

## **Can Wisdom Be Taught?**

By Claire Arnold-Baker

### **Abstract**

This paper explores the concept of wisdom, and how it has been defined by philosophers and psychologists alike. It will consider whether existential psychotherapy training leads to the creation of wisdom in trainees and practitioners and whether it is therefore possible to teach. Aspects of wisdom will be explored in relation to existential training, and the paper will conclude by highlighting some sign posts in the journey towards wisdom.

Questo articolo esplora il concetto di saggezza e il modo in cui è stato definito da filosofi e psicologi. Si valuterà se la formazione in psicoterapia esistenziale porta alla creazione di saggezza nei tirocinanti e nei praticanti e se è quindi possibile insegnare. Verranno approfonditi gli aspetti della saggezza in relazione alla formazione esistenziale, e l'articolo si concluderà evidenziando alcuni punti di riferimento nel viaggio verso la saggezza.

### **Introduction**

This paper is based on a talk presented to the International Symposium of Existential Therapy Schools, in Rome, a joint event organised by S. P. Es. and the Federation for Existential Therapy in Europe (FETE). The theme of the conference was 'Wisdom in Practice: From Existential Training to Therapeutic Encounter'. This led to an exploration of whether, as training providers, we have an aim to help our trainees to become wiser. This paper seeks to answer the question: As training providers are we in the business of teaching wisdom?

### **What is Wisdom?**

Although there may be common understandings of what 'wisdom' means in everyday life, philosophers have sought to define or identify its essence in order to gain a deeper understanding of what it pertains to. Jonkers (2020) is one such philosopher who, in a recent paper, defined wisdom as having 3 components:

- 1) 'encompassing, theoretical and practical knowledge, which orients people in their search for the good life'.

- 2) 'is able to relate this insight in a meaningful way to the particular existential situations of concrete individuals or societies.'
- 3) 'a wise person is someone who not only *has* wisdom but also uses and lives it'.

(Jonkers, 2020: 262)

Central to Jonkers' definition is that a wise person has a level of knowledge, both theoretical and practical. However, wisdom is not just about knowledge acquisition. Jonkers argues that wisdom also involves the application of knowledge, particularly in order to gain insight into existential situations, which suggests being able to think deeply and gain insights about human existence in general. The final element of wisdom for Jonkers, is that a wise person is able to live in a wise way in everyday life. He places an emphasis on a search for the 'good life', similar to the ancient Greek philosophers. Aristotle, for example, developed the concept of *eudaimonia* which placed a focus on a value-based lifestyle rather than one which was based on pleasure, such as that suggested by Epicurus. Aristotle believed that a person should live the best possible version of their life, whilst living in line with their values. Deurzen (2009) cautions against aiming for what might seem like a utopian place and instead suggests finding better ways of living in general.

Understanding wisdom has not just been the domain of philosophers. The psychologist Robert Sternberg developed the Balance Theory of Wisdom where he defines wisdom as,

'the use of one's intelligence, creativity, common sense and knowledge and is mediated by positive ethical values toward the achievement of a common good through a balance among (a) intrapersonal, (b) interpersonal, and (c) extrapersonal interests, over the (a) short and (b) long terms to achieve a balance among (a) adaptation to existing environments, (b) shaping of existing environments, and (c) selection of new environments'. (Sternberg, 1998).

Similar to Jonkers view that wisdom involves a search for the good life, Sternberg's theory focuses on an achievement of a common good. Sternberg also introduces the idea of ethical values in how one might act to achieve a common good. He highlights the interrelation between an individual and themselves and with others and how that has to balance with their relationship to the environment. Sternberg's introduction of ethical values highlights an important element of wisdom and echoes De Beauvoir's (2018) position that an individual's freedom must always be considered in relation to another's freedom. De Beauvoir believed that individuals must always act in ways that did not impact the freedom or experience of others in a negative way.

Walsh was also interested in the question: what is wisdom? He reviewed and analysed different characterisations of wisdom to offer a new definition. Walsh was careful to

caution that his definition was in no way to be considered a 'ONE TRUE definition' (Walsh, 2015: 279). He identified some common features in previous definitions:

- Prosocial attitudes and behaviours
- Social decision making/pragmatic knowledge of life
- Reflection/self-understanding
- Value relativism/tolerance
- Recognition of and effectiveness with uncertainty and ambiguity
- Perspicacity
- Emotional homeostasis

(Walsh, 2015)

Walsh's analysis led to him formulating the following definition of wisdom

'Wisdom is deep accurate insight and understanding of oneself and the central existential issues of life, plus skillful benevolent responsiveness.' (Walsh, 2015: 282).

Walsh placed emphasis not just on self-knowledge, but also on a deep understanding of existential issues, which was in common with Jonker's definition. Walsh also included an ethical element to his definition which echoed Sternberg's when he used the word 'benevolent'. Additionally, Walsh highlighted the applicability of understanding in how a person might respond to the world.

### **Existential Therapy Training**

Looking at Walsh's definition it may well be plausible to think that training as an existential therapist would lead to someone becoming wise. I have been working in the field of existential psychotherapy training for over 30 years. In that time, I have interviewed hundreds of applicants for existential therapy courses. I always start with the first question, which is: 'why do you want to study an existential approach to therapy?'. What is interesting is that the applicants tend to say similar things about the existential approach. This includes:

- It makes sense to me
- It is similar to how I think about life
- The approach matches my values
- It resonates with me and my reflections on life
- I am drawn to existential questions
- I like the non-pathologising and open-mindedness of the approach

The common theme that draws people to the approach seems to be the need to connect with existential ideas and questions. When considered as a whole, training to

become an existential therapist would seem to have all the basic building blocks needed for wisdom. As an existential training brings together:

|               |   |
|---------------|---|
| Psychotherapy | how we can relate to other people in a more connected way,  |
| Psychology    | how we can understand other people and ourselves at a deeper level  |
| Philosophy    | how we can comprehend life and existence and grapple with existential questions. In fact, the word <i>philosophy</i> comes from the Greek which means love of wisdom. |

It feels like a perfect recipe that will lead to people becoming wiser. Yet although we can put these different elements together in a training programme, help our students to acquire the knowledge and demonstrate to them how to use it, it does not necessarily mean that we can create wisdom in others.

Having worked in many different roles over the years and supported students in their journey to become existential therapists, I have observed that there are different types of students. There are those students who want to go through the programme quickly, almost seeing it as a tick box exercise, trying to complete all the requirements in a hurry. These students tend to stay on the surface, attaining some knowledge and some practical application of that knowledge into skills.

There are others who are diligent in their reading and work, they gain their qualification and are often good therapists, but it might be difficult to say that they had attained wisdom. There is another type of student however who fully immerses themselves in their studies, who reads beyond the set texts, who struggles with the philosophy, attempting to make sense of the philosophical ideas and applying them. These students come out at the end of the programme as changed people and we might even go as far as to say they have gained some wisdom.

They all do the same course, with the same materials and the same tutors but what is interesting is what makes the difference between someone who gains wisdom and someone who gains learning without necessarily attaining wisdom? As Jonkers highlights it is not purely about how much knowledge a person might have. To have wisdom is predicated on the way in which knowledge is utilised or applied in order to gain further insights into existential questions.

### **Wisdom as a state of mind**

Aristotle highlights another important aspect of wisdom when he said, 'knowing yourself is the beginning of all wisdom'. He argues that in order to be able to utilise or apply knowledge, whether to gain insight or further knowledge, a person needs to

understand themselves first. As each person must make sense of what they know and the experiences that they have and how they use that knowledge or experience to inform them and their responses to life. Our capacity to reflect on and make sense of, acts as a filter or a lens through which we understand ourselves, others and the world at large.

Socrates added another element to understanding wisdom when he stated that 'wonder is the beginning of wisdom'. Like Aristotle, Socrates emphasises the importance of how a person is orientated to the world, which in turns impacts the way in which we understand life and the world around us. The use of the word *wonder* suggests an openness to what is being experienced but also what is thought and felt too. It calls for curiosity and this aspect was taken up by Husserl (1973) when he claimed that we need to 'go back to the things themselves'. That if we only take account of the sense we have made of something then there is a possibility that we miss something new and different through the assumptions that we make. This is the foundation of phenomenology and links both Aristotle's and Socrates views on wisdom together. That what is important is not so much what we know or how much we know but rather that we adopt a reflective curious attitude to the knowledge that we have. It is noteworthy that both Aristotle and Socrates have emphasised what allows the path to wisdom to begin, rather than setting out what the full path might look like. They have highlighted what conditions need to be in place for wisdom to develop. In the same way a gardener needs to ensure the health of the soil and the right growing conditions to ensure that seeds are able to grow. Wisdom, then, might share some similarities with Heidegger's (1962) concept of authenticity, that it is not possible to grasp wisdom completely, in the same way that we cannot always be authentic and will fall back into times of inauthenticity. This would mean that wisdom is not necessarily a state in which we aim for and once reached it is attained forever, instead it might be more realistic to suggest that a wise person might have moments of wisdom and moments when they are not so wise.

It follows then that wisdom could be seen as a state of mind, that requires a reflective approach and curiosity to allow one to meet the world anew. Socrates introduces another element of wisdom when he says, 'the only true wisdom is in knowing you know nothing'. At first this feels a contradictory statement by Socrates 'knowing you know nothing', and counter intuitive in that wisdom seems to be predicated on the acquisition and application of knowledge. Socrates is highlighting that wisdom is about knowing there is always *more* to know, which is presently unknown. This involves a move from focussing on what you might already know, to the many things that you do not, and may never know. Tolstoy (2007) shares Socrates views when he stated that 'we can know only that we know nothing. And that is the highest degree of human wisdom'. Confucius (1979) also highlights this element of wisdom when he says 'He who knows all the answers has not been asked all the questions'. Whilst we need to orientate ourselves in order to be open to seeing and understanding the world in new ways, Confucius

suggests that it is also in relation to the world of others and things that we are tested and questioned. This involves an interaction between the person and the world.

If wisdom comes about through wonder, self-reflection and knowing that you know nothing then it is reasonable to ask whether wisdom can be taught. Einstein disagrees, he believed that wisdom could not be taught directly as one might teach a theory or how to develop a skill. Einstein believes wisdom comes about indirectly through experience and the attempt to acquire wisdom. Proust (2003) too notes that wisdom is not received but discovered on life's journey. Confucius goes further to map out the three ways we learn wisdom

‘By three methods we may learn wisdom:

First, by reflection, which is the noblest;

Second, by imitation, which is the easiest; and

Third, by experience, which is the bitterest’

Confucius notes how wisdom comes through an interplay between reflection, learning from others and from experience of living and acting in the world. Noting that when we learn from experience it is always through life's challenges rather than when life goes smoothly.

### **Becoming wise through existential therapy training**

As training providers, we are always faced with considerations regarding what we need our students to learn or know, for them to become existential therapists. This will include different types of knowledge. It is important for students to have a grounding in both academic and research areas, as it then provides a foundation for their practice. We also need our students to learn practical therapeutic skills, to be able to listen deeply and be with their clients in a therapeutic relationship, whilst at the same time drawing from their knowledge, both self-knowledge and academic knowledge to help them formulate their understanding of their client, their client's needs and how to respond in any given moment. However, it might also be useful to consider what students might need to learn if we are also hoping they leave the course with some wisdom. Below are four ways in which the conditions for wisdom can be created.

#### *i. Living the philosophy*

At NSPC we have two intakes of existential trainees each year and as part of their induction I spend some time talking to the new students about the need to ‘live the philosophy’. This is an essential part of being able to integrate philosophical ideas into therapeutic practice, as existential philosophy was never written with the intention of being used as a therapy. Although Heidegger was involved in talking to Boss' psychiatry students which could be seen as an application of his philosophy to therapy (Boss,

2001) and therefore one of the first forays into existential psychotherapy training. Therefore, the task for each therapist, trainee or professional is to find a way to apply existential philosophy to everyday living. Whilst training providers might offer some guidelines or a framework for students; it would go against the principles and values of existential philosophy to establish a rigid protocol to follow. It therefore must start as a personal endeavour. To begin with I ask my students to try and live the philosophy first, apply it to their own lives before they can apply it to anyone else. In this way I am asking them to grapple with the philosophical concepts and see how they relate to themselves. What resonates with them? What do they have difficulty with? We often have conversations in class for example about Sartre's (1943) idea of *existence precedes essence* and whether individuals have free will. Not all students agree with Sartre when they think about their own lives and experiences.

This idea of applying existential philosophy to everyday living is very much in line with de Beauvoir and Sartre's views that they wanted the philosophy to be a practical one. The fact that they wrote novels and plays as well as philosophical tomes exemplifies this. De Beauvoir stated that existentialism 'also claims to be a practical and living attitude toward the problems posed by the world today.' (de Beauvoir, 2004: 3). She goes on to say, 'it is a philosophy yet does not want to stay enclosed in books and schools; It intends to revive the great tradition of ancient wisdom.' (ibid., 2004: 3). De Beauvoir stresses how existentialism needs to go beyond taught philosophy and that it can be helpful to everyone in trying to make sense of everyday living. She highlights how existentialism is intended to help individuals cultivate a particular attitude to take toward the world. In this way we are not just asking students to think about how philosophical ideas apply to themselves but also to think deeply about life and their own lives.

## *ii. Therapy as a developmental process*

The second thing that I say to my students is that the process of becoming a therapist is a developmental process. This element of development or change over time feels like it gets closer to a place of wisdom. I emphasize that becoming a therapist is not just about learning but developing one's thinking and relating, so that they are changed in the process. This for me is an important aspect of becoming an existential therapist, because if a student thinks deeply about life in general and their own lives in particular then inevitably, they will be changed. Regardless of whether students agree with Sartre's notion of *existence precedes essence*, once we start to experience the world in new ways, whether that is through being introduced to new ideas or whether that is about re-evaluating your own values and beliefs, we are changed. I say to my students 'This course is life changing'! At the beginning they may feel daunted by this prospect and wondering what that change will look like. But so many students talk to me after they graduate and confirm how much their lives have changed in many ways.

### *iii. A deep experience of life*

Thirdly we expect our students to experience life in a deep way. Wisdom is found in the dusty corners of life, in the dark and scary places as well as in the joyous and hopeful moments. Students who have had their own difficulties and challenges are often drawn to training to become existential therapists. This is not uncommon as we know from the concept of the 'wounded healer'. We also look for students who have lived a little, and who have maturity that comes from facing life's difficulties. This does not mean that students need to be older in age, rather it is about what experiences they have had and what they have made of them that matters. Wisdom, as Confucious highlighted, is learnt through the lessons of life, when we interview students for the course, we ask them whether they have experienced difficult times in their lives and what they have taught them about life. We are interested in how they have managed to overcome adversity but also how they have reflected on their experiences and made sense of them. Walsh concurs that wisdom comes through addressing the central existential issues of life. He states that 'Life is endlessly mysterious, knowledge is never complete, and the future is largely unpredictable.' (Walsh, 2015: 285). Wisdom therefore comes through rising to the challenge of existential issues. It is not just about experiencing difficult or challenging times; it is how a person faces those challenges. This can be demonstrated through defenseless openness, an attitude of courage and through authenticity and resoluteness (Walsh, 2015).

Deurzen states something similar when she says

'But it is even more important not to let ourselves be defeated by this blow of fate, and rather to take our changed destiny by the horns and make it our own. It is important to shake off our blues and rediscover our capacity for making something of the troubles visited on us. It is important to invite ourselves back into the dance of life and rediscover hope'. (Deurzen, 2021: 145).

### *iv. Transformation through Praxis*

An essential element of any therapy training is developing the ability to be reflective. This involves being able to be reflective in a session with a client and also to be able to reflect on the work afterwards in supervision. This reflective action is part of praxis, 'Praxis is defined as reflective action, or active reflection' (Deurzen, 2021: 163). This definition suggests reflection is not a passive process but an active one that requires a person to think about what has happened or is happening. Gibbs (1988) conceptualised a Reflective Cycle which highlighted elements needed for full reflection which can lead to deep self-knowledge. Alongside a description of the event or situation, there would be reflection on the feelings and thoughts surrounding the event, as well as an evaluation what was good or bad about the experience. A person would be encouraged to then consider alternative perspectives to enable them to think about what else could

have been done in the situation. Gibbs' cycle ends with an action plan to formulate a response if something similar occurred in the future. Whilst this cycle is rather simplistic it does highlight the importance of how a therapist, in particular, needs to always consider themselves in relation to their clients. Reflexivity is a key element of Husserl's epoché - a fundamental part of phenomenology. Epoché, as it relates to therapy, requires therapists to examine their own assumptions and judgement systems. The bracketing element of epoché means, as Deurzen has described (Deurzen & Arnold-Baker, 2025), that we need to work out the bracket first, which is ourselves as practitioners. This means thinking carefully and critically about how our assumptions, bias and blind spots influence our interactions with other people and the world, and essentially our work with clients. The development of praxis that comes through training as a therapist, with its attention to reflexivity and reflection, brings about deeper self-knowledge, something that we also hope our clients will attain through the course of therapy.

### **Broadening Horizons**

Considering praxis highlights the importance of being able to see new perspectives and how this brings about greater self-knowledge and insight. This resonates with Gadamer's concept of horizon,

'the concept of horizon suggests itself because it expresses the superior breadth of vision that the person who is trying to understand must have. To acquire a horizon means that one learns to look beyond what is close at hand – not in order to look away from it but to see it better.' (Gadamer, 1989: 301).

The concept of horizon can be linked to a sense of curiosity and wonder that have already been discussed. A broadening of one's horizon allows for the possibility of looking beyond what is already known to what is not known or out of our field of vision. As Gadamer states this is needed if understanding is to be attained. It prompts us to consider what we already know and what new perspectives are possible, how our horizon can be shifted and what that reveals to us in terms of what we know and how we understand our current situation. Being able to look beyond what is in front of us, to see alternative perspectives seems an essential part of wisdom.

### **Wisdom and compassion**

As Walsh and Sternberg have emphasised an important aspect of wisdom is having a compassionate attitude towards others, whether that is finding a common good, holding ethical values which take the other person's freedom into account or responding in a benevolent way. There is also wisdom to be found through sitting with people in pain that is present in therapeutic practice. As therapists, and particularly existential therapists, we can learn something important about life through being with suffering and experiencing how individuals respond to and make sense of the suffering

they experience. There is a practical wisdom in being able to be with people in pain and to hear their suffering. Wisdom also comes through the process of seeking ways to respond and to understand a person's experience, what they have been through and what it has been like for them. It is through the attempt of creating I-Thou (Buber, 2000) relationships with clients that suffering can be reduced and well-being enhanced.

### **Conclusion: Signposts to wisdom**

This article aimed to explore the concept of wisdom and how it might be developed through the experience of training to become an existential therapist. It has been shown that training programmes themselves may not create wisdom for trainees directly as wisdom is gained through active engagement, reflection, relationship, knowledge and state of mind. However, having said that the following are some signposts to help on the journey to finding wisdom,

- Find a guide or an authentic teacher to inspire you
- Live the philosophy and think deeply about existence and the central existential issues of life
- Learn life's lessons through adversity and difficulty both your own and listening to other people's
- Use reflection, reflexivity and therapy to gain deep self-knowledge
- Challenge your assumptions and biases constantly
- Expand your horizons, seek new perspectives and other ways of looking at things
- Engage in ethical freedom, having an awareness of your own impact on others and act in a benevolent manner, seeking the common good
- Allow yourself to be changed by the process
- Question, wonder and be curious – always

In exploring wisdom, it has been shown to have a similar quality to Heidegger's concept of authenticity. There may be moments when a person is wise and moments when they are not so wise. Wisdom may become part of a lifelong journey of discovery, reflection and insight. It may also be the case that a person never realises they have attained it as wisdom is often bestowed on us by others. Therefore, to end on a word of caution: if one feels that they may be wise then they probably need to question themselves more.

### **References**

- Aristotle (2004). *The Nicomachean Ethics: Aristotle*. transl. H. Tredennick, J. A. K. Thomson, Penguin Classics.
- Boss, M. (2001). *Martin Heidegger: Zollikon Seminars*, transl. F. Mayr & R. Askay, Northwestern University Press.

- Buber, M. (2000). *I and Thou*. Simon & Schuster.
- Confucius (1979). *The Analects*, transl. D. C. Lau, Penguin Classics.
- De Beauvoir, S. (2018). *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, transl. B. Frechtman, Open Road. [1947].
- De Beauvoir, S. (2004). Pyrrhus and Cinéas, in M. A. Simons, M. Timmerman & M. B. Mader (eds.), *Philosophical Writings*, university of Illinois Press [1944].
- Deurzen, E. van. (2021). *Rising from Existential Crisis*. PCCS.
- Deurzen, E. van (2009). *Psychotherapy and the Quest for Happiness*, Sage.
- Deurzen, E. van & Arnold-Baker, C. (2025). *Structural Existential Analysis: An existential-phenomenological method for researching life*, Routledge.
- Heidegger, M. (1962). *Being and Time*, transl. J. Macquarrie & E. Robinson, Blackwell Publishing.
- Gadamer, H-G (1989). *Truth and Method*, transl. J. Weinsheimer & D. G. Marshall, Continuum.
- Gibbs, G. (1988). *Learning by Doing: A guide to teaching and learning methods*, Further Education Unit, Oxford Brookes University.
- Husserl, E. (1973). *Cartesian meditations: An introduction to phenomenology*, transl. D. Cairns, Nijhoff [1929].
- Jonkers, P. (2020). In *Philosophy and Wisdom*, Algemeen Nederlands Tijdschrift voor Wijsbegeerte, Amsterdam University Press, volume 112, issue 3, p. 261-272.
- Proust, M. (2003). *In Search of Lost Time*, transl. L. Davis, Penguin Modern Classics.
- Sartre, J.P. (1943). *Being and Nothingness: An essay on phenomenological ontology*. Transl. H. Barnes, Routledge.
- Sternberg, R. J. (1998). A Balance Theory of Wisdom. *Review of General Psychology*, 2(4), 347-365. <https://doi.org/10.1037/1089-2680.2.4.347> (Original work published 1998)
- Tolstoy, L. (2007). *War and Peace*, transl. A. Briggs, Penguin Classics.
- Walsh, R. (2015). What Is Wisdom? Cross-Cultural and Cross-Disciplinary Syntheses. *Review of General Psychology*, 19(3), 278-293.