

The Concentric Nature of Belief, Knowledge and Wisdom

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Abstract

This paper is an analysis of the concentric nature of belief, knowledge and wisdom. In common sense view, belief, knowledge and wisdom appear to be three exclusively different concepts; however, a deeper look at the three concepts reveals that they are inevitably inclusive in nature. In view of this, this paper analyses what wisdom entails in connection to knowledge and belief. It does this with the aim of highlighting the connections and departures between the three concepts and more importantly it emphasises the need not to confuse wisdom with knowledge as well as belief with knowledge in spite of the strong and inherent link between them.

Keywords: Epistemology, Concentric, Belief, Knowledge, Wisdom, Philosophy

Introduction

Etymologically, the word 'philosophy' is derived from the fusion of two Greek words *phileo* meaning 'love' and *sophia* meaning 'wisdom'. Therefore, the literal meaning of philosophy is 'love of wisdom'. This connotes an undying passion or quest for wisdom. What then is wisdom? What is this thing that philosophers love so passionately? What does wisdom entails? Central to any attempt to unravel these fundamental questions are two epistemic concepts: belief and knowledge. This is the case in as much as a wise man is often said to possess knowledge and knowledge itself is said to require belief. It is in this sense that this paper sees wisdom, knowledge and belief as three concentric concepts in which the analysis of one necessitates that of others.

While belief and knowledge have been discussed at length in most epistemological works, the concept of wisdom has not received much treatment in contemporary discourse; particularly in relation to belief and knowledge. This perhaps is one of the reasons why many people mistake knowledge for wisdom as they are intimately related

but quite different in an important way. An understanding of the difference between them (knowledge and wisdom) makes one to appreciate why it is vital to properly distinguish the two.

With the internet, it is now relatively easy for a reasonably diligent person to quickly become knowledgeable in virtually any field of his or her choice. We are literally bamboozled with myriad of information! But having a cutlass and knowing how to use it are two entirely different propositions. A cutlass is amoral, that is, “not morally responsible or not having anything to do with morality” (Uduigwomen 7). So, whether it is used for good or evil depends entirely on the wielder.

Sadly, the history of mankind shows a lengthy record of the harms wrought by knowledgeable, well-meaning people who lacked wisdom. The question here is, what is that thing that is missing which if added to knowledge would have positively changed the course of human action in history? This paper fills the lacuna as it attempts a brief analysis of what wisdom entails side by side with belief and knowledge. It does this with the view of highlighting the connection between the three concepts and more importantly to emphasise the need not to confuse wisdom with knowledge or knowledge with belief.

Belief

The term 'belief' is synonymous with 'opinion' which literally means 'to suppose, seem, appear'. In contrast to knowledge, belief refers to the subjective mental acceptance that a claim is true (Soccio 13). Beliefs, unlike knowledge, need not be true or adequately justified. This is simply because beliefs are subjective mental states which help us to make sense of the world we live in. In this sense, Ibrahim sees belief as “the interpretative lens through which evaluation, conclusion or prediction about the world take place” (127).

On the one hand, it is possible to be firmly convinced that a belief is correct when it is not. Sometimes our beliefs are true, but we are unable to offer adequate evidence for them. However, some beliefs are more reasonable than others and there is a big difference between informed belief and mere belief.

Mere belief simply involves a personal feeling and non-critical presupposition that something is the case while informed belief refers to ideas formed as a result of certain gathered information on a particular matter. Although this gathered information may not be conclusive enough but at least they have led to the formation of the belief. Soccio captures this distinction between mere belief and informed belief clearer when he writes that:

Mere belief refers to a conviction that something is true for which the only evidence is the conviction itself... Mere belief “validates itself” or tries to... any position that is sound and worth holding must be supported by ample, identifiable reasons. These reasons

must go beyond merely feeling sure that something is true. And the best way to distinguish reliable beliefs from problematic ones is to subject important ideas to careful scrutiny (13).

It is in the process of subjecting our ideas or beliefs to scrutiny that we move reasonably closer to acquiring knowledge. Comparatively, knowledge and belief are in a certain way related to one another; knowledge requires belief, but belief does not require knowledge. It is obviously impossible for someone to claim knowledge that P (where 'P' stands for any proposition or statement) without believing that P. On the other hand, it is apparent that people sometimes believe things which they do not know to be so, or which are even false. This argument will be further explored in the course of our discussion in this paper.

Knowledge

The use of the word “knowledge” has diverse connotations, that is, it is one of the elastic terms that can be stretched to mean anything we choose. For instance, we do not mean the same thing by the phrase “to know something”. The meaning of this depends greatly on the perspective through which it is conceived. Let us briefly consider some usages of the word “know”.

i. Knowing how:

This has to do with the ability to engage in a certain activity. Usually, it is a learned ability like “to know how to swim or drive a car, to know how to behave myself” (Ayer, 8). It involves having the technical know-how to do many things that people do not. It also includes knowing how to do something without having learnt it. This is referred to as knowing by instinct or being programmed genetically to act in specific way. For instance, lambs know how to walk immediately after birth.

ii. Knowing by acquaintance:

This is based on direct non-propositional awareness of something. It involves the perceptual features received by the senses during its contact with physical objects. For instance, knowing in the sense of being familiar with a person or a place; of knowing something in the sense of being able to recognise or distinguish, as when we claim to know an honest man when we see one or to know butter from margarine (Ayer 8). Some philosophers have sometimes referred to this as “knowledge by acquaintance”. Some are of the opinion that this is simply acquaintance, not knowledge. Knowledge, they argue goes beyond mere sensual perception of physical objects. It entails having before one's mind some statements that are either true or false. Although, there could be no knowledge without acquaintance, but still acquaintance is not knowledge, it only provides the materials for knowledge.

iii. Knowing that:

This is propositional knowledge which involves knowing that something is the case. That is, knowing that some situations or state of affairs actually occur or exist. You do not have knowledge until you are in a position to claim that something is the case. Knowledge is simply propositional; it involves some knowledge of truth. Simply put, it is the sense, or senses, in which to have knowledge is to know that something or another is the case (Ayer 8).

It is as a result of these diverse usages of the word “know” that philosophers distinguish between theoretical and practical knowledge. Theoretical knowledge is the accurate compilation and assessment of factual and systematic information and relationships. Practical knowledge consists of skills needed to do things, such as play the piano, use a band saw, remove a tumor, or bake a cake (Soccio 13). It is also in view of this that Ozumba in his *A Concise Introduction to Epistemology* outlines what it means to know as follows:

to be aware of something; to be certain about it; to learn and remember something; to have understanding or grasp of the object of knowledge; to be familiar with something, to be able to recognize or identify something; ability to distinguish between things; to have enough experience and training; to be intimate with something (2).

In philosophy, the study of knowledge is called epistemology and at the centre of the epistemological discourse is the famous definition of knowledge as “justified true belief”. This definition enjoyed popular patronage such that it became known as the traditional account of knowledge. The traditional account of knowledge provided the platform for the analysis of knowledge through the identification and justification of the elements that constitutes to knowledge. It holds that there are three main conditions of knowledge. These conditions were suggested in one of Plato's dialogues, *Theatetus* by defining knowledge as a justified true belief (Ibrahim 134). Thus, to know x means, first, that x actually is true; second, that I believe x to be true; and third, that I can justify my belief in x by providing “adequate evidence”. Of course, these requirements raise some interesting questions, for example: Is strong personal feeling adequate evidence? How much proof is enough? According to whose criteria? Philosophers demand that we provide reasons to justify our knowledge claim and that this justification be free of error.

In the light of the foregoing, it is clear that all knowledge claims involve identification and justification in the form of logical arguments, scientific predictions, or the demonstration of skilful performance, depending on what kind of knowledge is involved. Thus, knowledge involves the acquisition of information and skills through experience or education; it is the theoretical or practical understanding of a subject. That is, the state of being aware of how things are. It is important to point out at this juncture that

knowledge is a step towards wisdom. For the essence of acquiring information and skills is to be able to utilise same in making human life more meaningful and enjoyable. As such, knowledge is simply a means to human happiness.

Wisdom

Wisdom is a term that a lot of people use without knowing exactly what they mean by it. This is the case because the fullest understanding of what wisdom entails is not something that can be grasped so easily. When the ancient Greek thinkers referred to wisdom, they usually meant “the knowledge of fundamental principles and laws, and awareness of that which was basic and unchanging, as opposed to those things that are transitory and changing” (Stewart, et al. 1).

In view of this, Aristotle distinguished between speculative and practical wisdom, that is, between *sophia* and *phronesis*. The latter term is also, and usually, translated as “prudence”. While practical wisdom relates to the conduct of life, speculative wisdom – requiring the elements of intuitive reason and rigorous knowledge of first causes and principles – is best exemplified by that highest branch of speculative science known as “theology,” “first philosophy,” or “metaphysics.” (Reese 630). Thus, wisdom implies the highest exercise of all the faculties to discern the underlying principles and laws that govern nature and how it affects our existence. This explains why the Webster's Dictionary sees wisdom as “the mental power acting upon the materials that fullest knowledge gives in the most effective way” (1445). In this sense, wisdom connotes the attempt to provide for oneself an outlook on life based on the discovery of broad, fundamental principles. In line with this reasoning, Will Durant is of the opinion that “wisdom is total perspective... seeing an object, event, or idea in all its pertinent relationships... seeing things *sub specie to tius*, in view of the whole” (25).

From this synoptic perspective, wisdom involves a deep understanding and realisation of people, things, events or situations, resulting in the ability to apply perceptions, judgments and actions in keeping with this understanding. It often requires control of one's emotional reactions so that universal principles, reason and knowledge prevail to determine one's actions.

From the above, it is evident that having the awareness of the basic principles and laws of things is not wisdom in itself, rather, it is how this awareness (knowledge) shapes and directs our course of action. Thus, whenever our knowledge conditions our actions rightly then wisdom is achieved. Ijiomah corroborates this position when he looks at knowledge from a sociocentric perspective as follows:

Knowledge is not just the state of the mind or what is contained in the brain or journals or papers, it entails what is acted out as humans take part in social activities. Thus, knowledge is supposed

to provide our needs, satisfy our wants, regulate our blood pressure, release the captives, mend the broken hearted and heal the sick: here lies its morality (29).

However, it is pertinent to point out that Ijiomah's consideration of the social value of knowledge as a condition for defining knowledge is mistaken. It is indeed very convincing (as also argued in this paper) that our knowledge is supposed to be a veritable tool for the satisfaction of human needs. However, it is not a justification to confuse the theoretical aspect of knowledge with its practical utility. It is one thing to have an awareness of how things are (knowledge) while it is another to utilise this awareness profitably. To say morality is a condition of knowledge is to say that what something is, is the same with how it ought to be utilised.

This certainly does not add up! For instance, on the one hand, what a chair is, is simply a combination of the various elements that make up the chair like the legs, the handles, the seat, the back, the apron, the spindle and so on. On the other hand, the purpose for which the chair is created is “sitting”. Then, how can we attribute “sitting” as part of the constitutive elements of the chair? In the same vein, knowledge is simply the awareness of how things are while the purpose for this awareness is for the improvement of human life. As such, Ijiomah's conception of knowledge is to be understood as saying knowledge has a moral purpose which places value on it and not a condition for its definition.

This means that, knowledge is not acquired for its own sake rather for the improvement of human life. When knowledge is not utilised for the improvement of human life, it becomes foolishness. But, the right application of knowledge points to wisdom. That is, knowledge is a means to an end not an end in itself. The end or purpose of knowledge is human happiness; it is acquired to promote human happiness. As such, there is nothing like knowledge for knowledge sake, it is always knowledge for the sake of humanistic end. In this sense, knowledge has the touch of wisdom if what it “seeks to achieve is the primacy of human interests in their physical and spiritual dimensions” (Ozumba 20).

Thus, knowledge is said to promote human interest and happiness only when it is applied to resolve the complexities of our life in order to achieve a maximum fulfilment of the purpose of our existence. This is what wisdom entails. It is the ability to make best use of knowledge to the benefit of humanity. Wisdom therefore becomes the value we derive from the application of the insights of our knowledge to order our life purposefully. This explains why Stanley Godloritch as quoted by Soccio says that:

It is not the knowledge of the wise we acknowledge to be special but the value they place and invite us to place on it. In some sense, the recognition of wisdom is the recognition of what which we, the unwise, not only have known but should have known all along (7).

From the above quotation, it is deducible that what makes an individual a wise man

is not just his possession of knowledge but the value that is derivable from his knowledge. That is, the benefit of his knowledge to humanity makes him a wise man. It therefore means that wisdom is general knowledge of what does and does not produce human happiness. Wisdom requires knowing the difference between right and wrong, combined with the desire and ability to act in basic accord with the knowledge acquired. Unlike forms of knowledge based primarily on formal education and specialized intelligence, wisdom involves an accumulation of experiences beyond the intellectual or theoretical variety (Soccio 12). Traditionally, wisdom has been associated with maturity and experience in a way that knowledge has not. That is probably why wisdom is so often associated with the elders of a tribe or clan. Yet, clearly, age alone does not guarantee wisdom. Wisdom is also a function of personal, moral, intellectual, and spiritual growth. Wisdom is associated with personal virtue to a degree that knowledge is not. In this sense, a knowledgeable but arrogant and morally bankrupt man is seen as a fool as his character negates the essence of the knowledge he possesses.

This means that wisdom entails the cultivation of intellectual humility. That is, having knowledge of one's ignorance. Paul and Elder characterise intellectual humility thus:

Intellectual humility may be defined as having a consciousness of the limits of one's knowledge including a sensitivity of circumstances in which one's native egocentricism is likely to function self-deceptively. This entails being limitations of one's view point, and the extent of one's ignorance. Intellectual humility depends on recognizing that one should not claim more than one actually knows. It does not imply spinelessness or submissiveness. It implies the lack of intellectual pretentiousness boastfulness, or conceit, combined with insight into the logical foundations, or lack of such foundations, of one's beliefs (5).

The above description of wisdom is exemplified in the life and teaching of the famous Ancient Greek philosopher Socrates who was pronounced as the wisest of men by the revered Oracle at Delphi, “a pronouncement delivered when he was only thirty years old” (Chaffee 50). This indicates that age is not a necessary condition for wisdom. On receiving the news from the Oracle, Socrates exhibited a sense of intellectual humility by making effort to reflect on the meaning of the Oracle's pronouncement rather than basking in the glow that there is not wiser man than he. He therefore embarked on an experimental exploration, interviewing the people thought to be the wisest in Athens. After series of cases, he came to the conclusion that the difference between him and his interviewees is that he did not think he knows what he does not know. In his words as quoted by Chaffee:

I went to a man who was reputed to be wise... when I conversed with him, I came to see that, though a great many persons, and most of all he himself, thought that he was wise, yet he was not wise. Then I tried to prove to him that he was not wise, though he fancied that he was; and by so doing I made him indignant, and many of the bystanders. So, when I went away, I thought to myself, I am wiser than this man: neither of us knows anything that is really worthwhile, but he thinks that he has knowledge when he has not, while I, having no knowledge, do not think that I have. I seem, at any rate, to be a little wiser than he is on this point: I do not think I know what I do not know (51).

The above shows that the so-called “wised men of Athens” were victims of intellectual arrogance. That is, “a lack of consciousness of the limit of one's knowledge, with little or no insight into self-deception or into the limitations of one's point of view” (Paul & Elder 6). Wisdom therefore, entails recognition of the limit of one's knowledge and excludes the claim to know more than one actually knows. The point being stressed here is that, on the one hand, it is a question of knowledge to know that one does not know. On the other hand, it is a question of character to recognize and be humble enough to come to terms with one's intellectual limitation. It is only the wise that have the courage to accept that he knows not, when he does not know. In a nutshell, knowledge plus virtue gives wisdom.

Belief, Knowledge and Wisdom: Connections and Departures

At the beginning of his work “*Metaphysics*”, Aristotle declares that “all men by nature desire to know” (Bartlett 27). This declaration underscores the fact that the quest for knowledge is a natural disposition in man. But, why are we naturally disposed to seek knowledge? Why is knowledge an existential imperative?

Human existence is a cloudy and complex phenomenon that requires an understanding of how things are in order to figure out one's way through its treacherous currents. Knowledge is an existential instrument for guidance and direction in life, the absence of it throws man into a state of ignorance and existential despair and ultimately makes life a living hell. Knowledge therefore is an existential imperative as it makes man feel cognitively and practically at home in his habitat. This means that understanding the state of things and how to utilise this awareness in making life liveable is a non-negotiable condition of existence. This explains why in spite of the financial, mental and physical demands of education human beings continuously pursue knowledge with renewed vigour and commitment. But what is the starting point of the search for knowledge?

Any epistemic journey usually begins from what we accept as the situation of things. That is, what we take to be the case in terms of our beliefs and convictions. Belief is

the mental acceptance of a statement as true (Pence 6). On the basis of this acceptance, our beliefs become the conceptual tools with which we interpret and make sense of our environment. Thus, we make decisions and express judgements within the framework of our belief system. This belief system (set of beliefs) becomes our mental map with which we navigate our way and take decision in daily life. But, at what point does our belief begin to transform into knowledge? This is the point where we are able to exercise the capacity to distinguish between informed beliefs and uninformed beliefs. This capacity is a pointer to the gradual ascension from belief to knowledge.

Beliefs therefore serve as the starting point in the epistemic process. They are clues to what things really are; they are means to an end (knowledge). Knowledge cannot be acquired without the formation of beliefs. Since belief is the mental acceptance of the truth of a proposition, it creates a sort of psychological boost in the individual having it. In essence, beliefs are not actions of assenting to a proposition; they are simply dispositional psychological states that can exist even when un-manifested. Thus, the connection between belief and knowledge lies in the fact that the conviction we feel in our understanding of how things work was originally derived from the belief that led to such understanding.

However, the point of departure between belief and knowledge begins at the point of the probabilistic presence of truth in belief and the presence of truth in knowledge. A J. Ayer in his book *The Problem of Knowledge* elucidates the difference between belief and knowledge when he writes that:

To discover that there need be no difference, in respect of being sure, between knowing and believing, we need not know what he thought he knew. Very often the reason for this is that what he thought he knew was false. Consequently, he could not have known it, he only believed it (27).

On the connection between belief and knowledge, Ayer also points to the mental or psychological state of the one who claims to know. He writes further that:

But there is no suggestion that his mental state was different from what it was supposed to be. Had what he claimed to know been true he would, in these circumstances, have known it. (27).

The above analysis shows on the one hand that to know that something is true is different from believing that it is actually true. For instance, it was believed in the past that the sun revolves around the earth instead of the earth revolving around the sun. Thus, you can believe what is not true but you cannot know what is not true. We cannot know that rectangles are round because it is not true that rectangles are round. We just can't know what is not so! On the other hand, something must be believed before it is proven to be known or not. We cannot know a proposition unless we believe it; that is, believing presupposes knowing as it is a stage, we have to reach in the endeavour to attain

knowledge. As argued elsewhere, “if we know that rectangles are not round, then we must believe that rectangles are not round” (*Filosofia Theoretica...* 134). In this sense, we cannot claim to know something and equally claim not to believe it; to know it is to believe it, but to believe it is not to know it. Thus, knowledge requires belief but belief does not require knowledge.

The foregoing analysis shows that beliefs are building-blocks of knowledge while knowledge is the state of awareness of how things are and the proper utilization of knowledge leads to wisdom. In effect, the connection between belief, knowledge and wisdom is so strong that the negation of one lead to the inconceivability of the others. The concentric nature of the three concepts can be captured as follows:

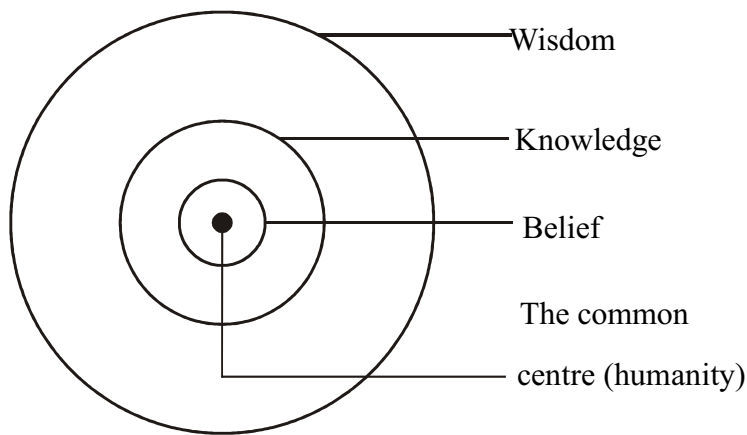


Figure 1: Diagrammatic Representation of the Concentric Nature of Belief, Knowledge and Wisdom

The above diagram shows that the three concepts are like circles with a common centre which connects them together. They are concentric in the sense that they share the same centre which if removed leads to the non-existence of the three circles. In this sense, the meaningfulness of any one of them is obtainable within the framework of their togetherness; as they are interwoven and intertwined.

However, the diagram also depicts a huge difference between the three concepts as each circle represents each concept in the order of their importance. We can obviously identify which circle stands for each concept. For there to be a circle for each, it means that each concept has an individual identity whose meaningfulness is tied to that of the other two concepts. Kolak and Martin capture this line of difference between the three concepts as follows:

Belief can be handed down. Knowledge can perhaps be handed down. Wisdom can never be handed down. The goal of philosophy is wisdom. Trying to hand down philosophy is unphilosophical. Wisdom requires questioning what is questionable. Since everything is questionable, wisdom requires questioning everything (2).

The point being stressed in the above quotation is that in as much as philosophy is conceived as the 'love of wisdom', to accept a claim without scrutiny or questioning is unwise and thereby unphilosophical. Thus, questioning the reasonability of our belief and the value of our knowledge to the service of humanity is in itself wisdom. In this sense, wisdom is an element of personal character which is not inherited but enables one to question the value of his/her knowledge. It is the ability to apply relevant knowledge in an insightful manner, especially to different situations from that in which the knowledge was gained.

Wisdom is also the ability to know and apply spiritual truths. Basically, wisdom is the right use of knowledge. It is the ability to recognise and judge everything; which aspects of the knowledge are true, right, lasting, and applicable to one's life. It is the ability to apply that knowledge to the greater scheme of things. It is also the ability to make decisions based on the combination of experience and intuition. The following are the highlights of the demarcation between knowledge and wisdom:

- ❖ Knowledge is obtained; wisdom is developed.
- ❖ Knowledge knows the difference between right and wrong; wisdom is choosing the one that will hurt less.
- ❖ Knowledge knows mistakes are part of life; wisdom is not making the same mistake twice.
- ❖ Knowledge knows the difference between being smart and being stupid; wisdom is that sometimes, when you want to be smart, you can make yourself look stupid.
- ❖ Knowledge knows how to manage your money, budgeting, spending, saving; wisdom understands how money impacts the quality of your life and future.

Conclusion

We began this paper with a conceptual clarification of belief, knowledge and wisdom. This was followed by a careful articulation of the connections and departures between the three concepts. It was shown that these three concepts are central to the ability to make meaning out of our existence. It was argued that if one lacks belief, he lacks knowledge and if one lacks knowledge, he also lacks wisdom. The three concepts go hand-in-hand. The paper submits that we should never mistake belief for knowledge nor knowledge for wisdom in spite of their connections. Beliefs initiate our thinking; knowledge gives us a living while wisdom gives us a life. Thus, everything we believe must be subjected to

critical examination in order to achieve knowledge and knowledge, when achieved, becomes meaningful only when utilised to the benefit and progress of humanity. In effect, humanity is the centre-piece of these three concentric epistemic concepts.

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