

# Wisdom for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century



ARISTOTLE



PLATO



Illustrations by Dennis O'Laughlin

**I**N THIS YEAR OF OUR LORD 1986, nearly 11 percent of the United States population is over 65 years of age. This seemingly innocuous statement feels about right to most of us; a little over a tenth is not a large fraction when considered statistically. But this simple statistic can be startling when translated into real numbers. Currently, about 25 million Americans are beyond the age of retirement — and that is a lot of old people. And if today's real numbers are startling, tomorrow's are alarming. Fifteen years from now, in the popular year of the future 2001, about a third of our

*this percentage will increase to 14, and in 2030*

populace (or 80 million people) will fall within the group traditionally considered elderly.

Why is this projection alarming? People who deal in the management of people — politicians, administrators, executives, and so on — must ask themselves, "What are we going to do with all these old people?" But must a "large number of the elderly" necessarily be seen as a problem? I say "No" and affirm the opposite: that the possibility exists to regard the elderly as a benefit.

Our culture in this country has developed a negative attitude towards the old because of two incompatible

desires. Americans want to be young, but they also want to live a long time. Youth, exclusively, is associated with fresh ideas, active lives, and healthy bodies, all of which are extremely desirable attributes which are not accorded to the old.

As individuals, however, each of us also wants to preserve that most important person — our self — as long as possible. Since aging is a sign of the natural progress to the end of life, we try to ignore it. People stop having birthdays at 39 — not having birthdays leaves you a long life yet to live — and are often angered or depressed when

*Philosophical Wisdom*

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forced to acknowledge their age.

Unfortunately, when ignoring aging it is also convenient to ignore the aged. Thus the old become a problem with no solution: we want to ignore them so we label them useless and forget them, but there are so many that they keep getting in the way. But ignoring a problem is no way to solve it — or so my grandmother once said.

The conflict between our desires is obvious. Nothing can change the fact that the longer one lives, the older one gets. But the companion idea — that one's quality of life must deteriorate — is wrong. The young hold no monopoly on new thoughts, social life, or vigor. Eighty percent of the elderly today are healthy enough to maintain their normal level of activity, and as medical geriatrics and gerontology continue to advance, this proportion will increase. By the year 2001, most people will lead vigorous lives into their late seventies — and many into their nineties. In addition, the level of education and socioeconomic status among the elderly is constantly rising.

So the people managers have a new worry: what is to be done with all these healthy, active, smart old people? Won't they clog up the system, demand later retirement, and keep young people from advancing and making good lives for themselves?

They will not. Investigations have shown that as socioeconomic position and educational level increase, individuals become more, not less, interested in early retirement. The reason for retiring is not to become divorced from one's earlier life, but to separate just far enough to refocus interests, explore new areas, and integrate new information with the knowledge and experiences gained earlier. These much more personal goals cannot be achieved in an environment of commitments and responsibilities aimed at immediate and pragmatic results. The older person often relishes the opportunity to withdraw from competition with the young, if it does not include isolation

from the stimulation of youth. The result is that retirement can become a means to contribute more to our culture, not less.

The unique contributions that the old can make to a culture are particularly evident in cultures that contain exceedingly long-lived individuals. In areas of Ecuador and the Soviet Union, a significant number of people live to extremely old ages. Although some of the ages reported from southern Georgia, USSR, are exaggerated because of a method used to dodge the Czars' military draft, many people do live to be over 100 — and some to the maximum human life span of 115+ years. Despite the wide geographic division of the Soviet Union from South America, there are some interesting cultural similarities between the regions where longevity is longer.

People in both regions look forward to getting old. Youth is something to be left behind for the experience, knowledge, and pleasures of maturity. A 60-year-old man may have both a father and grandfather still living and consider himself to be just getting started. Social position increases with age and prestige is gained simply by becoming older, although the respect for age most likely began as recognition of the knowledge and wisdom possessed by the older community members. Recognition of these qualities would also be of benefit to our own society.

One way in which the elderly were and are of use in preliterate social groups is as a repository of information. Imagine, for example, that crops are threatened by drought and there is not enough water for both drinking and irrigating. The village elders would be consulted, and perhaps an old woman would recount the story of a similar crisis from her own distant childhood. She might remember when the old man in her village had sent the children to the dry streambed to gather

round, clear quartz pebbles. The pebbles, when spread around the roots of the plants, condensed enough dew from the air for the crops to survive. Thus, knowledge critical to the survival of the village survived with the elderly.

But in our society we have libraries and computer banks to store information and this role is no longer vital. So what significant contribution can the elderly make to our capable, industrious society?

Wisdom. Wisdom is a unique blend of knowledge, reasoning, and creativity, matched to the needs of a situation.

One factor in producing wisdom is the match between a person's cognitive abilities and the circumstances of a problem, so it is of course possible for anyone to seem wise in a limited sense. But due to the natural progression of human development, a true, broad-based wisdom can only be achieved in later life.

The ancient Greeks defined two types of wisdom: practical and philosophic. Practical wisdom can be further divided into an understanding of the physical world, and an understanding of relationships, particularly those among people.

A practical understanding of the physical world can result, for example, in an old woman's advice on conserving water and saving a crop.

A practical understanding of human relationships can result in the good advice that avoid a tragic misunderstanding. A teenage boy is frustrated by a girl who keeps annoying and teasing him, until his mother points out that the behavior means she likes him. A middle-aged housewife is baffled when her husband stops talking to her, calls in sick to work, and sits around all day reading westerns, until her father mentions his own feelings of despair at that age. Two diplomats realize the necessity of breaking through their own and each other's

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feelings of mutual distrust but fail, until a third, mutually trusted and experienced mediator becomes involved. These are three examples of a practical situation in need of an experienced word of wisdom.

The third form, philosophic wisdom, is based on an understanding of knowledge: what is known, how it is known, and where and when it should be applied. This requires an understanding of self, an internal focus on one's own methods of thinking and acting, and the expansion of this knowledge into a general understanding of people. Such a self view leads ultimately to an expertise in the understanding of meaning, virtue, and order.

Each of the three kinds of wisdom corresponds to a period of human development. And because each part of life must be passed through sequentially, it is clear that becoming

wise in the full sense must be left to later life.

The three phases of life have been noted throughout history since the riddle of the sphinx “*What animal walks on four legs in the morning, two legs through the day and three legs in the eve?*” “*Man, who crawls in childhood, walks erect as adult, and uses a cane in old age*”).

Learning about the physical world begins in childhood. The child first learns about sensations and things, then how to manipulate, relate and classify those things, and finally, during adolescence, how to think in abstract terms about things. The child's main focus is gathering the information necessary for working and surviving in the world.

The second period of life — late adolescence to middle adulthood — focuses on learning about the social world. The young adult must learn

that final solutions do not come from an ultimate authority, then that infallible authorities do not exist but everyone cannot be right in their own way, and lastly how to independently evaluate situations and make decisions while accounting for personal biases. This period of life focuses on preparing for and assuming social responsibilities in the family and community.

In the last phase, we learn about the self and about thought in general, beginning in late middle-age when the responsibilities assumed earlier are relieved as children marry and retirement looms. Personal growth proceeds with this easing of commitments. The development of wisdom could now begin with a review of what is known and what still needs to be learned about the physical and social domains, thus this is the time when reminiscence assumes an important function in life. Old knowledge is reintegrated with new information selected for its relevance to a changing perspective on life, and new global structures and relations emerge. Finally, these structures and relationships are able to evolve into a higher order cognitive system that encompasses an understanding of the physical, social and philosophic. The goal of this period seems to be to prepare a lifetime of learning for the next generation, and then to reach a plateau which could be the broad-based capacity for wisdom.

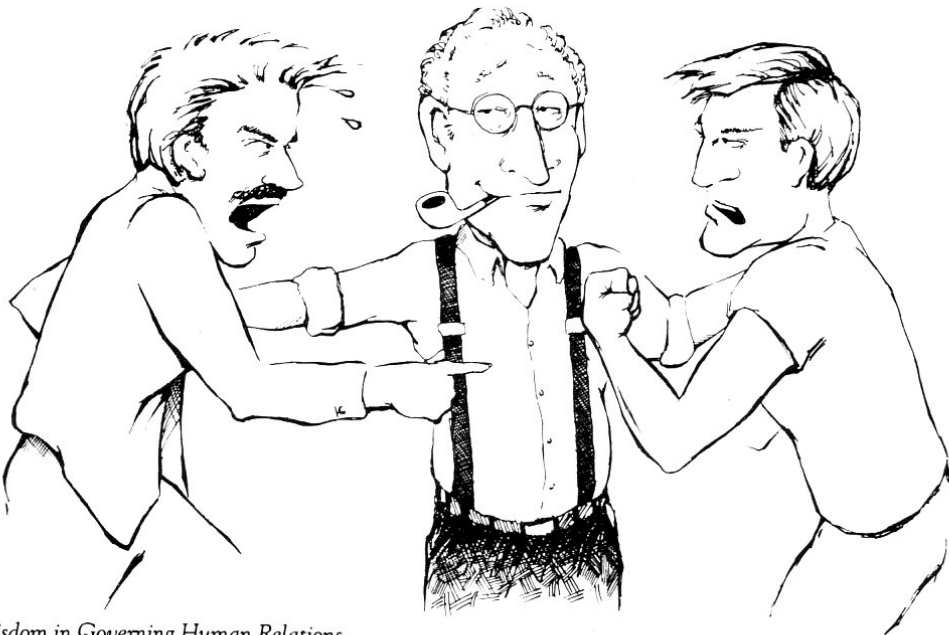
At this plateau, the older person possesses the cognitive skills that apply to any problem, whether physical, social, or philosophical. If information is available and a proper degree of creativity used, wisdom will result. It is just this sort of wisdom that is so desperately needed in our (or any) society. Scientific and medical ethics, technological and industrial responsibility, and economic and military negotiation are all issues that demand wise responses. Yet wise men and women are too scarce to meet these demands.

Why? Because so many people stall



Wisdom in Dealing with Physical Reality

**“If we begin to plan now, we could expect to see a new definition of ‘old’ — i.e., ‘wise and respected’ — in time for the 21st century.”**



*Wisdom in Governing Human Relations*

along the developmental path. Age does not of itself produce wisdom, but we too often leave it to nature and chance. And as B. F. Skinner asked regarding the training of children, “Where is the virtue in accident?”

Unlike Skinner’s ideas of education, I do not believe that wisdom can be trained or taught. (Who living today would feel competent to force-feed wisdom or even presume to guide its evolution?) However, it is possible to enhance the possibility of its achievement. If we can increase the number of people that achieved wisdom, the two problems of unrespected elderly and unmet need for wise counsel would both be remedied.

The liberal arts curriculum is specifically intended to roundly educate each individual in the natural sciences, the social sciences, and the humanities; each of these areas is a component of the grounding needed for wisdom. Research has demonstrated that a liberal arts education enhances the development of students through the middle part of their life, although direct involvement

ends in young adulthood. We recognize that the purpose of education is to develop wisdom, and now we must act on that information. We must extend the concept of the college and university, and invite our elderly back to school. Not to be taught, but to participate in a stimulating, collegial atmosphere — an intellectual environment that will nurture the free growth of wisdom.

Can it be done? The elements needed for an organized program to increase the prevalence of wisdom are converging: (a) the field of psychology is evolving a model of wisdom and how it can be achieved, to provide a focus and a goal for the educational institution which has previously operated on heuristic methods; (b) the traditional student population is declining, leaving educational facilities available for a wisdom program; and (c) people are ready to avail themselves of just this sort of opportunity. These are people just entering the last phase of development, who are looking for a new, fruitful concept of what the later years can mean.

I recently talked with three men nearing retirement age who have expressed similar needs, independent

of each other and without my prompting: a physician who would like to return to campus life to study ethics and philosophy, the president of a moderately sized business who wishes to study history from the Renaissance to the Industrial Revolution, and an electrical engineer who would like to attempt theoretical physics and cosmology. These people are financially secure and wish to return to the scholarly environment to fulfill a need for self development. They would not drain finances needed for younger students; but would enhance, through their experience, the academic quality of the liberal arts program. They would increase scholarly productivity through interaction with both young students and faculty, and they would benefit the country and the world by providing a pool of wisdom from which to draw. And because of anticipated extensions in active lifetime, a second period of formal scholarship following the usual 30 years of productivity would leave another 30 years to again contribute to society in a different way.

Such a system of wisdom-oriented education is a positive alternative to the “problem” of aging that confronts this country. If we begin to plan now, we could expect to see a new definition of “old” — i.e., “wise and respected” — in time for the 21st century.



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