

Chapter VI

Will Wisdom Save the Human Project?

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this chapter is to investigate whether we humans are wise enough to save our civilization from threats of internal conflicts and natural (even cosmic) disasters. Humans have gained wisdom through life experience and philosophical investigations for the last 2,600 years. In this investigation, we would like to find out whether philosophy can be helpful in finding the wisest strategic solution, which would sustain civilization forever. If the current state of philosophy cannot do it, it will be necessary to offer a new philosophy which could undertake this task, particularly in these times when other social sciences are aware of our civilization crisis and have influenced the formation of many research foundations and centers which aim at the more harmonious development of civilization.

FROM MYTHS TO WISDOM OF CIVILIZATION

Western Philosophy as a Source of Survival Wisdom

The more humans populate the Earth, and the more we are civilized, the more we threaten civiliza-

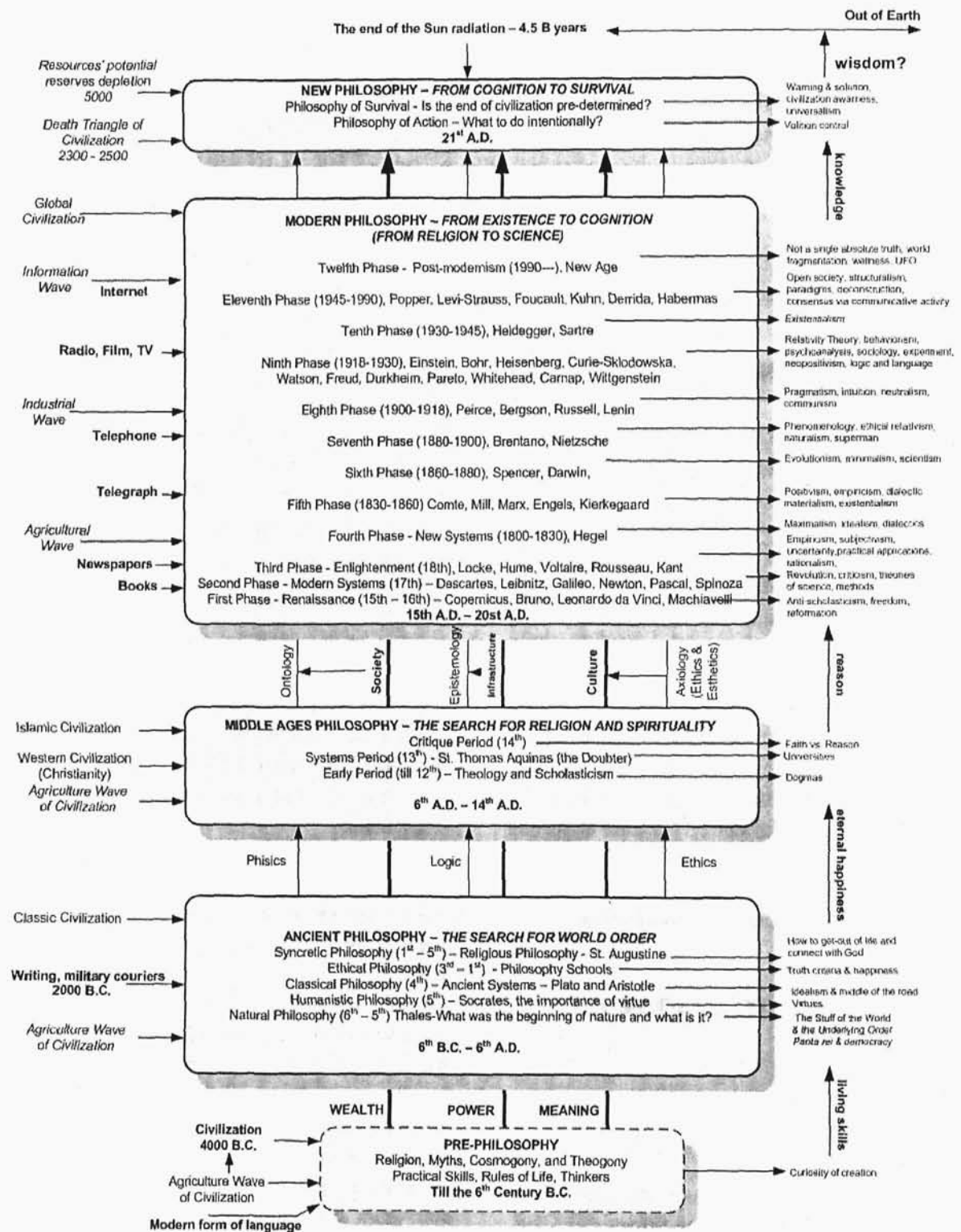
tion, since more complex artificial systems are developed that affect the natural ecosystems. The 21st century will be particularly critical; the global population will reach 8 billion people, which is estimated as the threshold of the ecosystem, with no more carrying capacity (Millennium Ecosystem Assessment, 2005).

Civilization is about 6,000 years old and during this long time, life on Earth has appeared safe, except to some religions which predicted the end of the world. For many religious people, doomsday scenarios were metaphors rather than possible events. From the very beginning, humans were very interested in how the world and people were formed (*cosmogony*) and always saw in it God's hand.

For the last 2,600 years, one can observe the systematic development of philosophy, the discipline associated with "love of wisdom." The synthesis of the development of human wisdom is illustrated Figure 6-1, which indicates that humans first learned life skills then spent 1,200 years looking for eternal happiness (6th century B.C.-6th century A.D.). During the Middle Ages, they found that there is no contradiction between faith and reason, and the latter should drive the search for knowledge and wisdom on Earth.

Based on such a foundation, humans began 500 years ago searching for knowledge about

Figure 6-1. The development of wisdom and exemplification based upon western philosophy (numbers in boxes identify centuries)



the world and life, offering rules and laws which promote wise choices and actions. In this period, philosophers defined many approaches toward knowledge and wisdom, some emphasizing cognition (Descartes, Hume, Kant, Darwin, Pierce, Einstein, Whitehead, and Carnap), some looking for better existence (Kierkegaard, Heidegger, and Sartre).

Thousands of intellectuals participated in this great cerebral movement, discovering laws of nature and civilization, mostly having in mind how to act wisely. On the other hand, the more knowledge humans discover, the more we are lost in its details, sometimes losing from the horizon the art of wisdom, which is a different unit of cognition than "knowledge."

For example, philosophy in the 20th and 21st centuries has entered a period of looking more for objective methods and information of world perception than for wise and committed solutions that are expected by the societies involved in local and global conflicts and crisis. The philosophy of action tries only bashfully to attack the question, how to live day by day wisely. Furthermore, the philosophy of social universalism offers ideas of how to be wise and good, which should limit social and state confrontations. This latter philosophy observes the dramatic challenges of the contemporary world, which in the 20th century was able to kill 200 million people and in the 21st century threatens to kill more in civilization wars with all kinds of bombs. Skolimowski (1981) even claims that current philosophy is detached from life, socially unconcerned, mute about individual responsibility, politically indifferent, and mostly oriented toward language rather than toward quality of life.

Maxwell (2005) states that nowadays knowledge instead of wisdom is at the center of academic inquiry, and this cannot solve the problems of wars, global warming, poverty and so forth. He thinks that we need a revolution in science and humanities to move from knowledge to wisdom, when the first aim of education should be to learn

how to acquire wisdom. Since scientific and technological progress have massively increased our power to act in the absence of wisdom, we need wiser institutions, wiser customs, wiser social relations, and a wiser world.

Brown (2005) wants to transform our attitude from eco-phenomenology to eco-logos, based on wisdom, which should include everyday experiences in developing dwellings. Servomaa (2005) claims that the essence of beauty of nature should lead toward wisdom. Because in order to achieve wisdom, first we need to love beauty, which can contradict the rush for greedy gains and egoistic pleasures that, in reality, destroys wisdom. Only by cultivating wisdom can we recognize the difference between the false myths and the true, which is necessary to see our society functioning well (Stawinski, 2005).

The same argument motivates Hubert (2005), who argues for replacing mythos by logos to pursue the quest for wisdom. According to him "love for wisdom" as a mission of philosophy is not understood, much less practiced, by a meaningful portion of the world's population. He says also that from "love for wisdom" we need to move to building a wise civilization, which nowadays, is full of myths. To do so we need compassion as the focal point of any future philosophy in order to minimize the current apathy in our ailing planet (Krieglstein, 2005). Krieglstein claims that knowledge cannot be built on domination and exploitation, but on cooperation and partnership, hence logos should be in synchronicity with some life's myths.

Stawarska (2005) concurs with this view, adding that the self has strong impact upon supposedly "dispassionate" scientists. Unfortunately, one of those myths is perhaps the "new" conservative wisdom, which according to Havers (2005) teaches "calculated action and hedonism." It rejects Liberalism (successfully experienced in the U.S.), returning to the 19th century concepts of "Nietzsche's order and power" and de facto rejecting modernity. Eventually, "love for

wisdom” should perhaps be seen as the quest for “wonder” by “asking and asking” (Stark, 2005), which means not necessarily “curiosity” by rather “transformation of existential conditions.” Seeberg (2005) supports this approach, since he thinks that philosophy has the mission of mediating between reason and wisdom by making explicit the limits of scientific explanations. For example, he differentiates knowledge of the nature from knowledge of one’s individual life. This quest concurs with Kant’s idea of right relations between myth and logos and not replacing the former by the latter and hence leaving a narrow door for teaching wisdom.

Sugiharto (2005), coming from the Islamic civilization, criticizes Western civilization’s Logo-centrism (Logical Positivism), which eventually leads to self-destruction, since it is without substance and promotes wisdom as seeing through brute facts and impersonal physical objects in the absence of soul, which is seen as something alien, an anomaly. He thinks that philosophy can accomplish its mission if it will bring back the breadth, the depth and the ambiguity of concrete human soul into its discourse. He understands wisdom as an ability to come to terms with uncertainty and insecurity, an ability to see through the “absence” (soul).

Harman (2005) argues that when philosophy began shifting the focus from reality to abstracts, the university lost its influence on life. Demenchonok (2005) thinks that wisdom can come from transforming from multiculturalism to dialogue of cultures, breaking isolation and developing some universal-transcultural solutions that are accepted by engaged parties. Kuczynski (2005) asks a very important question: “Can we cultivate logos-oriented wisdom and neglect irrational mythos?” My answer is that in the past this would not have been a good program; but nowadays we do not have such luxury of choice anymore and we should rather ask “Can our wisdom save the Human Project from overdeveloped civilization?”

Otherwise our situation will be driven by the creed “feel better and live shorter.”

As a result of this kind of poor condition of mankind’s wisdom, there is a trend of developing political and social philosophies which try to address issues of a good state and society, particularly with the application of reinvented pragmatism.

In conclusion, one can state that nowadays philosophy responsible for “wisdom” is more involved in tactical issues than strategic ones. Even the philosophy of post-modernism questions the whole of accumulated knowledge and wisdom. In this philosophy, objectivism is replaced by subjectivism, which leads toward comfortable relativism, which accepts every solution a given person or organization finds satisfactory. On the other hand, post-modernistic deconstruction (promoted by Jacques Derrida, 1982) may perhaps have applications if we accept that everything *panta rei* and some old and no longer appropriate solutions must be re-engineered and adapted to new challenges.

If contemporary western philosophy escapes from taking on the world systems of wisdom, that cannot be said about other social sciences, which clearly perceive the strategic challenges of civilization.

Non-Western Philosophies as a Source of Survival Wisdom

Among current non-western philosophies one may include those of India, China, Japan, and Islam. Their characteristics are provided in Table 6-1.

In general, non-western philosophies provide more wisdom on civilization development than the western one. Their main message is to develop civilization slower, in a more harmonious relationship with nature and community. If civilization enters a stage of open crisis, perhaps the Chinese Model of the authoritarian government and flexible economy can be adapted by the world civilization to better ensure its recovery and survival.

Table 6-1. Characteristics of non-western philosophies

PHILOSOPHY	TIME CONCEPT	CIVILIZATION DEVELOPMENT CONCEPT	MAIN INTEREST	LEADING PARADIGM	HELP OF WISDOM IN RESCUING CIVILIZATION
INDIAN	Cyclical Reincarnation <i>Samsara</i>	Local Involvement, <i>Nirvana</i> via Enlightenment	Truth , Reality, <i>Nirvana</i>	No violence	Scaling down large-scale undertakings
CHINESE	Circular	Steady and controlled	Morality, Social order, Family	Middle of the road	Political authority and economic flexibility
JAPANESE	Circular	Advances humanity	Zen Nature <i>Shinto</i>	Harmony	Crush and change
ISLAMIC	Linear	Development should strengthen community ties and faith	Faith	Submission	Strong critique of Western civilization

Social Awareness as a Source of Wisdom of Civilization

Social sciences, such as sociology, political science ecology and others perceive that civilization in the 21st century is at a crossroads. In religion there is a common belief that civilization is predetermined (“destiny”) and in science that it is unpredictable and uncontrollable.

Table 6-2 summarizes the awareness of different scientific communities and their plans of coping with declining civilization.

The presented summary of programs is not complete, but illustrates quite well the human effort in understanding problems of civilization. In the intellectual sense, these programs characterize profound knowledge and care about the well-being of civilization. In the practical sense, these programs are segmented, dispersed, and implemented according to availability of financial support, mostly provided by private donors.

The implementation of these programs is long-term, not synchronized with a short-term

political cycle lasting between 4 and 8 years. Hence, these programs are not high priorities of politicians, whose survival is assured by short-term undertakings. For them, “civilization” is an abstract term that has nothing to do with daily life and its challenges, particularly in developed countries where the life is still good.

The politics of rescuing civilization will become more active when civilization enters a very serious crisis, but then it will perhaps be too late to avoid catastrophe.

TOWARDS ECO-PHILOSOPHY

Civilization in its adaptation to nature and technology achieves steadily more complex solutions and passes from one conflict and crisis to another. These crises may be classified in the following manner¹:

- Current crisis – as a result of world political dynamism