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# Wisdom and Evil

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People typically think that wisdom and goodness go hand in hand. One has only to think of common exemplars of wisdom and goodness to see this association. Mahatma Gandhi and Mother Teresa were both noted for goodness, but also seemed serene and wise. Though wise people are commonly thought to be good, good people are not always thought to be wise. Those who are both wise and good are special cases, rising to a height of moral virtue not many of us achieve. But if goodness and wisdom can pull apart in cases of people who are good but not wise, might they not pull apart in more radical ways? Here I challenge the association of wisdom with goodness, and argue that wisdom and evil can co-exist. There can be wise, but evil, people. Let me begin by offering an explanation of why wisdom and goodness are so commonly associated. Though this explanation is completely speculative, it is amenable to empirical study and confirmation or falsification.

Western countries have been deeply shaped by Judaeo-Christian traditions and values. Judaeo-Christian concepts have seeped into our secular culture, traditions, and mindsets, tacitly influencing the way we see the world and think. Religious concepts shape our moral concepts. We are often unaware of these influences until we stop to examine how and why we think as we do. I suggest that we associate wisdom and goodness because of the effect on our thinking of the Judaeo-Christian concept of God [1]. The Judaeo-Christian God is a being of many attributes, all of which are perfect. Foremost among them are wisdom and goodness. God is all-knowing, all-wise, and omnibenevolent. He cannot be less than fully wise and completely good. How does the concept of such a being operate in our everyday thinking?

The concept of the Judaeo-Christian God as perfectly wise and good functions in much the same way as the concept of 'bird.' It provides a general category that allows us to classify specific creatures when we encounter them, as well as a standard for judging how well those instances meet our criteria for being a bird. Those criteria are derived from our concept of bird: the creature has wings, a beak, can fly, reproduces by laying and hatching eggs, and so on. The case of 'bird' is familiar. We know what the concept of a bird is, having been taught it when we were young. We know that we use it to make sense of the world, and to categorize creatures. Not only do we use it to distinguish birds from non-birds, we also use it to designate some birds as more central to the category than others. We know that a robin is more central to the category of bird than a penguin, since a robin has more characteristics of a bird than the flightless penguin.

Though we do not use the concept of the Judaeo-Christian God to distinguish gods from non-gods, we implicitly use it, I believe, as a standard for classifying and judging the moral qualities of the people we encounter. It is a standard of perfection that operates at a deep and nonconscious level in our views of people and the world. If the concept of God does function in this way, it is likely to be the standard we tacitly use when thinking about wisdom and goodness, for God is the only being who is both perfectly wise and perfectly good. We closely associate wisdom and goodness because of the internalization and operation of the concept of the Judaeo-

Christian God in our psyches, and if this is so, when we judge Mahatma Gandhi and Mother Teresa to be both wise and good, we assimilate them rather centrally to a God-like standard. When we judge others to be good but not wise, they fall shorter.

What does all of this have to do with wisdom and evil? Simply this. Our background assumptions for understanding human wisdom and goodness, shaped as they are by the concept of the Judaeo-Christian God, fail to take into account the fact that God is atemporal. God is eternally good and eternally wise. There are no changes in the divine personality. When we tacitly use God as the standard for viewing human wisdom and goodness, we overlook the temporal factor. We implicitly assume that humans are unchanging in wisdom and goodness. But they are not. The possibility of character change, in particular, of corruption, opens the door to seeing how wisdom and evil might co-exist in human lives.

How might someone be both wise and evil? Suppose a person has attained wisdom and goodness. Typically we think of a sage like Confucius, a leader like Gandhi, or Mother Teresa, who dedicated her life to serving God and humanity. In these cases, we might find it hard to think their goodness would ever change. Mother Teresa's strong faith, Gandhi's spiritual discipline, and Confucius's perfection of ritual practice, we might think, indemnify them against corruption of character. But even angels fall from grace. Presumably, when we consider wise and good *people*, we do not ascribe to them perfect wisdom and goodness, though we might, as in the exemplars mentioned above, attribute strong wisdom and goodness. Imagine a less morally strong individual who suffers a severe blow in life, such as losing a beloved child in a horrible and senseless accident. Such a person, perhaps wise and good at one time, is set on a downward spiral. She becomes bitter, and this bitterness corrodes her character. Lucifer's downfall was his pride. If an angel – a being superior to humans in both wisdom and goodness – can fall from goodness, why can't a human being? The question then is, "Does our embittered person lose her wisdom, as she loses her goodness?" Does the loss of goodness somehow infect or compromise her wisdom?

One clear answer to this is, "Yes." Many virtue ethicists would make this reply. The philosopher John McDowell, for example, holds the "unity of virtues" thesis, according to which one cannot have a single virtue unless one has all of the others [2]. This is because the virtues cluster together as a unified set of moral sensitivities that shape the perspective of their possessor. Accordingly, if one loses a virtue, this affects the integrity of the others in one's psychological landscape. In other words, one's loss of virtue is bound to affect how one views the world. One's vision becomes distorted. But an occluded vision bespeaks loss of wisdom. One cannot be wise and look at the world in distorted ways. This is brilliantly illustrated in the character of Satan in John Milton's *Paradise Lost* [3]. His pride clouds his vision, prodding him to find ways of undermining God, despite the stunning defeat of the rebel angels at the hands of heavenly hosts. Satan is clever and resourceful, but not wise [4]. Might not the situation be similar for our embittered person? Could her bitterness cloud her vision, causing her to lose her wisdom?

This is a possibility we cannot discount. Against this, however, consider another option. Philosophers of mind and cognitive scientists have stressed the modularity of mind and the domain-dependency of skills and reasoning [5]. Neera K. Badhwar, a philosopher, adopts a similar view of the domain-dependency of virtue [6]. If our thinking is modular and our virtues

are domain-specific, perhaps our vices are domain-specific, too. If this is so, it is possible that neither pride nor bitterness need corrupt wisdom. Pride and bitterness, as well as other vices, could be operative in specific domains, but need not extend to those areas in which wisdom operates. But then we need to raise another question: “Is wisdom domain-dependent, too?” Perhaps we are wise in some domains, such as raising our children, but not in others, such as our romantic involvements.

We need to take modularity and domain-dependency seriously. It could well be that some of us are wise in some areas, but not in others, and simultaneously good in some respects, but evil in others. But if so, wisdom and evil can co-exist in the same person.

The take-home message is this. Our lay thinking that associates wisdom and goodness is deeply but tacitly shaped by our conception of God’s perfect wisdom and goodness. But God is atemporal, and humans are not. The susceptibility of humanity to corruption of character, as well as the modular and domain-dependent nature of the human mind, presents a more complex and perhaps, less comforting picture of wisdom and goodness. In this more fragmented account, parcels of wisdom can co-exist with non-wisdom, as well as with evil, in the human personality.

## References

[1] By focusing on the Judaeo-Christian concept of God, I do not mean to exclude the possibility that concepts of deities in other cultures and traditions might function similarly.

[2] John McDowell, “Virtue and Reason,” *The Monist* 62 (1979): 331-350.

[3] John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, ed. John Leonard (London, England: Penguin Books, 2000). See especially Book I, pp. 5-7.

[4] Satan complains of being denied wisdom at Milton (2000, p. 54).

[5] See, for example, Jerry A. Fodor, *The Modularity of Mind: An Essay on Faculty Psychology* (Boston, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1983); and Keith R. Laws, Rebecca L. Adlington, F. Javier Moreno-Martinez, and Tim M. Gale, *Category-Specificity: Evidence for Modularity of Mind* (Hauppauge, New York: Nova Science Publishing, 2011).

[6] Neera K. Badhwar, “The Limited Unity of Virtue,” *Nous* 30:3 (1996): 306-329.

- See more at: <http://wisdomresearch.org/forums/p/1223/1609.aspx#sthash.xqoQGNVT.dpuf>