



SCIENCE & YOU *Visible creation showing the invisible God*

Wise Man?

We may be giving ourselves too much credit.

In 1735, the Swiss botanist Carl Linnaeus proposed an ingenious, shorthand way to name plants using one Latin word to designate the “genus” group and another to identify a particular “species” within that genus. Used together, the terms make up the unique “binomial” name of each plant species. The system has since been expanded to include bacteria, animals, and human beings. The two-word designation for humans is *Homo sapiens*, which literally means wise or knowing man. But have we named ourselves wisely? Surely we know a lot of information and we are intelligent, but is intelligence the same as wisdom?

The Eastern Gray Squirrel (*Sciurus carolinensis*) cannot pass a standard intelligence test but is often used as an object lesson of “wise” behavior because it stockpiles nuts in advance of winter when its food becomes scarce. The American Black Bear (*Ursus americanus*) is not a Rhodes Scholar, but it wisely prepares for winter by eating voraciously in the summer and fall, accumulating enough fat to sustain itself during its long winter hibernation. The female black bear breeds in the spring but delays development of the embryo until after beginning her winter hibernation, by which time she has put on enough fat to sustain both herself and her growing embryo.

To some extent wisdom includes the ability to act in the present to preserve the future good. But, like the examples above, much of animal behavior is unlearned and instinctive. It is this pre-programmed behavior we view as “wise.” By contrast, human beings, though highly intelligent, are not pre-programmed and so must learn wisdom by experience, insight, reflection, or even

by revelation. One writer wryly observed that wisdom and good judgment come from experience, but experience comes from poor judgment. One might reasonably conclude from this that animals are wise but unintelligent; whereas, humans are intelligent but often unwise.

So, does “Wise Man” live up to the name? Do we use our intelligence wisely by planning now to supply future needs? Unfortunately, the answer seems to be no. Examples of intelligent people making unwise decisions abound. A recent *Frontline* episode suggested that most people do not plan for retirement, even though they know there is a time coming when they will be unable to work. Far more tragically, most people do not plan for their spiritual futures either. Choosing to ignore rather than accept

God’s present offer of salvation through Jesus Christ is the very antithesis of wisdom. It is foolishness on an eternal scale.

Bruce Sterling, imagining the future extinction of “Wise Man” in the year 2380 and writing as a non-human news reporter in the journal *Nature*, suggests the following epitaph on the fictional passing of *Homo sapiens*: “They were very, very curious but not at all far-sighted.”¹ Thankfully, this needn’t describe believers. As Jim Elliot, the martyred missionary to the Auca Indians, wisely wrote in his diary, “He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain that which he cannot lose.”

—MICHAEL G. WINDHEUSER, PH.D.

1 B. Sterling, “Homo sapiens declared extinct,” *Nature*, vol. 402, 1999, 125.

Surely we know a lot of information and we are intelligent, but is intelligence the same as wisdom?

