

Boundary Crossings

The wise stance in human geography

Dragos Simandan

Geography Department, Brock University, St Catharines, Ontario, Canada L2S 3A1
email: dsimandan@brocku.ca

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This essay aims to show what human geographers might gain from reflecting upon the concept of wisdom and does so by means of an exploration of how being wise might relate to being critical. Since the rhetorical hints of prescriptiveness and paternalistic judgement-passing implied by words like wise and foolish may alienate some readers, I have to ask them to at least try to suspend their beliefs and prejudices at the outset and bear with me until I present all the steps of the argument.

One of the defining features of contemporary human geography in the English-speaking world resides in its ambition to go beyond the mere description and explanation of the spatiality of social phenomena, by incorporating a normative-evaluative dimension in virtue of which human geographers see it as their right *and* obligation to assess the morality, utility or wisdom of the particular discursive practices they are investigating (Barnett 2008; Blomley 2008; Gregory 2010; Hyndman 2010; Massey 2008). It immediately follows from this observation that the quality of normative judgement is directly proportional to the quality of our mental models of key normative categories such as fairness, honesty, usefulness, wisdom, trustworthiness, generosity, open-mindedness and tolerance (Dancy 2000; Thomson 2008). Beginning with the premise that we can upgrade the quality of our work not only by improving our methodological prowess, but also by complexifying our mental models of the aforementioned normative concepts (Gallie 1956; Johnson-Laird 2006), this essay is a modest attempt to open up this direction of enquiry by taking a closer look at the twin concepts of wisdom and foolishness. Both lay people and scholars make frequent use of them in their judgement of human agents because they seem to offer much more than the less problematic pairs

knowledgeable-ignorant or intelligent-unintelligent¹ (Baltes and Smith 2008). But how wise are we to judge *others* as wise or foolish without having a more refined understanding of just what is conveyed by these elusive concepts?

The nature of wisdom

Beginning with the early 1980s, psychologists in Europe and North America have initiated a sustained effort to theorise the concept of wisdom. For this purpose, they have reviewed the work of major philosophers, the sacred texts of major religions, the scattered references to wisdom in the earlier history of psychology, the nuggets of wisdom contained in proverbs and sayings, as well as the answers provided by lay people when asked how they differentiate wisdom from intelligence and creativity. It is beyond the scope of this essay to inventory all the various theories that have emerged in the wake of this sustained and thorough research effort (for a comprehensive view, see the three edited volumes by Brown 2000; Sternberg 1990; Sternberg and Jordan 2005). Instead, in order for human geographers to become aware of the *key* facets of this normative concept, it will suffice to juxtapose the related but not identical meanings of wisdom espoused by the three major authors who have attempted to synthesise knowledge in this area.

The first school of thought on wisdom is often referred to as the 'Berlin model' and coalesced around Paul Baltes' work at the Max Planck Institute in Germany. According to this model (Baltes forthcoming; Baltes and Smith 2008), wisdom is expert knowledge in the fundamental pragmatics of life. More specifically, wisdom presupposes superior mastery of five bodies of knowledge: (a) factual knowledge about the nature of reality,

the nature of human nature and the major difficulties of living; (b) procedural knowledge about knotty problems in life (knowing what needs to be done and how to do it); (c) life-span contextualism, i.e. sensitivity to the peculiarities involved in the major turning-points of human life; (d) the management of uncertainty, i.e. awareness of the need to make significant decisions without full information and; (e) knowledge and understanding of the relativity of values across historical times, cultures, groups and individuals. Significantly, the Berlin model emphasises the fact that an agent can acquire only less-than-optimal wisdom throughout one's life. In other words, a wise person stands out from an average individual by simply being well ahead on the path of acquiring the wisdom scattered in one's culture. However, how much we learn from life depends not only on breadth of experience (i.e. number of years lived), but also on our ability to learn from those experiences (the altitude of intellect). This two-fold determination means that there is no correlation whatsoever between age and wisdom (Jordan 2005). Old fools and wise youngsters are not alien categories.

The second school of thought on wisdom revolves around Warren Brown's painstaking effort to synthesise and integrate different and not necessarily congruent ways of conceiving wisdom. Brown (2005) starts with the observation that we do not yet know exactly what wisdom is. The implication, then, is that any theory of wisdom at this stage is a mere working theory, a tool for fostering deeper and more insightful research on the topic. Helped by the metaphor of the 'seven pillars of wisdom', he constructs a multidimensional (seven dimensions) and open (an eighth or ninth dimension might be added in the future) perspective on the concept. The pillars of wisdom are: appreciative wisdom (the ability and propensity to recognise a wise behaviour or saying as wise; this pillar is the mother of all wisdom), discernment (the ability to be critical about received wisdom), common behavioural wisdom (the everyday pieces of wisdom that we detect in the actions and words of lay people), uncommon behavioural wisdom (referring to the special characteristics of wisdom among extremely gifted creators and leaders), communal wisdom (the wisdom of a community or cultural group), transcendental wisdom (the wisdom associated with the divinity dimension of human nature), and virtue (those components

of one's personality that make one a person of character).

Finally, the third school of thought has grown on American soil, around Robert Sternberg's research team. Sternberg has provided successively improved accounts of his theory, culminating in his recent WICS formula (Wisdom, Intelligence, and Creativity, Synthesized; Sternberg 2005a). The WICS formula defines wisdom as the use of intelligence and creativity, as mediated by values, in order to achieve a balance between long-term goals and short-term goals, and between intrapersonal, interpersonal and transpersonal interests, by means of adapting to one's environment, adapting one's environment to oneself, or leaving one's environment altogether. The distinctive advantage of Sternberg's view resides in the fact that he states what wise individuals actually do. Wisdom is all about balance and indeed Sternberg's account is frequently referred to as the balance theory of wisdom. As the definition suggests, the sage knows how to weigh competing interests and strategies in three inter-related dimensions of life: the temporal dimension (long-term versus short-term desires), the narcissist dimension (intrapersonal desire versus interpersonal concerns and transpersonal commitments) and the geographical dimension (giving in to fit one's present environment versus struggling to modify one's environment versus moving out to greener pastures).

In the last few years, Sternberg (2005b) has added to our understanding of wisdom by elaborating an imbalance theory of foolishness. In the same way that specialists in logical reasoning detect logical fallacies, Sternberg pierces the heart of unwise behaviour and proposes that it results from the interplay of five fallacies of wisdom: the what-me-worry fallacy (unrealistic optimism or insouciance on the part of the subject with regard to the consequences of her/his action or inaction), the egocentrism fallacy (lack of ability or disposition to pay attention to what lies beyond the boundaries of one's inflated ego), the omniscience fallacy (lack of awareness of how much one does not know and of the general tendency of hitherto valid knowledge to become obsolete), the omnipotence fallacy (lack of awareness of the limits of what one can accomplish), and the invulnerability fallacy (lack of awareness of the many ways in which one can be defeated by luck, broader forces, other people and even one's own foolishness).

Geography and wisdom

The intention of the previous section has been to broadly call the attention of geographers to these three theories rather than discuss the finer points of difference between them. Indeed, when considered together, these three perspectives on wisdom and foolishness force the conclusion that these evaluative concepts are multidimensional and that, therefore, their use in human geographical scholarship can be made to mean different things to different researchers. While this may be seen as a drawback, it can equally well be seen as a strength, as the philosophical analysis of 'essentially contested concepts' has shown for other normative categories (Gallie 1956). More generally, the whole point of expanding and diversifying our mental models of key normative concepts is not the elimination of ambiguity and plurality of meanings, but the enrichment of our toolbox for exercising evaluative judgement (Dancy 2000; Thomson 2008). Will we be wise enough to profit from it? I think the answer depends on the routes taken in our engagement with the wisdom literature. More specifically, a research agenda about the problematic of wisdom in human geography would need, at the very minimum, to begin with an exploration of the possible answers to a key question: what is the relation between the wise stance and the critical stance ('the critical stance' is consciously deployed here as a heuristically useful catch-all term, and is not intended to homogenise)? The need for this first step arises from the fact that many human geographers define themselves as critical, that is, as being concerned not only with understanding the world but also with making the world a better place (Blomley 2008; Gregory 2010; Massey 2008). These geographers are highly critical of the existing social-political order, a stance that itself is enabled by their critical skills, such as the capacity to question the taken-for-granted, to bring to light hidden assumptions, to ask questions about authorship and responsibility, to demonstrate the contingent character of those social phenomena that are portrayed as inevitable, to render the familiar unfamiliar, and so on and so forth. Part of the critical stance is the very questioning of received wisdom. The wise stance, on the other hand, seems to be more conservative, to build on time-tested knowledge, to acknowledge the value of tradition and of past experience, and to question the excessive reliance on changing one's environment as means of

successful adaptation (Baltes and Smith 2008). Yet, both stances have a strong normative and prescriptive component. In a sense, both of them are guides to living. Clarifying the exact nature of the tensions between them and trying to uncover the benefits we might derive from living and grappling with these tensions seem to me to be worthwhile avenues of geographical reflection. To spur this much-needed reflection, I would like to offer, for the final part of this essay, three alternative ways of imagining the relation between the two stances.

The first model portrays the wise stance and the critical stance as *mutually exclusive*. The questionable move underpinning this pessimistic model consists of bringing to the foreground only those aspects of the two stances that are – or seem to be – at odds with each other. To understand why this model sounds plausible, we might focus on the dominant research paradigm in psychology, because most that has recently been written on wisdom emerged from this particular discipline. Since contemporary psychological research remains largely indebted to logical positivism, to quantitative techniques and to methodological individualism (Slife and Richardson 2008; Kagan 2009; Yanchar *et al.* 2008), we may expect that the wise stance, an offspring of such research, would antagonise human geographers because our discipline relies increasingly on post-positivistic philosophies, qualitative techniques and methodological holism (Johnston and Sidaway 2004).

The second model depicts the wise stance and the critical stance as *complementary* but equally valuable ways of thinking and feeling. The reasoning behind this more generous model is indebted to pluralistic epistemology (Preston 2005), in that it envisages each of the two stances as constellations of epistemic gains and epistemic losses. By entertaining both stances in our minds, we escape the limiting grip of each of them, while benefiting from their unique vantage points on social reality and human life. It is worthy of note that the distinction between the first model and the second model rests not so much on formal logic as it does on attitude. Indeed, from a formal logical standpoint, in order for two stances to count as complementary, they must be, if not totally exclusive, at least partly non-overlapping, because if they were not, we would call them redundant stances and not in any way complementary. Bearing this observation in mind, and building on Richard Phillips' fascinating work on curiosity (Phillips 2010), I suggest that the

choice to approach the wise stance and the critical stance as complementary is the logical upshot of having embraced an attitude of good curiosity, of openness, of adventure, of willingness to be challenged, of courage to travel into *terrae incognitae*. By parity of argument, the choice to perceive the two stances as mutually exclusive might betray an attitude of dogmatism, of closed-mindedness, of insecurity and of intellectual cowardice that is incompatible with either being wise or being critical. Indeed, as I am about to show, it is foolish to hastily disparage the wisdom literature just because it ensues from a discipline still under the spell of methodological individualism and positivistic philosophy. Ironically, in spite of initially relying on methodological individualism, scholars of wisdom research ended up (at least implicitly) acknowledging the very inadequacy of an exclusive reliance on that methodology (recall that one of the seven pillars of wisdom in Brown's model is communal wisdom, i.e. the wisdom of a community or cultural group, the investigation of which can hardly be undertaken by means of methodological individualism alone). Furthermore, even though the psychological study of wisdom has largely been guided by the rigid value system of positivistic philosophy, this fact alone has not prevented researchers from concluding, like true post-positivists, that a key component of wisdom is heightened awareness of the relativity of values (recall that this is one of the central elements in the Berlin model of wisdom). My final argument in support of the complementary model and against the mutually exclusive model brings out an equivocation that might otherwise pass unnoticed. More to the point, it behoves critical thinkers to recognise that my aforementioned formulation 'part of the critical stance is the very questioning of received wisdom' does not entail that the wise stance and the critical stance are mutually exclusive. Indeed, this misleading impression stems from the equivocal use of the term wisdom: whereas by 'received wisdom' it is meant 'common, cursory knowledge', true wisdom actually presupposes the critical stance (recall that discernment, i.e. the ability to be critical about 'received wisdom', is the second pillar in Brown's model of wisdom).

Finally, if (as Brown argues) true wisdom presupposes the critical stance while the converse is not true, we can dare to begin to think of a third, more provocative model, according to which the critical stance appears *nested* within the more

encompassing wise stance. The reasoning underwriting this model emphasises the continuity between the two stances,² portraying the wise stance as a later, more mature and more comprehensive stage in one's path of intellectual and moral development within the critical stance. Since I defined myself as a critical geographer long before starting to investigate the topic of wisdom and since I see the critical stance as a necessary but not sufficient ingredient of the wise stance, I confess that it is this last model that most appeals to me. Whether human geographers will concur in envisioning the critical stance as a stage on the path to the wise stance remains to be seen, but, importantly, human geography's engagement with the wisdom literature need not depend on the endorsement of my third, nested, model. Provided enough curiosity and courage, even the second, complementary, model will do.

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Notes

- 1 The case of George W. Bush comes to mind as an example of a politician who was foolish even though he scored high on IQ tests (see the analysis in Stanovich 2009; see also Gregory 2010).
- 2 This is the mindset evinced in my recent analysis of contingency in geography (Simandan 2010), for example.

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