Wisdom, (Arthur) John Terence Dibben (1904–1993), philosopher, was born on 12 September 1904 at 69A Davies Road, Leyton, Essex, the youngest of the six children of Henry John William Cridland Wisdom (1864–1937), a Church of England clergyman, and his wife, Edith Susan, née Dibben. In 1909, after four years in parishes in Devon and Cornwall, the family settled in the rectory of Hardest, Bury St Edmunds. John Wisdom, as he was known, was educated at Aldeburgh Lodge School and, briefly, at Monkton Combe School, Somerset. In 1921 he became a member of Fitzwilliam House, Cambridge. At Cambridge he read moral sciences and attended lectures by G. E. Moore, C. D. Broad, and J. M. E. McTaggart. After graduating BA in 1924 he was employed by the National Institute of Industrial Psychology. In 1929 he was appointed lecturer at the University of St Andrews, in the department of logic and metaphysics under G. F. Stout.

Wisdom’s early publications, from 1931 to 1934, established his reputation as an exponent of the theory of philosophical analysis associated with Russell, Moore, and Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus*. *Problems of Mind and Matter* (1934) offers an introduction to the method of analysis, with critical discussions of Moore, Broad, and Stout. In 1934 Wisdom was appointed lecturer in moral sciences at Cambridge, leading to a fellowship at Trinity College. Wittgenstein had been at Trinity since 1929. Having rejected the logical atomism of *Tractatus*, he was developing the subtle critique of both traditional metaphysics and current analytic philosophy that occupied his later years. Wisdom was impressed, and soon papers appeared with acknowledgements to Wittgenstein. Yet even the earliest signalled a difference between them. Wittgenstein, Wisdom wrote, ‘too much represents [metaphysical theories] as merely symptoms of linguistic confusion. I wish to represent them as also symptoms of linguistic penetration’ (Philosophical perplexity, *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 16, 1936; repr. in J. Wisdom, *Philosophy and Psycho-Analysis*, 1953). By ‘linguistic penetration’ Wisdom meant insight into the types of statement or question, into their roles and inter-relations. Previously he had seen the aim of
philosophy as comprehensive 'perfect ostentation', complete analysis of all other statements or facts into the ultimate types of statement or fact. Now he saw reductive analyses as being, if interesting, false—assimilating types of statement or question in ways that ignore irreducible differences but nevertheless embody insight, not otherwise easily conveyed, into logical and epistemological relations. Conversely, metaphysical realism, embracing 'the idiosyncrasy platitude' that 'everything is what it is, and not another thing', correctly distinguishes different kinds of question, but characteristically responds with unhelpful multiplication of 'ultimate' types of proposition or entity or knowledge. Scepticism figures in a three-way dialectic, typically springing from metaphysical realism, but thereby motivating reductive analyses. The model covers 'most or all metaphysical conflict' (Metaphysics and verification, Mind, 47, 1938; repr. in J. Wisdom, Philosophy and Psycho-Analysis, 1953), and its application to the philosophy of mind is pursued at length in another series of articles in Mind, 'Other minds' (1940–43; repr. as Other Minds, 1952).

On 8 January 1929 Wisdom married a South African singer, Molly Iverson (b. 1903/4), who gave up a promising career as a soprano at Sadler's Wells. A son, Thomas, was born in 1932. During the first years of the Second World War, while his wife and son moved to Canada, Wisdom lived largely in London. The marriage did not survive the separation. On 27 July 1950 Wisdom married Pamela Elspeth Strain (1914/15–1989), a painter.

Wisdom's characterizations of philosophical truth and insight increasingly reflected his interest in literature, art, religious belief, and psychoanalysis (of which he had personal experience). In argument anticipating later ethical realism, he links the question of the nature of truth and insight in each of these areas with the question of the nature of value and of the distinction between reasonable and unreasonable attitudes or feelings towards things and people. Such truths, like those of philosophy, are elusive and hard-won. Whereas Wittgenstein offers a demystifying therapy aimed at dissolving philosophical problems, if not removing the desire to philosophize, Wisdom saw a similarity between metaphysics and psychoanalysis in the very need to ask questions and to take seriously even shocking or paradoxical answers, the reasons for them as well as the objections to them, as an essential route to understanding and insight. Debate can be cut too short, as well as go on too long.

These analogies fall within a more general consideration of judgement and reasoning that is a priori in the sense that it may take place, as Wisdom puts it, after all the facts are in. Such reflective assessment involves neither strict deduction nor inductive inference to some further fact, but can issue in a revelatory characterization of what was already otherwise known. Examples range from sober argument between lawyers as to whether such and such behaviour constitutes negligence to the paradoxes by which poets can give a new view of the familiar. Fundamental in such argument is the appeal to analogies and disanalogies between
unproblematic cases and the case in question. Indeed, an analogy can express or stimulate insight by itself, without a determinate judgement. (In one example a woman sees what is wrong with a hat when her friend murmurs, 'The Taj Mahal'.) Both traditional and analytic philosophy have tended to assume that appeal to examples and analogy ('the case-by-case procedure', or 'mother's method') is indirect appeal to an unstated principle or definition ('father's method'). Wisdom's radical claim is that the reverse is true. What Mill asserts of inductive reasoning, that it is always ultimately from particular to particular, Wisdom asserts of all reasoning. The peculiarity of a priori reasoning is that the relevant particulars are not necessarily actual. General principles simply order or 'cut a path through' the possible cases. Yet, so far from disparaging them, Wisdom allows that general principles may have force even in the face of counter-examples. Since assessing the force of an analogy or general consideration (or counter-example) always calls for judgement, there is room for rational disagreement, not only about borderline cases, when good reasons exist on both sides, but with respect to extravagant yet supportable and insightful assertions (see especially J. Wisdom, *Proof and Explanation: the Virginia Lectures*, ed. S. Barker, 1991).

Wisdom followed Wittgenstein as professor of philosophy in 1952. His lively, socratic, humorously rhetorical lectures entertained many and, by their own account, deeply engaged some, including some who later achieved eminence outside academic life. His own style was hardly academic. His direct, sociable, and unconventional personality endeared him to students, to whom he showed great personal kindness. His wiry figure, his gait, and the cut of his clothes, as well, not infrequently, as his conversation and philosophical examples, reflected his lifelong passion for everything to do with horses. He rode to hounds, and would take students to race meetings, or invite them to help exercise his two hunters. In 1968 he resigned his Cambridge chair to become distinguished professor at the University of Oregon. On retirement in 1972 he moved with Pamela to 154 Stanley Road, Cambridge, an appropriately unpretentious house next to common land for his horse. In 1978 he was elected honorary fellow of Fitzwilliam College. He died in the Hope Residential and Nursing Care Home, Brooklands Avenue, Cambridge, on 9 December 1993, four years after Pamela.

In 1967 Wisdom was accorded a significantly longer article in *Macmillan's Encyclopedia of Philosophy* than A. J. Ayer, yet is nowhere mentioned in *The Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy* of 1998, as if airbrushed out of the history of analytic philosophy. A decline in reputation probably began when Wittgenstein's writings were posthumously published and attention shifted from interpreter to oracle. At the same time 'Oxford philosophy' was getting into its stride, influenced by Wittgenstein but with ambitions to replace philosophical confusion with precision of one kind or another, and with little respect for Wisdom's unorthodox style and penchant for the provocative and paradoxical. When that movement lost steam, argument took other directions. Yet Wittgenstein's thoughts about meaning and metaphysics have remained important to many analytic
philosophers. Wisdom's philosophy supplies arguably the most constructive development of some of those thoughts to date, avoiding their tendency towards a purely naturalistic vision of language in favour of a view of it, difficult to extract from Wittgenstein's own reflections, as even in its intrinsic unruliness (and in its metaphysical employment) essentially the tool of human rationality. One day semantic theory will have to come to terms with that view, whether or not John Wisdom is remembered for having expounded it.

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