

Mike Hennessy

## Why Socrates' Inclusivity Encapsulates a Better Account of Wisdom than Grimm

### 1. Introduction

In the pursuit of understanding wisdom, scholars have explored various perspectives, each offering distinct criteria for what constitutes a wise individual. In this paper, I delve into the philosophical discourse surrounding wisdom by comparing the accounts presented by Socrates and Stephen Grimm. Specifically, I argue that Socrates' conceptualization of wisdom, as expounded in Plato's *Apology*, provides a more encompassing and applicable understanding than Grimm's analysis in *Wisdom*. Socrates posits human wisdom as an acknowledgment of one's ignorance, emphasizing intellectual humility and recognizing the limits of one's knowledge. On the contrary, Grimm's framework delineates wisdom as "knowledge of how to live well" (Grimm 139), incorporating theoretical understanding, accurate self-assessment, and effective strategies for well-being. Through an exploration of the strengths and weaknesses of each account, I contend that Socrates' approach strikes a more balanced and inclusive depiction of wisdom, accommodating a broader spectrum of individuals while maintaining the potential for refinement.

### 2. Socrates' Account of Human Wisdom

In Plato's *Apology*, human wisdom is defined as a form of intellectual humility and understanding of one's own ignorance. Someone that has human wisdom understands their own lack of knowledge on certain subjects and does not pretend to know everything. Socrates explains human wisdom using a description of superhuman wisdom, which is a special kind of knowledge of what is real and good (*Apology* 24). Human wisdom is within our power, while

superhuman wisdom can only be aspired to. Further, human wisdom is necessary but not sufficient for superhuman wisdom. An example of one who possesses human wisdom is a person that studies math, specifically algebra, and knows that to have knowledge of math, they must have knowledge of calculus. This person does not have knowledge of calculus, and, thus, they understand that they do not have knowledge of math. Human wisdom involves recognizing the limits of one's knowledge and admitting this ignorance.

### 3. Stephen Grimm's Account of Wisdom

Stephen Grimm's concept of wisdom starts with the claim that wisdom is "knowledge of how to live well" (Grimm 139). This knowledge is further delineated into three components. Firstly, wisdom entails an understanding of "what is good or important for well-being" (Grimm 140), including notions like justice and truth. Grimm stresses that this knowledge is not solely rooted in experience but necessitates a theoretical understanding. Secondly, wisdom includes "knowledge of one's standing, relative to what is good or important for well-being" (Grimm 140). Accurate self-assessment is crucial for embarking on the right path toward well-being. Grimm provides the example of "Smith", who correctly acknowledges the importance of a loving relationship for his well-being but mistakenly believes he already possesses it, leading to a diminishing relationship, proving that he lacks wisdom (Grimm 145). Lastly, wisdom involves knowledge of effective strategies "for obtaining what is good or important for well-being" (140). Grimm contends that a wise person possesses general strategies to achieve their goals. He illustrates this point by referencing various traditions, such as Christianity, where the overarching goal is to love God and serve others. The strategies to obtain this goal include praying and living in the name of Jesus. Grimm's account of wisdom encompasses a theoretical understanding of

what is good, accurate self-assessment, and the possession of effective strategies for the pursuit of well-being.

#### 4. Strengths and Weaknesses of Each Account

The following strengths and weaknesses of both Socrates' and Grimm's accounts are separated by paragraph and described in the following order: Socrates' strengths, Socrates' weaknesses, Grimm's strengths, and Grimm's weaknesses. Many of the arguments begin with a pre-theoretical assumption, which is justified economically.

Many people are wise. I know a very small portion of the people on the Earth, yet I know at least a few people that are wise, and most other people could say the same. Proportionally, this means that there are at least hundreds of thousands of wise people currently alive. Since being wise is common among a portion of humans, then attaining wisdom must be achievable. Socrates' view accounts for this achievability of wisdom by setting the qualifications low and saying that the only necessity for achieving human wisdom is knowing what you do not know and not acting like you understand it. This is simple enough to achieve for people with intellectual humility. On the same note, wisdom is often tied to having intellectual virtues, as seen countless in Nathan King's *The Excellent Mind*. Socrates' view accounts for wise people having these virtues, specifically intellectual humility and intellectual honesty. For one to understand their own ignorance, which Socrates requires, then they must have both of these virtues. Lastly, lived experience is associated with wisdom. For example, older people tend to be seen as wiser than young kids. Socrates' argument makes sense of our intuitive connection between wisdom and lived experience because one that has human wisdom understands the vast amounts of knowledge that they do not possess. As one lives longer and continues learning, they learn that there is boundless information to continue exploring.

On the other hand, Socrates sets the bar too low for wisdom. There are many people that are unwise but would be considered wise in Socrates' analysis. This includes people that understand they lack knowledge but do nothing to learn. They are complacent with being ignorant. Most would agree that this person is unwise, yet they qualify for human wisdom because they accept their lack of knowledge. Moreover, pre-theoretically, wise people give good advice. This is portrayed with any form of television that has a wise character, whose role is typically to mentor another character by giving them advice. Somebody with human wisdom is ignorant, and ignorant people cannot give good advice since they do not know about the subject at hand. Thus, one that has human wisdom may not always give good advice, which is a flaw in Socrates' account.

Grimm's view also accounts for the intuitive correlation between wisdom and lived experience, for the same reasons as Socrates. Grimm even explains this correlation by stating that one can acquire knowledge by learning from experiences (Grimm 142). An example is a person that loses their job and believes this event is the worst thing that could happen to them. Over time, they realize that losing their job was not as bad as expected, which they could not have learned without having the experience (Grimm 142). Also, like Socrates, Grimm's view accounts for the fact that wisdom is tied to having intellectual virtues. Specifically in Grimm's case, one that is wise has both intellectual humility and intellectual perseverance. Their humility comes from understanding where one lies in relation to living well and not thinking they are further ahead. Their intellectual perseverance comes from understanding how to achieve wisdom and following that strategy. Unlike Socrates, Grimm's account makes sense of the connection between wisdom and the ability to give good advice. One that understands a strategy for how to

get wise will always be able to give good advice because good advice stems from understanding how to grow and live well.

Contrarily, Grimm sets the bar too high for wisdom, as he objects using Sharon Ryan's argument (Grimm 146-147). There are many wise people, as explained at the beginning of this section, and Grimm's view does not account for that. The second part of his account states that one must understand where they lie in relation to living well. This should not have to be true because whether one knows where they stand or not, they will still be in the same place. If they know how to achieve wisdom, which is already one of Grimm's qualifications, then knowing where they stand is redundant. With excessive qualifications, people that are truly wise may not be considered wise under Grimm's view. Further, Grimms' view accounts for general wisdom, or being wise "overall" (Grimm 148). It does not account for domain-specific wisdom, or theoretical wisdom. Theoretical wisdom is an "ancient tradition" (Grimm 148) that states one can have wisdom in a specific field. Failure to account for this fundamental type of wisdom is a weakness because of the "long tradition of claiming that knowing how to live well is only one part or species of wisdom" (Grimm 148), and an adequate account of wisdom must include this aspect.

## 5. Why Socrates' Account is Better than Grimm's Account

As detailed in the previous section, Socrates' view of wisdom has too few qualifications for being wise, while Grimm's view of wisdom has too many qualifications. More specifically, all people that are truly wise qualify as such under Socrates' account. None of the previously stated strengths or weaknesses of Socrates exclude wise people from qualifying as wise. Under his account, many people can be wise. Further, people with intellectual virtues are considered wise. Also, those with lived experience can be considered wise. On the other hand, all people

that are wise do not qualify under Grimm's view. People that are wise in a particular subject area, or have domain specific wisdom, are not considered wise because one must be wise "overall" (Grimm 148). Further, a significant portion of the population cannot qualify as wise under Grimm. Moreover, he includes an unnecessary qualification that one must understand where they are in accordance with living well. He also states that one must have knowledge, rather than mere belief of how to live well, which disqualifies wise figures that have opposing views. For example, Jesus and the Buddha cannot both be wise because they have opposing viewpoints, and thus only one of them has true knowledge, while the other has false beliefs, meaning only one would qualify as wise under Grimm's account.

For an account of wisdom to be correct, wise people must qualify under the account. Pre-theoretically, the Buddha is wise. His teachings have been followed and studied for countless years by billions of people. Under Grimm's view, he may not be considered wise. Thus, Grimm's view is flawed. Under Socrates' view, the Buddha is considered wise because the Buddha's teachings are notorious for letting go of the ego and relate directly to intellectual humility, which is the single qualification for being wise under Socrates. Moreover, all other notable wise figures hold similar justifications. Further, Socrates' account can be made more accurate and filter out more unwise people by adding extra qualifications. Thus, Socrates' account has the potential to get better. Modifying Grimm's account by adding more specifications would only make his account worse because it would filter out more wise people.

Someone who is wise will always qualify as such under Socrates' account, while they may not qualify under Grimm's account. Also, Socrates' account has the potential to improve by adding further qualifications, while Grimm's account cannot. Since an account of wisdom is only

correct if wise people qualify as such under the account, Socrates' account of wisdom is better than Grimm's.

## 6. Objections to the Argument

People that are unwise may qualify as wise under Socrates' view. Attaining knowledge, or mere beliefs, is not a qualification for being wise under Socrates. Thus, somebody that is ignorant of everything in the world can still have human wisdom if they understand their ignorance. An example is someone that knows nothing about philosophy and does not plan to learn anything about the subject. They accept that they know nothing about philosophy. Socrates would say this person has human wisdom because of this acceptance of ignorance. However, most would agree that this person is unwise because they know nothing about the subject. On the other hand, Grimm's view qualifies a small number of unwise people as wise because of his narrow specifications. The person from the previous example that lacks philosophical knowledge would not qualify as wise under Grimm's view for multiple reasons: they do not know what is important for understanding philosophy and they have no strategy to attain philosophical knowledge. They only know where they stand in accordance with philosophical knowledge. Since Socrates' account considers some people wise that are not wise, and Grimm's account includes few unwise people, Grimm's account can be considered better. In this case, excluding people that are unwise is more important than including people that are wise, which is the opposite of the argument in the previous section (5).

## 7. Rebuttal to the Objections

The decision of whether it is more important to exclude people that are unwise or include people that are wise can be argued both ways. Moreover, the decision becomes more difficult

when studying whether it is worse to include people that are unwise or exclude people that are wise. However, it is easier to modify the side that includes people that are unwise by adding further qualifications. Nothing can be added to the side that excludes people that are wise, because that would simply exclude more people. Thus, Socrates' view can be modified easier than Grimm's view to form the correct argument, making his view better.

One added qualification to Socrates' view could be that a wise person must have a desire or pursuit of knowledge. An ignorant person should only be considered wise if they attempt to learn and grow out of this ignorance. Take the previous example of the person that lacks knowledge in philosophy. They were considered unwise because they lacked knowledge and were complacent with it, yet Socrates' view considered them as wise. Under the added qualifications for Socrates' view, this person would now be considered unwise because they are not attempting to gain knowledge in philosophy. Thus, with the added condition, Socrates' view filters out more unwise people, and becomes further better than Grimm's view.

Word Count: 2,274