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A path of Wisdom

Every culture pursues wisdom. Some view it as being obtained through age, as in most eastern cultures. They feel the elder have more experience with life, and are more prone to do the best for their people. In Western cultures, such as the United States of America, we equate wisdom with the young. We are a society of Darwinism – evolution of thought is how we attempt to stay ahead of other countries. Thus, we idolize our youth as the wise, because they are the setter of trends and the voice of the next generation. The truth, however, is that both of these ideas are false. J.R.R. Tolkien saw this, and made it clear in *The Lord of the Rings*. To be wise, one does not have to be old or young – one must embrace knowledge, humility, logic, and different perspectives. Thus, not all elderly are wise, and not all young are fools.

Initially, though, one has to ask – what makes a person wise? In reference to *The Lord of the Rings*, when one thinks of a wise man, one immediately thinks of a sage. A sage, as we know the word, is synonymous with wizards. After all, sages seem to have mystical insight of what is to come. Gandalf, as it were, is the most renowned sage from *The Lord of the Rings*. As Tolkien described Gandalf in a personal letter, ***“There are naturally no precise modern terms to say that he was. I would venture to say that he was an incarnate “angel.” ... That is, with the other Istari, wizards, “those who know,” .. By “incarnate” I mean they were embodied in physical bodies... the purpose was precisely to limit and hinder their exhibition of [angelic] “power” ... so that they should do what they were primarily sent for: train, advise, instruct, arouse the hearts and minds of those threatened by Sauron to a resistance with their own strengths; not to do the job for them”*** (Dickerson p.49). Wisdom, however, is to utilize knowledge to do such acts.

The knowledge used in wisdom has to be first understood if it is to be used properly. Think of

your mind as a computer processor and your memory as RAM (a place to temporarily store memory). If you are learning a new subject, it is stored in the RAM. Until it is fully understood and 'saved' into your mental hard drive, it can dissipate as soon as the energy to learn that subject dies out. Thus, when saving the subject into your hard drive, it has to process it, and understand the underlying truth of the subject. If the subject is a ball drawn on paper, then the ball is round – it is a circle, and its area is equal to pi multiplied by the radius to the power of two.

Thus arises the question – can wisdom be taught? If wisdom is the ability to utilize knowledge, then surely it can. As Plato explains in *Euthydemus*, wisdom can, indeed, be taught. It is, however, a task only the willing will take upon themselves, for only the willing will become wise, and remain so (Plato *Euthydemus* p.2-6). Much like Plato, Tolkien explains that to be wise, one must be willing to stand up for what's right. Tolkien explained it through the actions of Saruman, who not only was unwilling to remain wise, but also let pride take over his mind. If his will in addition to his pride is damaged or threatened, he will slowly lose his ability to maintain wisdom.

One might think that if wisdom can be taught, then it has a specific form when taught. This, however, is false. Wisdom as it were, is shapeless. It can come in the form of words, cautions, ideas, or even predictions of movements. It has been said that a good chess player looks three steps ahead of his opponent. Thus, the player is always attempting to understand what his opponent is thinking. This is a form of wisdom - an understanding of what the opponent is thinking is used to make a rational decision on what his next move might be. The opponent can be anything, such as the weather, and the board can be the world around you. Only by processing the knowledge you have, can you give a logical prediction as to what the weather will be tomorrow. Once more, Gandalf is the example that comes to mind when one thinks of wisdom governing his every move. However, one must not forget an important duo in *The Lord of the Rings* who may have turned the tide of the war against Sauron and Saruman: Merry and Pippin. They are the last you would think of as exhibiting wisdom.

Often referred to as fools throughout the trilogy, Merry and Pippin were a good-natured duo. They wanted to help Frodo in whatever way they could, be it encouraging advice or just plain tomfoolery. When Merry and Pippin became lost in the forest of Fangorn, they found an unlikely friend amongst the forest: Treebeard the Ent.

Treebeard is the exact opposite of the Hobbit duo, Merry and Pippin. He is old, while they are young. He bottles up his emotions until they are needed, as Merry and Pippin let the emotions take hold of themselves. Merry and Pippin are much quicker with their decisions, while Treebeard is slower and more decisive. Treebeard, being a leader of his people, can rouse his fellow Ents when the time is needed. Merry and Pippin, on the other hand, tagged along to the Fellowship of the Ring, and were the most likely to make no contributions to the venture.

However, within a few days, the hobbit duo had roused the Ents to fight back against Saruman, who had been harming their beloved forest for quite some time. With their knowledge of events outside of the Ent's known world, Merry and Pippin convinced the Ent's to wage war against Saruman. Merry and Pippin, with their limited resources and isolation from the outside world, convinced one of the oldest (and wisest) races to go to war. Resulting from this move, Merry and Pippin had shown wisdom, for it was a wise course of action: Convince the Ent's to go to war, thus relieving the pressure on Gondor from the west.(Tolkien TTT) Thus, the power of Saruon was greatly weakened militarily. Merry and Pippin had shown wisdom beyond their stature, for they had intended to ask the Ents for aid.

The question arises, however; is wisdom a trait or a state of mind? If wisdom can be used, surely it is a trait, for traits can be used like tools. However, if it is an understanding of things, surely it would be a state of mind. This, in effect, is the difference between eastern philosophies and Western philosophies.

Eastern philosophies are mainly established from ideas originating in Buddhism. Buddhism claims that wisdom is more like a state of mind. If one has achieved an understanding, one has

achieved enlightenment. In the Translation of *The Book of Five Rings*, originally written by Miyamoto Musashi, a renown Samurai from the late 1500's and early 1600's, the translators stated that, “**Zen has no philosophy of its own: it is simply a method of learning, of observing, and of experiencing what you do every day... It is a set of values or beliefs...**” (Musashi Five Rings p.xx) Strangely similar to wisdom, Zen differs in the fact that it has no definite philosophy of its own – wisdom, on the other hand, is considered a good thing. Zen can be either good or bad – it all depends on how it is applied.

In western philosophies, however, wisdom seems to be more of a trait. Even in video games targeted towards America's youth, wisdom seems to be held in some regard as a trait. In *Dungeons and Dragons*, wisdom is set alongside strength and dexterity. Western philosophy originates from the works of Greek philosophers, such as Plato. Plato says that wisdom can be obtained, used and taught, as according to his writings in *Euthydemus* (Plato Euthydemus p.1-6). A trait is an attribute. It can be used passively or actively, depending on the circumstances. A man can also use his strength passively or actively. He can attempt to pick up a large weight, thus making it an active attempt. He can carry a bag with him, thus using his strength passively. The same can be done with wisdom. This way, wisdom can not only be a tool, but it can also be a state of mind. Thus, with western philosophy, wisdom logically merges both eastern and western ideas.

Surely, though, wisdom is the use of knowledge, be it passive or active. So how does logic come into the list of the things needed for wisdom? Surely knowledge can do it's job. The truth is, however, that without logic, wisdom cannot survive. As explained before in reference to a computer processor and memory, the processor, your mind, utilizes logic to discern what things mean. One can look at the world around themselves, and notice many things occurring at once – it is snowing outside, there is wind, the clouds are thick. If one applies logic to their knowledge of sciences, one could say that it is snowing due to a low temperature, and because of that low temperature, the wind from warmer areas are rushing towards colder areas. However, because the wind is rushing, it is expelling its warm

heat, for heat is a form of energy, and the movement of the air requires energy. When the wind arrives, it is cold. Also, the thick clouds contribute to the lack of warmth, because by obscuring the sun's rays, less heat is given to the land, thus it is snowing and likely to remain so. Logic is the ability to process the knowledge obtained, and apply it differently depending on the subject.

If logic is the ability to process knowledge, which comes first, logic or knowledge? Surely knowledge, for we are beings of intelligence, and intelligence implies intellect. To improve your intellect implies improving the ability of the mind and its knowledge. However, it would make more sense that logic would come first. Look at the relation between knowledge and logic like the coexistence of the Ents and their Tree-herds. The Ents were once trees, once restricted by their lack of speech. They could logically understand the world around them, but not truly understand other creatures, be it through speech or through thought. The Ents gained speech from the elves, who, early on in their species' life, desired to talk to everything, be it earth, man, or tree. They taught trees to speak, and the speaking trees became Ents. Only by possessing logic can the knowledge passed from elves to trees be understood. Thus, logic was inherent in the trees, and knowledge given to the trees transformed the taught trees into Ents. Ents are, after all, tree herders. Only those with logic and knowledge can guide their followers.

Do the guides, be they Ents or leaders of men, have to be good to use logic? Logic in itself is but a neutral term. It feels devoid of good or bad. If logic can be used for bad purposes, surely there would be no wisdom in such actions. Wisdom, after all, is synonymous with good. Thus, what would a wise man be if he was not good, but had all the qualities of wisdom, save good intentions? This is the difference between wisdom and cleverness. Wisdom is to use knowledge to do good for as many possible. Cleverness, however, is to use knowledge to do bad to others while to do good for a few, mainly the user.

If a man were robbing a bank, would he be using knowledge when disabling security alarms

undetected? Yes, he would. Would one call a man logical if he disabled all the security cameras via a directed electronic pulse, which cannot be detected by visible eyes? Yes, one would, for his goal would be nearer. However, would one call it wise for the man to rob a bank to get money? No, one wouldn't. Wise men do unto others as they would do unto themselves. The bank robber is stealing the money of others to benefit himself. Thus, he is not wise, but clever, for being clever is the evil sibling to being wise.

Furthermore, cleverness is synonymous with fool. A wise man can be smart and logical, but he does things for the better of others. A clever man, however, does things for himself and only himself. If one thinks about it, if the man stealing from the bank is doing his job alone, would he be considered clever? Yes, for he would less the chance of being reported on by another man. Is he a fool? Yes, for fools make mistakes and have their ethics in disarray. Thus, he is a clever fool. Clever, for he is robbing the bank in a systematic and logical fashion, utilizing knowledge. A fool, for he is doing it for the wrong reason. Who are we, though, to decide if he is doing good or doing bad? This argument is the same that caused Saruman to betray the people of Middle-Earth and side with Sauron. The very same that caused Gandalf and Elrond not to see eye to eye with both Saruman and Boromir.

The difference between Gandalf/Elrond and Saruman/Boromir is exactly the same difference as between deontology and consequentialism. When examining the word deontology, one notices two roots – deon, which is greek for duty or obligation, and ology, or body of knowledge. Thus, deontology must describe doing the best thing for society with a morally right action. With that thought in mind, it is the action of doing the greatest good for the greatest number of people while avoiding any immoral choices. The opposite is, of course, consequentialism. When taking apart the word, consequential is made, and thus is the result of some action. The goal of consequentialism is to achieve some result. However one achieves it is irrelevant. A blunt description of consequentialism is a very old saying; “The ends justify the means.”

During the Council of Elrond, Gandalf tells of his last meeting with Saruman. Saruman, as Gandalf recalled, claimed, *“A new Power [Sauron] is rising... We may join with that Power. As the Power grows, its proved friends will also...and the wise, such as you and I, may with patience come at last to direct its course, to control it”* (Tolkien FOTR p.253). Saruman, of course, was trying to recruit Gandalf, with words of consequentialism. He was saying that by the means of joining Sauron and bringing destruction and chaos to middle earth, they can gain control of Sauron, and control Sauron's forces internally. Thus, the end would justify the means. Gandalf, on the other hand, believes in a more Deontological ideal – he wants to do the greatest good for all of middle-Earth with only morally right actions. Thus, he cannot join Saruman, for joining him to destroy Sauron internally would hurt others in the process, and be morally wrong. This requires him to oppose Sauron, and rouse others to do so as well. If he sides with Saruman, he would be no better than Sauron, for he would have done cruelty to others. He would have stepped down from wisdom, as Saruman had done, and plunged himself into the darkness of cleverness.

The same opposition is found between Elrond and Boromir at the council of Elrond. Elrond, like Gandalf, follows a form of deontology – he wants to do the greatest good for the greatest number of people without any unjust actions done. When Boromir suggests that the Ring should be used against Sauron, Elrond strongly opposes it, with good reason to – the Ring corrupts all who use it. Boromir, however, is thinking with consequentialism – if he could use the Ring as a weapon and fight against the armies of Mordor, surely the ends (destruction of Mordor's army) would justify the means (corrupting himself). What army could take down an invisible warrior clad in heavy armor and wielding a sword? Boromir, however, is clouded by the Ring, for it is already working its evil upon his mind. Boromir desires to use the Ring against Mordor – and desire is how evil worms its way into corrupting a man. With logic, one can dictate that using the Ring would be bad, for it would fall into the enemies' hands if the warrior was to fall. It would also be bad to corrupt such a high-ranking man as Boromir, for his

father controls the armies of Gondor.

However, one must look at what corrupted Boromir and Saruman. They were both very knowledgeable people. They both tried to do good, despite their short view points. However, they fell from the morals of good. How they did was not through foolhardy moves or callowness, but through pride – a lack of humility.

Though, to point out how Boromir and Saruman had plunged themselves from humility to pride, one must ask a question: What is humility? Humility is related to the word humble. Humble means a variety of things; it can mean low or inferior, cause to be unpretentious, shameful, or, most importantly, meek or modest. All these explanations point to the fact that humility is the ability to view yourself as low and inferior. Initially, one would think that such an ability is bad, for one would lapse into depression when looking upon themselves as lowly people, but, as Stanley Godlovitch pointed out in *On Wisdom*, ***“The wisdom of the Stoic...cuts deeply into our expectations and deceptions, and persists in the reminder that our individual affairs are not quite nearly so magnificent in their triumph or grief as we care to imagine them”*** (Godlovitch, p.1). Humility is then a reminder of where we had come from, and that all our accomplishments, as grand as we wish them to be, are just another brick in the wall.

One might ask, “Why must humility be used to keep pride in check if one wishes to be wise? Surely they will be proud to be wise.” This question is a failure of logic and knowledge of human nature. Pride is like a fog – it is a mist that enshrouds the proud to what occurs around them. If they become too prideful, the fog thickens, and droplets of pride lay upon the skin of the prideful. He soaks in the pride through his skin, like poison, seeping through his pores and orifices. It goes inside him, and clouds his logical reasoning, and causes him to lose focus on what the best means to his goal would be. Plato explains this very same concept in *The Republic*. He states that a man must balance three pieces of his personality – Desire, Reason, and Spirit. The desire, in this case pride, must be moderated if

Wisdom is to give reason to an action. Courage must strengthen reason, for strength is needed to hold back and tame desire. If pride is let to run free, desire will control reason, and the spirit of courage would only fuel the dysfunction of reason (Plato Republic, p.5-6).

Thus, Boromir and Saruman may have once been wise, but their lack of humility had gotten the better of them. Boromir, being a mighty and proud warrior, wanted to use the Ring to do good – he could fell many enemies, and believed that he could destroy Sauron with the power of the Ring. This, however, would be his undoing – if Boromir had fallen in battle, he would have given the Ring to its one master, with or without his own will. He would have given Middle-Earth to the dark lord, as he had his life. It would have been his pride, however, that the Ring had taken advantage of. It would convince him to think he was invincible, and convince him to kill all that oppose him, be they orc or man. It would have truly cursed him to be the next dark lord if, in fact, the Ring willed Sauron to perish.

Saruman, however, let his pride cloud his judgment. He joined Sauron so that he might save what he could. Thinking that he was so wise, he could even fool Sauron, the dark lord. The truth be told, there is no wisdom in such deception – only cleverness. It was Saruman's lack of humility that led him to think he was much too clever for Sauron, or any other being, to defeat. Ironically enough, Saruman, once considered the wisest of his order, was beaten by the two humble Hobbits, Merry and Pippin, the two fools of the Fellowship.

Humility is the ability to bring one's self down the ladder of vanity and pride. If knowledge, humility, and logic are used in conjunction, why does one need to add different perspectives to the path to wisdom? Surely knowledge, humility and logic are enough. The sad truth, however, is no – these three abilities and traits, even when utilized together, are not enough to become wise. Different perspectives are needed, for one cannot make a decision on his own, and decide it is the wisest course of action. Only by deliberation in the mind, and a deliberation between deliberating minds may true wisdom arise. The council of Elrond is a self-evident example.

When each mind, such as Frodo, Elrond or Gandalf, met at the council, they were already debating on what should be done with the Ring. Surely it should not remain in the fair elven city, for they could hold against an army for so long. It should not be given to Gondor, for using it as a weapon would be a foolish move in of itself. It should not be cast into the sea, for the problem of Sauron would remain, and who knows what would happen to the one Ring if so.(Tolkien FOTR p.233-264) It took many minds to bring up these different options. Many different perspectives were utilized. A wise man must deliberate as a group, even when alone. He must attempt to see every path, and every idea he can. Only with this form of observation can wisdom come. When a man has the ability to form a mental debate, utilizing as many different perspectives in the debate, he has a better chance to choose the right option.

Though the council of Elrond is a moment full of prime examples, one character seems to use this ability, despite his innocence – Samwise Gamgee. It was Sam, after all, who thought on his feet the best. He was the most loyal to Frodo, and willing to go to any lengths to help him, as shown in *The return of the King*, ***“Sam looked at him and wept in his heart, but no tears came to his dry and stinging eyes. “I said I'd carry him, if it broke my back,” he muttered, “and I will! Come, Mr. Frodo!” he cried. “I can't carry it for you, but I can carry you and it as well. So up you get! Come on, Mr. Frodo dear! Sam will give you a ride. Just tell him where to go, and he'll go”*** (Tolkien ROTK p.218). Despite Frodo's reluctance to let him carry the Ring, Sam knew he couldn't let him walk on his own – the burden had become too great for even Frodo to bear. But he did not want Sam to become victim to the will of the Ring. Sam picked him up, and went trudging on, so that Frodo would live to tell the tale.

Sam's ability to understand other perspectives doesn't fail earlier in the travels, either. In *The Fellowship of the Ring*, as Frodo was attempting to part from the Fellowship and do the rest of the trip on his own, Sam realized what Frodo was up to by thinking as Frodo had thought. ***“But he's still to***

frightened to start. And he isn't worrying about us either: whether we'll go along with him or no. he knows we mean to. That's another thing that's bothering him. If he screws himself up to go, he'll want to go alone. Mark my words!" (Tolkien FOTR p.394). Sam was indeed right. When he rushed to Frodo's aid, Sam had to nearly drown himself to convince Frodo to let him come. Only by truly showing his conviction to follow him to the end of the journey did Frodo realize that Sam would do anything for him. This, the ability to think as another while still thinking as yourself, a form of a willful multiple-personality, is what is needed to be wise. A man must be able to create and accept other perceptions if he is going to use his Wisdom effectively.

If one can use not only different perspectives, but also knowledge, humility and logic in a unified fashion, wisdom will be the resulting product. Due to how each quality is within him, they all require the benefit of another to allow the user to become wise. If one does it halfway and stops, wisdom is not the resulting product – only foolishness will come of it. Thus, anyone, be they young or old, of different race or stature, can obtain wisdom: they just have to be willing to do so. For to be wise, one does not have to be anything – they must embrace knowledge, humility, logic, and different perspectives, and continue to do so.

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