

INTERFAITH INSIGHT

Knowledge in science and the pursuit of wisdom



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“Science in my generation has become like a razor blade in the hands of a 3-year-old.”

Albert Einstein is so quoted in Krista Tippett’s book, “Einstein’s God: Conversations About Science and the Human Spirit.” It was as he watched German science being handed over to fascism that he began to lose faith in the increase in knowledge without a corresponding growth in wisdom.

Building on last week’s Interfaith Insight column on the difference between propositional truth and the pursuit of wisdom, I wish to pursue further the various kinds of knowledge. We asked why we talk of modern science and ancient wisdom, but not “modern wisdom.” Why do we find ourselves returning to Socrates, Plato, Augustine and Aquinas when seeking wisdom? Why do the various religious texts and scriptures come up when the wisdom topic is examined?

Tippett continues regarding Einstein’s concern about the advance of knowledge at the expense of spiritual wisdom. “He began to see figures such as Gandhi and Moses, Jesus and Buddha and St. Francis of Assisi, as what he called ‘geniuses in the art of living.’ He proposed that their qualities of spiritual genius were more necessary to the future of human dignity, security and joy than objective knowledge.”

One might attribute the success of science to its limiting its scope to only one dimen-

sion of the human encounter with reality, essentially that which can be called impersonal or objective. Even in this limited domain, science does not attain complete and absolute truth. The exploration of science results in the creation of “maps” of the physical world which are indeed reliable but not complete.

The map image reminds one of the difficulty of making a two-dimensional map of the three-dimensional planet Earth. When looking at a flat map of the flight route from America to England, it seems like one goes too far north rather than straight east. That is because the map distorts what is, in fact, the shortest distance on the globe, which is the arc of a great circle. My Muslim friends point out the same situation when, in their daily prayers, they are to face Mecca, for which the shortest “great circle” route is in three dimensions facing northeast from Michigan.

Theology and religion use metaphor and symbolism to create “maps” which help us comprehend aspects of reality that go beyond the limits set by science. Because of the complexity and uniqueness of human experience, the “maps” are not as specific and precise, and yet they can be invaluable in helping us make our way through the pathways of our human existence.

PAST INSIGHTS STILL RELEVANT

Another difference is between the cumulative nature of science and the importance of tradition and heritage in other fields. A

typical physicist of today understands much more about the universe than Isaac Newton ever did. This is simply because she is living three centuries later than that great genius. In religion, as in many other encounters with reality, we cannot presume that the present is superior to the past. The individual creative work of a Bach or a Beethoven continues as a vital part of our present experience of music. Likewise, the theological insights of great figures and writings of the past are relevant to a contemporary understanding of wisdom.

DIFFERENT EXPLANATIONS, AND ALL CAN BE TRUE

Science and religion seek to explain, but there are different and yet not incompatible ways of explaining. I could ask why a candle burns and give a scientific explanation involving the breakdown of hydrocarbons into molecules of hydrogen and carbon, which vaporize and react with oxygen from the air to create heat, light, water vapor and carbon dioxide. Or I could give a practical explanation: It’s burning because I just lit it a few minutes ago.

One could also offer a purposeful explanation: It’s burning because we are celebrating a birthday, a Sabbath or a baptism. While the scientific explanation might be precise and non-controversial, the purposeful explanation might be more relevant in a given situation. All of the explanations can be true while at the same time not in opposition.

The kind of knowledge that leads to wisdom is not necessarily the kind of propositional knowledge that science explores. That is why personal experience is so critical to the development of wisdom. We can understand people and certain emotional issues often better through a novel or movie than factual or scientific studies.

Wisdom is often connected to religious insights as well, and it is no surprise to find scriptures and religious writings dealing with the topic. Neal Plantinga, former president of Calvin Theological Seminary, deals with these issues in his book, “Not the Way It’s Supposed to Be: A Breviary of Sin.” He writes: “In the literature of Scripture, wisdom is, broadly speaking, the knowledge of God’s world and the knack of fitting oneself into it.”

In the Hebrew Scriptures, it was King Solomon who was famous for his wisdom. He is reported to have asked God for “a discerning heart to govern your people and to distinguish between right and wrong.”

God responds: “Since you have asked for this and not for long life or wealth for yourself, nor have asked for the death of your enemies but for discernment in administering justice, I will do what you have asked. I will give you a wise and discerning heart.” (1 Kings 3:9-12)

In our personal and communal life, let this be our resolution for the coming year. Let us seek this gift of wisdom to administer justice and care for all people.

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