and Cairns.
9. See Thomas Schipflinger, *Sophia Maria: A Holistic Vision of Creation*, trans. James Morgante (York Beach, Me.: Samuel Weiser, 1998), pp. 1–45.
10. See Jean Leclercq, O.S.B., *The Love of Learning and the Desire for God: A Study of Monastic Culture*, trans. Catherine Misrahi (New York: Fordham University Press, 1971); see also William Johnston, *Mystical Theology: The Science of Love* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1975), ch. 6: “Wisdom through Love.”
11. The author is grateful to one of the volume’s anonymous reviewers who recommended that I include Stoicism in this essay.
12. John 1:1 (RSV).
13. John 1:17 (RSV).
14. I Corinthians 1:18–25.
15. Bruno Barnhart, *The Future of Wisdom: Toward a Rebirth of Sapiential Christianity* (New York: Continuum, 2007).

16. William Johnston, *Mystical Theology: The Science of Love* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2000).
17. Raimon Panikkar, *The Rhythm of Being: The Gifford Lectures* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2010).
18. Bruno Barnhart, O.S.B., *Second Simplicity; The Inner Shape of Christianity* (New York: Paulist Press, 1999), p. 51.
19. Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. & intro. R. S. Pine Coffin (New York: Penguin, 1961), X, 23, p. 229.
20. For well chosen texts on wisdom according to Christian theologians, see Eugen Biser, “Wisdom,” in *Encyclopedia of Theology: The Concise Sacramentum Mundi*, ed. Karl Rahner (New York: Seabury, 1975), p.1819. Another excellent survey of the Medieval Christian worldview is in Richard Tarnas, *The Passion of the Western Mind* (New York: Harmony Books, 1991), pp. 89–190.
21. Ibid.
22. For an insightful comparison of the Enlightenment and the Romantic reaction, see Richard Tarnas, *Passion of the Western Mind*, p. 366, and several books by Isaiah Berlin.
23. H. T. Costello, “Recollections of Royce’s Seminar on Comparative Methodology,” *The Journal of Philosophy*, LVIII, no. 3 (February 2, 1956): 72–73.
24. John J. McDermott, ed., *The Philosophy of John Dewey, vol. 1: The Structure of Experience* (New York: G. P. Putnam Sons, 1973), p. 95; and in Joseph Ratner, ed., *Creative Intelligence* (New York: Modern Library, 1915), p. 65.
25. Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Nature*, Introduction, first paragraph.

26. Ralph Waldo Emerson, quoted in Gertrude Reif Hughes, *Emerson's Demanding Optimism* (Baton Rouge, La.: Louisiana State University Press, 1984), from *Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, V, 391.
27. Ralph Waldo Emerson, "The American Scholar," in *Emerson: Essays and Lectures*, p. 57.
28. See William James, *Essays in Psychological Research*, intro. Robert McDermott (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986).
29. John J. McDermott, ed., *The Writings of William James* (New York: Random House, 1967), xi; from Henry James Jr., *The Letters of William James*, 2 vols. (Boston: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1920), I, 190.
30. Josiah Royce, *Loyalty to Loyalty*, intro., John J. McDermott (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1995).
31. See Robert J. Sternberg, ed., *Wisdom: Its Nature, Origins, and Development* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990); and Warren S. Brown, ed., *Understanding Wisdom: Sources, Science, and Society* (Philadelphia: Templeton Foundation Press, 2000).
32. "[T]he only God worthy of the name must be finite." William James, *A Pluralistic Universe* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1996; orig., 1909), p. 125.
33. John Dewey, *A Common Faith* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1934).
34. See John Dewey, *Nature and Experience* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1929).

35. Quoted in John Hellman, *Simone Weil: An Introduction to Her Thought* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), p. 1; from *L'Express*, February 11, 1961.
36. Quoted in George A. Panichas, ed., *The Simone Weil Reader* (New York: David McKay, 1977), xvii.
37. Ibid.
38. Soren Kierkegaard: "For a crowd is untruth," in *Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre*, ed. & intro. Walter Kaufman (New York: New American Library, 1975), p. 94.
39. *Way to Wisdom*, p. 126. In 1924 Steiner made the same point: "For at the very frontier where the knowledge derived from sense perception ceases, there is opened through the human soul itself the further outlook into the spiritual world." *Anthroposophical Leading Thoughts*, trans. George and Mary Adams (London: Rudolf Steiner Press, 1973), p. 13.
40. *Way to Wisdom*, 127–128.
41. Cf. Simone Weil's emphasis on *amor fati*, love of fate.
42. *Karl Jaspers: Basic Philosophical Writings*, ed., trans., intro. Edith Ehrlich, Leonard H. Ehrlich, and George B. Pepper (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1986), Part Seven: "Encounters with Limit Situations, Journal Entries 1939–42," p. 542. Jaspers and his wife Gertrude moved to Basel, Switzerland, in 1947. He died in 1969, Gertrude died in 1974.
43. Rudolf Steiner, *Intuitive Thinking as a Spiritual Path* (Great Barrington, Mass.: Steinerbooks, 1995); original translation, *Philosophy of Freedom* (London: Rudolf Steiner Press, 1970).

44. Rudolf Steiner, *How to Know Higher Worlds*, Afterword, Arthur Zajonc (Great Barrington, Mass.: Steinerbooks, 1994).
45. See especially Teilhard's masterpiece, *The Human Phenomenon*, trans. Sarah Appleton Weber (Portland, Ore.: Sussex Academic Press, 1999); and Ursula King, *The Spirit of Fire: The Life and Vision of Teilhard de Chardin* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1996).
46. Bertrand Russell, *The Problems of Philosophy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959), p. 161.
47. Plato, *The Republic*, VI, 517.