

November Philosophy Group Meeting – Wisdom

Half the battle in any philosophy topic is to define the terms, and tying down the concept of wisdom proved no exception to this observation. Yet it has run as a thread through philosophical thought, both western and eastern, from ancient to modern times. Perhaps wisdom is found at the meeting point of intelligence, knowledge, experience and judgement?

Our starting point in history was, as so often, ancient Greece. Socrates said he was wise because he knew that he knew nothing. Plato equated wisdom with the virtue of having the capacity to give good advice, or sound judgement, but only those with a large chunk of rationality in their soul, could achieve this virtue. In a new development, Aristotle described two types of wisdom: sophia is about understanding knowledge and contemplating truth, while phronesis relates to living well and making good decisions.

We went on to take a brief look at wisdom in early Christian times, where it is seen as a divine gift, linked to love and salvation, and in the medieval period, picking out Thomas Aquinas who argued that Aristotelian thought and Christian theology could be integrated to give a comprehensive view of wisdom.

Later, rationalist and empiricist thinkers debated whether wisdom derives from reason and logic, or from sensory experience. Kant argued that morality forms a key component of wisdom and, with a nod to Socrates, said that true wisdom involves recognising the boundaries of our own understanding.

Coming to the modern age, we took a peep at the science of practical wisdom. For example, and relevant to we Third Agers, changes in the ageing brain mean that sensory and cognitive deficits can be accompanied by an uptick in the wiser parts of the brain. Hooray for a silver lining!

We finished with a look at the challenges of our modern life such as a surfeit of data, instant gratification, the rapid advance of technology (can we use it wisely?), and considered how we ourselves can cultivate wisdom.

Our next meeting will be on January 27th, when we plan to look at the Philosophy of Time, then February 24th. The venue is Enterprise House, Barnard Castle, meetings begin at 10am and all are welcome.

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