Science and the quest for wisdom

Wisdom: From Philosophy to Neuroscience

by Stephen S Hall

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Reviewed by Adina Roskies

We all want it, few of us have it, we don't know what it is, but we are pretty good at recognizing it, and if you think you have it, you probably don't. I'm talking about the elusive human quality of wisdom. Although philosophers have been exploring the concept of wisdom for 2,500 years, the human race has made little progress in either defining or acquiring wisdom. In recent years, however, there has been a move toward examining wisdom more scientifically. When I was asked to review Stephen Hall's *Wisdom: From Philosophy to Neuroscience*, I balked. It seemed the perfect recipe for a train wreck. But the allure of wisdom made me reconsider and, despite myself, I could not resist accepting the assignment (it is not lost on me that self-control is one of the facets of the wise person). Happily, it turned out to be a good decision, even if it was unwise. *Wisdom* is an excellent contribution to the ever-growing, but not always good, literature aimed at making brain science relevant to deep human questions and accessible to the nonspecialist.

With the flair of an experienced science journalist, Hall takes us on a rollicking interdisciplinary journey through the ages, blending modern science, history and philosophy. Hall ably explains the relevant science and enlivens the narrative with personal anecdotes and intelligent analysis. Throughout, he weaves tales from the lives of historically enshrined Wise Ones (Socrates, King Solomon, Marcus Aurelius and Gandhi, to name a few), as well as contemporary luminaries, such as the Dalai Lama and others who, although unknown to the masses, nonetheless evince their wisdom in their own private realms of social interaction rather than the world stage. The result is a highly readable and anything but boring bird's-eye view of the complicated landscape of wisdom.

Hall starts the book with a nondefinition of wisdom, recognizing that its elusiveness is part of what makes wisdom so compelling and so valuable. In Part One, entitled "Wisdom defined (sort of)," he reviews the history of philosophical and psychological approaches to understanding wisdom. Instead of trying to fit it into a neat package or to reduce it to some platitude, Hall considers characteristics of wise people and tries to identify the psychological traits that contribute to wise action. Part Two

is devoted to a serial consideration of the "Eight neural pillars of wisdom" corresponding to these characteristics. These eight chapters discuss emotional regulation, knowing what's important, moral reasoning, compassion, humility, altruism, patience and dealing with uncertainty. Although one might quibble with this particular way of dividing up the wisdom pie (for instance, is patience a separate aspect of wisdom or just a manifestation of emotional regulation; is compassion a form or a font of altruism), this division captures pretty well the wide range of qualities or capacities that seem to underlie the broad reach of wise judgment and wise action. Moreover, each maps to some relatively well-defined area of contemporary research in psychology and neuroscience. Each chapter is an engaging gallop through the centuries and across world cultures, illustrating the trait exemplified in historical figures and describing contemporary research in psychology and neuroscience, often by relating Hall's own colorful encounters with the most prominent researchers in the field. Part of the genius of the book lies in the way these various strands, philosophical, sociological, anecdotal and scientific, are woven together. To his credit, Hall ventures beyond the usual focus on Western civilization, incorporating insights from other cultures and showing the quest for wisdom to be a human universal rather than a Western conceit. What is more, by understanding wisdom as the concerted action of the various components discussed in each of these chapters, we can understand how wisdom can be conceptually unified and yet still take different forms in different cultures and ages and in different circumstances and individuals. Wisdom may be irreducibly context dependent, but it may nonetheless rely on the fluid exercise of the same bundle of capacities.

The book is not perfect. Not all of the chapters are equally successful and Hall's treatment of the psychology is often more thorough than his treatment of the neuroscience. Some parts of the book are a little redundant or disorganized and Hall occasionally falls prey to bad dichotomies, such as when he asks whether decisions are the result of good judgment or neural programs, but overall he does an admirable job of relaying the state of the art in all its breadth and avoiding most of the deadly sins of dualism. This book is peppered with delightful turns of phrase and whimsical metaphors. Although these sometimes verge on the edge of being too contrived, I can't help but be impressed by his literary facility.

In Part Three, "Becoming Wise," Hall considers whether the new understanding that science brings has practical value in helping us become wiser. He explores the conditions under which wisdom manifests and develops, casts doubt on the common myth that wisdom is a gift of age and considers the extent to which wisdom can be taught or learned. However, *Wisdom* does not purport to offer anything like a recipe for achieving its namesake. In this age of how-to mania and brain training, the lack of practical advice might disappoint. Knowledge too is an important aspect of wisdom, and as I was already familiar with almost all the research Hall discusses, one might conclude from this and the book's lack of instruction that I am no wiser for having read the book than I was before. But that conclusion might be mistaken. A core aspect of wisdom is mindfulness of one's decisions, their sources and their effects. This reflective aspect of wisdom is essential. By prompting us to think about our actions, past, present and future, through the lens he provides and by helping us focus on what is important with his thoughtful, analytic style, perhaps in this book Hall does give us a training tool for wisdom. ■

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