

## Wisdom Writers: Franklin, Johnson, Goethe, and Emerson

By Walter G. Moss

“Wisdom was a virtue highly and consistently prized in antiquity, the Middle Ages, and the Renaissance.” So says one scholar. Subsequently, however, regard for wisdom gradually declined. By the 1930s Dutch historian Jan Huizinga was writing that as a result of scientific and technological progress “the masses are fed with a hitherto undreamt-of quantity of knowledge of all sorts.” But he added that there was “something wrong with its assimilation,” and that “undigested knowledge hampers judgment and stands in the way of wisdom” (see [here](#) for citations). Later in the century others writing about wisdom such as [E. F. Schumacher](#) and philosopher [Nicholas Maxwell](#) made a similar point about the advances of knowledge since the seventeenth century and the concurrent decline of concern about wisdom. In the late twentieth century postmodernists like Jean-François Lyotard dismissed the idea that literary works could reflect any great wisdom. Wisdom scholar Richard Trowbridge [stated](#) in 2005: “Since the Enlightenment, wisdom has been of very little interest to people in the West, particularly to educated people.”

Yet, this decline in its esteem was gradual. And the four eighteenth and nineteenth century individuals mentioned in the title of the present essay—Benjamin Franklin (1706-1790), Samuel Johnson (1709-1784), Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749-1832), and Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882)—still retained great respect for wisdom, as this essay will demonstrate.

In [Where Shall Wisdom Be Found?](#) (2004) America’s most famous literary critic, Harold Bloom, includes a chapter entitled “Samuel Johnson and Goethe.” In another section he treats the wisdom of Ralph Waldo Emerson, who to Bloom “remains the central figure in American culture.” Bloom believes that these three writers followed, but now mainly in “aphoristic” style, in the “wisdom literature” tradition of the Bible’s books of Job and Ecclesiastes, Greeks like Plato and Homer, and Cervantes and Shakespeare.<sup>1</sup>

Paul B. Baltes, in his [Wisdom as Orchestration of Mind and Virtue](#), lists Franklin and Goethe as two of about a dozen people often mentioned as prototypes of wise people, at least “in the Western world.” In Hans Kohn’s [The Mind of Germany](#) he writes, “Some Americans liked to compare Goethe to Benjamin Franklin. . . . They shared a love for science, for practical wisdom, for minute attention to details, and a concern for the good of man and society.”

### Benjamin Franklin

Both Gordon Wood in his [The Americanization of Benjamin Franklin](#) and Walter Isaacson in his [Benjamin Franklin: An American Life](#) indicate how some intellectuals have thought of Franklin as a lightweight thinker. Both authors, for example, cite English novelist D. H. Lawrence, who thought (in Wood’s words) “Franklin embodied all those shallow bourgeois moneymaking values that intellectuals are accustomed to dislike.” This view fit in with the belief that Americans were too money-grubbing and not much concerned with any type of deep philosophizing. As the historian Henry Steele Commager wrote in [The American Mind: An Interpretation of American Thought and Character since the 1880s](#) (1950): “Theories and

speculations disturbed the American, and he avoided abstruse philosophies of government or conduct as healthy men avoid medicines. Benjamin Franklin was his philosopher . . . and when he took Emerson to heart it was for his emphasis on self-reliance rather than for his idealism.”

Both Wood and Isaacson make clear, however, that Franklin valued practical wisdom and possessed an ample share of it. They also insist that although he became a very wealthy man, he did not overemphasize the importance of making money. Historian Edmund S. Morgan [observed](#) that Franklin was “a man with a wisdom about himself that comes only to the great of heart.” And as Aristotle first convincingly demonstrated when he divided wisdom into two types, theoretical and practical, the latter type wisdom is important. If we fast forward to the latest thinking on wisdom, we see that many modern wisdom scholars emphasize the importance of practical wisdom. For example, Robert Sternberg [has written](#): “People are wise to the extent that they use their intelligence to seek a common good. They do so by balancing, in their courses of action, their own interests with those of others and those of larger entities, like their school, their community, their country, even God.” In a recent book on Practical Wisdom (see review [here](#)), its two authors emphasize that it involves making good choices in our everyday private and public lives and is deeply concerned with the common good and “public service” to help further it.

In the light of such an emphasis, Franklin was wise in many ways and displayed an interest in wisdom throughout his adult life. In one of his earliest writings (1722), while still a young apprentice printer, he [wrote](#) that “without Freedom of Thought, there can be no such Thing as Wisdom.” His [Autobiography](#) indicates that as a very young man, when not yet as far removed from his Presbyterian roots as he would later be, he looked to such sources as the Bible’s Book of Proverbs for wisdom, and he thought “God to be the fountain of wisdom.” He composed a short prayer that contained these words: “O powerful Goodness! bountiful Father! merciful Guide! increase in me that wisdom which discovers my truest interest. Strengthen my resolutions to perform what that wisdom dictates.”

In 1731, while still in his mid-twenties, he thought of founding a new society: “There seems to me at present to be great occasion for raising a United Party for Virtue, by forming the virtuous and good men of all nations into a regular body, to be governed by suitable good and wise rules, which good and wise men may probably be more unanimous in their obedience to, than common people are to common laws.”

The following year he began a work that became a multi-year best-seller of its day. Again he described the process in his [Autobiography](#):

In 1732 I first published my Almanack . . . it was continued by me about twenty-five years, commonly called “Poor Richard’s Almanac.” . . . And observing that it was generally read, scarce any neighborhood in the province being without it, I considered it as a proper vehicle for conveying instruction among the common people, who brought scarcely any other books. I therefore filled all the little spaces that occurred between the remarkable days in the calendar with proverbial sentences. . . . These proverbs, which contained the wisdom of many ages and nations, I assembled and formed into a connected discourse prefixed to the Almanack of 1757, as the harangue of a wise old man to the people attending and auction. The bringing all these scattered counsels thus into a focus enabled them to make greater impression. The piece, being universally approved, was copied in all the newspapers of the Continent; reprinted in Britain

on a board side, to be stuck up in houses; two translations were made of it in French, and great numbers bought by the clergy and gentry, to distribute gratis among their poor parishioners and tenants.

Among the hundreds of proverbs found in the [Almanac](#) are the following that contain some variant of the word wise or wisdom:

12. After crosses and losses men grow humbler and wiser.
131. Early to bed and early to rise, makes a man healthy, wealthy, and wise.
146. Fools make feasts, and wise men eat 'em.
148. Fools need advice most, but wise men only are the better for it.
205. He that builds before he counts the cost, acts foolishly; and he that counts before he builds, finds he did not count wisely.
208. He that can bear a reproof, and mend by it, if he is not wise, is in a fair way of being so.
209. He that can compose himself, is wiser than he that composes books.
302. It is wise not to seek a secret, and honest not to reveal it.
325. Liberality is not giving much, but giving wisely.
398. Of learned fools I have seen ten times ten; of unlearned wise men I have seen a hundred.
478. The brave and the wise can both pity and excuse, when cowards and fools shew no mercy.
482. The cunning man steals a horse, the wise man lets him alone.
495. The heart of the fool is in his mouth, but the mouth of the wise man is in his heart.
547. The wise man draws more advantage from his enemies, than the fool from his friends.
651. Who is wise? He that learns from every one.
670. You will be careful, if you are wise; how you touch men's religion, or credit, or eyes.

In Franklin's latter decades we often see his concern with political wisdom. Wood quotes a letter of 1760 in which Franklin indicates how America might help the British Empire to become "the greatest Political Structure Human Wisdom ever yet erected." In assessing other human beings from British government officials to fellow revolutionary John Adams, Franklin often spoke of their wisdom or lack thereof. For example, in 1748 he refers to the royal governor of Massachusetts as "a wise, good and worthy Man" (Wood, 77). And writing of Adams in 1783, he [stated](#), "I am persuaded, however, that he means well for his Country, is always an honest Man, often a wise one, but sometimes, and in some things, absolutely out of his senses."

In 1787 at the Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia, where Franklin made his home, he was still concerned with wisdom. Before it began, he [wrote](#) to Jefferson in April: "The Delegates [to the Convention] generally appointed as far as I have heard of them are Men of Character for Prudence and Ability, so that I hope Good from their Meeting. Indeed if it does not do Good it

must do Harm, as it will show that we have not Wisdom enough among us to govern ourselves; and will strengthen the Opinion of some Political Writers, that popular Governments cannot long support themselves.”

At the Convention itself, he [said](#) in late June: “The small progress we have made after 4 or 5 weeks close attendance and continual reasonings with each other, our different sentiments on almost every question, several of the last producing as many *noes* as *ays*, is methinks a melancholy proof of the imperfection of the human understanding. We indeed seem to feel our own want of political wisdom, since we have been running all about in search of it.” To counter the lack of wisdom being displayed, Franklin, who believed in God but not Church dogmas, urged the delegates to exhibit more humility and pray to God for more enlightenment.

In his [final speech](#) to the convention, which historian Clinton Rossiter labeled “the most remarkable performance of a remarkable life” (Isaacson, 459), Franklin displayed more optimism.

I confess that there are several parts of this constitution which I do not at present approve, but I am not sure I shall never approve them: For having lived long, I have experienced many instances of being obliged by better information, or fuller consideration, to change opinions even on important subjects, which I once thought right, but found to be otherwise. It is therefore that the older I grow, the more apt I am to doubt my own judgment, and to pay more respect to the judgment of others. . . .

. . . I doubt too whether any other Convention we can obtain, may be able to make a better Constitution. For when you assemble a number of men to have the advantage of their joint wisdom, you inevitably assemble with those men, all their prejudices, their passions, their errors of opinion, their local interests, and their selfish views. From such an assembly can a perfect production be expected? It therefore astonishes me, Sir, to find this system approaching so near to perfection as it does. . . . Much of the strength & efficiency of any Government in procuring and securing happiness to the people, depends, on opinion, on the general opinion of the goodness of the Government, as well as of the wisdom and integrity of its Governors. . . .

On the whole, Sir, I can not help expressing a wish that every member of the Convention who may still have objections to it, would with me, on this occasion doubt a little of his own infallibility, and to make manifest our unanimity, put his name to this instrument.

The statement indicates several of the [values or virtues that wise people usually possess](#), namely truth-seeking, humility, tolerance, and a willingness to compromise. In his essay “[Citizen Ben’s 7 Great Virtues](#),” Isaacson emphasizes Franklin’s commitment to several of them. But perhaps the most important wisdom virtue that Franklin displayed was brotherly love, which was appropriate since the word “Philadelphia” comes from two Greek words meaning exactly that (see [here](#) for the contention that such love is the most important of the wisdom virtues).

As Isaacson sums up in his Franklin biography:

Franklin’s belief that he could best serve God by serving his fellow man may strike some as mundane, but it was in truth a worthy creed that he deeply believed and faithfully followed. He was remarkably versatile in this service. He devised legislatures and lightning rods, lotteries and lending libraries. He sought practical ways to make stoves less smoky and commonwealths less corrupt. He organized neighborhood constabularies and international alliances. He combined two types of lenses to create bifocals and two types of representation to foster the nation’s federal compromise.

All of this made him the most accomplished American of his age and the most influential in inventing the type of society America would become. Indeed, the roots of much of what distinguishes the nation can be found in Franklin: its cracker-barrel humor and wisdom; its technological ingenuity; its pluralistic tolerance; its ability to weave together individualism and community cooperation; its philosophical pragmatism; its celebration of meritocratic mobility; the idealistic streak ingrained in its foreign policy.

His effective commitment to the common good and public service, the best testament of his practical wisdom, is [summed](#) up by historian Andrew S. Trees:

During his years as a printer, Franklin played an increasingly important and influential role in the civic life of Philadelphia. He became actively involved in numerous voluntary ventures to improve life in Philadelphia, a kind of practical application of many of the precepts he enumerated in his almanac. In 1731, with a group of friends, he established the first circulating library in America, which came to be emulated throughout the colonies. He founded a fire company (1736), the American Philosophical Society (1743), a college that later became the University of Pennsylvania (1749), an insurance company (1751), and a city hospital (1751). He also organized a number of other improvements in city life, such as streetlights and street cleaning. In his *Autobiography*, Franklin wrote, “Human Felicity is produc'd not so much by great Pieces of good Fortune that seldom happen, as by little Advantages that occur every Day”—an apt summation of Franklin's pragmatic and common-sense approach to life.

After his retirement [at age 42], Franklin busied himself with science and performed a variety of experiments with electricity. He eventually came up with a theory to explain electricity in its various forms . . . His discoveries made him the most famous American in the thirteen colonies. As always, Franklin looked for practical applications and invented the lightning rod to protect buildings against lightning strikes. Lightning rods soon began to appear on buildings throughout the world.

Increasingly, though, Franklin's retirement was spent in public service. He was elected to the Pennsylvania Assembly in 1751 and spent virtually the rest of his life in one governmental post or another.

Trees then indicates how from 1757 to 1775 Franklin lived mainly in England representing Pennsylvania and later also other colonies, becoming “the leading spokesman for America in Britain during the crucial pre-revolutionary years.” Returning to America, he “was elected to the second Continental Congress, and in 1776 he found himself re-crossing the Atlantic to try to persuade the French government to support the American Revolution. . . . When the war ended, he helped negotiate the Treaty of Paris with Great Britain and returned to Philadelphia in 1785. He attended the Constitutional Convention . . . and he worked for the cause of abolition in the final years of his life.”

To this list of services, many more could be added. In addition to Trees' list, historian Wood [adds](#):

Philadelphia owes much to Franklin, for almost single-handedly he made it the most enlightened city in 18th-century North America. No civic project was too large or too small for his attention. . . . He took on many mundane problems as well. Because of the ever-present danger of fire, he advised people on how to carry hot coals from one room to another, how to keep chimneys safe . . .

In the face of strong opposition, he worked hard to promote inoculation against smallpox. To make the city streets safe, he proposed organized (and tax supported) night watchmen. . . .

To deal with smoky chimneys and poor indoor heating, he invented his Pennsylvania stove. To deal with the inconvenience of switching eyeglasses, he invented bifocals. Small matters perhaps, but they were all designed to add to the sum of human happiness.

Trees' comment about Franklin's abolitionist efforts deserve some elaboration. Although like many other wealthy men of his time, he had owned a household slave or two throughout many of his adult years—ten percent of Philadelphia's people were slaves in 1760—by the year of the Constitutional Convention (1787), he was working toward its abolition. That year he became president of the Pennsylvania Society for Promoting the Abolition of Slavery. In February 1790, he presented a [petition](#) to Congress in its behalf. It called on Congress to “countenance the Restoration of liberty to those unhappy Men [slaves], who alone, in this land of Freedom, are degraded into perpetual Bondage, and who, amidst the general Joy of surrounding Freemen, are groaning in Servile Subjection, that you will devise means for removing this Inconsistency from the Character of the American People, that you will promote mercy and Justice towards this distressed Race, & that you will Step to the very verge of the Powers vested in you for discouraging every Species of Traffick in the Persons of our fellow men.”

Franklin's practical wisdom was attested to by an English friend, Benjamin Vaughan, who wrote to him in 1783 urging him to continue writing his *Autobiography* (in which the letter was eventually [included](#)):

But your biography will not merely teach self-education, but the education of a wise man; and the wisest man will receive lights and improve his progress by seeing detailed the conduct of another wise man. And why are weaker men to be deprived of such helps, when we see our race has been blundering on in the dark, almost without a guide in this particular, from the farthest trace of time? Show then, sir, how much is to be done, both to sons and fathers, and invite all wise men to become like yourself, and other men to become wise. . . .

. . . you, sir, I am sure, will give under your hand nothing but what is at the same moment wise, practical, and good.

Vaughan was correct in believing that the *Autobiography* would inspire others. Wood mentions that “schools in the nineteenth century began using his *Autobiography* to teach moral lessons to students.” And Isaacson lists various others who were influenced by it, for example Andrew Carnegie: “Not only did Franklin's success story provide him guidance in business, it also inspired his philanthropy, especially his devotion to the creation of public libraries.”

Among Franklin's contemporaries, some of our other Founding Fathers also seemed to value wisdom highly. For example, a quick look at the [Adams-Jefferson Letters](#) reveals more than 30 favorable mentions of “wisdom” by the three letter writers, who included Abigail, as well as John, Adams. In his [The Founding Fathers Reconsidered](#), R. Bernstein writes that American political thinkers like John Adams and Alexander Hamilton “saw the Enlightenment as an opportunity for a gigantic project of sorting human wisdom—identifying and conserving what was worth conserving in the best of the past while setting aside what had to be revised or replaced.”

### **Samuel Johnson**

In an 1888 work entitled [Wit and Wisdom of Samuel Johnson](#) English author George Birkbeck Hill wrote: “The most striking quality in Johnson was his wisdom, his knowledge of the whole art of life.” Hill then indicates that wisdom implies much more than mere common sense.



But mere common sense would never have made Johnson all that he is to us. Benjamin Franklin had more common sense than the frame of any single man seems capable of containing or supporting. But who loves common sense when it stands alone. . . . It must at times be crossed by the playful extravagances of a wayward humour. It must be joined not with a cold and calculating selfishness, but with a tenderness and a pity for those whose want of it has brought them to misery. No one understood better than Johnson the art by which we arrive at such happiness as life admits of; no one felt more compassion for those who, through the infirmity of will, failed to practise this art. It is perhaps this union of the strongest common sense and a real tenderness of heart that more than anything else endears him to men who are wide as the poles asunder.

Based on what we have earlier learned about Franklin, Hill was being unfair to him by suggesting that he possessed insufficient humor and compassion to be truly wise. His compassion for his fellow human beings has been amply demonstrated, and Isaacson listed (and gave examples) of Franklin's humor in his "[Citizen Ben's 7 Great Virtues](#)." But was Hill correct in writing that wisdom was Johnson's most striking quality? That is a more complicated question. Although wise in many ways, Johnson was not so in others, for example in his prejudice against the Scots and the abilities of women, and his lack of sympathy for American revolutionists. (In his famous multi-volume biography of Johnson, [James Boswell recorded](#): "As early as 1769, I was told by Dr. John Campbell, that he [Johnson] had said of them [Americans], 'Sir, they are a race of convicts, and ought to be thankful for any thing we allow them short of hanging.'") In general, Johnson's conservative, royalist political leanings have also seemed unwise to many. But our interest here is not so much with the wisdom of Johnson—and the same goes for Franklin, Goethe, and Emerson—but with the extent to which he valued that quality.

His concern with wisdom can be seen most conveniently in two of his writings: his "one great poem" (Bloom's phrase) "[The Vanity of Human Wishes](#)" (1749) and his novel [Rasselas, Prince of Abyssinia](#) (1759) (also [here](#)), about which Bloom writes, "[It] always moves me by its wisdom." Bloom thinks the poem very much in the spirit of the Bible's Ecclesiastes, which proclaims "vanity of vanities, all is vanity." Bloom claims that Johnson was "profoundly affected" by this Biblical book and that his "wisdom is somber and mordant, in the mode of Ecclesiastes." But Ecclesiastes is not all gloom and doom; it also recognizes:

To every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven:  
A time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up that which is planted;  
A time to kill, and a time to heal; a time to break down, and a time to build up;  
A time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance.

In his poem Johnson advises a scholar to:

Deign on the passing world to turn thine eyes,  
And pause awhile from letters, to be wise;  
There mark what ills the scholar's life assail,  
Toil, envy, want, the patron, and the jail.  
See nations slowly wise, and meanly just,  
To buried merit raise the tardy bust.

Later on he warns of some of the "ills [which] from beauty spring":

Ye nymphs of rosy lips and radiant eyes,  
Whom Pleasure keeps too busy to be wise.

He also calls upon the ancient Greek Democritus, known as the “laughing philosopher,” to

. . . arise on earth,  
With cheerful wisdom and instructive mirth.

Religious man that he was, Johnson ends his poem calling for God’s help and wisdom:

Pour forth thy fervours for a healthful mind,  
Obedient passions, and a will resign’d;  
For love, which scarce collective man can fill;  
For patience, sov’ reign o’er transmuted ill;  
For faith, that panting for a happier seat,  
Counts death kind Nature’s signal of retreat:  
These goods for man the laws of Heav’n ordain,  
These goods he grants, who grants the pow’r to gain;  
With these celestial wisdom calms the mind,  
And makes the happiness she does not find.

*Rasselas* is comparable to Voltaire’s more famous *Candide*, also published in 1759 (see [here](#) for an interesting comparison, where the author states, “There is an enormous amount of wisdom in these two short works”). Both short novels, coming four years after the shattering Lisbon Earthquake, rejected the claim of Leibniz that our “world is the best of all possible worlds.” Johnson’s story is about *Rasselas*, a prince from Abyssinia (modern-day Ethiopia), who with his sister (Princess Nekayah), her servant Pekuah, and an old wise man and poet, Imlac, leave their secluded land to discover the world and seek wisdom. As the prince tells Imlac, if given the choice, he would choose his “friends among the wise.”

His sister is also concerned with wisdom. In a conversation with *Rasselas* she says, “As it is always more easy to do evil than good, though the wisdom or virtue of one can very rarely make many happy, the folly or vice of one makes many miserable.”

One chapter (18) is entitled “The Prince Finds a Wise and Happy Man.” *Rasselas* listens to this “master of true wisdom” and tells Imlac, “This man shall be my future guide: I will learn his doctrines and imitate his life.” But Imlac warns him not to be too hasty “to trust or to admire the teachers of morality: they discourse like angels, but they live like men.”

Several days later *Rasselas* visits his “future guide” and finds him grief stricken because of the death of his daughter. He tells *Rasselas*, “My views, my purposes, my hopes, are at an end: I am now a lonely being, disunited from society.” But the prince replies, “Mortality is an event by which a wise man can never be surprised: we know that death is always near, and it should therefore always be expected. . . . Has wisdom no strength to arm the heart against calamity?” But the father replies, “What comfort can truth and reason afford me? Of what effect are they now, but to tell me that my daughter will not be restored?” *Rasselas* departs thinking of the “emptiness of rhetorical sounds.”

Later on *Rasselas*’s travelling group visit a hermit. Imlac tells him, “We have heard at Cairo of your wisdom, and came hither to implore your direction for this young man and maiden (the sister) in the *choice of life*.” But the hermit simply tells the group, “To him that lives well every form of life is good; nor can I give any other rule for choice than to remove all apparent evil.”



Nor does he recommend a life of solitude: “If I escape the example of bad men, I want likewise the counsel and conversation of the good. I have been long comparing the evils with the advantages of society, and resolve to return into the world to-morrow.” After meeting an astronomer who also had spent much time alone and suffered from it, Imlac says, “This, sir, is one of the dangers of solitude, which the hermit has confessed not always to promote goodness, and the astronomer’s misery has proved to be not always propitious to wisdom.”

From time to time, Imlac, often voicing Johnson’s own thoughts, will offer his own words of wisdom, for example, “When we act according to our duty, we commit the events to Him by whose laws our actions are governed, and who will suffer none to be finally punished for obedience. When, in prospect of some good, whether natural or moral, we break the rules prescribed us, we withdraw from the direction of superior wisdom, and take all consequences upon ourselves.”

At the end of the novel *Rasselas*’s sister, the princess, “thought that, of all sublunary things, knowledge was the best. She desired first to learn all sciences, and then proposed to found a college of learned women, in which she would preside, that, by conversing with the old and educating the young, she might divide her time between the acquisition and communication of wisdom, and raise up for the next age models of prudence and patterns of piety.” And *Rasselas* “desired a little kingdom in which he might administer justice in his own person and see all the parts of government with his own eyes; but he could never fix the limits of his dominion, and was always adding to the number of his subjects.”

Besides his poem on vanity and *Rasselas*, some of Johnson’s journalistic works and conversations display his concern with wisdom. Boswell [tells us](#), “In 1750 he [Johnson] came forth in the character for which he was eminently qualified, a majestick teacher of moral and religious wisdom. The vehicle which he chose was that of a periodical paper.” This paper was called *The Rambler* and appeared from 1750 to 1752. The book [Dr. Johnson and His Circle](#) (1913) relates the “subjects for the ten *Ramblers* which appeared between November 20 and December 22, 1750: “the shortness of life, the value of good-humour, the folly of heirs who live on their expectations, peevishness, the impossibility of knowing mankind till one has experienced misfortune, the self-deceptions of conscience, the moral responsibilities of men of genius, the power of novelty, the justice of suspecting the suspicious, the pleasures of change and in particular that of winter following upon summer.” (In this same book, the author often mentions Johnson’s wisdom, e.g., “here was a man uniquely rich in the wisdom of every day, learned but no victim of learning, sincerely religious but with a religion that never tried to ignore the facts of human life, a scholar, a philosopher and a Christian, but also pre-eminently a man.”)

A few of [Johnson’s wisdom quotes](#) from *The Rambler* include the following: “It is . . . the business of wisdom and virtue to select, among numberless objects striving for our notice, such as may enable us to exalt our reason, extend our views, and secure our happiness. But this choice is to be made with very little regard to rareness or frequency; for nothing is valuable merely because it is either rare or common, but because it is adapted to some useful purpose, and enables us to supply some deficiency of our natures” (*Rambler* #78, December 15, 1750). Also, “It very commonly happens that speculation has no influence on conduct. Just conclusions and cogent arguments, formed by laborious study and diligent inquiry, are often repositied in the treasuries of memory, as gold in the miser’s chest, useless alike to others and to himself. As some

are not richer for the extent of their possessions, others are not wiser for the multitude of their ideas” (*Rambler* #98, February 23, 1751).

Similar in style to his *Rambler* essays were those he later wrote from April, 1758 to April, 1760, which are collectively called [The Idler](#). Bloom says of them, “Lighter on their surface, the *Idler* essays tend to be pure wisdom literature.” On an essay on cunning, Johnson wrote with some exaggeration that “every man wishes to be wise; and they who cannot be wise are almost always cunning.”

Thanks mainly to his biographer Boswell, Johnson is as well known for his conversation as his writings, and Boswell recorded many of his words. On one occasion, he told Boswell, “Sir, be as wise as you can; let a man be *aliis laetus, sapiens sibi*: [Be merry and wise] . . . . You may be wise in your study in the morning, and gay in company at a tavern in the evening. Every man is to take care of his own wisdom and his own virtue, without minding too much what others think” (Boswell quotes from the [Osgood abridged edition](#)). Also, “Johnson talked with approbation of one who had attained to the state of the philosophical wise man.” And he told Boswell that a wise man should be happy and that “all unnecessary grief is unwise, and therefore will not be long retained by a sound mind.” And Boswell writes of him that despite the “complication of disorders” that he labored under at one time, “he did not resign himself to despondency and discontent, but with wisdom and spirit endeavoured to console and amuse his mind with as many innocent enjoyments as he could procure.” The biographer also often mentions the “wisdom and wit” of Johnson and that Johnson “loved to have his wisdom actually operate on real life.”

Valuing his London clubs, coffee-house meetings, and other social contacts, he said to Boswell, “No wise man will go to live in the country, unless he has something to do which can be better done in the country.” In giving Boswell advice about travel, he agreed with the quote “rather to go an hundred miles to speak with one wise man, than five miles to see a fair town.”

Boswell also records that Johnson sometimes spoke of the wisdom or folly of others. For example of his fellow writer Oliver Goldsmith he declared, “No man was more foolish when he had not a pen in his hand, or more wise when he had.”

Besides recording conversations, Boswell includes some Johnson prayers and letters in his biography, some of which tell us more about his views on wisdom. On beginning *The Rambler* he composed the following prayer: “Almighty GOD, the giver of all good things, without whose help all labour is ineffectual, and without whose grace all wisdom is folly; grant, I beseech Thee, that in this undertaking thy Holy Spirit may not be with-held from me, but that I may promote thy glory, and the salvation of myself and others.” Another of his prayers (this time in 1765) begins thus: “Almighty GOD, the giver of wisdom, without whose help resolutions are vain, without whose blessing study is ineffectual; enable me, if it be thy will, to attain such knowledge as may qualify me to direct the doubtful, and instruct the ignorant.”

In a letter to a friend in 1758, Johnson criticizes himself for not seeking wisdom with as much energy as he should: “I am not much richer than when you left me; and, what is worse, my omission of an answer to your first letter, will prove that I am not much wiser. But I go on as I formerly did, designing to be some time or other both rich and wise; and yet cultivate neither

mind nor fortune.” And he advises his friend, “While you are studying, enjoy the end of study, by making others wiser and happier.” This advice is similar to one of the goals of Princess Nekayah at the end of *Rasselas*, which Johnson completed the following year—“the acquisition and communication of wisdom.”

Before moving on to Goethe’s regard for wisdom, it is appropriate to mention that Johnson was far from alone in eighteenth-century Great Britain in his regard for wisdom. We have already seen Boswell’s admiration of Johnson’s wisdom, and the latter’s comment on the wisdom of Goldsmith’s writing. Goldsmith was a friend of Johnson and author of such fine works as the novel *The Vicar of Wakefield*, the play *She Stoops to Conquer*, and the poem “The Deserted Village.” His series of essays entitled [The Citizen of the World](#) (1760-61) adopted the format of a Chinese philosopher’s letters about London to friends back home. A search of the text reveals 34 mentions of the word “wisdom,” including the philosopher writing that “the chief business of my life has been to procure wisdom, and the chief object of that wisdom was to be happy.” A [scholarly article entitled “Oliver Goldsmith and the Wisdom of the World”](#) states: “Implicit in the wisdom Oliver Goldsmith urges in his writings is the insistence that we live in a less-than-perfect world inhabited by less-than-perfect people. A man guided by feeling rather than reason denies this reality at the cost of his material well-being and happiness.” And it refers to this idea as a “recurrent theme” in his works.

Another friend of Johnson, and of Goldsmith, was the political thinker, orator, and Member of Parliament Edmund Burke. A brief look at just one of his writings should suffice to indicate how much he valued wisdom. In his [“A Letter to a Member of the \[French\] National Assembly”](#) (1791), he uses the word “wisdom” 33 times, including in the following passage: “What is liberty without wisdom and without virtue? It is the greatest of all possible evils; for it is folly, vice, and madness, without restraint.”

Johnson, Boswell, Burke, and Goldsmith belonged to “The Club,” a small group founded in the mid-1760s that dined together in London. In 1775, the Scottish economist Adam Smith also became a member, though he returned to Scotland a few years later. Although famous today as the chief early spokesman for free-market capitalism and the author of *The Wealth of Nations* (1776), Smith was earlier a professor of moral philosophy at the University of Glasgow and author of *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759). A [search](#) of this latter book results in 35 paragraphs with one or more mentions of “wisdom.” The following is an example.

This disposition to admire, and almost to worship, the rich and the powerful, and to despise, or, at least, to neglect persons of poor and mean condition, though necessary both to establish and to maintain the distinction of ranks and the order of society, is, at the same time, the great and most universal cause of the corruption of our moral sentiments. That wealth and greatness are often regarded with the respect and admiration which are due only to wisdom and virtue; and that the contempt, of which vice and folly are the only proper objects, is often most unjustly bestowed upon poverty and weakness, has been the complaint of moralists in all ages.

Like Johnson, Smith believed that the highest wisdom came from God, but he had more confidence than did Johnson that human economic inclinations reflected divine wisdom, that “the benevolent wisdom of nature” was clearly evident in economic life. He also believed that “by the wise contrivance of the Author of nature, virtue is upon all ordinary occasions, even with regard to this life, real wisdom, and the surest and readiest means of obtaining both safety and

advantage.” He thought that a benevolent God, by use of an “invisible hand,” the division of labor, and the free market system, coordinated this individual self-seeking to advance the public good and keep “in continual motion the industry of mankind.” At times “the wisdom of the state” is necessary to encourage and maintain the division of labor, as Smith explains in the case of soldiering: “It is necessary that it should become the sole or principal occupation of a particular class of citizens, and the division of labour is as necessary for the improvement of this, as of every other art. . . . It is the wisdom of the state only which can render the trade of a soldier a particular trade separate and distinct from all others. . . . It is the wisdom of the state only which can render it for his interest to give up the greater part of his time to this peculiar occupation: and states have not always had this wisdom, even when their circumstances had become such that the preservation of their existence required that they should have it.”

Whether Smith was wise or not in thinking that a divine “invisible hand,” sometime with government aid, wisely reconciled individual and social well-being is not the question here. But we do see how highly Smith regarded wisdom.

Besides the British men above, others could also be mentioned such as one of the most popular poets of his day, William Cowper. In his long poem [“The Task,”](#) for example, there are 23 mentions of “wisdom.” But it is time to pass on to another country and another wisdom advocate, Germany and its most famous writer, Goethe.

### **Johann Wolfgang von Goethe**

In his chapter on Johnson and Goethe in *Where Shall Wisdom Be Found?* Harold Bloom contrasts these two “wisdom writers.” Compared to Johnson’s “somber and mordant” wisdom, “in the mode of Ecclesiastes,” Goethe manifests the “‘joyful wisdom’ that Nietzsche so desperately sought.” In the nineteenth century numerous other writers spoke of Goethe’s wisdom. In his Introduction to an English edition of Goethe’s [Autobiography: Truth and Fiction Relating to My Life](#) Thomas Carlyle wrote of the poetry of Goethe: “To our minds, in these soft, melodious imaginations of his, there is embodied the Wisdom which is proper to this time; the beautiful, the religious Wisdom, which may still, with something of its old impressiveness, speak to the whole soul; still, in these hard, unbelieving utilitarian days, reveal to us glimpses of the Unseen but not unreal World, that so the Actual and the Ideal may again meet together, and clear Knowledge be again wedded to Religion, in the life and business of men.” Emerson, as we shall later see, was also a great admirer of the German poet’s wisdom. English poet Matthew Arnold [referred](#) to Goethe as “the greatest voice of the century.”

In the twentieth century, one of its greatest poets, T. S. Eliot, who asked (In *The Rock*)

Where is the Life we have lost in living?  
Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge?  
Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?,

also thought of “Goethe as the Sage,” as he entitled a lecture in 1955 (printed in his 1957 collection, [On Poetry and Poets](#)). In his talk, he said: “In some men it [wisdom] may appear fitfully and occasionally, or once in a lifetime, in the rapture of a single experience beatific or awful; in a man like Goethe it appears to have been constant, steady and serene.”

Eliot does not tell us where exactly in Goethe he discovers the most wisdom. But he does say that “wisdom is greater than any sum of wise sayings” It “is communicated on a deeper level than that of logical propositions; all language is inadequate, but probably the language of poetry is the language most capable of communicating wisdom. The wisdom of a great poet is concealed in his work; but in becoming aware of it we become ourselves more wise.” Eliot also suggests that some wisdom is to be found in Goethe’s [Conversations with Eckermann](#) (CE),” which occurred late in his long life.

Bloom has observed how Goethe “scattered pungent aphorisms throughout his writings” and that many of his thoughts on wisdom are gathered together in his [Maxims and Reflections](#) (M&R). His writings—prose fiction, poems, drama, essays, scientific works, etc.—are so extensive that in considering his wisdom, we shall concentrate here primarily on only a handful of works, namely CE, M&R, [Hermann and Dorothea](#), *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* (WMA), *Wilhelm Meister's Journeyman'ship* (WMJ), and *Faust*.<sup>2</sup> It is, however, always difficult to be sure that any particular fictional character is speaking directly for the author, and so one has to be careful, for example, in attributing thoughts about wisdom uttered by any such Goethe character to the author himself. Again, however, our concern here, as with Franklin and Johnson, is more to demonstrate Goethe’s *interest* in wisdom rather than his *possession* of it.

The Germany where Goethe was born in 1749 was not yet a united country and would not become one even by his death in 1832. But it produced many notable philosophers and writers who valued wisdom. One of the most important was Immanuel Kant (1724–1804).

The now deceased German psychologist Paul Baltes in his [Wisdom as Orchestration of Mind and Virtue](#) (2004) sums up nicely Kant’s thinking on wisdom. Baltes’s work states that the philosopher did not develop a comprehensive theory of wisdom. In this sense he was typical of Enlightenment thinking because during this period “wisdom lost its appeal as an inclusive theoretical-philosophical category. Other concepts took center stage.” Yet, in his scattered comments on wisdom Kant still emphasized the importance of it.

He thought that we arrived at wisdom based on science, reason, morality, and consideration of others’ wellbeing. This approach is broader than that of many Enlightenment thinkers because he believed that reason, and thus wisdom, involved not just thinking but also feeling and willing—see [here](#) for a similar modern-day viewpoint that emphasizes a “synergistic interaction of feeling, thought, and action that is the hallmark of wisdom.” And Kant’s stress on morality and others’ wellbeing has recently been echoed by psychologist Robert Sternberg, who [has written](#): “People are wise to the extent that they use their intelligence to seek a common good. They do so by balancing, in their courses of action, their own interests with those of others.” Kant also thought that “perfect wisdom” should demonstrate to us the end purposes of reason. In writing about wisdom the twentieth-century economist and environmentalist E. F. Schumacher said something similar when he wrote that wisdom deals with fundamental questions like “What is the purpose of life?” (See [here](#) for more on Schumacher and wisdom.)

Several other aspects of Kant’s view of wisdom are also emphasized by modern wisdom writers including the need for humility. Baltes quotes Kant as saying that in pursuing wisdom we are not “error-free.” And he believes that Kant thinks that “teachers of wisdom (philosophers) as well as



ordinary people can only aspire toward it, they cannot achieve it in full.” And like many modern wisdom thinkers, Kant stressed the importance of wisdom seekers exercising self-control over their passions.

Finally, like Samuel Johnson, who wrote in “The Vanity of Human Wishes” that “celestial wisdom calms the mind,” Kant believed in “divine wisdom and identified human wisdom as less than that.” As Baltes states it: “Wisdom . . . involving principles of conduct fully appropriate to the final purpose of all things, appropriate to the highest good, is situated only with God . . . and not acting contrary to that idea in any manifest way is what one could refer to as human wisdom.”

In addition to Kant, Germany produced other eighteenth-century writers and thinkers who valued wisdom and, like Kant, had some influence on Goethe. Although he eventually came to appreciate Kant, Goethe was more influenced as a youth by Gotthold Lessing (1729-1781) and Johann Herder (1744-1803). The former’s play *Nathan the Wise* and the latter’s *Treatise on the Origin of Language*, where Herder writes of “nature’s wisdom” and with respect for human wisdom, give some inkling of this appreciation. But Goethe was a great believer in self-development (*Bildung*) and differed in many ways from his German predecessors. Unlike the philosopher Kant, the writer Goethe looked upon life from a much more artistic, less rationalistic and abstract, viewpoint. In Goethe’s valuable *Conversations with Eckermann*, recorded near the end of his life, he said: “There is a point of view beyond the sphere of philosophy,— namely, that of common-sense; and that art and science, independently of philosophy, and by means of a free action of natural human powers, have always thriven best. This is grist for our mill. I have always kept myself free from philosophy. The common-sense point of view was also mine.” As with Franklin, Goethe was more interested in practical, rather than theoretical, wisdom.

Like Franklin, Johnson, and Kant, however, Goethe believed in divine wisdom. Eckermann quotes him on God as saying “the great Being whom we name the Deity manifests himself not only in man, but in a rich, powerful nature, and in mighty world-events.” But Goethe thought that most humans possessed little capacity to comprehend divine mysteries. “Nay, if the Supreme Being attempted to reveal such mysteries to us, we should not understand them or know what to do with them. . . . On this account it is quite right that forms of religion have not been given directly by God himself, but, as the work of eminent men, have been conformed to the wants and the understanding of a great mass of their fellows. If they were the work of God, no man could understand them; but, being the work of men, they do not express the Inscrutable.”

Goethe, therefore, sought a higher point of view. According to Eckermann,

Such a point Goethe early found in [Baruch] Spinoza [1608-1674]; and he acknowledges with joy how much the views of that great thinker answered the wants of his youth. In him he found himself, and in him therefore could he fortify himself to the best advantage. And as these views were not of the subjective sort, but had a foundation in the works and manifestations of God through the world, so were they not mere husks which he, after his own later, deeper search into the world and nature, threw aside as useless, but were the first root and germ of a plant that went on growing with equally healthy energy for many years, and at last unfolded the flower of a rich knowledge. His [Goethe’s] opponents have often accused him of having no faith: but he merely had not theirs, because it was too small for him. If he spoke out his own, they would be astonished; but they would not be able to comprehend him.



Goethe once stated that “If you want to deny that nature is a divine organ, you might as well deny all revelation,” and Bloom refers to it as “Spinoza-like pantheism.” Indeed, there are many similarities between Spinoza and Goethe regarding God and nature. Both men perceived a divine presence throughout the universe.

Goethe’s [Hermann and Dorothea](#) is a long epic poem written in the late 1790s. Hermann, the son of a small Rhineland town innkeeper, discovers Dorothea among refugees fleeing French troops in the early 1790s. He is moved by her beauty, and the remainder of the poem deals with his wooing her and convincing his father to accept her as a daughter-in-law into their household. Throughout the poem, Goethe indicates his appreciation of wisdom.

Hermann says of his parents, “No one knew more, so I deemed, or was wiser than those who begot me.” His mother seems especially wise. Goethe refers to her as a “prudent, intelligent housewife.” On one occasion when her husband is being too critical of Hermann, she says: “Why wilt thou always, father, be doing our son such injustice? That least of all is the way to bring thy wish to fulfilment. We have no power to fashion our children as suiteth our fancy; As they are given by God, we so must have them and love them; Teach them as best we can, and let each of them follow his nature. One will have talents of one sort, and different talents another. Every one uses his own; in his own individual fashion.”

Although Hermann’s dad does not demonstrate as much wisdom and is very reluctant to accept the refugee Dorothea as a daughter-in-law, Hermann lets him know that he expects him to display wisdom: “Heap not up sorrow and anger, but rather let all this be ended; For I could hold thee never again in such high estimation, If thou shouldst show but delight in pain, not superior wisdom.”

Hermann also values the wisdom he believes her perceives in Dorothea. On one occasion he says to her, “Ah, what wisdom thou showest, thou good, thou excellent maiden.” At another time, he says of her, “Say what she will, ‘twill be good and wise; of that I am certain.”

Another character who is respected for being wise is the local pastor, who helps Hermann convince his dad of the worthiness of Dorothea. Goethe describes him as a “wise man,” and, desiring his help in making Dorothea his wife, Herman says to him: “Hasten and show us in this a proof of the wisdom we honor.”

A few years before writing *Hermann and Dorothea*, Goethe had completed *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* (WMA), but *Wilhelm Meister's Journeyman'ship* (WMJ) did not appear until decades later in the 1820s, a first edition earlier in the decade and an expanded one at the end of the 1820s. About WMA, Emerson [wrote](#), “it is so crammed with wisdom, with knowledge of the world and with knowledge of laws; the persons so truly and subtly drawn, and with such few strokes, and not a word too much,—the book remains ever so new and unexhausted.” The novel is considered a classic *Bildungsroman*, or coming-of-age novel in which the hero discovers by trial and error some of life’s truths.

Scholars differ somewhat on what WMA has to say about wisdom. One [essay](#) (by Irvin Stock) declares “*Wilhelm Meister’s Apprenticeship* is not only, as Yeats said, the wisest novel ever written, wisdom being ideas about life that do not betray its complexity, but express it, ideas that

bring us closer to fact and that can have the poignancy of fact; it is also one of the most enthralling and beautiful of novels. It surely ranks with the greatest novels in the world.” Stock adds, “The wisdom which the novel embodies is precisely an insight into the nature of success in living, and of how—by what attitudes as well as behavior—it is to be won, if it is to be won at all.”

Another [essay](#) (by Michael Bell) stresses the irony found in WMA and warns us that Goethe does not always agree with wisdom statements made by the novel’s characters. “Although wisdom itself is not banal, its expression is peculiarly susceptible of being, or seeming, so. . . . Goethe is peculiarly concerned with the problematics of wisdom as such, and how the meaning of experience can be communicated.” One of Bell’s main points is that in WMA Goethe is telling us that wisdom comes primarily from inner development and that wisdom platitudes are not that significant.

One of Wilhelm’s mentors, the abbé, stresses this same point when he says: “To guard from error is not the instructor’s duty, but to lead the erring pupil; nay, to let him quaff his error in deep, satiating draughts, this is the instructor’s wisdom. He who only tastes his error, will long dwell with it, will take delight in it as in a singular felicity; while he who drains it to the dregs will, if he be not crazy, find it out.” At the end of the novel the abbé has Wilhelm read the following words: “Words are good, but they are not the best. The best is not to be explained by words. The spirit in which we act is the highest matter. Action can be understood and again represented by the spirit alone. . . .Whoever works with symbols only is a pedant, a hypocrite, or a bungler. There are many such, and they like to be together. Their babbling detains the scholar: their obstinate mediocrity vexes even the best. The instruction which the true artist gives us opens the mind; for, where words fail him, deeds speak. The true scholar learns from the known to unfold the unknown.”

Born in Germany and a great admirer of Goethe and his writings, E. F. Schumacher emphasized a similar point. In his [A Guide for the Perplexed](#) (1977), he recommended various steps to becoming wiser:

—One’s first task is to learn from society and “tradition” and to find one’s temporary happiness in receiving directions from outside.

—One’s second task is to interiorize the knowledge one has gained, sift it, sort it out, keeping the good and jettisoning the bad; this process may be called “individuation,” becoming self-directed.

Bell also analyzes WMJ and believes that even more so than in WMA Goethe expresses “an essential reticence and skepticism towards any all-encompassing wisdom.” Near the end of this second novel we are presented with a series of aphorisms from “Makaria’s archive.” About them Bell writes: “As these aphorisms explore what it is to be ‘wise’ (*weis*) so they insist on each individual finding his own manner (*Weise*) of being so.”<sup>3</sup>

[Faust](#) is generally considered Goethe’s greatest work. He labored over it off and on for decades, completing Part Two only in the year before his death in 1832. And this poetic two-part play is primarily about Faust’s quest for wisdom, which leads him to make a pact with the demon Mephistopheles (see [here](#) for an essay comparing the wisdom of *Faust* with that found in the

Bible's Ecclesiastes). Even more passionately than Wilhelm Meister, Faust is driven through trial and error in his quest, and he comes to distrust mere words. As he says in his opening lines:

I've studied now Philosophy  
and Jurisprudence, Medicine,  
and e'en, alas! Theology,  
from end to end, with labor keen.  
Yet here, poor fool! with all my lore  
I stand, no wiser than before;  
.....  
Therefore, from Magic I seek assistance;  
my hope is many a secret to reach  
Through spirit-power and spirit-speech,  
and so the bitter task forego  
of saying the things I do not know;  
'tis to detect the inmost force  
which binds the world and guides its course,  
all germs and forces to explore,—  
And bandy empty words no more!<sup>4</sup>

But in the end, the chief lesson that Faust learns about wisdom is the importance of love, the greatest of the wisdom virtues. In his introduction to a paperback edition of *Faust*, Stuart Atkins writes: “the most important theme of *Faust* is undoubtedly love,” of which the supreme poetic symbol is Margarete (realistically in the First Part and, in various metamorphoses—particularly that of Helen of Troy—in the Second).<sup>5</sup> Towards the end of Part Two Faust, now blind, passionately directs a coastal reclamation project to aid the people who will inhabit it.

I rest not till the finished work hath crowned me:  
The master's word alone shall here have might.  
Up from your couches, workers every man!—  
make grandly visible my daring plan!  
Seize now your tools, with spade and shovel press!—  
the work staked out must be a swift success.<sup>6</sup>

Like Wilhelm Meister, Faust has come to realize the importance of wise actions as opposed to mere words. His reclamation project is in keeping with the words of Kohn quoted earlier in this essay, comparing Goethe and Franklin: “They shared a love for science, for practical wisdom, for minute attention to details, and a concern for the good of man and society.” The enthusiasm for practical altruism that Goethe places in Faust as he nears his end reflects Goethe's own earlier commitment to helping others through public service when he served as chief advisor to the Duke of Saxe-Weimar-Eisenach and held positions in the Weimar government, including President of the Treasury and Overseer of the Mines. For almost a decade beginning in 1777, he served on the duke's small Privy Council, which in that period met about 600 times and averaged about 30 agenda items for each meeting.

Amidst Faust's reclamation project, however, he dies, but angels bear away “the immortal part of Faust,” and *Faust* ends with him being reunited with his earthly love Margarete, who has already died before Part Two begins. She asks the Queen of Heaven to “Vouchsafe to me that I instruct him, / whom dazzles still the new Day's glare!” And the Queen replies: “Rise, thou, to higher spheres! Conduct him, / who, sensing thee, will follow there!”<sup>7</sup> The final words of Part Two have

been translated in different ways, but one rendering is, “It is the eternal feminine that leads us upwards and on.” Goethe’s concept of the “eternal feminine” has been linked by the Russian philosopher Vladimir Soloviev (1853-1900) to his own idea of Sophia or Holy Wisdom (see [here](#) and [here](#) for more on this linkage).

Given Bell’s observations about the caution that must be exercised regarding Goethe’s wisdom aphorisms, we approach his *Maxims and Reflections* (M&R) mindful that the context in which they appear is important. Fortunately, German-literature scholar Peter Hutchinson provides just this context in his Introduction to the [Penguin edition](#) of M&R, which contains 1413 maxims with their sources indicated according to chronological order. More than half of them first appeared in periodicals and novels, especially WMJ, but hundreds of them also appeared posthumously. Among the subjects Goethe’s maxims speak to the most significant are “Literature and Life,” “Art and Art History,” and “Nature and Natural Science.”

As Hutchinson indicates, Goethe was fond of collecting and writing maxims or aphorisms and was influenced by those of the Bible’s Proverbs and Ecclesiastes, as well as the terse aphorisms of writers such as Montaigne and Pascal. A year after Goethe’s death his secretary Eckermann collected about 600 of his sayings in a work entitled *Einzelheiten. Maximen und Reflexionen* (*Individual Items. Maxims and Reflections*), and in 1840 Eckermann oversaw the publication of a larger collection entitled *Sprüche in Prosa* (*Sayings in Prose*).

But while Goethe valued the terse form and content of these “sayings,” Hutchinson cautions us to realize that Goethe “did not see them as a specific collection of aphorisms, nor as anything as planned and as formal as the biblical Wisdom books; nor did he wish to see them presented under specific headings which would enable swift reference to his opinions on a variety of matters (a task readily undertaken by later compilers). . . . It is significant that Goethe’s letters and his conversation are often comparable to the ‘maxim and reflection’ form, and this may be one reason why he took the trouble to structure and formulate his passing thoughts, to set them down in formalized shape for posterity.”

Later compilers did indeed often present Goethe’s maxims as “wisdom sayings.” In 1883, a retired professor at the University of Edinburgh gathered together Goethe’s sayings and wrote a long introduction to this collection, which he entitled [The Wisdom of Goethe](#). And in his “Translator’s Preface” to [The Maxims and Reflections of Goethe](#) (1893), Bailey Saunders writes, “so deep is the wisdom of these maxims, so wide their reach, so compact a product are they of Goethe’s wonderful genius.” The book contains 590 items, plus about a half-dozen pages of unnumbered maxims regarding nature. It also features an index with links to the numbered items under such additional terms as Age and Youth, Beauty, Common Sense, Fools, Friendship, God, Great Ideas, Great Men, History, Imprudence, Knowledge, Love, Men and Women, Mistakes, National Character, Originality, Progress, the Public, Self-appreciation, Success in the World, Thought, Truth, Wisdom, and Work.

A later collection, also entitled [The Wisdom of Goethe](#) (1955), was arranged by the prolific German biographer Emil Ludwig, and the book is not limited to M&R, but also contains brief selections from Goethe’s other works, including his letters. It is divided according to 24 subject

areas, among which are the Art of Life, Education, Life and Death, Marriage and Children, Politics and Power, and War and Revolution.

What our brief overview of Goethe's views on wisdom indicates is that he valued wisdom. He was, in Bell's words "peculiarly concerned with the problematics of wisdom as such, and how the meaning of experience can be communicated"; but he maintained "an essential reticence and skepticism towards any all-encompassing wisdom," and he stressed the need of "each individual finding his own manner" of gaining wisdom.

Before we turn to the American Ralph Waldo Emerson, some words in general regarding attitudes toward wisdom in early-nineteenth-century Europe during the Romantic Age are appropriate. Although Goethe later moved beyond his own earlier Romantic manifestations, his novel *The Sorrows of Young Werther* (1774) is considered an important precursor of the Romantic movement, as were Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Johann Herder, the latter, as we have seen above, being an important early influence on Goethe. Herder's emphasis on the *Volk* (folk) and *Volkgeist* (folk-spirit) would have wide appeal in Germany and beyond, especially in Slavic lands such as Russia.

One German thinker of the Romantic Age who wrote on wisdom was the philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer. In his [The Wisdom of Life](#) he stated that "the wise man will, above all, strive after freedom from pain and annoyance, quiet and leisure, consequently a tranquil, modest life, with as few encounters as may be."

In England poets such as Wordsworth, Byron, Coleridge, Keats, and Shelly reflect the Romantic spirit. It was characterized by a rebellion against the eighteenth-century's neoclassical emphasis on rationality and restraint and instead emphasized individualism, imagination, emotion, the wonders of nature, the medieval, the strange, the mysterious, and heroic action (Napoleon was a hero to some). To the Romantics, wisdom came not so much from reason, but more from some combination of intuition and imagination often connected with a feeling of almost mystical oneness with nature, the folk-spirit, or some other spiritual or divine force.

In "The Tables Turned," Wordsworth writes:

Up! up! my Friend, and quit your books;  
Or surely you'll grow double:  
Up! up! my Friend, and clear your looks;  
Why all this toil and trouble?

The sun above the mountain's head,  
A freshening lustre mellow  
Through all the long green fields has spread,  
His first sweet evening yellow.

Books! 'tis a dull and endless strife:  
Come, hear the woodland linnet,  
How sweet his music! on my life,  
There's more of wisdom in it.

And hark! how blithe the throstle sings!

He, too, is no mean preacher:  
Come forth into the light of things,  
Let Nature be your teacher.

She has a world of ready wealth,  
Our minds and hearts to bless—  
Spontaneous wisdom breathed by health,  
Truth breathed by cheerfulness.

One impulse from a vernal wood  
May teach you more of man,  
Of moral evil and of good,  
Than all the sages can.

In his poetry, Shelly frequently mentions wisdom (see, e.g., [here](#)). He also does so in an unfinished "[Essay on Christianity](#)" (c. 1815). For example:

Before man can be free, and equal, and truly wise, he must cast aside the chains of habit and superstition; he must strip sensuality of its pomp, and selfishness of its excuses, and contemplate actions and objects as they really are. He will discover the wisdom of universal love. . . .

. . . In proportion as mankind becomes wise — yes, in exact proportion to that wisdom — should be the extinction of the unequal system under which they now subsist.

At the other end of Europe in the early 1820s, a group of Moscow writers influenced especially by German Romanticism formed a group known as the Lovers of Wisdom. The head of it was Vladimir Odoevsky, whose most famous work was entitled *Russian Nights*, in which the main character was named Faust. Odoevsky himself was later known as the "Russian Faust." In *Russian Nights* he quotes Goethe's works—*Faust* and both *Wilhelm Meister* novels—several times. Another member of the Lovers of Wisdom was the philosopher Ivan Kireevsky, who in the 1830s and 1840s was a member of the Slavophiles, a group of conservative nationalist thinkers who emphasized religious faith and intuition as opposed to "Western rationalism." Vladimir Soloviev (see above), whose concept of Holy Wisdom (or Sophia) was central to his thinking, was influenced in his youth by latter-day Slavophiles before rejecting their thinking as too narrow and nationalistic (see [here](#) for more on wisdom in Russia).

## Ralph Waldo Emerson

Born in 1803, essayist, philosopher, poet Ralph Waldo Emerson was strongly influenced by Goethe and Romantic thinking. The [Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy entry on him](#) notes that "drawing on English and German Romanticism, Neoplatonism, Kantianism, and Hinduism, Emerson developed a metaphysics of process, an epistemology of moods, and an "existentialist" ethics of self-improvement. He influenced generations of Americans, from his friend Henry David Thoreau to John Dewey, and in Europe, Friedrich Nietzsche, who takes up such Emersonian themes as power, fate, the uses of poetry and history, and the critique of Christianity."



In 1824, when Goethe still had eight more years to live, Harvard-graduate Emerson was still a year away from entering Harvard Divinity School to prepare himself to become a minister. But he had been keeping a journal for several years—in it, relevant to this essay, he frequently expressed his admiration for Benjamin Franklin. In 1824 the young Emerson [wrote](#) in it of the importance he attributed to wisdom.

There is another sort of book which appears now and then in the world, once in two or three centuries perhaps, and which soon or late gets a foothold in popular esteem. I allude to those books which collect and embody the wisdom of their times, and so mark the stages of human improvement. Such are the Proverbs of Solomon, the Essays of Montaigne, and eminently the Essays of Bacon. . . . I should like to add another volume to this valuable work. I am not so foolhardy as to write Sequel to Bacon on my title-page; and there are some reasons that induce me to suppose that the undertaking of this enterprise does not imply any censurable arrogance. . . . It may be made clear that there may be the Wisdom of an Age, independent of and above the Wisdom of any individual whose life is numbered in its years. And the diligence rather than the genius of one mind may compile the prudential maxims, domestic and public maxims current in the world and which may be made to surpass the single stores of any writer, as the richest private funds are quickly exceeded by a public purse.

To an unusual extent Emerson fulfilled this dream of his youth: like Bacon, he became a prolific essayist—in 1832 he resigned his position as a minister and sailed for Europe, where he met, among others the poets Wordsworth and Coleridge and the writer Thomas Carlyle, a great admirer and translator of Goethe.

Emerson's essays on all sorts of topics (e.g., Love, Fate, Power, Wealth, Culture, Behavior, Worship, Beauty, Self-Reliance, Friendship, Heroism, Manners, Nature, Shakespeare, Goethe, Prudence, Old Age, Success, and Politics) reflected his appreciation of wisdom (see [here](#) for links to his essays).<sup>8</sup> Vernon Parrington in his *Main Currents in American Thought* [wrote](#) of “the oracular [Emerson] Essays with their confident wisdom” and declared that “the very brilliancy of the Essays conceals the laborious processes by which their abundant wisdom was distilled . . . . Wisdom did not come to him of its own accord; it was painfully groped for. . . . To invest his days wisely was his single purpose.”

Although there is considerable continuity in his view of wisdom, he also was always open to new ways of looking at it. He once said wisely that “the healthful mind keeps itself studiously open to all influences.” After his 1832-1833 trip to Europe and meeting the poets Coleridge and Wordsworth he began to display a greater Romantic sensibility. This is reflected in his new understanding of Reason and Understanding, which reflects Coleridge's non-Enlightenment view. As Emerson explained in a May 1834 [letter](#): “Reason is the highest faculty of the soul—what we mean often by the soul itself; it never *reasons*, never proves, it simply perceives; it is vision. The Understanding toils all the time, compares, contrives, adds, argues, near sighed but strong-sighted, dwelling in the present the expedient the customary.” In his first published work [Nature](#) (1836), a long essay divided into chapters, Emerson wrote: “This universal soul, he [man] calls Reason: it is not mine, or thine, or his, but we are its; we are its property and men. And the blue sky in which the private earth is buried, the sky with its eternal calm, and full of everlasting orbs, is the type of Reason. That which, intellectually considered, we call Reason, considered in relation to nature, we call Spirit. Spirit is the Creator. Spirit hath life in itself. And man in all ages and countries, embodies it in his language.”

In that same work, he sounds at times like Wordsworth, who had [written](#)

One impulse from a vernal wood  
May teach you more of man,  
Of moral evil and of good,  
Than all the sages can.

In [Nature](#) Emerson wrote: “The stars awaken a certain reverence, because though always present, they are inaccessible; but all natural objects make a kindred impression, when the mind is open to their influence. Nature never wears a mean appearance. Neither does the wisest man extort her secret, and lose his curiosity by finding out all her perfection. Nature never became a toy to a wise spirit. The flowers, the animals, the mountains, reflected the wisdom of his best hour, as much as they had delighted the simplicity of his childhood. When we speak of nature in this manner, we have a distinct but most poetical sense in the mind.”

Carlyle’s great enthusiasm for Goethe communicated itself to Emerson, but was just one reason for his adult indebtedness to the German writer. Emerson’s leading biographer, Robert D. Richardson Jr., in his [Emerson: The Mind on Fire](#), summarizes well Goethe’s influence on the American thinker.

And there was always too the persistent, powerful influence of Goethe, pulling at Emerson's tides like the great full moon.

The effect of Goethe on Emerson is nearly impossible to overestimate. From 1828, when he began to read Goethe in German, through the mid-1840s . . . , [Goethe] was virtually a daily presence in Emerson’s life. In the mid-thirties Emerson worked his way through practically everything in the fifty-five volume edition he owned of Goethe’s writings. . . . Many things in Goethe kept Emerson (who hated having to read in the original if a translation was available) laboriously working in his imperfect German year after year on the study of the vast body of Goethe’s writing. Emerson skimmed and skipped in many books, but not in Goethe’s. Goethe laid down fundamental lessons that over the years became part of Emerson’s own bedrock. “Goethe teaches courage,” he would write. . . . Now [mid-1830s], as he worked on [his essay] *Nature*, Emerson jumped at Goethe’s insistence that beauty is fundamental, separate, underived. . . . With equal enthusiasm Emerson seized on Goethe’s idea that “all is in each:” “Every natural form to the smallest, a leaf, a sunbeam, a moment of time, a drop, is related to the whole, and partakes of the beauty of the whole.”

One might list a hundred kindling ideas Emerson found in Goethe. . . . But Emerson was now drawing from Goethe not only ideas, perhaps not mainly ideas. He was discernibly fascinated with the way Goethe’s mind worked. [See [here](#) for a 1915 Ph.D. thesis on “Emerson and Goethe” that details Emerson’s appreciation of Goethe’s wisdom, but also mentions some reservations that he had.]

Emerson’s gratefulness for Goethe’s wisdom never ceased. In his 1862 essay [“Old Age,”](#) reprinted in his 1870 collection *Society and Solitude* Emerson refers to him as “Goethe, the all-knowing poet.” And it was not just his literary work that Emerson appreciated; he was also influenced by his scientific writings. In his [most significant essay on Goethe](#) he wrote, “Thus Goethe suggested the leading idea of modern botany, that a leaf or the eye of a leaf is the unit of botany, and that every part of a plant is only a transformed leaf to meet a new condition; and, by varying the conditions, a leaf may be converted into any other organ, and any other organ into a leaf.” Richardson tells us that Emerson thought that Goethe’s scientific views affirmed that there was “a real, if undiscovered order in things,” that this “gave one hope for the human world.” Later on, in 1860, Emerson was eager to read Darwin’s *Origin of Species*, just then appearing in

American bookstores. Richardson tells us that “Emerson’s reading in Goethe long ago had prepared him for some of Darwin’s conclusions.”

Many of Emerson’s essays were first presented as lectures, for he was also a prolific lecturer, perhaps the most famous in America of his era—in 1867, when his health was already beginning to decline, he gave 80 lectures. Throughout his works one finds many mentions of wisdom and being wise. A [search](#) at one site of Emerson’s quotes using the words [wise](#) and [wisdom](#) provides about eighty results.

Here we shall look at what he had to say by dividing his thoughts into several categories: 1) the nature of wisdom, 2) types and examples of wise people, 3) wisdom frequency, 4) characteristics of wise people, and 5) the wise and society and politics.

Perhaps the logical place to begin in describing Emerson’s view of the nature of wisdom is to mention that like Goethe and Wordsworth he had a pantheistic view of it. The [Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy entry on pantheism](#) states that a “vital source of pantheistic ideas is to be found in literature, for example, in such writers as Goethe, Coleridge, Wordsworth, Emerson, Walt Whitman, D.H. Lawrence, and Robinson Jeffers.”

In one of his first collection of essays (1841), his [“The Over-Soul”](#) declared:

That great nature in which we rest, as the earth lies in the soft arms of the atmosphere; that Unity, that Over-soul, within which every man’s particular being is contained and made one with all other; that common heart . . . ; that overpowering reality . . . which evermore tends to pass into our thought and hand, and become wisdom, and virtue, and power, and beauty. We live in succession, in division, in parts, in particles. Meantime within man is the soul of the whole; the wise silence; the universal beauty, to which every part and particle is equally related; the eternal ONE. And this deep power in which we exist, and whose beatitude is all accessible to us, is not only self-sufficing and perfect in every hour, but the act of seeing and the thing seen, the seer and the spectacle, the subject and the object, are one. We see the world piece by piece, as the sun, the moon, the animal, the tree; but the whole, of which these are the shining parts, is the soul. Only by the vision of that Wisdom can the horoscope of the ages be read.

Also in his 1841 collection, in [“Self-Reliance,”](#) he wrote of intuition as the “primary wisdom,” and added:

The relations of the soul to the divine spirit are so pure, that it is profane to seek to interpose helps. It must be that when God speaketh he should communicate, not one thing, but all things; should fill the world with his voice; should scatter forth light, nature, time, souls, from the centre of the present thought; and new date and new create the whole. Whenever a mind is simple, and receives a divine wisdom, old things pass away, —means, teachers, texts, temples fall; it lives now, and absorbs past and future into the present hour.

And yet, for all of Emerson’s emphasis on us all being part of a larger Over-soul and partaking in divine wisdom, he also, as the title of his essay suggests, stressed self-reliance. In [“History,”](#) another essay in the same 1841 collection, he wrote, “So all that is said of the wise man by Stoic or Oriental or modern essayist, describes to each reader his own idea, describes his unattained but attainable self.” In a later essay on [“Experience,”](#) we read: “The life of truth is cold, and so far mournful; but it is not the slave of tears, contritions, and perturbations. It does not attempt

another's work, nor adopt another's facts. It is a main lesson of wisdom to know your own from another's. I have learned that I cannot dispose of other people's facts; but I possess such a key to my own, as persuades me against all their denials, that they also have a key to theirs." An emphasis on one's individual potential for self-improvement, for growing in wisdom one might say, remained a cornerstone of Emerson's beliefs throughout his adult years.

In an 1832 [journal](#) entry, he had written:

. . . I will be  
Lighthearted as a bird and live with God.  
I find him in the bottom of my heart,  
I hear continually his Voice therein,  
And books, and priests, and worlds, I less esteem.  
Who says the heart's a blind guide? It is not.  
My heart did never counsel me to sin.  
I wonder where it got its wisdom . . . .

Thus, he thought that wisdom involves not just the mind, but the heart and much more. In one of his more famous lectures, "[The American Scholar](#)" (1837), he said that "character is higher than intellect." In an essay on "[Nature](#)," in his second series of essays (1844)—not to be confused with his earlier book-length essay with the same title—we read that "every moment instructs, and every object: for wisdom is infused into every form. It has been poured into us as blood; it convulsed us as pain; it slid into us as pleasure; it enveloped us in dull, melancholy days, or in days of cheerful labor; we did not guess its essence, until after a long time."

To him being amidst nature seems conducive to wise thoughts. He loved the outdoors and walking amidst it—in September 1842, for example, he and Nathaniel Hawthorne walked forty miles on a two-day round-trip to a village and nearby Shaker community. In 1832, while spending some time among the White Mountains of New Hampshire, he wrote in his [journal](#), "Here among the mountains the pinions of thought should be strong, and one should see the errors of men from a calmer height of love and wisdom." In his 1836 book, [Nature](#), Emerson stated, "In the woods, we return to reason and faith. There I feel that nothing can befall me in life,—no disgrace, no calamity . . . which nature cannot repair. Standing on the bare ground,—my head bathed by the blithe air, and uplifted into infinite space,—all mean egotism vanishes. . . . I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or particle of God." In one of his poems, "[Waldeinsamkeit](#)," from a 1867 collection, Emerson reminds us of Wordsworth's contention (see above) that

One impulse from a vernal wood  
May teach you more of man,  
Of moral evil and of good,  
Than all the sages can.

In Emerson's poem he declares, "The forest is my loyal friend," and suggests the wisdom that being receptive to it can bring:

Oblivion here thy wisdom is,  
Thy thrift, the sleep of cares;  
For a proud idleness like this  
Crowns all thy mean affairs.

He also believed that meditation was a source of wisdom. In January 1835, he wrote in his [journal](#) of “the infinity of wisdom that issues from meditation.” But like Goethe, he thought that wisdom is displayed primarily in actions not words. In an essay on ["Demonology,"](#) based on a lecture first given in the late 1830s, he declared, “Before we acquire great power we must acquire wisdom to use it well.” In another essay of his second series, [“Experience,”](#) we read, “What help from thought? Life is not dialectics. . . . Intellectual tasting of life will not supersede muscular activity. . . . To finish the moment, to find the journey's end in every step of the road, to live the greatest number of good hours, is wisdom.”

In one of his final essays, [Natural History of Intellect](#), which was presented as part of a lecture course he gave at Harvard in 1871 but not published in essay form until 1893, more than a decade after his death, he stated:

There are men of great apprehension, discursive minds, who easily entertain ideas, but are not exact, severe with themselves, cannot connect or arrange their thoughts so as effectively to report them. A blending of these two—the intellectual perception of truth and the moral sentiment of right—is wisdom. All thought is practical. Wishing is one thing; will another. Wishing is castle-building; the dreaming about things agreeable to the senses, but to which we have no right. Will is the advance to that which rightly belongs to us, to which the inward magnet ever points, and which we dare to make ours.

In addition to reiterating wisdom’s requirement of the need for a good heart (the appropriate “moral sentiment”) and effective action, Emerson emphasizes here, as he has done before, that wisdom also requires a strong will and self-discipline. Wisdom is like love in that it is maximized by best using all our virtues. Emerson hints at this in an early essay on [“Love,”](#) where he writes of love seeking “virtue and wisdom everywhere, to the end of increasing virtue and wisdom.” And he tells us that “the truly wise . . . in all ages” have told that human love can lead us to divine love.

The quotes presented so far give us some idea of what Emerson thought concerning the nature of wisdom. But, moving on to our second category, we ask who are the “truly wise,” where do they come from, who are some examples? We have already seen that Emerson believed that Goethe was wise. In his poem [“Solution,”](#) from his 1867 collection *May Day and Other Poems*, he wrote:

GOETHE, raised o'er joy and strife,  
Drew the firm lines of Fate and Life  
And brought Olympian wisdom down  
To court and mart, to gown and town.  
Stooping, his finger wrote in clay  
The open secret of to-day.

Emerson also believed other great poets possessed wisdom. In his [“Over-Soul”](#) essay he wrote, “There is, in all great poets, a wisdom of humanity which is superior to any talents they exercise.” And in his essay [“Circles,”](#) also in his 1841 collection, he stated: “Therefore we value the poet. All the argument and all the wisdom is not in the encyclopedia, or the treatise on metaphysics, or the Body of Divinity, but in the sonnet or the play.” In a [speech of the same year](#), he said: “It was always the theory of literature, that the word of a poet was authoritative and final. He was supposed to be the mouth of a divine wisdom.”

As did Johnson and Goethe, who praised Shakespeare greatly in WMA, Emerson thought of the English poet as very wise. In his [essay on him](#) in the same 1850 collection where his essay on Goethe appeared, he wrote: “And all the sweets and all the terrors of human lot lay in his [Shakespeare’s] mind as truly but as softly as the landscape lies on the eye. And the importance of this wisdom of life sinks the form, as of Drama or Epic, out of notice. . . . He has no discoverable egotism: the great he tells greatly; the small, subordinately. He is wise without emphasis or assertion; he is strong, as nature is strong.”

After reading Walt Whitman’s poems in [Leaves of Grass](#) in July 1855, Emerson [wrote to him](#): “I find it the most extraordinary piece of wit and wisdom that America has yet contributed. . . . I find incomparable things said incomparably well, as they must be. I find the courage of treatment, which so delights us, and which large perception only can inspire. I greet you at the beginning of a great career.” Although not as talented a poet as Whitman, Emerson’s friend Thoreau also wrote verse, and Emerson [stated](#) that “there was an excellent wisdom in him.”

Another poet whose wisdom Emerson admired was the medieval Persian poet Hafez, whose mystical Sufism had a special appeal to the American essayist and poet. In his excellent biography of Emerson, Richardson devotes a chapter, “Persia and Poetry,” to the influence of Hafez and other Persian poets on Emerson. Still another chapter is entitled “Ex Oriente Lux,” a Latin term meaning “out of the East, light.” According to [The Concise Oxford Dictionary of World Religions](#) the term reflects the “belief that greater wisdom and deeper spirituality can be found in E.[Eastern] religions than in the materialistic West.” In Richardson’s chapter he mentions that “Emerson also returned to his interest in Indic wisdom during 1844 and 1845,” rereading such “old favorites as Vishnu Purana and the Bhagavad Gita.”

But Emerson did not believe that wisdom was possessed only by poets and certain religious works. Some philosophers like Socrates and Plato he included among the wise. In his essay on [“Old Age,”](#) he referred to “Franklin, Jefferson and Adams, the wise and heroic statesmen.” And in his [“The Over-Soul,”](#) he wrote that “the learned and the studious of thought have no monopoly of wisdom.” In a [Journal entry in 1836:](#) he noted:

Many are the paths that lead to wisdom and honor: nay, every man hath a private lane thereto from his own door. Raphael paints wisdom, Handel sings it, Phidias carves it, Shakespear writes it, Washington enacts it, Columbus sails it, Wren builds it, Watt mechanizes it, Luther preaches it. Let us take Duty this serving angel for a god in disguise. Without telling us why, he bids us ever do this and that irksomeness. What if it should prove that these very injunctions, so galling and unflattering, are precisely the redemptions of time for us? These books thrust into our hands are books selected for us, and the persons who take up our time are picked out to accompany us. I, at least, fully believe that God is in every place, and that, if the mind is excited, it may see him, and in him an infinite wisdom in every object that passes before us.

He later used these examples of wisdom being displayed in different fields in his essay [“Art,”](#) which appeared in in his 1870 collection *Society and Solitude*.

A year later in his [“Natural History of Intellect,”](#) he indicated that every person was capable of being wise, of partaking of universal wisdom, whatever his/her position or station in life—like most writers of his time Emerson usually used the noun “men” to refer to humans of both genders, but he certainly thought that women, as well as men, could be wise, and he had wise



women friends like Margaret Fuller, an admirer and [translator of Goethe](#) with whom he often spoke (see [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#) for more on Emerson and women). “There are two mischievous superstitions, I know not which does the most harm, one, that ‘I am wiser than you,’ and the other that ‘You are wiser than I.’ The truth is that every man is furnished, if he will heed it, with wisdom necessary to steer his own boat,— if he will not look away from his own to see how his neighbor steers his.” Only by drawing on our own “private wisdom” can we be successful, Emerson had told us earlier in [“Considerations by the Way,”](#) which appeared in his 1860 collection, *The Conduct of Life*.

Regarding wisdom frequency (our third category), in [“Wealth,”](#) in that same 1860 book, Emerson wrote: “Wise men are not wise at all hours, and will speak five times from their taste or their humor, to once from their reason.” In [“Clubs,”](#) in his 1870 collection *Society and Solitude*, we read, “Wisdom is like electricity. There is no permanently wise man, but men capable of wisdom, who, being put into certain company, or other favorable conditions, become wise for a short time.”

Emerson had more to say about our fourth category: the characteristics of wise people. In [Nature](#) (1836) he wrote, “Nature never wears a mean appearance. Neither does the wisest man extort her secret, and lose his curiosity by finding out all her perfection. . . . The invariable mark of wisdom is to see the miraculous in the common.” In one of his 1844 essays we read something similar about the “difference between the wise and the unwise: the latter wonders at what is unusual, the wise man wonders [ marvels ] at the usual.” In [an 1841 speech](#) he said:

A man's wisdom is to know that all ends are momentary, that the best end must be superseded by a better. . . . If he listen with insatiable ears, richer and greater wisdom is taught him . . . .

. . . As far as we can trace the natural history of the soul, its health consists in the fulness of its reception. . . .

What is Love, and why is it the chief good, but because it is an overpowering enthusiasm? Never self-possessed or prudent, it is all abandonment. Is it not a certain admirable wisdom, preferable to all other advantages? . . . He who is in love is wise and is becoming wiser, sees newly every time he looks at the object beloved, drawing from it with his eyes and his mind those virtues which it possesses. Therefore if the object be not itself a living and expanding soul, he presently exhausts it. But the love remains in his mind, and the wisdom it brought him; and it craves a new and higher object. And the reason why all men honor love, is because it looks up and not down; aspires and not despairs. . . .

. . . The lovers of goodness have been one class, the students of wisdom another, as if either could exist in any purity without the other. Truth is always holy, holiness always wise.

In his 1841 essay [“Love,”](#) he wrote of love: “The introduction to this felicity is in a private and tender relation of one to one, which is the enchantment of human life; which, like a certain divine rage and enthusiasm, seizes on man at one period, and works a revolution in his mind and body; unites him to his race, pledges him to the domestic and civic relations, carries him with new sympathy into nature, enhances the power of the senses, opens the imagination, adds to his character heroic and sacred attributes, establishes marriage, and gives permanence to human society.”

In still another 1841 statement, the lecture [“Man the Reformer,”](#) he indicated that he valued brotherly as well as romantic love:

But there will dawn ere long on our politics, on our modes of living, a nobler morning . . . in the sentiment of love. This is the one remedy for all ills, the panacea of nature. We must be lovers, and at once the impossible becomes possible. Our age and history, for these thousand years, has not been the history of kindness, but of selfishness. Our distrust is very expensive. The money we spend for courts and prisons is very ill laid out. We make, by distrust, the thief, and burglar, and incendiary, and by our court and jail we keep him so. An acceptance of the sentiment of love throughout Christendom for a season, would bring the felon and the outcast to our side in tears, with the devotion of his faculties to our service. See this wide society of laboring men and women. We allow ourselves to be served by them, we live apart from them, and meet them without a salute in the streets. We do not greet their talents, nor rejoice in their good fortune, nor foster their hopes, nor in the assembly of the people vote for what is dear to them. . . . The state must consider the poor man, and all voices must speak for him.

These quotes suggest three important points about wisdom and perceiving life wisely. First, that wise people perceive more beauty, truth, and goodness in this world, are more awed by it glories, than are the unwise. As the poet Gerald Manley Hopkins [wrote](#), “The world is charged with the grandeur of God”—and “grandeur” (and beauty, truth, and goodness) are certainly there, whatever their source. Secondly, as Franklin and Goethe also believed, the wisest people display love of others—Goethe and Emerson referred to both romantic and brotherly love. Thirdly, wisdom, like love, “looks up and not down; aspires and not despairs.”

In his [Nature book](#) (1836), Emerson states: “A wise writer will feel that the ends of study and composition are best answered by announcing undiscovered regions of thought, and so communicating, through hope, new activity to the torpid spirit.” In [one of the essays](#) in his 1841 collection, he wrote, “We judge of a man's wisdom by his hope.”

Being full of hope, however, did not mean ignoring life's facts and its negatives and ugliness—see, for example, Emerson's [“Fate,”](#) in his 1860 collection of essays, *The Conduct of Life*. He had too much respect for truth to ignore facts. In an essay on [“Character”](#) in his 1844 series, he claimed that “truth is the summit of being: justice is the application of it to affairs.” Eight years earlier in [Nature](#) he stated, “To the wise, therefore, a fact is true poetry, and the most beautiful of fables.” In his essay on [“Montaigne; or, the Skeptic,”](#) which appeared in his 1850 collection along with essays on Goethe, Shakespeare, and other “representative men,” Emerson wrote, “Who shall forbid a wise skepticism, seeing that there is no practical question on which any thing more than an approximate solution can be had?” This humble realization that “approximation” is often as close as we can come in acting wisely is characteristic of wise thinkers and doers.

Related to hopefulness is cheerfulness. In his essay [“Considerations by the Way”](#) he mentioned a “wise woman” and suggested that her words indicated a “fine disposition,” which he thought “more essential than talent.” He added, “You must have the cheerfulness of wisdom.” A little later in the same essay he quoted the Latin motto that Boswell once heard from Johnson: “*aliis laetus, sapiens sibi*” (“Be merry and wise”). Emerson had earlier read Boswell's *Life of Johnson* and greatly enjoyed it. In his essay [“Culture”](#) we read, “A cheerful, intelligent face is the end of culture, and success enough. For it indicates the purpose of Nature and wisdom attained.”

In an essay entitled [“The Comic,”](#) which appeared in Emerson's 1875 volume of essays, *Letters and Social Aims*, but had first been printed more than three decades earlier, he wrote that it “is

the top of wisdom to philosophize yet not appear to do it, and in mirth to do the same with those that are serious and seem in earnest; . . . thus the very jests and merry talk of true philosophers move those that are not altogether insensible.”

A little later in the essay he mentioned religion, science, literature, manners, and politics as examples of where the comic arises from our realization of “the sense of the disproportion” between the ideal and “the bloated nothing which pretends to be it.” He added that “the oldest gibe of literature is the ridicule of false religion. This is the joke of jokes.” He began his last paragraph with these words: “But there is no end to this analysis. We do nothing that is not laughable whenever we quit our spontaneous sentiment. All our plans, managements, houses, poems, if compared with the wisdom and love which man represents, are equally imperfect and ridiculous. But we cannot afford to part with any advantages. We must learn by laughter, as well as by tears and terrors; explore the whole of nature, —the farce and buffoonery in the yard below, as well as the lessons of poets and philosophers upstairs, in the hall, —and get the rest and refreshment of the shaking of the sides.” David S. Reynolds, in his [Beneath The American Renaissance: The Subversive Imagination in the Age of Emerson and Melville declares that](#) “among his contemporaries he [Emerson] was often regarded as a masterful American humorist. (See [here](#) for an essay on “Wisdom, Humor, and Faith.”)

Emerson thus realized that wise people were often cheerful and no strangers to laughter, and that skepticism, irony, and satire could also be employed by the wise. As the poet W. B. Yeats later wrote, “Wisdom is a butterfly / And not a gloomy bird of prey.” Yet, Emerson acknowledged at the end of the essay above that “the comic also has its own speedy limits,” and that it could “quickly becomes intemperate.” And temperance and prudence were additional traits that Emerson believed a wise person should possess. In his essay “[Prudence](#)” he wrote that “no gifts can raise [or make up for] intemperance.” As his young friend and author of *Little Women*, Louisa May Alcott, [indicated](#) about him, he was “in favor of temperance in all things.”

Another wisdom value that Emerson believed wise people should possess is empathy, though he never wrote an essay about it. In his essay “[History](#),” however, he did indicate how imaginatively placing ourselves in the position of others helps us to understand them better. “There is one mind common to all individual men. Every man is an inlet to the same and to all of the same. . . . What Plato has thought, he may think; what a saint has felt, he may feel; what at any time has be-fallen any man, he can understand. Who hath access to this universal mind is a party to all that is or can be done, for this is the only and sovereign agent. . . . We as we read must become Greeks, Romans, Turks, priest and king, martyr and executioner, must fasten these images to some reality in our secret experience, or we shall learn nothing rightly.”

In one of his *Conduct of Life* essays (1860), “[Considerations by the Way](#),” he suggests that empathy for the poor can be combined with experience to make us wiser. “He who is to be wise for many, must not be protected. He must know the huts where poor men lie, and the chores which poor men do. The first-class minds, Aesop, Socrates, Cervantes, Shakspeare, Franklin, had the poor man's feeling and mortification.” From experiencing some hardships, one may come out of the experience “with broader wisdom and manly power.” Earlier he stated that “the wise workman will not regret the poverty or the solitude which brought out his working talents.” And he concluded that “bad times have a scientific value. These are occasions a good learner would not miss.”

Although experience and age can bring wisdom, as Emerson hints in his essay [“Old Age”](#)—“America is the country of young men, and too full of work hitherto for leisure and tranquillity; yet we have had robust centenarians, and examples of dignity and wisdom”—the old are also often unwise. In [“Politics,”](#) in his 1844 collection, he laments that “Society always consists, in greatest part, of young and foolish persons. The old, who have seen through the hypocrisy of courts and statesmen, die, and leave no wisdom to their sons. They believe their own newspaper, as their fathers did at their age.”

How wise people relate to others in society and politics is the final category we shall consider in regard to Emerson’s thoughts on wisdom. In his 1841 essay collection, there is one on [“Friendship,”](#) where we read:

I awoke this morning with devout thanksgiving for my friends, the old and the new. Shall I not call God the Beautiful, who daily showeth himself so to me in his gifts? I chide society, I embrace solitude, and yet I am not so ungrateful as not to see the wise, the lovely, and the noble-minded, as from time to time they pass my gate. Who hears me, who understands me, becomes mine,—a possession for all time. Nor is nature so poor but she gives me this joy several times, and thus we weave social threads of our own, a new web of relations; and, as many thoughts in succession substantiate themselves, we shall by and by stand in a new world of our own creation, and no longer strangers and pilgrims in a traditionary globe. My friends have come to me unsought. The great God gave them to me.

Despite his appreciation for solitude, Emerson was no recluse. He was the third of six children, all sons, in his family, and the brothers influenced each other and often corresponded when separated. Older brother William, for example, wrote to Ralph Waldo about his experiences studying theology in Germany, where he also had an opportunity to meet and talk with Goethe before he died. And Emerson married twice—his first wife, Ellen, died of tuberculosis in 1831 at age 19—and, with his second wife, Lidian, had four children, one of whom (Waldo) died as a child. In addition, his aunt [Mary Moody Emerson](#) had a great molding influence on him during his youth. And he had numerous friends, male and female, old and young, in the USA and abroad, including Henry Thoreau (1817-1862). The young man briefly lived in the Emerson household and wrote his most famous work, *Walden* (1854), about his experience of over two years (1845-47) on property at Walden Pond owned by Emerson—Thoreau himself built the cabin where he lived alone. Emerson also devoted an [essay](#) and a [poem](#) to friendship.

He believed that a wise person should share his wisdom with other people and that they could benefit greatly from such contact. In [“Self-Reliance”](#) he wrote: “The soul is no traveler; the wise man stays at home, and when his necessities, his duties, on any occasion call him from his house, or into foreign lands, he is at home still and shall make men sensible by the expression of his countenance that he goes, the missionary of wisdom and virtue, and visits cities and men like a sovereign and not like an interloper or a valet.” In an 1840s poem, [“Woodnotes I,”](#) he conveyed a similar thought:

Go where he will, the wise man is at home,  
His hearth the earth,—his hall the azure dome;  
Where his clear spirit leads him, there's his road,  
By God's own light illumined and foreshadowed.

In his introductory essay, "[Uses of Great Men](#)," in his 1850 collection *Representative Men*, we read, "If a wise man should appear in our village, he would create, in those who conversed with him, a new consciousness of wealth, by opening their eyes to unobserved advantages; he would establish a sense of immovable equality, calm us with assurances that we could not be cheated; as every one would discern the checks and guarantees of condition." In a later essay, "[Considerations by the Way](#)" Emerson wrote, "Ask what is best in our experience, and we shall say, a few pieces of plain-dealing with wise people. . . . We lay up money; we make our roof tight, and our clothing sufficient; but who provides wisely that he shall not be wanting in the best property of all,— friends? . . . Life would be twice or ten times life, if spent with wise and fruitful companions."

In [speaking of education](#), he said: "Is it not manifest that our academic institutions should have a wider scope; that they should not be timid and keep the ruts of the last generation, but that wise men thinking for themselves and heartily seeking the good of mankind, and counting the cost of innovation, should dare to arouse the young to a just and heroic life; that the moral nature should be addressed in the school-room, and children should be treated as the high-born candidates of truth and virtue?"

In "[Politics](#)" he states: "the less government we have, the better, —the fewer laws, and the less confided power. The antidote to this abuse of formal Government, is, the influence of private character, the growth of the Individual; . . . the appearance of the wise man, of whom the existing government, is, it must be owned, but a shabby imitation." He also writes: "The idea, after which each community is aiming to make and mend its law, is, the will of the wise man"; "to educate the wise man, the State exists"; "according to the order of nature, which is quite superior to our will, it stands thus; there will always be a government of force, where men are selfish; and when they are pure enough to abjure the code of force, they will be wise enough to see how these public ends of the post-office, of the highway, of commerce, and the exchange of property, of museums and libraries, of institutions of art and science, can be answered." He also stated that "the wise: know that foolish legislation is a rope of sand." In "[Civilization](#)" he writes that "the skilful combinations of civil government . . . require wisdom and conduct in the rulers, and in their result delight the imagination."

Although some quotes taken out of context make Emerson sound like a modern-day Tea-Party Republican railing against big government, such isolated quotes are misleading. Daniel Aaron, in [Men of Good Hope: A Story Of American Progressives](#) (1951), declares that "Emerson was the real prophet of the progressive tradition," and that what Emerson opposed was not government itself but *bad* government. And he cites Emerson's words (similar to what he said in an 1860 journal entry) that government "was set up for the protection and comfort of all good citizens." And like most later Progressives, Emerson did not wish to overthrow or replace capitalism, but only modify it so that it served the public good.

Although, as opposed to the later Progressives, Emerson tended to emphasize the need for self-improvement, more than progressive government steps, he was not opposed to the latter. The lecture "[The Young American](#)," which Emerson gave in 1844, makes clear his belief that good government should help people: "In consequence of the revolution in the state of society wrought by trade, Government in our times is beginning to wear a clumsy and cumbrous appearance. We



have already seen our way to shorter methods. The time is full of good signs. Some of them shall ripen to fruit. All this beneficent socialism is a friendly omen, and the swelling cry of voices for the education of the people, indicates that Government has other offices than those of banker and executioner.” Emerson then went on to mention reform movements in Europe and the establishment of experimental utopian communities in the United States—he was very familiar with the establishment and operation of one of them, Brook Farm, which existed from 1841 to 1847. These communities, he added,

proceeded from a variety of motives, from an impatience of many usages in common life, from a wish for greater freedom than the manners and opinions of society permitted, but in great part from a feeling that the true offices of the State, the State had let fall to the ground; that in the scramble of parties for the public purse, the main duties of government were omitted, — the duty to instruct the ignorant, to supply the poor with work and with good guidance. These communists [i.e., those living in communes] preferred the agricultural life as the most favorable condition for human culture; but they thought that the farm, as we manage it, did not satisfy the right ambition of man. The farmer after sacrificing pleasure, taste, freedom, thought, love, to his work, turns out often a bankrupt, like the merchant. This result might well seem astounding. All this drudgery, from cockcrow to starlight, for all these years, to end in mortgages and the auctioneer's flag, and removing from bad to worse. . . . On one side, is agricultural chemistry, coolly exposing the nonsense of our spendthrift agriculture . . . and, on the other, the farmer, not only eager for the information, but with bad crops and in debt and bankruptcy, for want of it. Here are Etzlers and mechanical projectors . . . and, on the other side, a multitude of poor men and women seeking work, and who cannot find enough to pay their board. The science is confident, and surely the poverty is real. If any means could be found to bring these two together! . . .

This is the value of the Communities; not what they have done, but the revolution which they indicate as on the way. Yes, Government must educate the poor man. Look across the country from any hill-side around us, and the landscape seems to crave Government. The actual differences of men must be acknowledged, and met with love and wisdom.

The English thinker Raymond Williams in his book [\*Culture and Society, 1780-1950\*](#) emphasized that “the development of the idea of culture has, throughout, been a criticism of what has been called the bourgeois idea of society.” He gave examples of this from the thinking of Coleridge and Carlyle, two English writers whom Emerson knew and who influenced him. In his own essay “[Culture](#)” he wrote, “Whilst all the world is in pursuit of power, and of wealth as a means of power, culture corrects the theory of success.”

Emerson also held other progressive political views. As his biographer Richardson observes, they encompassed “a politics of social liberalism, abolitionism, women’s suffrage, American Indian rights, opposition to the Mexican War, and civil disobedience when government was wrong.” Sometime after the Civil War, Emerson [wrote](#): “Well, now in this country we are suffering much and fearing more from the abuse of the ballot and from fraudulent and purchased votes. And now, at the moment when committees are investigating and reporting the election frauds, woman asks for her vote. It is the remedy at the hour of need. She is to purify and civilize the voting, as she has the schools, the hospitals and the drawing-rooms.”

In 1838 he sent a [letter](#) to U. S. President Martin Van Buren, which was “A Protest against the Removal of the Cherokee Indians from the State of Georgia.” As early as 1844, he gave a [strong anti-slavery speech](#). In 1851, he strongly [criticized](#) the Fugitive Slave Act, which allowed escaped slaves to be arrested and brought back to their slaveowners, and he encouraged



Massachusetts to disobey the law. After John Brown was hanged for his abolitionist raid at Harper's Ferry in 1859, Emerson [stated](#) early the next year:

I am not a little surprised at the easy effrontery with which political gentlemen, in and out of Congress, take it upon them to say that there are not a thousand men in the North who sympathize with John Brown. It would be far safer and nearer the truth to say that all people, in proportion to their sensibility and self-respect, sympathize with him. For it is impossible to see courage, and disinterestedness, and the love that casts out fear, without sympathy. All women are drawn to him by their predominance of sentiment. All gentlemen, of course, are on his side. I do not mean by "gentlemen," people of scented hair and perfumed handkerchiefs, but men of gentle blood and generosity, "fulfilled with all nobleness." . . . For what is the oath of gentle blood and knighthood? What but to protect the weak and lowly against the strong oppressor?

Nothing is more absurd than to complain of this sympathy, or to complain of a party of men united in opposition to slavery. As well complain of gravity, or the ebb of the tide. Who makes the abolitionist? The slave-holder. The sentiment of mercy is the natural recoil which the laws of the universe provide to protect man-kind from destruction by savage passions. And our blind statesmen go up and down, with committees of vigilance and safety, hunting for the origin of this new heresy. They will need a very vigilant committee indeed to find its birthplace, and a very strong force to root it out. For the arch-abolitionist, older than Brown, and older than the Shenandoah Mountains, is Love, whose other name is Justice, which was before . . . before slavery, and will be after it.'

Emerson's criticism of slavery and strong support of the North during the Civil War help explain why in the late nineteenth century and beyond his writings were much less popular in the South than in other regions of the country. But in the rest of the USA, and to a lesser extent abroad, his works continued to be read long after his death.

Historian Paul Johnson [writes](#) that "Emerson was by the end of the 1870s a national hero and mentor." He had a particularly strong influence on two young men who were close friends and whom he knew personally, the future philosopher William James and the future Supreme Court Justice (1902-1932) Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr. (see, e.g., [here](#) and [here](#)). This influence continued long after the death of Emerson. At age ninety, Holmes said "that the only firebrand of his youth that burned to him as brightly as ever was Emerson." The Progressive Jane Addams "in youth, had worshiped Emerson" (see [here](#) for source of both quotes). The naturalist and founder of the Sierra Club, John Muir, thought highly of Emerson's writings and met with him when Emerson visited Yosemite (not yet a national park) in 1871.

In Bloom's treatment of Emerson (see above), he mentions the strong effect he had on future poets such as Whitman, Robert Frost, Wallace Stevens, and Hart Crane. He especially influenced Frost, who once wrote that a poem "begins in delight and ends in wisdom." [My own research](#) indicates that he and Whitman were also among poet Carl Sandburg's youthful favorites, and that in the final decade of his long life (d. 1967) he often still read their works.

Bloom [notes](#) that in the middle of the twentieth century, Emerson's popularity declined, "but was revived in the mid-1960s and is again what he was in his own time, and directly after, the dominant sage of the American imagination." Bloom sums up Emerson as follows: "[He] is closer to us than ever on his 200th birthday [2003]. In America, we continue to have Emersonians of the left (the post-pragmatist Richard Rorty) and of the right (a swarm of libertarian Republicans, who exalt President Bush the second). The Emersonian vision of self-reliance inspired both the humane philosopher, John Dewey, and the first [anti-Semitic] Henry Ford . . . . Emerson remains the central figure in American culture and informs our politics, as well as our unofficial religion, which I regard as more Emersonian than Christian."

Although paying less attention to Emerson's influence abroad, Bloom does mention it in regard to Nietzsche and dramatist Oscar Wilde. But even more noteworthy is what the English poet and critic Matthew Arnold had to say about the recently deceased Emerson in an 1883 lecture in Boston, which later appeared in his [\*Discourses in America\*](#).

We have not in Emerson a great poet, a great writer, a great philosophy-maker. His relation to us is not that of one of those personages; yet it is a relation of, I think, even superior importance. . . . He is the friend and aider of those who would live in the spirit. . . .

Yes, truly, his insight is admirable; his truth is precious. Yet the secret of his effect is not even in these; it is in his temper. It is in the hopeful serene, beautiful temper wherewith these, in Emerson, are indissolubly joined; in which they work, and have their being. He says himself: "We, judge of a man's wisdom by his hope." . . . If this be so, how wise is Emerson! for never had man such a sense of the inexhaustibleness of nature, and such hope. It was the ground of his being; it never failed him. . . . In his old age, with friends dying and life failing, his tone of cheerful, forward-looking hope is still the same. . . .

One can scarcely overrate the importance of thus holding fast to happiness and hope. It gives to Emerson's work an invaluable virtue. . . . Emerson's *Essays* are, I think, the most important work done in [English] prose. . . .

. . . Happiness and eternal hope . . . that was Emerson's gospel.

Toward the end of his remarks, Arnold linked Emerson with Benjamin Franklin and quoted some lines of Dr. Oliver Wendell Holmes, the father of the later Supreme Court Justice:

Where in the realm of thought, whose air is song,  
Does he, the Buddha of the West, belong ?  
He seems a winged Franklin, sweetly wise.  
Born to unlock the secret of the skies.

Arnold went on to say that the two men were the "most distinctively and honourably American" of our writers . . . "the most original and the most valuable. Wise men everywhere know that we must keep up our courage and hope. . . . Franklin and Emerson maintained theirs with a convincing ease, an inspiring joy."

### **Commonalities from Franklin to Emerson**

Although the main concern of this essay has been to demonstrate how four prominent men valued wisdom, it is appropriate here to summarize the commonalities of their views of it. All four believed in some form of divine wisdom, as Franklin said in his *Autobiography*, "conceiving God to be the fountain of wisdom." But their view of the divine differed with Goethe and Emerson leaning toward a more pantheistic interpretation, while Franklin was a Deist and Johnson a more conventional Protestant (Anglican). Three of the four were throughout most of their adulthood far removed from any religious dogmatism and tolerant of a wide variety of different religious approaches, both Christian and non-Christian. And, according to one [source](#), the fourth, the Anglican Johnson, "was remarkable, privately, for his tolerance; maintaining that the differences between Christian sects (Protestants and Roman Catholics, for example) were trivial, and due primarily to political rather than religious differences."

All four men stressed that true wisdom was best displayed by some form of love. This is perhaps less clear in Johnson than the other three, but at the end of *Rasselas*, after Rasselas and his sister have spent their time seeking wisdom, he “desired a little kingdom in which he might administer justice,” and she wished to “divide her time between the acquisition and communication of wisdom,” and raising up “for the next age models of prudence and patterns of piety.”

We have seen how both Johnson and Emerson linked being wise with being joyful. And Isaacson lists humor as one of Franklin’s “seven great virtues.” Bloom writes of Goethe’s “joyful wisdom,” and a book on Goethe is entitled [“Dare to Be Happy!”: A Study of Goethe's Ethics](#). Although Johnson advocated a cheerful wisdom, he was by nature more pessimistic than the other three, and his wisdom thinking reflects it.

Like Goethe and Emerson, however, Johnson greatly valued Shakespeare’s wisdom (see [here](#) for an excellent treatment of it.) Only Franklin, despite his long stays in London, appears to have been immune to the great poet’s influence—neither Franklin’s *Autobiography* nor the chief biographies of him indicate any Franklin fondness for Shakespeare.

### Wisdom in the Post-Emerson Years

Despite all of Emerson’s influence, the emphasis on wisdom we see in his works gradually dissipated in those who came after him. At the turn of the century two other Americans, famed for both their writing and lecturing, William James and Mark Twain, displayed some concern for it, but to a much lesser degree than did Emerson. About James, Baltes (see above) writes: “his references to wisdom were very rare, and when present, they were more accidental than systematic.” The same could be said for Twain, who once stated that “laughter without a tinge of philosophy is but a sneeze of humor. Genuine humor is replete with wisdom.” Like Emerson, James, and Twain, the poet Sandburg often made public appearances dispensing wit and wisdom, though in Sandburg’s case he usually brought his guitar along and sang folk songs, as well as reciting his poems (see [here](#) for more on Sandburg’s wisdom). But as with James and Twain, he seldom spoke of wisdom directly.

Influenced by both Goethe and Schopenhauer, as well as Emerson, the German philosopher Frederick Nietzsche was quite interested in wisdom, as a quick glance through [The Portable Nietzsche](#) will indicate. In his book [Gay Science](#) (entitled *Joyful Wisdom* in another translation) he expressed his hope for a future when “laughter will then have formed an alliance with wisdom.” But “for the present,” he lamented, “we still live in the age of tragedy, the age of moralities and religions.” Despite his hope for “joyful wisdom,” Nietzsche lacked the serene and optimistic temperament of Goethe and Emerson.

The Belgium dramatist Maurice Maeterlinck, strongly influenced by the writings of Schopenhauer addressed the topic of wisdom in his short book [Wisdom and Destiny](#) (1898), but he differed from Schopenhauer in proclaiming that “wisdom and love are one” and that “the man is not wise whose reason has not yet been taught to obey the first signal of love.” In Russia during the 1890s, Vladimir Soloviev (see above) and Leo Tolstoy both sought wisdom in different ways—Tolstoy sought wisdom from many sources including at least some of the

writings of Goethe, Emerson, Schopenhauer, and world religions, East and West. In India, [Rabindranath Tagore](#) (1861-1941), despite the Western influences on him and his travels in Europe and the Americas, continued to seek wisdom in a manner more akin to Asian sages than to Western philosophers.

By 1900, however, the Western world was being more and more inundated with new scientific and technological developments and with professionals and specialists who eschewed the kind of broad humanistic concerns that characterized thinkers like Goethe and Emerson. In 1925, mathematician and philosopher Alfred North Whitehead stated in his [Science and the Modern World](#):

Another great fact confronting the modern world is the discovery of the method of training professionals, who specialise in particular regions of thought and thereby progressively add to the sum of knowledge within their respective limitations of subject. . . . But the point is the restraint of serious thought within a groove. The remainder of life is treated superficially, with the imperfect categories of thought derived from one profession. The dangers arising from this aspect of professionalism are great, particularly in our democratic societies. The directive force of reason is weakened. The leading intellects lack balance. They see this set of circumstances, or that set; but not both sets together. The task of co-ordination is left to those who lack either the force or the character to succeed in some definite career. In short, the specialised functions of the community are performed better and more progressively, but the generalised direction lacks vision. The progressiveness in detail only adds to the danger produced by the feebleness of co-ordination. We are left with no expansion of wisdom and with greater need of it. Wisdom is the fruit of a balanced development. It is this balanced growth of individuality which it should be the aim of education to secure. The most useful discoveries for the immediate future would concern the furtherance of this aim without detriment to the necessary intellectual professionalism.

In 1930 the Spaniard José Ortega y Gasset said much the same thing in his *The Revolt of the Masses*. It included a chapter on “The Barbarism of ‘Specialisation,’” in which he wrote of the specialist, “He is not learned, for he is formally ignorant of all that does not enter into his speciality.” It was later in that same decade that Huizinga and Eliot (see above) bemoaned, in Eliot’s words, “the wisdom we have lost in knowledge.” In the 1970s Schumacher (see above) echoed their lament, and at present Nicholas Maxwell [makes a similar point](#):

We need a revolution in the aims and methods of academic inquiry, so that the basic aim becomes to promote wisdom by rational means, instead of just to acquire knowledge.

Acquiring scientific knowledge dissociated from a more basic concern for wisdom leads, via technology and industry, to an enormous increase in the power to act.

This has led to much that is good, but also to much that is harmful. All our modern global crises are the outcome of science without wisdom. If we are to avoid in this century the horrors of the last one—wars, death camps, dictatorships, poverty, environmental damage—we urgently need to learn how to acquire more wisdom, which in turn means that our institutions of learning become devoted to that end.

In his [Wisdom as Orchestration of Mind and Virtue](#), while tracing the decline of nineteenth- and twentieth-century interest in wisdom as a central concept, Baltes did mention recent studies dealing with wisdom in various fields, especially psychology. While modern developments such as the emphasis on science, technology, and specialization may not be conducive to the broad wisdom-type concerns of thinkers like Goethe and Emerson, the emphasis on wisdom found in such places as [The Wisdom Page](#) indicate that the quest for wisdom displayed by these two men is far from dead.

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<sup>1</sup> Quotes from most works can usually be found within their proper context by using the link to each work and then using the find or search function within each one.

<sup>2</sup> Various editions of Goethe's works exist. I have found the [Delphi Works of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe](#) (Kindle ed.) convenient. It contains M&R, WMA, WMJ, both parts of *Faust*, plus other works including some of his poems, and some works about him such as Emerson's essay "Goethe the Writer." The [Internet Archive](#) and [Project Gutenberg](#) also contain numerous downloadable editions of Goethe's works.

<sup>3</sup> Bell's essays on WMA and WMJ can be found as two chapters in his *Open Secrets: Literature, Education, and Authority from J-J. Rousseau to J. M. Coetzee* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 87-129. The final two quotes are from pp. 124, 125. The few quotes I have taken directly from WMA and WMJ are from the Kindle edition of Goethe's works mentioned in note 2.

<sup>4</sup> Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Faust Part One*, trans. Bayard Taylor; rev. and ed. Stuart Atkins (New York: Collier Books, 1962), 59.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

<sup>6</sup> Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Faust Part Two*, trans. Bayard Taylor; rev. and ed. Stuart Atkins (New York: Collier Books, 1962), 220.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 237.

<sup>8</sup> Some of Emerson's essays found at <http://rwe.org/>, the main source of essays cited here, begin with one of his poems, but they did not accompany most of the essays in some of the earlier editions available.