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WISDOM

Abstract: What is it that makes someone wise, or one person wiser than another? I argue that wisdom consists in knowledge of how to live well, and that this knowledge of how to live well is constituted by various further kinds of knowledge. One concern for this view is that knowledge is not needed for wisdom but rather some state short of knowledge, such as having rational or justified beliefs about various topics. Another concern is that the emphasis on knowing how to live well fails to do justice to the ancient tradition of "theoretical wisdom." I try to address both of these concerns in the process of filling out the account.

Keywords: wisdom, epistemology, well-being

Some people are wise in domain-specific ways. For instance, someone could be a wise gardener, or a wise stock analyst, or a wise mechanic. But there also seem to be people who are wise in a more general sense. Thus it is no paradox to say of someone that while he might be a wise stock analyst he is not wise "overall"—where this latter description is supposed to pick out a more pervasive, more holistic property of a person.

But what does it mean to be wise overall or in general? Or perhaps better, what is it that makes one person wiser than another in this general sense? In this paper I will argue that wisdom in this more general sense is constituted by knowledge of how to live well, and that one person is wiser than another (in part) to the extent that she has more of this knowledge. Although this view has its defenders,[1] it goes against current trends in epistemology in a few different ways. First, in contrast to Sharon Ryan's recent arguments [Ryan 2012; 2013], it insists that what is required for wisdom is indeed *knowledge* of how to live well, as opposed to some epistemic standing short of knowledge, such as having rational (though perhaps mistaken) beliefs about how to live well. Second, and against not just recent claims by Dennis Whitcomb [2011] and Jason Baehr [2014; *ms.*] but a long tradition dating back to Aristotle, I will argue that there is no independent kind of wisdom—"theoretical wisdom"—that can be understood apart from its connection to knowing how to live well. Put another way, I reject

[1] See, e.g., Nozick [1989], Garrett [1996], and Kupperman [2005].

the ancient tradition that there are two distinct kinds of wisdom, practical and theoretical, and that it is possible to give self-contained accounts of each. If I am right, the sort of theoretical knowledge that is sometimes classified as "wisdom" only qualifies as such if it is appropriately connected to knowing how to live well.

But what does it mean, exactly, to say that wisdom requires knowledge of how to live well? What sort of knowledge is that? On my view knowledge of how to live well is a complex state that can be broken down into various components. In particular, knowing how to live well is constituted by the following further types of knowledge, all of which, I believe, are individually necessary for wisdom:

1. Knowledge of what is good or important for well-being.
2. Knowledge of one's standing relative to what is good or important for well-being.
3. Knowledge of a strategy for obtaining what is good or important for well-being.

Most of this paper will be dedicated to fleshing out and elaborating these further sorts of knowledge. And one thing I will argue is that these conditions not only shed light on the epistemology of wisdom but also capture many of the core properties that psychologists and others typically associate with the wise person: for example, that the wise person is experienced, concerned for others, self-aware, and open to new ideas.[2]

A further attractive feature of the view is that it helps to shed light on why academic interest in wisdom has waxed and waned over the centuries—from being a central concern of ancient and medieval thinkers to a near afterthought for much of the 20th Century. Although there has recently been a revival of interest in wisdom among psychologists and philosophers, a satisfying theory of wisdom should provide insight into its varied reception over the years.

1. Two Distinctions

It will help to begin with two distinctions. First, I have been speaking so far of the wise person and of wisdom in a way that requires clarification. For on the one hand, there is a tradition of thinking that someone is wise only if she is *fully* or *completely* wise. On the other hand, we sometimes call people wise who fall short of full or complete wisdom but who are nevertheless "on the path" towards complete wisdom. These later people are, as it were, *incipiently* wise; they are pointed in the direction of wisdom and seem equipped to make progress on the path.

Adding further detail, we can say that someone is fully wise if she not only knows what is good or important for well-being, but if she has actually attained those goods. Suppose with Socrates we take knowledge of things like justice, goodness, and beauty to be crucial to well-being. Then the ideally wise person

[2] For some of the empirical studies see Jeste et al. [2010] and Staudinger and Glück [2011].

would not just know that this sort of knowledge is crucial to well-being but would actually have achieved it; that is, she would actually know the true nature of justice, goodness, and beauty. Or suppose with the Stoics we take tranquility (or *ataraxia*) to be central to well-being. Then the ideally wise person would not just be aware of the importance of *ataraxia* but would actually have achieved it.

Now, who is ideally wise in this way? Arguably no one. Or at least, the fully wise person would be extraordinarily rare. For the Stoics, the ideally wise person would be the sage, and according to many Stoics a true sage has never existed. This rarity is also reflected in the Abrahamic claim that "God alone is wise." It would seem that when Socrates disavowed any sort of serious wisdom, it was therefore ideal wisdom (what he sometimes called "divine wisdom") he had in mind.

But in addition to this ideal state we also think of people as wise, in some sense, when they are appropriately oriented towards complete wisdom. As Katja Vogt points out, according to some Stoics this change in orientation occurred when a person acquired knowledge about what was good or important:

> The transitional moment in which a human being finally and fully recognizes that only virtue (consistency) is good is momentous: this is the moment in which a fool becomes a wise person [Cicero, *De fin*. 3.20–22]. At that point, a human being acquires what we might call the scientific concept of the good. She now masters a concept of the good that gets things right—once one has this concept, one is not going to fall back on misguided ideas such as "money brings happiness." [Vogt 2011: sec. 4.3]

Surely to be consistent here the Stoics must mean that in acquiring the knowledge that virtue alone is good a person only becomes incipiently wise—on the path or progressing towards wisdom, but not perfectly or ideally wise, as the sage is wise. Seneca indeed had his own name for people in this state: he called them "progressors" (*proficiens*) people who were not ideally wise but who were nevertheless pointed in the right direction.

Properly speaking the account I offer here is therefore an account of incipient wisdom: a state that involves knowledge of what is good or important for well being, an accurate sense of where one stands with respect to those goods, and a strategy for realizing them. One advantage of thinking of wisdom in this way is that it naturally captures the sense in which wisdom comes in degrees. Someone could therefore be much wiser than she was five years ago in virtue of having, e.g., more detailed, particular knowledge of what is good or important for well-being, or more specific strategies for realizing those goods.[3]

Socrates is perhaps the premier example of someone who was wise in this incipient sense. Although he flatly denied that he was wise in the sense of possessing complete knowledge of justice, goodness, and beauty, he nevertheless

[3] She might also have made advances in the *attainment* of these goods: perhaps a good is "having a mind like unto the world" and through her studies of science she had made some advances there.

took himself to be wise "perhaps in this alone"—that he knew what was good (to have this knowledge), knew himself to lack these goods, and had a strategy for trying to achieve them (dialectic, or conversing with everyone he could find).

Wisdom therefore seems to be essentially an in-process state for human beings at least—more like a way (a *Tao*), than a settled destination. Perhaps "incipient" then is not the best description for this state because it suggests only the early or initial stages of wisdom, and seems to leave out someone such as Socrates who has been on the path for quite some time. Nevertheless, because it appears better than the alternatives,[4] I will continue to use it, bearing in mind that the "incipiently wise" are all of those on the path towards complete wisdom, not just the beginners.[5]

The second preliminary distinction I want to make is not between types of wise people but rather between theories of wisdom. Let us call a theory of wisdom *fully articulated* if it not only invokes notions like "what is important for well-being" but also tells us what *is* important for well-being. My theory is not like that, because I will not opt for any particular view about what is more or less important for well-being, or about what is most important, or about how broadly the notion of well-being should be understood. We can therefore think of it as a *partially articulated* theory instead. Just as reliabilist theories in epistemology hold that reliability is necessary for knowledge but leave it up to others to determine which cognitive processes actually *are* reliable, so my claim is simply that knowledge of things like "what is good or important for well being" is necessary for wisdom. I leave it to others, wiser than me, to determine what actually *is* good or important for well-being, and to spell out effective strategies for achieving those goods.

2. Knowledge of What is Good or Important

One of the most common claims about the wise person is that she has wide experience of life. This is the sense in which wisdom and age are often thought to go hand in hand. Nevertheless it seems clear that experience alone is not sufficient for wisdom, even in an incipient sense. Virtually everyone who reaches old age has a wide experience of life, but a much smaller percentage of them are regarded as wise.

So what is it that certain people *learn* from experience that sets them on the right path? What sort of knowledge do they acquire? In keeping with the first condition on wisdom outlined above, what I want to say is: They learn from experience what is good or important for well-being. More exactly, they learn

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[4] Developing? Evolving? Progressing? I have tried all of these alternatives at various times, without much happiness.

[5] The distinction between complete and incipient wisdom also helps to explain the well-known dispute between Paul Baltes and Monika Ardelt in the psychological literature on wisdom. In his article with Ute Kunzmann, Baltes makes it clear that he considers wisdom "a utopia of mind and virtue" [Baltes and Kunzmann 2004: 292], one that does not seem achievable by human beings. Ardelt [2004], by contrast, seems much more concerned studying the sort of wisdom real human beings sometimes possess.

what is more or less important for well-being. As Joel Kupperman puts it, experience offers "knowledge of what has high, low, or negative value" [Kupperman 2005: 250], both at the general level and especially in particular situations.

For example: Suppose I think that losing my job is one of the worst things that could possibly happen to me. But then it happens, and I realize that I can struggle through—it is not really as devastating as I had thought. I also come to see that there are much worse things I could have lost than my job, such as my integrity, or my friendships, or my health. Or, to take a more trivial case, suppose I think that going on a long road trip with my three children in the backseat "won't be that bad." But then I try it and after a brief period of peace it becomes a prolonged agony of squabbling and complaining. Now I know the true measure of the thing.

One thing that experience can therefore teach us is what different possibilities are like and thus how to weigh or value them appropriately.[6] In this sense the elderly, wise or not, are important repositories of wisdom because they can help provide evidence about what different alternatives are like and thereby help us to assign different values to those alternatives.

Of course there is some variability here, both across the lifespan of a single person and across different people. What was very important to me at 14 might not be very important to me at 64. But there does appear to be an implicit objectivity even across this variability. When we are looking for advice about life, we do not turn to people who seem to have flawed (or "screwed-up") priorities—that is to say, to people who apparently overvalue some things and undervalue others. Instead, we turn to people who seem to have the "right priorities," and can discern how to properly respect these priorities in our particular situation.

What cases like this reveal is that our estimation of whether someone is wise turns on our more basic estimation of whether we think the person knows what is good or important for well-being, or whether she has the right kind of well-being in her sights. If we think that someone has false beliefs about what is important for well-being, or about the relative weight of different goods, we do not think that person is wise. Or again, if we think that someone has not properly appreciated the sort of well being that really matters, we do not think of the person as wise.[7] On a more positive note, we also seem to judge that a person is wiser to the extent that we think she knows more about what is good or important for well-being, and in particular to the extent that we think she appreciates the relative weights of these goods.

Note that I have been speaking so far about what is good or important for well-being, but I have left undiscussed the question of whose well-being matters

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[6] Why *can* teach rather than *does* teach? Because sometimes people can take the wrong lesson from experience. Suppose someone claims to have learned from a bad break up that he "should never trust any one again." Arguably experience has taught him no such thing.

[7] For an illustration of our negative judgments on this score, see John Kekes's interesting discussion of Tolstoy's character Ivan Ilyich in Kekes [1983; 1995].

exactly. Is it the well-being of the individual, or the community, or some larger group still? To see the force of this question more clearly, consider the following passage from Jane Goodall, the renowned naturalist and conservationist:

> It is awfully sad that with our clever brains, capable of taking us to the moon and developing all these sophisticated ways of communicating around the planet, that we seem to have lost wisdom; and that's the wisdom of indigenous people who would make a major decision based on how that decision would affect people seven generations ahead. We're making decisions now based on the bottom line. How will this affect me now? Me and my family, now? How will this huge decision affect the next shareholders' meeting three months ahead? How will this decision I make today affect my election campaign? Something like that. So although we think we're caring about our children and grandchildren, we're actually stealing their future.
> [Quoted in Zuckerman 2008: 83]

According to Goodall, the sort of well-being of interest to the wise person is therefore quite broad, and much broader than we often suppose. In particular, the truly wise person is concerned not just with her own well-being, or the well-being of her contemporaries; she is also concerned with the well-being of future generations. If Goodall is right, the vast majority of us lack wisdom because we are ignorant about the sort of well-being that really matters.[8]

Is Goodall right about this? I will not try to settle that question here (again, that would be a task for a fully articulated theory of wisdom), but will simply add three further observations. (1) Just as our judgment about whether someone is wise turns on our more basic judgment about whether we think the person has a correct grasp of what is good or important for well-being, so too it apparently turns on whether we think the person has the right sort of well-being in mind. (2) If one thinks that the wise person is primarily concerned with the well-being of the group or the community, then our original formula—that the wise person "knows how to live well"—will have to be understood in a new light. Rather than suppose that the wise person simply knows what it takes for *herself* to live well, the formula should instead be taken to mean that she knows what it

[8] Interestingly, this way of thinking about wisdom also helps to shed light on recent claims among psychologists working on wisdom that would otherwise appear peculiar. According to Robert Sternberg, for instance, wisdom is "defined as the application of tacit knowledge as mediated by values towards the goal of achieving a common good" [Sternberg 1998: 353], and according to Ursula Staudinger and Judith Glück, "people in Western and Eastern societies have clear conceptions of what wisdom is", viz., "the perfect integration of mind and character for the greater good" [Staudinger and Glück 2011: 221]. What is initially puzzling about both views, I think, is the reference to the greater good or the common good—an element that in both cases is simply asserted (as a descriptive truth) rather than explained, and which to my mind at least does not obviously leap to mind when one things about wisdom. If our theory is correct, however, there is something importantly right about these references to a common good, because they naturally flow out of the wise person's concern for what is good and important.

takes for the group or the community to live well, or to flourish. (3) It seems central to our concept of wisdom that *human* well-being is importantly involved in some way. For suppose that someone only knew what was good or important for the well-being of something non-human: daffodils, say, or snails. Then while we might say that such as person was wise in some domain specific sense—wise-with-respect-to daffodils or wise-with-respect-to-snails—it seems clear that such a person would not be considered wise in general or "simply" wise. For good or ill, there thus seems to be an anthropocentric slant to our concept of wisdom.[9]

3. Knowledge of One's Standing Relative to Goods

Knowledge of what is good or important for well-being therefore appears to be necessary for wisdom, but is it sufficient? It seems not. One also needs to know where one stands relative to what is good or important, in order to set out on the right path towards these ends.

Suppose Smith believes—correctly, let us assume—that having a loving, respectful relationship with his spouse is important to his well-being. But he also believes—incorrectly—that he already possesses this good, unaware that his selfish behavior has been eroding his marriage for years. He therefore makes no effort to improve his relationship and continues to move farther away, rather than closer to, what he acknowledges as important. When we learn this, far from being wise, Smith then begins to seem like a clear case of a fool.

A more historically prominent example along these lines can be found in Plato's *Apology*, in his discussion of the craftsmen. Recall that while Socrates takes the craftsmen to be admirable in virtue of the knowledge they do possess (viz., of their trades), he also criticizes them for thinking they possess genuine knowledge of what is just, beautiful, good, and so on, when in fact all they have are poorly supported opinions. They therefore again come across as foolish in virtue of their (misguided) self-satisfaction and lack of self-awareness. Although they know that knowledge of these things is important to well-being, they incorrectly take themselves to have achieved these goods, shutting off the possibility of growth.[10]

This second condition on wisdom also helps to explain the significance of the Delphic admonition to "Know Thyself." Unless one properly understands how far or near one is to what is good or important—what sorts of psychological or historical or natural impediments stand in the way of the good—one will not know where to start in one's path. And it is not surprising that the same holds for the "broader" sorts of well-being considered in the previous section; if one cannot properly assess how near or far one's community is relative to flourishing or doing well, then one cannot offer effective advice on how to realize that goal. A wise

[9] Of course we do sometimes speak of animals as possessing wisdom: the wise fox, say. But we might mean this simply in the sense of being clever, which is different than being "really" or "simply" wise. In any case, I offer my third observation here in a more speculative vein.

[10] For more on the Socratic view of wisdom, along with how other ancient philosophers conceived of "philosophy as a way of life," see Cooper [2012]. For more on Aristotle's view of practical wisdom, see Nussbaum [1986: ch. 10] and for Plato's see Annas [1981: ch. 5].

person therefore needs to be rooted in reality, if he or she is to make genuine progress towards the good.

4. Knowledge of a Strategy for Obtaining Goods

We now seem to have two necessary conditions for wisdom: (1) knowledge of what is good or important for well being and (2) knowledge of where one stands relative to these things. So once again we can ask: Is that sufficient? And again the answer seems to be No.

As we mentioned earlier, a wise person knows not just which possibilities are especially good or valuable, but also how to realize these possibilities.[11] A wise person has effective strategies, at least of a general kind, for achieving his or her ends.

Virtually every wisdom tradition offers strategic advice along these lines. Recall that for the Stoics *ataraxia* or contentment was at the core of well-being. But how does one achieve this good? By not desiring things beyond one's control. And how does one do that? By visualizing and reminding oneself of the impermanence of things beyond one's control: of one's health, one's loved ones, one's reputation, and so on. So there are not just goods to be aimed at, but also recommended strategies and sub-strategies.

Similarly, in Buddhism the aim is to empty the self. But how does one do that? Among other things, by using breathing methods to bring one's mind away from the insistent demands of the self and to focus one's attention on the oneness of all things. In Christianity, the goal is to love God and serve others in love. But how does one do that? Through prayer, reminding oneself what Jesus would do in the same situation, and so on.

There are also many more strategies for well-being that have found their way into everyday "sayings": don't sweat the small stuff; keep calm and carry on; develop an attitude of gratitude; etc. Sayings of this sort seem to have a common goal: to help keep us focused on what is "really important," and to help us avoid getting preoccupied with things that are less important.

Needless to say, my goal in this section is not to write a (bad) self-help book. My point instead is that a hypothetical person who knew what was important for well-being, knew that she was far away from achieving these goods, but had *no inkling at all* about how to make progress towards these goods would not, I think, be considered wise. The wise person, after all, is someone we think we can turn to for advice about how to live well; knowing strategies along these lines therefore seems essential to wisdom.

5. Knowledge or Rationality?

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[11] Note that I mean to be agnostic in this paper about whether wisdom is a kind of irreducible "know how" or whether instead it can be reduced to items of "know that." My inclination is to say that many types of "know how" cannot be reduced to "know that," and that cases of wisdom are probably an instance of this. A referee, however, notes that my account here could also be construed in terms of "know that." If I opt for that view in the future, I am glad to see there is some flexibility here.

I have been arguing that the three different sorts of knowledge canvassed above are all necessary for wisdom. Later on I will also briefly ask whether they are sufficient, but in this section I will consider an important challenge posed by Sharon Ryan [2012, 2013] to the effect that what is required for wisdom is not knowledge but rather rationality. On Ryan's view, what is problematic about knowledge is that it requires truth, but if she is right it is possible to be wise in the absence of truth. So long as someone has rational beliefs about "a wide variety of valuable academic subjects" and about "how to live rationally (epistemically, morally, and practically)" [2013: sec. 5], then the person can qualify as wise, even if his or her beliefs end up being mistaken.[12]

Consider a great thinker such as Ptolemy. According to Ryan, even though he might have been mistaken about many natural facts surely he could still qualify as wise in virtue of the rationality of his beliefs. Or suppose, more provocatively, that a sage such as Confucius were to be trapped in the Matrix. Surely Confucius would still count as wise, Matrix or not, in virtue of how carefully (rationally) he formed his beliefs about the world. Ryan's argument for these views is worth quoting in detail:

> I will assume that, given how intelligent [Ptolemy] was, he had a lot of epistemically justified beliefs about a wide variety of subjects. He discussed his ideas and experiments with the best scientists of his time. As it turned out, most of Ptolemy's justified beliefs about the solar system were false…. If he had a lot of false, but highly justified beliefs about a wide variety of subjects, he should not, on that basis alone, be excluded from the honor of being a genuinely wise person. Since so much of what was considered knowledge has been abandoned, or has evolved over time, a theory that requires truth (through a knowledge condition) would exclude almost all people who are now long dead, including Hypatia, Socrates, Aristotle, Homer, Lao Tzu, etc., from the list of the wise. Bad epistemic luck should not count against being wise…. What matters, as far as being wise goes, is not that a wise person has knowledge, but that she has highly justified and rational beliefs about a wide variety of subjects, including knowing how to live well, science, philosophy, mathematics, history, geography, art, literature, psychology, and so on…. Another way of developing this same point is to imagine a person with highly justified beliefs about a wide variety of subjects, but who is unaware that she is trapped in the Matrix or some other skeptical scenario. Such a person could be wise even if she is sorely lacking in knowledge. [Ryan 2012: 107]

[12] By "can qualify" I do not mean that these are sufficient conditions for Ryan, just necessary; she adds two other conditions [see 2013: sec. 5] that I will not discuss here. Given its affinity with Hume's dictum that "a wise man proportions his belief to the evidence," we might think of Ryan's view as a broadly Humean view of wisdom.

In short, what all these cases seem to show is that something short of knowledge, particularly rational belief, is all that is needed for wisdom.

Is Ryan right? We can start with the Matrix question because it helps to clarify the others. The first point worth making is that it is not at all clear that someone in the Matrix would be as bereft of wisdom-relevant knowledge as Ryan claims. Living in the Matrix would presumably not rob Confucius of his knowledge that things like friendship, fairness, and respect for others are important for well-being. It would not, for that matter, rob him of his knowledge that knowledge itself is important for well-being! We can also imagine that he knows some effective strategies for achieving these ends. Because he takes having true beliefs to be a good thing, and false beliefs a bad thing, he updates his beliefs in the face of counterevidence, and so on. At the very least, he is therefore doing well with respect to some of the key dimensions of wisdom articulated above—so on our theory we can recognize, along with Ryan, the pull of thinking of him as wise.

That said, our theory can also explain why it seems best on the whole to say that Matrix-Confucius, unlike the real Confucius, falls short of wisdom. For instance, even though he knows that friendship is good, he also thinks that he has real friends, as opposed to just strings of computer code. And even though he might know that knowledge of the external world is good, he also thinks he has a great deal of this knowledge. He takes himself to know, for example, that a tree is in front of him, or that there are three disciples by his side. But in all this he is mistaken; indeed, massively deluded. Since his sense of his distance from what he takes to be good is pervasively compromised by the Matrix, he fails to be wise because he fails the second condition described above.

For what it is worth, on this way of thinking Ptolemy and other past greats actually seem to be *better* candidates for wisdom than sages in the Matrix. Even though their physics was mistaken, we can charitably suppose that their beliefs about their standing with respect to other goods—such as virtue, love, and friendship—were much more accurate.

Note that I am not claiming that our judgments about whether a sage in the Matrix is wise, or about whether Ptolemy is wise, are beautifully clear. My claim is instead that even though there is a temptation to think of them as wise, there is also a temptation—often a stronger one, especially in Matrix-like cases—to think of them as unwise. The theory here can make sense of this tension because while a person might be doing well along some of the dimensions of knowledge essential to wisdom, he or she might be doing poorly on others. Just as a person who satisfies some but not all of the conditions on knowledge is "closer" to knowledge than someone who satisfies none, so too a person who satisfies some of the dimensions of wisdom is closer than someone who satisfies none. Since "deep rationality" theories of wisdom such as Ryan's judges such people to be unequivocally wise, I think it is a mark against her view that it fails to account for the tension in our judgments.

6. Theoretical and Practical Wisdom

We are now in a position to say more about the ancient distinction between practical and theoretical wisdom. For while I have been claiming that someone is wise "overall" in virtue of knowing how to live well, there is of course a long tradition of claiming that knowing how to live well is only one part or species of wisdom, and that there is another species of wisdom, theoretical wisdom, that can be understood or defined apart from its connection to knowing how to live well.

Aristotle is the most influential classical source of this idea, but it has also been defended more recently by Dennis Whitcomb and Jason Baehr. In particular, according to Whitcomb and Baehr there is a kind of wisdom that comes simply from having deep knowledge or understanding of a subject area. Thus Whitcomb claims that a person can be theoretically wise through deep knowledge of physics or metaphysics [Whitcomb 2011: 100], and according to Baehr someone can be theoretically wise in virtue of having "deep explanatory understanding of epistemically significant subject matters" [Baehr ms.: sec. 2.1], where for Baehr "epistemically significant subject matters" include topics such as physics, or metaphysics, or economics, or history.[13]

According to Baehr and Whitcomb, what this implies is that wisdom is essentially a domain-relative phenomenon. There is wisdom with respect to living well, wisdom with respect to physics, wisdom with respect to chemistry, and so on, but there is no such thing as "being wise in general." As Baehr describes the framework:

> To be wise relative to a given domain D is (1) to know what is basic or fundamental in D, (2) to understand how the other elements of D stand in relation to the more basic elements, (3) to be competent at applying this cognitive perspective to new or particular contexts or questions proper to D, and (4) to be disposed to respond appropriately to judgments resulting from these applications. [Baehr *ms*: 15]

The generic notion of wisdom therefore needs to be relativized to a domain—made specific—before it has any reality.

Let us call this *the genus-species view of wisdom*, where there is no such thing as being wise in general, but only wise with respect to particular domains, and hence where the element of knowing how to live well enjoys no special

[13] For simplicity, suppose for a moment that the relevant "epistemically significant subject matter" is physics. Why think that someone with a deep knowledge or understanding of physics would be wise in a distinct sense—i.e., theoretically wise? Because, as Whitcomb argues and as Baehr concurs, if you took two people, A and B, and supposed them equal in terms of "the best practical knowledge" but added that A had more of "the best non-practical knowledge"—physics, metaphysics, etc.—then it is natural to think that A would be wiser than B [Whitcomb 2011: 99; Baehr ms.]. Hence there must be some dimension of wisdom that is distinct from knowing how to live well, and that a person might have simply in virtue of possessing deep knowledge or understanding of some area.

privilege. While appealing in many ways, thinking of wisdom in genus-species terms seems flawed for at least three reasons.

First, when people are asked for paradigms of wisdom (or asked "Who is wise?"), virtually everyone gravitates towards examples of people who know how to live well, and in particular towards people renowned for their moral excellence (Ghandi, Confucius, Jesus, Martin Luther King, Socrates, etc.). People do not gravitate towards paradigms of exceptional understanding in the sciences, e.g., such as Albert Einstein or Stephen Hawking.[14] If the genus-species view were correct, however, this would be puzzling: when asked for paradigms of wisdom people would presumably either attempt to clarify the question ("Do you mean with respect to living well? Or with respect to physics?" etc.), or would choose exceptional examples more or less randomly from among a range of domains (living well, physics, etc.), in the way that someone asked to give an example of a *color* might choose more or less randomly among various species of that genus (yellow, red, blue, etc.). Since no attempts at clarification seem needed when we ask about wisdom, and since the spread of people nominated as wise is far from random, this seems to be a strike against the genus-species view.

Second, the genus-species view implies that one can properly attribute wisdom where there is deep understanding of any epistemically significant subject matter. But our concept of wisdom does not seem that flexible or wide-ranging. Presumably logic and mathematics are epistemically significant subject matters, but it seem like a mistake to say that someone could be wise with respect to mathematics or logic,[15] in a way that it does not seem mistaken to say that one can be wise with respect to areas like gardening or stock picking or baseball managing. What seems needed for deep understanding of math or logic is superior intelligence, or perhaps insight, but not wisdom—contrary to what the genus-species view predicts. (More on this in a moment.)

The final argument against the genus-species view is perhaps the most straightforward: namely, that we have no problem making judgments of the sort featured at the beginning of this paper, e.g., that someone might be wise with respect to some domain (stock analysis, etc.), but not wise in general or not "really" wise. On the genus-species view these judgments make no sense, because there are *only* domain-specific varieties of wisdom, and there is no content to the notion of being wise in general or simply wise. It would be as if one were to say,

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[14] When students and adults across a wide range of North American contexts were asked to name exemplars of *intelligence* on the one hand and *wisdom* on the other, only one person made it onto both lists: Oprah [Paulhus et. al 2002]. By and large, the people selected as paradigms of intelligence were scientists, politicians, and inventors: e.g. Einstein, Bill Clinton, Bill Gates, Stephen Hawking, and Thomas Edison. The exemplars of wisdom, by contrast, were entirely well-known moral or spiritual leaders; in addition to those listed above we find Mother Theresa, Solomon, and the Buddha, for example.

[15] Note that this is not to say that one cannot be wise in things *related* to mathematics, such as figuring out how to apply it to other domains (such as engineering, perhaps). My claim is that it sounds inappropriate to say one could be wise with respect to the body of knowledge we think of as mathematics.

"Well, Barbara might be a history professor, but she is not really a professor." That judgment makes no sense, because there is no such thing as being "really" a professor or being a professor "in general"; instead, there are only particular species of professors. The fact that claims like this do make sense with respect to wisdom suggests that we need a new framework for thinking about the nature of wisdom, distinct from the genus-species view.

What I propose is this: knowing how to live well is what we might call the "focal meaning" of the concept wisdom,[16] with other uses of the concept counting as analogical extensions thereof. Similarly, and to borrow an example from Aristotle, although we use the term "healthy" in many ways—we speak not only of "healthy bodies" but also of "healthy soup" and "healthy exercise"—these different uses of "healthy" are not all on the same footing. "Healthy" applies in a primary or focal way to bodies and only in a secondary or derivative way to soup and exercise, because soup and exercise are only healthy to the extent that they contribute to bodily health.

The comparison is not exact,[17] but I want to claim that a similar dynamic holds with respect to our concept of wisdom. Namely, that the focal meaning of wisdom has to do with knowing how to live well, and that this concept can only be extended to other domains (gardening, stock picking etc.), to the extent that these domains fit the model of knowing how to live well.

What are the important elements of this fit? The primary one is the ability to discern what is important in a domain, and especially what things are more or less or *most* important—i.e., how the different elements of the domain rank relative to one another. Just as the wise person (*simpliciter*) knows what is important for well-being, so too the wise stock analyst knows what is important for good stock performance, the wise gardener what is important for healthy plants, and so on. But there needs to be more to it than that. The reason why wisdom is required in these domains is because there is a notable lack of certainty, or perhaps lack of ready information, in the domain—either with respect to what is important or how to achieve what is important. The more these facts are obvious or decidable by formula, the less discernment will be required and the less apt the concept of wisdom will be to the given domain. This is the main reason, to my mind, why it sounds awkward or inappropriate to say that someone is "wise with respect to mathematics" or "wise with respect to logic." Given the possibility of decidability or certainty in these areas, what seems required for mastering the domains is intelligence or insight, but not wisdom.

All of this makes sense on a scheme in which the focal sense of wisdom relates to knowing how to live well, because there is by and large significant uncertainty with respect to what is important for living well, or for bringing about

[16] Following G.E.L. Owen in his [1960].

[17] Why? Because one cannot, in a similar way, claim that someone is a wise stock analyst in virtue of this wisdom contributing to his knowledge how to live well. It might not. The idea in this case is that the domain-specific varieties of wisdom count as *wisdom* in virtue of their similarity to the primary or focal sense.

well-being, especially in particular cases. Other domains will therefore be wisdom-apt to the extent that they share in this lack of certainty. Finally, just as the "focal meaning" account in Aristotle allows us to say things like "Tony might have a healthy diet but he is not healthy," so too when applied to wisdom it allows us to say things like, "Tony might be wise with respect to gardening but is not wise (in general)." In both cases, it is the latter use of the word that is the focal one, and controls our judgments about how the word is applied in its analogical extensions.

Even though wisdom therefore seems to be fundamentally practical in orientation, it would be good if we could make sense of the ancient idea that the wise person is somehow especially concerned with knowing what the world is like at a fundamental level, and hence especially concerned with topics such as physics and metaphysics. It would also be good if we could make sense of the idea that the person who joins this sort of theoretical knowledge with the best practical knowledge is in some sense wiser than the person who "merely" has the best practical knowledge.[18] In my view the way to accommodate both of these ideas is as follows.

To begin with, note that one of the things that wise people typically take to be important is having a deep understanding of the world. Insofar as wisdom increases with the possession of things that are important for well-being, wisdom will therefore increase along with gains in understanding, including the understanding that comes from things like physics. Another plausible reason why theoretical knowledge was traditionally thought to be central to wisdom is that according to many traditions a good life is a life lived in harmony with nature, or with the universe. This is an idea we find not just in Stoicism, Buddhism, and Confucianism, but also in Egyptian traditions according to which the gods planted order in the universe and "the sages studied nature to ascertain this principle of justice, order, and truth" [Crenshaw 2010: 7]. Pierre Hadot's account of wisdom, influenced by the Stoic tradition in particular, clearly brings out this connection; for him, "Wisdom is nothing more than a vision of things as they are, the vision of the cosmos as it is in the light of reason, and wisdom is also nothing more than mode of being and living that should correspond to this vision" [Hadot 1995: 58]. Since on this view a good life is a life that "corresponds" with nature, or is in harmony with it, it is not hard to see why acquiring knowledge of what nature is like would be crucial to wisdom, and thus merit a special appellation ("theoretical wisdom") or status.

For our purposes, the important point is that there seem to be a variety of ways in which theoretical wisdom can be given special prominence within a focal-meaning or "practical-wisdom-first" framework—thus acknowledging its importance while avoiding the view that the practical and theoretical dimensions of wisdom are somehow on par with one another.

7. Summary

[18] As Whitcomb [2011: 99] and Baehr [ms.] both claim.

Wrapping up, I would like to note one final strength of the account of wisdom offered here, and point out a significant way in which the view remains incomplete.

The strength is that the view provides a plausible account of why scholarly interest in wisdom has waxed and waned over the years. For notice: because on our view wisdom requires knowledge of what is good or important for well-being, then this presumably entails that there are objective facts about well-being to be known by the wise person. But then the more a society or culture doubts that there *are* objective facts about well-being, or that these facts can be known, the more the concept of wisdom will—by hypothesis—lose prominence in that society or culture.

Although serious historical work would need to be done to test this hypothesis, my preliminary sense is that in periods where philosophers at least (which form their own kind of society or culture) have lost faith in an objective notion of well-being, wisdom has indeed been given little attention. The era of logical positivism would be an example. In our own time, moreover, which seems willing to take objective notions of well-being more seriously [see, e.g., Tiberius and Plakias 2012], philosophical interest in wisdom has likewise enjoyed a revival.

In any case, I disagree with Whitcomb's claim that the lack of attention to wisdom among 20th-century scholars, and epistemologists in particular, was essentially arbitrary:

> It is as if twentieth-century epistemologists inherited a big set of interconnected issues from the ancients and their followers, and arbitrarily chose to theorize about some of those issues much more than others. Wisdom falls into the neglected category, so our theorizing about it has some catching up to do. [Whitcomb 2011: 95]

If the account here is correct, the fading of wisdom was not arbitrary because the notion of wisdom brings with it significant ethical and metaphysical commitments that other epistemic concepts, such as knowledge, seem to lack. In periods where there is wariness about these commitments, interest in wisdom will decline accordingly.

Turning to ways in which the account is incomplete, I will focus on just one issue. Notice that I have claimed only that our conditions on wisdom are individually necessary, not jointly sufficient, so it remains to be determined what else needs to be added in order to complete or round out the view. By my lights, the main obvious contender is some sort of application condition: that the wise person not only knows what is good or important for well-being and has effective strategies for achieving these goods, but actually *does* achieve these goods. In other words, she is able to employ these strategies in real life and hence ends up actually living well. This all seems very important to wisdom, because the person whose actions are not informed by what she takes to be good or important does not seem like a good candidate for wisdom. Put another way, there is a kind of

integration between thought and action that seems characteristic of wisdom, and that an adequate theory should try to capture.

While I think all this is right, and in particular that an integration of thought and action is crucial for wisdom, what I am less sure about is whether it is really possible to satisfy the three conditions spelled out here and yet fail to apply this knowledge in one's actions—in other words, I am unsure whether it is possible for something like *akrasia* to stand in the way of the knowledge being implemented in one's life. I will not try to settle this question here, but simply flag that where one stands on this issue will affect whether one thinks additional conditions need to be added to the account.[19]

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