

Philosophy—Love of wisdom: From the study of the nature of things, the insight of oneself, to the understanding of death

Yue Peng *

Department of Philosophy, University of Washington, Seattle, WA, United States of America

* Corresponding Author Email: yuep3@uw.edu

Abstract. This paper investigates the philosophical concept of wisdom, focusing on its distinction from knowledge and common sense. Drawing on Presocratic philosophers such as Anaxagoras and Empedocles, the paper argues that wisdom involves understanding the essence and regularity of things. It also explores whether wisdom originates from divine sources or within humans, contrasting views of Heraclitus and other philosophers who believed wisdom is divine and beyond human grasp, with the author's stance that wisdom is subjective and internal. Through Socrates' philosophy, the paper highlights wisdom's practical and ideological significance, emphasizing self-awareness and the pursuit of truth over material gain. Socrates' love of wisdom is portrayed as a lifelong pursuit of knowledge, rooted in recognizing one's own ignorance. The paper concludes by drawing parallels between Western and Eastern philosophies, specifically Taoist ideas, to illustrate the cyclical nature of life and death and the shared wisdom in embracing mortality.

Keywords: Wisdom; Presocratic philosophy; Socrates; Metaphysics; Love of wisdom; Life and death.

1. Introduction

Wisdom and reason are always topics that cannot be avoided in philosophical discussions. In fact, if expressed in a formula, it can be said that philosophy equals the “love” (the love of wisdom) plus the “wisdom” (the exploration of wisdom). This determined and persistent pursuit of wisdom can be found in the texts of philosophers from all periods throughout this quarter -- from Presocratic philosophers to Plato to Aristotle. In this following paper, I will focus mainly on the research of Presocratic philosophers and Plato literature, and carry out a sincere discussion on “wisdom” in “the study of love and wisdom”. I will refer to the viewpoints of various ancient western philosophers and elucidate my corresponding understanding of the essence of wisdom, the possibility of humans acquiring wisdom, the description of the meaning of wisdom in Socrates' love of wisdom, and the relationship between wisdom and death in philosophical thought. I begin by arguing from a metaphysical standpoint that wisdom is the understanding of the essence and regularity of things. Multiple Presocratic philosophers are cited in this section to support my contention that the essence of things is wisdom itself. I then contrasted my comprehension with that of the pre-Socratic philosophers by raising the question of where wisdom originates and whether or not it is truly accessible to mortals. In addition, I take steps to recapitulate Socrates' comprehension of wisdom and its guiding influence on individual behavior and identify several points that I believe are comparable to those of the pre-Socratic philosophers. Finally, in conjunction with my research on ancient Chinese Taoist philosophy, I illustrate by analogy the similarities between Eastern and Western philosophical perspectives on the relationship between wisdom and death.

2. Organization of the Text

2.1. Section Headings

2.1.1. Wisdom - a Grasp of the Nature and Regularity of Things

“Wisdom” is distinct from “knowledge” and “common sense”. To use a straightforward illustration, it is called “common sense” to know that people will grow old, get sick and die, and that seeds will germinate and grow; It is called “knowledge” to understand that life, death and seed germination are

due to the metabolism of cells; However, only by understanding that everything is subject to change, is connected and developed, can be called "wisdom". In a similar manner, it is when we broaden our perspective and contemplate the nature of the whole world and the principles by which it operates that we begin to approach the requirements of "wisdom" -- which is what metaphysics is about.

Ancient western philosophers seem to have realized this very early, such as Anaxagoras's research on the nature of everything in the world: Anaxagoras believed that the universe is composed of infinitesimally small, diversely shaped, colored, and scented ingredients, which are the fundamental constituents of everything in the universe. Originally, moist and dry, frigid and warm, pale and dark, were categorized together. The exception, however, is called "Nous," which is infinite, self-governing, and possesses the utmost power (Anaxagoras, #12); it cannot be combined with anything else and is pristine in and of itself. According to Anaxagoras, all things will be in everything and nothing is completely separated from the other, which can be interpreted to mean that all things (with the exception of Nous) are composites, including the most fundamental units, that all things are infinitely divisible, and that even the smallest particle of matter contains elements. Things are the synthesis of the elements they contain, and when one element is predominant, the thing takes on that characteristic (Anaxagoras, #25). In addition to the study of the nature of things, philosophers are also tireless in exploring the law of changes between things: For example, Empedocles argues that everything in our sensory world does not have a definite source or an end that will eventually be reached, that is, there is no coming to be or passing away. The formation and extinction of everything in the world is always in a cycle, in which the two "forces" that cause this cycle to work are "love" and "Strife". Specifically, there are fundamental things in the world - the roots, water, air, and fire - These basic substances are affected by the ebb and flow of the relative forces of Love and Strife, continuously deducing the cycle from complete integration to complete separation, in which Love acts to come together and Strife acts to split apart (Empedocles, #47).

I have argued thus far that wisdom is a comprehension of the nature and operation of the world's objects. However, our interpretation of wisdom cannot end here. I believe that to have wisdom means to be aware of the uniqueness and significance of wisdom and to be able to comprehend the sanctity of wisdom above all else. In my opinion, wisdom is a prerequisite for the world to be "established" for us - without it, the whole world would be meaningless. On this point, I find some support in Heraclitus's argument. Heraclitus argues that there is one unchanging principle/universal truth that governs and explains the universe that is constantly changing yet balance each other and finally reach a delicate harmony -- logos. Logos is an objective truth that ordinary people cannot recognize (Heraclitus, #2).

In summary, wisdom is an understanding of the general pattern of things, also known as an understanding of the essence and regularity of things. Besides, wisdom is the insight into the complexity of things: where common sense thinking has no problem, wisdom means to be able to see and find the problem and ask for the root; where common sense thinking sees a level, wisdom means to be able to unfold multiple levels; and where common sense thinking only reaches a certain point, wisdom can open up a whole new world.

2.1.2. Does Wisdom belong to God or to Humans? -- Are we qualified to inquire into the truth?

When conducting studies, we always return to the original source. Similarly, when we examine wisdom, we will inevitably investigate its source. I believe that the discussion about the origins of wisdom can be divided into two parts: wisdom from the outside and wisdom from the inside. From God to the universe, from nature to the earth ecology, from the country to the social form, from the city to the school, from teachers to parents to friends, to experience, and anyone who agrees that these conditions play a significant role in human wisdom can be considered to agree that "wisdom comes from the outside." Here, I believe that the pre-Socratic philosophers generally held the view that wisdom comes from the outside: In particular, they generally believed in an objective and divine truth about everything -- that is, divine wisdom -- while constantly criticizing and satirizing the ignorance of human's consciousness and denying the possibility of mortals acquiring such divine wisdom. For

example, in Heraclitus's description of logos, he argues that logos is a single divine law that controls and steers the cosmos, and logos is an objective and independent truth available to all, but most people do not exercise the capacities required to come to understand it. For example, Heraclitus states that "...no one reaches the point of recognizing that what is wise is set apart from all" (Heraclitus, #10), "...for many, in fact all that come upon them, do not understand such things, nor when they have noticed them do they know them, but they seem to themselves to do so" (Heraclitus, #26), and "...people are deceived about the knowledge of obvious things" (Heraclitus, #33). All of the above reflects Heraclitus's belief that wisdom is inaccessible and difficult to comprehend and master for mere mortals.

If we want to ask here, on what grounds can we conclude that mere mortals cannot comprehend and control this so-called "wisdom"? The most likely response from Heraclitus is that, due to the vast gulf between gods and humans, "wisdom" is divine and far superior to the concepts of mortals, so it cannot be easily understood by mortals—that "Human nature has no insight, but divine nature has it" (Heraclitus, #42). Humans are as far below God just as apes are below humans. Philosophers who followed Heraclitus (including Plato) seem to share the same attitude toward the idea that wisdom is divine and far superior to mortal perception in every respect. They denied the validity of mortal sensory experience, and Parmenides, for example, considered experience from the world of the senses to be unreal: He states that "...do not let habit, rich in experience, compel you along this route..." (Parmenides, #7) and "...how it were right that things that seem be reliable, being true, the whole of things" (Parmenides, #1).

Additionally, philosophers believe that ignorance, narrowness, and arrogance are additional reasons for the statement "wisdom comes from the outside" and cannot be controlled by mortals. People always think they know a lot, but the truth is that they have no insight at all: as Empedocles states, "...Narrow are the means of apprehension spread throughout the limbs. People see a tiny part of life during their time. But everyone boasts that he discovered the whole" (Heraclitus, #34). In the *Apology* of Plato, Socrates examines politicians, poets, and craftsmen accordingly and finds that they are not wise because they arrogantly assume that they know things when they actually don't (*Apology*, #21d).

My understanding of this part of the discussion is that we can temporarily divide wisdom into two kinds -- wisdom in the secular sense and wisdom in the philosophical sense. It is worth noting that I emphasize here that this classification is "temporary" because wisdom in the secular sense does not seem to me to be true wisdom, only wisdom in the philosophical sense is true wisdom. I believe that if a person is prematurely filled with secular wisdom, then philosophical wisdom has nowhere to rest in his body. Although he seems to be comfortable in society, he has actually lost the possibility of gaining insight into higher wisdom. Due to the fact that secular wisdom is merely instrumental rationality, it does not provide higher values to people, but only appeals to the existing social order. Philosophical wisdom, on the other hand, is critical and reflective, and it conceals the transcendence of the existing social order and the pursuit of the highest value of life. If a person is dominated by secular wisdom, he may achieve success in a secular sense; however, this will cause him to uncritically believe that everything he knows is correct, so he loses his critical and reflective abilities in his spirit and becomes a tool.

At this point, we have successfully argued for the "wisdom from outside" part: in summary, the pre-Socratic philosophers believed that wisdom is objective, comes from God, is divine, and is not known to mortals; the world of mortal senses is not real, but many people do not discover this due to the ignorance and arrogance of mortal perception.

On the contrary, I hold a different view of the origin of wisdom from that of the pre-Socratic philosophers. I believe that "wisdom comes from the inside" and that it exists subjectively. I argue that wisdom consists of various beliefs that exist in the minds of individuals, and that its existence is subjective. If you have firmly believed in something or a principle, it has become a part of your truth, and it has no relation to the truths of other people (each person has their own truth); if you don't have a sure thing to believe in, then you haven't reached your own truth until you find it.

2.1.3. The Guiding Significance of Socrates' Love of Wisdom to the Individual

In *Apology*, Socrates' insistence on the love of wisdom is demonstrated by his statement, "I will not give up the love of wisdom as long as I live and as long as I am able. In this section, I will focus on the meaning of "love of wisdom" in Socrates' perception, so as to provide some more specific definitions and interpretations from Socrates for my study of "wisdom". In my view, Socrates believed that "wisdom" can be summarized into two guiding roles for an individual —ideologically and practically.

To elaborate, the intellectual guidance of "wisdom" is reflected in the fact that it requires one to focus on perfecting one's own awareness, by "awareness" I mean one's understanding of one's own abilities and "what one can realize and understand. I refer to "awareness" as a perception of one's own abilities and "what one can realize and understand. For example, Socrates told the story of his friend Chaerephon, who sought a prophecy and was informed that "no man was wiser than Socrates" (*Apology*, #21a). This is the basis for Socrates' discussion of "knowing what I do not know", which Socrates referred to as "human wisdom" (*Apology*, #20e). Since Socrates was startled and perplexed by the oracle, he decided to investigate the individuals he believed to be wise in an attempt to discover a counterexample of the oracle. The subjects of Socrates' investigation, i.e., the individuals he generally considered to be the wisest, were politicians, poets, and craftsmen. Socrates examines those people and ends up finding that they are not wise because they arrogantly assume that they know things when they actually don't. Therefore, we can see that Socrates' wisdom lies in his ability to recognize his own ignorance, or to put it another way, his recognition of the limits of human intelligence. In fact, I identified a similar perspective to Socrates' self-perception in Heraclitus's works, "I searched [or: inquired into] myself" (*Heraclitus*, #37).

Having discussed the ideological significance of "wisdom," we now turn to the practical significance of Socrates' "science of love of wisdom". First of all, the first guiding principle is that, people should not be concerned with amassing money or glory, but should be concerned with wisdom, truth, and the highest cultivation of the soul. In Socrates' case, the heart of philosophy as "the science of love of wisdom" lies in inspiring the individual soul to shift from the love of money and fame to the love of wisdom - as Socrates says to the citizens of Athens in *Apology*, "...not to care for your body or your wealth in preference to or as strongly as for the best possible state of your soul, as I say to you: Wealth does not bring about excellence, but excellence makes wealth and everything else good for men, both individually and collectively" (*Apology*, #30b). Socrates attempted to arouse the Athenians to a love of truth through his incessant love of self-truth. He believed that the individual's pursuit of wisdom comes from the love of the individual soul, the pursuit of wisdom becomes the activity of the individual soul's self-perfection, which leads to the happiness of the individual soul and further motivates the individual's desire for higher wisdom in order to achieve the continuous perfection of virtue and happiness.

In addition, the practical guidance of the doctrine of the love of wisdom is also reflected in the choice of different opinions. Specifically, Socrates believes that we should only consider the words of those who are rational, without concern for the opinions of the masses—"why should we care so much for what the majority think? The most reasonable people, to whom one should pay more attention, will believe that things were done as they were done" (*Crito*, #44d).

To sum up, only God possesses true knowledge and wisdom, whereas all that human beings can do is to "love" wisdom, that is, to keep their love of wisdom unconditionally. Because of this, what we see in Socrates is not ready-made wisdom; his wisdom is precisely the wisdom of knowing one's own ignorance; the center of Socrates' wisdom is the search for "wisdom" itself, that is, the unconditional love of wisdom. According to Socrates, it is this love that constitutes the endless inner motivation of the individual to seek knowledge.

2.1.4. Wisdom - a Belief in Living toward death

I believe that the highest level of "wisdom" is in the "foresight" of changes and trends in things. The study of life and mortality is one manner in which this so-called "foresight" is demonstrated. In

this section, I will try to identify the similarities between the Western philosophers, represented by Plato, and the ancient Chinese philosophers, represented by Taoism, in their understanding of death. In Plato *Pheaedo*, Socrates offers an "opposites" argument in response to Cebes' questions about the existence of the soul apart from the body. Everything, he thought, came out of its opposite, such as the big producing the small, and the small producing the big. And for every pair of opposites, there are always two processes—"from the one to the other and then again from the other to the first" (*Pheaedo*, #71b). Socrates concludes that the relationship between life and death is the same: "living" produces "death", and "death" produces "living", and the whole world works in a cycle.

I found a similar view in Taoist thought to that of Socrates on the cycle of life and death: the master of Taoism, Zhuangzi, believed that death is just a natural law for us, just as we are born, breathe and run. In addition, Taoism famously proposed the idea that "life and death are one", which states that life and death are equivalent and that death is merely a return to life. Taoism takes a naturalistic and open-minded attitude toward death. To sum up, Western and Eastern philosophies share similar views on the inevitability of death, the cyclical transformation between life and death, and the attitude toward death in a pleasing and tacit way.

3. Summary

In this essay I discussed the concept of wisdom and its significance in philosophy, drawing from the perspectives of various ancient western philosophers such as the Presocratics and Plato. I argued that wisdom is distinct from the knowledge and common sense and defines it as an understanding of the nature and regularity of things. In addition, I highlighted the metaphysical perspective of the essence of things as wisdom and explored the question of whether wisdom is accessible to mortals. I also recapitulated Socrates' comprehension of wisdom and its guiding influence on individual behavior. Finally, by drawing parallels between Eastern and Western philosophical perspectives on the relationship between wisdom and death, I demonstrated that Western and Eastern philosophies share similar perspectives on the inevitability of death, the cyclical transformation between life and death, and the attitude toward mortality.

References

- [1] Cooper, John M. (Ed). *Plato: Complete Works*. Indianapolis, Cambridge: Hackett Publ.Co., 1997.
- [2] Laozi. *Tao Te Ching*. New York: Vintage Books, 1972.
- [3] Mill, John Stuart. *Utilitarianism*. BookRix, 1907.
- [4] Patricia Curd, Richard D. McKirahan, *A Presocratics reader*. Indianapolis: Hackett Pub. Co, 1996.
- [5] Sinnott-Armstrong, Walter. "It's not my fault: Global warming and individual moral obligations." *Climate Ethics*, 26 Aug. 2010, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780195399622.003.0029>.
- [6] Upton, Hugh. "Ethics: The fundamentals - by Julia Driver." *Philosophical Books*, vol. 49, no. 3, July 2008, pp. 276–277, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-0149.2008.467_14.x.