
A Revival of Epistemic Humility as a Type of Wisdom in the 21st Century

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“God, 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.” — Reinhold Niebuhr¹

The significance of this prayer cannot be overstated for it captures the theme of this essay and, because most of us have encountered it at one point or another, highlights just how profound its influence and relevance are, even today. The focus of my essay is primarily addressing the latter third of Niebuhr’s prayer and arguing for the necessity of wisdom in the 21st Century. Often, wisdom involves acknowledging and resolving the conflict between what we believe and presume to be the case on the one hand, and what is *actually* the case on the other—regardless of how uncomfortable it may be to accept. Moreover, because ethics and morality are necessarily linked to and dependent on individual autonomy, our ignorance and failure to grasp the difference between belief and truth may, and often does, lead us into gray areas, in which the probability of making mistakes is that much greater. It is this type of wisdom—the ability to distinguish between what is in our control from that which isn’t—that we need in modern society.

The concept of wisdom may seem relatively simple on a superficial level, but our failures as individuals and as societies in transitioning from a simple conceptual understanding of wisdom to its concrete application demonstrate the importance of this virtue and how, fundamentally, it is the foundation upon which we can cultivate other virtues. It must be noted, however, that I am arguing for a particular *type* of wisdom: specifically, wisdom as *epistemic humility*.² This type of wisdom is that which is expressed elegantly in the famous Socratic

¹ This (paraphrased) *Serenity Prayer* is authored by Reinhold Niebuhr, an American theologian, and though its original textual source is disputable, it still resonates today.

² This is just one of five types of wisdom as understood in the Western philosophical tradition. Ryan, Sharon, "Wisdom", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.

paradox: "I know that I know nothing."³ In other words, we should not so hastily jump to conclusions about that which we *think* we know or about things which we *believe* to be the case. Nor, on the other hand, should we throw our hands in the air and conclude that nothing is knowable. Rather, what we should strive for is, precisely, *humility*—that is, a healthy balance between epistemic skepticism and epistemic self-confidence. It is this particular type of wisdom for which I argue in this essay and one that may serve us well to not only understand, but implement in our own lives.

A good illustration of this epistemic humility is borrowed from Robert Sapolsky, endocrinologist and professor of biology and neuroscience at Stanford University: "When it comes to the biology of our individuality, issues are raised that should be fascinating to each of us for the simple reason that we are all asked to function as behavioral biologists on some occasion."⁴ In other words, we are all forced to evaluate each other's behavior in some form or another—whether it be assessing a person's culpability while serving on a jury or determining the extent to which a student is underperforming as opposed to being plain lazy—but the fundamental question which we must ask ourselves is, precisely, which of our behaviors can we hope to change, and which are we stuck with? Or, to put it more bluntly, for which of our failures should we be held responsible? The importance of these questions is, I hope, self-evident: if and once we find an answer, we are forced to confront the sobering reality that we, as a society, whether intentionally or not, misappropriate blame—criminal or otherwise—to individuals who are *not* necessarily responsible. Epistemic humility is what allows us to recognize fault when it exists, distinguish those faults for which we are responsible from those for which we aren't, and

³ Though not explicitly found in Plato's works, its paraphrase is generally attributed to the *Apology*.

⁴ Sapolsky, Robert M. *The Trouble with Testosterone: And Other Essays on the Biology of the Human Predicament*. New York, NY: Scribner, 1997. 13. Print.

reprimand those who are genuinely at fault and learn to excuse those who aren't. Epistemic humility is not only desired in a society, but necessary for an individual to build his or her moral character. And it is important for one reason above all: practicing epistemic humility can prevent us from making moral mistakes.

In my own life, I have learned a great deal about humility by dealing with my brother and his health condition. When I was born, I was diagnosed with PKU, an inherited metabolic disorder in which the individual cannot properly metabolize phenylalanine. If diagnosed early enough, the newborn can grow up with normal brain development (often through a combination of diet and medication). Left undiagnosed, however, complications may include severe intellectual disability, brain function abnormalities, and behavioral problems akin to attention deficit hyperactive disorder.⁵ Luckily for me, I was born in the United States, where newborn screening was the norm. My older brother, on the other hand, was born three years earlier in Egypt, where newborn screening was virtually nonexistent. Consequently, it wasn't until I was born that my brother was diagnosed with PKU as well. In effect, he had been living with a dietary complication—of which my parents were ignorant—that would result in permanent learning disabilities (among other things). Naturally, much of my life has revolved around observing and learning from the way my parents and I interact with my brother, both separately and collectively.

Growing up, I certainly had trouble understanding and accepting the fact that my brother's capacities were *limited*. It took time before I finally understood the implications of precisely what that meant. In retrospect, there were times when I was younger and had unfairly

⁵ "Phenylketonuria: MedlinePlus Medical Encyclopedia." *U.S. National Library of Medicine*. U.S. National Library of Medicine. Web.

lashed out on him for doing something that bothered me or for failing to do something that I had repeatedly instructed him to do. Was it fair? It's a hard question to answer. A large part of our relationship involves a tension between of what I *think* he is capable—and by extension that for which he is or is not responsible—and of what he is *genuinely* capable. Thus, in most of the altercations that arise between us, I am reminded by a painful truth that my mother had once said—and still says—to me: "He's just not like you." At face value, it seems obvious. But the implications of its subtler meaning force me to take a step back, exercise restraint, and acknowledge that I simply cannot treat him in the same way I treat others. To do so would be not only unfair, but fundamentally wrong. In truth, and in practice, it is difficult. It's not easy to look up to an older brother and realize that, in all the ways that really count, he is more like a younger brother, physical traits notwithstanding. I don't know whether I'll ever be able to *truly* accept it, but I have to try. Because if I don't, who will?

Indeed, it's a humbling experience to willingly put yourself down to another's level, and not because you have to, but because you genuinely understand that doing so is part of what makes you human. Our capacity for empathy is part of our essence and is what distinguishes us as humans. Without it, we may be nothing more than automatons devoted only to maximizing our own self-interest. People often take a lot of things for granted—their health, education, income—but it isn't until they are forced to confront and accept, on a visceral rather than cerebral level, the reality that many people are genuinely worse off than they are. It is one thing to nod in assent, but it's another to internalize it through personal experience.

Wisdom is a necessary safeguard to destructive ideology and is what separates prejudice from humility. It is what allows us to recognize a legitimate restraint when one exists. And it is

what helps us determine the extent to which a person is bound by an inherent limit as opposed to an amenable character flaw. At its core, wisdom can prevent us from wrongly dishing out injustice and calling it justice. And despite the distance we have traveled in science, technology, and medicine, we still remain largely ignorant about the limits by which people are bound. It is far better to doubt oneself when right than to arrogantly believe oneself when wrong. The former produces humility, while the latter produces embarrassment in the best case, and moral outrages in the worst.

It is true that this theory of epistemic humility is neither necessary nor sufficient for a definitive conclusion about wisdom. But it has its merits: it provides us with some insight into particular character traits associated with wise people.⁶ That is, we assume that wise people acknowledge their fallibility and are tolerant of uncertainty. These are traits that can benefit us not only in personal relationships, but also in the context of political and social responsibility. They arm us with tools to break through prejudice and make the correct moral decisions. For without this, we are left with two extremes: “At one extreme can be a wasted life, when prejudice dictates that there is a limit when none exists... At the other extreme, the specter of blame can haunt the blameless, when ignorance leads to failure to recognize a real biological [or otherwise] constraint that exists.”⁷ Recognizing the importance of epistemic humility and practicing it in our own lives will lead to better communication, deeper understanding, and greater acceptance between us and our fellow man.

⁶ Ryan, Sharon, "Wisdom", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.

⁷ Sapolsky, Robert M. *The Trouble with Testosterone: And Other Essays on the Biology of the Human Predicament*. New York, NY: Scribner, 1997. 12. Print.

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