

July 2011

KNOWLEDGE AND WISDOM, Part 1

When engaged in casual conversation, we often use the words *knowledge* and *wisdom* interchangeably, but this is often due to a habit of carelessness when it comes to language. To consider these terms as being synonymous is to indulge in fuzzy thinking. Knowledge may be defined as “facts or ideas gained through observation, study, or experience.” It also can mean “an understanding of an art, science, or technique.” A definition of wisdom is a bit more elusive, but this should not lead us to presume wisdom does not exist. Philosophers throughout the ages have considered the attainment of wisdom to be the supreme goal of human existence.

To illustrate how wisdom differs from knowledge, we might begin by stating the obvious, namely, that in today’s world there is a growing surplus of knowledge accompanied by a disturbing deficit of wisdom. Thanks to the Internet, we have more information at our fingertips than ever before in the history of the world. Unfortunately, examples of wisdom from leaders in all walks of life seem difficult to find.

Then there is the fact that knowledge is often a type of commodity, in the sense that it can be bought and sold, passed from teacher to seeker, from parents to children, from one generation to the next. Can you do that with wisdom? You may be as wise as Solomon but can you transfer your wisdom to another? We can transmit ideas, distribute facts, and share statistics, but wisdom is not to be treated as a commodity that is exchanged or bartered in the market place. As the American patriot Thomas Paine observed in his 1776 essay “The Crisis,” “Wisdom is not the purchase of a day.”

In short, knowledge has a price while wisdom is priceless. Of course we need to acquire knowledge of various kinds, but what is most needed in this world of seemingly endless crises is the ability to link the knowledge we have with the wisdom that we lack. In a pertinent passage from H. P. Blavatsky’s *The Voice of the Silence*, we are reminded that “even ignorance is better than head-learning with no Soul-Wisdom to illuminate or guide it.”

David P. Bruce is the National Secretary of the Theosophical Society in America.