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INTRODUCTION: WISDOM IN COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVES

Wisdom is embedded in civilization; or in other words, civilization begins with the search for wisdom, in which humans become more knowledgeable and skillful in dealing with matters and solving problems. However, human nature determines that we would not be content simply with “living well”; we would want to know answers to more perennial questions, such as where the world comes from and who we are. In the conscious search for knowledge, the formation of wisdom is initiated and the models of wisdom develop into various kinds of philosophical and religious systems. From these systems emerge two dimensions or layers of wisdom. At the practical level, wisdom guides individuals or groups on how to deal with daily matters, and helps them to determine what measures can be best adopted to cope with current life situations. At the philosophical level, wisdom is about the nature, the ultimate meaning, and the orders or “patterns” of the world and life, and manifests either as a mostly intuitive understanding of the seemingly unconceivable, or as a kind of insight that penetrates the surface of phenomena and grasps the essence of existence, or even as a predictive vision of the fortune or misfortune of the people or about the good or bad result of particular events or action.

Wisdom is rooted in our “study” of the world and life, but gradually it has also become the “subject” of our studies. The two meanings of wisdom have naturally caused some people to believe that there are two kinds of wisdom. In China, Confucius first noted the difference between practical knowledge and philosophical wisdom, and Daoist philosopher Zhuangzi suggested separating the “great knowledge” (*da zhi*) from the “small knowledge” (*xiao zhi*). While it is worthwhile to highlight the divergence between the result of intellectual exploration and the tool for intellectual exercise, or between the practical dimension and the philosophical dimension of knowledge, wisdom must be seen holistically, and any step further to a dichotomy would inevitably go wrong.

This is exactly what underlies the first problem in the contemporary study of wisdom. Some scholars tend to focus more on the contradiction between practical knowledge and philosophical wisdom than their integrity, presenting them either as totally separate or irrelevant.

In fact, wisdom is a whole, dealing both with practical matters and with more fundamental and philosophical issues, and any attempt to make them opposed to or separated from each other will seriously damage human vision of the world and life.

There is a second problem in modern scholarship on wisdom. Considering that wisdom is embedded in particular cultural settings and crystallized through individual philosophical and religious traditions, some scholars tend to isolate one particular textual transmission from others, while paying less attention to the fact that various wisdom traditions have a common nature and are related in overt or covert ways. The real nature and characteristics of wisdom cannot be explored unless we see it through a comparative perspective.

With these two problems in mind, this special issue on wisdom is devoted to a comprehensive and comparative perspective of wisdom. Wisdom is comprehensive, containing all elements of knowledge, the “lower” and the “higher,” the simple and the complicated, the pragmatic that searches for the best among the available means, and the “philosophic” that transcends material gains and calculations. Wisdom is comparative, not only in the sense that comprehensive knowledge cannot be gained unless it is examined in the context of inter-philosophical dialogues, but also in the sense that wisdom is interpreted in different cultural traditions and that without placing wisdom in a comparative structure of these strings it is not possible for us to grasp its true meaning and function.

By combining the comprehensive and the comparative, I have organized eight articles on different dimensions and traditions into a special issue on wisdom in comparative perspectives. This issue contains two parts, the first concerning Chinese wisdom traditions, presenting the primary wisdom models as developed in Chinese philosophical and religious traditions, primarily the Confucian, the Daoist, and the Buddhist, and the second dealing with wisdom models as cherished or explored in other world traditions that will shed light on Chinese understandings, particularly the Hindu, the Christian, and the Islamic.

The wisdom of the *Yijing* philosophy occupies a primary position among Chinese models. I specifically asked Professor Chung-ying Cheng to make a contribution on the *Yijing* wisdom, which has not been explored yet by other articles in this volume. He has kindly sent me his article, in which he focuses on the ontological interpretation of the *Yijing* philosophy concerning reality and creativity as embodied or developed in the *Yizhuan*, arguing that onto-interpretations have further developed in Song-Ming Neo-Confucianism and provided an insight into totality as the wisdom of life. Jiyuan Yu examines the practical dimension of Confucian wisdom by analyzing the

concept of *yi* (appropriateness) in the *Analects of Confucius*. Xinzhong Yao examines the Confucian discourse on a moral–spiritual–epistemological model of wisdom, as manifested through seeking the knowledge of human nature, destiny, and heaven. Karen Lai focuses her attention on Zhuangzi and explores the relation between Daoist skepticism and Zhuangzi’s treatment of plurality. Brian Bocking and Wang Yongxian deal with wisdom in the Buddhist tradition through examining the three layers of truth in Buddhism. Yong Huang concentrates his discussion on Wang Yangming, exploring how Wang has integrated the three major traditions in China to present a new Confucian perspective on wisdom.

The three non-Chinese models are intended to expand the context of comparative perspectives. The articles on Hindu, Christian, and Islamic traditions not only examine the wisdom models significantly different from the Chinese ones, but also look into Chinese conceptions through the lens of categories developed in significantly different philosophical traditions. Aware of the risks of such a practice, Gavin Flood nevertheless argues that it might also bring out possibilities not previously seen. He engages in a philological and philosophical examination of possible Sanskrit analog to wisdom and parallels them with the Neo-Confucian understandings. Christopher Hancock presents a model on the wisdom of St. Paul as the center of Christian doctrines and reveals to us some fascinating resonances between Paul’s thought and Confucian, Mohist, and Daoist wisdom thinking, particularly in regard to methodology, epistemology, the use of paradox, and recognition of the limitations of human knowledge, or intelligence, as the source of virtuous wisdom. David Thomas’s article on “Receiving and Acquiring Wisdom in Islam” provides an insightful treatment of the Islamic understanding of wisdom and tentatively brings it to the comparison with Confucian and Neo-Confucian concepts of knowledge and wisdom.

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