

Michel Ferrari · Nic M. Weststrate *Editors*

# The Scientific Study of Personal Wisdom

From Contemplative Traditions  
to Neuroscience

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Michel Ferrari

Nic M. Weststrate

University of Toronto

Department of Applied Psychology and Human Development

Ontario Institute of Studies in Education

Toronto, Ontario

Canada

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# Preface

Since its inception into contemporary scientific inquiry over 30 years ago, wisdom researchers have debated the empirical definition of wisdom and how to measure it. These conceptual and methodological tensions in the science of wisdom have made for a remarkably diverse field of inquiry. Rather than view this variety as a limitation of the field (i.e., violating the scientific principle of parsimony), we envision the science of wisdom as a richly colored and varied tapestry woven by eminent researchers and theoreticians. In assembling this book, our goal was to render some of this tapestry visible.

This book is not only an update on recent work in the empirical field of wisdom, it also represents an important shift to the scientific study of *personal wisdom*, as opposed to general wisdom, which was the focus of past volumes (e.g., Sternberg, 1990; Sternberg & Jordan, 2005). As such, this book is an effort to capture the current trends in the psychological science of personal wisdom. We asked contributors to consider and comment on the distinction (or lack thereof) between personal and general wisdom within their theoretical frame. We also asked them to discuss how their account of personal wisdom might be measured scientifically. The contents of this book, however, go well beyond these basic considerations.

The chapters of this book are organized into four parts, each approaching personal wisdom from a different perspective. Naturally, there is some overlap across parts, and we acknowledge that this is but one of potentially many ways to conceive of this book's organization. What follows is a walk through the most salient points of each chapter and a description of how we see them fitting together in a meaningful landscape.

## Part I: Person-Based Wisdom

In the first part, we have included chapters that consider personal wisdom to be an ability or aspect of the person. Some models adopt the perspective that personal wisdom is deep insight into the reality of life matters and expertise in judgment or

self-directed action about those matters. Others conceive of personal wisdom as an aspect or trait of the person, including basic neurobiological differences. These approaches identify various “components” that reside within the individual at the personality or biological levels.

In many ways, **Staudinger** was a catalyst in the science of wisdom’s shift from general to personal wisdom, a distinction first introduced as a concept in the late 1990s (Staudinger, 1999). For this reason, we open the volume with her chapter, in which she appropriately orients us to the short history of the science of personal wisdom. Staudinger distinguishes personal wisdom and its ontogenesis (concerned with developing personal maturity) from general wisdom or advice giving, both theoretically and by drawing upon recent empirical evidence to propose a parallel structure for personal and general wisdom. Staudinger proposes a procedure for measuring personal wisdom comparable to research conducted within the traditional Berlin Wisdom Paradigm (see Baltes & Staudinger, 2000). Staudinger concludes her chapter with a comparison of personal and general wisdom’s respective antecedents and correlates and their differential responses to intervention strategies.

**Vervaeke and Ferraro** anchor their understanding of personal wisdom within the cognitive sciences. On this view, wisdom involves the enhancement of cognition (broadly construed); more specifically, it asserts that the central process of cognition that makes an agent intelligent is their ability to realize relevance. Therefore, a powerful way to enhance cognition and generate wisdom is to enhance relevance realization. Intelligence is necessary but not sufficient for wisdom because intelligence is not sufficient for rationality. Rationality recursively applies intelligence to the problem of using intelligence well. Likewise, wisdom recursively applies rationality to the problem of using rationality well. Wisdom is rationality transcending itself rationally so as to greatly enhance one’s ability to realize relevance. In particular, people who so engage their rationality should experience more active open-mindedness, insight, self-regulation, and perspectival knowing. But the aim of such rational reflection is to develop a mature personality of the sort Staudinger sees as personally wise.

Likewise, relevance realization seems key to what **Sternberg** seeks to promote in his balance theory of wisdom (see Sternberg, 1998). The balance theory of wisdom argues that personal wisdom applies one’s knowledge and abilities to maximize the common good while at the same time coordinating the larger interests of society with one’s own interests and the interests of others over the short and long terms. Importantly, in considering personal wisdom, Sternberg adds that such actions be infused with positive ethical values. Sternberg proposes an eight-step process through which one may act ethically and discusses the greater significance of this process for personal wisdom by drawing many real-world exemplars of both wise and foolish leaders.

In their chapter, **Glück and Bluck** unveil a conceptual model that explains the development of personal wisdom based on their ongoing work that integrates wisdom, lifespan development, growth from negative experiences, and autobiographical memory. This model assumes that wisdom develops out of life

experiences that involve fundamental change, but only when individuals bring certain personal resources to such experiences. The core resources include sense of *mastery*, *openness*, *reflectivity*, and *emotion regulation/empathy*. Together, these capacities make up what the authors have coined the “MORE” model of personal wisdom. Glück and Bluck discuss the theoretical background of this model and describe how these resources influence which life experiences people encounter, how they appraise them and deal with them, and how they integrate them into their life story, as illustrated by data from two empirical studies. The first study investigated people’s autobiographical narratives of situations in which they had been wise. The second study, currently in progress, tests predictions from the MORE life experience model directly.

**Sanders and Jeste** are among the first to envisage a brain-based model of personal wisdom (see also Hall, 2010; Jeste & Harris, 2010; Meeks & Jeste, 2009). Through a careful reading of the wisdom literature, they point to keystone qualities of wisdom and explore neurobiological bases of these qualities. In fact, they propose a set of “neural pillars” of wisdom, to the extent that these brain systems are foundational to the expression of wise traits. Sanders and Jeste examine data available on the components of wisdom in both human and nonhuman species in an effort to understand their underlying neurocircuitry, providing a firm foundation for future neuroscientific studies on personal wisdom.

## **Part II: Wisdom in Everyday, Real-Life Contexts**

The second part advocates for the study of personal wisdom in real-life contexts. It explores how contextual factors are relevant to the development and manifestation of personal wisdom in persons’ lives. Indeed, many of the previous chapters discuss wisdom with little acknowledgement of the ecologies in which it dwells. Such contexts may both constrain and facilitate its development or simply vary its overall expression. With wisdom, one size truly does not fit all situations, and the chapters in this part are an exploration in this variability.

At the heart of her model, **Yang** defines wisdom as a “real-life process” that involves the integration of conflicting ideas, which can then be embodied through action for the purpose of positively impacting one’s self and others. In this chapter, Yang provides theoretical rationale for why wisdom should be studied in real-life contexts and carefully considers methodological issues that manifest in real-life studies. Finally, to substantiate her argument, Yang discusses some of her own recent empirical work that is located at the nexus of wisdom and leadership.

**Ferrari, Weststrate, and Petro** propose that any complete science of personal wisdom must consider wisdom in a narrative mode. They argue that life narratives not only offer a rich viewpoint from which to study personal wisdom, but, from a process perspective, they propose that crafting meaningful stories about autobiographical experiences may be central to the development of personal wisdom itself. In particular, they point to two capacities that may be particularly important to the



development of wisdom: autobiographical reasoning and narrative simulation. Some evidence for this view is provided from a study on engagement with cultural master narratives of wisdom.

In their chapter, **Wink and Dillon** take us deeper into a real-life contexts within which personal wisdom is manifest, exploring the areas of religion and spirituality. The relationship between wisdom and religion has been of long-standing interest to scholars and laypeople alike. Situating their discussion within contemporary America and drawing from longitudinal data, the authors offer a stimulating analysis of the lived experiences of two women: one who is religious and the other spiritual. The case studies presented here describe two distinct ways of being wise, speaking to the complexity of personal wisdom and its variability across persons and contexts.

**Edmondson**, in her chapter, blends ethnography with philosophy by considering the various ways in which wise processes can be enacted in everyday life. She does this by reconstructing the details of socially embedded, culturally influenced forms of interaction to illuminate what wisdom means in practice in different settings and by exploring what is considered “personal” wisdom within them. The main social context approached in this chapter—the rural West of Ireland—offers an approach to wisdom that accentuates interpersonal processes in which people regarded as wise exercise an enabling influence on others. Edmondson explores what happens in these processes, the parallels between wisdom in the West of Ireland and in other traditions, and how they illuminate what is involved in being a “wise” person.

### **Part III: Self-Transcendent and Contemplative Wisdom**

As opposed to previous parts, where wisdom is viewed as an embodied phenomenon, the third part looks at wisdom’s self-transcendent qualities and primarily situates the discussion within Buddhist philosophy. The Eastern viewpoint on wisdom has been noticeably absent from previous volumes (e.g., Sternberg, 1990; Sternberg & Jordan, 2005), and we take the current interest in this area as an emerging direction for the contemporary science of personal wisdom, despite its ancient roots in Eastern philosophical and religious texts and practices.

In their chapter, **Levenson and Aldwin** propose a theory of personal wisdom that bridges it with the contemplative psychologies, such as Buddhism, Sufism, and mystical Christianity. They make the general point that contemplative psychologies are centrally concerned with transformational change in adult psychological development. They do not elevate cognitive complexity to some ultimate psychological development but rather endorse “simplicity on the other side of complexity.” Contemplative psychologies are teleological with similar goals across traditions; goals that can be seen as “equifinal,” with many paths leading to the same goal. Their chapter discusses the moral implications of such a theory of self-transcendence that unifies all contemplative traditions.

In line with Levenson and Aldwin, **Rosch** proposes a contemplative view of personal wisdom. She [Rosch] draws a creative parallel between contemplative paths in Buddhism and the plot of Dr. Seuss's famous children's story *How the Grinch Stole Christmas* in order to illuminate what is essential to personal wisdom. She also makes a compelling critique of scientific studies of mindfulness. For example, she worries that the application of such research to education risks missing the essence of mindfulness, because such educational programs try to capture mindfulness within a mindset that itself is not wise.

In his chapter, **Takahashi** discusses the evolution of the general-personal wisdom division by tracing the transformation of wisdom in the East, with a particular focus on the Buddhist tradition. Although the original conceptualization of wisdom in this tradition was based on a relational epistemology, the meaning of the concept moved to a split (exclusive) epistemology, as the Buddhist texts were rewritten over the centuries; this eventually yielded dichotomies such as the personal wisdom-general wisdom divide. Takahashi proposes a relational developmental systems perspective on personal wisdom that sees synthetic and analytic approaches to wisdom as two poles on a continuum. In doing so, Takahashi treats general and personal wisdom as aspects of an integrated whole. This relational framework sidesteps debates over the semantic dichotomies of personal wisdom and general wisdom by recognizing them as parts of an integrated whole and coordinates related lines of wisdom research so they can cooperate scientifically, rather than compete semantically.

We conclude this part with the chapter by **Ardelt, Achenbaum, and Oh**, who discuss the paradoxical nature of wisdom within the context of Ardelt's (2003) three-dimensional model of wisdom. Although this chapter is not uniquely about wisdom's relationship to self-transcendence or Buddhism as a system of thought and action, the authors use the story of the Buddha to illuminate their main argument: Individuals who follow the paradoxical path to wisdom will gain liberation, truth, and love, as was the case for Buddha. Notably, many of wisdom's paradoxes parallel teachings in the contemplative traditions, which previous chapters have spent some time discussing. This chapter also in part explains why wisdom continues to evade scientists—its inherent paradoxes make it difficult to conceptualize and measure with rigor.

## **Part IV: The Transformative Potential of Wisdom-Inquiry**

The fourth and final part contains a singular chapter that is in many ways a call to arms for wisdom researchers. **Maxwell's** central thesis is that more importance must be placed on the cultivation of wisdom itself rather than our collective knowledge about wisdom. According to Maxwell, the preceding chapters aim to understand what wisdom is—something he argues is a misguided or “irrational” enterprise. This chapter serves as a reminder that, while gaining deep understanding

of the phenomenon of wisdom is important, we must not lose sight of the pragmatic value of wisdom for humankind. As wisdom researchers, we must translate our scientific knowledge about wisdom into a resource that is useable by the public at large, creating the potential for a better world—science is but a means to this end.

Maxwell takes this argument one step further and advocates a radical shift in how we approach education at the postsecondary level. He proposes a recasting of the traditional emphasis on knowledge-inquiry in higher education to that of wisdom-inquiry, leading students to depart university or college wiser and not just smarter. We conclude with Maxwell's chapter because it is a rallying call for all scientists engaged in wisdom research to bear in mind the higher purpose of this work.

The conclusion by **Ferrari and Weststrate** draws together common themes about personal wisdom that emerge in the various chapters of the volume. They propose that any particular current approach to personal wisdom can be situated on a finite series of dimensions. Historical exemplars are invoked to further differentiate the various definitions of personal wisdom, and inherent paradoxes are explored. The book closes with a discussion of the feasibility of a science of personal wisdom and future directions that such a science might take.

Wisdom, an ancient concept, has received dynamic treatment across history in terms of *what* it is, *who* has the authority to study it, and *how* it should be measured (see Assmann, 1994; Birren & Svensson, 2005; Kekes, 1983; Osbeck & Robinson, 2005; Staudinger & Glück, 2011). But, why has personal wisdom persevered as an object of scientific curiosity? It may be because wisdom is viewed by many as the ultimate resource available to humans for positive transformation in their lives. Not only can wisdom be thought of as a road map or guide to living the good life, it may also hold the key to solving the world's most dire problems. Wisdom in this light is the keeper of life's secrets and life's lessons. We hope that readers will enjoy these chapters and find them personally engaging. Ultimately, we hope the contents of this book will not only inform but also transform the reader in their search for a science of personal wisdom or for personal wisdom itself.

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**Part I**  
**Person-Based Wisdom**



# The Need to Distinguish Personal from General Wisdom: A Short History and Empirical Evidence

Ursula M. Staudinger

The quest for wisdom is as old as humankind. Even though theoretical and empirical work on the psychological study of wisdom has increased tremendously over the last decades, this research in comparison is still in its infancy. It was not before the 1970s that empirical wisdom research began (Clayton, 1975). Since then, psychological wisdom research has covered a series of different topics such as lay definitions of wisdom (e.g., Bluck & Glück, 2005), defining and measuring wisdom (e.g., Brugman, 2006), understanding the development of wisdom (e.g., Sternberg & Jordan, 2005), investigating the plasticity of wisdom (e.g., Baltes & Staudinger, 2000), and also exploring the applicability of psychological knowledge about wisdom in life contexts (e.g., Sternberg, Jarvin, & Grigorenko, 2009; for a general review of wisdom research see: Staudinger & Glück, 2011). In this chapter, I would like to demonstrate the usefulness of a rather recent addition to the conceptualization and measurement of wisdom, and that is the notion of “personal or self-related wisdom,” which was first introduced as a concept in the late 1990s (Staudinger, 1999a, pp. 366). The need for a distinction between general and personal wisdom emerged from my attempt to integrate research from the fields of self- and developmental regulation, personality development, and wisdom so as to derive the components of a psychological approach to the art of living.

The introduction of the actual term “personal wisdom,” however, is not to be confused with the availability of research that can be subsumed under that label (Staudinger & Glück, 2011, Table 1, suggest a categorization of extant approaches into those focussing primarily on personal or general wisdom, respectively). From Erik Erikson’s early work on personality maturation to the work by Ravenna Helson and Paul Wink, Jane Loevinger, Gisela Labouvie-Vief, or Carolyn Aldwin and Monika Ardelt, to name just a few, research pertaining to personal wisdom has been conducted—but either without referring to the wisdom literature at all, or without acknowledging the need for a distinction between general and personal wisdom.

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U.M. Staudinger (✉)  
Columbia Aging Center, Mailman School of Public Health, Columbia University,  
722 West 168th Street, New York, NY 10032, USA  
e-mail: [umstaudinger@columbia.edu](mailto:umstaudinger@columbia.edu)

**Table 1** Categorization of extant approaches into those emphasizing personal or general wisdom

Level of performance	Life experience: Self-related		Life experience: General	
	<i>Judgment</i>	<i>Action</i>	<i>Judgment</i>	<i>Action</i>
Average	Self-insight	Life management/ coping behavior	Life insight	Advice-giving/ supporting others
Very high	Personal wisdom		General wisdom	

## The Distinction Between Personal and General Wisdom

More and more evidence accumulating in psychological wisdom research stemming from different research traditions (Staudinger & Glück, 2011) has created a need to introduce additional conceptual dimensions ordering the field. The distinction between *personal* wisdom, on the one hand, and *general* wisdom, on the other, can be considered one of these (cf. Staudinger, 1999a; Staudinger, Dörner, & Mickler, 2005). G. Stanley Hall (1922), in his pioneering conceptual piece on senescence, was probably the first psychologist to mention the concept of wisdom. He associated the development of wisdom in a person with the emergence of a meditative attitude, philosophic calmness, impartiality, and the desire to draw moral lessons that emerge in later adulthood. As in G. Stanley Hall's description of a wise person, most psychological conceptions of wisdom have not explicitly distinguished between personal and general wisdom. Implicitly, however, they do place relative emphasis on either one or the other form of wisdom.

Approaches primarily geared toward personal wisdom are usually based in the tradition of personality research and personality development. Wisdom in this perspective describes the mature personality or the endpoint of personality growth (e.g., Ardel, 2003; Erikson, 1959; Helson & Wink, 1987; Helson & Srivastava, 2001; Ryff & Singer, 1998). When thinking about wisdom from this vantage point, clearly, there are close links to research on coping and learning from traumatic events (e.g., stress-related growth, Park, Cohen, & Murch, 1996; posttraumatic growth, Tedeschi & Calhoun 2004; see also Aldwin & Levenson, 2001; Vaillant, 1993). Approaches primarily oriented toward investigating general wisdom typically have a stronger connection with the historical wisdom literature and an expertise approach to the study of wisdom (e.g., Baltes, Smith, & Staudinger, 1992; Sternberg, 1998).

But before I continue, let me reiterate how exactly I defined the difference between personal and general wisdom (Staudinger, 1999a). This distinction is

loosely related to the philosophical separation between first- and third-person ontology (Searle, 1992). First-person ontology indicates insight into life based on personal experience. In contrast, third-person ontology refers to the view on life that is based on an observer's perspective. In loose analogy to Searle's first-person perspective, *personal wisdom* refers to individuals' insight into their selves, their own life. Analogous to the third-person perspective, *general wisdom* is concerned with individuals' insights into life in general, into life from an observer's point of view, that is, when their own life is not directly concerned.<sup>1</sup> The notion of personal wisdom does not imply that the fundamental social nature of human existence and its consequences for life management, life planning, and life review are ignored rather it is part and parcel of both personal and general wisdom (cf. Staudinger, 1996). The difference lies in the relevance of a given problem for a person's life. Do I ponder about the loss of my own parent, or do I give advice to another person for this life experience. Most likely, the advice for the other person also includes personal experiences with losing a parent if they exist. Therefore, personal and general wisdom are closely linked with each other but nevertheless distinct.

Of course, these two types of wisdom are related and essential components of the overall construct of wisdom. However, they will not necessarily coincide to the same degree in one person: A person can be wise with regard to the life and problems of other people or life in general and can be sought out for advice from others because of her wisdom, but the very same person does not necessarily have to be wise about her own life and her own problems. Likewise, it is conceivable that individuals, who have attained some self-insight or even personal wisdom, do not have the ability and/or the motivation to think about life problems beyond their own specific circumstances or are lacking the advice-giving ability. As a consequence, we expect that individuals high on both types of wisdom will very rarely be found.

For heuristic purposes only, Table 1 illustrates the extreme case of an orthogonal relationship between the two types of wisdom, hardly ever be found in reality. In order to establish the empirical relationship between the two types, however, they first need to be conceptualized and measured independently of each other (see below). Table 1 also highlights another important aspect of research on personal and general wisdom and that is that, empirically, we are mostly dealing with various degrees of self- or life insight, and not with wisdom as such. Whether degrees of insight and (personal or general) wisdom are to be placed on a continuum or constitute qualitatively different phenomena has yet to be empirically decided. As of now, wisdom research is conducted under the premise that indeed they do form a continuum. And for the sake of simplicity, we speak, for instance, about differences in wisdom when in fact we mean different degrees of insight. We should not forget,

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<sup>1</sup> Note that I use the distinction between the first-person and third-person perspective only in *loose analogy* to the distinction originally introduced by Searle. For my purposes, the major difference concerns the question whether certain life circumstances with relevance to one's own life have been experienced by oneself or not (i.e., first person). In that sense, my notion of "third person" encompasses all other life experiences including what Varela and others have called the second-person perspective (e.g., Varela & Shear, 1999).

however, that this is indeed a shorthand solution. To avoid one more possible misunderstanding, still another distinction has been added to Table 1, the distinction between wisdom-related judgment and action. The distinction between personal and general wisdom is not to be mistaken with addressing the difference between wisdom as judgment and wisdom as action. Wisdom research has mostly focussed on judgment; only few studies have started to examine action side of wisdom (e.g., Bluck & Glück, 2004; Oser, Schenker, & Spychinger, 1999). Certainly, one kind of wise action in the realm of general wisdom is advice-giving. With regard to personal wisdom, wise action includes, for instance, life management or coping (see also Staudinger, Kessler, & Dörner, 2006). It is not the case that personal wisdom addresses the application in terms of wisdom-related action whereas general wisdom refers to wisdom as judgment. For both personal and general wisdom, the respective judgment and/or the action related to the judgment can be investigated. In this chapter, however, I would like to confine my considerations to wise judgment.

## **The Distinction of Personal and General Wisdom as Reflected in Their Ontogenesis**

The distinction between personal and general wisdom unfolds even more clearly when exploring the processes involved in their ontogenesis. Even though we do not yet have a great amount of evidence available addressing the development of wisdom, some issues relevant to the distinction between general and personal wisdom can be raised. For instance, life reflection has been identified as one of the key social-cognitive processes to promote the development of general as well as personal wisdom (cf. Staudinger, 2001). Extending work about life review (e.g., Butler, 1963), life reflection has been defined as the reconstruction of life events from memory and their further analysis, with the aim of gaining more insight into one's own life or into life in general. Unlike life review, life reflection is not confined to old age but is a lifelong process starting in adolescence (cf. Habermas & Bluck, 2000).

The further analysis of recalled events and sequences of events typical of life reflection includes their thorough explanation and evaluation: "How did the event come about?" "How does it fit my life plans?" "How did I feel about it and why?" "How can I avoid it in the future?" "How can I make those events happen more frequently in the future?" This analysis involves a mixture of cognitive, motivational, and emotional elements. At the next lower level of analysis, explanation and evaluation may involve social-cognitive process elements, such as grouping events into categories (e.g., success/failure, friendship, work, family, relations to authorities, intimate relationships) or along a time dimension. Such groupings then may provide a basis for abstracting and identifying overarching themes and characteristics that generalize across concrete events and behaviors. Those general

themes and characteristics in turn are an important precondition for gaining further insight into self and life in general. Comparison processes are another central process element at this level of analysis. Both social and temporal comparisons apply: “How does my life course compare with those of others or the normative life course?” or “How have others, including religious and philosophical writers, handled a given life situation?” or “How does my present condition compare with that ten years ago?” or “Have I achieved the goals that I set for myself?” Processes of emotion and motivation regulation are a constituent part of these explanatory and evaluative processes. Without the ability to step back from one’s own behavior or one’s own life priorities and without the ability to monitor feelings such as shame, anxiety, anger, pride, or greed, it is very difficult to increase self-understanding. Thus, conducting such review processes together with another person may increase the amount of insight that is accomplished (Staudinger, 1996). This increase is because the other person may support these processes of emotion and motivation regulation and may point to the so-called blind spots of self-perception and the self-serving biases of autobiographical reconstruction that Greenwald (1980) has described so eloquently. We will return to this hypothesis below.

Decades of research on self-regulation (e.g., Carver & Scheier, 1998; Karoly, 1993) as well as research on the therapeutical process have demonstrated that it is much more difficult to obtain insight into one’s own life than into the difficulties and problems of others. Thus, we propose that ultimately it is less difficult and therefore may be ontogenetically earlier that general wisdom is attained as compared to personal wisdom. Certainly, in the course of ontogeny (i.e., in working toward general and/or personal wisdom), both types may alternate in taking the lead. From research on the early development of the self-concept, we know that infants appropriate general knowledge about the world before being able to acknowledge the self (e.g., Harter, 1999). From research on the self later on in ontogeny, we know that self-relevant information seems to be processed differently than general information. Some have used the distinction between hot and cold knowledge to highlight this difference (cf. Greenwald, 1980). On the one hand, under certain conditions, we have better memory for self-relevant information. On the other hand, it has also been found that threatening or inconsistent self-relevant information is suppressed or modified (e.g., Greenwald & Pratkanis, 1984) which indeed may hinder the development of personal wisdom.

## **Measuring General and Personal Wisdom Independently Yet Comparably**

If the goal is to find out whether it is useful to distinguish general from personal wisdom, a first step is to establish a comparable measurement procedure for both constructs. At first glance, it seems that personal wisdom is most often measured by self-report scales (e.g., Ryff, Aldwin, Ardel, Webster; but see also Loevinger,

Labouvie-Vief), whereas general wisdom most often is assessed using performance-based measures (e.g., Baltes et al., Sternberg; but see also examples of scales by Ardelt, or Helson & Wink). This observation, however, is a natural consequence of the research areas within which personal and general wisdom approaches have developed rather than a methodological one. In order to be in a position to establish the empirical relationship between general and personal wisdom, it is critical that both types of wisdom are measured using the same paradigm. Otherwise, the ascertained relationship is confounded by the type of assessment used to obtain it. In order to avoid the social desirability bias involved in self-report assessments of wisdom, we developed a performance-based assessment of personal wisdom in the tradition of the Berlin (general) wisdom paradigm and compared it to the level of general wisdom of the same participants, as measured with the same basic paradigm.

**The Berlin (General) Wisdom Paradigm.** The Berlin wisdom paradigm defines wisdom as expertise in the fundamental pragmatics of life (e.g., Baltes & Smith, 1990; Baltes & Staudinger, 2000). The fundamental pragmatics of life refer to deep insight and sound judgment about the essence of the human condition and the ways and means of planning, managing, and understanding a good life. The term “expertise” implies that wisdom is a highly differentiated body of insights and skills usually acquired through experience and practice. Expertise in the fundamental pragmatics of life is described according to five criteria (two basic and three meta-criteria). The first criterion, *rich factual knowledge*, concerns knowledge about such topics as human nature, lifespan development, variations in developmental processes and outcomes, interpersonal relations, and social norms. The second criterion, *rich procedural knowledge*, involves strategies and heuristics for dealing with the meaning and conduct of life, for example, heuristics for giving advice, or ways to handle life conflicts. Wisdom also entails *lifespan contextualism*, that is, to consider life problems in relation to the domains of life (e.g., education, family, work, friends, leisure, the public good of society), and their interrelations within a lifetime perspective (i.e., past, present, future). *Relativism of values and life priorities*, another criterion of wisdom, means to acknowledge and tolerate interindividual differences in values, while at the same time aiming to optimize and balance the individual and the common good. The last criterion, *recognition and management of uncertainty*, is based on the idea that human beings can never know everything that is necessary to determine the best present decision, to perfectly predict the future, or to be 100 % sure about why things happened the way they did in the past. A wise person is aware of this uncertainty and has developed ways to manage it. Uncertainty, as well as the dialectic between knowledge and doubt, is a feature of wisdom that plays an important role in ancient (Socrates: the only real wisdom is knowing you know nothing) as well as contemporaneous conceptions of wisdom (e.g., Brugman, 2006; Meacham, 1990).

To elicit and measure general wisdom-related performance, participants are presented with difficult and existential life problems such as the following: “Imagine someone sits down and thinks about his/her life and realizes that he/she has not achieved what he/she once set out for. What could one/you be thinking about, how

could one/you deal with this situation?” Participants are then asked to “think aloud” about the problem. Their responses are recorded and later transcribed. To quantify performance quality, a select panel of judges, who are extensively trained and calibrated, evaluate respondents’ protocols according to the five wisdom criteria, using a 7-point scale. The scores obtained across the five criteria and across different tasks are reliable (Cronbach’s alpha around .9; e.g., Staudinger, 1999b) and measure the quantity and quality of wisdom-related knowledge and skills of a given person. Responses to such fictitious problems primarily tap knowledge and heuristics about life problems in general and therefore probably are emotionally less challenging than solving existential and difficult personal life problems (see below the section on “Personal Wisdom”). Just to make sure: This does not imply that respondents do not draw from personal experiences when responding. But the problem does not put themselves at stake.

Indication of the external validity of this paradigm was obtained by studying people who were nominated as wise according to nominators’ subjective beliefs about wisdom: Wisdom nominees received higher wisdom scores than comparable control samples matched for age and education (Baltes, Staudinger, Maercker, & Smith, 1995). Information about the correlates in the realm of cognitive and personality functioning is discussed below in the section on the ontogenesis of wisdom.

**The Bremen Measure of Personal Wisdom.** To match this Berlin wisdom paradigm, the Bremen measure of personal wisdom uses the same general methodological approach but adapts it to reflect personality growth or personality maturity (Mickler & Staudinger, 2008). As pointed out earlier, the major reason for this close alignment was to minimize method variance when establishing the relationship between general and personal wisdom. Both approaches to general and personal wisdom share the core assumption that the dialectic between assimilation and accommodation promotes growth (cf. Piaget). In other words, our expectations need to repeatedly be challenged by new experiences, to emancipate ourselves in thinking and feeling, and to transcend the structures within which we have been socialized in order to progress on the path toward (personal and/or general) wisdom (e.g., Chandler & Holliday, 1990).

The Bremen paradigm also defines five criteria (2 basic and 3 meta-criteria) to index personal wisdom based on the literature about personality development and maturity. The first basic criterion is *rich self-knowledge*, that is, deep insight into oneself. A self-wise person should be aware of his or her own competencies, emotions, and goals and have a sense of meaning in life. The second basic criterion requires a self-wise person to have available *heuristics for growth and self-regulation* (e.g., how to express and regulate emotions or how to develop and maintain deep social relations). Humor is an example of an important heuristic that helps to cope with various difficult and challenging situations. *Interrelating the self*, the first meta-criterion, refers to the ability to reflect on and have insight into the possible causes of one’s behavior and/or feelings. Such causes can be age-related or situational or linked to personal characteristics. Interrelating the self also implies that there is an awareness about one’s own dependency on others. The second meta-

criterion is *self-relativism*. People high in self-relativism are able to evaluate themselves as well as others with a distanced view. They critically appraise their own behavior but still display a basic acceptance of themselves. They also show tolerance for others' values and lifestyles—as long as they are not damaging to self or others. Finally, the third meta-criterion is *tolerance of ambiguity*, which involves the ability to recognize and manage the uncertainties in one's own life and development; it is reflected in the awareness that life is full of uncontrollable and unpredictable events, including death and illness. At the same time, tolerance for ambiguity includes available strategies to manage this uncertainty through openness to experience, basic trust, and the development of flexible solutions.

Analogous to the Berlin general wisdom paradigm, personal wisdom is measured by a thinking-aloud procedure, while solving a difficult and existential personal life problem, and subsequent rating of the response transcripts (see Mickler & Staudinger, 2008 for details; also a manual describing the assessment and rating procedure can be obtained upon request). However, the Berlin wisdom paradigm uses life problems of fictitious persons, which is not useful for eliciting personal wisdom, so a new personal wisdom task was developed. Pilot studies showed that using a self-related dilemma, such as talking about a past personal problem was not ideal. Apart from the problem of comparability between individuals, participants tended to describe the circumstances of such problem situations, rather than focus on their own characteristics and strategies—possibly due to an actor-observer bias or to the highly self-threatening character of such a problem. Therefore, we decided to ask all participants about the same, generally nonthreatening, but still central and rather age-neutral area of the self: friendship. A pilot study showed that the friendship domain best fulfilled these requirements: For young and old adults, friendship ranked third among important life areas, after family and partnership, and before occupation and hobbies (see Mickler & Staudinger, 2008 for details). The personal wisdom task asks, “Please think aloud about yourself as a friend. What are your typical behaviors? How do you act in difficult situations? Can you think of examples? Can you think of reasons for your behavior? What are your strengths and weaknesses, what would you like to change?”

In a first study, the new performance measure of personal wisdom showed good convergent validity (Mickler & Staudinger, 2008). It was positively correlated with other measures of personality growth, such as Ryff's personal growth and purpose in life and Loewinger's ego development, as well as with benevolent personal values and psychological mindedness (California Personality Inventory CPI; Gough, 1964), a concept measuring interest in thoughts and feelings of other people. With regard to discriminant validity, personal wisdom showed—as expected—substantial overlap with measures of general wisdom but also significant unique variance.

Personal wisdom was uncorrelated with indicators of subjective well-being, such as life satisfaction, negative or positive emotions, and adaptive motives such as power, achievement, and hedonism. This is not surprising when interpreted within the theoretical framework of distinguishing two types of positive personality development, that is, personal maturity and adjustment (cf. Staudinger & Kessler, 2009). As will be discussed in more detail below, the pursuit of personal wisdom



does not imply the optimization of positive emotions but rather seeking to unlock the potential contained in the dialectics of positive and negative emotions.

In addition, we found that personal wisdom is not preempted by knowing a person's intelligence. Interestingly, while controlling for age, the relationship between personal wisdom and fluid intelligence followed an inverted U shape, implying that among highly intelligent persons, there is a significant negative correlation of fluid intelligence with personal wisdom. Follow-up analyses suggested that this may be due to differences in values, in particular, the value domain of "universalism" (as measured by the Schwartz Value Survey, Schwartz, 1992). Extremely intelligent people may tend to be rather egotistical and focused on achievement, as opposed to interpersonal or social issues. Concerning personality variables, openness to experience was the most important predictor—the other Big Five variables were uncorrelated with personal wisdom.

## **Antecedents and Correlates of Personal and General Wisdom in Comparison**

The distinction between personal and general wisdom may be especially relevant when exploring the ontogenesis of wisdom. There is reason to assume that a dynamic interplay between self-insight and life insight is at the heart of eventually attaining wisdom. Individuals most likely are not following either a personal or a general wisdom trajectory but rather fluctuate between the two depending on life phase and possibly even life situation.

Conceptually, an ontogenetic model has been postulated that requires a set of factors and processes to "cooperate" for general as well as personal wisdom to develop (e.g., Staudinger, Mickler, & Dörner, 2005). First, there are personality characteristics such as crystallized and fluid intelligence (as necessary but not sufficient conditions), creativity, openness to new experience, social competence, emotion-regulation competence (exploiting the dialectics of positive and negative emotions), an ethical value orientation, as well as an intermediate level of self-esteem and agency that provide the necessary basis for challenging oneself and the world around one.

Second, the model presumes that the development of wisdom is advanced by certain expertise-specific factors, such as a strong motivation to learn about life (general wisdom) or oneself (personal wisdom), practice with difficult (personal and/or general) life situations, and being guided by a mentor. Third, the model assumes the operation of macro-level facilitative experiential contexts. For example, certain professions and historical periods are more conducive to the development of wisdom than others, and age also facilitates as well as constrains the range of experiences.

These three sets of factors influence which kinds of experiences one has but also how experiences are subsequently analyzed to form insights. Social-cognitive processes of life reflection (i.e., life planning, life management, and life review; Staudinger, 2001) are assumed to be critical for the development of wisdom-related knowledge and skills. If these processes are applied to autobiographical experiences, they contribute primarily to creating personal wisdom (cf. Erikson's model of personality growth), and if they are applied to general knowledge and experiences with life in general, they primarily contribute to creating general wisdom. Based on the assumptions of this model, age is not necessarily related to higher levels of wisdom-related performance, as many other variables need to come together for progress to occur.

Turning to empirical evidence about the development of (personal or general) wisdom, to date, we primarily have cross-sectional data and evidence on general wisdom, measured according to the Berlin wisdom paradigm, with only one study of personal wisdom. Given this limitation, the empirical work on the ontogenesis of wisdom-related performance has produced outcomes consistent with expectations. Contrary to work on the fluid mechanics of cognitive aging, older adults perform as well as younger adults (i.e., older than 25 years) on general wisdom tasks (for overview in Staudinger, 1999b). It seems that general wisdom-related knowledge and skills emerge between the ages of 14 and 25 years, when controlling for intelligence during that period (Pasupathi, Staudinger, & Baltes, 2001). But, as expected, after that point growing older is not enough to become wiser. Rather, we found that older adults performed better on typical dilemmas of old age and young adults performed better on typical dilemmas of young adulthood (Staudinger, Smith, & Baltes, 1992). However, when age has been combined with wisdom-related experiential contexts, such as professional training and experience in matters of life (e.g., clinical psychology), higher levels of general wisdom-related performance were observed at higher ages (Smith, Staudinger, & Baltes, 1994; Staudinger et al., 1992).

In line with the historical wisdom literature, which portrays wisdom as the ideal combination of mind and virtue, it was found that general wisdom-related performance is best predicted by measures located at the interface of cognition and personality, such as a judicial cognitive style (i.e., "seeking to understand why and what it means that people think what they think, say what they say, and do what they do"; Sternberg, 1990, p. 154), creativity, and moral reasoning (Staudinger, Lopez, & Baltes, 1997). Neither fluid and crystallized intelligence nor personality (Big Five) made a significant contribution to general wisdom-related knowledge and skills independently of each other. Interestingly, a very different predictive pattern is found when general wisdom-related performance is considered in adolescence, where cognitive development seems to be a crucial basis for the emergence of wisdom-related knowledge (Staudinger & Pasupathi, 2003). General wisdom-related performance has also been found to be substantially correlated with moral reasoning (assessed in the Kohlbergian tradition), a relationship that is mediated by personality characteristics and intelligence (Pasupathi & Staudinger, 2001).

Consistent with a threshold model, high levels of general wisdom-related performance are unlikely to be found among those with low scores in moral reasoning.

General wisdom as measured according to the Berlin wisdom paradigm is unrelated or only weakly related to subjective well-being (Kunzmann & Baltes, 2003). Wise individuals reported experiencing both positive affect (e.g., happy, cheerful) and negative affect (e.g., angry, afraid) less frequently than other individuals, but they reported a higher degree of affective involvement (e.g., being interested, inspired) than the rest of the sample. This pattern suggests that wisdom might go along with a more realistic, less self-enhancing, and less positively biased view on life but at the same time with better emotion-regulating skills. Also, individuals with higher wisdom-related scores tended to endorse values referring to personal growth, life insight, societal engagement, the well-being of friends, and ecological protection more than other individuals did.

When comparing these findings on general wisdom with the first evidence ascertained on correlates of personal wisdom, similarities and differences emerge. First, neither general nor personal wisdom have a positive linear relationship to *age*. For example, a recent study presented evidence from a 34-year longitudinal study on self-reported personal wisdom in an Eriksonian sense (Sneed & Whitbourne, 2003). Despite considerable interindividual differences, integrity scores increased in young adulthood, dropped somewhat around age 40, and then began to increase again. Many aging adults may focus on stabilizing previous self-perceptions in order to maintain well-being, rather than engaging in deep life reflection (Mickler & Staudinger, 2008; Sneed & Whitbourne, 2003). Research with the Bremen measure of personal wisdom found that age is not only unrelated to personal wisdom (as is the case for general wisdom), but even negatively related to the three meta-criteria of self-relativism, interrelating the self, and tolerance of ambiguity (Mickler & Staudinger, 2008). Declining cognitive resources may make abstract thinking—which is required more to satisfy the meta than to satisfy the basic wisdom criteria—more difficult for older adults. Also, control analyses were able to demonstrate that younger adults' higher levels of openness to experience are an added advantage when it comes to testing established self-related insights against new evidence, which is a prerequisite to developing further self-insight. In addition, self-criticism is less crucial for general wisdom-related performance than for personal wisdom. Similarly, personal growth is generally negatively related to age (Ryff & Keyes 1995), and ego development peaks in early midlife and declines thereafter (Cohn & Westenberg, 2004). When interpreting such findings, we need to be careful, however, to not causally attribute them to age. Rather contemporaneous societal restrictions of growth opportunities in old age also need to be taken into account (e.g., Ryff & Singer, 2006; Staudinger & Kessler, 2009).

Furthermore, we were able to demonstrate that the developmental task of later life, including the psychosocial crises of old age, integrity vs. despair—that is, coming to terms with one's own life as lived (Erikson, 1959)—may prejudice older adults' life reflection toward a positive evaluation of their own life (Kennedy, Mather, & Carstensen, 2004). In terms of the mastery of this developmental task, a positive self-evaluation is highly functional—but at the same time, it is

detrimental to developing personal wisdom, because it avoids confronting one's own limitations and weaknesses. Coming to terms with one's life as lived is easier given a positive evaluation of one's life, but the personal wisdom criterion of self-relativism requires that one pays attention to the negative aspects in one's life. This interpretation is supported by the larger negative age effects for personal wisdom as compared to general wisdom. General wisdom-related performance is less dependent on self-criticism than is personal wisdom-related performance.

Second, personal wisdom shows a significantly smaller relationship than general wisdom with indicators of *subjective well-being* (Mickler & Staudinger, 2008). It is not enough to master the tasks of everyday life (and thereby increase subjective well-being) in order to gain in personal wisdom. Again, this finding underscores the importance of distinguishing between different types of positive development during adulthood and into old age (Staudinger & Kessler, 2009). Sincere self-reflection and self-criticism, as well as facing negative emotional states—all of which are necessary steps on the road to personal wisdom—are not likely to increase subjective well-being (in the sense of hedonic well-being, as captured by measures of life satisfaction or positive and negative affect). It is, however, likely to increase eudaimonic well-being, as captured by measures of personal wisdom (cf. Waterman, 1993). When interpreting the relationship between indicators of wisdom and of subjective well-being, we also need to consider that usually participants have not yet come very far on their journey to wisdom, and therefore hardship and pain might still outweigh the positive aspects of progress toward wisdom. In samples of individuals who are closer to attaining wisdom, the relationship between wisdom and well-being is most likely of a different kind.

Third, *personal life events* did not contribute to the prediction of general wisdom-related performance, but they played an important role when predicting personal wisdom scores (Mickler & Staudinger, 2008). This is in line with the finding that traumatic life experiences can be conducive to the development of (personal) wisdom (e.g., Baltes et al., 1995; Kinnier, Tribbensee, Rose, & Vaughan, 2001), a notion prominent in concepts such as posttraumatic growth (e.g., Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2006), stress-related growth (Aldwin & Levenson, 2001; Park et al., 1996), or growth through adversity (e.g., Joseph & Linley, 2006; King, 2001). After negative experiences such as accidents, life-threatening illness, or the death of a close other person, many people report self-perceived increases in aspects of personal life such as compassion, affect regulation, self-understanding, honesty and reliability, spirituality, and self-reported wisdom itself (cf. Park, 2004). While such self-perceptions of growth may be delusional (Maercker & Zoellner, 2004), it seems plausible that personal wisdom is fostered by the experience of fundamental changes that “force” individuals to grow (Nolen-Hoeksema & Larson, 1999) by challenging them to transform and reorganize their conceptions of the self and their life, but not completely destroying them. Against our expectations, other indicators of personality maturity were not more strongly associated with personal as compared to general wisdom.

## Modifying Personal and General Wisdom: Similarities and Differences

In previous studies of wisdom-related performance, be it general or personal, the average levels observed in unselected samples were rather low, leaving a lot of space for improvement. And indeed, empirical studies have found support for the positive plasticity of general wisdom. In two intervention studies, we found that by either providing for a certain type of social performance context, that is, discussing the difficult life problem with a real or imaginary confidant (Staudinger & Baltes, 1996), or by teaching a certain knowledge-search strategy (Böhmgig-Krumhaar, Staudinger, & Baltes, 2002), general wisdom-related performance was significantly increased. Thus, interventions that help to activate individuals' actual wisdom-related reserves can enhance wisdom-related performance. However, activation of abstract conceptions of wisdom (by means of the instruction to "try to give a wise response") did not lead to increases in performance (Glück & Baltes, 2006).

Similarly, a first intervention study using the Bremen measure of personal wisdom was successful but once more showed a differential effect as compared to general wisdom. In contrast to the finding for general wisdom (Staudinger & Baltes, 1996), personal wisdom was *not* facilitated by the opportunity to exchange ideas with a familiar person before responding to a personal wisdom task. Rather, it was found that instruction about how to infer insight from personal experiences (cf. life reflection; Staudinger, 2001) significantly increased personal wisdom scores (cf. Staudinger et al., 2006). The authors interpreted this finding such that in the case of personal wisdom, the exchange with a well-known other person may be less helpful, as relationships tend to develop such that partners learn to avoid sensitive issues unless urgently necessary. Thus, for personal wisdom to be facilitated, it seems more useful to seek support from someone unknown and trained to support the life-reflection process, such as a psychotherapist, or from some form of educational intervention. This first evidence available on the plasticity of general as compared to personal wisdom underscores the importance of the differentiation between the two wisdom types. It seems that different interventions are prone to further either one or the other form of wisdom.

## Conclusion

In this chapter, a short history of the concept "personal wisdom" has been presented, and a theoretical as well as empirical argument has been proposed that supports the usefulness of the distinction between general and personal wisdom. One measurement approach to personal wisdom, the Bremen personal wisdom measure, has been described, and evidence on differential patterns of convergent and discriminant validity has been presented. Furthermore, evidence from intervention work has shown that interventions have different effects on general as

compared to personal wisdom. Research on personal and general wisdom is in need of longitudinal data in order to increase our understanding about the developmental dynamics between the two types of wisdom.

Why do some individuals develop further on the road to personal wisdom in the course of their life, while most of us do not? Is it possible to distinguish societies according to how much they facilitate the development of wisdom? Wisdom theorists agree that the development of wisdom is a complex interaction of intraindividual, interindividual, and external factors that dynamically interact over the course of an individual life (e.g., Baltes & Staudinger, 2000; Brugman, 2006; Kramer, 2000; Sternberg, 1998). To date, however, very few longitudinal data are available to help trace these interactions and possibly identify different types of developmental trajectories toward wisdom (e.g., Helson & Roberts, 1994).

To gain further insight into the development of different types of wisdom, it will also be important to start applying neuropsychological work on the social-cognitive processes involved in wisdom-related performance. Neurophysiology may help to illuminate to which degree emotions, motivations, and “hot” and “cold” cognitions play a role in general and personal wisdom-related performance. Finally, learning more about the different ways in which we may positively influence the development of personal and of general wisdom seems an important goal in times that need more insight or even wisdom (e.g., Ferrari & Potworowski, 2008; Sternberg, 2004).

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# Relevance, Meaning and the Cognitive Science of Wisdom

John Vervaeke and Leonardo Ferraro

## Introduction

Let us begin the study of wisdom by noting that it involves some kind of cognitive improvement that affords the living of a good life. When we use the term ‘cognition’ or ‘cognitive’, it should be broadly construed as the terms are used in cognitive science, meaning thinking, reasoning, memory, emotion and perception. There are factors such as good fortune that can improve life, but wisdom centres on a kind of self-transformation of cognitive processing that enhances the quality of life in some comprehensive manner. Philosophers (especially ancient philosophers) have devoted a lot of time to addressing the related questions of what wisdom is and what it is to live a good life. Recently, psychologists have also broached the topic because of the central role of cognitive processes in wisdom (Brown, 2000; Sternberg, 1990, 2003; Sternberg & Jordan, 2005). Neuroscientists have also begun to explore the topic as they have forayed into explaining higher cognitive processes, and wisdom seems to involve higher cognitive processes such as self-regulation and problem solving (Goldberg, 2005; Hall, 2010; Meeks & Jeste, 2009). It stands to reason that cognitive science, which attempts to create theoretical links between philosophical, psychological and neuroscientific constructs (by making use of information processing ideas drawn from the fields of machine learning and artificial intelligence), could have a lot to say about wisdom. In a sense, wisdom is a quintessential cognitive science topic: cognitive science offers both a diverse and

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J. Vervaeke (✉)

Cognitive Science Program, Department of Psychology, and Buddhism, Psychology, and Mental Health Program, University of Toronto, Toronto, ON, Canada

e-mail: [john.vervaeke@utoronto.ca](mailto:john.vervaeke@utoronto.ca)

L. Ferraro

Department of Applied Psychology and Human Development, Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto, Toronto, ON, Canada

e-mail: [leonardo.ferraro@utoronto.ca](mailto:leonardo.ferraro@utoronto.ca)

integrated theoretical perspective that makes it uniquely suited to investigating and explicating a phenomenon as cognitively complex as wisdom.

In this chapter, we will explore what cognitive science contributes to the understanding of the nature and development of wisdom by explicitly drawing upon philosophical, psychological and neuroscientific theories that are integrated through information processing/machine learning ideas. In doing so, we expressly are not attempting some simple reduction of wisdom, but rather, we hope to enrich the construct in a way that will make it more empirically tractable. To do this, we hope to tie our theoretical account of wisdom to independently established constructs within psychology, machine learning and neuroscience and to thereby provide a process theory that explains how one undergoes processes of self-transformation that result in wisdom, as well as explicating and specifying those processes to some degree. Throughout this chapter, we seek to translate the classical notion of wisdom into current psychological constructs with established empirical methods, bound together within the common mathematical framework of dynamical systems theory and self-organizing criticality. This provides specific guidance for the scientific study of wisdom.

## Process Theories and Personal Wisdom

Why a process theory? As an analogy, let us consider the study of epistemology: Chisholm (1982) distinguishes between two broad methods for studying knowledge. One is to define knowledge and then to use that definition to formulate the question ‘How is knowledge acquired? Which psychological processes result in knowledge as their product?’ The second method is to define a process by which knowledge is acquired and to use that procedural specification as the basis for a definition of what knowledge itself is. Chisholm’s point was not to set these two methods in competition with each other but rather to reveal their fundamental interdependence. Any definition of a product implicitly presupposes the process by which it is generated. Any theory of a process likewise relies upon an implicit concept of the resulting product. In coming to understand wisdom, simply knowing the features of wisdom is insufficient. Such an understanding is fundamentally dependent upon our understanding of the processes by which someone becomes wiser. Over the past 30 years, there has been a sustained and fruitful effort to produce an account of what wisdom is. Researchers such as Sternberg (1998), Baltes and Staudinger (2000) and Ardelt (2004) have produced various accounts of what the fundamental features of wisdom are. However, until recently, the processes by which an individual comes to be wise have remained relatively unexamined. Current work has tended to address this lacuna through invoking the distinction between general wisdom and self-related (or personal) wisdom (Staudinger, Dörner, & Mickler, 2005).

Staudinger et al. explicate this by invoking Searle’s (1992) account of the ontological differences between first-person and third-person perspectives. Their argument situates personal wisdom within a first-person perspective and general

wisdom in that of the third-person: personal wisdom ‘indicates insight into life based on personal experience’, whereas general wisdom ‘refers to the view on life based on an observer’s perspective’ (Staudinger et al., 2005). By way of example, they compare giving advice about marriage to managing one’s own marital difficulties. In doing so, they highlight aspects of wisdom not normally salient within product models of wisdom, namely, self-reflective insight and perspectival knowing. Staudinger et al.’s point is a strong one, perhaps more so than how they initially framed it; what they refer to as ‘general wisdom’ is actually *theoretical knowledge*, which, while a necessary condition for wisdom, is not in and of itself a form of wisdom. Rather, theoretical knowledge helps address problems of ignorance, by guiding one in the generation of missing knowledge. However, as emphasized by Socrates, knowledge on its own is not sufficient for overcoming foolishness, and it is the overcoming of foolishness that is the hallmark of wisdom (Plato, Charmides; The Republic). Let us consider Staudinger et al.’s marriage advice example: the observer needs only a good theory of marriage to provide you with useful advice. In attempting to solve one’s own marital problems, however, one is faced with the demand to change one’s own behaviour; this demand is very difficult, because the nature of those changes can be challenging both in terms of identifying them and accomplishing them. These changes typically require significant alteration of how one apprehends both situations and oneself. Successfully addressing these problems leads one to confront one’s self-deceptive patterns that prevent the necessary changes from occurring. Note that a strong theoretical knowledge of marriage is only one component of what is needed here; the ability to effect change in one’s own perception and practice is distinct from simple possession of facts. Rather, how one has cared or failed to care about these facts, how we make them *matter*, is what is crucial. What is needed is not additional facts but rather an appropriate realization of the relevance of the facts already at hand. The fundamental difference between the first- and third-person perspectives is precisely a difference in how one cares about facts. Similarly, insight (as will be discussed in detail below) is not about acquiring new facts but rather reconfiguring the relevance of existing facts. Foolishness is not ignorance, even if ignorance can foster foolishness. As we have outlined above, the essence of foolishness is a lack of insight that malforms caring. Knowledgeable fools abound, as Stanovich (2002, 2009) and Sternberg (2002) both note; smart (meaning knowledgeable) people can do very stupid (i.e. foolish) things. Hence, self-transformation is central to wisdom and thus *all* wisdom is inherently *personal* wisdom.

This conception of wisdom finds its roots in the Axial Period, a time when many of the prominent wisdom traditions surveyed by psychologists and cognitive scientists came into existence. The four basic wisdom traditions were founded around 800 to 300 BCE in four geographic regions: Greece, Palestine, India and China (Armstrong, 2007; Bellah, 2005; Eisenstadt, 1982; Jaspers, 2011; Schwartz, 1975). The common feature that distinguished these traditions from their preaxial antecedents is the use of critical thinking to trigger and guide the transformation of personal life narratives with the goal of alleviating violence and its consequent suffering (Bellah, 2005). Bellah, in his review, emphasizes that this change is not

merely the development of theoretical tools but rather the application of these tools to the transformation of narrative and, hence, the self. In the ancient world, any attempt to generate an account of wisdom was situated within the context of an account of foolishness, an account of flourishing and, most importantly, how to navigate from one to the other through a process of personal self-transformation. A theory of wisdom guided one in the process of personal development, whereby one came to recognize the causes of foolishness in one's own life and to cultivate the skills and virtues both to alleviate that foolishness and to produce a flourishing life.

This ancient approach embodies Chisholm's insight that process and product are tightly intertwined. We propose that the modern scientific study of wisdom needs to complement its current taxonomic/product approach with a developmental/process approach. As such, we will seek to emulate the ancient tradition: we will provide a psychological theory of foolishness, a theory of the psychological conditions for the possibility of flourishing, and our theory of cognitive and affective self-transformation that leads one from a life dominated by foolishness to a life pervaded by flourishing. In short, we hope to provide a theory not just of the nature of personal wisdom but a theory of becoming wise.

## Relevance and Insight

What kind of cognitive processes might be central to wisdom? McKee and Barber (1999), after reviewing both *a priori* and empirically based accounts of wisdom, point to the central feature of seeing through illusion and by implication seeing into reality. Wisdom seems to involve a special kind of insight, and this is borne out by the intuition that it is not odd to say 'Sam is not that educated but he is very wise' nor is it odd to say 'Sarah is not that artistic but she is very wise'; however, it does seem quite odd to say 'Sam is not very insightful but he is very wise'. In a recent neuroscientific review of the literature, Meeks and Jeste (2009) explicitly note the importance of insight when they say that one of the central components of wisdom is self-reflection because it 'is an essential prerequisite for insight, which is commonly included in many researchers' concept of wisdom' (Meeks & Jeste, 2009, p. 360). Additionally, Bluck and Glück (2005) also strongly emphasize the central role of insight. However, McKee and Barber note that it is not just any kind of insight that constitutes wisdom. Rather, it is some kind of insight through illusion and into reality. Meeks and Jeste indicate that the insight involved in wisdom also has importantly to do with self-reflection/self-understanding; this is also supported by Levenson (Chap. 10, this volume). The connection here is that illusion is some form of self-deception, so seeing through illusion and into reality involves important insight into one's own cognition and how it might be impeding contact with reality. This type of insight, therefore, involves and enables the self-transformation needed to dispel the illusory processing and facilitate an enhanced interaction with reality. Let us call these *depth* insights because they involve seeing deeper into our cognition, that is, into the patterns and processes of one's own learning and

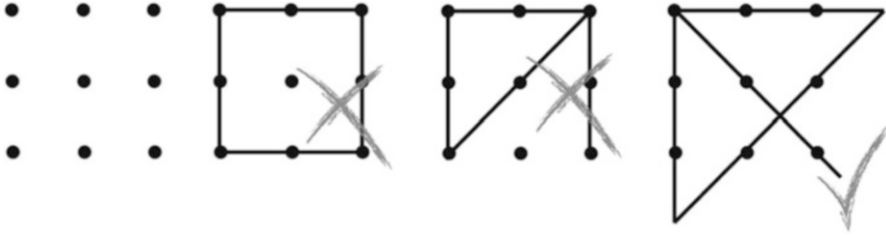
perception, in order to break through misleading appearances to an underlying (deeper) reality. Such insights also involve increased abilities of self-understanding and self-transformation, that is, one becomes a *deeper* person.

McKee and Barber's invocation of the term 'reality' can be seen as philosophically problematic, given the largely constructivist orientation of developmental psychology and cognitive science. However, their point does not rely on an endorsement of naïve realism; we need not commit to any notion of absolute truth. Instead, the word 'real' is being used here in a comparative sense, which means a general enhancement of problem-solving abilities. In this sense, seeing into reality is seeing into the nature of our problems, to be able to understand the challenges before us in a manner that facilitates their solution. It does not mean unlocking the metaphysical secrets of the universe but rather appreciating what needs to be done and knowing how to do it.

Three questions immediately arise when considering insight as central to wisdom. The first is what is insight and why is it so crucial? The second is what is the nature of the special kind of depth insight found within wisdom and how is it related to the more mundane kind? Finally, is the special type of depth insight sufficient for being wise, and if not, how is it integrated into other cognitive processes to help develop wise individuals?

## Relevance Realization

In order to understand the central role of insight and how it could have a comprehensive impact on all of one's life, we need to see insight as a specific and explicit phenomenological experience of a more pervasive and often implicit cognitive process that is central to cognition, namely, *relevance realization* (Vervaeke 1997; Vervaeke, Lillcrap, & Richards, 2009). In order to both explicate the nature of relevance realization and to demonstrate its cognitive centrality, we will consider problem solving. Historically, cognitive science has tried to mechanize problem solving as the following: an initial state, a goal state, a set of operators for moving between states and some set of path constraints that limit the application of the operators. This results in what is conceptualized as a problem space, which immediately falls prey to the issue of combinatorial explosion: even a relatively small set of parameters can result in a vast number of paths through the problem space, a number that exceeds human computational capability. This brings into focus what is sometimes referred to as the finitary predicament (Cherniak, 1990): our finite computational abilities preclude simple search-space procedures as the means by which we approach problem solving (and cognition as a whole); there are simply too much information, too many possibilities and too many contingencies for us to process. As such, algorithmic strategies of exhaustive search are generally doomed to failure. Rather, our ability to solve problems, to navigate combinatorially dense problem spaces, is contingent upon our ability to constrain that space. This puts the focus on the problem formulation aspect of problem solving rather than the



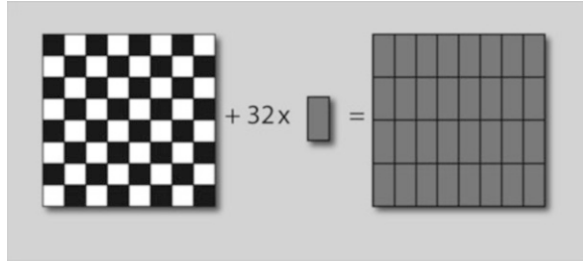
**Fig. 1** The 9-dot problem

execution of the solution – we need to be able to construct problems in a manner that sufficiently constrains the set of available options to a set that is computationally manageable. Again, this is the role of relevance realization: the ability to ignore vast numbers of options (hopefully poor ones) and focus on a small set of potentially fruitful ones.

Thus far, in using the classical search-space framework for describing problems, we are still discussing a massively simplified domain, that of well-defined problems. Even with the combinatorial pitfalls so far encountered, we have not yet fully articulated the difficulties we face in the act of problem solving. Above, we articulated problems in terms of clear initial and goal states, with known sets of operations and constraints allowing us to navigate from initial to goal state. However, such well-defined problems are rare in our day-to-day existence. Rather, we are most often faced with ill-defined problems: problems in which many or even all of the above parameters are mysterious to us. Consider the problem we (the authors) are currently attempting to solve: writing a good chapter for a scholarly anthology. Our initial state? The blank page. The goal state? A good chapter. But what constitutes a ‘good chapter’? There is no homogeneous class of ‘good chapters’ that we can look to as a clear goal state; every chapter, good or otherwise, is largely unique (certainly, we hope to offer something resembling a unique contribution). Moreover, the set of operations and constraints do not seem to offer much utility in solving our problem: we know a lot of things we should not do (i.e. do not plagiarize, adhere to the word limits set forth, etc.), but those proscriptions offer little help in guiding us towards positive action in the service of our goal. As mentioned above, problem *formulation* is the key: the ability to resolve a nebulous intent into a specified problem. In the same way that we must use relevance realization to constrain our set of solutions in a well-defined problem, we must employ this machinery to constrain our problem formulation from the ill-defined set of goals and challenges we face every day.

As such, successful problem solving is contingent upon our relevance realization abilities, which is aptly demonstrated when we consider insight problems. The most famous insight problem is the classical nine-dot problem (e.g., Weisberg & Alba, 1981; see Fig. 1). The nine-dot problem presents an array of dots: three rows of three dots evenly spaced and aligned. The problem is to connect all of the dots with four connected straight lines. This presents a seemingly unsolvable problem, as

**Fig. 2** The mutilated chessboard, part 1



most initial attempts at a solution fall prey to a poor problem formulation: the array of dots is taken to signify a square, whose edges form a boundary. And within that boundary, there is no solution to the problem. However, without that boundary, the solution is simple (simple enough to generally elicit negative reactions from those who are shown the solution after giving up on the problem, often with claims that the solution is a ‘cheat’).

This is the genesis of the often-misused phrase ‘think outside of the box’<sup>1</sup>: the common formulation of the problem precludes its solution. However, by interacting with one’s relevance realization machinery, one can reframe the problem in a way that enables the solution. Another good example of this is the mutilated chessboard problem. Consider a standard chessboard: an  $8 \times 8$  array of alternating black and white squares. It is trivial to see that the entire board can be covered with a set of 32 dominos (each of which is a rectangle precisely the size of two adjoining squares), without overlap or overhang (see Fig. 2).

However, if two diagonally opposite corners are removed, can the board be completely covered by 31 dominos without overlap or overhang (see Fig. 3)? Well, mathematically, initially, it seems so: the board has 64 squares and is coverable with 32 dominos; remove two squares and we are left with 62 squares to be covered by 31 dominos. And yet, attempts to produce a pattern of dominos that perfectly covers this mutilated chessboard always fail. Over and over, people tasked with this problem try various covering strategies and generally come to believe that the board cannot be covered, but are unable to provide a proof of this impossibility other than their own repeated failure.

This is due to a poor problem formulation: the board is seen as a grid with simple arithmetic properties, which then result in large number of possible covering configurations. On the other hand, if one considers the colours of the chessboard, the solution becomes simple: a given domino must cover both a white and black square, but removing diagonally opposite corners results in the loss of two squares

<sup>1</sup> Weisberg and Alba (1981) explicitly asked subjects to ‘go outside the box’ in an attempt to facilitate the solution of the problem. They found that this admonition had very little effect, sufficiently so that Weisberg and Alba called the very existence of insight into question. This undermines the cultural currency of the commonly used phrase; it has been empirically shown to not accomplish precisely what we seek to accomplish when we use it. Saying “be insightful” does not in fact provoke insight.



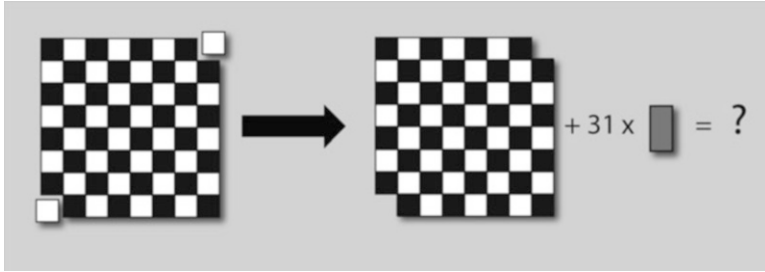


Fig. 3 The mutilated chess-board, part 2

of the same colour. As such, the board cannot be covered as specified, because an unequal number of black and white squares remain. Note how the framing of the problem is essential in its solution: treating it as a covering problem results in intractability, while focusing on the colours of the squares results in a clear, simple solution. Insight problems are good examples of the central nature of relevance realization and also reveal the value of being able to purposefully interact with that relevance machinery.

If we step back, we can consider problem solving in increasingly abstract scales; simple interaction with the world is the messiest, most ill-defined problem of all. Acting in the world involves the consideration of the consequences of those actions in diverse domains from the simple mechanical, to the social, all the way up to the moral and ethical. As Dennett argued in 1984, any cognitive agent, to be an actor as opposed to a mere behavior, must consider side-effects. This consideration of consequences is an extremely broad domain of combinatorial entanglement: any action will result in an uncountably large set of consequences. A small subset of these will comprise our intended goals, while the rest fall under the broad heading of side effects. The difficulty lies in the appropriate treatment of side effects – the relevance of our goals is clear, but only some of the side effects are worth considering, while others are immaterial to the matter at hand. As has been noted before, this set of relevant side effects is extremely contextually sensitive and is not a stable, homogeneous class. How then, do we manage to navigate our existence in the face of this sea of information? We cannot evaluate all of the incoming data, moment to moment, to arrive at a principled determination of what matters and what does not; to attempt to do so would paralyse us into inactivity in even the simplest of circumstances. Rather, we must be able to *ignore* the vast majority of this information. This is the heart of relevance realization: to be able to usefully ignore information in a contextually sensitive manner so as to enable our actions. Taken together, combinatorial complexity in problem solving, the largely ill-defined nature of most problems and the consideration of consequences serve to indicate the centrality of our relevance realization machinery.

Thus, relevance realization is central; it involves the ability to frame our cognition and, most importantly, to do this *flexibly*, that is, to be able to reframe. This ability to reframe how we find things relevant is sometimes experienced as the

‘aha’ moment called an insight experience. However, if the above arguments are correct, there is a more implicit form of insight (i.e., relevance realization and reframing) that is pervasive and crucial to our successful learning and interaction with the world. For the purposes of the study of wisdom, we need to specify the concept of relevance further.

## Importance, Co-relevance and Transcendence

Relevance is a broad term; for the purposes of the discussion at hand, we can divide relevance into three broad categories. We need to note that there is a difference between two pieces of information being relevant to each other, for example, how the words of this sentence are all *co-relevant* to each other, and how the sentence is relevant to you the reader, that is, how *important* this sentence is to you. Co-relevance is how pieces of information belong together, while importance is how they belong to an individual. Importance signifies information that is relevant to satisfying the individual’s goals, while co-relevance is about patterns in information that help us to find and make use of important information. These patterns help us to overcome our pervasive problems in managing the information we get from the world. This information is generally partial, polluted with irrelevant information, and is (as we have seen) too vast to exhaustively search. By finding patterns of co-relevance, we can facilitate the discovery of important information. Some of the patterns we realize are patterns in events. This patterning gives us the ability to intervene in causal processes, that is, it affords us *knowing how* to interact with the world. This is our *procedural* knowledge. We can also find patterns of patterns, that is, higher-order patterns. Especially important are finding patterns that are invariant across many different contexts and are multiply realized in many different causal processes. Such patterns are indications of causal conditions as general principles. Knowledge of such principles that constrain and enable how events unfold is knowledge of facts. This is our *knowing that* something is the case. It is our *propositional knowledge*.<sup>2</sup>

In addition to co-relevance and importance, there is a third aspect to the phenomenology of relevance. As inherently social creatures, we need to be relevant to others, and we need to say and do things that are relevant to others. Not only does information need to belong together and to us, but we also need to emit and transmit information that can belong to others, that is, we need to participate in and belong to a group. Loneliness and alienation are powerful experiences of suffering that indicate to us that we are somehow lacking in this dimension of relevance. This is the form of relevance that carries us beyond ourselves. Let us call this dimension *transcendence*. The knowledge of these patterns of participation and identification

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<sup>2</sup> Note that here we are invoking a version of dual processing theory, as reviewed in Stanovich (2002).

is our *perspectival* knowledge.<sup>3</sup> Perspectival knowledge is not just knowledge of how events are relevant to each other or how facts are relevant to each other. It is knowledge of how facts are relevant to events (constrain and enable sequences of events) and how events are relevant to facts (how events can change constraining and enabling conditions). This enables one to narratively know what it is like to be in a particular situation, that is, to participate in it with a particular role/identity. This is to have a perspective. It enables one to be relevant to the world.

So, to summarize, there are three dimensions to relevance realization: co-relevance, importance and transcendence. These abilities to realize relevance support finding different kinds of patterns: there are patterns in events, which afford procedural knowledge; patterns in facts, which afford propositional knowledge; and, finally, patterns in participation, which afford perspectival knowledge.

## Science, Expertise and Wisdom

Science is largely the project of finding co-relevant patterns of facts that are expressible as propositional knowledge. The kind of insight found in science is theoretical and explanatory insight. How might wisdom differ from scientific knowledge, and what kind of insight is specific to it? Since wisdom is tied to both self-transformation and the cultivation of a good life, it stands to reason that wisdom must centre upon the procedural knowledge that realizes the important information that affords one the ability to intervene in the causal processes of self-transformation and the construction of a good life. However, this is not to say that propositional knowledge will play no role. The wise person must be able to acquire and use the propositional knowledge of causal principles and conditions that factually constrain (and enable) the processes of self-transformation and the cultivation of a good life. So the wise person must have good insight into the important information that facilitates beneficial causal intervention into the self and towards the cultivation of a good life. The wise person must also have good insight into those causal principles and facts that bear upon these processes of self-intervention. Moreover, he or she must have crucial insight into how the procedural and propositional knowledge are perspectivally relevant to each other. Specifically, how the procedural knowledge of self-intervention and the propositional knowledge of factual constraint interact and how to advantageously manage that interaction.

Expertise is largely about finding co-relevant patterns of events that are expressible as sophisticated procedural knowledge. The kind of insight found in expertise is *intuition* (Hogarth, 2001). How might wisdom differ from expertise? One significant difference is that expertise is largely value neutral. One can use one's expertise for good or for evil, yet wisdom seems to be inherently virtuous: it can only be about making life good. Also, expertise seems to be limited to specific domains with redundant features that support specific practice and provide feedback (Anders

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<sup>3</sup> We owe this idea to work currently being done with Greg Katsoras.

Ericsson & Towne, 2010; Vicente & Wang, 1998). In contrast, wisdom is a higher-order construct that informs cognition in general. It is not domain specific, and in this way, it is more like intelligence and relevance realization in its broadly general scope (see below on intelligence and relevance realization). Wisdom is needed in all aspects of life because there are no contexts that are not threatened by foolishness and self-deception or that cannot afford opportunities for contributing to a good life; there is no act that cannot be done either foolishly or wisely. In this way, wisdom seems to be much more like a cognitive style (see below) in its broad application. This is not to say that procedural knowledge will not play a significant role in wisdom, it is just that this procedural knowledge of the wise person must be integrated with propositional knowledge about important factual constraints and causal principles that govern the transformations of selves, and that this integration always takes place in light of the perspective of a good life for human beings. Wisdom involves the perspectival knowledge of saying and doing things that are highly relevant to creating good lives for human beings. Wisdom therefore involves seeing the world comprehensively in such a way that one can regulate one's actions into alignment with realizing a good life. Wisdom involves the cultivation of character, which is a procedural system more comprehensive than expertise and that is intricately integrated with perspectival knowledge of what it is like to be a self leading a good life.

All this talk about kinds of knowledge may give the impression that wisdom is largely an intellectual affair. However, this would be to misconstrue the nature of relevance realization. Relevance realization is always a matter of the selective direction of attention, the appraisal of value and the rationing and commitment of processing resources. It is simultaneously attentional, affective and motivational. Relevance realization largely concerns how you *care about* and *care for* information. Since it involves selection, judgment of value and the rationing of resources, it can be evaluated according to standards of rationality. However, the rationality involved will not be the rationality of theoretical argumentation but a rationality of construal and caring, that is, it will be a type of rationality that prominently figures in depth insights.

## **Adaptivity and Self-Organization**

The third overall point about relevance realization concerns an important theoretical feature. In a very deep sense, we cannot theoretically define the content of relevance. Science requires homogenous and invariant classes of features in order to support broad inductive generalizations. Any set of entities that does not form a homogenous or stable class cannot be the basis of a scientific definition. So, for example, there cannot be a science of things that happen on Tuesday or a science of white things (Fodor, 2000). In a similar manner, any information that we find relevant does not form some stable or homogenous class. Things we find relevant one minute can be completely irrelevant the next. The classes of things we can find relevant are

extremely heterogeneous. We can find things that happen on Tuesdays relevant or all white things relevant. This has two important consequences (see Vervaeke et al., 2009 for a more developed version of the following argument). The first is that there cannot be a theory of relevance; there can only be a theory of relevance *realization*. However, this is no cause for despair: consider that the class of features that make any creature fit, in a Darwinian sense, is neither stable nor homogenous. There is no theory of fitness. Natural selection is a theory of how fitness is continually being realized and re-realized in the world. Fitness is inherently pluralistic. What it is differs greatly from time to time and place to place, on many different scales. In contrast, the processes that generate it are universal, so it is not an arbitrary or purely relativistic phenomenon. In the same way, what counts as relevant differs from time to time and place to place, but the processes that realize it are universal and therefore non-arbitrary and non-relativistic. It is important not to confuse the universality of processing and the relativity of content. While such a theory admits of many possible instantiations of wisdom, it nevertheless affords discriminatory evaluation – it is possible to determine what is and is not wise by the application of the process model. As such, while not privileging a specific individual or tradition as defining wisdom, this theory nevertheless allows for the principled distinction of the wise from the unwise necessary for any scientific account of wisdom.

Since relevance cannot be pre-specified nor made constant in terms of its content, this means that, like the process of evolution, it must be a self-organizing and self-defining process (see Lewis, 2000 for a discussion of the nature of self-organizing systems within development). Evolutionary processes are constantly redefining *from within evolution* what it means to be fit. Likewise, relevance realization must constantly be redefining *from within relevance realization* what it means for information to be relevant. This in turn means that if relevance realization is central to both cognition and wisdom, then both cognition and wisdom must also be self-organizing and self-defining processes to some significant degree. It also means that wisdom is an inherently pluralistic phenomenon. What counts as wise is going to vary from time to time and place to place. However, the self-organizing and self-defining processes of relevance realization that comprise wisdom are universal, and therefore, there can be a science of how wisdom is realized within cognitive processes. This means that in a deep sense, there cannot be a universal and complete product theory of wisdom.

The self-organizing nature of relevance realization helps to explain both its adaptive nature and how it is realized in the brain. Also, the concept of self-organization makes important contributions to a theory of foolishness. Perkins (2002) has argued that a specific form of self-organizing processing is responsible both for making the brain adaptive and, importantly, how this can be a source of foolishness. Following the seminal work of Bak, Tang, and Wiesenfeld (1987), he argues that the human brain demonstrates *self-organizing criticality*. Consider a pile of sand that has a stream of sand falling onto its apex. The causal constraints of gravity and friction enable the sand pile to organize itself into a cone shape. This cone shape channels the sand in such a manner to reinforce the cone. So we see a feedback loop in which the shape of the pile directs the sand, which helps to further

shape the pile. For a period, the feedback loop maintains the system's stability. However, at some point, the sand pile becomes too tall for its base, and there is an avalanche. This is a period of instability and a loss of integrity for the system. However, this instability makes possible a wider base for the sand that then starts to constrain the placement of the sand, and the whole system has now reorganized into a newer, more stable one.

Perkins argues that much of cognition runs in a similar manner. The brain is a dynamical system with multiple feedback loops that create periods of stable organization followed by transition periods of instability in response to inputs to the system. These periods make possible new emergent structures that reorganize and restabilize the system. There is now considerable evidence that the brain works this way at many levels and scales of analysis (Beggs & Plenz, 2003, 2004; Bassett, Meyer-Lindenberg, Achard, Duke, & Bullmore, 2006; Bullmore & Sporns, 2009). Perkins argues that this is how most decisions are made, in what he calls 'emergent activity switching'. The brain is like the pile of sand receiving input from the world. Like the pile receiving more sand, the brain configures itself into a stable feedback loop of activity. But as the input to the brain changes, the brain goes through a transition period of instability that affords a new structure of activity, and this is how the brain constantly redesigns its behaviour in order to adjust to changes in the environment. The brain switches activities in an emergent, self-organizing manner. This helps to explain how the brain is constantly making 'decisions' about when and how to switch activities and modes of processing without any direct deliberative decision-making. It also helps to explain how the brain switches activities under circumstances that are too rapid for deliberation (e.g. in the middle of playing sports), yet still in a highly sophisticated and intelligent manner.

Irving, Vervaeke and Ferraro (unpublished manuscript) have recently argued that the self-organizing criticality found in the brain is a powerful way that the brain implements the self-organizing process of relevance realization and, moreover, that this is the basic ability that makes us intelligent. This is evident in that relevance realization has a central role at every level of cognition; likewise, self-organizing criticality is found in the brain at all scales and levels of analysis. Likewise, this helps to explain how the self-organizing criticality of emergent activity switching results in sophisticated and intelligent behaviour. With its self-organizing criticality, the brain engages in a kind of ongoing opponent processing between integration and differentiation of information processing. This means that the brain is constantly complexifying its processing, simultaneously integrating as a system while differentiating component parts. In this way, the brain is continually adapting to a dynamically complex environment. One important property of such self-complexification in any system is that it results in emergent functions and abilities for that system. Complex systems can do more while retaining their integrity as systems. The brain is thus constantly transcending itself in its ability to realize relevant information. It is constantly evolving its cognitive fitness to its environment. So the connection between relevance realizing self-organizing criticality and intelligence helps to explain how brains can be dynamically intelligent in a dynamically complex world; see Takahashi (Chap. 12, this volume) for a similar

elaboration on cognition as a dynamic self-organizing system and the role of complexification. However, this connection has yet more promise, offering significant insights into a process theory of wisdom via a process theory of foolishness.

## Foolishness as Parasitic Processing

Perkins (2002) argues that the emergent activity switching that makes one so adaptive is also the source of human folly, which he defines as maladaptive behaviour that is not explained by ignorance (lack of factual knowledge) nor by lack of intelligence. His idea is that the emergent activity switching very much has a life of its own: the feedback loops that constitute it are self-reinforcing and self-maintaining, robust and resilient. They can become very complex and stable structures of behaviour. In a manner analogous to a computer virus, the dynamical processes of the brain can get caught up in self-destructive feedback loops that are very compulsive and highly resistant to change because they have hijacked the self-organizing criticality of the brain. Foolishness is *parasitic processing*. Figure 4 provides a schematic example of such parasitic processing. In it, we can see how various construals, biases and factors of cognitive processing such as encoding specificity can all powerfully reinforce one another such that a complex, compulsive (because of positive feedback) and resilient/resistant self-organizing system can take shape within one's cognition. It is a system that warps our sense of reality and robs life from us. Ironically, the very thing that enables our intelligence and makes us adaptive, that is, complex self-organization, is also what makes us vulnerable to foolishness.

This proposal by Perkins leads us to make an important suggestion: perhaps wisdom involves the purposeful cultivation of self-organizing processes within cognition that enhance depth insights and the rationality of framing. Many schools of thought suggest that wisdom involves just such a self-organizing nature. For example, Taoism emphasizes that wisdom involves becoming an empty vessel for the Tao. Buddhism emphasizes that the eightfold path should be understood as an eight-spoked wheel in which all the components feed into each other and 'roll' along. The Platonic tradition emphasizes the importance of a dialogue between people that has a life of its own. The Neo-platonic tradition emphasizes the advent of the one being something that happens to someone seeking enlightenment. Csikszentmihalyi and Rathmunde (1990) emphasize the importance of 'flow' to wisdom. In short, it is commonly believed that the pursuit of wisdom involves the cultivation of the conditions for wisdom, but that wisdom itself takes shape within individuals and very much has a life of its own. In this sense, wisdom is the obverse of the parasitic processing we see at work in foolishness. It is plausible that the only way to deal with the dynamic self-organizing nature of foolishness is with a counteractive self-organizing system within cognition and behaviour.

This common element between the basic natures of both foolishness and wisdom suggests another important theoretical insight. Thus far, the terms 'wisdom' and

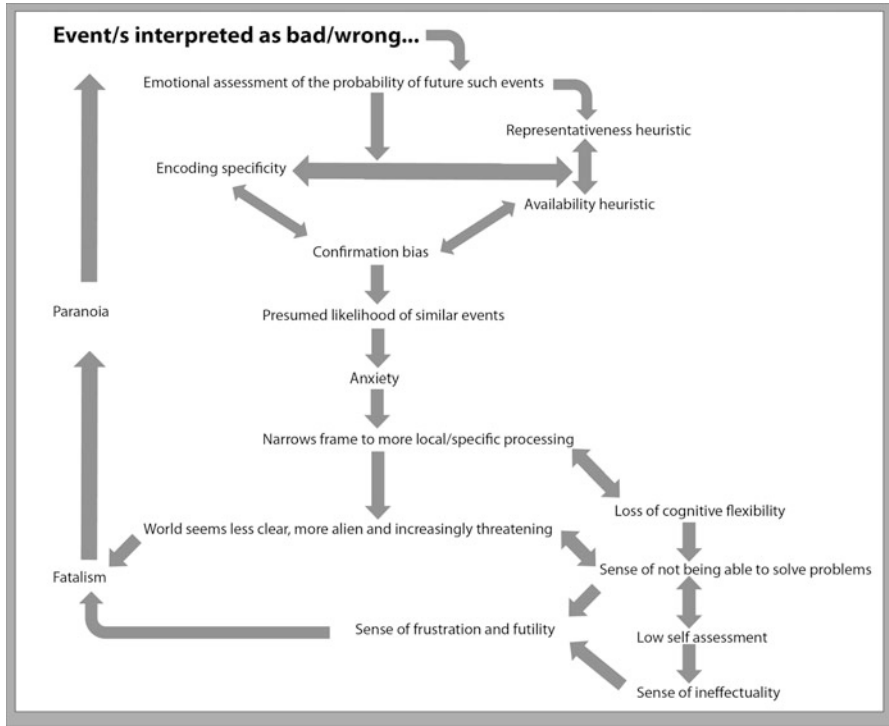


Fig. 4 Foolishness as parasitic programming

‘foolishness’ have been treated as categorical concepts. However, given their common machinery, a machinery that pervades human cognition in general, it makes sense to consider wisdom and foolishness as opposed points on a single continuum.

As it stands, Perkins’ theory has much going for it in that it helps dissolve the seeming paradox of foolishness, that is, how it is that knowledgeable and intelligent people can perform stupid actions. There is no paradox, in that foolishness is not simply a matter of lacking factual knowledge, nor does it involve any mysterious processing. Rather, the very same processing that makes us intelligent also makes us vulnerable to foolishness; foolishness is, in this sense, inevitable.

### Rationality and Wisdom

However, there are two important and related lacunae in Perkins’ account. The first is that Perkins has not really explained the self-deceptive nature of foolishness, only its self-destructive nature. If we return to Figure 4, we can see that an important element of the self-reinforcing nature of depression is the attributional bias that shapes one’s perception of one’s circumstances. This damaged construal of



situations is among the types of illusions that wisdom allows one to penetrate. If wisdom ameliorates the self-destructive nature of foolishness, it will do so through cognitive processes that see through the illusions of self-deception. Second, while Perkins names top-down processes that tune and manage emergent activity switching, their overall place in the cognitive ontology is left unclear. Perkins does not explain how a process other than our own intelligence can make use of itself to redesign how that very intelligence is being applied. We argue, following Stanovich (Stanovich, 2002, 2005, 2009; Stanovich & West, 2000), that these processes are processes of *rationality*, which are derived from but also measurably distinct from intelligence. However, we argue that Stanovich's account of self-deception, while valuable, is inadequate for a theory of wisdom.

Stanovich (Stanovich, 2002, 2005, 2009; Stanovich & West, 2000) argues that what he calls dysrationalia is largely due to a failure of reflectively cultivating and applying a cognitive style that protects propositional processing from interference by procedural processing. Very often, intelligent and knowledgeable people allow themselves to use procedural processing when propositional processing is needed. People sometimes use an intuitive judgment as the basis for a given belief rather than relying upon explicit inference. For example, people will use the ease of remembering or the vividness of a mental image to assess the probability of some event rather than relying upon good inferences drawn from readily available information – these are, respectively, the availability and representativeness heuristics/biases (Tversky & Kahneman, 1974). Stanovich (2002, 2009) has good evidence that this failure is not due to a lack of intelligence and that intelligence is largely not predictive of the ability to behave rationally. Instead, what is missing is a *cognitive style* that can be cultivated and applied through reflective awareness (i.e. a metacognitive, phenomenological awareness, not a theoretical awareness) of both our propositional and procedural processing so that their relationship is properly managed. A cognitive style is a configuration of domain-general abilities of directing attention, valuation and motivation that produces a particular salience landscape within which one undertakes one's tasks. This sense of 'cognitive style' is derived from Kozhevnikov (2007) and is exemplified by Stanovich's use of Baron's active open-mindedness (Baron 2008) and Langer's mindfulness (Langer, 1989, 1997). Cognitive styles, in this way, are learned configurations of heuristics rather than temperamental preferences in processing.<sup>4</sup> We need a cognitive style that directs attention, valuation and motivation such that propositional information should be processed via formal inferential procedures, that is, what we need is a cognitive style that protects and promotes the *rationality of computation*. This is a

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<sup>4</sup> A distinction needs to be made here between temperament and style; historically, the concept of temperament in developmental psychology refers to some innate element of self or personality, which expresses itself in certain preferences and behaviours. In contrast, the term 'style' has usually referred to an *acquired* set of sensitivities and abilities. This can lead to some confusion, as 'style' can be taken to be equivalent to manner, which could be due either to innate temperament, learned style, or both. For the purposes of this chapter, 'cognitive style' specifically invokes the historical concept of an acquired suite of abilities and sensitivities.

reflective monitoring and managing of cognition that insures that propositional information is being properly encoded and manipulated by formal inferential procedures such as logic and probability theory.

There are key ideas within Stanovich's theory with which we strongly agree. The first is that wisdom (the rationality for overcoming foolishness) is a matter of reflection, that is, it crucially involves directing attention to the medium of cognitive processing rather than the content of the cognitive product, such as a new belief or decision to act. Rationality, as a cognitive style, is not directed primarily at the content of one's beliefs but rather the process by which beliefs are generated and validated. Being rational means, in part, that one's cognitive medium of computational processing is salient. The second insight with which we agree is that self-deception involves conflict and misalignment between different cognitive processes. Finally, the third is that rationality is not a matter of simple intelligence but rather how intelligence is reflectively applied to its own operations through the cultivation of cognitive styles. Such cognitive styles (Kozhevnikov, 2007; Sternberg, 1998) involve learned skills and sensitivities of *learning to learn* (Harlow, 1949; Mercado, 2008).

## Rationally Self-Transcending Rationality

Intelligence can be directed not only to learning about and interacting with the world to produce a particular cognitive product, for example, some knowledge or behaviour, but it can also be directed to learning about the cognitive processes of learning itself, that is, it can become learning to learn. An habitual way of learning to learn results in a cognitive style for an organism. Such learning to learn means that an organism notices important patterns in how it is processing information and intervenes in those patterns, that is, restructures them, in order to improve how the information is being processed. Rationality presupposes such learning to learn, for without the ability to intelligently intervene in its own cognition a creature cannot be held responsible for its cognition nor deemed subject to rational standards. Such intervention also means that the creature is *using intelligence to improve how intelligence is being used and developed*. This leads to an interesting suggestion: if rationality is the reflective application of intelligence to the use and development of intelligence, then perhaps, in a similar manner, wisdom is the reflective application of rationality to the use and development of rationality. Perhaps wisdom is *using rationality to improve how rationality is being used and developed*. However, we should note that such learning to learn is often initially associated with insight since insight involves restructuring what patterns one finds relevant. It involves altering how co-relevance is being realized so to better facilitate finding and using information that is important to the organism. Learning to learn would also be needed by the depth insights associated with wisdom, since these involve self-reflective insights, that is, insights into one's own cognitive processing.

We argue that in addition to the rationality of computation advocated by Stanovich, we also need a rationality of framing. As previously argued, this framing is always simultaneously a matter of attention, motivation and valuation. We will call this a rationality of construal; however, this should not be conflated with our previously articulated notion of perspectival rationality, what we will later articulate in more depth as our rationality of communion. We argue that the self-deception of foolishness is largely about being locked into a feedback loop that maintains and reinforces an inappropriate construal of problems, that is, a misframing of problems and situations, that cause one to misjudge the co-relevance and importance of the information presented (see Fig. 4). This is why our foolish behaviour persists – it leverages the same adaptive self-organization that underlies all of our intelligent cognition. It possesses the same persistence, resilience and growth that are the hallmarks of human adaptivity. In short, self-deception is a self-imposed lack of the cognitive flexibility needed for depth insights, so that we trap ourselves in illusion. This entrapment follows from the self-organizing nature of relevance realization; this means that a rationality of construal will have to be one that can counteract the formation and persistence of such parasitic processing. We will also argue, following the literature on insight problem solving (Adams et al., 1988; Lockhart, Lamon, & Gick, 1988; Needham & Begg, 1991; Schooler, Ohlsson, & Brooks, 1993; Weisberg & Alba, 1981), that factual knowledge is largely impotent to overcome such misframing and parasitic processing. Instead, highly related skills of construal, self-awareness and self-regulation are needed to overcome the misframing at the heart of foolishness. These skills need to be deployed in a self-organizing system in order to counteract parasitic processing. Computation alone is largely inadequate to the task of realizing the depth insights needed to reframe the problems of life and escape foolishness. Moreover, computation is also largely inadequate on its own for manifesting the self-regulation needed to change patterns of behaviour. Instead, success or failure in self-regulation is largely dependent upon the skills and sensitivities of construal (Ayduk & Mischel, 2002; Myrseth & Fishbach, 2009).

So, in addition to a reflective cognitive style that protects and promotes a rationality of computation, the wise person needs to develop a reflective cognitive style that protects and promotes the rationality of construal, that is, how we are framing events so that we may interact with the world free from parasitic processing. The wise person would also need to have skills and sensitivities for how to co-ordinate these two cognitive styles, both within themselves and also in the context of a larger community. They would need to know how to govern the relationships between the rationality of computation and the rationality of construal, and balance these within a rationality of communion (both inter- and intrapersonal communion). The manner in which these cognitive styles are coordinated within an individual is an internalization of how we perspectively manage our belonging to other people and our participation in a culture. One learns how to get the two cognitive styles to belong together by internalizing knowing what it is like to belong to a social group, that is, knowing what it is like for different takes on the world to fit together (Pascual-Leone, 1990). In a similar manner, one learns how

to commune with one's envisioned future self leading a good life, and thereby how to belong to one's future self, by means of internalizing how one currently communes with others. In this way, the rationality of communion involves perspectively appropriating one's development in order to transform oneself into a better future self. This involves internalizing the perspectives of appropriate role models. One powerful way to enhance learning to learn is to look at one's processing from the perspective of someone who is performing better. From these role models, the person cultivating wisdom would, through such learning to learn, come to emulate a higher-order cognitive style of perspectival rationality for the application and co-ordination of the lower-order rationalities of computation and construal. This higher-order process would realize a cognitive meta-style for rationally improving how rationality is being applied and developed. Wisdom is such a rationally self-transcending rationality.

Stanovich has considerable work supporting the conclusion that Baron's *active open-mindedness* (AOM; Baron, 2008) is an optimal cognitive style for a rationality of computation (Stanovich & West, 2000; Stanovich, 2002, 2005, 2009). AOM means actively looking for the ways in which bias warps and thwarts our problem solving. A bias is when a heuristic of procedural processing is being used on a problem for which computational processing is better for achieving the goals of the problem. A bias is a misplaced heuristic that interferes with computational processing. AOM requires learning about cognitive biases and actively searching for them in one's processing in order to actively counteract their effect by applying more formal computational procedures (Baron, 2008). It should be noted that AOM is applied to deduction, induction and abduction (plausibility reasoning) as well as to their successful integration within reasoning. AOM enhances our sense of how information is relevant to and within our propositional grasp of facts. It enhances our sense of *reasonableness* and affords that good vision of factual reality that Aristotle called *sophia* (Aristotle, Nichomachaen Ethics).

However, a rationality of construal is also needed. Langer (1989, 1997) and Langer and Moldoveanu (2000) and current independent work within clinical psychology (Baer, 2003; Hayes & Feldman, 2004; Teasdale, 1999) and neuroscience (Farb et al., 2007) point to the cognitive style of mindfulness as being very important for comprehensively transforming and improving the framing of situations so as to avoid becoming trapped in self-defeating construals of situations and problems. Mindfulness allows one to see through parasitic processing by paying attention not to one's propositional encoding or inferences but to how one is paying attention to situations, that is, to how one is distinguishing relevance from irrelevance. This involves training skills in shifting the direction, aspect and scale of attention and thereby enhancing the cognitive flexibility of construal. Mindfulness enhances our situational insight, foresight (insight into potentials within situations) and mindsight (insight into others' cognition; Siegel, 2007, 2010), and the interaction between them. These skills are trained in mindfulness cultivation practices such as meditation and contemplation. Mindfulness is an optimal cognitive style for the rationality of construal; for more about mindfulness, see Levenson (Chap. 10, this volume) and Rosch (Chap. 11, this volume). Mindfulness enhances our sense of how

information is relevant to and within our procedural grasp of events by enhancing our sense of *fluency* and affording that efficacy of interaction with situations that Aristotle called *phronesis* (Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*).

Within the framework of personal wisdom, we can see AOM as an instantiation of *sophia*; just as *sophia* refers to understanding derived from first principles, AOM is the grasping of the first principles of computational cognition. Specifically, AOM allows us to override contextually bound biases in favour of cross-contextual principles of inferences. Likewise, *phronesis* takes form in this framework as mindfulness, a means of tracking and dealing with the contingencies of the psyche and its idiosyncratic development. Mindfulness allows us to tailor our cognition to contextually specific courses of events. Just as *sophia* affords for the planning of long-term goals and *phronesis* makes possible our coping with immediate challenges, AOM facilitates our understanding of the conditions on events, while mindfulness facilitates our tracking of courses of events (Teasdale, 1999).

Wisdom relies upon a meta-style of rationally self-transcending rationality that governs the rational cognitive styles of mindfulness and AOM in a manner that enhances the developmental complexification of information processing that constitutes basic general intelligence. Wisdom involves simultaneously differentially developing each cognitive style of rationality and integrating them into a self-organizing system which enhances relevance realization overall. We become more fluently reasonable and more reasonable in our fluency. However, while this framework may provide a theory of how foolishness is overcome, which may be the central therapeutic aspect of wisdom, it is questionable that this framework alone will provide for a sufficient account of wisdom. It is very plausible that there is much more to leading a good life than merely avoiding foolishness. As we have argued, a person cultivating wisdom needs to appropriate their own development by learning how to commune with their future flourishing self. A theory of wisdom needs a theory of the cognitive processes that afford such communing and flourishing. There has been a lot of important work by psychologists (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Diener, 2000; Diener, Suh, Lucas, & Smith, 1999; Ryan & Deci, 2000, 2001) and philosophers (Frankfurt, 2006; Kekes, 1986, 1995, 2000, 2005, 2006; Russon, 2009; Wolf & Koethe, 2010) about the cognitive processes that create the conditions for the possibility of a good life. All these theorists realize that wisdom can only, at most, create the conditions under which flourishing can possibly occur. The world must co-operate for an individual to be flourishing; there must be an appropriate political environment, good economic conditions and personal good health.

## The Conditions of Flourishing

By drawing on all of this work, it seems plausible that there are three central dimensions that must be in place in order for an individual to lead a good life. First, the individual must have *subjective well-being* (Diener, 2000; Diener et al., 1999). That is, the individual must judge and experience his or her life as satisfying. Second, the individual's life must be judged and experienced as morally respectable,

both by the individual and by those whose moral judgment he or she respects (Kekes, 1986, 1995, 2000, 2005, 2006). Thirdly, and more recently, Susan Wolf (1997; Wolf & Koethe, 2010) has argued for the independent dimension of *meaning in life*. Meaning in life is to judge and experience oneself as connected appropriately to something that has an important value independent from one's valuing of it. To put it more loosely, one needs to feel connected to something 'bigger' than oneself, or as Wolf puts it, 'subjective attraction meets objective attractiveness' (Wolf & Koethe). To use our terminology, meaning in life is to judge that one has significant transcendence. Thus, the conditions that afford a good life are the judgment and experience of one's life as satisfying, virtuous (morally good) and deeply connected.

A theory of the cognitive conditions that afford achieving such ends would be a theory of the flourishing that is necessary for wisdom. What might those cognitive conditions be? One helpful suggestion that draws these three dimensions together is that a wise person must have a constellation of abilities focused on the making and protection of selves (identities, persons) and communities of selves. It is plausible that conditions of satisfaction (subjective well-being) mark out conditions for the agency necessary for being a self. This is a subjective sense of well-being based on the sense that one has the autonomy and competence to have succeeded and to continue to succeed reliably (not perfectly) in one's projects (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2000, 2001). It is also plausible that meaning in life marks out those conditions that create the kinds of connections that are constitutive of selves, connection such as those between mind and body, mind and mind (both intra- and interpersonal connections) and between mind and world (conditions for action and interaction). It is also plausible that virtue marks out the conditions that protect, as inherently valuable, persons and their communities. The wise person would have depth insights into the processes by which selves/identities/persons are constituted, protected and promoted.

These depth insights mean that the wise person is very focused on the transcendence dimension of relevance realization. The wise person is not only aware of how pieces of information are relevant to each other (co-relevance) or how they are relevant to the wise person himself (importance), but they are also aware of and concerned for how he/she is relevant to others. As we have argued, the wise person is not only concerned with realizing what is relevant, but they are also concerned with saying and doing relevant things. Agency, meaning in life and virtue come together in actions that connect the agent to others in ways that the agent intrinsically values.

## Self-Knowledge

This concern for transcendence means that the self-knowledge involved is not primarily autobiographical knowledge nor narcissistic knowledge. It is the perspectival knowledge of what it is like to be a self and the linked procedural and propositional abilities to cultivate selves. This knowledge results in *knowing what is good for selves and how to bring about what is good for selves*. It means knowing

how to form and share those identity-making connections between mind and body, mind and mind (both intrapersonal and interpersonal connections) and between mind and world that support a sense of successful agency.

The self-knowledge involved also means knowing how to care for the dynamic and reciprocal connections of identification (and therefore identity creation) between agency and meaning in life. It implies skilfully understanding that we want meaning in life that fosters agency and agency that fosters meaning in life, and that we have a process of dynamic reflective equilibrium between them. We sometimes alter which aspects of our *actions* we identify with (agency transformation) under the normative guidance of our sense of meaning in life, that is, we evaluate what kind of agent we are in terms of how it is effecting our meaning in life. For example, we sometimes wonder if our actions are damaging our ability to find and feel at home and at peace in the world. We sometimes realize that our attempts to find satisfaction are undermining our sense of connection. We also sometimes alter those aspects of our meaning in life with which we identify (meaning in life transformation) under the normative guidance of our sense of agency. That is, we evaluate what kind of home in the universe we are making with ourselves and with others in terms of the kinds of agency we are fostering. For example, we may wonder if our meaning in life is causing the existential confusion or foolishness that undermine agency. We sometimes realize that our attempts to connect are undermining our ability to find satisfaction.

Finally, the self-knowledge involved is eudaemonistic in nature. It involves knowing how to create and implement those rules of attitude and conduct that protect selves, their projects and their meaning in life. Such self-knowledge involves knowing how to be virtuous, how to promote virtue and how to protect selves, their projects and meaning in life from vice. This means that self-knowledge involves the perspectival awareness of how to align actions to a self-transcending vision of a good life to which the person cultivating wisdom is committed and to which they belong.

Wise people have knowledge of the nature of selves such that they can promote and protect: agency, meaning in life, the agency meaning in life identity formation relation, and the virtues needed to protect selves, communities of selves and to afford participation in this way of life. Although these four areas of knowledge are analytically distinguishable, in practice, the four greatly interpenetrate and interact. Knowing how to cultivate this dynamic system of knowledge constitutes knowing how to flourish and how to promote and protect flourishing.

## **Sophrosyne as Internalizing the Sage**

How then does one personally enact the cultivation of wisdom in one's own life? We have argued that wisdom requires the cultivation of the cognitive styles of AOM and mindfulness as well as the cognitive meta-style that affords their mutual complexification. We have already discussed practices such as meditation and contemplation for the cultivation of mindfulness and practices such as bias

identification and counteraction for the cultivation of AOM. These practices have already been examined in considerable detail elsewhere (Baron 2008; Bishop et al., 2004; Langer, 1989, 1997; Siegel, 2007; Stanovich, 2009). However, the enactment and training of our proposed cognitive meta-style requires explication. In this cognitive meta-style, one appropriates one's development by managing how one internalizes the perspectives of others and thereby optimizes one's learning to learn. In this way, one coordinates one's perspectival knowledge according to the principles of the rationality of communion.

This can be accomplished by a process we are going to call 'internalizing the sage'. By taking the perspective of the sage on one's cognition, one can enhance learning to learn until one comes to emulate the perspective of the sage. This is a common strategy used by many wisdom traditions in different times and places. For example, St. Paul emphasizes that it is 'not I who live but Christ who lives in me' (Galatians 2:20). Within Buddhism, one is to realize one's own Buddha nature (see Chap. 15 by Ferrari & Weststrate, this volume). Stoicism has been described as the process of becoming like Socrates (Long, 2004). The followers of Epicurus explicitly practised imagining how Epicurus would reflect upon their actions. A plausible explanation of Plato's use of Socratic dialogues is to create a 'spiritual exercise' (Hadot & Chase, 2004; Hadot & Davidson, 1995) for internalizing Socrates and his method of *elenchos*. The Tao Te Ching continually talks about the sage and how the sage sees the world and acts within it. More recently, Baltes and Staudinger have produced empirical evidence that simply imagining talking to another person improves one's performance on tasks related to wisdom (Baltes & Staudinger, 2000). This work indicates that simply viewing one's cognition from the perspective of another does facilitate becoming more insightful. It is reasonable that Vygotsky's concept of internalization within proximal development helps to explain why internalizing someone with more wisdom could even further enhance one's insight (Cox & Lightfoot, 1997; Vygotsky, 1986; Wertsch, 1984; Wertsch, Minick, & Arns, 1984). Why would taking the perspective of the sage be good for overcoming foolishness and affording flourishing? One suggestion is that by taking the perspective of the sage, one comes to have a salience landscape that is similar to that of that sage. Staudinger (Chap. 1, this volume) illustrates this, presenting evidence that simply imagining discussion with a familiar person is insufficient, but rather that 'it is more useful to seek support from someone unknown and trained to support the life-reflection process, such as a psychotherapist or some form of educational intervention'. What is relevant about the sage is what the sage finds relevant: in adopting the perspective of a sage, one tends to find salient those things that a sage would. This is a method for procedurally implementing the factual knowledge we have concerning the good life and revealing that gap between who we are and who we want to be. All of the above wisdom traditions placed a high priority on turning theory into practice. Recently, Kosslyn and Moulton (2008) have described a similar process in athletic training in which mental practice is used to enhance performance. The athlete first stores motion images from the coach. The athlete then tunes the images to his or her own body, but from the third-person perspective. The athlete then compares the imagined action to real actions and shifts



from the third-person perspective to first-person perspective. Finally, the athlete trains to make this action habitual. So it is plausible that internalizing the sage involves both taking the perspective of the sage on one's cognition, as a kind of heightened third-person perspective on one's cognitive processing that enhances learning to learn, and then taking the perspective of the sage on the world, as a kind of heightened first-person perspective that transforms one's salience landscape so as to implement the insights gained through learning to learn. Finally, this orientation is trained until it becomes a habit of mind and a way of life.

Internalizing the sage also engages processes of transforming one's salience landscape, and such salience transformations are key to the self-regulation (Ayduk & Mischel, 2002; Metcalfe & Mischel, 1999; Myrseth & Fishbach, 2009) required to appropriate the development of one's character. In this context, character does not refer to some internal homunculus; it is neither a process nor an event. Rather, one's character is the set of constraints and affordances that define one's cognitive/behavioural repertoire.<sup>5</sup> Character does not make things happen, it makes things *possible*. The wise person, through internalization, rationally identifies with certain developmental paths while disidentifying with others. This second-order identity is one's character. In this way, we move from self-regulation to spontaneous moral and rational agency. A good person fights temptation, a *wise* person learns to be tempted by the good. A wise person is able to intervene on his or her own development such that he or she can move from repressing and suppressing unwanted impulses and urges to being effortlessly attracted to what is rationally and morally appropriate. This is part of the classic metaphor: 'As the child is to the adult, so is the adult to the sage'. As Paul famously put it: 'When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put childish ways behind me' (1 Corinthians 13:11).

Finally, internalizing the sage develops the narrative skills necessary for excellence in perspectival knowing (see Chap. 7 by Ferrari, Weststrate, & Petro, this volume, for the role of narrative within wisdom). Following the ancient Greek wisdom tradition, having the salience landscape of the sage such that one naturally self-regulates so as to realize the good life was called *sophrosyne* (McGhee, 2000; Schmid, 1998). As such, we propose calling the cognitive meta-style upon which wisdom relies *sophrosyne*. In sum, the pursuit of wisdom requires cultivating *sophrosyne* by internalizing the sage, and using *sophrosyne* to govern the complexification of AOM and mindfulness. One can cultivate AOM by becoming aware of inferential bias and actively counteracting it. One can cultivate mindfulness through meditative and contemplative practices that help to break up patterns of parasitic processing. In this way, one cultivates a self-organizing system that enhances and develops the relevance realization central to cognition (see Fig. 5). One improves one's ability to see through foolishness and into the good life.

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<sup>5</sup> This language of affordances and constraints is a hallmark of mathematical modeling within dynamical systems theory.

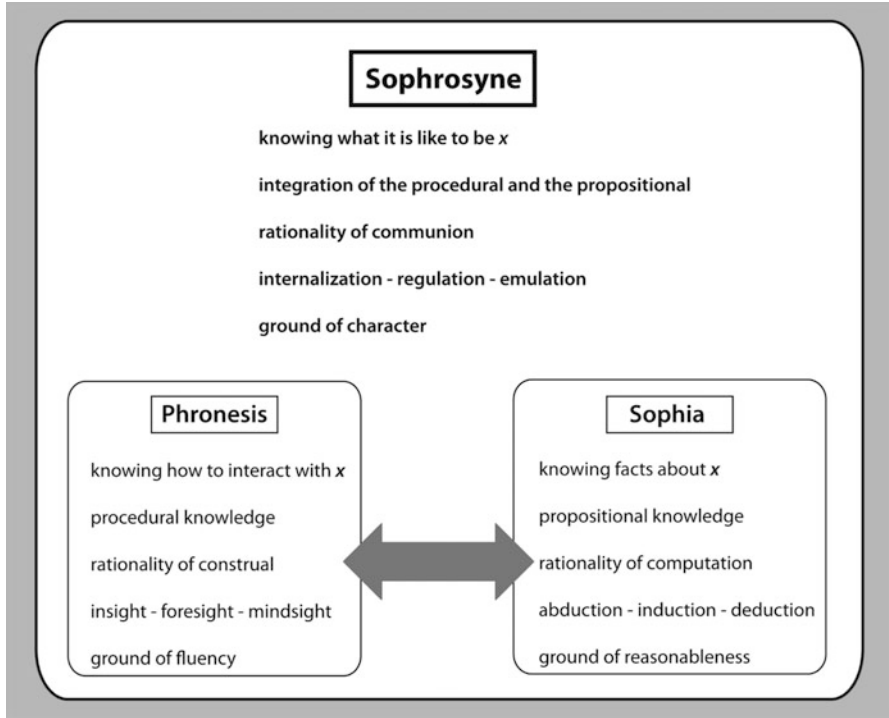


Fig. 5 Wisdom as rationally self-transcending rationality

## Directions for Empirical Research

If wisdom is actually a dynamical system of cognitive styles that afford the complexification of rationality, this suggests several possible lines of empirical investigation and research that can be pursued. One such project that immediately comes to mind is to test to see if wise people demonstrate more mindfulness than control comparisons. There are two strategies that can be pursued: the first is to use some of the standard assessments of mindfulness, while the second (and more important strategy) would be to test to see if this mindfulness is correlated with improved insight abilities and cognitive flexibility. However, for wisdom studies, standard tests of insight and cognitive flexibility alone would be insufficient. It would also be important to test for mindsight (insight into and ability to take on other perspectives) and foresight (insight into opportunities and threats). Standard tests for mindsight and empathy could be adjusted and revised to test for a broader range of abilities, both above and below the norm. Foresight abilities could be tested by using variations on tests for problem finding. It would also be important to see if wise people demonstrate a positive manifold between insight, mindsight and

foresight abilities; much like Spearman's positive manifold for *g*, this would provide strong evidence for the construct of wisdom.

Many standard tests for active open-mindedness could also be used to test for critical detachment, bias awareness and need for cognition<sup>6</sup> (Stanovich & West, 2000). Stanovich's methods for evaluating active open-mindedness could form the basis for the construction of psychometric instruments that would afford much better quantification of the, at present, largely theoretical entities implicated in wisdom. A key point that needs to be investigated by researchers is the positive manifold between tests of mindfulness/insight and tests of active open-mindedness. This is one of the central predictions of the theory; wise people should show significant positive correlation between these two since they have cultivated a mutualism of development between them.

Tests for sophrosyne would include tests of self-regulation. However, simple behavioural outcomes would be insufficient; it is not enough to know that a given subject has engaged in successful self-regulation, but rather, we need to know how and why. Our theory holds that a wise person does not merely thwart or resist temptation but rather calibrates his or her salience landscapes in such a way as to not be drawn to negative behaviours and to be attracted to beneficial ones. This represents a key difference between normal people and those independently deemed wise; a normal person may be able to fight temptation, but a wise person transcends it. If the wise person is better at self-regulation, it is because they find salient things within the tempting situation differently than the normal person. The wise person can intelligently intervene on their salience landscape, and it is this reconfiguration of salience that predicts successful self-regulation.

The delay of gratification methodology is a promising framework for this sort of research, which could be supplemented with psychophysiological data as well. Heart variability (HRV) is increasingly becoming seen as an indicator of both self-regulation and response flexibility (Beauchaine, 2001; Dietrich et al., 2007). By collecting this data as well as self-report measures and behavioural data, in the context of a delay of gratification task, it would be possible to access to some degree how difficult the exercise of self-regulation is for each subject. If our above predictions about the nature of wisdom are correct, not only should our wise subjects be more successful at self-regulation tasks, but they should also show less perturbation in their HRV levels, maintaining uniformly high HRV, even in the face of seeming temptation.

This also offers potential insights into clinical research and interventions: if we get normal people to redirect their attention to mimic the salience landscape of the wiser person, would that afford improved self-regulation? Moreover, we could test if the altered salience landscape of the wiser person is significantly correlated with their concept of the sage's perspective, that is, have they identified with and thereby internalized the sage. One could do this by getting a wiser person to describe how

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<sup>6</sup> 'Need for cognition' refers to that quality in people of seeking mental challenge and learning opportunities.

the sage would size up a situation and what the sage would find salient within it. Next, the candidate wise person could be tested to see if they take a similar perspective in such a situation, that is, one could test what the actual patterns of salience were for the individual through tracking of attention and priming studies to see which objects, relations and aspects of things were in fact salient for the candidate wise person. Finally, we could test to see if there is a predictive relation between sophrosyne and any positive manifold between mindfulness and AOM.

As we can see, wisdom is indeed a cognitively complex (in fact, self-complexifying) phenomenon in need of precisely the sort of integrated theoretical perspective afforded by cognitive science. The cognitive science framework of relevance realization offers a new conceptual vocabulary for theory construction, directions for new and informative empirical investigation and a novel approach to interpreting ancient wisdom traditions. Lastly, it affords the appropriation of such traditions into a modern cultural milieu for the cultivation of personal wisdom. The lens of cognitive science enables us to not only reflect upon wisdom but also to realize it in our very lives.

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# Personal Wisdom in the Balance

Robert J. Sternberg

I came to the study of personal wisdom through a confluence of personal experiences. These experiences continue even until the present day.

First, I had developed a theory of intelligence, the theory of successful intelligence (e.g., Sternberg, 1997). The theory was proving to be reasonably successful as theories go, in that research we were doing seemed to support at least the main aspects of the theory (Sternberg, 2005b). According to the theory, the conventional notion of intelligence is incomplete: It involves memory and analytical aspects of intelligence, but not creative and practical ones, so the theory goes. In order to act intelligently, one needs creative skills to generate new ideas, analytical skills to ascertain whether they are good ideas, and practical skills in order to apply the ideas and persuade others of their value. But I was perplexed by what appeared to be an obvious weakness of the theory. What about someone like Josef Stalin or Mao Tse Tung or Robert Mugabe? All have shown themselves ruthlessly creative in generating ideas about how to stay in power, were analytical in making sure their ideas worked regardless of who else might suffer, and were practical in carrying out their policies, resulting in the impoverishment, imprisonment, suffering, and death of millions of people. But they successfully adapted to the environments in which they lived. Indeed, they shaped these environments to be more or less what they wanted them to be, regardless of the costs to others. One possibility is to say that there are people who are smart sociopaths, but another possibility is to say that whereas the idea of successful intelligence was formulated to combat the narrowness of traditional definitions of intelligence, perhaps this concept of successful intelligence also was too narrow.

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R.J. Sternberg (✉)

Department of Psychology, Oklahoma State University, Whitehurst 101,

Stillwater, OK 74074, USA

e-mail: [robert.sternberg@okstate.edu](mailto:robert.sternberg@okstate.edu)

Second, in my early years as a faculty member—perhaps 5 years into my career—a graduate student asked me for advice regarding which of two jobs she should take. One job was at a highly prestigious university that valued research greatly and teaching only slightly. The other was from a very fine but less prestigious university that was more balanced in its rewarding of teaching and research. The problem was that the particular passion and perhaps excellence of the graduate student was in her teaching. I foolishly recommended that she take the more prestigious position, telling her that if she did not, she always would wonder what would have happened if she had. Unfortunately, she followed my advice. Predictably, it was a disaster. The university did not value her particular strengths; she did not value the value system of the university; and after several years, she and the university parted ways. She went to a university much more concerned with excellence in teaching and has been highly successful there. But my advice steered her wrong. I realized that however smart my advice may have been, it certainly was not wise.

Third, during the 1980s, there was a series of serious business scandals. Firms like Enron, WorldCom, Global Crossing, and Arthur Andersen, among others, were engulfed in scandals perpetrated by individuals who, by almost any standard, seemed to be conventionally intelligent and, arguably, successfully intelligent. Many of the perpetrators went to first-rate colleges and then on to topflight business schools. One Enron CEO, Jeffrey Skilling, was a graduate of the Harvard Business School. Another Enron CEO, Kenneth Lay, had a doctorate in economics. Their fancy educations seemed to have left a gaping hole.

Of course, such scandals did not end in the 1980s. In 2008, the allegedly brilliant minds of Wall Street—certainly they thought themselves brilliant—created a worldwide financial disaster. Having caused financial ruin and bankruptcy for countless people, many of them went on to look for ways further to profit from others' misery. In other words, how could they take the horrible mess they created for others and extract yet more profit from the misery of other people that they had created? In December of 2009, it was discovered that Goldman Sachs, an investment bank, was selling its clients prepackaged mortgage-based securities while betting its own money against the securities they were recommending to their clients. And this was from the most prestigious firm on Wall Street.

Fourth, in between the 1980s and the 2000s were the 1990s, when more genocides occurred than at any time since the Holocaust. Many of these genocides, such as in Rwanda, were planned not by people in the uneducated masses; rather, they were planned by well-educated leaders directing the uneducated masses. In 2010, many contemporary terrorists are not illiterate rascals but rather highly educated men who are, in a word, evil.

The one thing that the various scoundrels described above have in common is intellectual talent or even brilliance accompanied by stunning lack of wisdom. (There might be those who would call them wise, but I show below that they would not qualify as “wise” by the definition to be used in this chapter.) Our society and many others give short shrift to wisdom. Wisdom is usually left out of accounts and assessments of intellectual skills, or at least, of childhood intellectual skills. But

in an age where lack of wisdom seems to be responsible for wars, economic hardship, and societal stagnation, can a society really afford to leave wisdom out of the equation?

## The Concept of Wisdom

Some people would say that wisdom is not relevant to conceiving of, measuring, or teaching children, because wisdom is a characteristic only of the later years of adulthood. Is wisdom truly associated only with older people?

There are different accounts of wisdom and its relation to aging (Sternberg, 2005a). By one account, aging is the key to wisdom—at some age, one somewhat mysteriously becomes wise. By a second account, one is becoming wiser with age, but slowly and incrementally; one is, on this account, building upon the life experiences one has had earlier that have bestowed upon him a steadily increasing supply of wisdom, one that is likely to increase until our last days. By a third account, one is increasingly rapidly losing whatever wisdom one may have gained in our life. And by a fourth account, one has lost whatever wisdom one may have had long ago.

We all have a considerable stake in which of these accounts is correct. As it is, we only can present the evidence, offer our appraisal, and then let the reader, and the young people who depend on us, decide.

There almost certainly is no one trajectory of wisdom with age. In other words, age is not, in and of itself, a variable that is valid for indexing the development of wisdom. Age in itself always has been an “empty” independent variable. Rather, age is a proxy for other things, such as personal growth (Ryff, 1989; Staudinger, & Pasupathi, 2003; Staudinger, 1996), openness to experience (Kramer, 2000), or ability to learn from experience (Sternberg et al., 2000). In the case of wisdom, age has been, in large part, a proxy for experience. But experience does not create wisdom. Rather, one’s ability to profit from and utilize one’s experience in a reflective and directed way is what determines how wisdom develops. Thus, using age as an independent variable can distract us from understanding the cognitive and other mechanisms involved in the development and decline of wisdom.

## What Is Wisdom?

Different approaches have been taken to figuring out what wisdom is, in general, and what personal wisdom is, in particular (Staudinger & Glück, 2011a, 2011b; Sternberg & Jordan, 2005). Consider, in turn, philosophical, implicit-theoretical, and explicit-theoretical approaches to the nature of wisdom.

## ***Philosophical Approaches***

Philosophical approaches have been reviewed by Robinson (1990; see also Robinson, 1989, with regard to the Aristotelian approach in particular; Kupperman, 2005; Labouvie-Vief, 1990; Osbeck & Robinson, 2005; for further reviews). Robinson points out that, in the Platonic dialogues, there are three different senses of wisdom: wisdom as (a) *sophia*, which is found in those who seek a contemplative life in search of truth; (b) *phronesis*, which is the kind of practical wisdom shown by statesmen and legislators; and (c) *episteme*, which is found in those who understand things from a scientific point of view.

## ***Implicit-Theoretical Approaches***

Implicit-theoretical approaches to wisdom have in common the search for an understanding of people's folk conceptions of what wisdom is. Thus, the goal is not to provide a "psychologically true" account of wisdom, but rather an account that is true with respect to people's beliefs, whether these beliefs are right or wrong.

Holliday and Chandler (1986a, 1986b) used an implicit-theories approach to understanding wisdom. I have taken a related approach.

I reported (Sternberg, 1985, 1990a) a series of studies investigating implicit theories of wisdom. In one study, 200 professors each of art, business, philosophy, and physics were asked to rate the characteristicness of each of the behaviors obtained in a prestudy from the corresponding population with respect to the professors' ideal conception of each of an ideally wise, intelligent, or creative individual in their occupation. Laypersons were also asked to provide these ratings but for a hypothetical ideal individual without regard to occupation. Correlations were computed across the three ratings. In each group except philosophy, the highest correlation was between wisdom and intelligence; in philosophy, the highest correlation was between intelligence and creativity. The correlations between wisdom and intelligence ratings ranged from .42 to .78 with a median of .68. For all groups, the lowest correlation was between wisdom and creativity. Correlations between wisdom and creativity ratings ranged from  $-.24$  to .48 with a median of .27. The only negative correlation ( $-.24$ ) was for ratings of professors of business.

In a second study, 40 college students were asked to sort three sets of 40 behaviors each into as many or as few piles as they wished. The 40 behaviors in each set were the top-rated wisdom, intelligence, and creativity behaviors from the previous study. The sortings then each were subjected to nonmetric multidimensional scaling. For wisdom, six components emerged: *reasoning ability*, *sagacity*, *learning from ideas and environment*, *judgment*, *expeditious use of information*, and *perspicacity*.

Examples of behaviors showing high loadings under each of these six components were “has the unique ability to look at a problem or situation and solve it,” “has good problem-solving ability,” and “has a logical mind” for *reasoning ability*; “displays concern for others,” “considers advice,” and “understands people through dealing with a variety of people” for *sagacity*; “attaches importance to ideas,” “is perceptive,” and “learns from other people’s mistakes” for *learning from ideas and environment*; “acts within own physical and intellectual limitations,” “is sensible,” and “has good judgment at all times” for *judgment*; “is experienced,” “seeks out information, especially details,” “has age, maturity, or long experience” for *expeditious use of information*; and “has intuition,” “can offer solutions that are on the side of right and truth,” “is able to see through things—read between the lines” for *perspicacity*.

In this same study, components for intelligence were *practical problem-solving ability, verbal ability, intellectual balance and integration, goal orientation and attainment, contextual intelligence, and fluid thought*. Components for creativity were *nonentrenchment, integration and intellectuality, aesthetic taste and imagination, decisional skill and flexibility, perspicacity, drive for accomplishment and recognition, inquisitiveness, and intuition*.

In a third study, 50 adults were asked to rate descriptions of hypothetical individuals for intelligence, creativity, and wisdom. Correlations were computed between pairs of ratings of the hypothetical individuals’ levels of the three traits. Correlations between the ratings were .94 for wisdom and intelligence, .62 for wisdom and creativity, and .69 for intelligence and creativity, again suggesting that wisdom and intelligence are highly correlated in people’s implicit theories.

### ***Explicit-Theoretical Approaches***

Explicit theories are constructions of (supposedly) expert theorists and researchers rather than of laypeople. In the study of wisdom, most explicit-theoretical approaches are based on constructs from the psychology of human development (see Staudinger & Glück, 2011a, 2011b).

Some theorists have viewed wisdom in terms of post-formal operational thinking, thereby viewing wisdom as extending beyond the Piagetian stages of intelligence (Piaget, 1972). Wisdom thus might be a stage of thought beyond Piagetian formal operations. For example, some authors have argued that wise individuals are those who can think reflectively or dialectically, in the latter case with the individuals’ realizing that truth is not always absolute but rather evolves in an historical context of theses, antitheses, and syntheses (e.g., Basseches, 1984a, 1984b; Kitchener, 1983, 1986; Labouvie-Vief, 1990; Pascual-Leone, 1990; Riegel, 1973). Consider a very brief review of some specific dialectical approaches.

Kitchener and Brenner (1990) suggested that wisdom requires a synthesis of knowledge from opposing points of view. Similarly, Labouvie-Vief (1990) has emphasized the importance of a smooth and balanced dialogue between logical

forms of processing and more subjective forms of processing. Pascual-Leone (1990) has argued for the importance of the dialectical integration of all aspects of a person's affect, cognition, conation (motivation), and life experience. Similarly, Orwoll and Perlmutter (1990) have emphasized the importance to wisdom of an integration of cognition with affect. Kramer (1990) has suggested the importance of the integration of relativistic and dialectical modes of thinking, affect, and reflection. And Birren and Fisher (1990), putting together a number of views of wisdom, have suggested as well the importance of the integration of cognitive, conative, and affective aspects of human abilities.

Other theorists have suggested the importance of knowing the limits of one's own extant knowledge and of then trying to go beyond it. For example, Meacham (1990) has suggested that an important aspect of wisdom is an awareness of one's own fallibility and the knowledge of what one does and does not know. Kitchener and Brenner (1990) have also emphasized the importance of knowing the limitations of one's own knowledge. Arlin (1990) has linked wisdom to problem finding, the first step of which is the recognition that how one currently defines a problem may be inadequate. Arlin views problem finding as a possible stage of post-formal operational thinking. Such a view is not necessarily inconsistent with the view of dialectical thinking as such a post-formal operational stage. Dialectical thinking and problem finding could represent distinct post-formal operational stages, or two manifestations of the same post-formal operational stage.

Although most developmental approaches to wisdom are ontogenetic, Csikszentmihalyi and Rathunde (1990) have taken a phylogenetic or evolutionary approach, arguing that constructs such as wisdom must have been selected for over time, at least in a cultural sense. In other words, wise ideas should survive better over time than unwise ideas in a culture. The theorists define wisdom as having three basic dimensions of meaning: (a) that of a cognitive process, or a particular way of obtaining and processing information; (b) that of a virtue, or socially valued pattern of behavior; and (c) that of a good, or a personally desirable state or condition.

I proposed (Sternberg, 1990b) an explicit theory of wisdom, suggesting that the development of wisdom can be traced to six antecedent components: (a) knowledge, including an understanding of its presuppositions and meaning as well as its limitations; (b) processes, including an understanding of what problems should be solved automatically and what problems should not be so solved; (c) a judicial thinking style, characterized by the desire to judge and evaluate things in an in-depth way; (d) personality, including tolerance of ambiguity and of the role of obstacles in life; (e) motivation, especially the motivation to understand what is known and what it means; and (f) environmental context, involving an appreciation of the contextual factors in the environment that lead to various kinds of thoughts and actions.

Whereas that theory (Sternberg, 1990a) specified a set of *antecedents* of wisdom, the subsequent balance theory (Sternberg, 1998) specifies the *processes* (balancing of interests and of responses to environmental contexts) in relation to the *goal* of wisdom (achievement of a common good). The first theory is incorporated into the

balance theory as specifying antecedent sources of developmental and individual differences, as discussed later.

According to the balance theory, wisdom is the application of intelligence, creativity, and knowledge as mediated by values toward the achievement of a common good through a balance among (a) intrapersonal, (b) interpersonal, and (c) extrapersonal interests, over the (a) short and (b) long terms, in order to achieve a balance among (a) adaptation to existing environments, (b) shaping of existing environments, and (c) selection of new environments (Sternberg, 1998, 2003; Sternberg & Lubart, 2001).

What kinds of considerations might be included under each of the three kinds of interests? Intrapersonal interests might include the desire to enhance one's popularity or prestige, to make more money, to learn more, to increase one's spiritual well-being, to increase one's power, and so forth. Interpersonal interests might be quite similar, except as they apply to other people rather than oneself. Extrapersonal interests might include contributing to the welfare of one's school, helping one's community, contributing to the well-being of one's country, or serving God, and so forth. Different people balance these interests in different ways. At one extreme, a malevolent dictator might emphasize his or her own personal power and wealth; at the other extreme, a saint might emphasize only serving others and God.

What constitutes appropriate balancing of interests, an appropriate response to the environment, and even the common good, all hinge on ethical values. Values, therefore, are an integral part of wise thinking. The question arises as to "whose values"? Although different major religions and other widely accepted systems of values may differ in details, they seem to have in common certain universal values, such as respect for human life, honesty, sincerity, fairness, and enabling people to fulfill their potential. Of course, not every government or society has subscribed to such values. Hitler's Germany and Stalin's Russia blatantly did not, and most societies today only subscribe to them in some degree but not fully.

## **The Problem of Personal Wisdom**

### ***Is Personal Wisdom Any More Than Wisdom?***

Consider some individuals who have generally been considered among the wisest of the twentieth century: Martin Luther King, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, Mother Teresa, and Socrates. King was notoriously unfaithful to his spouse. Roosevelt, like King, was unfaithful to his spouse. He also rejected the opportunity to save large numbers of Jews and members of other persecuted groups from certain death by refusing to accept them into the United States. Mother Teresa's diaries revealed herself to be tormented for many of her later years by her lack of faith. And Socrates, considered one of the wisest men of all time, was probably considerably less than a perfect husband or father. Perhaps his scorn of money and material goods

would not have been ideally helpful to the family in maintaining an adequate standard of living. If Xanthippe was as ill-tempered as often is suggested, perhaps it was in part because of the man she was with. And Socrates' uncompromising trial defense and later drinking the hemlock by choice may have helped cement his reputation as standing on principles, but may have been less helpful to the family he was supposed to support.

One can be wise in the abstract, and perhaps wise with others, but unwise with regard to one's own life. Gardner (1983, 2006) has distinguished between interpersonal and intrapersonal intelligences, and perhaps wisdom at an interpersonal level or more general level needs also to be distinguished from personal wisdom, or wisdom at the intrapersonal level.

Personal wisdom seems to require all that wisdom in the abstract requires, but also, something more. What might be this something more? The something more is perhaps an attitude toward life—that one wishes to apply to one's own life the principles that one applies in the abstract—and that one wishes to apply them in an ethical fashion. This attitude is not an easy one to acquire.

First, hormones, baser instincts, or whatever one wants to call them may work against the attitude. Does anyone really believe that Tiger Woods didn't know any better when he became physically involved with multiple women beyond his wife? Certainly President Bill Clinton knew better, or Governor Mark Sanford, who visited his mistress in Argentina while claiming to be hiking the Appalachian Trail. At the extreme, one can live the kind of ascetic life that Mohandas Gandhi eventually claimed to live. But most people try to live normal lives and in the course of doing so fight the unacceptable impulses within themselves, with better or worse results.

Second, who among us is never hypocritical, applying to others standards that we fail to observe ourselves? Someone could be wise in giving excellent advice and yet hypocritical in not following the advice him or herself.

Third, we may have conflicting goals and, lacking external objectivity, fail to apply the same wise standards we would apply to others in seeking a resolution of these goals. No one can view him or herself in a totally objective manner and so our perceptions may be skewed and result in our acting in ways that appear very differently to ourselves than they do to others.

Finally, by dint of the "actor-observer effect," we tend to view others' behavior as reflecting their traits and our own behavior as reflecting how we respond to situations. Perhaps it is no great challenge to behave wisely when situational variables favor us. But when we lose our jobs or our marriages or our children, we may find ourselves tempted to act in ways that more benevolent situations would not bring out.

In sum, we may fail ourselves, even as we serve others wisely. Personal wisdom goes beyond wisdom in general. Hard though it is to be wise with others, it is probably harder to be wise with ourselves. To be personally wise, one needs to deal, minimally, with hormones, hypocrisy, lack of objectivity, and situational challenges. We tend to view ourselves through lenses, often rose-colored, that cloud our thinking about our behavior—so-called myside bias.



## *Is Personal Wisdom Beneficial?*

There is evidence that wisdom does lead to higher degrees of subjective well-being (SWB) in older adults, holding constant other variables (Ardelt, 1997). Similarly, Takahashi and Overton (2005) have suggested that wisdom brings an internal sense of reward by helping people better to appreciate the subjective meaning in their lives. Hui and Yee (1994) found that wisdom and life satisfaction are positively correlated in older adults. Although older adults experienced losses, these losses helped them better appreciate what they had and gave them new insights into their lives and what they meant. This in turn increased their satisfaction with their lives.

A different view is that of Baltes (1997), who proposed that wise people may experience what he refers to as *constructive melancholy*. People who are wise, on this view, see the sadness as well as the joy in the complex events of life.

The view of Baltes and his colleagues is also different from that of traditional thinkers, such as Erikson (1959), who believe that wisdom involves some degree of emotional distance and detachment. The traditional psychoanalytical view of the therapist, for example, emphasizes the importance of keeping one's emotional distance from the patients one advises, lest one get caught up in their problems and thereby become unable to help the patients overcome this problem. In the Berlin view, wisdom inheres not in detachment but in sympathizing and empathizing with fellow human beings in the crises that beset them (Kunzmann & Baltes, 2005). Hence, wisdom may bring with it at least as much sadness as joy. People who do good work and apply their wisdom to it may see that others, in contrast, use their intelligence for less positive ends, which may lead to sadness (Solomon, Marshall, & Gardner, 2005).

Another factor that may work against wisdom leading to happiness is the presence of negative stereotypes about aging (e.g., Levy, Slade, Kunkel, & Kasl, 2002). To the extent that people have negative stereotypes, they may find sadness in thinking about their own age-related status, and hence feel the sadness invoked by these stereotypes joining whatever sadness the wisdom of aging may bring. Actual decreases in physical health may also lead to such sadness (Jordan, 2005).

Finally, wisdom may make one more deeply aware of the misery and hardship that exist in the world. Can a wise person ignore the suffering of others while enjoying life, him- or herself? But if the person is too cognizant of such suffering, is there a danger that the individual will find him or herself unable to enjoy life at all?

In the end, the data seem consistent with a picture of the ability of the individual to continue to develop wisdom until the latter days in which health problems impair thinking. But whether wisdom actually will develop depends not so much on age as upon cognitive variables, personality variables, and life experiences. Most important, the person has to utilize life experience in a way that is consistent with the development of wisdom. There is a joke about how many psychologists it takes to change a light bulb. The answer is it doesn't matter, so long as the light bulb wants to change. Similarly, people must want to develop their wisdom-related skills in order for them actually to develop, and then must adopt the attitudes toward life—

openness to experience, reflectivity upon experience, and willingness to profit from experience—that will enable this development to occur.

A problem is that there is relatively little reinforcement in our society for the development of personal wisdom. It is not, for the most part, taught in schools; it is not tested on achievement tests. On the contrary, what is tested is a set of memory and analytical skills that is quite remote from wisdom. A student who spends the time developing wisdom does so not for reward, but rather, at his or her own peril.

## **The Ethical Component of Personal Wisdom**

### ***Introductory Remarks***

When people falter in their personal wisdom, it appears often to be because of ethical lapses in their professional or personal lives. An important part of personal wisdom is having but also acting in accord with positive ethical values. How do such values get enacted—or not? One cannot be personally wise without being ethical.

“I am very proud of myself,” I told the 17 students in my seminar, Psychology 60, The Nature of Leadership. I had just returned from a trip, I told them, and felt that the honorarium I was paid for consulting on ethical leadership was less than I deserved. I felt badly that I had decided to accept such a consulting engagement for so little compensation. I then told the class that I was about to fill out the reimbursement forms when I discovered that I could actually get reimbursed twice. The first reimbursement would come from the organization that had invited me, which required me merely to fill out a form listing my expenses. The second reimbursement would come from my university, which required me to submit the receipts from the trip. I explained to the class that I had worked really hard on the trip consulting about ethical leadership, and so I was pleased that by getting reimbursed twice, I could justify to myself the amount of work I had put into the trip.

I waited for the firestorm. Would the class—which had already studied leadership for several months—rise up in a mass protest against what I had done? Or would only a half-dozen brave souls raise their hands and roundly criticize me for what was obviously patently unethical behavior? I waited, and waited, and waited. Nothing happened. I then decided to move on to the main topic of the day, which was ethical leadership! All the time I was speaking about that main topic, I expected some of the students to raise their hands and demand to return to the topic of my supposed double reimbursement. It didn’t happen.

Finally, I stopped talking about whatever the topic was, and flat-out asked the class whether any of them thought there was something off the mark with my desiring to obtain double reimbursement. If so, I told them, why had no one challenged me? I figured that, to a person, they would be embarrassed for not having challenged me. Quite a few of them were embarrassed. Others thought I

must have been kidding. Others thought that as I was the professor and a dean to boot, whatever I did I must have had a good reason for. What I did not expect, though—especially after having taught them for several months about ethical leadership—was that some of the students would commend me on my clever idea and argue that, if I could get away with it, I was entitled to receive the money—more power to me!

This experience reminded me of how hard it is to translate theories of ethics, and even case studies, into one's own practice. The students had read about ethics in leadership, heard about ethics in leadership from a variety of real-world leaders, discussed ethics in leadership, and then apparently totally failed to recognize unethical behavior when it stared them in the face. Moreover, these were students who by conventional definitions would be classified as gifted. (Full disclosure: I did *not* really seek double reimbursement!) Why is it so hard to translate theory into practice, even after one has studied ethical leadership for several months?

Latané and Darley (1970) opened up a new field of research on bystander intervention. They showed that, contrary to expectations, bystanders intervene when someone is in trouble only in very limited circumstances. For example, if they think that someone else might intervene, the bystanders tend to stay out of the situation. Latané and Darley even showed that divinity students who were about to lecture on the parable of *The Good Samaritan* were no more likely than other bystanders to help a person in distress who was in need of—a good Samaritan! Drawing upon their model of bystander intervention, I propose here a model of ethical behavior that would seem to apply to a variety of ethical problems (see Sternberg, 2009a, 2009b, 2009c). Without ethical reasoning of the kind deriving from this model, one cannot be wise.

The basic premise of the model is that ethical behavior is far harder to enact than one would expect, simply on the basis of what we learn from our parents, from school, and from our religious training. To intervene, individuals must go through a series of steps, and unless all of the steps are completed, they are not likely to behave in an ethical way, regardless of the amount of training they have received in ethics, and regardless of their levels of gifts in other types of skills.

### ***A Multiphase Model for Ethical Behavior***

A proposed model of ethical behavior, taking off from the work of Latané and Darley described above, shows why it is so hard to behave ethically (Sternberg, 2009a, 2009b). Yet personal wisdom requires ethical behavior—not just in the abstract, but also in one's daily life. According to the proposed model, enacting ethical behavior is much harder than it would appear to be because it involves multiple, largely sequential, steps. To behave ethically, the individual has to:

1. *Recognize that there is an event to which to react*
2. *Define the event as having an ethical dimension*

3. *Decide that the ethical dimension is of sufficient significance to merit an ethics-guided response*
4. *Take responsibility for generating an ethical solution to the problem*
5. *Figure out what abstract ethical rule(s) might apply to the problem*
6. *Decide how these abstract ethical rules actually apply to the problem so as to suggest a concrete solution*
7. *Decide upon the ethical solution, meanwhile preparing to counteract contextual forces that might lead one not to act in an ethical manner*
8. *Act ethically*

Seen from this standpoint, it is rather challenging to respond to problems in an ethical manner. Consider the example of the supposed double reimbursement.

### **Recognize That There Is an Event to Which to React**

The students were sitting in a class on leadership, expecting to be educated by an expert on leadership about leadership. In this case, he did not present the problem as one to which he expected them to react. He was simply telling them about something he had done. They had no a priori reason to expect that something an authority figure would require any particular kind of reaction, perhaps, except for taking notes. So for some students, the whole narrative may have been a nonevent.

This, of course, is a problem that extends beyond this mere classroom situation. When people hear their political, educational, or religious leaders talk, they may not believe there is any reason to question what they hear. After all, they are listening to authority figures. In this way, leaders, including cynical and corrupt leaders, may lead their flocks to accept and even commit unethical acts.

### **Define the Event as Having an Ethical Dimension**

Not all students in the class defined the problem as an ethical one. It became clear in the discussion that some students saw the problem as utilitarian: I had worked hard, had been underpaid, and was trying to figure out a way to attain adequate compensation for my hard work. In this definition of the problem, I had come up with a clever way to make the compensation better fit the work he had done.

Cynical leaders may flaunt their unethical behavior—one is reminded today of Robert Mugabe, but there are other world leaders who might equally be relevant here. When Mugabe and his henchmen seized the farms of white farmers, the seizure was presented as one of compensating alleged war heroes for their accomplishments. Why should it be unethical to compensate war heroes?

The Chinese government attempted to manipulate media to downplay the dimensions of an event with a huge ethical component (Atlas, 2008). On May 12, 2008, an earthquake in Sichuan province killed an estimated 10,000 school children. Earthquakes are natural disasters but there was an irregularity in the buildings

that imploded during the earthquake. Schools for children of well-connected party leaders as well as government buildings withstood the earthquake with no problem. In contrast, schools housing poor children crumbled to dust. It turned out that the schools had been built in ways that could only poorly withstand an earthquake. Presumably, the money that was supposed to have supported better construction went to line the pockets of Party functionaries (Atlas, 2008). The government is doing what it can to suppress these basic facts.

### **Decide That the Ethical Dimension Is Significant**

In the case of the professor having sought double reimbursement, some of the students may have felt it was sketchy or dubious but not sufficiently so to make an issue of it. Perhaps they had themselves asked for money twice for the same cause. Or perhaps they had sometimes taken what was not theirs—say, something small like a newspaper or even money they found on the ground—and saw what he was doing as no more serious than what they had done. So they may recognize an ethical dimension but not see it as sufficiently significant to create a fuss.

Politicians seem to specialize in trying to downplay the ethical dimension of their behavior. The shenanigans and subsequent lies of Bill Clinton regarding his behavior are well known. A few years ago, a state senator in Massachusetts was arrested for attempting to grope a woman on the street (“Senator faces list of assault allegations,” [http://www.boston.com/news/local/massachusetts/articles/2008/06/05/senator\\_faces\\_list\\_of\\_assault\\_allegations/](http://www.boston.com/news/local/massachusetts/articles/2008/06/05/senator_faces_list_of_assault_allegations/), 2008, retrieved June 5, 2008). He apparently had a record of harassing other women over a period of years. What is more amazing than his pleading innocent after being caught red-handed is that, when asked his name, he gave the name of a colleague in the state senate as his name! He thereby sought to duck responsibility for his own unethical behavior.

### **Take Responsibility for Generating an Ethical Solution to the Problem**

The students may have felt that they are, after all, merely students. Is it their responsibility, or even their right, to tell a professor in a course on leadership how to act, especially if the professor is a dean? From their point of view, it was perhaps his responsibility to determine the ethical dimensions of the situation, if any.

Similarly, people may allow leaders to commit wretched acts because they figure it is the leaders’ responsibility to determine the ethical dimensions of their actions. Isn’t that why they are leaders in the first place? Or people may assume that the leaders, especially if they are religious leaders, are in a uniquely good position to determine what is ethical. If a religious leader encourages someone to become a suicide bomber, that “someone” may feel that being such a bomber must be ethical. Why else would a religious leader suggest it?

### **Figure Out What Abstract Ethical Rule(s) Might Apply to the Problem**

Perhaps some of the students recognized the problem the professor created for them as an ethical one. But what rule applies? Have they ever had to figure out reimbursements? Perhaps not. So it may not be obvious what rule would apply. Or even if they have, might there be some circumstances in which it is ethical to be dually reimbursed? Maybe the university supplements outside reimbursements, as they sometimes do fellowships? Or maybe the university does not care who else pays, so long as they get original receipts. Or maybe what he meant to say was that he had some expenses paid by the university and others by the sponsoring organization, and he had actually misspoken. Especially in new kinds of situations with which one has little familiarity, it may not be clear what constitutes ethical behavior.

Most of us have learned, in one way or another, ethical rules that we are supposed to apply to our lives. For example, we are supposed to be honest. But who among us can say he or she has not lied at some time, perhaps with the excuse that we were protecting someone else's feelings? By doing so, we insulate ourselves from the effects of our behavior. Perhaps, we can argue, the principle that we should not hurt someone else's feelings takes precedence over not lying. Of course, as the lies grow larger, we can continue to use the same excuse. Or politicians may argue that they should provide generous tax cuts to the ultrawealthy, on the theory that the benefits will "trickle down" to the rest of the population. So perhaps one is treating all people well, as we learn to do—just some people are treated better than others with the rationalization that eventually the effects will reach all the others.

Sometimes the rules that apply to a problem may conflict. For example, if you have a good friend who tells you in confidence that he is a drug user, your promise to keep the information confidential conflicts with your responsibility to seek external help for him (assuming, as is likely, that you are unable to help him yourself). In this case, one must decide which responsibility is greater and thus dominates the other.

### **Decide How These Abstract Ethical Rules Actually Apply to the Problem So As to Suggest a Concrete Solution**

Perhaps the students had ethical rules available and even accessible to them, but did not see how to apply them. Suppose they have the rule that one should only expect from others what one deserves. Well, what did he deserve? Maybe, in application, they saw him as deserving more because he said he did. Or suppose they had the rule that one should not expect something for nothing. Well, he did something, so he was only trying to get something back that adequately reflected his work. In the end, they may have had trouble translating abstract principles into concrete behavior.

This kind of translation is, we believe, nontrivial. In our work on practical intelligence, some of which was summarized in Sternberg et al. (2000), we found

that there is, at best, a modest correlation between the more academic and abstract aspects of intelligence and its more practical and concrete aspects. Both aspects, though, predicted behavior in everyday life. People may have skills that shine brightly in a classroom, but that they are unable to translate into real-world consequential behavior. For example, someone may be able to pass a written drivers' test with flying colors but not be able to drive. Or someone may be able to get an A in a French class, but not speak French to passersby in Paris. Or a teacher may get an A in a classroom management course, but be unable to manage a classroom. Translation of abstracted skills into concrete ones is difficult and may leave people knowing a lot of ethical rules that they are nevertheless unable to translate into their everyday lives.

If one follows reports in the media, there are any number of instances in which pastors who are highly trained in religion and ethics act in unethical and unscrupulous ways. They may be able to teach lessons on ethics, but they fail to translate what they teach into their own behavior. One may tend to be quick to blame them, but as psychologists, we know that there are many competent psychologists who are unable to apply what they do in therapy to their own lives. Being a psychologist is no protection against personal strife, any more than being an ethicist is protection against unethical behavior.

### **Decide upon the Ethical Solution, Meanwhile Possibly Counteracting Contextual Forces That Might Lead One Not to Act in an Ethical Manner**

You sit in a classroom and hear your teacher brag about what you perhaps consider to be unethical behavior. You look around you. No one else is saying anything. As far as you can tell, no one else has even been fazed. Perhaps you are simply out of line. In the Latané and Darley (1970) work, the more bystanders there were, the less likely one was to take action to intervene. Why? Because one figured that, if something is really wrong, then someone among all the others witnessing the event will take responsibility. You are better off having a breakdown on a somewhat lonely country road than on a busy highway, because a driver passing by on the country road may feel that he or she is your only hope.

Sometimes, the problem is not that other people seem oblivious to the ethical implications of the situation but that they actively encourage you to behave in ways you define as unethical. In the Rwandan genocides, Hutus were encouraged to hate Tutsis and to kill them, even if they were within their own family (see discussion in Sternberg & Sternberg, 2008). Those who were not willing to participate in the massacres risked becoming victims themselves (Gourevitch, 1998). The same applied in Hitler's Germany. Those who tried to save Jews from concentration camps themselves risked going to such camps (Totten, Parsons, & Charny, 2004).

One may hesitate to act because of possible repercussions. Perhaps students in his class saw the professor as grossly unethical but did not want to risk challenging him openly and thereby potentially lowering their grade. In genocides, opposing the perpetrators may make one a victim. Or one may look foolish acting in an ethical

way when others are taking advantage of a situation in a way to foster their personal good. Even before one acts, one may be hesitant because of the aftermath one anticipates, whether real or merely imagined.

We would like to think that the pressure to behave ethically will lead people to resist internal temptations to act poorly. But often, exactly the opposite is the case. In the Enron case, when Sherron Watkins blew the whistle on unethical behavior, she was punished and made to feel like an “outcast” (“Person of the Week: Enron Whistleblower Sherron Watkins,” 2002, <http://www.time.com/time/pow/article/0,8599,194927,00.html>, retrieved June 5, 2008). In general, whistle-blowers are treated poorly, despite the protections they are supposed to receive.

### **Act Ethically**

In the end, all the thinking in the world will not matter if one does not bridge the gap between thought and action. Ultimately, wisdom inheres in actions, not in preparation for those actions.

## **Is There an Ethical Ability Underlying Personal Wisdom?**

Gardner (1999b) has wrestled with the question of whether there is some kind of existential or even spiritual intelligence that guides people through challenging life dilemmas. Coles (1998) is one of many who have argued for a moral intelligence in children as well as adults. Is there some kind of moral or spiritual intelligence in which some children are inherently superior to others? Kohlberg (1984) believed that there are stages of moral reasoning and that as children grow older, they advance in these stages. Some will advance faster and further than others, creating individual differences in levels of moral development.

The perspective here is perhaps a bit different. People can certainly differ in their moral reasoning and moral development, but we can teach children as well as adults to enhance their ethical reasoning and behavior simply by instructing them regarding the challenges of thinking and acting in an ethical way. It is not enough to teach religion or values or ethics. One needs to teach children about the steps leading to ethical behavior, as described above, so that they can recognize for and in themselves how and why it is that ethical behavior presents such a challenge. They need education and they need inoculation against the forces that are likely to lead them to fail to behave ethically because they do not make it through all 8 of the steps as described above.

From this point of view, ethical reasoning and behavior do not derive from some kind of inherent characteristic but are things we can develop in virtually all children (assuming they are not psychopathic). But such development is difficult because, as we have seen, thinking and acting ethically is more of a challenge than would appear. Merely going to religion or ethics classes will not, in and of itself, produce



ethical behavior. Wise people are always ethical, although ethical people are not always wise, so if we want to develop personal wisdom, we must develop a mature sense of personal ethics.

In speaking of the challenges of leadership, and particularly of leaders who become foolish, we have spoken of the risk of ethical disengagement (Sternberg, 2008).

Ethical disengagement (based on Bandura, 1999) is the dissociation of oneself from ethical values. One may believe that ethical values should apply to the actions of others, but one becomes disengaged from them as they apply to oneself. One may believe that one is above or beyond ethics, or simply not see its relevance to one's own life.

There are other fallacies that lead people to be foolish, where "foolishness" is viewed as the opposite of wisdom (Sternberg, 2002, 2005a, 2005b, 2008). They include

1. *Unrealistic optimism*. The person thinks he or she is so bright, or so powerful, that anything he or she does will turn out all right, regardless of how foolish or unethical it may be.

2. *Egocentrism*. The person comes to believe that his or her leadership or power is for purposes of self-aggrandizement. Tyco CEO Dennis Kozlowski, currently in prison for tax evasion, ran the company as though it was his own personal piggy bank ("Timeline of the Tyco International Scandal," 2005; [http://www.usatoday.com/money/industries/manufacturing/2005-06-17-tyco-timeline\\_x.htm](http://www.usatoday.com/money/industries/manufacturing/2005-06-17-tyco-timeline_x.htm), retrieved June 5, 2008). Ethics took the back seat to Kozlowski's desire to enrich himself and his family.

3. *False omniscience*. Some people come to believe themselves as all-knowing. The surprising thing about the behavior of a Bill Clinton or a George W. Bush, in quite different domains, is not that they made mistakes, but rather, that they kept making the same mistakes over and over again. Clinton correctly viewed himself as very intelligent and perhaps thought that his intelligence and excellent education gave him levels of knowledge that he did not have. George W. Bush appears to have believed that he could trust his gut. He was wrong, over and over again, but was so lacking in intrapersonal intelligence (Gardner, 1983) and self-reflection, that he learned little, if anything, from his mistakes. In contrast, Barack Obama, during his presidential campaign, made mistakes, but each time seemed to learn from them and not repeat them, which is one of many reasons he was elected as president.

4. *False omnipotence*. Napoleon's failed invasion of Russia stands as one of the great historical monuments to false feelings of power. Napoleon believed himself to be extremely powerful. His invasion of Russia was politically pointless and strategically flawed, but he wanted the prize nevertheless. The invasion was the beginning of the end for Napoleon. Like so many other powerful leaders, he overreached, and his feelings of omnipotence led to his doom.

5. *False invulnerability*. Perhaps Eliot Spitzer, as governor of New York State, felt himself not only extremely powerful, but invulnerable. He must have felt pretty close to invulnerable, because as a former prosecutor, he must have known that police agencies had multiple ways of tracking patrons of prostitutes. He

nevertheless engaged in a pattern of repeated reckless behavior (“Spitzer is linked to prostitution ring,” 2008; [http://www.nytimes.com/2008/03/10/nyregion/10cnd-spitzer.html?\\_r=1&oref=slogin](http://www.nytimes.com/2008/03/10/nyregion/10cnd-spitzer.html?_r=1&oref=slogin), retrieved June 5, 2008), which eventually cost him the governorship.

6. *Ethical disengagement.* How did Jimmy Swaggert go wrong? Or Jim Bakker? Or Ted Haggard? Or any of the countless men of the cloth who, when given the chance, acted in their own lives precisely how they told their listeners not to act in their lives. They exhibited ethical disengagement, whereby they came to believe that ethics are important for others, but not for them. They came to believe that they were, somehow, above acting ethically—until society decided they weren’t.

If we want to nurture wisdom, we must nurture ethical reasoning and action because they are an essential part of wisdom. In our own theory, WICS (Sternberg, 2003), wisdom is viewed here according to the balance theory of wisdom proposed earlier, according to which an individual is wise to the extent he or she uses successful intelligence, creativity, and knowledge as moderated by positive ethical values, to (a) seek to reach a common good, (b) by balancing intrapersonal (one’s own), interpersonal (others’), and extrapersonal (organizational/institutional/spiritual) interests, (c) over the short and long term, to (d) adapt to, shape, and select environments. Wisdom is in large part a decision to use one’s intelligence, creativity, and experience for a common good.

Wise individuals do not look out just for their own interests, nor do they ignore these interests. Rather, they skillfully balance interests of varying kinds, including their own, those of others, and those of the communities of which they are a part. They also recognize that they need to align the interests of their group or organization with those of others groups or organizations because no group operates within a vacuum. Wise people realize that what may appear to be a prudent course of action over the short term does not necessarily appear so over the long term. And they realize the importance of doing the ethically right thing, not merely the expedient one.

Leaders who have been less than fully successful often have been so because they have ignored one or another set of interests. For example, in the United States, Richard Nixon and Bill Clinton, in their respective cover-ups, not only failed to fulfill the interests of the country they led, but also failed to fulfill their own interests. Their cover-ups ended up bogging down their administrations in scandals rather than allowing them to make the positive accomplishments they had hoped to make. George Bush became the most unpopular US president since polls started measuring popularity because he appeared to some to care more about the enhancement of his own power than the good of the world or even the country he was elected to lead. Freud was a great leader in the fields of psychiatry and psychology, but his insistence that his followers (disciples) conform quite exactly to his own system of psychoanalysis led him to lose those disciples and the support they might have continued to lend to his efforts. He was an expert in interpersonal interests, but not as applied to his own life. Napoleon lost sight of the extrapersonal interests that would have been best for his own country. His disastrous invasion of Russia, which appears to have been motivated more by hubris than by France’s need to have

Russia in its empire, partially destroyed his reputation as a successful military leader and paved the way for his later downfall.

Leaders can be intelligent in various ways and creative in various ways; it does not guarantee they are wise. Indeed, probably relatively few leaders at any level are particularly wise. Yet the few leaders who are notably so—perhaps Nelson Mandela, Martin Luther King, Mohandas Gandhi, Winston Churchill, and Mother Teresa—leave an indelible mark on the people they lead and, potentially, on history. It is important to note that wise leaders are probably usually charismatic, but charismatic leaders are not necessarily wise, as Hitler, Stalin, and many other charismatic leaders have demonstrated over the course of time. In the end, wisdom is the use of intelligence, creativity, and knowledge in a positively ethical way that is directed toward the common good.

People may differ in their ability to behave ethically, but, to our knowledge, there is no evidence of intrinsic differences in “ethical giftedness” or “moral intelligence.” The difference in people’s behavior appears rather to be in their skill in completing a set of eight steps that, conjointly, produce ethical behavior. Failure of an earlier step is likely to lead to failure to execute the later steps. Teaching children abstract principles of ethical behavior or ethical rules is unlikely, in itself, to produce ethical behavior. Rather, children need to be taught the sequence of processes leading to ethical thinking, and to inoculate themselves against pressures—both external and internal—to behave in unethical ways. If we want to produce ethical giftedness, we have to develop it, not hope it will be a given in some group of intrinsically gifted children.

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# The MORE Life Experience Model: A Theory of the Development of Personal Wisdom

Judith Glück and Susan Bluck

## Introduction

We all experience challenges in our lives, and probably most of us feel we have learned something from the challenges we have encountered. But why do some (few) people learn things that make them wiser over their life course – while others become (or remain) rigid, bitter, depressed, superficially content, or overly self-involved? Little theoretical and even less empirical work has directly addressed how wisdom might develop over a lifetime. In this chapter, we present a conceptual model of the development of wisdom, based on previous research and theory concerning wisdom, life-span development, growth from negative experiences, autobiographical memory, and the life story.

Although wise persons are not a homogeneous group and have highly individualized developmental trajectories, we postulate that some basic tenets are essential for the development of wisdom. The core elements of our model are four general resources that influence which life events individuals are likely to encounter, how they perceive and appraise them, how they deal with challenges, and how and to what extent they integrate and reintegrate experiences into their life story. The four resources are a sense of *mastery*, *openness*, *reflectivity*, and *emotion regulation and empathy* – in short, MORE. The MORE Life Experience Model proposes that these resources form a kind of “positive syndrome” that helps

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J. Glück (✉)

Department of Psychology, Alpen-Adria-Universität Klagenfurt, Klagenfurt, Austria  
e-mail: [Judith.Glueck@aau.at](mailto:Judith.Glueck@aau.at)

S. Bluck

Department of Psychology, University of Florida, Gainesville, FL, USA  
e-mail: [bluck@ufl.edu](mailto:bluck@ufl.edu)

individuals to deal with life challenges in a way that fosters the development of wisdom. In this chapter, we first lay out the theoretical background of the MORE Life Experience Model and then discuss each resource in detail. Finally, we describe how the MORE resources influence which life experiences people encounter, how they deal with them, and how they integrate them into their life story.

To illustrate our theory, we use data from two studies on how wisdom manifests in real life. In the first study (Bluck & Glück, 2004; Glück, Bluck, Baron, & McAdams, 2005), we investigated people's autobiographical narratives of situations in which they thought they had been wise. Most people reported difficult situations such as life decisions or having to deal with an unexpected negative event. We found that most people showed evidence of having grown and learned from the experience (Bluck & Glück, 2004) and that age groups differed in what form of wisdom they reported (Glück et al., 2005). The second study is currently in progress; its goal is to provide the first empirical test of predictions from the MORE Life Experience Model. A sample of 47 wisdom nominees and 47 control participants completed measures of wisdom, predictors of wisdom, and the MORE resources and were interviewed about their most difficult life event, their best life event, and an important conflict in their past. Our main hypothesis is that wiser participants should show higher levels of the MORE resources than others both in scalar measures and in coded variables from autobiographical narratives of life experiences.

### ***Theoretical Background: The Development of Wisdom Through Life Experience***

Life experience plays an important role in the development of wisdom. This idea is supported by (a) previous wisdom theories, (b) life-span developmental views of adulthood, and (c) literature on personal growth as a result of negative experiences. Each is detailed in the following.

**The role of life experience in wisdom theories.** Life experience may be the most typical characteristic that laypeople associate with wisdom (overview in Bluck & Glück, 2005). Most laypeople believe that a broad spectrum of experience is important for the development of wisdom. There is less agreement about the role of fundamental challenges, such as facing mortality or losing significant others, for the development of wisdom, but most people also consider such experiences important (Glück & Bluck, 2011).

Wisdom researchers generally share laypeople's view that wisdom is not possible without life experience, although theoretical accounts of the ontogenesis of wisdom have yet to explicate the role of life experience in detail. Wisdom theorists tend to differ (just as laypeople do) in how much first-person experience with



difficult and challenging situations they consider necessary for the development of wisdom. Some theories, such as the Berlin wisdom model (overview in Baltes & Smith, 2008; Baltes & Staudinger, 2000) or Sternberg's balance theory (Sternberg, 1998, 2001), focus on knowledge as the core of wisdom: deep, complex, partly implicit knowledge about the fundamental or difficult issues of human life – such as decision-making, conflict resolution, or finding meaning. Note that while the Berlin wisdom model explicitly views wisdom as knowledge-based expertise, it also has a role for noncognitive psychological characteristics such as personality, values, and emotion regulation (e.g., Kunzmann & Baltes, 2003). Still, theories that suggest a complex knowledge base as the most important component of wisdom tend to assume that wisdom develops like other sorts of exceptional knowledge or expertise: through repeated experience and practice combined with high levels of motivation. Specifically, proponents of the Berlin wisdom model propose three main factors that contribute to the development of wisdom: general person attributes such as intelligence, cognitive style, and openness to experience; expertise-specific factors such as experience with life problems, availability of mentors, and motivation; and facilitative experiential contexts such as age, parenthood, work contexts, or historical period (Baltes & Staudinger, 2000).

Other authors put greater emphasis on the importance of critical experiences in one's own life for the development of wisdom. For example, Ardel (2005) argued that wisdom is fostered by crises and obstacles in people's lives that challenge their existing world views and thereby broaden their perspective (Ardel, 2005; see also Kinnier, Tribbensee, Rose, & Vaughan, 2001; Kramer, 2000). Ardel (2004) believes that wisdom goes beyond deep and complex knowledge because it entails a process of transcendence of one's subjectivity and self-centeredness. This process leads to greater feelings of connectedness to others and the world, which she views as essential for wisdom (see also Chap. 10 by Levenson & Aldwin, this volume; Levenson, Jennings, Aldwin, & Shiraishi, 2005).

To summarize, there are two general lines of thinking about the development of wisdom. They differ in their emphasis on first-person life experience, particularly with the role of critical life challenges. The two views have been summarized (Staudinger & Glück, 2011; see also Chap. 1 by Staudinger, this volume) as concerning personal wisdom (i.e., wisdom as self-related knowledge acquired through direct personal experience) and general wisdom (i.e., wisdom as world knowledge that can also be acquired in more indirect ways). In spite of these differences, however, all wisdom theorists likely agree that wisdom is acquired incrementally over the life course and that this occurs through some level of confrontation, direct or indirect, with the fundamental themes and questions of human existence. Thus, theories of wisdom have generally had a place for the role of life experience, but the dynamic between self-resources and life experiences that causes some people to grow toward wisdom more than others has not yet been conceptualized in detail.

**General theories of life-span psychological development.** Outside the wisdom literature, arguments for life experiences as a major catalyst for the development of wisdom can be found in life-span psychological theories. These theories suggest

that moving across adulthood is likely to expose people to a variety of experiences and to entail dealing with negative events and losses (e.g., Baltes, Staudinger, & Lindenberger, 1999). Such experiences are often considered relevant for the development of wisdom. Note that while laypeople generally associate wisdom with old age (Bluck & Glück, 2005; Heckhausen, Dixon, & Baltes, 1989), the empirical evidence from wisdom research is mixed (Staudinger, 1999). There is certainly not a linear association between age and wisdom, as many people do not develop wisdom with age. Life-span theories generally assume broad heterogeneity of developmental trajectories across adulthood (Baltes et al., 1999). Given that, the absence of a direct association between wisdom and age is reconcilable with the idea that old age is a wisdom-fostering phase for those (few) people who are already “on track” toward wisdom.

One obvious argument for old age being related to higher levels of wisdom is that if life experience is cumulative, the amount of experience should be correlated with chronological age. As we will argue in the following, however, an individual’s amount of experience in itself is not a sufficient predictor of wisdom – the way individuals deal with and integrate experiences is crucial. Old age may specifically contribute to wisdom-fostering ways of dealing with experiences in some individuals: It brings new perspectives due to losses of primary control in some life domains as well as appreciation of one’s limited subjective lifetime. Such perspectives have been shown to foster emotion-regulation skills (Carstensen, Fung, & Charles, 2003), as well as self-transcendent values (Brandtstädter, Rothermund, Kranz, & Kühn, 2010). A similar notion is inherent in Erikson’s (1959, 1963) conception of wisdom as a possible optimal end stage in life-span development (i.e., integrity as opposed to despair). Thus, the higher likelihood of experiences of uncontrollability in old age (as well as other conditions that limit individuals’ subjective lifetime) may foster the development of wisdom in individuals who have sufficient levels of psychological resources to deal with such experiences constructively. Note that at the other end of the life span, in childhood, wisdom development is only emergent both because the person has encountered very few experiences and because they do not have the social or cognitive skills necessary to integrate challenging experiences. The emergence of the life story in adolescence allows for wisdom development to begin in earnest (Habermas & Bluck, 2000).

**Personal growth from negative experiences.** Related ideas have been presented by researchers studying concepts such as posttraumatic growth (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2006) stress-related growth (Aldwin & Levenson, 2001; Park, Cohen, & Murch, 1996), or growth through adversity (Joseph & Linley, 2005, 2006). Even after devastating experiences, many people report subjective growth in addition to negative consequences. Typically such perceptions of growth include a greater appreciation of life, closer relationships to others, an increased sense of personal strength, recognition of new possibilities, and/or spiritual development (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1995, 2004). Other studies have reported self-perceived increases in compassion, emotion regulation, self-understanding, honesty and reliability, and even wisdom itself (overview in Park, 2004). Thus, a number of wisdom-related variables have

been associated with experiencing negative life events, again suggesting the importance of serious consideration of life experience in any theory of the development of wisdom. Note, however, that a frequent criticism of work on growth from negative experiences is that most of these studies are based on self-reports. It is difficult to determine whether participants have “really” grown or whether their self-perceptions of growth reflect positive illusions or coping attempts (Taylor, Kemeny, Reed, Bower, & Gruenewald, 2000; Zoellner & Maercker, 2006). Future longitudinal research that assesses resources and personal wisdom as and after individuals encounter negative experiences, measured using self- and peer-reports as well as behavioral measures, may help to disentangle actual from illusory growth.

To summarize, evidence for a central role of experience in the development of wisdom comes from the wisdom literature, from theories of life-span psychological development, and from empirical research on growth from negative experiences. Although everyone has their share of challenges across life, however, most do not develop high levels of wisdom. Gaining wisdom is not simply a matter of experiencing many or particular types of life events. Rather, people who bring certain resources to bear in facing difficult challenges are more likely to grow from such experiences (Ardelt, 2005; Kramer, 2000). The goal of the MORE Life Experience Model is to develop a specific framework for understanding why and how some people incrementally develop wisdom through dealing with life experiences, while others do not.

## **The MORE Wisdom Resources**

We argue that four resources are particularly important for the development of wisdom through life experiences. People who have a strong sense of mastery, high levels of openness, reflectivity, and emotion-regulation skills combined with empathy are more likely to (a) encounter experiences that can foster wisdom across their lives, (b) deal with life challenges in a manner that promotes wisdom, and (c) reflect on and integrate such experiences into their life story in a way that allows them to grow and learn from past experience over time. For each of the four MORE resources, we give a definition and illustrate it using quotations from life experience narratives (translated from German) of wisdom nominees in our ongoing research. The theoretical rationale for including each resource in the model is also discussed.

### ***A Sense of Mastery***

We define a sense of mastery as wise individuals’ belief that they are able to deal with life’s challenges, whatever they may be. This does not mean that they have exaggerated or illusory notions of control: They are perfectly aware of the uncontrollability of many of life’s events but do not feel helpless or victimized by the

knowledge that some things cannot be predicted or controlled. Thus, a sense of mastery, as defined here, is an inherently dialectical concept entailing active control but also the acceptance of uncontrollability and the ability to balance these two in response to what a situation requires (Ardelt, 2005; Brandtstädter, 2007; see also the paradoxical nature of wisdom as discussed in Chap. 13 by Ardel, this volume). For example, one of the wisdom nominees in our study talked about a long history of conflicts with her parents. She concluded that in those conflicts she had learned that “I cannot fight, cannot quarrel, but I’m good at holding on and staying true to myself.” Another woman said, looking back at a time where she had hurt someone badly, “I cannot make right what happened then, but I can do it right this time.” One wisdom nominee succinctly summarized mastery in her narrative by saying, “There are things in life that cannot be changed, and then you have to accept them. Sometimes you have the choice, and sometimes you just don’t.”

A related notion, manageability, is one of three key components of Aaron Antonovsky’s (1979) salutogenesis model, which was proposed as one of the first counterpoints to the focus of medical research on disease rather than health and well-being. Based on studies of how people overcome even severe life stressors, Antonovsky argued that a crucial psychological component is an intact “sense of coherence,” which comprises three components: comprehensibility (belief that there is some logic and order in why things happen), meaningfulness (a belief that life in general can be interesting, satisfactory, and worth living), and manageability, which he defines as belief that one will be able to deal with and overcome the crisis because of one’s internal and external resources.

Evidence concerning the role of a sense of mastery for the development of wisdom through life experience comes from the literature on growth from negative experiences, as well as from the literature on wisdom. First, a number of studies have shown that high self-efficacy, the (sometimes unrealistic) conviction that one can deal with just about anything, is conducive to coping with negative events (e.g., Benight & Bandura, 2004), and a mastery-oriented coping style is a key predictor of positive growth from stressful experiences (Maercker & Zoellner, 2004). While self-efficacy may be effective in coping, wisdom does not entail the naïve illusion of being in full control of whatever may happen. In fact, seeing through illusions and being aware of the inherent uncertainty in human life have been proposed as key aspects of wisdom (Baltes & Staudinger, 2000; McKee & Barber, 1999). Negative experiences can profoundly shatter people’s control illusions (Janoff-Bulman, 2004), and individuals who are able to accept such loss of control may be able to learn more as they reconstruct their world after a crisis.

## *Openness*

Wise individuals are aware of the fact that there are multiple perspectives on every phenomenon, and they are interested in learning from new perspectives and from other people. Therefore, they are less judgmental and influenced by prejudice in how they perceive others than other people are, and able to accept that others’ goals

and values can differ from their own. For example, a wisdom nominee in our current project on the life stories of wise individuals felt that her own development had been positively influenced by having a child with a severe disability (she listed this event both among the most difficult and the best experiences of her life). However, she said, “In no way do I dare to judge how other people would deal with this, with having a child with special needs.” Thus, even though she felt that she had grown from her experience, rather than viewing her own way as the optimal one, she was fully aware of the internal and external factors that may lead other people to experience this situation differently. Another participant said in talking about problems with his son, “One learns a tremendous number of things. First of all about another person’s development, then about how accepting one is able to be – seeing that a child is not one’s property but an independent human being, and accepting that his generation is just different from mine.” Both these examples show wise individuals’ motivation to see and accept others as they actually are, rather than forcing their own views upon them. Thus, openness as we define it implies high levels of tolerance for ways of life that differ from one’s own.

Evidence for the role of openness for the development of wisdom comes both from the empirical wisdom literature and from work on growth from negative experiences. The Big Five factor Openness to Experience (e.g., Costa & McCrae, 1992) is among the strongest personality predictors of wisdom-related knowledge as assessed by the Berlin wisdom paradigm (Glück & Baltes, 2006; Staudinger, Lopez, & Baltes, 1997). Of the six facets of openness measured by the NEO-PI-R (Costa & McCrae, 1992), we believe that openness to values (the willingness to re-examine one’s social, religious, and political values) and, to a lesser degree, openness to actions (the inclination to try new activities and visit new places) are closest to our understanding of openness. Openness to feelings (receptiveness to emotional states and experiences) and openness to ideas (intellectual curiosity and willingness to learn) are also highly typical of the “positive syndrome” that characterizes wisdom. Those aspects are, however, more closely related to our resources of emotion regulation and reflectivity, respectively.

Webster (2003, 2007) included openness (to “alternate views, information, and potential solution strategies”; Webster, 2003, p. 15) as one of five components in his model of wisdom. Rather than viewing openness as an integral part of wisdom, however, the MORE Life Experience Model postulates that openness is a necessary precursor: It is one of the crucial resources likely to be present early on in individuals who eventually develop high levels of wisdom (cf. Ardelt, 2011). As a personality trait, openness is the most debated of the Big Five because it seems to be less stable and its structure less clear than is the case for the other four (e.g., Caspi, Roberts, & Shiner, 2005). Thus, while openness is partly an innate personality trait (McCrae et al., 2000), it is also influenced by social-environmental influences. For example, parents or schools who model openness by trying to accept a child as he or she is, and who encourage the child to take an unbiased view on other people and new experiences, may lay an important foundation for later development. Thus, both high innate levels of openness and/or openness-supporting environments across a life may help individuals to seek out wisdom-fostering

situations, embrace challenges, and gain new perspectives through life experiences – which, in the long run, may help them develop toward wisdom.

## ***Reflectivity***

On the most general level, we define reflectivity as the willingness to look at life issues in a complex way, rather than to simplify them. Wise individuals reflect deeply on experiences as they strive to see the “big picture” and identify larger themes, developmental links over time, and relations between issues. For example, in interpreting someone’s current behavior, they take situational and contextual aspects as well as developmental trajectories into account. Because of their reflective style of thinking, wise individuals are not aimed only at self-enhancement or self-protection. They are willing to question their own views, values, feelings, and behaviors.

As reflectivity implies complex thinking, it is difficult to find succinct quotations from our interviews representing it. An example of seeing a broader picture comes from one participant who noticed that she tended to react anxiously to difficulties. In thinking about this pattern, she took a broader societal perspective: “And I’ve found that fear is permanently present in our society. All unconsciously, fear is being used to manipulate people everywhere. The church, the medical system, they are all relying on people’s fear, people’s bad conscience. . . .” Another participant showed self-reflection in talking about an argument with her father that she had had in the past. Reflecting back on it, she said, “Now I think that it was just my perception at the time. He probably did appreciate me, but I didn’t appreciate myself.”

Staudinger (2001) has argued that life reflection is an important factor in the development of wisdom. She argues that life reflection is a combination of remembering (and reconstructing) experiences and a thorough explanatory and evaluative analysis, which involves emotional and motivational processes as well as cognition. Life reflection may be organized around certain themes or periods and can involve considerations of the present and future as well as the past. Staudinger argues that life reflection may lead to life insight, which act as a predecessor of general wisdom, as well as self-insight, which may precede personal wisdom. Empirical evidence for the role of reflection in the development of wisdom comes from both the wisdom literature and research on growth from negative experiences. Reflectivity emerged as a key component of wisdom in our review of lay-theory studies (Bluck & Glück, 2005). Reflection is also one of three components of wisdom in Ardelt’s (2000, 2004) model, defined as the ability and willingness to see things, including oneself, from multiple perspectives. Webster (2003, 2007) also included reflection as a component of wisdom. While we do not dispute that reflection is a necessary characteristic of wise individuals, the MORE model emphasizes that reflectivity, (i.e., the motivation to understand complex

issues, including one's own complexity) is a characteristic that individuals must develop "on the way," long before they attain high levels of wisdom.

An important distinction in the realm of posttraumatic growth is made between reflection and rumination. The latter refers to persistent, sometimes uncontrollable, "brooding" about negative experiences in the past or present (Nolen-Hoeksema & Larson, 1999). Instead, reflection is a growth-oriented effort to make meaning of what is happening or has happened in the past (Zoellner & Maercker, 2006). While rumination is a negative marker for well-being, reflection about lost possibilities after negative life events is positively related to concurrent and subsequent ego development (King & Hicks, 2007).

### ***Emotion Regulation and Empathy***

The first version of the MORE Life Experience Model, which was at the basis of our current research project, proposed that emotion regulation in the classical sense (i.e., accurate perception and situation-adequate management of one's own as well as others' emotions), is necessary for the development of wisdom. We soon became aware, however, that this definition of emotion regulation does not include an important affective aspect of wisdom: Wisdom entails not only the ability to deal with others' feelings effectively, but also to reach out to others through empathetic concern (Ardelt, 2000), that is, to care about others' emotions out of a prosocial motivation to improve the lives of others. Thus, empathy was included as a second aspect of the "E" component. In the following, we first discuss perception and regulation of one's own emotions and, then, empathy-based perception and regulation of others' emotions.

*Perceiving and regulating one's own emotions.* The MORE Life Experience Model proposes that wise individuals perceive their own emotions accurately, even when they are contradictory or ambivalent, and are able to manage them as appropriate to a given situation. Specifically, wise people do not suppress negative feelings but also do not dwell extensively on them. Their aim is not to maximize a shallow kind of well-being but to achieve a fuller understanding of life by also seeing the sad and difficult sides of human existence. At the same time, they are able to limit these emotions so that they remain manageable and to enjoy the positive aspects of life.

For example, a man nominated as wise in our current research talked about the disadvantages of suppressing negative feelings: "Well, talking to others is certainly helpful, but you should not use that to get rid of your feelings. You have to see them through, live through them – even if it's painful, because it will be better later. You can deal with the issue in a better way later and look at it from a meta-level, so to speak, if you've really been through the feeling." As an example of downregulating negative emotions, another wisdom nominee said that whenever she gets angry about small things, she says to herself, "No, I will not let this make me angry. It is just not worth it." Thus, wise individuals perceive their own feelings in depth, but

they can also judge the suitability of their emotional response to a situation and up- or downregulate accordingly.

Evidence for the role of regulating one's own emotions in dealing with life challenges comes mostly from wisdom research and research on emotional development. Laypeople's implicit theories often entail a view of wise individuals as able to remain calm in the face of conflict or difficulty (Bluck & Glück, 2005). Wisdom researchers have also suggested that emotion regulation is central to wisdom (Kunzmann, 2004). As with openness and reflection, Webster's model (2003, 2007) includes emotion regulation as a component of wisdom, while we also view it as an important building block for the eventual development of wisdom (cf. Ardel, 2011).

Emotion-regulation skills generally increase across adulthood (Carstensen, Isaacowitz, & Charles, 1999; Carstensen, Pasupathi, Mayr, & Nesselroade, 2000; Kunzmann, Kupperbusch, & Levenson, 2005): This increased skill in managing one's emotions may be another reason why wisdom is often associated with old age. Young adults may sometimes be overwhelmed by strong feelings if faced with novel, distressing events (e.g., Blanchard-Fields, Mienaltowski, & Seay, 2007; Phillips, Henry, Hosie, & Milne, 2008). Note, however, the ongoing debate about whether older adults' "better" emotion regulation is actually related to the denial or suppression of negative feelings (e.g., Labouvie-Vief, Grünh, & Mouras, 2009). Coping research also suggests that emotion regulation is important for dealing with negative events (Maercker & Zoellner, 2004). Regardless of whether it is linked with chronological age, emotion regulation appears to be a critical ability in responding to life's experiences in a manner that allows one to find balance in one's own emotional life and have the capacity to reach out to others.

*Empathy-based perception and regulation of others' emotions.* Wise persons are able and motivated to "put themselves in another person's shoes." This includes the ability to perceive others' feelings and reactions clearly so as to take their perspective, as well as the ability to "regulate" others' emotions well, on the basis of a caring concern for their welfare. Thus, wisdom includes a prosocial motivation in addition to skill in emotion regulation. Wisdom does not, however, imply engaging in others' trauma or pain so that one takes it on as one's own. In fact, wise individuals are able to downregulate their own feelings so as to remain able to support others in need.

One wisdom nominee in our project showed that she was able to take her father's perspective in describing a conflict: "I guess he probably felt that he was losing his daughter. I think he couldn't really handle the idea that I am a different person than he thought I was. Probably he was also feeling I rejected him somehow. I can imagine that." Another participant showed empathetic concern for humankind at large rather than for a specific person, saying that she sometimes felt "compassion for that whole complex system of judging and dismissing one another that goes on between people, and how they cannot get themselves out of that."

The wisdom literature supports the idea that empathy and prosocial orientations are central characteristics of wisdom. Concern for others is an important component of wisdom in lay theories (Bluck & Glück, 2005). Commonly cited public wisdom



figures are often people who showed empathetic responsiveness that effected positive change in the world (e.g., Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Mother Teresa; Paulhus, Wehr, Harms, & Strasser, 2002). Thus, many laypeople view wisdom as related to caring for the common good, extending one’s empathetic concern beyond one’s own close friends and family. Sternberg’s (1998) balance theory of (general) wisdom argued that aiming for the common good in complex problem situations is the main factor that distinguishes wisdom from practical intelligence (which might be used for maximization of one party’s profits). In the personal-wisdom tradition, Ardel (2000, 2003) proposed compassionate love for others as the core of the affective component of her wisdom model. From a developmental perspective, empathy has been suggested as a factor in prosocial moral development (e.g., Hoffman, 2000, 2001): Individuals who have higher levels of empathy as children are more likely to develop benevolent and altruistic value orientations in adulthood. Notably, skillful emotion regulation motivated toward empathy is necessary for effectively helping or providing advice to others in crisis, another typical quality of wise individuals (most people react suboptimally to those struggling with negative events; Lehman et al., 1993; Neimeyer, 2004).

### ***Dynamic Interaction: The MORE Resources and Life Experience Across the Life Span***

In theorizing about the development of wisdom, it is important to take a dynamic perspective (Brugman, 2006; Joseph & Linley, 2005, 2006; Kramer, 2000; Linley, 2003). We do not see the four resources as stable personality characteristics that people do or do not bring with them when they encounter fundamental life challenges. Rather, we suggest that they co-develop with each other and with wisdom, in an interactive way, over the life span. For example, regulating one’s emotions during a life challenge, being open to others’ views, and reflecting upon one’s role and actions afterward may help people to develop even better emotion-regulation skills and a higher sense of mastery, which then help them deal better with new difficulties. Importantly, resources also shape the experiences that individuals seek out, and having these experiences, in turn, further fosters the resources (Roberts, Robins, Trzesniewski, & Caspi, 2003). Thus, predispositions and experiences interact dynamically in the life-span development of wisdom (Baltes & Staudinger, 2000).

It is unlikely that there is a specific point in life at which an individual “achieves” wisdom. Wise people would probably say that the development of wisdom never ends and that the ideal of an absolutely wise person is not useful for psychological research. The manifestation of one’s wisdom is always a function of a person’s current developmental level and the situational context – some situations make it relatively easy for people to display wisdom whereas other contexts are not supportive or encouraging of wise behavior (Bluck, 2007). Thus, there is a

“state” aspect to the construct of wisdom, implying that all (or most) individuals are able to display wisdom in some situations (Bluck & Glück, 2004; Glück et al., 2005). Over time, repeated experience with challenges that require wisdom leads to more generalized wisdom in those individuals who have the resources to learn from such experiences. Eventually, they are able to show wisdom even in very challenging situations.

An important question that arises from our model is whether people can also lose wisdom, especially in old age where some researchers have suggested that losses in fluid intelligence may limit the capacity for complex processing of emotional and social information (Labouvie-Vief, Diehl, Jain, & Zhang, 2007; Labouvie-Vief & Medler, 2002). We can only offer some speculations about this question here, but we tend to think that regression from high to low levels of wisdom is unlikely because the self-reinforcing “positive resource syndrome” that wise people have developed over a long time may have become largely automatized rather than complex and cognitively effortful. In extreme cases such as severe trauma or advanced dementia, however, it is certainly possible for people to lose their wisdom.

## **Life Experiences and the Development of Wisdom**

The MORE resources influence the dynamic between life experiences and the development of wisdom on three levels: what challenges individuals encounter and how they experience them, how they deal with those challenges, and how they learn from these challenging events as they integrate them into their life story over time. Each level is discussed here.

### ***Fundamental Life Experiences May Foster Wisdom***

Our basic assumption is that certain life experiences can serve as catalysts, fostering wisdom in those individuals who are high in the MORE resources. We propose that the main characteristic of these experiences is that they constitute *fundamental life challenges*, that is, they provoke a major change in individuals’ world views and priorities. As proposed by Ardel (2004) and Kramer (2000), such experiences can lead people to see not only that their own previous view was inaccurate but perhaps also that holding any narrow view may be limiting. This allows them to broaden their perspective.

We do not propose, however, that only highly negative events can cause growth. Adopting a broad definition of “trauma,” Tedeschi and Calhoun (1995, 2004) argued that events that massively shatter people’s previous world views and force them to rethink their priorities have the strongest potential to foster growth in some individuals (in addition to their negative consequences). This shattering of world

views, however, is not necessarily characteristic only of severely negative events. Positive challenges such as the birth of one's first child or moving to a different culture may also change world views profoundly (Aldwin & Levenson, 2004). As mentioned before, several wisdom nominees in our current project listed the same events among their "best" and among their "most difficult" experiences. We propose that the development of wisdom is fostered through experiencing (negative or positive) fundamental changes that push individuals to grow by challenging them to reorganize their assumptions about life and priorities (Nolen-Hoeksema & Larson, 1999).

From this perspective, the MORE resources are relevant in two ways: they affect which experiences people actively seek out as well as how they perceive and appraise events that happen to them through no fault of their own. First, individuals higher in the MORE resources are more likely to seek out certain types of experiences. Due to their openness and trust in their own mastery, they may be less fearful of new experiences and changes than others. They may be more willing to travel and live in foreign cultures, engage in activities that may end in crisis or loss, meet a variety of people, learn about new ideas, and seek change in their life if internal or external circumstances require it. Thus, these individuals are more likely to encounter experiences that may in turn foster the development of wisdom. As an example for how openness can create new experiences, a wisdom nominee in our current study was in a difficult financial situation when she happened to see a job advertisement in her daughter's nursery school. She immediately talked to the headmaster and got the position, even though she had never worked in this field before. This gave her life, in turn, a whole new direction.

In addition to seeking out experiences, however, things happen to all of us that we in no way sought to encounter, including difficult conflicts, accidents, illness, or the death of close others. Wise individuals may differ from others in the way they perceive and appraise these events. Even a serious conflict (e.g., an unwanted divorce) may feel less devastating if one has the empathy, openness, and reflective ability to at least understand the other person's perspective. In the longer run, reflecting on one's own role and retrospectively understanding how the problem came about also allow a more positive appraisal of the event as a learning experience. In a similar vein, caregiving or bereavement can be dealt with better if a person has emotion-regulation skills, the ability to reflect and make meaning, and the openness to seek social support (Ainsworth, Bluck, & Glück, *in press*). Thus, the MORE resources may shape both what experiences people voluntarily encounter in the course of their lives and how they perceive and appraise negative and difficult experiences that happen to them. An example comes from our autobiographical wisdom narratives (Glück et al., 2005): An elderly participant actively decided to bring his wife, who had terminal cancer, home from the hospital to die in peace. Although it presented a huge emotional and practical burden, he later viewed this experience as the wisest in his life.

## ***Dealing with Fundamental Changes***

Life challenges are part of virtually everyone's life, but not all people grow from them, and only very few people develop high levels of wisdom. In line with other authors (Joseph & Linley, 2005; Kramer, 2000), the MORE Life Experience Model posits that certain ways of dealing with and reflecting on fundamental experiences are crucial for transforming life experiences into wisdom. For example, Ardel (2005) interviewed three high-wisdom and three low-wisdom participants about the most pleasant and unpleasant events in their lives and how they had coped with the unpleasant ones. While the types and numbers of events were comparable, the wise individuals reported more active coping and subsequent reflection, which helped them to grow and feel mastery of the negative events. The low-wisdom individuals described themselves as helpless and passive in the face of hardship and reported no learning.

The MORE resources influence how people deal with life challenges when they occur. Depending on the type of challenge, different resources may be of particular importance. For example, in a difficult conflict, openness and empathy may help an individual to see the other person's perspective, reflectivity and emotion-regulation skills may prevent them from acting too impulsively, and a sense of mastery may give them the confidence to be assertive where necessary. In coping with a serious illness, reflection and emotion regulation are important in dealing with anxiety and stress, and a sense of mastery may help individuals to cope actively with the situation and see it as an opportunity for growth in addition to a threat. Openness may help them adapt to a new situation and perhaps seek support from others, and empathy may be helpful in dealing with their loved ones.

Again, an example comes from our autobiographical-wisdom study (Glück et al., 2005): A participant talked about seeing her husband in hospital after he was in a car accident. He was severely injured and looked terrible. However, she did not let him see how she was feeling: "I told myself, I can cry later – at this time the priority is to care about how he feels." Thus, empathy with her husband and reflection caused her to effectively downregulate her current emotions to respond adequately in that particular situation. A participant in our current study described her general strategy of taking a reflective perspective in difficult situations: "And only then can I see where the situation is actually escalating – how much I am a part of that whole. As soon as I take myself out of it, I react in a totally different way because then I have become an observer. As long as I am the spinning top, permanently rotating, I can't see anything. So I've learned that the main thing is just to step out."

## ***The Integration of Fundamental Changes in Life Stories***

In addition to having experienced certain types of events, and having dealt well with fundamental life challenges at the time they occurred or in the immediate aftermath,

the MORE Life Experience Model proposes that wise individuals differ from others in their long-term retrospective view of events, that is, in how they reflect back on events over a lifetime and integrate them into their life story. How individuals integrate the events of their lives into a life story is a fundamental aspect of identity beginning in adolescence (Habermas & Bluck, 2000) and continuing throughout adulthood (McAdams, 2006). The life story, as represented in the life story schema (Bluck & Habermas, 2001), is argued to be the largest unit of personality in a recent comprehensive personality theory (Hooker & McAdams, 2003).

One way to think of this is that persons with greater wisdom continue to reflect on their memories of personal events so as to guide and direct them long after the events are over (Pillemer, 1998): They use the past directly to plan and make goals for the future (Bluck, 2003). They are more likely to engage in *autobiographical reasoning* (Bluck & Habermas, 2001; Singer & Bluck, 2001) so as to make sense of remembered events from their current vantage point in the life span. Autobiographical reasoning is a process of self-reflective thinking or talking about the personal past that involves forming links between elements of one's life and self in an attempt to relate one's personal past and present (Bluck & Levine, 1998). This updating of the life story in the light of one's constantly unfolding experience may be adaptive both emotionally and in terms of building more comprehensive models of how the world works (Levine, Lench, & Safer, 2009). Freeman (2010) has convincingly argued that many of life's important events can only be understood and learned from in hindsight. His thesis holds that it is often only in retrospect that one has sufficient information and perspective to meaningfully see how and why events unfolded as they did. But many people do not take advantage of the power of hindsight. We believe that people high in the MORE resources are more likely to engage not only in autobiographical recall but autobiographical reasoning that allows an event's meaning to be malleable and thereby continually reinterpreted as relevant to their current lives.

These ideas are consistent with classical views of human development, particularly those of theorists who focused on life-span or adult development. For example, Erikson (1959) postulated that individuals need to reflect back on their lives, accepting positive but also challenging and negative events in order to create wisdom and integrity. Butler (1963) proposed the life review as an integrative process in which individuals look back over their lives and evaluate the life lived. Although he suggested that this may be more common when facing death or loss, he recognized the life review as a process that could be engaged in at any time in life, particularly during periods of transition. MORE resources such as openness and reflection may foster people's willingness and level of engagement in conducting small life reviews as they move through life and confront normative and nonnormative changes and transitions.

Traditionally, the life review was considered as something largely engaged in by older persons and possibly in preparation for death. More current theoretical notions of the life review have moved away from its clinical roots to include reference to social-cognitive processes, particularly a dynamic, malleable memory system through which life's events are recalled and to some extent reconfigured in the light of current knowledge and life circumstances (Bluck & Levine, 1998).

There is an integrated, bidirectional, relation between the self and autobiographical memory: One can revisit and reinterpret life's events without also losing the basic correspondence between the reality of lived events and how they are remembered and interpreted in the present (e.g., correspondence vs. coherence, Conway, Singer, & Tagini, 2004). That is, it can be argued that in reconstructing memories and reflecting on our lives, we do not lose or erode the truth of what "actually happened" (e.g., the classic cognitive notion of memory fading over time and becoming less reliable) but in fact may be more likely to find the truth (Freeman, 2010). That is, if we accept a malleable autobiographical memory system, this allows individuals to gain insights and learn life lessons (i.e., develop wisdom) from events as they look back at and reconstruct them a month, a year, or ten years later.

Individuals high in the MORE resources may also be particularly adept at reflecting on negative events, as needed, in order to integrate them into their lives, because they also have the emotion-regulation skills to avoid having their life center on, or be defined by, a negative event (Berntsen & Rubin, 2006; Glück, 2011). Reexamining both the positive and negative events of life may be useful in continually updating one's life story, but processing negative events can present a challenge to well-being. Although there is no research specifically on how wise individuals reflect on negative or traumatic events, related literatures do suggest that there are ways of processing difficult life events that are more likely to result in personal growth. For example, as Pals and McAdams (2004) have argued, "post-traumatic growth may be best understood as a process of constructing a narrative understanding of how the self has been positively transformed by the traumatic event and then integrating this transformed sense of self into the identity-defining life story" (p. 65). In a similar vein, Neimeyer (2004) argues that meaning-making through creation of an event narrative and its integration into one's long-term "self-narrative" is a crucial component of posttraumatic growth. Studies of narratives about traumatic events suggest that growth after such events is related to two aspects of autobiographical processing. Individuals who (1) acknowledged and examined the deeply disequilibrating impact of the event on the self and (2) were able to construct a positive resolution (including an account of how the self was positively transformed through the experience) were most likely to show growth (King, Scollon, Ramsey, & Williams, 2000; Pals, 2006). Individuals high in reflectivity may be better able to contextualize past negative events in terms of their larger significance for their life.

Little research examines wise persons' personal growth explicitly, but the available evidence supports the idea that greater wisdom is related to a stronger ability to transform negative events into growth experiences. In Ardelt's (2005) study, wise persons were able to see positive consequences by retrospectively examining even severely negative events. In an Austrian survey (Glück, 2005), participants who viewed themselves as wise reported positive long-term consequences of originally negative life events more often than others. In addition, when individuals were asked to provide retrospective autobiographical narratives of times in their lives when they were wise, a significant majority talked about initially negative events being transformed into positive outcomes over time (Bluck & Glück, 2004; Glück et al., 2005).

The MORE Life Experience Model proposes, therefore, that wiser individuals may differ from others in how they construct and tell their life stories, and particularly how they frame diverse and negative events within their lives. The four MORE wisdom resources (mastery, openness, reflection, and emotion regulation) are not only relevant while processing life's events in situ but also in how individuals recall and reflect on their lives as they construct and reconstruct their life story over time.

Reflectivity is particularly central to the life-story integration of life events and life challenges. Much of the deep knowledge base that is at the core of wisdom is likely to have resulted from wise individuals reflecting on and deriving lessons from life experience. When describing wisdom experiences in their lives, people are often able to encapsulate what they have learned from the event in terms of changes to their view of themselves or their view of the world and how things operate in the world (Bluck & Glück, 2004). The development of maturity is positively associated with interpreting memories of challenging events as having caused new insights (Bauer, McAdams, & Sakaeda, 2005) and with reflection that helps one to identify unreachable goals (King & Hicks, 2007). Reflection, defined as a conscious effort to understand what is happening in one's life and to make meaning of it, is an important predictor of longer-term growth from negative experiences (Zoellner & Maercker, 2006). Openness is related to both the self and the directive functions of autobiographical memory (Bluck, 2009), that is, using memories to understand one's self and direct one's decisions and actions (Rasmussen & Berntsen, 2010). It is also linked both to deep examination of the negative impact of an event on one's self and one's life and to the ability to perceive a positive resolution (Pals & McAdams, 2004). It is highly plausible that a general sense of mastery and good emotion-regulation skills are resources that allow individuals to reflect on and repeatedly reexamine life events, even negative events, without feeling that they will be overwhelmed by them (i.e., maladaptive rumination).

While a sense of mastery and emotion-regulation ability can affect how one engages in reviewing past events, they may also be seen as outcomes of autobiographical reasoning about life's events and challenges. Integrating difficult life events into an acceptable life story both requires and fosters mastery and regulation skills: Newfound abilities allow one to deal even more successfully with life's future challenges. Thus, when the MORE resources converge optimally in an individual, they interact to help them develop wisdom more fully through an evolving life story.

One example from our earlier study (Glück et al., 2005) comes from the woman mentioned earlier who had to cope with her husband's accident. Retrospectively, she described how the motto "I can cry later" became a general strategy that she used in new situations when she wanted to be strong as others needed her support. Another example comes from our current study, in which a participant said, "Now I am 70, and all in all I look back at my life feeling satisfied. The events in my life were quite challenging, and sometimes I was up all night thinking about something. But now when I look back, I think it had to be like that, this is my way, and all these experiences shaped my life, and I needed them to come to where I am now and see things from a different perspective." Thus, he was able to reinterpret challenges as experiences that had helped him to grow and develop.

**Table 1** Summary of the MORE life experience wisdom model

Resources	Encountering life challenges	Dealing with challenges	Life-story integration
Mastery	Wise individuals trust in their ability to handle any challenge. Therefore, they experience more self-induced challenges and are not avoidant and afraid of negative events.	Wise individuals trust in their ability to deal with an ongoing challenge. They deal with challenges actively or adapt to them, depending on the demands of the situation.	Wise individuals have developed a “story of mastery” reflecting how they earned through experience that they can handle challenges appropriately.
Openness	Wise individuals are interested in new experiences and perspectives. They view life changes as positive opportunities for learning.	Even in difficult situations, wise individuals are interested in multiple perspectives. They are willing to seek others’ views and to try out new approaches.	Wise individuals are open to changing the narrative of their own development based on new experiences or others’ perspectives.
Reflectivity	Wise individuals do not categorize experiences as “good” or “bad.” They take a broader picture in encountering events and are tolerant of ambiguity.	Wise individuals are able to take a step back to understand the context and history of a situation. They critically reflect on their own role and past and present behavior.	Wise individuals reflect frequently on past experiences to find new meaning and direction and to interpret current events in terms of past experience.
Emotion regulation/empathy	Wise individuals perceive their own and others’ emotions accurately. They are concerned about the well-being of others, which may put them into the role of “helpers” or “leaders”.	Wise individuals are able to regulate their emotions as a situation requires. They neither suppress nor avoid negative emotions. They are also able to effectively support others in difficulty or distress.	Wise individuals can retrospectively understand and integrate emotions. They are accepting of reinterpretations of experiences even if they are not self-enhancing.

### Conclusions: Toward a Dynamic Model of the Interaction of Resources and Life Experiences in the Development of Wisdom

To briefly summarize, the MORE Life Experience Model postulates that (at least) four resources are crucial to the development of wisdom over time because they influence (a) what life challenges individuals encounter and how they appraise them, (b) how they deal with life challenges, and (c) how they retrospectively integrate and reintegrate them into their life story. These four resources are a sense



of mastery, openness, reflectivity, and emotion regulation/empathy. If present at high levels in an individual, the resources reinforce each other over time, forming a kind of “positive syndrome” that helps people deal with challenges in their own and others’ lives. Such individuals are likely to develop high levels of wisdom over the course of their lives. Table 1 shows how the four resources influence the three levels of experiencing life challenges.

We emphasize that at this point the MORE Life Experience Model is, itself, under development. We are currently conducting the first study to test its predictions, and while the evidence looks promising, we are refining our own model as we apply it to real data. While we have a sufficient sense of mastery to believe that the model is empirically testable, we are well aware of uncontrollable factors in “proving” ideas related to a construct as complex as wisdom. We plan to remain open to modifications and additions to the model that come from the data and from our colleagues: Additional resources may need to be added based on future findings. We are constantly trying to reflect critically on our insights and blindnesses in thinking about wisdom, and finally, we hope to effectively regulate our emotions when negative feedback about the model comes our way and to show empathy with students learning, sometimes painfully, to content code the MORE resources.

Ultimately, we need to begin a longitudinal survey to gain a deeper understanding of the developmental dynamics between the MORE resources and life experiences. We believe, however, that the current conceptual model is an important step, moving developmental theories of wisdom toward a set of testable hypotheses. The MORE Life Experience Model is offered here as a conceptual framework that encourages a developmental focus in the growing body of wisdom research. If we understand better why and how wisdom develops, we may eventually find ways of making the wider world a little wiser.

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# Neurobiological Basis of Personal Wisdom

Jeff D. Sanders and Dilip V. Jeste

Wisdom is an ancient concept that has been cross-culturally recognized throughout history (Birren & Svensson, 2005; Jeste & Vahia, 2008). Wisdom has been subject to a number of definitions, including a system of logic for understanding the world, a notion that is the basis of modern science. Wisdom has also been considered the human embodiment of Gods. Though there are a variety of definitions of wisdom, the notion of personal wisdom is considered the oldest and most familiar and generally refers to the ability to cope with life and live it to its fullest.

While there is not yet a universal consensus on a more specific definition for personal wisdom, we have recently attempted to define personal wisdom via an expert consensus panel using a 2-phase Delphi method (Jeste et al., 2010). This study revealed that there was considerable agreement among expert participants on personal wisdom being a distinct entity with a number of characteristic qualities that were different from those in intelligence and spirituality. Many of these qualities could be classified as belonging to a cognitive dimension (i.e., rich knowledge of life, social cognition, tolerance of ambivalence, acceptance of uncertainty), some belonged to a reflective dimension (i.e., sense of justice and fairness, self-insight, tolerance of differences among others), and others were consistent with an affective dimension (i.e., empathy and social cooperation). Additional items

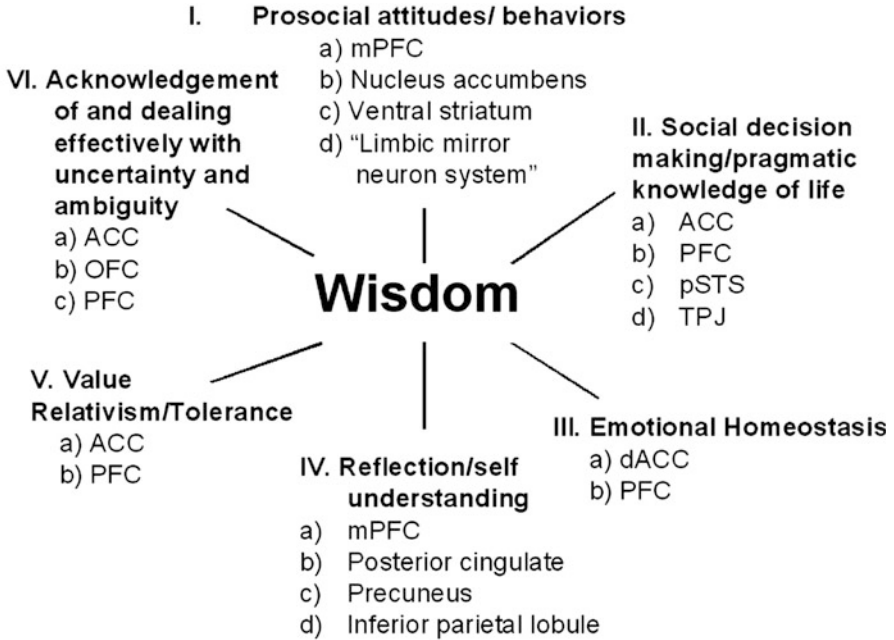
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J.D. Sanders

Sam and Rose Stein Institute for Research on Aging and Department of Psychiatry, University of California, San Diego, 9500 Gilman Drive, #0664, San Diego, CA 92093, USA  
e-mail: [j2sanders@ucsd.edu](mailto:j2sanders@ucsd.edu)

D.V. Jeste (✉)

Sam and Rose Stein Institute for Research on Aging, Department of Psychiatry, and Department of Neurosciences, University of California, San Diego, 9500 Gilman Drive, #0664, San Diego, CA 92093, USA  
e-mail: [djeste@ucsd.edu](mailto:djeste@ucsd.edu)



ACC = Anterior Cingulate Cortex  
dACC = Dorsal Anterior Cingulate Cortex  
mPFC = medial PreFrontal Cortex  
OFC = OrbitoFrontal Cortex  
PFC = PreFrontal Cortex  
pSTS = posterior Superior Temporal Sulcus  
TPJ = Temporo-Parietal Junction

**Fig. 1** Components of personal wisdom with putative neuroanatomic regions involved. *ACC* Anterior cingulate cortex, *dACC* Dorsal anterior cingulate cortex, *mPFC* Medial prefrontal cortex, *OFC* Orbitofrontal cortex, *PFC* Prefrontal Cortex, *pSTS* Posterior superior temporal sulcus, *TPJ* Temporo-parietal junction

considered to be descriptive of wisdom included emotional regulation, openness to new experiences, sense of humor, and maturity gained with experience. We have also reviewed traits associated with wisdom in published literature and have noted components from several published definitions that are consistent with the data from the above-mentioned Delphi study (Meeks & Jeste, 2009). These components include prosocial attitudes and behaviors, social decision-making, emotional homeostasis, reflection, tolerance, and dealing effectively with uncertainty and ambiguity (Fig. 1).

Collectively, these qualities associated with wisdom are similar to those emphasized in previous definitions as well as in ancient religious/philosophical literature such as the Bhagavad Gita (Jeste & Vahia, 2008). Such findings

underscore the antiquity of the concept of wisdom and highlight its cross-cultural veneration. We have proposed that the similarities between descriptions of personal wisdom across times and cultures suggest it might arise from of a uniquely interacting assembly of neural systems. A review of studies in humans has further revealed putative neuroanatomical and neurochemical substrates that may subserve these component traits (Meeks & Jeste, 2009).

Advances in neurobiology, especially in functional neuroimaging, have improved our ability to study brain regions important for this trait. In addition, animal studies of homologous behavioral components and brain regions may begin to allow for a further dissection of underlying neurocircuitry. The literature suggests that not only is wisdom an ancient concept in human societies but that it is also an emergent property of advanced brain systems whose roots may be studied in more simplified brain networks. Wisdom may have evolutionary significance in facilitating human longevity despite declining physical health associated with aging (Jeste & Harris, 2010).

Applying these approaches to the study of personal wisdom comes at an opportune time, particularly since the study of wisdom has progressively intensified in recent years. Indeed, publications in peer-reviewed journals on wisdom have increased nearly 15-fold over the past 40 years (Meeks & Jeste, 2009). This chapter will examine data on the neurobiology of the six components of wisdom and briefly review studies that point to the basic neurocircuitry in other species too. Whereas wisdom is likely to be a uniquely human trait, its individual components (at least in attenuated form) may be seen in some lower animals.

As a brief introduction we will describe the neuroanatomical terms and organization of brain areas that we will discuss. First, it is important to be oriented to general terms for designating the position of brain structures according to anatomical axes. The anterior end refers to the front of the brain, while the posterior end is the back of the brain. The dorsal aspect refers to the top of the brain, while the bottom of the brain is considered ventral. Finally, laterally positioned structures are toward the side of the brain, while medial structures are positioned toward the midline.

These terms are important for understanding the location of many brain areas that will be discussed in this chapter. While the human brain is an enormously complicated structure, our discussion will focus largely upon the cortex, amygdala, thalamus, striatum, and hippocampus. The cortex forms the convoluted outer mantle of the brain and is further divided into frontal, parietal, occipital, and temporal lobes. Our discussion will focus on the frontal cortex and will extensively rely upon the positional terms we have introduced. For instance, a cortical region of special emphasis will include the frontal cortex, which is situated in the anterior pole of the brain. Just anterior to the frontal cortex is the prefrontal cortex (PFC), which consists of a heterogeneous system of subdivisions. These subdivisions are organized according to lateral regions, positioned on the outer sides of the PFC, and medial regions, positioned on the inner aspect of the PFC. The lateral PFC is further subdivided in to the ventrolateral region (VLPFC), dorsolateral region (DLPFC), and rostral region (RPFPC). The medial PFC (mPFC) is situated near the midline of



the PFC and harbors the anterior cingulate cortex (ACC), which has important connections with the other prefrontal regions. Residing beneath the cortex are the subcortical structures we will discuss which include the amygdala, thalamus, striatum, and hippocampus.

## Prosocial Attitudes and Behaviors

Perhaps the most commonly included traits in definitions of personal wisdom are prosocial attitudes and behaviors. Sternberg proposed a theory that emphasized wisdom as an application of tacit knowledge that is directed by values toward a common good (Sternberg, 1990). This application of knowledge is proposed to incorporate a balance among intrapersonal and extrapersonal interests. Ardeli has emphasized the ability of knowing the positive and negative aspects of human nature. An essential aspect of wisdom is integrating this with affective capacities of positive emotion and behaviors toward others (Ardeli, 2004).

Neuroimaging studies point to the PFC as an important brain region subserving human social function. A meta-analysis of 80 studies identified the mPFC as playing a major role in human empathy (Seitz, Nickel, & Azari, 2006). Data show that observing another person's emotional states activate neural networks in the mPFC (de Vignemont & Singer, 2006; Sommerville & Decety, 2006). Further data supporting a role for the mPFC in empathy includes studies that have shown this brain region is important in the perception of shared emotional experience (Seitz et al., 2008).

At an even greater level of resolution, a brain system that may be important to human empathy is the "mirror neuron system" within the PFC. Evidence points to a "limbic mirror neuron system," which activates when a person is experiencing an emotion and when she/he is watching another individual experience that particular emotion (Cattaneo & Rizzolatti, 2009). A separate role has been identified for parieto-frontal mirror neurons, which activate when a person is performing an action and when she/he is watching another person perform that action. The coordinated activities of mirror neuron systems are proposed to form an important basis for empathy (Rizzolatti, Fadiga, Gallese, & Fogassi, 1996). These data suggest that empathy is founded upon neural systems that actually recreate a neural representation of other's experiences within us.

Other neuroimaging investigations have examined social cooperation. Studies with fMRI have shown that social cooperation involves the mPFC and the nucleus accumbens/ventral striatum (Jean Decety & Jackson, 2004; Rilling et al., 2002; Singer, Kiebel, Winston, Dolan, & Frith, 2004). Altruism also has been shown to activate similar brain regions as social cooperation in neuroimaging studies, using paradigms such as money donation (vs. taxation), where the primary brain regions activated were striatum and nucleus accumbens (Harbaugh, Mayr, & Burghart, 2007; Moll et al., 2006).

More recent data suggest that the possible neurobiological roots of empathic behavior can be studied even in mice (Jeon et al., 2010). Prefrontal regions in mice

are associated with “observational fear learning,” which is considered a primitive form of empathy. For example, mice that observe other mice being shocked will freeze when placed back in the observation chamber the next day. This demonstrates that mice are capable of responding emotionally to cues that signal the previous distress of another mouse. The brain regions involved in this phenomenon have been shown to include the lateral amygdala and medial pain system, comprised of the ACC and mediodorsal and parafascicular nuclei of the thalamus.

Other experiments in voles have shown that two neuropeptides, oxytocin and vasopressin, are important to social behaviors (Insel, Young, & Wang, 1997). The distribution of these receptors in reward circuitry mirrors the involvement of this reward circuitry in human social cooperation (Shapiro & Insel, 1992). These experiments may allow us to better understand the neurochemical underpinnings of prosocial behaviors in wisdom.

## **Social Decision-Making/Pragmatic Knowledge of Life**

### ***Social Valuation***

Negotiating the complexities of social networks has been recognized as an important aspect of personal wisdom. Previous descriptions of wisdom have emphasized that it requires one to be “interpersonally skilled and have judgment and communication skills that are exercised in a framework which includes substantial knowledge of human social concerns” (Holliday & Chandler, 1986).

Findings that have the most relevance to “pragmatic life knowledge and skills,” have been uncovered in neuroimaging studies of social cognition. Studies of “moral decision-making” are of considerable relevance to wisdom. Investigators have examined neural correlates for personal versus impersonal moral decisions. An example of an impersonal moral decision dilemma is one where a trolley is headed for five people. The observer can redirect the trolley from these five people toward a different set of tracks where it will kill one person instead. A personal moral decision is one where the observer may save the five people by pushing a separate person in front of the trolley. One study found that such personal moral decisions preferentially activated the ACC and the DLPFC (Greene, Nystrom, Engell, Darley, & Cohen, 2004). These regions have been implicated in cognitive conflict detection, which may be important in regulating more automatic emotional responses. These data suggest that social decision-making capacities associated with wisdom may rely upon circuitry in the ACC and DLPFC.

“Theory of mind” research may be of further applicability to the social aspects of wisdom. This area of research focuses on how humans understand the mental states of others (Perner & Lang, 1999). Neuroimaging studies have implicated the mPFC and posterior superior temporal sulcus (pSTS) and temporo-parietal junction (TPJ) in subserving “theory of mind” functions. Each of these brain regions plays a

distinct role in this capacity, with the mPFC primarily involved in “mentalizing” or conceiving of the inner world of others, while the pSTS responds to visual stimuli related to social cues and internal mental states (e.g., body gestures or facial expressions). The TPJ plays a role in self-other distinction (Brunet, Sarfati, Hardy-Baylé, & Decety, 2000; Fletcher et al., 1995; Gallagher et al., 2000; Goel, Grafman, Sadato, & Hallett, 1995).

While social decision-making has not been extensively addressed in other animals, studies in monkeys have examined the neurobiology for the motivation to engage in social interactions and to value certain social cues. These nonhuman primate behaviors are important for successful social integration and most likely form an important foundation for more sophisticated social skills in humans. Inquiries into brain regions mediating social valuation in primates have uncovered an important role for the cingulate cortex. In macaques, cingulate lesions result in decreased social interaction, less time spent in the proximity of other monkeys, and decreased vocalizations (Hadland, Rushworth, Gaffan, & Passingham, 2003). Social decision-making also has been a recent area of inquiry in macaques. Experiments have examined the effects of lesioning the anterior cingulate gyrus (ACC<sub>g</sub>) on recognizing social cues. Macaques with selective lesions of the ACC<sub>g</sub> show impairments in normal patterns of social interest for other individual male or female macaques (Rudebeck, Buckley, Walton, & Rushworth, 2006).

## Emotional Homeostasis

Emotional homeostasis is widely regarded as an important dimension of personal wisdom. Theories have postulated wisdom as coordinated regulation of affect and cognition with affect regulation being an important aspect (Kramer, 1990). Prior work has described wise individuals as in possession of excellent senses of humor in the face of adversity and as peaceful (Kramer). Others have emphasized emotional management and emotional stability in the face of life’s uncertainty as an important aspect of wisdom (Brugman, 2005). Important to the attainment of this affect regulation would be a control of impulsivity and negative emotions such as anxiety and depression.

Impulse control is an important aspect of emotional regulation in wisdom (Meeks & Jeste, 2009). Impulsivity has been regarded as a disturbed inhibition of behavior, lack of reflection regarding the consequences of one’s behavior, and inability to postpone reward. Areas of the frontal cortex have been widely implicated in emotional regulation and impulse control in particular. The dorsal ACC (dACC) and lateral PFC/inferior frontal gyrus have been shown to be important for modulating impulsivity (Congdon & Canli, 2005). It has been proposed that the dACC senses conflict between instinctual emotional responses and more socially acceptable responses, whereas the lateral PFC incorporates more socially advantageous responses in working memory. It is then a coordinated action between the dACC and lateral PFC that orchestrates socially appropriate action

while inhibiting inappropriate responses. One behavioral task that is used to measure impulsivity is “go/no-go” task. This task has shown that the inferior frontal gyrus is consistently activated when behavioral inhibition is required (Horn, Dolan, Elliott, Deakin, & Woodruff, 2003).

Of further relevance to the study of emotional regulation is the capacity for cognitive reevaluation of emotions. The importance of this ability is illustrated by the therapeutic effects of reframing negative emotional experiences through cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT). Data suggest that this form of therapy allows the PFC to decrease excess activity in limbic areas such as the amygdala (Cooney, Joormann, Atlas, Eugène, & Gotlib, 2007; Goldin, McRae, Ramel, & Gross, 2008; Ochsner, Bunge, Gross, & Gabrieli, 2002; Phan et al., 2005). Indeed, the simple act of being able to label one’s emotions with words has been shown to increase VLPFC activity and decrease amygdala activity (Hariri, Bookheimer, & Mazziotta, 2000; Lieberman et al., 2007). Collectively, these findings point to an important role for prefrontal inhibition of limbic reactivity in the attainment of emotional homeostasis. These data further suggest that psychotherapy may facilitate emotional regulation circuitry that may be important for the emotional homeostasis subcomponent of wisdom.

Investigations of impulsivity in rodents have been pursued and include the go/no-go and stop-signal reaction time tasks, five-choice serial reaction time task (5CSRT), and delay-discounting paradigms. These models have been previously reviewed in depth (Winstanley, Eagle, & Robbins, 2006). Using these models, neuroanatomical foundations of impulsivity have been investigated. Though there are conflicting studies in rodents, some have shown that regions of the ACC and orbitofrontal cortex (OFC) are important to impulse control (Muir, Everitt, & Robbins, 1996; Winstanley, Theobald, Cardinal, & Robbins, 2004). Furthermore, a recent study has revealed close parallels between human and rodent ACC in depression. Mice subject to social-defeat stress showed similar reduction in ACC immediate early genes (IEGs) as did postmortem samples from clinically depressed human beings (Covington et al., 2010).<sup>1</sup>

## Value Relativism/Tolerance

Value relativism and tolerance of other people’s value systems is often considered an important component of personal wisdom. For instance, past descriptions of personal wisdom have described it as a trait in which one recognizes the relativity of various formal systems through life experiences and is able to manage contradictory points of view.

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<sup>1</sup> IEGs are molecules important to the plasticity of the cell. They have been shown to play critical roles in learning and memory.

Studies examining tolerance have focused on the study of societal prejudices toward race and ethnicity. Neuroimaging data have revealed that a regulation of prejudicial responses involves dorsal ACC detection of prejudice and subsequent inhibition by the lateral PFC with presumed downstream deactivation of the amygdala (Amodio et al., 2004; Cunningham et al., 2004). Studies on “theory of mind,” have proposed that the lateral PFC inhibits one’s own perspective, enabling one to consider someone else’s state of mind or view. This proposal is supported by research on persons with lesions in the lateral PFC. These subjects are markedly self-focused and have difficulties accurately interpreting social cues from others (Samson, Apperly, & Humphreys, 2007; Samson, Apperly, Kathirgamanathan, & Humphreys, 2005).

While value relativism and tolerance are components of wisdom that are difficult to investigate in other species, studies in bonobos and chimpanzees have examined social tolerance and cooperation (Hare, Melis, Woods, Hastings, & Wrangham, 2007). According to the “emotional-reactivity hypothesis,” one route by which social problem solving can evolve is through the selection of emotional systems controlling fear and aggression (Hare & Tomasello, 2005). According to this hypothesis, it is predicted that bonobos will socially cooperate more effectively than chimpanzees because their tolerance levels are higher. When presented with a food reward that is highly monopolizable, bonobos are indeed more successful at cooperating to retrieve it which is in parallel to their higher tolerance while co-feeding as compared to chimpanzees (Hare et al., 2007).

## **Acknowledgment of and Dealing Effectively with Uncertainty and Ambiguity**

Personal wisdom is often associated with an ability to accept and cope with life’s uncertainty and the ambiguity inherent in decision-making. Both Aristotle and Plato emphasized an awareness of the limits of personal knowledge as a characteristic of the wise (Rouse, 1956; Ross, 2011). A core aspect of wisdom has been defined as “a willingness and exceptional ability to formulate sound, executable judgments in the face of this uncertainty” (Kekes, 1983). Other investigators have argued that wisdom involves recognizing the dialectical nature of knowing while having the discipline and humility to ponder and choose the best solution possible (Sternberg, 1990).

In humans, cognitive flexibility and dealing effectively with uncertainty have been examined by having subjects confront uncertain and ambiguous decisions. A prior study reviewed experiments in which persons were confronted with decision-making where outcomes have known probabilities and the individuals must decide between “safe” and “risky” decisions. This was contrasted with ambiguous decisions where the probability of specific outcomes was unknown. It was found that making decisions in the face of ambiguity most consistently activated the

DLPFC, dorsal ACC, and insula. Risky decisions activated the OFC, mPFC, caudate, and ventral ACC (Krain, Wilson, Arbuckle, Castellanos, & Milham, 2006). A separate investigation found that persons who preferred ambiguous over risky decisions had higher activity in the lateral PFC, whereas ambiguous versus unambiguous decisions activated the dorsal ACC and DLPFC (Huettel, Stowe, Gordon, Warner, & Platt, 2006).

The emphasis on being able to make decisions in the face of uncertainty suggests an important component of behavioral and cognitive flexibility in the wise individuals, whereby they may entertain a possible problem solution but also be able to consider other modes of more adaptive thought or action according to changing information. Cognitive flexibility has been addressed in animals through behavioral tasks of reversal learning, attentional set-shifting, and task switching (Takei et al., 1992). The PFC and striatum have been largely implicated in these cognitive capacities. Other regions implicated in such tasks include the OFC, mediodorsal thalamic nucleus, nucleus accumbens, and mPFC (Birrell & Brown, 2000; Block, Dhanji, Thompson-Tardif, & Floresco, 2007; McAlonan & Brown, 2003; McEnaney & Butter, 1969).

## Discussion

Personal wisdom is a long-known and cross-culturally valued attribute whose empirical biological study is currently in its infancy. Indeed, research efforts are still in the process of establishing a consensual definition for wisdom. Although defining a consensus description of wisdom is an important first step in investigating its neurobiology, it should be noted that many psychological constructs that we seek a neurobiological understanding of also possess controversial definitions. For instance, DSM-IV criteria for psychopathology continue to undergo numerous revisions, yet these conditions are an area of prolific neuroscientific research (Coghill & Seth, 2011; Gurley, 2009). Furthermore, intelligence is a commonly disputed construct and yet is one of the most intensely studied psychological traits (Colom, Karama, Jung, & Haier, 2010; Langer et al., 2011; van den Heuvel, Stam, Kahn, & Hulshoff Pol, 2009). Similarly, happiness, consciousness, love, and creativity all have evasive definitions but have become subjects of neurobiological investigation (Ascoli & Samsonovich, 2008; Burgdorf & Panksepp, 2006; Carlsson, Wendt, & Risberg, 2000; Heilman, Nadeau, & Beversdorf, 2003; Lewis & Macgregor, 2010). Indeed, animal models have been proposed for studying positive psychological traits such as creativity, in addition to many psychiatric conditions (Bailey, McDaniel, & Thomas, 2007; Nestler & Hyman, 2010; Neumann et al., 2010).

In conclusion, personal wisdom is a revered and age-old concept in the history of humanity. While empirical research on wisdom is in its early stages, recent studies suggest that the individual components of personal wisdom may be related to the functioning of specific areas of the brain. The PFC appears to play an especially

important role since it is implicated in virtually every subcomponent of wisdom. Accordingly, we have previously proposed a working model in which the PFC and ACC work in a coordinated manner to modulate brain regions associated with emotionality and immediate reward. In so doing, this inhibition may promote social decision-making, emotional homeostasis, tolerance, and capacities for dealing effectively with uncertainty and ambiguity. The mPFC may be especially important in mediating self-reflection and introspection (Meeks & Jeste, 2009). An orchestrated balance between these areas may underlie personal wisdom.

In this chapter, we have reviewed studies that support this model and have also begun to explore how investigations in other species may begin to further inform our understanding of neurobiology of the proposed components of personal wisdom. Clearly, these theories are very speculative at this point. However, the aim of our discussion is primarily to promote discussion on the topic of the neurobiology of wisdom and to develop a heuristic framework for approaching its study. These data add to a growing interest in the neuroscience of wisdom (Hall, 2010). Collectively, these pursuits should provide a template on which further experiments specifically focused on uncovering neurobiological foundations of personal wisdom may be initiated.

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**Part II**  
**Wisdom in Everyday, Real-Life Contexts**

# From Personal Striving to Positive Influence: Exploring Wisdom in Real-Life Contexts

Shih-ying Yang

People manifest wisdom in real-life contexts through events in their own lives (Baltes & Smith, 1990; Kramer, 1990; 2000; Sternberg, 2007; Yang, 2008b). The ability to manifest wisdom is also developed through real-life learning. To understand wisdom, we must therefore examine wisdom as it is manifested real-life context. This chapter defines wisdom as a real-life process that is manifested when a person integrates conflicting ideas, and embodies those integrated ideas in actions that generate positive effects for oneself and others. It proposes an approach to real-life studies of wisdom in four parts. The first part provides theoretical arguments for studying wisdom in real life. The second part discusses some of the methodological issues encountered in real-life wisdom studies. The third part presents the findings of some recent studies of wisdom in real-life contexts. The fourth part discusses future directions for this branch of wisdom studies.

## Theoretical Arguments

### *The Purpose of Studying Wisdom*

Why should we study wisdom? Wisdom enables us to live a good life (Assmann, 1994; Holliday & Chandler, 1986). Although adaptation for survival is important for all living creatures, human civilizations have progressed to a point that biological survival or reproduction is not the sole purpose of life, as Jürgen Habermas (1968) asserted: “What may appear as naked survival is always in its roots a historical phenomenon. For it is subject to the criterion of what a society

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S.-y. Yang (✉)

Department of Educational Policy and Administration, National Chi Nan University,  
1 University Rd., Puli, Nantou, Taiwan  
e-mail: [shihying@ncnu.edu.tw](mailto:shihying@ncnu.edu.tw)

intends for itself as *the good life*” (p. 313). In general, most people strive to live well: to live with comfort, quality, dignity, happiness, and a sense of purpose and, in short, to live a life in which human potential is fully actualized, in which wonderful and satisfying things can happen.

## ***Wisdom and Good Lives in Human Society***

Wisdom is manifested as the result of the pursuit of a good life. Studies show that there is consensus over what constitutes a good life among members in different communities (Suh, Diener, Oishi, & Triandis, 1998). To most people, it is a life that is meaningful and satisfying (King & Napa, 1998). However, because *Homo sapiens* are social animals, our striving to live good lives also necessarily influences the lives of others. Recent events, such as global warming, shortage of natural resources, financial crises, and cultural and religious conflicts, are good examples of such interrelatedness. A good life, thus, must entail generating positive effects not only for oneself but also for others. Wisdom, as a process of pursuing a good life and resolving real-life problems by exerting positive influence both for oneself and others, has its foundation in human society.

### **A Good Life**

In *The Records of the Grand Historian* (97 B.C./1974), one of the best known historical texts in ancient China, the famous historian Szuma Chien, recorded a historical event concerning a crucial battle that I think reveals a sharp contrast between two different conceptions of a good life:

Chao Sheh was a very capable general in the State of Chao in the Warring States Period of ancient China (403 B.C.–221 B.C.), and he won battles in the most desperate situations. In 260 B.C. the mighty State of Chin [the state that unified China in 221 B.C.] attacked the State of Chao. At that time Chao Sheh had already died. The young king of Chao wanted to appoint Sheh’s son Chao Kuo to be the commander. . . .

Chao Kuo [the son] had studied military science and discussed strategy since boyhood. He was confident that no one in the world was a match for him. Once he even bettered his father Chao Sheh in a discussion on strategy, yet he could not win his father’s approval. When Chao Kuo’s mother asked why, Chao Sheh [the father] said, “War is a matter of life and death, but he makes light of it. I can only hope he never becomes our state’s commander. If he does, he will destroy our army.”

. . . . So when Chao Kuo [the son] was about to set out with his troops, his mother wrote to beg the king not to send him. Asked for her reasons, she replied, “When I was first married to his father [Sheh], who was then a commander, he offered food and wine to dozens of men at his meals and treated hundreds as his friends, distributing his gifts from Your Majesty and others of the royal house among his officers and friends. From the day he took the command he gave no further thought to family affairs. But as soon as Chao Kuo [her son] became a commander he put on such airs that none of his officers or men dare look

him in the eye. When you give him gold and silk he takes it home, and he looks every day for cheap property to buy. How does he compare with his father, would you say? Since father and son are so different, I hope you will not send him.”

“Leave it to me,” said the king. “I have made the decision.” . . . After Chao Kuo [the son] took over, he rescinded all previous orders and appointments. When General Pai Chi of the State of Chin learned of this, he made a surprise attack, feigned a retreat, cut Chao’s supply route and split the army into two so that both officers and men lost heart. When his army was starving some forty days later, Chao Kuo led picked troops out to fight and the men of Chin shot and killed him. The State of Chao was defeated and hundreds of thousands of its men surrendered, only to be buried alive by the State of Chin. In all, the State of Chao lost four hundred and fifty thousand men [450,000]. (Chapter 81, trans. 1974)

This disastrous battle, which is known as the Battle of Changping (長平之戰), was considered a decisive battle that ultimately allowed the State of Chin to conquer other states and unify China decades later ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battle\\_of\\_Changping](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battle_of_Changping)).

Chao Sheh [the father] is by no means a prominent figure in ancient Chinese history. His name was recorded in history probably because of his son’s horrible failure. By modern standards, we can hardly assert that the father had a good life. Reading through the text, he probably did not enjoy many peaceful meals, accumulate much wealth, or have much family time, whereas the son was rich and received recognition while alive. However, it is only by comparison with the son’s failure that we realize how many lives were saved by the father’s efforts. Between the two, who do we say had a good life?

In terms of its temporal length, “life” here can have at least three different meanings. First of all, life can mean everyday life or a sequence of moments. Hence, to live a good life in this sense means having as many wonderful and fulfilling moments as possible. Second, life can mean an individual’s complete life course. Thus, living a good life means managing a life course so that it is fulfilling and satisfying. Third, life can also mean that which “existed before we were born and will continue to exist after we leave this world” (Coelho, 1994, p. 175). In this case, to live a good life means advancing human possibilities (Wittgenstein, 1953/1958) so that future generations may have even better lives than were possible before. Thus, wisdom can be manifested in real life in at least three forms, depending on its form and temporal length: (1) successfully resolving real-life problems and challenges, (2) managing one’s overall life course in a satisfying way, and (3) actualizing new possibilities in human civilization.

## Positive Effects

One essential feature of wisdom is its positive effects on real-life situations (Yang, 2005). Examples of wisdom’s positive effects can be drawn from the biblical story of King Solomon, a figure who has been seen as an icon of wisdom for centuries in many Western societies. According to *Kings I*, Solomon was granted wisdom by God early in his life and reign (3:9–15), but his wisdom climaxed with the verdict he gave in the trial between two prostitutes over the maternity of a young boy:

The king said, “This one says, ‘My son is alive and your son is dead,’ while that one says, ‘No! Your son is dead and mine is alive.’” Then the king said, “Bring me a sword.” So they brought a sword for the king. He then gave an order: “Cut the living child in two and give half to one and half to the other.” The woman whose son was alive was filled with compassion for her son and said to the king, “Please, my lord, give her the living baby! Don’t kill him!” But the other said, “Neither I nor you shall have him. Cut him in two!” Then the king gave his ruling: “Give the living baby to the first woman. Do not kill him; she is his mother.” When all Israel heard the verdict the king had given, they held the king in awe, because they saw that he had wisdom from God to administer justice. (*The Holy Bible*, 1973, *1 Kings* 3:16–28, New International Version)

In the story, Solomon’s power, the infant’s well-being, the infant’s mother, and even the state of Israel are all positively affected by Solomon’s judgment. Thus, when wisdom is manifested in real life, it generates positive effects for both the self and for others. Wisdom is manifested when positive, life-promoting effects result from the application of ideas in a real-life context.

In addition, a wise solution to a real-life dilemma sometimes dissolves the problem altogether and hence prevents further problems from materializing; as Wittgenstein (1922) observes: “The solution to the problem of life is seen in the vanishing of this problem” (6.521).

However, Solomon’s unwise actions and egregious mistakes later in his life (*1 Kings* 11) make clear that there is no guarantee that a person who has great potential for wisdom will manifest it in real life at all times. A good life and, hence, wisdom can be judged more clearly by examining overall effects over the long run.

### ***The Relationship Between Personal and General Aspects of Wisdom***

Ultimately, wisdom deals with the pursuit of a good life for all. This observation raises a question concerning whether a distinction made between general and personal wisdom is a useful conceptual tool (Mickler & Staudinger, 2008). In my opinion, perhaps a better distinction is between the differing scopes of positive influence that wisdom generates. Evidently, the more that people identify the consequences of a decision or an action as positive, and the longer they evaluate them as positive, the greater the wisdom that has been manifested.

The term “personal wisdom” represents psychologists’ efforts to study wisdom manifested in real life through scientific reasoning and methods that are available to them. This term is useful because wisdom always begins with individuals. Wisdom begins to manifest when a person strives to live what he or she conceives of as the good life by cognitively integrating what are normally thought to be separate ideas or conflicting ideals, and it is manifested when a person acts based on these integrated thoughts in a way that generates lasting positive effects (Yang, 2008a). In addition, manifestations of wisdom in real life involve tacit knowledge—knowledge that can only be acquired by a person’s participation in endeavors of a



particular community (Polanyi, 1958; Sternberg, 1998). Thus, wisdom, as we observe it in real life, defies decontextualized abstraction to a certain extent and cannot be fully expressed in words.

On the other hand, the overall effects that wisdom generates inevitably go beyond personal boundaries and affect others who sustain the consequences of wise judgments and actions. Wisdom is thus a positive process that is also observed, evaluated, valued, and transmitted within a structured group of people—the members of a society. Hence, what wisdom entails cannot be just personal.

Wisdom thus involves both general and personal aspects. The relationship between personal and general aspects of wisdom can be delineated from the perspective of historical development, through the dialectic between our personal attempts to live a good life and the evolution of general knowledge.

## General Aspects of Wisdom

General aspects of wisdom involve consensus on what constitutes a good life and general knowledge of how this may be achieved.

### Consensus on a Good Life

Because a good life is good not only for the individual but for others as well, the effort to live a good life in human society is evaluated not only by experts in certain fields but also by people who participate in that effort and share in its consequences. No matter how well a person reacts to or copes with a situation, resolves a problem, or manages his or her life, the positive and satisfactory effects of wisdom have to be recognized by at least some members of the society (Wittgenstein, 1953/1958). Only then can we say that wisdom has manifested in the real-life situation. Hence, the evaluation of a good life and wisdom is based on the common agreement of a community.

### General Knowledge of Living a Good Life

Common agreement concerning the nature of a good life and wisdom, influences, and is influenced by, the knowledge transmitted by societies. Early in Western civilization, when Aristotle proposed the distinction between philosophical/theoretical wisdom (*sophia*) and practical wisdom (*phronesis*), the contemplation of a universal truth and rational thinking through syllogism were not commonly practiced. Although both *sophia* and *phronesis* were thought to help people to live a good life, higher value was attached to philosophical/theoretical wisdom, which deals with the invariant abstract and leads people to the truth (Osbeck & Robinson, 2005). After philosophical/theoretical wisdom was incorporated into

education (Kitchener & Brenner, 1990), it became widespread and eventually became part of the body of general knowledge and then gave rise to sciences.

During the Renaissance, Descartes, by devoting himself to the tradition of searching for universal truth, made the most extreme argument concerning general wisdom:

For sciences as a whole are nothing other than human wisdom, which always remains one and the same, however different the subjects to which it is applied, it being no more altered by them than sunlight is by the variety of the things it shines on. Indeed, it seems strange to me that so many people should investigate with such diligence the virtues of plants, the motions of the stars, the transmutations of metals, and the objects of similar disciplines, while hardly anyone gives a thought to *good sense—to universal wisdom*. For every other science is to be valued not so much for its own sake as for its contribution to universal wisdom. . . ., what makes us stray from the correct way of seeking the truth is chiefly our ignoring the general end of universal wisdom and directing our studies towards some particular ends. (Rule One, *Rules for the Direction of the Mind*, [Ch. Adam & P. Tannery X: 359–361], in Cottingham, Stoothoff, & Murdoch, 1985, pp. 9–10)

According to Descartes, “the word ‘philosophy’ means the study of wisdom, and by ‘wisdom’ is meant not only prudence in our everyday affairs but also a perfect knowledge of all things that mankind is capable of knowing, both for the conduct of life and for the preservation of health and the discovery of all manner of skills” (*Preface to the French edition of Principles of Philosophy*, 1647, [Ch. Adam & P. Tannery IXB: 2], in Cottingham et al., 1985, p. 179).

Descartes’ proposal was later incorporated into the field of psychology. As psychologists over the past century shaped their discipline, they modeled it after the natural sciences, such as physics, with the explicit goal to study natural laws in human behavior (Fancher, 1990). As a result, when applied to the social realm, the closest place one could expect to find such natural laws and order is where the behavior of a group of people shows definite and regular patterns over a certain amount of time. In other words, psychologists study regularities people in a society normally exhibit, with some minor individual variations. From those social regularities, universal laws and general knowledge are derived (Popper, 1959). Psychologists generally assume that such laws and knowledge can exist independently of the societal context that gives rise to them without their meanings being distorted (Polanyi, 1958).

Throughout human history, the effort to live a good life has occurred in many different cultural contexts. Successful attempts to live a good life are often emulated and tested by others. Attempts that have led to genuine and positive influences in helping people to live good lives are valued as past achievements and are often passed down from generation to generation in these particular cultural contexts. Over time, formalized procedures general enough to be implemented by most people have developed through these new attempts to live a good life. They consist of maxims such as “do not do unto others what you would not have others do unto you” (*Confucius: The Analects*, 1979), and edicts such as the Rights of Man (*Droite d’Hommes*) proposed in France in 1789, the Slavery Abolition Act adopted in 1833 in the UK, women’s suffrage, as well as more general knowledge

such as basic urban planning, modern practices of personal hygiene, common nutrition knowledge, and many others.

These are pieces of general knowledge that are commonly agreed on by members of specific cultures and thus preserved in customs, languages, symbol systems, organizational regulations, and domains of knowledge (Wittgenstein, 1953/1958). Habermas in his *Knowledge and Human Interests* (1968) noticed the connection between our striving for a good life and formalized knowledge: “The truth of statements is linked in the last analysis to the intention of the good and true life” (p. 317). In this way, general knowledge shapes parts of the world that we live in. Our conceptions of a good life are thus reshaped by those new pieces of general knowledge as they create new social regularities (Kuhn, 1962). These universal laws and the general knowledge concerning how to live a good life constitute general aspects of wisdom, which many believe can apply to most people in different societies.

### Personal Aspects of Wisdom

Paradoxically, it is the preoccupation with universal laws that has kept contemporary philosophers, ethicists, and psychologists from discussing wisdom as an object of study (Assmann, 1994). Polanyi observes:

This ideal of universal knowledge is mistaken, since it substitutes for the subjects in which we are interested a set of data which tell us nothing that we want to know. . . . This self-contradiction stems from a misguided intellectual passion – a passion for achieving absolute impersonal knowledge which, being unable to recognize any person, presents us with a picture of the universe in which we ourselves are absent. In such a universe there is no one capable of creating and upholding scientific values; hence there is no science. (1958, p. 140)

This argument holds true for the study of wisdom because personal involvement is vital for the manifestation of wisdom. After all, wisdom involves personal striving to live a good life. Moreover, cognitive integration of what are usually thought to be separate ideas and conflicting ideals, and the embodiment of this integration in real-life situation requires long-term personal effort.

Wisdom involves coping with real-life challenges. It is in this respect that wisdom is unlike intelligence, which may involve solving artificial problems derived from a particular symbolic system (e.g., mathematics, music; Gardner, 1983). As Thurstone (1924) once asserted, “intelligence and the capacity for abstraction are identical” (p. xv). An individual who has a significant amount of general life knowledge but leads a miserable life (based on the person’s own standards as well as others) is seldom viewed as wise. That person may be intelligent, but not wise. It is possible that these unwise individuals give no less sound advice than others whose deeds follow or even outweigh their words, but we seldom seek counsel from them.

Because integrating relevant pieces of information in a given context and forging a vision that opens up future possibilities cannot be accomplished by

adhering to general knowledge alone, personal aspects of wisdom thus involve attempts to resolve unsolved problems, to clarify fuzzy ideas, to follow intuitive directions, and to foresee possibilities that are hidden to many. These attempts are ways to live a good life that have been tried out but are not tested and emulated by others, and hence are not integrated into systems of general knowledge. Personal aspects of wisdom thus involve new patterns of behavior, developing pieces of knowledge, and evolving parts of human civilization.

### Participation in Human Society

To manifest wisdom in real life, we need to participate in human society to know its common agreements and social regularities. As Howard Gruber (1989) put it, “to be effective the creator must be in good enough touch with the norms and feelings of some others so that the product will be one that they can assimilate and enjoy. Even the person who is far ahead of the times must have some community, however limited or special, with whom to interact” (p. 14).

Imagine a person who, by acquiring all the necessary general knowledge of life from reading, provides advice for all kinds of important human problems from his or her armchair through his or her Internet communication with others, but has never left the armchair to interact with others, nor participated any activity in human society. Could this person’s activities result in wisdom?

If those problems are resolved by following that person’s advice, we might think that he or she is not too bad, but even this appraisal has its limitations. Without other people actually carrying out the advice, and using their own tacit knowledge in the process of applying the advice, it will not generate any positive effect. Moreover, the ability to identify real-life problem is directly related to a person’s vision for a good life and his or her striving to live it (Arlin, 1990). If a person spends most of his or her life time sitting in the armchair, it is doubtful that he or she knows what real-life problems really are, and it is unlikely he or she has the ability to resolve those problems without divine intervention.

To identify and resolve a significant real-life problem, one needs to be truly participating as a member in a human society to acquire adequate general and tacit skills and knowledge of life. It is perhaps by knowing general conceptions of a good life that we can distinguish a good life from an ordinary one. It is also by understanding social regularities that we distinguish wisdom from other accomplishments. Such knowledge of common agreements and social regularities are not taught explicitly but learned tacitly through real-life experiences (Polanyi, 1958).

### Unusual Integration

When wisdom emerges in a real-life context, it always strikes us that something unusual has happened. Although there may well be many people who can resolve

ordinary problems and manage their lives more or less adequately, they do not usually strike us as people who manifest wisdom. Wisdom tends to be manifested in contexts where the problems or challenges we face involve a certain degree of difficulty. It may be a very difficult problem that puzzles everyone and to which no one can find a good solution, even for after trying his or her best, or it may be an everyday challenge that is resolved in an extraordinary way.

As real-life problems and challenges that give rise to wisdom are often ill-structured and poorly defined, there may not be any known rule or standard method for resolving them (Arlin, 1990; Yang, 2008b). Multiple solutions seem viable, each with its own set of strengths and weaknesses (Sternberg, 1998). In addition, there may be no criterion for assessing the adequacy or correctness of these solutions. At times, “decisions, solutions, and judgments are acknowledged as wise because they push standards to their limit or create types of meta-standards that redefine the acceptable” (Arlin, 1990, p. 237).

A person who manifests wisdom may have to “cross a logical gap” (Polanyi, 1958, p. 123) that cannot usually be achieved by following existing rules or social norms. As Freeman (1985) points out, we often find ourselves celebrating after the fact someone’s good or wise judgment in having elected to pursue a course that, at the time it was taken, we were absolutely convinced was foolish. Using Solomon’s example, we can see that King Solomon had definitely come up with a solution that crossed a logical gap. His unusual way of handling the trial is what makes his verdict extraordinary.

Martin Luther King Jr.’s *I Have A Dream* is another good example of unusualness that opens up new possibilities. King and his contemporaries never encountered circumstances close to what he described in his speech: “On the hills of Georgia, sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood” (August 28, 1963; cited in King, 1983). In wisdom we find unusual integrations of what most deem separate ideas and conflicting ideals (Yang, 2001, 2008a, 2008b, 2011a). Without this kind of integration, we are merely being effective in following rules rather than displaying wisdom.

## Embodiment

We need to implement our integrated ideas in real-life situations so that our visions of a good life are concretely embodied. Embodiment—carrying out ideas or visions through actual actions—is thus an essential component of wisdom. As Polanyi (1958) observes, “practical wisdom is more truly embodied in action than expressed in rules of action” (p. 54). It is by embodying our visions of a good life that we begin to tacitly acquire social regularities and foresee future possibilities. As we perform purposeful actions in daily life, we integrate all the atomic information that we are subsidiarily aware of in the context and bring it to bear on a focal target—the purpose of our action (Polanyi). While implementing our ideas, we gather what we tacitly know through real-life interactions in a context, such as common

conceptions of a good life in a given society, conceptions of wisdom in a given culture, informal ethical rules of communities, self-knowledge, and the unspoken assumptions, needs, and implicit values of others. In the process, we examine our own beliefs and values, correct mistakes, revise our plans and strategies, set up new goals, view ourselves from an ever-widening perspective, and refine our vision of a good life.

Our embodiment of life-purposes shapes our personal worlds, although we are not aware of it most of the time. In 1989, after the Tiananmen Square protests, the Chinese government meant one thing to a human rights activist and quite another to a business person. Often, our embodiment can bring to us different experiences and lead us to encounter different sets of events. Sometimes, the experiences we have today depend on how well we dealt with some important events in the past. As one road leads to another, each step we take leads us to see different sets of social regularities and future possibilities (Frost, 1916/1969). Wisdom that is manifested in real life can thus lead us down a life path that is different from one in which no wisdom is manifested.

Just as Rome was not built in a day, great wisdom may take a long time to manifest. In the case of Chao Sheh discussed above, it probably took Sheh many experiences in combat and long involvement in the military to understand that life and death are not light matters. Daily practice and devotion to his goal of serving as a good general were necessary to gain respect from his followers and to give commands efficiently in times of emergency. By striving daily toward positive life purposes and fulfilling them in satisfying ways, we pave the way for future manifestations of wisdom. Eventually, people who have exerted the most widespread positive effects through many wise decisions and actions are regarded as wise persons.

## Human Possibilities

It is through the embodiment of integrated ideas that human possibilities are actualized in a positive direction and our conceptions of a good life can continue to evolve through history. Hence, the commonly agreed standards for evaluating what constitutes a good life are constantly forming and reforming. As long as generations of individuals continue to manifest wisdom, they continue to make new contributions to improve the lives of many. As new visions of a good life are illustrated by past wisdom, the social regularities of what constitutes a good life will be constantly forming and reforming. A positive feedback system is thus created between persons, manifestations of wisdom, general knowledge of life, world we live in, and conceptions of a good life, in which each shapes the progress of the other. At the same time, some parts of general knowledge about life may become obsolete and forgotten. It is in this sense that evaluative criteria for wisdom are ever developing and thus cannot be stringently formalized.

## *A Process View of Wisdom*

Wisdom manifested in real life thus covers a broad area and should not be limited to particular or personal boundaries. Although wisdom always begins in individuals, the wisdom process also consists of embodiment in action and the resulting positive effects, which influence multiple parties. In this way, wisdom is a positive process encompassing cognitive integration, embodiment, and positive effects for one's self and others. Though ultimately wisdom promotes a good life for many, it is accomplished only after a person integrates ideas that are usually deemed disparate, puts the integrated thought into action, and as a result exerts positive influence over the life of the acting self as well as the lives of others (Yang, 2001, 2005, 2008a, 2008b, 2009, 2011a).

## **Methodological Propositions**

### *On the Importance of Studying Wisdom in Real-Life Contexts*

Wittgenstein (1953/1958) once asserted “The ideal ‘*must*’ be found in reality” (I:101). For over a century, the history of psychology has recorded psychologists’ attempts to study what they observed in real life. When Charles Spearman proposed the concept “general intelligence” (1904), he had the ambition to find a correspondence between “Intelligence of Life and Tests of the Laboratory” [capitalized by Spearman] (pp. 224–225) as well as “Science and Reality” (p. 204). Alfred Binet stressed that the analysis of human intelligence should be based on “observations taken from life” and “concrete facts” (Binet & Simon, 1916, p. 25). Gardner contends that “psychology must address the major issues of human existence” (1989, p. 49).

Thurstone, another prominent figure in intelligence theory and testing, noticed that “when we are studying human nature, either in the laboratory or in our daily lives, it is much more conducive to psychological insight to look for the satisfactions that people seek through their conduct than to judge them as merely responding to a more or less fortuitous environment” (1924, p. 164). He observed that scientific experimentation “seldom relates to the permanent life interests of the persons who lend their minds to the psychological experiments” (p. 4). He explained:

The normal person who has sufficient leisure to serve as a subject of experimentation in the psychological laboratory is not likely to have any major mental disturbance and distress. If, on the occasion of a peaceful psychological experiment, he is mentally disturbed by any serious issue in his fundamental life interests – financial, sexual, social, professional, physical – he reports that he is indisposed, and he does not serve as a subject. It is therefore relatively seldom that the psychological laboratory gets for observation persons who are in a mental condition of major significance. (pp. 3–4)

What we do in a psychological laboratory often has little to do with our lives the minute we walk out of the laboratory: This is not the case with wisdom. In real-life situations where wisdom is called for, we tend to live with the long-term consequences of the decisions we make and actions we take, be they right or wrong. Wisdom manifested in real life produces consequences that are irreversible. It is thus essential that we study wisdom in real-life contexts.

Decades ago, Kohlberg (1973) had already foreseen that “the study of lives may someday aid in the comprehension and communication of more adequate life meanings. . . . In the end, lives are studied so humans will learn how to live better” (p. 204). In the presence, one purpose of psychology is to help people to live a better life (Mission Statement, American Psychological Association, 2011). We can contribute to the fulfillment of this vision by striving to study wisdom in real life.

### *Methods for Studying Wisdom in Real-Life Contexts*

We can understand wisdom in real life with the help of empirical methods. We first need to understand wisdom as it is preserved in languages and as it is commonly understood by investigating people’s conceptions of wisdom in different cultures. Because formal theories in psychology derive in part from scientists’ implicit theories of the construct under investigation, understanding implicit theories can provide a basis for explicit psychological theories (Sternberg, Conway, Ketron, & Berstein, 1981; Yang & Sternberg, 1997a, 1997b). Peoples’ informal conceptions of wisdom also serve to demarcate the conceptual boundary necessary for the development of formal wisdom theories (Sternberg, 1985). Methods such as prototypical studies, multidimensional scaling, factor analysis, cluster analysis of words related to wisdom, open-ended questionnaires, and structured interviews have proven to be effective in examining these conceptions of wisdom. Several studies have provided important insights into this aspect of wisdom (Clayton & Birren, 1980; Holliday & Chandler, 1986; Levitt, 1999; Sternberg, 1985; Yang, 2001).

Because tacit knowledge may not lend itself to observation from a third-person perspective and many reasoning and behavioral processes involved in manifesting wisdom in real life may be more difficult to detect by objective methods, retrospection elicited by qualitative methods such as interviews can be used to collect narratives from the first-person point of view and explore the psychological process of wisdom as it is manifested in real-life situations. Interviews concerning wise actions and their consequences in life management can highlight how daily-life events and life course are handled and managed, as well as real-life contexts where they occur. Thus, through the narratives of wisdom nominees, we can derive a clearer and more detailed look at how wisdom is manifested in the contexts of real people’s lives.

In addition, because generating positive effects is one of the defining features of wisdom, methods used to studying wisdom should also try to include the consequences and the *ex post facto* analysis of the visions, decisions, and actions



involved in manifestations of wisdom. Studies based on nomination of wise individuals by those who witness embodiment and experience the beneficial consequences, as well as biographical and archival studies of wisdom nominees, can expand our understanding of wisdom from a long-term perspective and can be used to disclose positive possibilities open to others through the embodied visions of wise people.

Contexts are also important for the manifestation of wisdom. By comparing manifestations of wisdom in particular kinds of contexts, we can gain a more general understanding of how wisdom is manifested in real life. Similarly, learning from important life experiences is essential for the development of the ability to manifest wisdom in real-life situations. By comparing learning from various important life experiences that foster later manifestations of wisdom, we can gain a broader understanding of how abilities leading to manifestations of wisdom are developed. In addition, because wisdom as a real-life process is observed and evaluated by members of a society, quantitative methods can be used to examine how strongly the process and content are considered by others to be related to wisdom.

## **Empirical Findings**

Previous studies have analyzed wisdom as it is commonly understood in real life among different cultural contexts (e.g., Clayton & Birren, 1980; Holliday & Chandler, 1986; Levitt, 1999; Sternberg, 1985; Yang, 2001) and have highlighted core components of wisdom (Yang, 2008a), the contexts and domains of life in which wisdom is mostly likely to be manifested, and the common functions of wisdom when it is manifested in real life (e.g., Bluck & Glück, 2004; Montgomery, Barber, & McKee, 2002; Yang, 2008b). In particular, leadership has been identified as an important context to study both the development and manifestation of wisdom in real life.

### ***Conceptions of Wisdom in Different Cultural Contexts***

#### **Western Conceptions of Wisdom**

Studies show that American conceptions of wisdom value reasoning ability, sagacity, learning from ideas and environment, judgment, expeditious use of information, and perspicacity (Sternberg, 1985). Canadian conceptions of wisdom value exceptional understanding of ordinary experience, judgment and communicative skills, general competencies, interpersonal skills, and social unobtrusiveness (Holliday & Chandler, 1986). Hispanic conceptions of wisdom emphasize spirituality (instead

of cognition), attitude toward learning (instead of possession of knowledge), and acts of serving and caring (instead of giving good advice; Valdez, 1994).

### **Eastern Conceptions of Wisdom**

Takayama (2002) found that Japanese people stress practical and experiential aspects of wisdom rather than abstract thinking. In Japan, wisdom consists of four core dimensions: knowledge and education, understanding and judgment, sociability and interpersonal relationships, and introspective attitudes (Takahashi & Overton, 2005). Results of my study (Yang, 2001) investigating the concept of wisdom in Taiwanese Chinese culture through examination of implicit theories of wisdom showed that for most Taiwanese Chinese individuals, a wise person has a broad range of competencies and knowledge, is benevolent and compassionate toward others, holds profound yet open-minded attitudes about life, and remains modest and unobtrusive in social interactions. For Tibetan Buddhist monks, wisdom includes attributes such as recognizing Buddhist truths, realizing that emptiness is the true essence of reality, becoming the nonself, existing beyond suffering, being honest and humble, being compassionate to others, respecting others, treating all creatures as worthy and equal, having the ability to distinguish good from evil, and being efficient in projects (Levitt, 1999).

### **Comparisons**

A previous study found that Easterners tend to hold a more synthetic view of wisdom, stressing both cognitive and affective dimensions, whereas Westerners tend to emphasize only cognitive dimensions (Takahashi & Bordia, 2000). A comparison of Eastern and Western descriptions of wisdom found that Easterners tend to put a stronger emphasis on both action and its effects when discussing wisdom, whereas Western models of wisdom stress the cognitive over the notion of practical application (Yang, 2008a).

### ***Wisdom in Real-Life Contexts***

#### **Core Elements of Wisdom: Integration, Embodiment, and Positive Effects**

My study (Yang, 2001) of Taiwanese Chinese descriptions of a wise person identified three common themes: integration, embodiment, and positive effects. Two studies (both in Yang, 2008a) were conducted to test the proposed process view of wisdom by examining whether the three components of wisdom exist in real life. The first study conducted content analysis on the rationales for nominations of wise individuals, which were solicited from people in different

walks of life, age groups, and educational levels in Taiwan. The second study investigated whether narratives of actual manifestations of real-life wisdom by wisdom nominees reveal the three components of wisdom, and whether emphasis of the three components affects raters' evaluation of wisdom. The results of content analysis of nominators' descriptions, nominees' narratives, and raters' evaluation showed that the three core components of wisdom play an important role in the descriptions, manifestation, and evaluation of wisdom.

## Contexts and Functions of Wisdom in Real Life

### Western Studies

Bluck and Glück (2004) investigated manifestations of wisdom from an autobiographical perspective using an "experienced wisdom" procedure in Germany. They found that wisdom is often manifested in the process of making life decisions, managing day-to-day lives, and reacting to negative events. In another study, Glück, Bluck, Baron, and McAdams (2005) found that wisdom manifested in three forms: "empathy and support" (i.e., seeing others' perspectives and feelings, and helping them resolve difficult situations), "self-determination and assertion" (i.e., taking control of a situation and standing by one's values, goals, or priorities), and "knowledge and flexibility" (i.e., relying on one's own experience, having the ability to compromise, and showing tolerance for uncertainty).

Montgomery et al. (2002) studied real-life wisdom as observed by North American older adults and found that wisdom often manifests through guidance, knowledge, experience, moral principles, time, and compassionate relationships. Nominators of wise individuals in this study were more likely to describe the positive influences of wise persons as a form of received guidance from a first-person perspective. For example, when asked to describe a wise person, one participant said "I was inspired by him to go to college. . . . And I think that was a wise decision, and it was inspired by him" (p. 144).

### Asian Studies

Results of my study (Yang, 2001), which collected behavioral attributes of wise persons, showed that descriptions of wisdom often include the handling of daily events (e.g., "Is able to transform an adverse situation to one's or everyone's advantage," and "Is able to analyze and resolve problems and their causes"), managing one's personal life (e.g., "Is able to make one's life meaningful, worthwhile, fulfilling, and valuable," and "Enjoys life fully; lives life with a sense of peacefulness and contentment"), and contributing to social improvement and progress (e.g., "Is able to make contributions enhancing and improving society," and "Is able to bring harmony to society, home and others").

In another study (Yang, 2008b), I asked Taiwanese Chinese nominated as wise persons to answer questions about the wisest things they have done. Content analysis of nominees' narratives showed that in real-life contexts, manifestations of wisdom were prominent in nominees' endeavors. When manifested in real life, wisdom often involves striving for common good by helping others and contributing to society, achieving and maintaining a satisfactory state of life, deciding and developing life paths, resolving difficult problems at work, and insisting on doing the right thing even when facing adversity.

The results also showed that a majority of manifestations of wisdom fell in the category of helping others and contributing to society. These manifestations were judged by raters as more related to nominees' display of self-determination and assertion rather than empathy and support for other people. Wisdom nominees' descriptions of the manifestations, such as caring for patients with terminal illnesses, suggested that wisdom is based more on a self-defined vision than on social obligations or duties.

Many nominees became aware of others' needs when they themselves encounter difficulties earlier in life, yet their wisdom does not manifest while solving their own problems, but when they vow to make a difference by helping others who face similar problems. This finding demonstrates an integration of an individual's own visions of a good life with an understanding of others' plights. Nominees were able to integrate conflicting ideals regarding self and others by employing their personal experiences to empathize with others' grievances. By quietly observing others' needs, they generated support and concern that they themselves had not received.

Some manifestations of wisdom had widespread effects, extending to entire institutions or even society at large, while others benefited the immediate environment and those involved by keeping personal goals and morality intact. In addition, the interests of wisdom nominees and other interest groups sometimes remained unbalanced. Wisdom may involve people who commit themselves without reward and may also be found where some are kept from exploiting others.

The findings suggest that wisdom tends to be manifested in at least two real-life contexts. One context is developmental; in this context, wisdom involves life decisions and life management. Wisdom was found to be manifested through fulfilling visions of a good life or pursuing life missions. The other context is situational; in this context, wisdom is manifested in everyday situations by taking the form of solving problems or resolving crises. Wisdom was found to thrive when a person resolved difficult life problems or work-related problems in both ordinary and exceptional circumstances.

### ***Wisdom and Leadership***

Seen from the perspective that wisdom is a real-life process, wisdom is not a quality that can be developed intrapersonally; what can be developed is the ability to manifest wisdom. Different manifestations of wisdom require different sets of

abilities, and these abilities can be developed through real-life experiences. Leadership involves dealing with human affairs in group contexts (Northouse, 2004). It is therefore an important context to study both the manifestation of wisdom and the development of abilities related to manifesting wisdom.

### **Wisdom Manifested Through Leadership**

As can be seen from the stories of Solomon and Chao Sheh, when wisdom is exercised through leadership, it often generates pervasive positive effects (Küpers, 2007; Srivastva & Cooperrider, 1998) and helps more people to live a good life. Difficult problems, such as global warming and financial crises, may be resolved or avoided if leadership is executed with wisdom. Ultimately, wisdom manifested through leadership can pave the way to a better and brighter future.

In a Taiwan-based study (Yang, 2011a), I found that many individuals nominated as wise people had leadership responsibilities (60 %). This is similar to the results of a German study (56 %; Staudinger, 1996). Analysis of transcripts of interviews with wisdom nominees showed that many instances of wisdom involved leadership.

I also found that a significant number of leadership-related wisdom was manifested by leaders of nonprofit organizations. Leadership-related wisdom was often manifested through leaders' influence on the society at a macro level, on organizations at a micro level, and also on younger generations. Leaders who were nominated as wise persons often strove to respond to certain societal needs; they often held ideals not only for those involved with their organizations but also for society in general. In addition, when wisdom nominees had no preexisting institution to help them fulfill their visions, they tended to create leadership responsibilities by founding their own organizations.

### **Wisdom and Learning from Important Leadership Experiences**

Abilities to manifest wisdom can also be developed through leadership experience. Theoretically, a continuous process of learning from extensive real-life experience can foster the manifestation of wisdom (Küpers, 2007; Small, 2004; Staudinger, Smith, & Baltes, 1992; Sternberg, 1998; Yang, 2008a, 2008b). As an important developmental task, leadership exposes a person to a wide variety of human conditions, as well as difficult and constantly changing challenges and problems. Resolution of leadership-related problems and challenges in real life may pave the way for manifestation of wisdom in a later stage of life (Bierly, Kessler, & Christensen, 2000; Bigelow, 1992; Dittmann-Kohli & Baltes, 1990; Erikson, 1982; Kessler & Bailey, 2007; Smith, Staudinger, & Baltes, 1994; Yang, 2009, 2011a).

I studied the relationship between leadership learning and wisdom using a mixture of qualitative methods (interviews) and quantitative methods (statistical analysis; Yang, 2009). The results showed that learning acquired in leadership positions was judged by raters as involving more wisdom than learning acquired

in subordinate positions. The study suggests that some leaders are able to transform learning they acquire from their leadership experiences into wisdom.

How does this transformation of leadership learning into wisdom take place? After gaining insights through integrating diverse perspectives and modes of operation (i.e., cognitive integration of different work domains, ideals and reality, and tact and tenacity), those leaders embody these integrated insights by making extra effort to share their experiences and thoughts within the organization. As a result, their satisfaction with the handling of human affairs increases, and their interpersonal skills, relationships, and networks expand and improve. Moreover, they are able to exert a positive influence on others by empowering members, making contributions, and serving communities outside the organization (Yang, 2011b).

## Conclusions and Future Directions

To conclude, wisdom is manifested in real-life contexts, and the ability to manifest wisdom must also be developed through participation in handling real-life human affairs. As Birren and Fisher (1990) argue, “The various aspects of wisdom must apply to real people in real situations in real time” (p. 331). It is therefore important that we study wisdom in real life. Researchers need to investigate how perspectives are integrated, how learned lessons are applied, how visions for a good life are embodied in real life, and how these applications and embodiment help both oneself and others to live meaningful and satisfying lives.

We also need to pay attention to how different conceptions of a good life shape people’s life goals, how unique life visions are formed, and how these life goals and life visions in turn influence people’s manifestation of wisdom. Wisdom, which helps people to live a good life, is thus important to the study of lifelong learning; adult and higher education; counseling, developmental, and health psychology; and organizational management and leadership.

Whenever a question or a problem in reality takes a field of inquiry beyond its initial discussions and applications, the field extends its boundaries. I think that is the reason Spearman (1904) and Thurstone (1924) wrote their articles on intelligence with extensive discussion of science and psychology. As contemporary psychologists studying wisdom venture into uncharted areas, it is time to rethink our history, culture, methods, knowledge structure, and, most of all, ourselves. In the final analysis, it is through striving for wisdom through the most appropriate methods we know of and trying our best to define wisdom that we participate in the advancement of human civilization.

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# Stories of Wisdom to Live By: Developing Wisdom in a Narrative Mode

Michel Ferrari, Nic M. Weststrate, and Anda Petro

## A Story of Personal Wisdom

The story goes that one day King Pasenadi of Kosala approached the Buddha and greeted him. The Buddha asked him where he was coming from in the middle of the day. King Pasenadi replied that he had been engaged in issues of state needed to keep stable control over a large kingdom.

The Buddha then asked, “What do you think, great king? Here, a man would come to you from the east, one who is trustworthy and reliable, having approached, he would tell you: ‘For sure, great king, you should know this: I am coming from the east, and there I saw a great mountain high as the clouds coming this way, crushing all living beings. [And suppose other reliable people, with the same message, came from the north, south, and west?] Do whatever you think should be done, great king.’ If, great king, . . . such a great peril should arise. . . what should be done?”

King Pasenadi answered, “If, venerable sir, such a great peril should arise, such a terrible destruction of human life, the human state being so difficult to obtain, what else should be done but to live by the Dhamma [eternal law], to live righteously, and to do wholesome and meritorious deeds?”

To which the Buddha replied, “I announce to you, great king: aging and death are rolling in on you” and added that, while great armies can often defeat an enemy, no armies can defeat aging and death; while crafty councilors can sometimes divide enemies or buy them off, not so when aging and death roll in. “So it is, great king! As aging and death are rolling in on you, what else should you do but live by the Dhamma, live righteously, and do wholesome and meritorious deeds?” (Samyutta Nikaya, 2000, Vol. 1, ch.3:25 (5) <224–29> passim)

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M. Ferrari (✉) • N.M. Weststrate

Department of Applied Psychology and Human Development, Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto, Bloor Street West 252, M5S 1V6 Toronto, ON, Canada  
e-mail: [michel.ferrari@utoronto.ca](mailto:michel.ferrari@utoronto.ca); [nic.weststrate@utoronto.ca](mailto:nic.weststrate@utoronto.ca)

A. Petro

Department of Adult Education and Counselling Psychology, Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto, Bloor Street West 252, M5S 1V6 Toronto, ON, Canada  
e-mail: [anda.petro@utoronto.ca](mailto:anda.petro@utoronto.ca)

This is a great story. But what is it about this sort of story that has stood the test of time and still speaks to us, even though most of us are not kings or even politicians? We propose that a story like this invites the reader to transport him or herself into the storyworld, simulating the experience firsthand and provoking insight about fundamental personal matters, and so helps develop personal wisdom. Following Bruner's (1986) distinction between paradigmatic and narrative modes of thought, we propose that personal wisdom involves narrative at its core (such as the narrative simulation above), whereas general wisdom emphasizes abstract paradigmatic theoretical knowledge (although even paradigmatic conceptualizations of wisdom contain narrative elements, as we shall see).

Thus, a science of personal wisdom is essentially incomplete if it does not consider wisdom in a narrative mode. The development of personal wisdom is bound to narrative in a number of ways. We suggest that a full science of personal wisdom consider the following:

1. The narrative simulations individuals create of (a) hypothetical situations that may come to pass and (b) situations lived by others (e.g., literary or historical exemplars, or others personally known), as well as the reasoning processes through which individuals make meaning of these simulations
2. How individuals actively reflect on their own past life experiences that are relevant to wisdom by crafting stories about these events, a process that has become known as autobiographical reasoning (see Habermas & Bluck, 2000; Singer & Bluck, 2001)

Indeed, in simulating events experienced by others and reasoning through their own life experiences retrospectively, individuals extract wise life lessons and insights for future application when making sense of the vicissitudes of their life as lived. In running simulations of hypothetical situations, that is, in casting themselves as protagonist in a hypothetical narrative, individuals may discern the wisest course of action.

We believe that these narrative processes represent related developmental pathways to personal wisdom. The first pathway is that of narrative simulation, the second pathway is that of life reflection or autobiographical reasoning. These pathways are related to the extent that the outputs of the narrative simulations that we run (e.g., lessons, insights) can be used for reasoning through our lived experience, and conversely, we bring our accumulated life story (including previous reasoning) to our narrative simulations. We consider these pathways in further detail in the sections to come. But first, we explore how current dominant theories of wisdom to some degree invoke narrative understandings of wisdom in their measurement models.

## Current Theories Are (Supposedly) About Paradigmatic General Wisdom

Most scientific research into wisdom has sought a general conceptual or paradigmatic account of wisdom. Such explicit theories involve theoretical constructions of wisdom that can be operationalized and investigated empirically, and for which one can identify relevant antecedents, correlates, and consequences of wisdom (Baltes & Staudinger, 2000). There are several explicit theories, but for ease of exposition, we will discuss two broad types: wisdom as task performance and wisdom as personal disposition.

### *Wisdom as Task Performance: The Berlin Paradigm*

Researchers at the Max Planck Institute for Human Development in Berlin, originally led by Paul Baltes, advocated a view of wisdom as a kind of “expert knowledge system concerning the fundamental pragmatics of life” (Baltes & Staudinger, 2000, p. 122). Their interest lies in wisdom itself—and specifically, in a Western concept of wisdom—that highlights cognitive elements, like knowledge and analytical abilities, although they do not make a sharp distinction between intellectual and moral excellence, claiming that wisdom coordinates mind and virtue. Wisdom is defined by the presence of five criteria. Two basic wisdom criteria concern *factual* and *procedural knowledge* about the fundamental pragmatics of life (i.e., knowledge of human nature, critical life events, and how to conduct oneself in life). Three additional meta-criteria involve *lifespan contextualism* (i.e., recognizing the influence of context on people’s thinking and behavior), *relativism of values and life priorities* (i.e., acknowledging different values and priorities while still holding certain values to be universal), and *managing uncertainty* given the limits of human knowledge. According to the theory, three kinds of factors (general person, expertise-specific, and context factors) influence the wisdom expressed in people’s judgments about life planning, life management, and life review. Wisdom is a utopian quality, and because humans are “failing and permanently incomplete beings, [Baltes and Kunzmann] claim that wise persons are imperfect illustrations” of it (Baltes & Kunzmann, 2004, p. 293). Humans are merely carriers of wisdom-related knowledge.<sup>1</sup>

The Berlin paradigm proposes that wisdom is found in responses to hypothetical vignettes that meet or approach the performance criteria set by this theoretical

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<sup>1</sup>Robert Sternberg’s (1998) balance theory of wisdom is very similar to the Berlin wisdom paradigm, proposing the wisdom involves balanced judgments promoting the common good—decisions that, in principle, might be better made by a group than by any one individual. As most studies have been done within the Berlin paradigm, we will direct our focus to methodological discussion on those studies.

model. In these vignettes, participants are asked to give advice to a fictitious person in a think-aloud format. For example, “A 15-year-old girl wants to get married right away. What should one say or do?” The advice generated in think-aloud responses are then rated on a scale of 1–7 by a panel of judges trained to identify each of the above criteria.<sup>2</sup>

As Ardelt (2004) notes, given the lack of available information for any one of these vignettes, the wisest answer might be “It depends [...] on the specific conditions, personalities, priorities, and commitments of the people involved” (p. 262). Sternberg (1998) adds that, “because wisdom is in the interaction of person and situation, information processing in and of itself is not wise or unwise. Its degree of wisdom depends on the fit of a wise solution to its context” (p. 353).

Admittedly, Baltes and Kunzmann (2004) grant that “specific cognitive, emotional, motivational, and social factors need to interact, and in their combined effects and individual constructions, they produce higher and higher forms of mental representations, including *understanding the context of life in which wisdom-related knowledge is required*” (p. 294, emphasis added). However, this reply does not address the difference between a real-life and a hypothetical situation. Most real-life problems are not difficult because one lacks information but rather because of too much information (Vervaeke & Ferraro, Chap. 2, this volume). In real-life contexts, wise respondents rule out certain possibilities. Past personal experience can make the decision easier or harder and may even determine whether particular situations will elicit wisdom in the first place. The point is that the hypothetical question makes it a *different* problem because hypothetical problems cannot replicate the context and variables of a real-life problem.

In fact, in the hypothetical case, any answer to the Berlin paradigm vignettes requires the creation of a “hypothetical narrative simulation”—a thought experiment about the imagined case presented. However, any such simulation may not be very good, because participants may lack the relevant information needed to effectively simulate the situation (even if they score high on the Berlin criteria). This is different from the sort of simulation one can create based on one’s own experience. And here we agree with Staudinger (Chap. 1, this volume; Mickler & Staudinger, 2008) that it is a very different matter to reflect on what to do when one’s own 15-year-old daughter wants to get married right away than to provide advice to a hypothetical friend concerning how he or she should handle this situation. This is no longer just a matter of creating a narrative simulation but also of reasoning through our past autobiographical experience with personally known characters and their actual behavior with an eye to future possibilities. We suggest that wisdom depends precisely on the quality of our reflection on such examples and learning from them. Before considering this claim further, let us first consider wisdom as an ideal characteristic of the mature personality.

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<sup>2</sup>The specifics of this procedure are discussed most thoroughly in the *Manual for the Assessment of Wisdom-Related Knowledge* (Staudinger, Smith, & Baltes, 1994).

### ***Wisdom as Personal Disposition: A Three-Dimensional Model***

Self-report questionnaires are designed to measure how closely participants approximate a set of personality characteristics that describe the ideally wise person, at least in terms of the operating theory. Again, this work proposes to develop a paradigmatic conceptual model that gives a general account of wisdom, not to reflect or measure wisdom as manifest in peoples' personal lives. Consider the following example from the work of Ardel.

Ardelt (1997, 2003) developed a self-administered 39-item questionnaire, the *three-dimensional wisdom scale* (3D-WS), in which wisdom is operationalized and measured as a latent variable that has cognitive, reflective, and affective dimensions. The 3D-WS includes items from existing scales as well as new items that assess each of these three dimensions: *cognitive* (e.g., "A person either knows the answer to a question or he/she doesn't"), *reflective* (e.g., "When I'm upset at someone, I usually try to 'put myself in his or her shoes' for a while"), and *affective* (e.g., "I don't like to get involved in listening to another person's troubles" [reverse scored]; Ardel, 2003, p. 318).

The advantage of self-report questionnaires is that they allow for standardization and control (Glück, Bluck, Baron, & McAdams, 2005). Besides the 3D-WS, there is also the work of Jason and colleagues (Jason et al., 2001), Brown and Greene (2006), Webster (2003, 2007), and Levenson and colleagues (Levenson, Jennings, Aldwin, & Shiraishi, 2005) who have developed their own self-report measures to assess wisdom. However, there is no general agreement on what characteristics should be included in these questionnaires, and there is an ongoing dispute over the quality of their psychometric properties. Witness, for instance, the recent exchange between Ardel and Webster and his colleagues (Ardelt, 2011; Taylor, Bates, & Webster, 2011; Webster, Taylor, & Bates, 2011). In our opinion, Ardel's model has greater conceptual clarity than does Webster's self-assessed wisdom scale, but both remain at a very high level of abstraction far removed from direct personal experience.

Note that all these questionnaires can be said to give an account of the personal characteristics of wise people, and so are personal in a general way (they describe the personality traits of a wise person), but are not able to capture the nuances of how wisdom is understood or expressed in peoples' lives. In terms of the levels of the three-tiered personality theory proposed by Dan McAdams (1996; McAdams & Pals, 2006), these questionnaires measure wisdom at the trait level and do not address either the characteristic adaptations (stock roles) of the wise person or the particular narratives in his or her life that would present a personally meaningful story of wisdom.

Furthermore, in order to answer questionnaire items about wisdom, participants must call upon past autobiographical narratives or construct a self-relevant narrative simulation about the items asked in order to determine a response. The three items mentioned earlier invite three separate stories, or one that combines them: One can imagine someone who disagrees with the item, "I don't like to get involved in listening to another person's troubles" and in fact thinks, "When I'm upset at someone, I usually try to 'put myself in his or her shoes' for a while" because it

believes the final item, “A person either knows the answer to a question or he/she doesn’t.” Or one might imagine oneself in a situation that agrees with each of these items. The consequence of this is that the ability to answer any self-report measure necessarily requires a context, which in turn requires a narrative simulation that allows a judgment about how one would respond to the questionnaire item or the recollection of a past personal event that sheds light on the item in question.

Our main point is that wisdom as autobiographical reasoning and narrative simulation allows us to coordinate the strengths of two competing approaches to the scientific study of wisdom: Wisdom vignettes focus on narrative plot; self-reported dispositions focus on the kind of character needed to enact plots involving wisdom, either as imagined or in one’s own life experience. Furthermore, narrative is an important medium through which to investigate personal wisdom for two reasons: First, examining real-life experiences of wisdom through autobiographical narrative is an ecologically valid and contextually rich method for studying this elusive phenomenon; second, the processes involved in constructing or simulating an autobiographical narrative support the development of personal wisdom itself.

## **The Narrative Turn in Studies of Wisdom**

That wisdom is essentially captured through autobiographical narrative is not a new idea. Randall and Kenyon (2001, 2004) proposed that wisdom inhabits the life story and that we access our own wisdom by telling our personal narrative (internally or externally). In telling our life story, we can then step back from it to investigate and interpret it—to “read” it, so to speak. Reading our life story is a reflective process whereby we make connections between our experiences and our sense of self and learn lessons along the way. From this process we glean the wisdom of our lives. While the position taken by Randall and Kenyon is theoretically sound, they did not empirically test it. Others have filled this gap, investigating autobiographical narratives for the types of situations where wisdom is found and the forms that it takes (Glück et al., 2005), wisdom’s relationship to growth and life lessons across the lifespan (Bluck & Glück, 2004), and self-reflective processes that might lead to wisdom (Ardelt, 2005; Mansfield, McLean, & Lilgendahl, 2010; Staudinger, 2001). Before examining this research in detail, let us first explore the theoretical tradition of narrative identity more generally, to which this narrative wisdom research is closely aligned.

### ***Autobiographical Reasoning Processes Support the Development of the Life Story and, In Turn, Personal Wisdom***

There has been a great deal of theoretical and empirical work dedicated to the idea that “who we are” is intimately bound up with—and perhaps inseparable from—the

stories we tell. In storying some of our most important lived experiences, we render our life meaningful and construct our personal identity (Bruner, 1986; Cohler, 1982; McAdams, 1996, 2001; McLean, Pasupathi, & Pals, 2007; Ricoeur, 1992). McAdams refers to this self-defining and selective collection of autobiographical narratives as the *life story*. From his view, the life story is an internalized and evolving narrative that brings us a degree of meaning, purpose, and unity across time (for a review of the concept see McAdams, 2001).

The narrative processes that support the development of the life story are collectively referred to as *autobiographical reasoning*. Habermas and Bluck (2000) define autobiographical reasoning as a process of self-reflective thinking or talking about the personal past that links specific events in one's life with a greater understanding of the self and world, resulting in the construction of a coherent narrative identity, and we argue, wisdom.

While autobiographical reasoning can take many forms, we believe that the type of reasoning most relevant to developing personal wisdom involves the derivation of deep meaning from our life experiences that is then integrated into our life story. The model of autobiographical reasoning that perhaps best and most intuitively describes this process is Kate McLean's *meaning-making* framework (see McLean & Pratt, 2006). McLean (2005) defines meaning-making as "a kind of causal coherence used to integrate experiences, which emerges as late adolescents begin to think about constructing their life stories in order to explain how a past event led to or influenced another event or aspect of the self" (p. 683). Revising her original coding system (see McLean & Thorne, 2003), McLean and Pratt proposed four increasingly sophisticated levels of meaning-making activity evident in autobiographical narratives: no meaning, lesson learned, vague meaning, and insight gained. Thus, in its simplest form, autobiographical reasoning can lead to the extraction of life lessons from past experience (e.g., "My divorce taught me that it is safest just to remain single"), and in its more sophisticated form, autobiographical reasoning can lead to deep insight or a new understanding of life (e.g., "From my divorce, I learned that one needs to first know and love themselves before they can expect to participate in a respectful, balanced relationship. Since my separation, I've been searching for who I am and have found a deep sense of fulfillment in this new mission.").

Other theorists have proposed analogous models to conceptualize and measure forms of autobiographical reasoning that are relevant to wisdom: Jefferson Singer (Blagov & Singer, 2004; Singer, Rexhaj, & Baddeley, 2007) analyzes autobiographical narratives for evidence of *integrative meaning*, Monisha Pasupathi (Pasupathi, Mansour, & Brubaker, 2007; Pasupathi & Weeks, 2011) searches for *self-event connections*, and Jen Lilgendahl (Pals, 2006; Pals & McAdams, 2011) investigates forms of *transformational* or *growth-related autobiographical reasoning*, to name a few.

How then does one develop wisdom through autobiographical reasoning? At least in Western contexts, it is widely believed that we become wise through life experience (Glück & Bluck, 2011; Takahashi & Bordia, 2000). When we experience a wisdom-related event (events that involve a fundamental life change, see



Glück & Bluck, Chap. 4, this volume), we are presented with the opportunity to gain insight—a pearl of wisdom—that can be integrated into our ongoing narrative of the self. This leads to a more complex or sophisticated perspective on the event at hand but also bears significance for our meaning-making of similar past and future events. Thus, through storying our past experiences we arrive at wise lessons and insights that—to the extent that we integrate them into our ongoing self-narrative—become part of the fabric of who we are.

On our view, that individuals learn from the past through autobiographical reasoning also explains why wise individuals are better at learning from past experiences—they are better at autobiographical reasoning (Ardelt, 2005; Staudinger, 2001). A quote from Singer (2004) describes this process nicely: “The progressive momentum is from story making to meaning making to wisdom accumulation that provides individuals with surer and more graceful footing on life’s path” (p. 446). We believe this is what is meant by living the proverbial “examined life.”

As mentioned earlier, this viewpoint is implicitly shared by other wisdom researchers who have begun to study the narrative basis of wisdom (Ardelt, 2005, 2010; Bluck & Glück, 2004; Staudinger, 2001). We now turn to a review of these studies.

### ***Scientific Evidence that Wisdom is Related to Optimal Autobiographical Reasoning***

While some researchers have collected autobiographical narratives as a means of investigating lived experiences of wisdom, they have not specifically looked at autobiographical reasoning processes (e.g., Montgomery, Barber, & McKee, 2002; Yang, 2008a, 2008b). Other researchers like Staudinger (2001), Bluck and Glück (2004), and Ardelt (2005, 2010), however, do have something to say about autobiographical reasoning as a process relevant to the development of personal wisdom.

#### **The Socio-Cognitive Process of Life Review**

Life reflection is one way to acquire wisdom. Staudinger (2001) defines *life reflection* as one part remembering and one part further analysis. This “further analysis” is both explanatory and evaluative, making it synonymous with autobiographical reasoning as described here. In a study of life reflection, Staudinger found that a sample of wisdom nominees and two comparison groups of young and old adults reported the same frequency of reflective processing on life events. She observed, however, that wisdom nominees more often used reflection as an evaluative process, as opposed to simple reminiscing about the past.

In general, this research supports the idea that wise individuals possess more advanced autobiographical reasoning skill than do their unwise counterparts. With that said, an important limitation of Staudinger's methodology is that she did not collect autobiographical narratives but rather asked participants decontextualized questions such as how often they reflect on their life, why they do so, and what exactly they do when reflecting (Staudinger, 2001). In a related set of studies on life reflection, Staudinger asked participants how they would expect a fictitious woman to reflect on her life when confronted with opportunity to do so (Staudinger, 1989; Staudinger et al., 1992). Examining life reflection in narratives of real-life events is needed to confirm that wise individuals actually do participate in optimal reasoning about life.

### **Wisdom of Experience**

Bluck and Glück (2004) proposed a "wisdom of experience" approach, in which they collected autobiographical narratives of events that individuals perceived to involve wisdom. At the most basic level, they examined whether ordinary people have some sense of themselves as being wise in thought or action and investigated how fully this self-understanding is integrated into their life stories through autobiographical reasoning.

Bluck and Glück (2004) found that most participants (60%) illustrated causal coherence in their wisdom-related memories—that is, they connected the wisdom-related event to later events or to the self in general. Midlife and older adults were twice as likely to show causal coherence as compared to adolescents. High levels of causal coherence indicate greater integration of wisdom into the life story. Further, they found that most participants reported learning a lesson from the wisdom-related event, a lesson that was generalized to other events or aspects of the self 80% of time. However, adolescents were less likely to learn a generalized lesson than were young and older adults. Bluck and Glück interpret age differences in causal coherence and lesson learning as evidence that wisdom is still developing during adolescence, an interpretation supported by research showing that both the life story (Habermas & Paha, 2001) and wisdom (Pasupathi, Staudinger, & Baltes, 2001) emerge in adolescence. One limitation of this study is that there is no way to know whether people who are wiser engage in more or different kinds of autobiographical reasoning than those who are less wise.

### **Coping with Hardships and Obstacles in Life**

Ardelt (2005) suggested that successfully coping with life's crises and hardships in life might be both a hallmark and one pathway to wisdom. In two studies, Ardelt (2005, 2010) examined the narratives of the most pleasant and unpleasant life experiences of a sample of older adults who were relatively high and low in wisdom according to her three-dimensional model. In the first study (Ardelt, 2005), an in-

depth analysis found that wise individuals engaged in “higher-order” coping strategies such as mental distancing, active coping, and the application of life lessons, while relatively unwise older adults rely on passive coping strategies that avoid reflection.

In Ardel’s (2010) second study, high wisdom scorers showed more evidence of personal growth than low wisdom scorers. Personal growth was defined as learning important life lessons from experience (following Bluck & Glück, 2004) and increases in insight, integrity, and self-transcendence (following Staudinger & Kunzmann, 2005). Although Ardel does not situate her work within the narrative identity literature, her emphasis on a personal growth orientation and the importance of reflective processing supports models of autobiographical reasoning and suggests that relatively wise individuals participate in more sophisticated reasoning processes.

A recent study by Mansfield, McLean, and Lilgendahl (2010), provides further evidence for the link between wisdom and autobiographical reasoning. Using Ardel’s 3D-WS, the researchers found that greater evidence of a narrative process they called “personal growth” (e.g., insights gained, lessons learned, positive self-transformation) predicted higher levels of wisdom in autobiographical narratives about transgressions. Likewise, King and colleagues found that optimal autobiographical reasoning, involving high levels of narrative resolution and accommodative change in the face of adversity, leads to ego development (King, Scollon, Ramsey, & Williams, 2000). Although wisdom and ego development are not synonymous, high levels of ego development may be necessary for wisdom (Wink & Helson, 1997). Thus, relatively wise individuals may be more able to grow from negative or difficult life experiences as a function of their skills in autobiographical reasoning.

Taken together, these studies suggest that autobiographical reasoning processes are meaningfully related to wisdom. Further, examining the sophistication of autobiographical reasoning in personal narratives is a potential way to differentiate wise and unwise individuals. Consistent with the idea that wisdom is a rare commodity, we propose that not all forms of autobiographical reasoning generate wisdom. Wisdom is likely to result from reasoning that (1) is sufficiently sophisticated, (2) involves fundamental life matters, (3) is oriented toward personal growth or flourishing, and (4) conforms to a culturally appropriate wisdom ideology. In light of these considerations, we propose that the type of reasoning characteristic of wise individuals be thought of as “optimal” autobiographical reasoning.

Clearly, progress has been made in terms of studying life reflection and autobiographical reasoning as a pathway to wisdom. We next consider another path to wisdom through narrative simulation, an idea that has as of yet received no empirical attention. On this view, wisdom can result from the simulation of literary, historical, or hypothetical narratives from which one extracts a wise lesson, just as in the Buddhist story that opened this chapter.

## The Potential Role of Narrative Simulation in the Cultivation of Wisdom

### *Understanding Narrative Simulation*

According to Oatley (1999; Mar & Oatley, 2008), literary narratives are simulations of the real world: “Narrative fiction models life, comments on life, helps us to understand life in terms of how human intentions bear on it” (Mar & Oatley, p. 173). By projecting ourselves mentally into such simulations, we can extract general and personal wisdom from them. In understanding a story, readers or listeners participate in a meaning-making process whereby they “read between the lines” of the story, interpreting and analyzing their lived experiences to achieve a deeper meaning in the text, and through this process, extract lessons to live by. Simulations provide abstract models of human intention in the social world—both what has happened and what could happen. Unlike didactic theoretical explanations, narrative simulations allow us to experience events vicariously by putting ourselves in the storyworld—heightening sympathy and empathy and extending our general and social knowledge (Gordon, 1986, 2009; Nichols, 2002; Mar & Oatley, 2008; Oatley, 1999, 2011).<sup>3</sup>

According to Mar and Oatley (2008), there are two purposes of simulation. First, simulations allow us to access experiences that we cannot otherwise access directly. We may not be able to access an experience because it is beyond our means (e.g., past historical periods or events), or we may not want to access an event directly because the potential costs are too great (e.g., war, traumatic personal events). Simulation allows us to indirectly gain wisdom by reflecting on the experiences of those fictional and real persons who have come before us. The second purpose of simulation is to understand and predict behavior that is embedded in a dynamic system involving complex interactions. A story reveals a network of causal relationships as the plot unfolds, unlike a single event, which is understood only in light of what happened before and after it. Because a story depicts real life, literary simulations allow us to understand and predict behavior we encounter in the real world with a high degree of verisimilitude. Additionally, Mar and Oatley, state that:

When reading we are also recipients of a narrator’s or protagonist’s construal of the situation and its solution, and such a contribution may provide us with new perspectives and possibly new solutions. Narratives allow us to try out solutions to emotional and social difficulties through the simulation of these experiences, as we try to comprehend the actions of protagonists and ponder how our own responses may compare were we presented with the same situation. (p. 184)

Of course, simulations are also tested against what actually happens, and that outcome can change the way that subsequent simulations are generated and

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<sup>3</sup>Evidence from the study of mirror neurons sheds some light on the biological basis of our capacity for social simulation.

interpreted. Thus, one can learn to become better skilled at simulation, much like one can optimize autobiographical reasoning (Gordon, 1986, 2009; Nichols, 2002).

Two types of simulations are relevant to the acquisition of personal wisdom. First, we can run simulations of stories created about wise literary and historical figures<sup>4</sup> in an attempt to emulate their behavior or to adapt it to particular life situations. In other words, not only do we emulate people personally known to us who we perceive as wise, we also look to literary, historical, political, religious, or philosophical figures as exemplars of what it means to be wise—and to stories of their lives often specially crafted to provide narrative examples of their exemplary behavior. We project or immerse ourselves in the storyworld of these wise characters, reasoning through an event from their perspective to gain deeper understanding of their thoughts, feelings, and motivations. This insight can then be generalized, by analogy, to our own lives. Some literary and historical narratives have become known as wisdom texts in their own right and are considered stories that possess lessons for living the good life. For example, a work of literary fiction that models wisdom is Hesse's (1922/2007) *Siddhartha*, based on the story of the Buddha. Examples of historical texts that portray wisdom include Erikson's psychobiographies depicting the stories of Gandhi (Erikson, 1969) and Martin Luther (Erikson, 1958). Historical and literary characters embody or personify narratives of wisdom because their story is considered emblematic of a cultural wisdom ideology, an idea that we elaborate on in the next section.

The second type of personal simulation is a hypothetical narrative one constructs about a future event that may come to pass. As Singer and Blagov (2004) describe it, "There is extraordinary evolutionary adaptive value to being able to 'test the waters' psychologically before actually diving in and taking action" (p. 124). In creating our own simulation, we craft a possible narrative, casting ourselves as protagonist. We explore our own actions and outcomes in this mental simulation. For example, in an interview study that we are currently conducting, one of our older female participants who was asked of a moment in her life when she was wise demonstrates what we mean by hypothetical simulation:

It was really small, but the decision to quit smoking, because I smoked about three packs a day when I was about your age [early twenties]. And uh I did it for reasons of vanity. Really, I stopped smoking because I don't like to be a slave to any habit, I don't like a habit to take me over, you know. And uh so I thought, no I don't need to do this, I don't need to be standing in an elevator that's going down 20 floors with an unlit cigarette in my mouth and a lighter in my hand waiting to step off the elevator. . . No, I don't want to be that person, and I mean, it did benefit me, it's been 4 years now since I've smoked, but I don't have lung cancer I don't ever have to worry about that.

Integral to this autobiographical narrative is a hypothetical simulation within which the participant explores the possible health consequences of smoking and the sort of person who is a slave to habit. The simulative experience revealed that a

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<sup>4</sup>The stories told about the lives of many historical figures have reached a canonical status in our culture (e.g., Gandhi, Jesus).

wise course of action would be to quit (“I don’t want to be *that* person”), and in reflection, she affirms this was the right decision (“it did benefit me”). Incidentally, this participant was among the highest female scorers in our sample according to Ardel’s 3D-WS.

A hypothetical simulation such as required by the Berlin or Bremen paradigm vignettes, or even imagining our own future, is potentially less informative than a literary or historical simulation because we are left to our own devices to simulate the myriad factors that come to bear on an imagined situation, not an easy task, since many potentially critical factors acting upon us may not be accounted for. Still, we argue, in the absence of a literary or historical narrative, we will spontaneously construct our own hypothetical narrative that models real-life events that may transpire.

### ***What Narratives Do We Simulate, and Why Does It Matter?***

As we’ve suggested, individuals are not limited to reflection on their lived experience when it comes to developing wisdom. Individuals become wiser through simulating hypothetical situations that they could potentially encounter. Individuals can also project themselves into the narratives of literary and historical exemplars of wisdom, or of people they know personally and consider wise, so as to glean wisdom from the lived experience of these memorable people. But what storylines are likely to be simulated in the pursuit of wisdom? The answer to this question leads us to consider cultural master narratives.

### **Cultural Master Narratives**

There is a burgeoning field of research that focuses on the socially and culturally situated nature of narrative identity (see Fivush, Habermas, Waters, & Zaman, 2011; Hammack, 2008; McLean, 2008; McLean, Pasupathi, & Pals, 2007). The idea here is that narrative processing does not happen in a vacuum but draws on the ideology particular to a culture. As McAdams and Pals (2006) suggest, “A person constructs a narrative identity by appropriating stories from culture” (p. 212). Singer (2004) agrees that, “The stories individuals create draw from the existing repertoire of cultural narratives based in myth, fable, literature, popular entertainment, and ethnic family history that define the meaning making parameters of their lives” (p. 445).

But the use of cultural stories is not made at random. Some works of literary fiction and historical narratives become canonical for the exact reason that they model or portray a generally accepted ideology that is abstracted into a master narrative. Cultural master narratives are sense-making structures available to individuals, effectively guiding and shaping the stories they tell to others and to themselves. These cultural stories are called “master” narratives because they espouse an ideology that is valued by members of the immediate social

environment and are thus dominant, even commonplace; that is, they are more commonly told because they say something important about a culture and how one should live within that culture.<sup>5</sup> Bruner (1987) puts it best:

Given their constructed nature and their dependence upon the cultural conventions and language usage, life narratives obviously reflect the prevailing theories about “possible lives” that are part of one’s culture. Indeed, one important way of characterizing a culture is by the narrative models it makes available for describing the course of a life. And the tool kit of any culture is replete not only with a stock of canonical life narratives (heroes, Marthas, tricksters, etc.), but with combinable formal constituents from which its members can construct their own life narratives: canonical stances and circumstances, as it were. (p. 694)

Not only do master narratives guide our self-telling and help us to make sense of our lived experience retrospectively, we can also simulate them and, in doing so, use them as a cultural resource for developing personal wisdom. In this way, simulation comes close to emulation, to the extent that through simulation, we can access wisdom we feel is worth appropriating and integrating into our own life story—we begin to live in accordance with someone else’s wisdom, making it our own. Importantly, because it is a master narrative that we simulate, that wisdom is also likely to conform to the standards of our culture.

The concept of master narrative recasts prototype (e.g., Neisser, 1979) and exemplar theories of reasoning (e.g., Smith & Zárate, 1992), focusing on the common plotlines that substantiate the wisdom of exemplary characters associated with canonical narratives. Research by Paulhus and colleagues reveals that individuals have a repertoire of wisdom exemplars that can be drawn from (Paulhus, Wehr, Harms, & Strasser, 2002). However, beyond simply nominating an exemplar of wisdom, a master narrative analysis also captures the story in which prototypical or exemplary instances of wisdom are embodied, providing for a more nuanced analysis.

In creating our personal narrative simulations, we invoke any one of a variety of master narratives and their associated exemplars. Aleida Assmann (1994) has identified four master storylines and exemplars that are historically and culturally representative of different kinds of wisdom in the Western world, and other authors in this volume have identified more. First, Assmann describes the creative and discerning judgment of King Solomon as representing a political understanding of wisdom. Shakespeare’s Prospero, the exiled magician king from *The Tempest*, represents the second figure, whose wisdom lies in instrumental cosmic knowledge; with the rise of the empirical sciences, this wizard figure might be re-interpreted as possessing deep scientific knowledge of the natural world. Third is Polonius, a character in *Hamlet*, who parodies traditional practical wisdom, guiding others in solving life’s problems through the use of pragmatic maxims and proverbs. Lastly, Assmann calls upon the character of Jaques, from Shakespeare’s *As You Like It*.

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<sup>5</sup> For examples of master narrative analyses on *gender*, see Bamberg (2004) and Thorne and McLean (2003); on *sexual identity*, see Hammack, Thompson, and Pilecki (2009) and Weststrate and McLean (2010); and on *national identity*, see Hammack (2006).

Jaques, a professional fool, portrays the contradictory, paradoxical, and impermanent ways of the world—a skeptical, problem-finding wisdom that is very different from Polonius’s problem-solving orientation (Assmann).

Master narratives thus contain two components: plot and character. They provide a plotline that meaningfully describes a type or form of wisdom, which can be embodied by one of potentially many exemplars who personify that form of wisdom. The character (or exemplar) helps us to personally relate to the story and facilitates our projection into the shoes of the protagonist.

Consider for a moment the story of the life of Jesus Christ—a widely told and studied narrative in North America and in many countries around the world. A powerful example of simulation is the expression, “What would Jesus do?” This turn of phrase is employed as a heuristic by many Christians to arrive at a wise course of action in a challenging situation. Some North American Christians go as far as to wear bracelets adorned with ‘WWJD’ as a reminder to seek the wisdom of Jesus Christ.<sup>6</sup>

But even the most devout follower of Jesus must critically negotiate the stories told about him. For example, consider the story of Jesus cursing the fig tree, from Mark 11:12–14 and 11:20–25 (see also Matthew 21:18–22) in the Christian holy Bible (1989 translation). According to Mark,

[...] when they came from Bethany, he [Jesus] was hungry. Seeing in the distance a fig tree in leaf, he went to see whether perhaps he would find anything on it. When he came to it, he found nothing but leaves, for it was not the season for figs. He said to it, “May no one ever eat fruit from you again.” And his disciples heard it. (Mark 11:12–14)

In the morning as they passed by, they saw the fig tree withered away to its roots. Then Peter remembered and said to him, “Rabbi, look! The fig tree that you cursed has withered.” Jesus answered them, “Have faith in God. Truly I tell you, if you say to this mountain, ‘Be taken up and thrown into the sea,’ and if you do not doubt in your heart, but believe that what you say will come to pass, it will be done for you. So I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours. (Mark 11:20–25)

That faith can move mountains is an inspiring message, but what about the fig tree? Wasn’t it excessive to kill the tree just to make a point? Of course there can be many subtle allegorical interpretations of this story, but our point is that Christians today must interpret this story in order to align it with modern Christian wisdom ideology, in which no one kills even a tree for an irrational reason (i.e., not bearing fruit out of season)—a point that also bothered Bertrand Russell (1927/1957). Cultural narrative and ideology are not usually accepted without question in circumstances where much is at stake for one’s sense of self, but instead are examined, negotiated, and refined—sometimes generating a new and alternative narrative or ideology that may emerge be either accepted or rejected by oneself or others in a culture.

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<sup>6</sup> We find an analogous process in Pakistan, where most of those interviewed from children to the elderly spontaneously chose Mohammed as the wisest person in history and used his life and words as a reference point to discuss wisdom in their own lives (Ferrari, Khan, Benayon, & Nero, 2011).



## The Cultural-Personal Interface in Simulation

Notably, simulation doesn't happen independent of our own lived experience—while the master narrative being simulated is cultural, the process of simulation is still deeply personal. With every simulation we conduct, we bring our accumulated autobiographical experience to bear as an interpretive lens. This lens tells us whether or not the wisdom extracted from a given simulation will “fit” within the context of our own lives. In fact, we may need to run iterations of a simulation before we settle on a final version because of its resonance with our lived experience. Thus, Jesus's life story need not be emulated in an absolute sense; aspects of it are extracted and endorsed separately. Research by Green (2004) supports the idea that our autobiographical experience influences the simulation of master narratives. She has shown that individuals with prior knowledge or experiences relevant to the content of a given story indicate greater levels of “transportation” into the narrative (Green). That is, they perceive the narrative to be more real and become more cognitively and emotionally involved in the story. Such transportation is bound to increase the effectiveness of the simulative experience, as the individual is expected to be more attuned to details of the story and better able to interpret the events within it.

The idea that Jesus Christ's story is a narrative that is commonly simulated reflects values of the local culture. That is, whether Jesus is deemed wise depends on cultural expectations about what ideal type of character is wise. For instance, in China, it is likely more common that the figure of Confucius would be called upon in light of an educational system that espouses his teachings (for a discussion of Eastern and Western conceptions of wisdom see Takahashi, 2000). In Pakistan, Mohammed will be taken as a historical model of wisdom (Ferrari et al., 2011; Khan, 2009). Additionally, while members in the broader culture might share a common set of expectations about such an ideal type, members of different subcultures or even different professions may have different ideals in mind (Edmondson, Chap. 9, this volume; Sternberg, 1985). This is precisely why it matters what stories we simulate and for what purpose. Wisdom is by nature ideological. Simulating a narrative that does not conform to the values of a given society and then appropriating its wisdom would be either foolish or revolutionary. In terms of the latter, endorsing a narrative that runs counter to the canon may in fact be the wisest course of action to the extent that it catalyzes social change on a broader scale. What is considered personally wise may be that which is also wise for society in general, and this may involve resisting or subverting the dominant ideology. This stance is reminiscent of the wisdom of social activists such as Nelson Mandela, Mahatma Gandhi, and Martin Luther King Jr. to name a few.

## The Larger Stories Within Which We Live: A Study of Master Narrative Engagement

To learn more about the master narratives available for simulation by Canadians, we are investigating how individuals differentially invoke cultural storylines relevant to wisdom across levels of age, gender, and degree of wisdom. We recently conducted a study that explored the autobiographical wisdom narratives of eight individuals selected from a larger sample of 82 participants (Weststrate, 2011; Weststrate & Ferrari, 2011). These participants were selected so that they were equally distributed across two age cohorts (young and old adults), gender, and degree of wisdom assessed according to the 3D-WS. For this qualitative analysis, we selected extreme scorers on the wisdom scale, in keeping with Ardel's (2005, 2010) methods. It was believed that selecting representatives from the highest and lowest pool of wisdom scorers would accentuate any differences that may naturally occur between them. Specifically, we looked for differences in how these individuals engaged with master narratives of wisdom. To invoke a master narrative, we asked participants to tell us a story about a historical or cultural exemplar that they believed to be wise and to articulate how this character had influenced or impacted them personally. Interestingly, master narratives were also spontaneously referenced in other sections of the interview, such as discussing a time when people saw themselves as wise or times when an acquaintance they knew had acted wisely. No notable age or gender differences were discovered, but interesting trends did emerge between those who were high and low scorers on the wisdom scale.

Consider this quote from a member of the older adult cohort and a high wisdom scorer, Marty,<sup>7</sup> who at the very start of his interview references a master narrative of wisdom that clearly draws on general ideological knowledge about wisdom:

I think first of my father, who wasn't on the surface a wise old man or explicitly wise, but he was quiet, pensive, seemed to be kind of a quiet but common sense kind of person, so I think of him when you ask me about wise. Who else would I think of? It's strange I don't really, I don't think of anybody who I would say, 'Oh that's a wise person'. I think my current wife is wise in many ways, but not in the sage, old, old man wisdom kind of way, but she has a lot of common sense, which is, I think, a fork of wisdom.

Marty makes reference to the figure of the "sage" or the "old wise man," a popular prototypical image of wisdom. He associates this prototypical image with specific attributes of wisdom and uses this as a compass to direct him to exemplars of wise people in his life. This is evident in how he compares his father to the prototype. Marty then goes on to nominate his wife as wise, claiming that she too possesses common sense characteristic of the wise, but diverges from the old wise man narrative in other ways that are not clearly specified. While it sounds like there are subtle differences in the type of wisdom exemplified by Marty's wife and father, in general, the prototype and associated master narrative invoked draws on

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<sup>7</sup> All names are pseudonyms.

knowledge that is closely aligned with the practical wisdom of Polonius that we discussed earlier (Assmann, 1994). Thus, we can begin to see the various ways in which exemplars and master narratives are called upon to understand the concept of wisdom (e.g., the practical wisdom of the old wise man). Notably, Marty does not recall or generate a depersonalized, abstracted definition of wisdom to drive his memory search. Instead, he engages various prototypes and tests their fit to people known to him for the purposes of evaluating their wisdom. This is an interesting twist on the standard implicit theory research, which seeks to identify the latent “wisdom concept” we all possess. We argue that exemplars of wisdom reflect this underlying implicit theory, but do so in the more contextual and nuanced manner that narrative emplotment allows.

The eight participants analyzed in this pilot study invoked multiple exemplars for the purposes of describing wisdom. For example, Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr., Rosa Parks, Mother Teresa, Jesus Christ, Buddha, Nelson Mandela, and Roméo Dallaire surfaced in seven of the eight cases. We combine all of these exemplars into one “character” because the individual narratives that they represent share important similarities, and these similarities converge on a master narrative of wisdom. Despite their differences, in one capacity or another, all of these exemplars were chosen because they represent selfless, self-sacrificial people, who cared deeply about the welfare of others and the world, and who also had the strategic know-how to execute their visions. If one must condense this to a single plotline, we might call this the *wisdom as concern for others narrative*. This master narrative was the most dominant narrative presented and was instantiated by calling upon the aforementioned characters and their life stories. Each instantiation, however, represented a nuanced version of the master narrative, reflecting personal understandings of the story and meanings contained within it. This is clearly a master narrative that is valued by Canadians and, interestingly, is not one of Assmann’s prototypes—although it might arguably be related to Solomon. As we review the narrative excerpts below, we will attempt to expose a small selection of these storylines.

While it is true that participants demonstrated some agreement concerning what figures of wisdom come to mind, the quality and nature of engagement with such master narratives differed across levels of high and low wisdom. High wisdom scorers are keenly aware of and critically engage with master narratives of wisdom, sometimes appropriating them and sometimes rejecting or refining them.

For example, consider this story shared by Beverly, a high wisdom scorer from the older cohort. Her response shows deep engagement with the master narrative, offering ample evidence for why she views Gandhi as a wise individual:

Another incredibly wise person is Mahatma Gandhi, who lived uh a very, very hard life. He was imprisoned for his beliefs, he was beaten, he was tortured, and he believed in nonviolence, now that was not a popular way to do things in his day, but um he was wise enough to see that if you indulge in violence even in retaliation, you’re only escalating the violence that uh any resistance to brutal authority must be met with non-nonviolent resistance um and the British were pretty brutal in India at the time. . . He was an Indian lawyer. His name was actually Mohandas Gandhi, Mahatma was a title, like a lord or a

servant. A tiny man, as he got older, he wore only a white sarong, shaved his head, tiny wingless spectacles. Preached nonviolence wherever he went, and uh there was a great civil war in India between Muslims and Hindu, and oh people were just being massacred for no other reason than that they were Muslim or Hindu, and he declared he was going to go on hunger strike, and by this time, everyone in India knew who he was because of his many marches and his lectures on freedom and peace and nonviolent resistance, and uh so he came within an eyelash of dying of hunger, but the violence stopped, and he was resuscitated and said he could take a little bit of food now, and someone came to him, a uh Hindu, and he said uh “Bapu” which means father in one of the Indian dialects, “Bapu, I’ve done a terrible thing. I have killed, there was a riot in the streets, and I have killed a little Muslim boy. I can’t forgive myself for it.” And uh Mahatma said, “Well there is one thing you must do for you own salvation. To get yourself out of the hell that you’re in right now, you must find an orphan child, and you must raise him as your own, only be sure that you raise him as a Muslim and that it’s not your faith, but his”. See, that is how I define wisdom by giving you an example of what wisdom is. That’s hard to do, but it heals hatred with love, and that’s what Jesus’s mission on earth was to do, and uh that’s how I define wisdom, by example.

Notice the clarity of this response. Beverly does not invoke an abstract image like the old wise man (although Gandhi would conform to this) but draws upon a detailed historical narrative surrounding the life of a particular exemplar of wisdom: Gandhi. She has clearly simulated his experiences—she has projected herself into his story, reasoned through his experience, and concluded that this story resonates with her view of wisdom or perhaps helped to form that view in the first place. This is no simple endorsement; she is able to provide an elaborate story to substantiate her position and makes a connection to the story of Jesus Christ, which she goes on to discuss in much more detail later in the interview. Notice one of the important features of simulation—Beverly is able to learn vicariously from the experiences of Gandhi without having to endure the hardships that he has faced. Although she is bound to have some emotional reaction to this experience, it is conducive to the simulative experience, as opposed to overwhelming her. In her interview, Beverly discusses the life philosophy that she has acquired from Gandhi, which is the importance of caring for others, a theme exemplified by other personal stories she shares, such as that of her best friend Paul, a businessman who always conducted his work in the best interest of his clients and not for personal gain. These themes pervaded Beverly’s interview, and while she rejects the idea that she is wise herself, she makes the following claim about the wisdom of Jesus Christ: “It inspires me to try to emulate him as far as I can.” All of this is to say that Beverly has taken the time to enter the storyworld of Gandhi and Jesus, and although her life does not conform to their narratives per se, she has drawn lessons and insights from these characters and strives to enact them in her own life.

Stephan, a young male who scored high on the wisdom scale, engages with Gandhi in a different way:

Well, I guess it’s just kind of like [Gandhi] has that stereotypical wisdom aura around him, whereas his ability via nonviolent protest, use of words in negotiation as opposed to physical action to bring an end to the colonization of India, was amazing, but at the same time, I don’t know if I per se identify with that strongly, but at the same time, he was the

first person that came to my mind. I don't know if that is because that's just the default, everyone knows who Gandhi is, or if that's 'cause I identify with him per se.

Here, Stephan refers to Gandhi as the default answer. At this point, Stephan has not appropriated this master narrative but reveals a process of critical engagement, as opposed to Beverly who has already evaluated and chosen to appropriate the narrative through simulation. We suggest this indicates a "simulation in progress." It is not that Gandhi is unworthy of the title of wise; Stephan is more concerned with whether or not this story resonates with him personally—whether he can use the Gandhi story in a simulation that is personally meaningful. This is what we mean when we say that one brings their accumulated autobiographical experience to the simulation of cultural master narratives. While Stephan grants that Gandhi is an exemplar of wisdom in his own right, it may not be the type of wisdom that "fits" with Stephan's life story. Given more time, Stephan may choose to endorse, reject, or refine this narrative so that it meaningfully relates to his lived experience.

It seems clear that relatively wise persons deeply engage wisdom master narratives. They are able to articulate a comprehensible story and provide an explanation for why they selected a particular character. They also provide evidence of critical engagement with the narrative and reflect upon its personal meaning. That is, they do not accept the narrative without first subjecting it to an evaluative process. An ability to simulate such master narratives could be one of the factors that led to their wisdom; that is, recognizing the larger stories of wisdom within which we live might provide individuals with the opportunity to refine their understanding of wisdom, critically engage with their meaning vis-à-vis their personal narratives, and ultimately integrate this into their life story.

Now let's consider a narrative that Craig, who is from the younger cohort and scored poorly on the wisdom measure, gives in response to the prompt for a historical figure that exemplifies wisdom:

The wisest historical figure. . . uhm. . . no one comes to mind, I mean, I guess. . . I'm having a tough time putting a name, uhm but let's just be general and say an army commander or someone to that nature. . . they. . . I think they need to be wise, I believe the definition of wisdom, in my opinion, is uh it's two parts: it's education/ intelligence and experience, and I think a person to that nature would have to possess those characteristics uh to be successful at what they do, and I would definitely think that it would be a person with great wisdom to be in those roles uhm. . . but yeah, I'm just having a tough time naming anyone and for whether, I guess, they're considered an evil army general or commander or uh one of the better ones, I would say, you know, someone like Napoleon, even Hitler—whether you agree or not, but uh I think they are wise people. Uhm, whether considered heroes or not. . . I guess. . . but yeah I think you can speak in general on that one.

By all accounts in the wisdom literature, figures like Hitler are not personifications of wisdom. Although one might argue that such figures approach the Solomonic master narrative of strategic thinking, they are devoid of affective concern for others. Sternberg (1998) has spoken about Hitler specifically as a figure that might demonstrate intelligence, but not wisdom, at least in accordance with his balance theory of wisdom that sees wisdom as the balance or maximization of good across interpersonal, intrapersonal, and transpersonal domains. Ardel (1997, 2003)

sees wisdom as involving compassion for others, as captured by her affective dimension of wisdom, which is far from all historical accounts of Hitler. In other words, a historical character like Hitler cannot represent wisdom, even if he might reflect a master narrative of intelligence. This level of engagement lacks the critical or discerning nature of relatively wise individuals and also suggests a lack of historical knowledge about Hitler. To say that Hitler is a figure of wisdom indicates a superficial and faulty simulation of his story. Indeed, the example of Hitler could be considered by some to be a counter-narrative to wisdom (see Bamberg & Andrews, 2004). In general, low wisdom scorers show less clear understandings of wisdom master narratives and cannot easily articulate a story surrounding the character chosen, despite being prompted for a story about wisdom.<sup>8</sup>

In conclusion, this qualitative analysis suggests that individuals engage with the larger stories of wisdom within which we live. Master narrative engagement appears to differ across degrees of wisdom, but not across age or gender. Relatively wise persons are aware of and engage critically with master narratives of wisdom, while relatively unwise individuals only superficially invoke master narratives or confuse master narratives of wisdom with those of intelligence. The differing levels of engagement suggest that wise persons are more adept at simulating master narratives from a first-person perspective and, possibly, that they have become wise by virtue of so doing.

### ***Optimal Narrative Simulation and the Development of Personal Wisdom***

With this framework in mind, let us consider one of the most important points we wish to explore: How the process of narrative simulation contributes to developing personal wisdom across the lifespan. Developing personal wisdom involves an expert or masterful simulation of living. Results of such simulations can be offered as advice to others and, in one's own case, can be enacted and thus tested against reality. Such simulations are expected to lead to a more positive life outcome. Lessons and insights learned from reflecting on the actual outcomes of enacted simulations can be incorporated into subsequent simulations, always negotiated in light of archetypal characters and cultural master narratives. Life performances or experiences that are unworthy of being integrated into future simulations or actions become part of what Bruner (1992) calls the "narrative unconscious" and are ignored.

In order for it to lead to wisdom, a narrative simulation must be optimal, that is, it must involve plots or characters consistent with core ideological beliefs that instantiate a wisdom ideology or important aspects thereof. This wisdom ideology

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<sup>8</sup> One limitation of the study being presented here is that we did not measure intelligence. It is possible that the participant's nomination of Hitler might indicate a lack of knowledge about who Hitler was.

will include ideas about what is thought to contribute to psychological and physical well-being and generally to a better quality of life. Although each person must come to decide for him or herself, common ideas about what contributes to a good life include selflessness needed for balanced judgment (Sternberg) and compassion (Ardelt), as well as deep insight into the human condition that allows for exceptional advice and problem solving (Baltes). When the results of a narrative simulation align with these ideological criteria and when this wisdom is integrated into the life story, a good life seems within reach.

While we know less about the positive effects of narrative simulation than we do about reflective autobiographical reasoning on real-life experiences, some research allows for speculation. King and colleagues found that adults who richly elaborate<sup>9</sup> (or, we would say, “simulate”) lost possible selves, that is, selves that did not come to pass but at one time may have, show increased ego development (King & Raspin, 2004; King & Smith, 2004), and were more likely to report personal growth in stories of difficult life transitions (King & Patterson, 2000; for a review of this research see King & Hicks, 2006). We may infer from these results that optimally simulating lost possible narratives may also be important to the development of wisdom.

This could be equally true for simulating narratives lived by others. Research has begun to look at how the simulation of fictional narratives can lead to personal change. A qualitative study by Levitt, Rattanasampan, Chaidaroon, Stanley, and Robinson (2009) investigated the processes of personal change reported by six individuals who read a fictional narrative that they perceived to have a profoundly positive impact on their lives. Themes were extracted from interview transcripts and reduced to five mechanisms that accounted for the experience of personal change. These centered on the core idea that “identification with characters’ experiences created a safe venue to consider threat and experiment with new possibilities and perspectives” (p. 326). This finding supports the theorizing of Mar and Oatley (2008; Oatley, 1999, 2011) as discussed earlier.

Recently, Kaufman and Libby (2012) coined the term “experience-taking” to describe a process analogous to narrative simulation. In their abstract, they define experience-taking as “the imaginative process of spontaneously assuming the identity of a character in a narrative and simulating that character’s thoughts, emotions, behaviours, goals, and traits as if they were one’s own.” In a series of primarily experimental studies, Kaufman and Libby examined the antecedents and consequences of experience-taking. They found that reduced self-concept accessibility (or what we would call self-transcendence) facilitated the experience-taking process and led to a greater internalization of the main character’s personality traits. Reducing the accessibility of one’s identity is thought to make it easier for the participant to “forget” (i.e., transcend) him or herself and simulate the experience of the protagonist. Such experience-taking was enhanced when the narrative was written in the first person and depicted a main character with whom the participant

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<sup>9</sup>Elaboration refers to the degree of detail, vividness, and emotional depth provided in stories about a lost possible self.

shared a relevant in-group membership, a combination of conditions that seems to create a sense of closeness and familiarity with the protagonist of the narrative.

Importantly, Kaufman and Libby found real-world effects of engaging in these kinds of narrative simulations. Participants who read a first-person narrative and shared a salient in-group membership with the main character were more likely to align their subsequent voting behavior with that of the main character. Kaufman and Libby also found that engagement in experience-taking led participants to judge homosexuals and African Americans less stereotypically and report more favorable attitudes toward these groups when the protagonist's out-group identity was disclosed later in the narrative.

In summary, Kaufman and Libby are among the first to test the extent to which narrative simulation can lead to change in our beliefs and our behaviors. They have shown that simulation, under certain conditions, can be a powerful tool for self-transformation, which suggests its importance for the development of personal wisdom.

These studies by Kaufman and Libby are thus a promising direction for future research, although they have not yet specifically investigated the outcomes of narrative simulation for the development of personal wisdom. Future research should compare the merits of simulation to other forms of learning, such as intensive conversations with friends, engaging with art or philosophy, practicing mindfulness, and the like.

## Conclusion

Following Bruner's (1986) distinction between paradigmatic and narrative modes of thought, we propose that personal wisdom involves narrative processes that depict the vicissitudes of human intentions, whereas general wisdom primarily involves explicit paradigmatic theoretical knowledge. We propose that personal wisdom comes from reasoning about life experiences and narrative simulations that provoke insight about fundamental personal matters. Thus, a science of personal wisdom is essentially incomplete if it does not consider narrative. Indeed, in simulating and reflecting upon our own and others' life narratives, individuals appropriate wise life lessons for future application and for making sense of their own lives.

We believe that narrative simulation and autobiographical reasoning represent two paths to developing personal wisdom. In the best cases, life imitates art, and the greatest artists of life embody and convey deep insight achieved through optimal autobiographical reasoning and simulation. Just as great art teaches us something, so do inspiring exemplars of the "art of living," like Buddha or Christ or our most inspiring friends and relatives; critically reflecting on their lives and our own increases our quality of life. This is what we mean by personal wisdom and why stories about wisdom, both invented and handed down to us, continue to inspire.



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# Religion, Spirituality, and Personal Wisdom: A Tale of Two Types

Paul Wink and Michele Dillon

The psychological concept of wisdom has its roots in philosophy and religion, a connection exemplified by references to wisdom in the Bible, the writings of Confucius, and in Buddhist teachings. In the Western tradition, wisdom was of prime concern to Greek philosophers including Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle whose ideas subsequently influenced the writings of early Christian theologians such as St. Augustine and scholastic scholars such as Thomas Aquinas (Osbeck & Robinson, 2005). An interest in wisdom among philosophers and theologians is understandable given that the concept raises questions about what constitutes a good life, how to strike a balance between concern for self and others, and the prerequisites necessary for exercising good judgment under conditions of uncertainty.

Although historically intertwined, the relationship between wisdom and religion is not easy to decipher because developments in religion over the ages resulted in concomitant shifts in the conceptualization of wisdom. For example, early Sumerian and Egyptian writings tended to emphasize the practical nature of wisdom as a guide to a successful life (Curnow, 2010), only for the focus to change to a stress on the ability to lead a good life that would reflect and glorify God's intentions during the early Christian era (Assmann, 1994), and reason and rationality in the Enlightenment period (Birren & Svensson, 2005). In the last 30 years, the focus has shifted to the connection between wisdom and the ability to make decisions under conditions of uncertainty (see e.g., Baltes & Staudinger, 2000). This change in emphasis appears related to the evolved religious and sociocultural landscape in the

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P. Wink (✉)

Department of Psychology, Wellesley College, Wellesley, MA, USA  
e-mail: [pwink@wellesley.edu](mailto:pwink@wellesley.edu)

M. Dillon

Department of Sociology, University of New Hampshire, Durham, NH, USA  
e-mail: [michele.dillon@unh.edu](mailto:michele.dillon@unh.edu)

West, with the historical dominance of Christianity giving way to greater religious pluralism, secularization, and the advent of spiritual beliefs and practices that are decoupled from traditional religious structures.

In this chapter, we will explore the relationship between religion, spirituality, and personal wisdom by first considering the relationship between religions and spirituality in contemporary America and then evaluating the various meanings of personal wisdom and their implications for the wisdom-religion nexus. In the second part of the chapter, we turn to empirical findings. We will discuss the relationship between religion, spirituality, and personal wisdom and present case studies exemplifying two different ways of being wise at a personal level.

The data we will use are from a 70-year longitudinal study of Americans who were born in California in the 1920s and who were interviewed at regular intervals across their lives by researchers associated with the Institute of Human Development at the University of California, Berkeley (Clausen, 1993; Dillon & Wink, 2007; Eichorn, 1981).

## The Spiritual Turn

The American religious landscape is currently undergoing significant changes. Surveys conducted since the early 1970s have consistently found that less than one in ten Americans (approximately 7%) expressed no religious preference (Hout & Fischer, 2002). By the late 1990s, however, this figure had more than doubled, such that in 2007, 16% of Americans were religiously unaffiliated. Protestants are close to becoming a minority population (51%) in the United States, and Catholics, the largest single denomination at 24% of the population, maintain a numerical stability that is bolstered by Hispanic immigrants (Pew Forum, 2008). Small fractions of Mormons (1.7%), Jews (1.7%) and Unitarians (0.7%) continue their presence in the United States, and additionally, reflecting the expanded diversity of the post-1960s religious landscape (Roof, 1999), Buddhists (0.7%), Muslims (0.6%), Hindus (0.4%), New Age (0.4%), and Native American (0.3%) spiritual practices are increasingly visible (Pew Forum). Adding to the diversity and complexity of American religion, among the growing group of religiously unaffiliated Americans, few are agnostic (2.4%) or atheist (1.6%), but instead express belief in the traditional tenets of Christianity and/or in an impersonal God and various spiritual forces (Pew Forum). Further complicating the religious landscape, substantial proportions of religiously affiliated and churchgoing Americans describe themselves as “religious and spiritual” (41%; *General Social Survey* [GSS], 2008) and as “spiritual but not religious” (24%; GSS), and many combine church participation with a diverse array of nontraditional spiritual beliefs and practices. In short, contemporary American religion is highly diverse and fluid.

The emergence of a growing number of individuals defining themselves as spiritual but not religious has resulted in ambiguity as to the meaning of the term “spiritual.” While some Americans tend to identify spirituality with piety and seriousness of engagement with traditional forms of religious beliefs and practices,

others use the term to signify beliefs and practices that are largely independent of religious institutions (e.g., churches) and mainstream religious traditions. Clearly, both uses are valid and in the Christian tradition date back to the times of the early Gnostics (Wink, 2010). Further, the stronger cultural presence of the church in American society makes it harder to decouple spirituality from traditional religion, unlike in Western Europe where several decades of vigorous secularization means that it makes sense to describe newly emergent forms of nontraditional spirituality there in terms of a post-Christian sensibility (Houtman & Aupers, 2007). Additionally, although spiritual seeking, post-Christian spirituality, and New Age spiritual practices have characteristics in common, an emphasis on disciplined meditation is not the same as belief in astrology and in the spiritual properties of physical things (e.g., mountains, crystals), or engagement in pagan rituals. Caution, therefore, needs to be exercised before grouping adherents of these kinds of practices together as spiritual. Nevertheless, there is enough substance to the concept of a spirituality that is independent of church for it to be meaningfully contrasted with church-based religiousness.

For some psychologists, the juxtaposition of religiousness against spirituality raises the danger of portraying the former as static and ritualistic and the latter as dynamic and conducive to personal growth (e.g., Pargament, 1997). Yet, this framing ignores a large body of sociological research indicating that churchgoing Americans are highly autonomous in their everyday religious habits and experience church traditions and rituals in highly creative, dynamic, and meaningful ways. Protestants have long been autonomous in their religious decision making, and following the Second Vatican Council's affirmation of the importance of religious freedom and personal conscience, large numbers of Catholics display a remarkably high degree of moral autonomy vis-à-vis the Vatican's teachings on sexual and social morality. Moreover, research specifically comparing church-participating religious individuals and spiritual individuals who do not attend church shows that these different ways of construing the sacred and incorporating it in everyday life are experienced as equally meaningful and psychosocially effective modes of being (e.g., Dillon & Wink, 2007).

A core difference between newer forms of individuated spiritual seeking and more traditional, institutional, or church-based religiousness centers on personal meaning and the locus of authority. For spiritual seekers, the process of finding ultimate meaning in life typically draws on beliefs and practices taken from various religious traditions including Christianity, Buddhism, Taoism, Hinduism, and Shamanism. The ultimate truth of these traditions is unimportant because they all lead to the same end point – the sacred self or the soul archetype (Aupers & Houtman, 2006). Although every spiritual quest draws on some specific tradition, in the case of spiritual seekers, the ultimate truth of the tradition is to a large extent irrelevant as long as it promotes inner growth. Thus, spiritual seekers feel free to mix and match different religious traditions to best suit their personal needs. This eclecticism is aided by the belief that the conventional or social self – the ego – associated with traditional religions is a false product of society. In fact, social conventions are perceived as violating the inner or authentic self (e.g., Aupers & Houtman, 2006;



Heelas, 1996, 2006; York, 2001), a self that can only be discovered through an inner process of discovery. For church-oriented religious individuals, by contrast, the presence of a higher truth that is external to the self and that is revealed in sacred texts or in the words of prophets is a critical consideration in their meaning-seeking and meaning-creating activities (Dillon & Wink, 2007). Thus, for example, even though many evangelical Christians believe in a highly personal approach to religious truth and are quite critical of religious institutions, there is no doubt in their minds that their religious or spiritual quest is aimed at uncovering the ways of an external God as revealed in the Bible, and that truth can only be found in the singular authority of Jesus and his teachings.

Our data from a community sample of men and women born in the San Francisco Bay Area in the 1920s and whose lives were studied longitudinally from childhood until late adulthood, when they were in their late 1960s or mid-1970s, pointed to patterned differences between religious (i.e., church affiliated and participating) and spiritual individuals (i.e., individuals whose spirituality was largely independent of church). The interviewees' narratives of religious and spiritual involvement were assessed by trained independent raters based on the interviewees' stated beliefs about God, the afterlife, their prayer and church participation habits, their sense of the sacred and how and where they experience it, and their participation in spiritual practices that are independent of churches. A small number of the interviewees scored high on both religiousness and spirituality (Dillon & Wink, 2007). Most notably, in terms of their personality, religious individuals were characterized as warm, protective of others, likeable, dependable, ethically consistent, and prone to overcontrol their personal needs and impulses (Wink, Ciciolla, Dillon, & Tracy, 2007). They also tended to uphold conventional beliefs regarding the status of women and gays in American society and emphasized the importance of maintaining law and order and existing societal traditions (Wink, Dillon, & Prettyman, 2007). In contrast, spiritual seekers were intellectually independent, introspective, and creative and had wide interests. Further, they had relatively low scores on authoritarianism, thus indicating that they accepted nonconventional gender roles and sexual preferences and, in general, demonstrated independence from traditional social rules and sources of authority.

Despite their differences in personality and social attitudes, our study's highly religious as well as our highly spiritual individuals exhibited high levels of generativity and did so from their 50s onward into late adulthood (Dillon & Wink, 2004). Nonetheless, the object of their generativity differed: religious individuals were more likely to be involved in altruistic activities at a local community level (e.g., helping the homeless) whereas the generativity of the spiritual seekers tended to encompass more global (e.g., environmental protection) and creative activities (e.g., sculpting, playing an instrument; Dillon & Wink, 2007).

In older adulthood, our study participants were actively engaged in an array of everyday activities or life tasks (Wink & Dillon, 2003). Spiritual seekers, however, reflecting their openness to experience, tended to engage more in creative life tasks (e.g., writing, sculpting, playing an instrument) and activities aimed at

self-improvement, while their religious peers showed a preference for activities involving family, friends, and community (Dillon & Wink, 2007). Religious and spiritual individuals were more satisfied with life than other study participants (i.e., nonreligious and nonspiritual individuals, a total of 25% of the sample; Dillon & Wink). Religious individuals, however, showed greater evidence of personal well-being than spiritual individuals.

Our findings regarding the different psychosocial correlates and implications of religiousness and spirituality support the recent tendency to distinguish between two different types of developmental trajectories or psychological maturity based on adjustment versus growth (Staudinger & Kessler, 2009; Staudinger & Kunzmann, 2005). Psychological maturity based on adjustment is judged by the degree to which the individual is able to meet traditional societal norms and expectations and, as a result, function effectively within society (see Helson & Wink, 1987). Individuals whose orientation to life is governed by adjustment tend to derive their sense of well-being from happiness or life satisfaction experienced in conventional social roles such as that of worker, spouse, and parent. In contrast, maturity associated with personal growth is characterized by a sense of well-being derived from self-understanding, complex emotional regulation, and the desire to transcend the structures within which the individual has been socialized (Chandler & Holliday, 1990; Staudinger & Kessler, 2009). Staudinger's distinction between maturity based on adjustment and growth parallels in many respects that of Ryan and Deci's (2001) between well-being based on hedonic (i.e., the presence of positive mood and life satisfaction and the absence of negative mood) versus eudaimonic (i.e., the realization of true potential) well-being and Helson and Wink's (1987) differentiation between other- versus self-orientation. Because religious individuals emphasize life satisfaction or positive affect, positive relations with others, and the importance of maintaining traditions and adhering to social convention, they exemplify individuals who place a premium on adjustment or hedonic well-being. In contrast, the emphasis on personal growth, the tendency to engage in life review designed to provide a new perspective on past experiences, and a differentiated view of the self and other reflect a connection between spiritual seekers and individuals whose maturing is characterized by an emphasis on growth and eudaimonic well-being. What remains unknown, however, is whether and how these different ways of being religious and these different types of maturity relate to wisdom construed as a personality characteristic. This chapter contributes to filling this gap in knowledge.

## **Personal Wisdom(s)**

The field of research on the psychology of wisdom, though increasingly vibrant, lacks consensus as to how to operationalize and measure the construct. The idea that there is more than one type of wisdom is well accepted, as illustrated by Birren and Svensson's (2005) review listing 13 different contemporary definitions of wisdom.

In her historical and cross-cultural review of the construct, Aleida Assmann (1994) argues for four general types of wisdom: the wisdom of *Solomon*, associated with good judgment in broad social, judicial, or political contexts; that of *Prospero*, with knowledge of the cosmic world expressed in everyday life in magic or sorcery, or in metaphors for what Jung (1971) construes as the ability to access the collective unconscious; that of *Polonius*, characterized by practical advice giving in everyday life contexts; and that of *Jaques*, the jester from *As You Like It*, exemplifying irony, doubt, and melancholy reflective of an outsider who is capable of adopting a nonnormative stance toward reality.

The accuracy of Assmann's fourfold classification is less important than its illustration of different ways of being wise and the concomitant possibility that an individual who is wise in one domain of life might not necessarily be so in other aspects of life. One can easily imagine that Solomon's good judgment in dealing with the predicament of two women, each claiming to be the child's mother, might not extend to his own intimate relationships. To acknowledge that wisdom may be domain specific, one only has to think of Mahatma Gandhi who showed great wisdom as a political leader fighting for India's independence from British rule, but whose relationships with his wife and son were seriously flawed and troubled (Erikson, 1969). Conversely, a person with high levels of practical wisdom in dealing with the immediate demands of work and love may strike a follower of Prospero as somewhat shallow and insensitive to the deeper mysteries of life.

Despite the proliferation of views on what constitutes wisdom and the characteristics of the wise individual, Staudinger and Glück (2011) seem to reflect a majority view in arguing that wisdom has to do with good judgment that is confined to existential and other questions dealing with the uncertainty of life. In other words, the prerequisite for calling a person or a decision wise is the ability to deal with a difficult life dilemma, whether it be a personal matter, as illustrated by Solomon's judgment, a more global political level as illustrated by Nelson Mandela's ability to achieve reconciliation between whites and blacks in South Africa or the more ephemeral and mystical level as illustrated by the writings of Carl Gustav Jung. Yet uncertainty continues to exist about the nature of the different psychological characteristics needed for the exercise of good judgment or wisdom. Contributing to the debate are conceptual differences over whether wisdom should be construed as a quality of the person or whether it should be viewed as a body of knowledge accumulated over the ages (Ardelt, 2004), and methodological differences over whether it is appropriate to study wisdom using self-report scales versus performance-based measures testing the individual's demonstrated ability to deal with a real life dilemma (Kunzmann & Baltes, 2005).

In her model differentiating positive adult development based on adjustment versus growth, Staudinger (Staudinger & Glück, 2011; Staudinger & Kunzmann, 2005) argues that personal wisdom is the end goal of the developmental trajectory associated with psychological growth. This assertion is based on the shared association of both constructs with personal growth and openness to experience, and the absence of a relation with subjective well-being. If, in fact, personal wisdom is predominantly characterized by openness and an emphasis on personal growth, this

has important implications for the understanding of the relationship between wisdom and religion as it strongly suggests that personal wisdom will more likely be characteristic of spiritual seekers than of church-oriented religious individuals. Staudinger's claim, however, appears to be premised on the notion that there is only one type of personal wisdom, and that it is appropriately assessed by a performance-based measure with a strong emphasis on the cognitive features of wisdom, such as tolerance of ambiguity and self-relativism.

A different approach to the study of personal wisdom is exemplified by Ardel (2003), who assesses the construct using a self-report, three-dimensional wisdom scale and further assumes that wisdom is a personality characteristic. According to Ardel (2003, 2004), a wise individual is characterized by a confluence of cognitive, reflective, and affective attributes. From the cognitive perspective, a wise person accepts the limits of human knowledge and is sensitive to life's unpredictability and uncertainties. In addition, wise individuals tend to be reflective (insightful, self-aware, and able to adopt the perspective of the other) and, as a result, can perceive reality as it is without any major distortions. In other words, a wise person is able to withhold projections and this, in turn, presumably allows for an understanding of where his or her own boundaries and interests end and where those of the other begin. Although the requirement of withholding projections may seem simple, in practice it requires considerable ego strength. The third and final (affective) dimension of wisdom postulates that sympathy and compassionate love are vital and necessary characteristics of personal wisdom.

Ardel's three-dimensional wisdom model has the advantage of breadth, but its assumption that wise individuals are necessarily characterized by high scores on the cognitive, reflective, and affective dimensions seems to go against the finding of moderate at best intercorrelations among the three dimensions (Ardel, 2003). While it makes good psychological sense to assume that there exists a positive relation between being, for example, tolerant of ambiguity, insightful, and compassionate, the magnitude of the association among these three characteristics is bound to be not that high because they each tend to draw on different psychological strengths. For example, in terms of the Big Five model (John & Srivastava, 1999), compassionate individuals are likely to be agreeable but not necessarily open to experience. Conversely, individuals who are tolerant and insightful are likely to be open to experiences but not necessarily agreeable. The possibility that the cognitive, reflective, and affective dimensions of wisdom might be only loosely federated is important to our argument concerning the relationship between religion and wisdom because it raises the possibility that there may be more than one type of personal wisdom and more than one way of obtaining a high score on a multidimensional measure of the construct. In other words, although it is unlikely that someone would obtain a high score on Ardel's three-dimensional wisdom scale by scoring high on just one of the dimensions, it is quite possible that he or she could score very high on one of three dimensions and moderately on the other two. Yet, whether someone is very high on compassionate love and only moderate on tolerance of ambiguity and/or insight or vice versa is likely to have important practical implications for how they see the world and its dilemmas. In other

words, as an ideal type, the wise individual would be characterized by an equal amount of tolerance, self-understanding, and compassion, but in real life, it is more likely that individuals who approximate the wisdom ideal differ somewhat in the wisdom characteristics that they possess.

Wink and Helson (1997) argued for a differentiation between practical and transcendent wisdom precisely because of the fact that although wisdom as an ideal might ultimately involve exhibiting a number of personal strengths, the development of these characteristics takes time and, in the “here and now” reality of everyday life, individuals are often more developed in one aspect of functioning than another. To test that hypothesis, Wink and Helson used longitudinal data to investigate two measures of wisdom that were found to be only moderately intercorrelated and which shared some characteristics in common but differed on others. In particular, high scorers on measures of both practical and transcendent wisdom were characterized as insightful, autonomous, and complex in evaluation of self and others, but only practical wisdom was associated with social poise, empathy, and the enjoyment of mentorship, and only transcendent wisdom was associated with occupational creativity, flexibility, and intuition.

In sum, a review of contemporary wisdom research suggests the presence of not one but multiple variants of personal wisdom. The nature of these variants depends in part on assessment method (performance vs. self-report) but also reflects, we conjecture, differences in the psychological characteristics deemed necessary for an individual to be seen as wise. The stronger the construct’s emphasis on the cognitive aspects of wisdom, the more likely the wisdom measure is to be associated with personal growth, openness to experience, reflection, divergent thinking, and by extension, spiritual seeking – given the latter’s association with these personal characteristics. In contrast, a greater emphasis on compassionate love and sympathy is likely to result in wisdom that is characterized by life satisfaction, positive relations with others, conventionality, and by extension, church-based religious participation given the latter’s association with these characteristics.

### ***The Study Design and Measures***

The data for our research on the relations among church-based religious participation, spiritual seeking, and personal wisdom came from the Institute of Human Development (IHD) Longitudinal Study consisting of two samples (the Berkeley Guidance and Oakland Growth studies) that originated at the IHD at the University of California, Berkeley, in the 1920s. The data consist of a representative community sample of infants born in Berkeley (California) in 1928–1929 and of preadolescents (ages 10–12) selected from elementary schools in Oakland (California) in 1931 who were born in 1920–1921. Both cohorts were combined into a single IHD study in the 1960s (see Block, 1971; Clausen, 1993; Eichorn, 1981). The participants were studied intensively in *adolescence* ( $N = 319$ ) and

interviewed in-depth four times in adulthood: in *early adulthood* (age 30s; interview conducted in 1958–1959;  $N = 237$ ), *middle adulthood* (age 40s; 1970;  $N = 233$ ), *late middle adulthood* (age 50s/early 60s; 1982;  $N = 240$ ), and *late adulthood* (age 70s; 1997–2000;  $N = 184$ ). At each interview phase, the participants also completed self-administered questionnaires. For the purpose of this chapter, we will mostly focus on data from the last assessment conducted when the IHD participants were in their 70s where we have not only measures of wisdom but also a rich array of self-report measures of psychosocial functioning.

### ***Demographic Characteristics of the Sample in Late Adulthood***

Of the IHD participants who were interviewed in late adulthood, 53% were women and 47% were men; 36% were born in the early 1920s and 64% were born in the late 1920s. Fifty-nine percent of the participants (or their spouses) were upper middle-class professionals or executives, 19% were lower middle class, and 22% were working class. (Among the fathers of the IHD participants, 36% were upper or upper middle class, 32% were middle class, and 32% were working class.) All but six of the participants were white. The majority of the sample (73%) grew up in Protestant families, 16% grew up Catholic, 5% grew up in mixed religious (Protestant/Jewish) households, and 6% came from nonreligious families. At the latest assessment, 83% were still living in California, 71% were living with their spouse or partner, and the median household income was \$55,000.

### ***Personal Wisdom***

Our measure of personal wisdom was developed for the California Q Set (CAQ-set; Block, 1978), a procedure that requires judges to rate the personal functioning of an individual using a deck of 100 descriptors that are placed into nine categories based on how characteristic they are of the individual, as reflected in an in-depth personal interview. The procedure was developed by Jack Block to make in-depth interview data comparable both across individuals and across assessments. The CAQ-set items were designed to represent all important aspects of personality functioning, and their content reflects all the major themes found in the Big Five personality model including openness to experience, agreeableness, conscientiousness, emotional stability, and extroversion. In the IHD study, separate teams of two or four trained assessors used the CAQ-set to rate reliably the IHD participants in adolescence (senior high school) and four times in adulthood.

The *CAQ wisdom scale (CAQ-WS)* was developed in two steps. First, five experts (three wisdom and two CAQ experts) were asked to describe the personality profile of a prototypically wise individual using the 100 items of the CAQ-set. Personal wisdom was defined following Birren and Svensson (2005) as “a personal

trait expressed in good judgment based on life experience, the seeking of information, and complex evaluation of alternative courses of action or belief that includes the ability to transcend self-interest.” In sorting the 100 CAQ-set items, the experts were asked to keep in mind the need to produce a prototype that would differentiate wisdom from related constructs of creativity, intelligence, altruism, and openness to experience. While all five of these constructs overlap, only wisdom implies good judgment based on experience, reflection, acknowledgment of uncertainty, self-insight, concern for self and others, and, in general, a balance between competing interests. The inter-rater agreement among the expert raters was very high, and the expert raters also indicated that, in their opinion, there was a good match between the CAQ wisdom prototype and the provided definition of wisdom (average rating of 5.6 on a 7-point scale).

In the second step, the top items of the prototype (i.e., those that were placed in the extremely characteristic and quite characteristic categories, along with one reverse scored uncharacteristic item particularly relevant to wisdom) were combined into the CAQ wisdom scale (CAQ-WS). The 11 items split into two separate factors measuring intrapersonal and interpersonal aspects of wisdom. Items representative of the interpersonal dimension, listed in the order of their centrality to the wisdom prototype, were the following: “Is turned to for advice,” “Behaves in a sympathetic and considerate manner,” and “Is straightforward in dealing with others.” The intrapersonal dimension was anchored by the following items: “Is comfortable with uncertainty and complexity,” “Is introspective,” “Is philosophically minded,” and “Has wide interests.” The item “Is insightful” was characteristic of high scorers on both the inter- and intrapersonal factors of wisdom. In sum, the CAQ wisdom prototype includes the advice giving and the ability to adopt a complex and differentiated view of the self and others inherent in the Berlin Wisdom Paradigm (e.g., Baltes & Staudinger, 2000) and the three dimensions of Ardel’s wisdom model: cognitive (e.g., in comfortable with uncertainty), reflexive (e.g., is insightful), and affective (e.g., is sympathetic and considerate).

In our considered judgment, we believe that the CAQ-WS assesses key components of wisdom necessary for good judgment in dealing with difficult life situations because the composite items reflect the cognitive, reflective, and emotional dimensions typically associated with the construct. Importantly, the CAQ-WS constitutes a quasi-performance-based measure of personal wisdom, as the underlying CAQ ratings are based on in-depth personal interview data spanning all aspects of the interviewee’s life and, therefore, involve a judgment by expert assessors as to how well an individual has dealt with the demands of life, including those related to relationships with others, work, and physical and mental health. In making these judgments, the raters were likely to go beyond the interviewee’s self-report and look toward specific life outcomes and the way in which the participant constructed and evaluated his or her life narrative.

### ***Measures of Religiousness and Spiritual Seeking***

During the interview at age 70, the IHD participants were asked, in the context of the same in-depth interview from which we measured wisdom, to talk about the beliefs and values that guided their daily lives; whether and how frequently they went to church or engaged in non-church-based spiritual practices; which church they belonged to; how active they were in its activities; whether their frequency and level of involvement had changed over the preceding 10 years; whether they thought of themselves as religious; how they thought about the place of religion or the spiritual in their lives; whether they had any personally significant religious or spiritual experiences; and whether they believed in, and how they envisaged, life after death. These narratives were rated reliably on religiousness and spiritual seeking by two trained coders using a five-point scale (Dillon & Wink, 2007; Wink & Dillon, 2003). A high score on *religiousness* indicated that church-centered or institutionalized religious beliefs and practices played a central role in the respondent's life, denoted by belief in God, heaven, and prayer and/or frequent (once a week or more) attendance at a traditional place of worship. A high score on *spiritual seeking* indicated that non-church-centered or nontraditional religious beliefs and practices played a central role in the life of the individual. The person typically reported an awareness of a sense of connectedness with a sacred Other (e.g., God, a Higher Power, or nature) and engaged in spiritual practices on a regular basis (e.g., meditating, participating in experiential or spiritual groups, nature-centered rituals, and undertaking a shamanic journey). Forty-nine percent of the sample were rated as moderately or highly religious, and 27% were rated as moderately or highly spiritual. In support of the validity of the ratings, our composite rating of religiousness correlated higher with self-reported participation in organized religious activities (e.g., church attendance), and our rating of spirituality correlated more strongly with self-reported involvement in nonorganized religious activities (e.g., meditation).

### ***Disentangling the Relations Among Personal Wisdom, Religiousness, and Spiritual Seeking***

One of our study's major findings is that personal wisdom correlated positively with both religiousness and spirituality (Wink, 2011). We expected a connection between wisdom and spirituality because of their shared emphasis on openness to experience, insight, and personal growth. In retrospect, however, a positive relationship between our measure of wisdom and religiousness was also to be expected given that high scorers on the wisdom scale combined intra- and interpersonal interests. Further supporting this association between wisdom and other-orientation, personal wisdom, religiousness, and spirituality all correlated positively with self-reported generativity and involvement in community service



**Table 1** Relationships among religiousness, spirituality, personal wisdom, and psychosocial functioning in late adulthood

Psychosocial characteristics	Religiousness	Spirituality	Wisdom
<i>Common characteristics</i>			
Generativity/altruism	.26**	.24**	.42**
Agreeableness	.20*	.28*	.36**
Community service involvement	.34**	.18*	.17*
<i>Characteristics common to spirituality and wisdom only</i>			
Openness to experience	-.05	.25**	.16 <sup>a</sup>
Personal growth	.15	.33**	.28**
Ego development	.05	.26**	.17*
Authoritarianism	.42**	-.22**	-.16*
<i>Characteristics common to religiousness and wisdom only</i>			
Life satisfaction	.17*	.01	.27**
Positive relations with others	.33**	.15	.23**
<i>Unique characteristics</i>			
Satisfying relations with parents	-.08	.11	.28**
Stressful life events	.00	.32**	.09
Social norm-favoring	.26**	-.07	.06

*Note:* *N* ranges from a low of 116 to a high of 156 for all variables with the exception of satisfying relations with parents where *N* = 93. All measures of psychosocial functioning are self-report with the exception of ego development which was assessed by the sentence completion test (Loevinger, 1976) and measures of stressful life events and therapy which are based on coding of interview transcripts. Among the self-report measures, generativity/altruism was assessed with a subscale of the Loyola Generativity Scale (Dillon & Wink, 2004), agreeableness and openness to experience with the Big Five Inventory (John, Donahue, & Kuntle, 1991), person growth and positive relationships with others with Ryff's Scales of Psychological Well-being (see Heidrich & Ryff, 1993), community service involvement with Cantor's measure of life tasks (Harlow & Cantor, 1996), authoritarianism with Altemeyer's (1996) Right-Wing Authoritarianism Scale, life satisfaction with Satisfaction with Life Scale (Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985), and social norm functioning with Gough's (Gough & Bradley, 1996) California Psychological Inventory's V.2 (Norm-Favoring) Vector Scale

<sup>a</sup>*p* < .10; \**p* < .05; \*\**p* < .01, two-tailed

activities (see Table 1 for a summary of results). This means that high scorers on all of our study's three core constructs described themselves as altruistic and caring toward others and indicated that in their everyday lives they engaged in volunteer activities helping friends, neighbors, and community groups. This finding suggests that both personal wisdom and the willingness to acknowledge the presence of a transcendent being, irrespective of whether it involves traditional religiousness or a more individualized form of spirituality, help an individual to extend the boundaries of the self to encompass a concern for others.

Although an altruistic attitude is expected of highly religious individuals, the nature of the association between altruism and spiritual seeking has been subject to controversy with some scholars relating the rise of spiritual seeking to a self-absorbed narcissism (Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, & Tipton, 1985). Our research findings provide unequivocal support for an alternative view, however, namely, that caring for others is a vital by-product of self-realization (Wink, Dillon,

& Fay, 2005). While it is true that the altruism of religious individuals tends to focus on the needs of those in their more immediate circle and community, whereas that of spiritual seekers tends to be oriented to more global causes such as protecting the environment, the main thrust of our findings is that religiousness and spiritual seeking are positively related to concern for others. When we turn to include wisdom in this constellation, the positive relationship between generativity and personal wisdom reinforces the view that a balance between self-oriented and other-oriented interests is a central dimension of wisdom (Sternberg, 1998). Further highlighting the intertwining rather than the exclusivity of self- and other-orientation, we also found that our high scorers on personal wisdom, religiousness, and spirituality tended to describe themselves as agreeable, meaning that they were warm, helpful, cooperative, considerate of others, and forgiving.

### ***Personal Wisdom and Spirituality***

Given the association between spiritual seeking and personal autonomy and growth, it was not surprising to find that our interviewees who were both highly spiritual and wise displayed strong intrapsychic and cognitive interests and abilities. In particular, we found that highly spiritual and wise individuals shared a cognitive style marked by well-developed verbal and performance abilities and the tendency to evaluate self and others in a nuanced and complex way. They also showed openness, originality and curiosity, inventiveness and ingenuity, artistic interests, and insight. In older adulthood, both spiritual seeking and personal wisdom were associated with well-being from personal growth, indicating an interest in growth and self-development. Not surprisingly, given this constellation of characteristics, our highly spiritual and highly wise individuals scored low on authoritarianism and instead displayed tolerance of the rights of gays and feminists and of deviations from traditional moral conventions. In sum, wise and spiritual individuals demonstrate the ability to understand complex issues, are self-reflective and self-evaluative, and have a personality structure that is marked by an emphasis on adaptation or growth as opposed to adjustment.

### ***Personal Wisdom and Religiousness***

Most notably, our highly religious and highly wise interviewees showed high levels of life satisfaction and mental health. Although the association between religiousness and life satisfaction is well established (Koenig, McCullough, & Larson, 2001), the link between personal wisdom and life satisfaction is subject to debate. On the one hand, using primarily self-report measures in American samples, Ardel (1997, 2003) has consistently found a positive relationship between wisdom and life satisfaction. On the other hand, when personal or general wisdom is assessed

with a performance-based measure, the findings show that it is unrelated to life satisfaction or positive affect (Kunzmann & Baltes, 2003; Mickler & Staudinger, 2008). Although this research used only German samples, Wink and Helson (1997) reported a similar lack of association between life satisfaction and both practical and transcendent in an American longitudinal sample. This difference in findings may reflect the degree to which the wisdom measure is saturated with its affective or interpersonal dimensions. Because both Ardel's 3D wisdom scale and the CAQ wisdom scale emphasize the importance of sympathetic and considerate relations with others, these personal wisdom measures may show a stronger relation with positive affect, such as captured by life satisfaction, than performance and cognitive-learning measures based on scoring responses to difficult life problems that do not place an analogous stress on the interpersonal aspect of wisdom.

Second, we also found that wise and religious individuals derived well-being from positive relations with others and had large social networks. Although, as noted earlier, personal wisdom, religiousness, and spiritual seeking were each related to warmth in relations with others (agreeableness), and to altruism or generativity, for spiritual seekers, these attributes did not extend to an emphasis on closeness with others. Our study's spiritual interviewees were not aloof or isolated from others, but unlike our religious interviewees, they did not place a special emphasis on maintaining close interpersonal ties.

The positive association of wisdom with religiousness, life satisfaction, and positive relations with others confirms its link with maturity based on adjustment rather than growth. The fact that personal wisdom was related to well-being from growth, closeness to others, and life satisfaction suggests, however, that it straddles both types of maturity. As will be suggested through our discussion of the two case studies, this may be the case because individuals can score high on the CAQ wisdom scale by having a comparatively higher score on the intrapersonal than the interpersonal wisdom dimension, or vice versa.

### ***Whither Adversity?***

The popular image of wisdom as something that grows from adversity through a journey of individuation is well exemplified by Herman Hesse's (1971) novel *Siddhartha*. It describes a young man who abandons the world of privilege and wealth to live the life of a secluded contemplative monk, only to return to the outside world as a wise ferryman. Interestingly, in our research, we found that this view of the development of wisdom applied to spiritual seekers but not to those high in personal wisdom. Our study's spiritual seekers, most of whom were women, tended as adolescents to be open to experience and complex in their evaluation of the world and in early adulthood were likely to have experienced stressful life events (Wink & Dillon, 2002). Yet, we found no evidence of a relationship between personal wisdom in older adulthood and the experience of stressful life events in the first part of adulthood.

There was, however, a positive relation between personal wisdom in their 70s and a satisfying adolescent relationship with parents (as assessed through observer ratings of interviews conducted with the study participants when they were in still in high school, ages 16–18). It appears, therefore, that personal wisdom characterizes individuals whose early positive relationships with parents might have allowed them to successfully negotiate the developmental tasks (e.g., industry, identity, intimacy) outlined in Erikson's (1950) epigenetic models. A successful negotiation of these tasks may, in turn, contribute to a sense of ego integrity in older age, a capacity that Erikson associated with wisdom. Further debunking the idea that wisdom is the product of personal suffering, we found that personal wisdom, but not religiousness or spiritual seeking, was negatively related to depression. This finding, when combined with that regarding life satisfaction, suggests that personal wisdom is associated with both the presence of positive affect and the absence of negative affect. Even though other research suggests a negative relationship between religiousness and depression (see Koenig et al., 2001), we did not find this to be the case. Instead, in our study, religiousness acted as a buffer against depression only among individuals who suffered some type of adversity such as poor physical health. Among individuals not affected by adversity, however, there was no difference between individuals who were religious, or spiritual, or neither.

In sum, our findings on wisdom, religiousness, and spirituality indicate that wisdom is not the province of any one particular religious or spiritual type. Wise individuals are found among those for whom church-centered religion is important and among those who carve a more individualized spiritual path. The personal growth dimensions of wisdom are more evident among spiritual seekers and the personal adjustment dimensions of wisdom are more typical of church-oriented religious individuals.

### ***Personal Wisdom in Context: Two Case Studies***

We selected the cases of Kathleen Ryan and Melissa White (both names are pseudonyms) based on the fact that in late adulthood both of them scored one standard deviation or above on the CAQ wisdom scale. But, whereas Kathleen had a high score on religiousness, Melissa had a high score on spiritual seeking; thus, they are good illustrative cases of how wisdom manifests in the lives of individuals whose religious/spiritual beliefs and practices vary.

#### **Kathleen Ryan**

Kathleen was the third born in a family of five children. The family was consistently rated by the IHD staff as a model of psychological adjustment, a cohesive group “with circumscribed standards of morality, behavior, and interests.” Richard, the father who worked as a vice president for sales at a San Francisco company, spent

weekends with the children frequently playing the guitar and singing flamenco. Grace, the mother, played the piano. Her social life centered on the family and they were described as outstanding in doing things together: they went to the opera, skated, and spent winter weekends skiing in Sun Valley. The parents were perceived as thoroughly enjoying the children and letting them know it. The family was Catholic and they went to church every Sunday. Deeply religious, Richard and Grace also sent the children to Catholic schools for many years because they felt that public schools did not develop religious values in children.

At age 16, Kathleen was described as a nice looking, brown-haired, slender girl whose outstanding characteristic was her good manners. She was also rated as top in family adjustment and perceived as poised, even tempered, and reasonably generous but, at the same time, very determined. When interviewed at the IHD, Kathleen would always smile and invite the staff home exhibiting “a typical private school culture pattern.” Although educated primarily in private schools, Kathleen attended 9th and half of 10th grade at a public school in Berkeley where she was described by teachers as “pleasant, polite, well-mannered and evidently not used to our kind of school system.” More interested in social life than her schoolwork, Kathleen appeared to go through the motions of being attentive in class but was indifferent to her poor grades. Although not a leader, Kathleen was part of a clique and fit in well with her peers, charming them with her spontaneity and good sense of humor. She showed a strong interest in boys and, according to her mother, was likely to marry early because she frequently mentioned her desire to have a home and family. Within her seemingly harmonious family, however, Kathleen appeared to be somewhat of an outlier. Less athletically gifted, she had a hard time keeping up on the skiing slopes with her father and older sister. According to Richard, his daughter underwent a personality change around the age of 14; she began to keep thoughts more to herself and to become somewhat devious about getting her own way, and it was generally more difficult to know what was going on inside her.

After graduating from high school, Kathleen enrolled at a local state college but dropped out after 2 years of studies in order to take care of her sick mother. Shortly thereafter, she met and, after a brief courtship, married George Ryan, who was making a successful career in a well-established dental practice. It was only after leaving home that Kathleen was able to come to terms with her feelings of deep resentment toward her parents and her disappointments as a child. Kathleen’s full childhood story emerged over a period of 40 years, spanning four interviews. Kathleen described her father as a self-centered narcissist who was prone to fits of anger and moodiness, characteristics that he skillfully managed to hide behind a veneer of good cheer and sociability when interacting with strangers. The whole tone of the family would change and become tense when he returned home from work for dinner. According to Kathleen, her mother was more concerned about social propriety than the true welfare of her children. When as an adolescent Kathleen expressed an interest in becoming a nurse, her parents said that nurses were nothing and Grace called them “janitresses”; ballet lessons were out of the question because they made legs ugly, and swimming, an activity at which Kathleen excelled, was made difficult by Grace’s concern about germs in public swimming pools.

The first 20 years of Kathleen's married life were devoted to raising the couple's eight children, a task that she fully enjoyed. Although George was pleased to have a large family, the decision to have so many children was made by Kathleen herself despite being informed by her doctor after the birth of the sixth child that she would receive the Church's absolution for a hysterectomy. Kathleen found great fulfillment in motherhood. She enjoyed the individuality of each child and assigned her four boys and four girls individual tasks to promote responsibility. Kathleen felt that she learned from her children how to be more relaxed, shed prejudice, and become less critical. The Ryans were evenhanded parents and steered away from favoritism, an attitude that was partly the result of Kathleen's perception that she was the least favored child in her family. The evenhandedness continued well after the kids left home; for example, when one of their daughters asked for a "horrific" amount of money as a down payment for a home, Kathleen and George gave her the deposit but only after making sure that they could afford to give each of the remaining children the same amount.

When interviewed at age 48, Kathleen was described as a well-dressed, attractive woman reminiscent in her appearance of the actress Barbara Stanwyck. She struck the interviewer as an effective, mature woman who had a very cohesive set of ideas on child rearing. Kathleen was perceived as having a more enriched life than most of the study's participants as she enjoyed sports, friends, social events, and children. She was hardworking, organized, and productive and seemed genuinely satisfied with life. Once their youngest child became independent, Kathleen took painting classes at a junior college and went on to become an accomplished artist in the second half of her adult life. She maintained an active and happy life despite being diagnosed with breast cancer in her early 40s. Although treated with surgery and chemotherapy, the cancer spread to Kathleen's spine and heart muscle. When interviewed at age 70, she used an oxygen tank and relied on a morphine drip to deal with chronic pain. Despite her medical problems and the fact that she was only given days to live 2 years earlier, Kathleen was upbeat and showed no inclination to give up. She was realistic about her prognosis but saw no reason to renounce the limited activities she could engage in – painting on good days – and planning a trip with George to a nearby resort. She continued to derive joy and pride from her children and grandchildren and was delighted that one of her grandsons spontaneously cuddled up to her when she was confined to bed with no energy and devoid of hair, following a bout of radiation treatment. She described her life as limited but not unbearable; after all, she said, she had "nine little faces (those of her eight children and husband) to prop her up."

When Kathleen was asked, at age 70, to give an example of wisdom and how she acquired it, she responded that she gained wisdom by making mistakes, and through relationships with other people: "Communicating with other people is where you get wisdom, I think." She further associated wisdom with personal stability, a sense of humor, consideration, sensitivity, and compassion. Kathleen's association of wisdom with compassion reflected her lifelong commitment to Catholicism. Even though she was too weak to attend Mass, she received communion every week at home, and a strong belief in the afterlife helped her deal with the realization that,

given the severity of her illness, she did not have much time left to live. Kathleen described faith as affecting her whole life and said that she would be saying prayers while digging in the garden because her religion is “a living religion.” Throughout her adult life, she held a conservative view of Catholicism, emphasizing that “in the church you grow up with certain rules: The Catechism, the Ten Commandments, and all this.” Yet while a devout believer, she was also accepting of other religious views, stating, “I believe in God, I believe Jesus Christ came to this earth as the son of God. I believe it’s a true religion, but I do respect other people’s religion, regardless of what they are, I do respect it.”

Notwithstanding Kathleen’s deep commitment to Catholicism and its teachings, the two, perhaps best, examples of her practical wisdom are provided by instances where she deliberately digressed from church teaching. The first instance involved Kathleen’s son Peter who wanted to remarry after a divorce without having received an annulment. Although his father was strongly against the second marriage, Kathleen supported Peter’s desire, arguing that her son’s new relationship had restored his warm personality and humor that had gotten lost during the first marriage. Further, Kathleen thought that Peter’s new partner was very good with his children from the first marriage. Arguing that the annulment would perhaps eventually come through and that “God should be the ultimate judge of things,” Kathleen overrode her husband’s objection to the marriage. A similar disagreement occurred between Kathleen and George when they became aware in the early 1990s, a time when there was far less social acceptance of gays and lesbians than is the case today, that their oldest daughter Maya was lesbian. George could not accept his daughter’s sexuality and simply could not believe how this could have happened – especially because Maya had dated boys while in college. In contrast, Kathleen, who did not approve of homosexuality on religious grounds, adopted the attitude that “sometimes, things work out that way.” Further, she did not waiver from her steadfast belief that Maya was “just a fabulous person” and succeeded in convincing her husband and other children to accept Maya’s partner because she was such “a lovely girl.”

What made Kathleen’s judgment wise in both instances was her willingness to suspend deeply felt religious beliefs in favor of what she believed to be the specific circumstances confronting Peter and Maya. In doing so, she allowed her perception of what was good for the individual and for the individuals in their immediate circle (e.g., Peter’s children, Maya’s partner) to take priority over religious tenets and scruples. Lest one get the impression that Kathleen was a “pushover” when it came to her children, she, once again, was able to see the larger picture in another conflict situation and, once again, overrode her husband’s wishes, when she asked their eldest son to leave home in his 30s because his behavior had become disruptive to family life. Similarly, she departed from her tendency to not intervene in her adult children’s lives when she strongly advised one of her sons to leave what she perceived as a destructive romantic relationship. When asked about the source of her autonomy of judgment, Kathleen attributed it to insight developed as a result of her feelings of being an “outcast” in her family of origin. We have no direct evidence corroborating Kathleen’s perception that she suffered hardship growing

up during her childhood, and there is certainly no evidence that she suffered psychological stress as an adult, other than medical problems related to poor physical health. However, Kathleen's perception of herself as an outsider, and her feeling while growing up that she could not trust anybody, caused her to become self-reliant emotionally and most likely contributed to her wisdom, as well as helped her to avoid in adulthood the mental health problems that plagued her other siblings.

### **Melissa White**

Melissa, not unlike Kathleen, grew up in a high-status but conflict-ridden family that hid behind a facade of social conformity and politeness. Her father was moody and aggressive, and her mother was controlling, critical, and negating of Melissa's desire for privacy and independence. Melissa's younger brother dealt with family conflict by siding with his parents, leaving Melissa to be the family scapegoat. The family was not particularly religious, though Melissa attended a Presbyterian Sunday school regularly as a child. Desiring to escape the unpleasant family situation, Melissa married at a young age despite having serious misgivings about her future husband's emotional maturity. The marriage turned out badly, and when interviewed at age 30, Melissa, by then a mother of a boy and girl, was depressed and felt she had reached "rock bottom" in her life. Following the realization that she was beginning to treat her daughter disrespectfully just as her mother had mistreated her, Melissa entered psychotherapy and, after a long separation, divorced her husband. Following the divorce, Melissa, an accomplished potter, sold her work in local stores and galleries, qualified as an adult education teacher, and supplemented her income by teaching art classes to children and adults.

Melissa benefited considerably from psychotherapy. In particular, she developed insight into the passivity and lack of assertiveness that had contributed to her troubled interpersonal relationships. The IHD psychologist who interviewed her when she was in her early 40s described her as someone who is "almost excruciatingly honest and direct" and who refuses to let herself "off the hook" over emotionally difficult issues such as her relationship with her parents. Melissa herself said that, "Psychotherapy literally changed everything I'd ever thought. I had to rework and undo everything I'd ever learned." Although she occasionally went to religious services at various churches and had an affinity for the Unitarian Society, as early as 1959 (age 30), she confessed to having her own brand of religion. Further, as a socially reserved person, she saw churches as having little relevance to her spiritual yearnings, saying: "Churches seem irrelevant to [spirituality]. Religion is such a social thing. I mean all these churches [I have visited] – I really didn't think they had anything to do with spirituality."

By age 54, Melissa had found an outlet for her spiritual needs. She was a regular participant in two different meditation groups, an avid reader of Jungian psychology, and she embarked on Shamanic journeys. From her mid-40s onward, Melissa had developed the habit of writing down her dreams and treating them like a



“running commentary” on her life that tapped the Jungian archetypal forces within her psyche. These spiritual journeys led her to have out-of-body experiences, and she used these encounters as confirmations of some kind of life after death and of reincarnation. In addition to gaining spiritual growth, Melissa had also become more engaged in the outside world. She was active in a number of potters’ groups and supported several environmental organizations, including the Sierra Club, the Nature Conservancy, the Environment Defense Fund, and Save the Bay.

When interviewed at age 69, Melissa was retired and spending contented days on a 4-acre coastal property which, ironically, she had inherited from her parents. She had completed training that allowed her to be a senior peer counselor, a volunteer role to which she was highly committed. She liked “talking to people” and thus also enjoyed the peer-counseling-supervision discussion group she attended weekly, as well as a women’s group. Melissa also maintained close relations with her two adult children although these never attained the warmth that characterized Kathleen’s interactions with her children. In addition, she continued to get a lot of satisfaction from her pottery and garden work, square-dancing with friends, meditation, and financially supporting environmental causes. Mourning the recent death of a close friend who had helped her build a kiln, Melissa continued to experience his spiritual presence, and she continued to work on gaining a better understanding of the factors that diminished her ability to establish close intimacy in relationships with men.

When asked about wisdom, the 69-year-old Melissa responded by saying that her main goal in life was to become wiser. She associated wisdom with “coming to terms with my life, and figuring out what happened, and getting, and seeing how I feel. Getting a nurturing parent inside. Getting non-judgmental. Just figuring it out is wisdom to me.” The qualities she associated with being wise were: “Being non-dogmatic, and open-minded, and willing to look at everything and inquiring. Having an inquiring mind. I think that’s wisdom, and just paying attention.” Surprisingly, Melissa’s responses to questions about wisdom and personal growth tended to be somewhat cryptic, and indeed, her interview in late adulthood was much shorter than Kathleen’s. In the context of the IHD study, a short interview frequently indicated the presence of depression or other psychological problems. In the case of Melissa, however, our impression was that her laconic responses especially to questions dealing with personal growth reflected a belief that many of these issues were deeply experiential and, therefore, while easily comprehensible by a fellow initiate, inexplicable to the novice. For example, when asked whether she had any important spiritual experiences, Melissa responded: “Yea. Yeah once I did. After I had had quite a bit of therapy I was really considering leaving my husband when my kids were eight or ten maybe. I was really considering it, and let’s see, they were off somewhere, and my husband and I, I guess we just had sex, or something. And I was looking at him, and looking at him really with this question in my mind, like: ‘Is there anything here to deal with’, and I just saw like his whole head turn in a white light, and so I took it that that was my answer. He didn’t know he was doing anything different, but I really saw. It was sort of like the cover of a Carlos Castaneda book: A brilliant white light. So that was my answer. So I stayed.”

When asked by the somewhat puzzled interviewer about the meaning of the experience, Melissa gave an answer that failed to illuminate the matter further.

Compared to Kathleen Ryan's, Melissa White's wisdom appears to be that of Prospero as it focuses on deep, seemingly magical, mysteries of life. To use Eleanor Rosch's (2008) terminology, this approach to wisdom involves a desire to attain "the beginner's mind," or to develop a basic understanding of the order of things, not through an outer-directed striving to gain more knowledge and experiences but, rather, through an inner-directed path accessing a basic wisdom that preexists in everyone's mind. Thus, for example, when asked how she had changed over the years, Melissa commented: "Well I'm the same person, but I've just. It's like. It's like having, you know, a screen in front of your eyes that you could hardly see through. So I have to get this screen back, and back, and back, and after a while it's pretty far back, but you maybe you never get rid of it. I don't know." She voiced a similar idea in response to a question regarding the beliefs, values, and philosophies that guide her life: "I am not sure that I think in those terms usually. I guess I'm interested in finding out what's true versus illusions. I try not to be trapped in illusion. Well, what comes to mind is what Caroline Casey says about—I'm not sure I can quote her right—'Consider possibilities, believe nothing,' or something like that. Open mindedness is one. Well, I think to experience different points of views. I don't like for people to say, 'Well that couldn't be true.'"

As a result of her spiritual growth, Melissa was able to reconcile herself with her then deceased mother and father by gaining the insight that "maybe you choose your parents. So I can say that to you, in this philosophy anyway, that you set yourself these parameters, or these difficulties, and then see what you can do with them." Although the wisdom contained in this attitude can be expressed in many different ways, it nicely illustrates Erikson's (1950) idea that successful aging involves an acceptance of the inevitability of one's life as the only one that could have been lived. In Melissa's case, her seemingly paradoxical belief that one chooses one's parents exposed her deeply felt belief in the interconnectedness of all life and the concomitant notion that there is little place in life for accident about "who you meet, and what you're doing with them," a view that also reflected her belief in reincarnation.

We chose the cases of Kathleen and Melissa because they both scored well above our study's participants mean on the CAQ-set measure of wisdom and its interpersonal dimension assessing a sympathetic and straightforward attitude toward others with Melissa, not surprisingly, scoring higher than Kathleen on the intrapersonal dimensions reflecting wide and philosophical interests, comfort with uncertainty and complexity, and introspection. Yet, despite these similarities, their lives reflect an emphasis on different values, goals, and sources of well-being. Kathleen, as befits an individual whose approach to life centers on adjustment, emphasized in adulthood her close relations with children and husband and embraced traditional religiousness. Her way of being was clearly socially sanctioned for women of her generation. Her life story shows few signs of deep introspection or personal insights even though Kathleen was able to verbalize her disappointment with her parents only once she left home. In keeping with her

personal style, Kathleen's wisdom is practical and focused on solving these worldly problems confronting her family. In contrast, after embarking on the traditional role of homemaker, Melissa's life following her divorce centered on gaining personal insight and piercing Maya's veil in order to get in touch with a basic and atemporal reality or order of things captured by Eastern spiritual thought and practices. Although a caring mother, Melissa's life story is not focused on personal satisfaction from intimate relations with others. Rather, her well-being and her wisdom appear to be wedded to personal growth and understanding of life's mysteries. Despite these differences, we would like to argue that both Kathleen and Melissa exemplify wisdom in their lives with the understanding that their wisdom is one with a small *w* compared to the few true sages of our times.

## Conclusion

Our exploration of the relation of personal wisdom to religious and spiritual engagement points to the complexity of wisdom and further illustrates that both traditional forms of church participation and more individuated forms of spiritual seeking are two equally meaningful ways of being. If wisdom were a one-dimensional construct, we would not have been surprised to find a simple straightforward relation between it and either religiousness or spirituality. As we discussed, however, there was a positive association between wisdom and both religiousness and spiritual seeking, a finding that, in part, reflects the fact that personal wisdom encompasses multifaceted traits that are inclusive of both self- and other-directed interests. By the same token, the fact that personal wisdom is not the province of either the traditionally religious or of those who seek spiritual fulfillment in practices that are largely independent of institutionalized religion suggests that religiousness and spirituality can be seen in comparable terms and without the temptation to see one as superior to, or more dynamic than, the other. Clearly, religiousness and spiritual seeking tap into different dimensions and manifestations of wisdom. The personal wisdom of Kathleen, a committed church-centered Catholic, seems more in tune with that of Solomon and Polonius; she is able to make sound practical judgments that transcend a legalistic morality to see the larger good that is served by particular courses of action. Melissa, on the other hand, a highly spiritual woman, shows a wisdom that fits more with that exemplified by Prospero and Jaques. She combines irony and doubt with a deference to cosmic forces that nurture ambiguity rather than decisive clarity. Wisdom, however, is not interchangeable with, or reducible to, religiousness and spirituality. In particular, its relationship to a gamut of characteristics that are unique to personal wisdom and to those shared with both types of religious orientation suggests that personal wisdom needs to be understood on its own terms. Its developmental trajectory, substance, and implications for psychosocial functioning clearly deserve further study.

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# A Social Interpretation of Personal Wisdom

Ricca Edmondson

How different are the varieties of thinking about wisdom, and personal wisdom, that we encounter in everyday life? An ethnographic perspective on wisdom takes very seriously the daily remarks and behaviour that are part and parcel of living in different cultural environments. It aims to reconstruct ways in which wisdom and wise people are thought of in different social settings, searching within socially embedded discourses and ways of behaving in order to reconstruct the understandings they express. It sets the views and conduct of ordinary people at centre stage, prepared to learn from what they say and do in an effort to understand more about wisdom as a topic. Here, I explore interpretations of wise people that are current in the West of Ireland, where envisaging not only what wisdom involves but also what ‘a person’ is has a striking view of the world to convey: it tends to accentuate interpersonal transactions and encounters, in contrast to intrapersonal ones. This offers a processual account of wisdom that can be pieced together as a result of observing and interacting with the people in whose world it is important.

The resulting construal of wisdom may have parallels in other settings that also highlight the significance of behavioural practice in conveying meaning (for instance, Jewish and other religious discourses or some approaches to psychotherapy), though they may or may not be dominant interpretations in those settings and may run alongside other accounts of what wisdom is. In this more interpersonal, process-oriented discourse, distinctions between being counted as wise generally and being personally wise may narrow and take special form. This approach to wisdom thus complements accounts of personal wisdom in other cultures and other disciplines, which highlight capacities on the parts of wise people such as

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R. Edmondson (✉)

School of Political Science and Sociology, National University of Ireland, Galway, Ireland  
e-mail: [ricca.edmondson@nuigalway.ie](mailto:ricca.edmondson@nuigalway.ie)

‘knowledge about the self and one’s own life’ and ‘strategies of self-management’ (Mickler & Staudinger, 2008, p. 788) or self-actualisation or self-transcendence (Achenbaum & Orwoll, 1991; Beaumont, 2009).

In this chapter, then, I first point out that the history of discussing wisdom offers us a number of strikingly various portrayals of what wise people are like. This should discourage us from assuming that there is one single capacity, wisdom, which appears in a relatively invariant manner in all settings. Instead, wisdom may be a ‘range’ concept: there may be a family of types of wisdom which may share many interconnections but do not take the same form everywhere. I argue too that finding out more about at least some of these types of wisdom demands a combination of ethnographic and philosophical methods that can illuminate aspects of wisdom which are not easy to access simply by asking people about them. In particular, I focus on a form of wisdom that can be observed in the West of Ireland, one in which ‘personal’ wisdom is less distinct from general wisdom than may be the case elsewhere and in which actualising wisdom is a fundamentally social process. I suggest too that while this may be in some ways a culturally distinct form of wisdom, it can cast light on related forms elsewhere.

## Portrayals of Wise People

An extraordinary range of images of wise people can be found in the history of debate about wisdom, even if we confine ourselves to traditions influenced by Judaeo-Christian or Graeco-Roman traditions in Western thought. These images seem to convey very disparate messages about the people concerned, oscillating between expectations about engagement in politics or society as a condition of the possibility of being termed personally wise, personal wisdom defined in terms of behaviour among friends, or personal wisdom in terms of the individual’s innermost life. The figure of Solomon, said to have ruled the Hebrews in the tenth century B.C., offers an early, and still key, paradigm of wisdom; but the story recorded in I Kings 4 in around the sixth century B.C. (Clarke, 1973; Crenshaw, 2010) tells us little about what Solomon intended in his famous judgement. Instead it concentrates on what he *did*. Appallingly, he decreed that an infant claimed by each of two women as their own should be cut in half. In the event, this ‘decision’ was not what it seemed: it provoked the discovery of the infant’s true mother.<sup>1</sup> In contrast, the Graeco-Roman, humanist tradition of wisdom associated with Isocrates (436–338 B.C.) and Cicero (106–43 B.C.) does in part involve the question of what sort of characteristics a wise person should have – knowledge of human and divine affairs, for instance – as well as what such a person should do: act as an optimal citizen in the state. On this account, a wise person is marked by outstandingly beneficial contributions to public contexts where decisions need to be made. Such effective contributions to the political community depend on wide-ranging knowledge and experience but also

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<sup>1</sup> For a reconstruction of the inductive and enthymematic logic of argument implied here.



on a passionate commitment to the common good, on emotions schooled to virtue and on the eloquence needed for convincing others (Cicero, *On Duties*, I, 6 19; Isocrates, *Panegyricus* 48f; cf. Poulakos & Depew, 2004, pp. 58–59). One might be generally wise through being insightful and well informed, but, in this tradition, personally wise people acted as such in public. The public arena was the place in which one was a person.

The wisdom of Socrates (469–399 B.C.), a contemporary of Isocrates, involved a continuing critical self-interrogation, in concert with other members of the political community, aiming at ‘care for the soul’ but not aspiring to the title ‘wise’. This contrasts with what other schools of thought saw as a ‘sage’. The Epicureans, in the same period, envisaged an apolitical individual, able to throw off the negative and irrational habits of thought, emotion and action which make human beings unhappy, attaining almost godlike felicity – among a small circle of friends rather than society at large. But Desert Fathers such as Anthony the Great (c.251–356 A.D.) astonished others by the awe-inspiring vulnerability of their radical *retreat* from society as a precondition for personal wisdom. At once audacious and humble, they appeared ‘aloof and forbidding’, yet with ‘an extraordinary depth of compassion’ (Burton-Christie, 1993, p. 3). A contemporary, Jungian version comes closer to the expectation that intrapsychic (rather than interpersonal or social) processes are central to personal wisdom. It depicts wisdom as embodied by ‘a person who has come to know what is true for him or her, one who has been refined by the fires of suffering and achieved a modicum of peace’, who knows ‘one thing’ well but is ‘open still to growth, correction and change, and respectful of mystery’ (Hollis, 2001, p. 88).

In response to this great range and variety of thought, emotion, character and action, we might try to discern different categories into which images of wise people fall. Even traits recurrently attributed to them, such as knowledge of human affairs or tolerance, do not appear in all contexts or take on different meanings from one to another. Nor are all the components variously attributed to such figures compatible; some see religious belief, for example, as essential for personal wisdom, while others view it as undermining it. Hence, it seems almost impossible to construct a single image of ‘the’ personally wise individual. Instead, different traditions offer a range of images which imply different conceptions of what wisdom involves, whether directed towards others or towards oneself.

Bearing these reservations in mind, perceptions of wisdom and wise people might be mapped along a variety of axes. For the purposes of this chapter, and bearing in mind the range of possibilities just discussed, I shall highlight spectra between intrapersonal – inward-turning or psychocentric – accounts of wisdom at one end and interpersonal, outward-looking or community-directed versions at the other<sup>2</sup>; and between wisdom as an overall perfection (whether or not attainable by human beings) and wisdom as achievable in some aspects of a person’s behaviour,

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<sup>2</sup>Extra-personal, environment-oriented versions of wisdom are subsumed in the category ‘interpersonal’ for these purposes, though they are in need of separate attention.

or useful as a guide, for fallible beings who might neither term themselves wise nor be termed so in all respects by others. I derive these categories from perennial contrasts in the history of debate: first, between wisdom regarded as pertaining to individuals (where individuals may be envisaged as relatively self-contained), and wisdom seen as located in processes of communication and joint action; secondly, between wisdom as perfect – perhaps effectively unattainable – in senses associated with Plato or Kant, versus wisdom in the tradition of Isocrates and Cicero, who were interested in practices within the reach of real people, even if not attainable in the same degree by everyone. It will be the second in each pair which relates most closely to the West of Ireland.

Versions of wisdom located at different positions on the resulting chart offer different answers to questions such as how wisdom can be encouraged and supported or whether general and personal wisdom differ. They also entail different sets of expectations of what a wise person would be like, as well as how likely it is that we should ever encounter such an individual. Very stringent standards for wisdom entail that wise people are so rare that attempting to study them would be exceptionally challenging (Ardelt, 2004). But in any case, the examples to be examined here belong in that quadrant of the chart (II) in which wisdom is envisaged as a relatively outward-facing phenomenon, in principle at least partly within the reach of relatively imperfect people.

Remaining within this top right-hand quadrant, this chapter argues for paying ethnographic attention to accounts of wisdom and wise people offered in cultures, times and places in which wisdom is envisaged as playing some part in everyday life. It begins to traverse the rough ground of practices associated with wisdom, retracing what wise people are said to do, or wise processes they produce. Attending to the practice of everyday life allows us to take account of the fact that much that is vital to people's worlds of meaning is, for a range of reasons, not willingly or easily put into words, particularly not into clearly inter-translatable single words.<sup>3</sup> From an ethnographic viewpoint, understanding what people mean is partly dependent on seeing what they do; it does not expect people always to be able, or to wish, to give meticulous accounts of the precise imports of their daily activities. Many forms of behaviour (for instance, reassuring, flirting, speaking sincerely) would not only be undermined but actually transformed into other, more manipulative types of action if undertaken with conscious meta-reflection. Moreover, the complexes of attitudes and behaviour often referred to as 'practices' bring with them cascades of conduct whose components need not all be deliberately chosen (Warde, 2005). A teacher, say, may adopt habits of speech or dress that indicate attitudes to the vocation of teaching but that seem to follow 'naturally' from that role so that their very existence may be unknown to the person concerned. Thus, accounts of wisdom carried by

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<sup>3</sup> Even attempts to discuss wisdom explicitly may be multivalent and long drawn-out. Hollis (2001), for example, offers an account which may seem more familiar to contemporary readers than Solomonic or Ciceronian versions; nonetheless, he takes an entire book, founded on a lifetime of therapeutic practice and reflection, to begin to explicate his approach to wisdom.

particular traditions may be partly implicit, scattered among disparate pieces of behaviour that need to be connected: from neighbourly gestures to responses to strangers, everyday actions may imply or express criteria for wise behaviour. Accounts may also be partly explicit, to the extent that people are prepared to discuss them, though the terms in which they do so may still require translation.

In this chapter, I shall examine a succession of particular views of wise people, reconstructing conduct and remarks from the West of Ireland within their social context. This is a context with its own account not only of what wisdom is but also of *what being a person is*, and this too offers suggestions about how to scrutinise wise people and processes. I shall infer from contextual usages and also from ethnographic interviews with people who themselves have been identified as wise or insightful by at least some others – heightening the richness we can expect in what they say.<sup>4</sup>

If we begin in this uneven territory, attempting to explicate partly obscured indications of what people in specified social contexts treat as wisdom, it is a separate, and more clearly evaluative, undertaking to assert that these accounts possess validity in themselves. Asking people what they believe wisdom is, or observing what their behaviour implies about it, produces important evidence that should be taken seriously, but it is (partial) evidence about what wisdom may be considered to be in a given personal, political or cultural setting. It does not offer a form of direct access to what it ‘actually’ is.<sup>5</sup> I shall focus here on explicating commonalities between versions of ‘wisdom’ in the discourses at issue. It will be possible to highlight elements of these versions that appear compatible with other theories in other times and places, but I shall take a tentative approach to the ultimate status of the theories involved.

## Wise People and Everyday Life in the West of Ireland

Ethnography, as a diverse tradition of professional practice and analysis drawn upon by sociologists and anthropologists (Arensberg, 1937; Rock, 2001), revolves around evidence derived primarily from face-to-face fieldwork, though it usually draws on other data – material or documentary – as well. As Atkinson, Coffey, Delamont, Lofland, and Lofland (2001) point out, whatever else ethnography is

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<sup>4</sup> Ethnographic interviews take place within contexts which the interviewer is in the course of studying in depth, diachronically as well as synchronically, taking into account practices, habits, conventions which can shed light on meanings not expressed directly, where the interviewer is conscious that language is a social phenomenon and responds to what the other person says with this in mind.

<sup>5</sup> It would be possible, and in some ways instructive, to produce an ethnography of a group whose view of wisdom could be argued to be sentimental or even destructive, but this approach will not be pursued here. This is not intended to be a relativist account of wisdom: however. I support the account of sociological realism and social construction offered by Sayer (1999).

taken to entail, it essentially begins from close, in some sense, participatory evidence about what other people say and do. As far as wisdom is concerned, the purpose of this activity cannot be solely to collect surface accounts of novel customs, habits and social structures, important as these are, but crucially to excavate to deeper levels of meaning, borne out in the language and behaviour of people who see the world differently from oneself. This entails navigating levels of meaning production *beneath* those on which language is used intentionally as a daily tool.<sup>6</sup> Based on my own participant observation in the West of Ireland from the early 1990s onwards, in an area some 20 km west of the city of Galway, this section of the chapter will outline specificities of local interaction as they concern personhood in general, before approaching the way in which wise people may be envisaged in the larger West of Ireland.

My own immediate neighbours speak Irish (*Gaeilge*, sometimes termed Irish Gaelic), usually because they were raised speaking it and wish to continue doing so, but this was an area well known for its mastery of the language many decades ago, and people still come to live here either to study Irish or to participate in continuing to speak it. A poet from this road or 'village', Máirtín Ó Cadhain, wrote the scurrilous *Cré na Cille*, a play dealing with vituperations among the dead in a local graveyard, and a powerful attempt to render the specificity of this culture. Until 50 years ago, it was based on a 'semi-traditional' economy in which women spun wool from their sheep in the winter to make thread they would carry in hazel-rod baskets to the local weaver, then sew clothes for their families; money was used mainly for items such as shoes, tea or sugar. Subsistence farming did not make for an easy life; a neighbour said once, 'The happiest day of my life was when I threw away my spindle!' Many habits of mind and behaviour from this period persist, though this road is now also in some ways multicultural, with inhabitants from countries including the Netherlands, India, Germany, the USA and the UK as well as from non-Irish-speaking parts of Ireland.

At least in some respects, life in the West of Ireland as a whole offers an account of what it is to be a person that draws attention to *inter*personal, public phenomena. Being a wise person is expressed through, and based on expectations about, habits and practices relating to what being a person is. This requires us to set aside conventional expectations of 'internal' or 'subjective' as opposed to 'intersubjective' behaviour since such distinctions are blurred here. But it may direct us to ways of scrutinising aspects of what persons do which can be usefully employed in understanding *wise* persons.

The observations made here stem initially from participation in everyday settings, ranging from greeting people in the local shop to attending funerals. My analysis of such events is supported by students' and colleagues' work concerning

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<sup>6</sup>This develops analytical methods in the tradition of Alfred Schütz (1962), Berger and Luckmann (1966), Geertz (1973), Turner (1974), as well as J. L. Austin (1962) and Winch (1958), reconstructing what people mean from the gamut of what they say and do. See also Fuller (1988) and Moses and Knutsen (2007).

wisdom or intercultural (mis-)understandings, and by ethnographic interviews, as well as visual and documentary data. This material is analysed using, in part, techniques imported from linguistic philosophy, with the aim of reconstructing the informal reasoning underlying everyday communication or interaction. Usages that may seem puzzling to the newcomer – ‘xenisms’, from the incomer’s viewpoint – tend to offer themselves for interpretation first. In the West of Ireland these include practices in connection with problems or conflicts with implications for local conceptions of personhood. It may seem hard to understand, for example, why potential conflicts are frequently not dealt with in direct speech (a fact that has often been misinterpreted by foreigners as evasiveness). But it is possible to reconstruct patterns of behaviour, speech and silence to suggest that in effect neighbours take a longer-term view of personal intentions than can be expressed in direct encounters. In one case in County Galway known to me, a publican who owned a flock of sheep purloined some animals from a neighbouring farmer. The farmer did not raise the issue in so many words, instead successfully requesting a non-returnable ‘loan’ in the malefactor’s pub to the value of the sheep in question. Justice, this implies, is expressed in action more effectively than words, and it was important to achieve it in a way which did not jeopardise future relations between the two people concerned. To argue overtly about the matter would have introduced extraneous resentments into the case; the individuals in question would have had the fleeting satisfaction of expressing their feelings, but their capacities for future interaction might have been permanently injured.

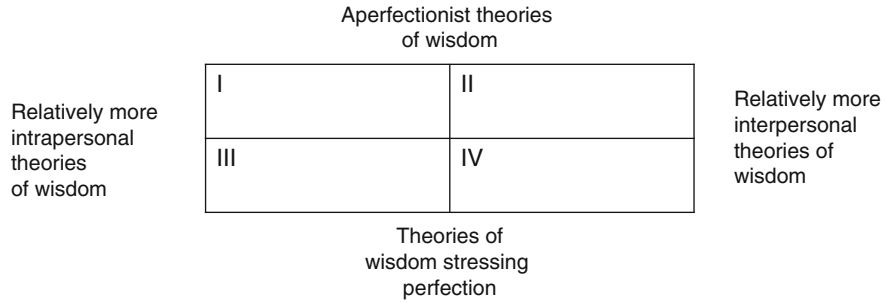
A superficially different case throws further light on this implication. When learning Irish, I once asked how to say, ‘I’m impressed!’ to a child, in admiration of her musical skill – to be told that it is impossible to make such a remark: ‘Irish isn’t a romantic language’. In other words, subjectivity plays a less public role here. Perhaps understandably, this type of meta-interpretation cannot readily be elicited from most ordinary inhabitants of any culture. It depends on combining ethnographic methods of participant observation, schooling oneself to behave and react as inhabitants do, with philosophical enquiries into meaning. Learning ‘how to go on’ in a cultural setting takes it that inhabitants’ concepts – of wisdom or anything else – are not ‘in their heads’ but to be discovered in their interaction (Wittgenstein, 1953/2001). Ethnographic methods restore their social aspects to ideas, which are often implicit in shared behavioural assumptions about appropriate action in particular circumstances; philosophical methods allow us to infer to patterns underlying these assumptions and to test out these inferences in our own conduct and future observations.

Thus, when new to this district, I possessed dogs which habitually trespassed onto my neighbour’s land. Speaking to a second person who lived in the village, I expressed my intention to visit my neighbour to apologise and to undertake to keep the animals under better control. To my surprise, this plan was greeted with obvious, but unformulated, disapproval. If we compare this case with the question of complimenting the musical child, it appears that in each, what is avoided is the explicit exposition of one’s own internal state as an unavowed means to causing another person to think, expect or feel something one designs them to think, expect

or feel. This would count here, it would seem, as manipulation: not manipulation in the cause of justice, as in the case of the farmer, but manipulation with the underhand purpose of trying to get others to think better of me than I deserved. This interpretation is based on an abductive inference (Peirce, 1903/1931–1958). If the account I have given of the status attributed to mental states in the West of Ireland is correct, my interlocutor's disapproval would follow as a matter of course. Under those circumstances, the only appropriate response on my part would have been actually to control the dogs (which I did). There was nothing that could immediately be done to extricate myself from embarrassment: I needed to accept that this was a longer-term problem than I would have preferred.

There is a dual point to be made here. First, since meaning is partially social, not exclusively dependent on individuals' views, it often needs to be elicited over time. Secondly, the culture of the West of Ireland is one in which the expression of subjective states of mind is simply less systematically lauded than it is in 'post-modern' cultures. The immediate expression of subjectivity is not automatically valued in itself, which is 'unromantic' in a strictly technical sense. Thus, for example, conversation with neighbours on the road is an interactive process; displaying the speaker's personal opinions counts as less important than offering remarks to which an interlocutor can respond. By and large, communication in the West of Ireland does not prioritise verbalising subjective states directly – which does not, of course, mean that concern for other people or criticism of their doings cannot be expressed effectively in other ways.

Phenomena like these contribute to a culture in which individual subjectivity is somewhat downplayed in comparison with conventions in more highly urbanised contemporary cultures – in which, possibly, it may be overplayed. Consonantly with this, everyday speech not only in the West but elsewhere in Ireland tends to be reluctant to isolate personal capacities. On the whole, it describes what people *do* rather than (perhaps presumptuously) identifying capacities that might be thought to underlie their activity. Thus, it is considered preferable to make the relatively reticent claim, 'They get on great together', rather than attempting what might be considered an overhasty diagnosis of a relationship: 'They are friends', 'They are in love', 'They co-operate effectively when serving together in a shop' or whatever the case may be. These locutions are situated within a communicative system which takes for granted that people know each other or can extrapolate from what is done by similar people in similar settings. Hearers are expected to make sense of what is said through schooled capacities to judge the context in question. This approach is also in a sense empirical, taking note of what speakers can see or have experienced than what they may speculate to be 'behind' others' behaviour in a psychological sense. To this extent, it is also relatively non-judgemental. (In Hibernian English – the type of English used in Ireland, which is influenced by Irish usages – this is 'slow' to judge: from the Irish 'mall', covering both slow in speed and reluctance. This is itself an instance of the behaviourist approach to personal description described here.) On the whole, this form of communication avoids the more



**Fig. 1** Locating theories of wisdom

reifying aspects of language relating to skills and capacities.<sup>7</sup> In this sense, personal conduct is interpreted as ‘social’, not in the political sense used by Cicero, but in the location of personal behaviour in its impact among others. A neighbour then in her 80s said, ‘Why shouldn’t I go to heaven? I’ve never quarrelled with my neighbours’. Her spiritual state, so to speak, was located in her relations with other people<sup>8</sup> rather than in primarily subjective or propositional attitudes.

It seems consonant with this interpretation that accounts of wise people offered in the West of Ireland tend to refer first and foremost to what people could do and did for others, rather than to more ‘internal’ characteristics. The cases traced in this chapter, consequently, fit into the top right-hand quadrant of Fig. 1 above: they do not focus on ideas about wisdom that presuppose (near-)perfection on the part of the person concerned, and they highlight interpersonal rather than internal or subjective capacities. In the case of Sean Murphy, a farmer from North Connemara, long after his death people recalled the ways he solved problems by bringing other people to take fresh approaches to them.<sup>9</sup> It is true that he had an attractive personality: his

<sup>7</sup> When asked on a radio show if she could change a plug, a caller said, ‘I’d give it a go’ (RTE 1, Joe Duffy Show, 8.10.2010). She expressed willingness to attempt an activity, rather than laying claim to the possession of a skill. A listener to this interchange wishing to have a plug rewired could infer that it was safe to entrust the task to this caller; but the caller insisted on referring to what she *might do*, rather than a capacity she *possessed*. On the contrary, her response, tactfully but firmly, avoided laying claim to any such thing. Simultaneously, she converted a technical question to a social one. Being able to convey a degree of tentativeness, modesty or humour is part of the sociality involved in such conversations. Significantly, it underlines the importance of attending to what happens between people, over and above features attaching only to individuals.

<sup>8</sup> The location of at least some personal characteristics in public, interpersonal behaviour suggests parallels with the contemporary translation of *Luke 17:21* by some interpreters to read ‘the kingdom of heaven is among you’ rather than ‘within you’. Similarly, the term ‘persona’ in Latin and Greek refers to public aspects of the person. This underlines the fact that the details and implications of distinctions between private and public, or subjective and intersubjective, in different cultural settings cannot be taken for granted.

<sup>9</sup> These details are taken, with thanks, from the account collected by Elaine McCaffrey in 2003. The protagonist’s name has been changed here at the request of relatives. See also Edmondson (2005).

behaviour to others was both ‘jolly’ and ‘straight down the line’. Like others identified as wise in this context, he was a narrator of stories; he would call often at others’ houses for conversation. ‘People wanted to listen to him’. He dealt with conflicts from the points of view of all participants, still keeping sight of what was right and getting a ‘dig’ in to that effect. In a case involving a neighbour who was angry with his son, Sean merely asked him what he had done to cause his son to lie to him. It took the neighbour a long while to realise that his own strictness had partly caused his son’s conduct. Sean’s wisdom seems to have consisted in supplying the spur for the neighbour to progress in eventually changing his behaviour (cf. Edmondson, 2005).

In this interpretive setting, to behave in a certain way does not show that one possesses (internal) capacities for wisdom, it *constitutes* being wise. Similarly, Tim O’Flaherty in South Connemara was described as wise because of what he could spur others to do. His use of proverbs was both diagnostic and effective: ‘The proverb would lay things out for you in a way that made you think about them, think what you would do in the future’ (cf. Edmondson, 2009). In an ethnographic interview, his son-in-law described how wise people communicate.<sup>10</sup>

People don’t like to be told what to do. And that’s not advice really, that’s more a command or an order. It’s too direct and it’s a bit intimidating.

What they would usually describe is somebody else up the road that had a similar problem. The idea really is to have the person themselves arrive at the solution, or at least to have new thought on the solution, so that the conversation revolves around the person with the problem explaining the problem and being teased about it and going through it. You don’t suggest the answer really but the question brings out an answer or brings out an option that the person wouldn’t see on their own.

Wisdom in this account resides not in the superiority of wise individuals but in what happens between them and others, as well as in what they bring others to do.

## Recognising Wise People

The instances of wise people discussed here point to what they do: and what they do seems centrally to enable *others* to act. Their own contributions to wisdom form parts of interpersonal *processes* that must be completed by others, who for their parts may or may not revise their predicaments appropriately. ‘Then they would choose what was best, or they wouldn’t always choose the right option but they would at least have had an opportunity’ (interview, 20.11.2010). Personal wisdom, in this interpretation, might refer less to wisdom in dealings with oneself than to the ability to bring vividly to light capacities for change in another person: to the personal nature of one’s investment in others.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Interview with Charlie Lennon (20 November 2010).

<sup>11</sup> In a different discourse, Petrarch seems to have seen Cicero as *personally* uniting eloquence and virtue, in comparison with Aristotle, better at expounding virtue than at urging its cultivation: Cicero could make people want to act well (Grant, 1960, p. 27).



This may seem disappointing in comparison with expectations of wise personhood like those voiced by one contributor to a recent Internet discussion: ‘the outward expression of inner being, of a state of mature, conscious inner being’.<sup>12</sup> From a different point of view, the philosopher John Kekes connects wisdom with ‘good judgment’ brought by someone ‘to bear on his actions’ – his *own* actions, which are not conspicuously engaged with in these Irish examples (1983, p. 277). ‘Self-wisdom’ seems relatively low key in this particular version. In the ethnographic interview referred to above, the speaker was asked to comment on this concept. He says,

It’s a strange thing, but sometimes you start with a problem, I may have some problem in my head, and I’d leave it a day or two. And then I’d have a word with Síle [his wife], and she’d say, maybe, ‘Well why don’t you do this?’ or ‘Did you think of that?’ – instantly, like, and I’d say, ‘Well no, I never thought of that actually, it’s very simple but it never occurred to me’. In many ways . . . you’re tempted to ignore very obvious solutions that are close by.

This speaker explicitly resists the view that personal wisdom is a matter of competence in conducting one’s own affairs. Wise people themselves ‘have their own problems, and they just try and deal with them’ like others. In this particular discourse, self-wisdom seems to appear when wise individuals reverse the roles allotted to them: they themselves become listeners to others, responding to ‘digs’ from those around them.

Kekes remarks that ‘Wisdom ought also to show in the man who has it’ (1983, p. 281). But this does not mean there has always been agreement on who is a wise person. Showing wisdom, in discursive settings stressing interpersonal behaviour, may depend on complex stages of interaction. What wise people described in the West of Ireland are ‘like’ as people may possibly be connected to their wisdom, but not necessarily in such a way as to make them immediately identifiable as wise. Sean Murphy was well known for his warmth, his hospitality and his facility for recitations; these underline his membership of public life in the context of Irish celebrations, to which participants were traditionally expected to contribute actively. But someone encountering him on his way home from the pub after a convivial evening might not have identified him immediately as a wise man.

In the case of Tim O’Flaherty, not everyone asked to recall him describes him as a wise person. This is not intended to suggest that traits of personality or character are not associated with this perception of wisdom. It does suggest that immediate recognition as wise, or *seeming* wise, may not be central to this model of wise personhood. It may be that recognising the wisdom of wise people is in part at least an achievement of witnesses, one which may itself require time to develop and apply and which may also require a degree of discernment on their own parts.

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<sup>12</sup>No reference is given here in order to protect the anonymity of the writer.

## Wise Interpersonal Processes in Contrasting Cultural Settings

So far, I have highlighted talk about wisdom located in a particular discourse within the particular social environment of the West of Ireland. Even if, in the contemporary world, this is by no means the only discourse current in relation to wisdom, related discursive practices may still be found in other social contexts.<sup>13</sup> The culture of the West of Ireland is not a complete outlier. There is space here only to point briefly to other locations where ways of behaving are at least sometimes stressed over and above statements and opinions. This allows us to trace other, possibly related approaches to the questions of who is expected to be a wise person and what wise people are expected characteristically to do. This may allow the development of this account of how ‘a-perfectionist’ forms of wisdom are thought to work, as well as highlighting some puzzles and surprises connected with the ways in which wise persons can be seen.

Problems in attributing wisdom to others and recognising wise people have been addressed in a number of cultural settings for a very long time. The ‘Seven Sages’ in Greece in the seventh to sixth centuries BC were revered for their capacities to contribute to social and political as well as natural-scientific questions; it is notable that there is no wholly agreed list of who these seven were. But Diogenes Laertius (flourished third century B.C.), in his *Lives and Doctrines of the Philosophers* (VII, 8; cf. I, 41/*Thales* I 27f), relates the story of a three-footed trophy or ‘tripod’ found in the sea by fishermen. The Oracle at Delphi instructed them to offer it to someone renowned for wisdom, and they first approached Thales himself. He refused it, sending it to another of the Sages, who, in turn, also passed it on. Versions of this tale differ, but all stress the part about passing on the acknowledgement of wisdom to another person rather than attributing wisdom to oneself. In one of the versions recounted by Diogenes Laertius, the last Sage to receive the tripod simply declared that no one was wiser than Apollo and instructed the trophy to be carried to Delphi.

This story can be interpreted in a number of ways. If it conveys that no human being can be regarded as wise in the sense that gods are wise, it remains ambiguous whether the tale is supporting a ‘perfectionist’ account of wisdom, in effect confining wisdom to the gods, or simply suggesting that, among imperfect human beings, it is pointless to try to decide who is wisest. It might merely be held to link wisdom with modesty. But it might be read to indicate that wisdom, at any rate among humans, is not something which can properly be attributed to a single individual, or not in its entirety. Here too, the suggestion may be that human wisdom takes place in the interpersonal space *between* a number of people rather than in what one or other of them does.

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<sup>13</sup> Most cultural environments today have become hospitable to a variety of public discourses and cannot be characterised in terms of unitary communicative forms. In the West of Ireland, for example, it may be possible to elicit accounts of wisdom associated with relatively recent religious interpretations of the world such as those associated with the work of the late John O’Donohue (1999).

## Personal Wisdom in Interpersonal Space

Searching for more insight into processual discourses about wisdom, we shall move on to a cultural setting in which questions about wisdom have been perennially raised and one in which both practice and the *idea* of practice are to the fore: Judaism (Klingenstein, 1996). For reasons of space, I cannot explore this setting in detail but shall concentrate on excerpts from an ethnographic interview with a London rabbi, Rabbi Lionel Blue, treating him in some respects as a paradigmatic case. On the one hand, this speaker is prepared to locate wisdom in what goes on among people. On the other, he certainly adverts to the need for people to ‘understand themselves’ and ‘evaluate their own experience’. However, it is unclear if he thinks this a component of personal wisdom as such rather than a sensible necessity for getting through life on anyone’s part.

Although Rabbi Blue is widely regarded as personally wise, he does not present himself as possessing orderly achievements in this regard, such that onlookers could at once identify him as a wise person. On the contrary, his autobiography (2005), rehearsing labyrinthine predicaments on its author’s part in remorseless detail, pointedly undermines any such simplistic attributions. We may make sense of this if the personal wisdom attributed to him resides in the ways he responds to and deals with others, supporting or developing their capacities to feel at home with life – at the same time as offering responses that may take them aback in relation to particular issues.

Holliday and Chandler (1986) comment on ‘the paradoxical, and often ironic, essence of wisdom’ (p. 12). If both people and practices are important to understanding wisdom in the Judaic tradition, this does not mean that it is possible simply to read off from either of them what to do, as some of Rabbi Blue’s references to practices in the following interview underline. The recipient of his examples must make an active effort to interpret them, which underscores the interactive nature of what they are intended to convey.

There was the question about whether people should stand up for the Shema. One group insisted upon sitting for it, meditating quietly upon it, and one group insisted on standing up and speaking it clearly out loud. The argument got so violent that they started throwing prayer books at each other! They had to find out which was right. So they went to see an old boy who was almost gaga and stuck away in a home somewhere. The first side explained their position. ‘Well, it could be’, he said, ‘but somehow I think it wasn’t quite like that in our day’. The side who wanted to declaim out loud explained their point of view. ‘No’, said the old boy. ‘I don’t think it was quite like that’. They said, ‘We have to know what the original tradition is, it’s urgent, because they’re throwing books at each other!’ ‘Yes!’ he said. ‘That was our tradition!’

Perhaps this story is intended to discourage us from reifying practice, significant as it is, or insight itself and to underline the fact that discerning what best to do is a continuing struggle. Even within a tradition in which practice is central, it is not always settled either what the practices should all be or how they should be interpreted: ‘The Talmud is one argument going on and on and on – with not many decisions!’ This is not necessarily a cause for despair. ‘The argument itself is

holy'; argument 'refines us' rather than providing us with definite conclusions. Long legal wrangles are most productive for offering 'throwaway remarks' which can help to move us on (all quotations in this paragraph come from one interview, on July 9, 2010). In the end, Rabbi Blue says about wisdom, 'It takes all sorts of people together, that's my aperçu on the whole thing!'

To pursue what is done by 'all sorts of people together', it would be important to explore further ethnographic fields in which it is emphasised that insights stem from interaction, for example, aspects of systems or narrative therapy (Edmondson, 2012; Edmondson, Pearce, & Woerner, 2009). Therapists do amass knowledge and understanding about how other people are likely to behave and how most effectively to respond to them (cf. Baltes & Staudinger, 2000; Wink & Helson, 1997). Yet this expertise, which mounts up from learning what sorts or reactions people might have or how they might respond to certain suggestions, is distinct from wisdom itself, which we may think of as developing in the course of therapeutic conversation (cf. Ferrari, 2003). This is not to claim that implicit concepts of wisdom are identical in the West of Ireland, the history of Judaism and psychotherapy. It merely points to the existence of an important *family* of concepts of wisdom, all of which stress wisdom as part of an interpersonal process among imperfect human beings.

In this chapter, I have examined a number of cultural settings in which wisdom can at least sometimes be regarded as involving a process or transaction. Personal wisdom, here, may most saliently involve the immediacy or integrity of relations to others or the vividness with which the process is brought to life. This is not to deny the significance of other discourses dealing with wisdom, which are notoriously carried out in different ways (Karelitz, Jarvin, & Sternberg, 2010). But it does suggest some further questions.

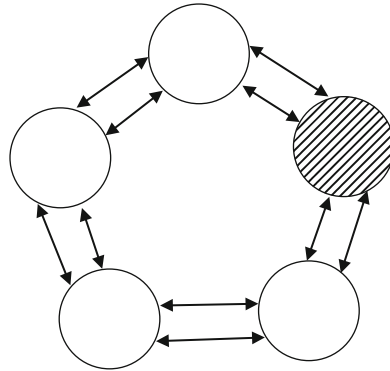
## The Role of Wise People in Wise Processes

The interviews and observations discussed here have highlighted aspects of some 'a-perfectionist' conceptions of wisdom that envisage wisdom as not in the first place 'internal' and see it as encountered in the real world. These features were derived from observations and conversations in their contexts of meaning<sup>14</sup>; commonalities between them should be regarded with caution but are striking nevertheless.

In different ways, these positions portray wise people as active and interactive, their most marked achievements being contributions to *processes* that *enable* others – to act differently, to alter perspective, to take a new viewpoint, to do something they formerly could not. This seems to point to what is most 'personal'

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<sup>14</sup> For reasons of space, in the later cases reported here it was not possible to supply details of these contexts. They are, however, more easily accessible to readers by other means.



**Fig. 2** Wisdom as residing in processes that evolve over time, often in conjunction with others

about their wisdom. It may take partially ethical form, as when it is someone's personal integrity that is especially enabling or convincing to others. Personal wisdom *activates* general wisdom, perhaps. But wise people, in this particular discursive presentation, do not resemble saintlike figures envisaged as patient or calm (hagiographies suggest that not all saints resemble this image either). Nor, to the extent that wise behaviour constitutes a contribution to the conduct of others, should wise people be expected to be behaving wisely all the time and in all respects. Moreover, processes involved in the recognition of wisdom by others who are not necessarily wise may be part of its operation and should be studied on their own account. Conversely, in this form of the phenomenon, it seems to be recognising wisdom in *others'* interventions and remarks that helps wise people to take decisions in relation to their own lives.

I have explicitly sought to explore understandings of wisdom which do not lay their first stress on features internal to the individual, but it has emerged that they claim more than that: they appear to see wisdom as residing in processes which evolve over time and which take place not just *between* individuals but often *in conjunction with others*. In Fig. 2 below, the *links* are as important as the individuals themselves. The wise person (shaded) enhances a process of which he or she forms part; this whole process needs to be studied in order for the instantiation of 'wisdom' to be grasped.

This version of how wisdom operates allows that some people behave more conducive to wise processes than others and are more effective within them – this is their personal wisdom. But it does not limit wisdom to properties of these individuals. This is not to deny the relevance of particular traits and capacities in this discourse; but it directs attention to other processes too. First, traits and activities involved in wise processes (such as friendliness or tolerance) might not always be those identifiable as 'wise' on their own; they can also be observed in cases which we might not term wise, whatever their other virtues. Conversely, individuals might be striking for characteristics such as stubbornness or authoritarianism which we might want to exclude from association with wisdom, yet they might behave wisely as the

outcome of an interactive process. Sean Murphy's neighbour might not have been wise, indeed this example suggests the contrary, but he was distressed enough about his relations with his son to shift his position in the end. The process involved in achieving the shift itself can be regarded as wise. Secondly, exploring process-dependent versions of wisdom suggests that we investigate what their social structures are expected to be, whether or not hierarchical, for instance. The interviewee in Connemara said, 'We're no wiser than anybody else, and it's foolish to think that we are . . . But we can, without having to be wise we can be very helpful to others . . .' People considered wise in these discursive settings do not seem to present themselves as superior to others (Gallagher & Edmondson, 2010).

Within this account of personal wisdom there are further implications for the question why people considered wise by most others (famously including Socrates) so often decline to accept this description. When they take part in social processes evolving over time, it must often be the case that they only *know* part of these processes. They may not know immediately what effects particular conversations have (as in the case of Sean Murphy and his neighbour), and especially in the case of longer-term developments they cannot be sure what parts they themselves have played. To the extent that their *personal* wisdom is envisaged as consisting in the vivid illumination of wise forms of conduct for others, they cannot be expected always to be aware of it.

This version of what wisdom is helps cast some light on the elusiveness sometimes attributed to it: the more people are involved in a wise process, the harder it may be to envisage and track. Sociality itself is difficult to describe univocally. Nonetheless, explicating this account of wisdom further might help to interpret connections often made between wisdom and 'the common good'. This heavily contested term was central to Cicero's political view of wisdom, and in the work of Sternberg (1998), it underlines the complexity of possible conflicts of interest between individuals or groups in situations needing wise mediation. Woerner (2010) points out that 'wise' debate may centre on 'matters of profound significance for human beings' rather than explicitly on 'the common good'. Woerner's suggestion can be read as directing us towards the *variety* of ways in which wise people are seen as contributing to what is done by others, especially given ethical and political aspects often attributed to these fields (see also Ardel, 2010; Baltes, Glück, & Kunzmann, 2002; Staudinger, 2001). Sean Murphy's remark to his neighbour was not an explicit contribution to the common good. But arguably, it enhances the common good if fathers can be brought to understand their sons and their own parts in influencing them; we might argue that 'the common good' can embrace conversations like this, even if the wise person concerned did not.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> It would be important to pursue further possible connections between this view of wisdom and democratic discourse. Distinctions and connections need also be explored between interactions attributed to individual 'minds' (Marcel 1954; Baltes & Staudiner, 1996; Staudinger, 1990; Staudinger and Bowen 2010) and those seen as predominantly social phenomena (Dittman-Kohli & Baltes, 1990; Edmondson, 2005; Meeks & Jeste, 2009).

There remains a plethora of questions for understanding processual interpretations of ‘wise people’. In Fig. 2, for example, the two-way and multitiered arrows are intended to point to the mutuality of the processes involved and the complexity of their composition. But, to use a term characteristic of the Berlin group, in this version of wisdom too, we need to know more about what is thought of as being ‘orchestrated’ and how. The ethnographic approach I have outlined suggests that Fig. 2 is defective at least in depicting individuals as imagined here with relatively clear-cut boundaries. Gallagher (2008) speaks of a ‘ripple effect’ in connection with the activities of wise older people in their communities; here, wisdom seems actually to *reside in* interaction itself, a social phenomenon as much as an interpersonal one. As the tale of the Seven Sages perhaps asks us to consider, we may sometimes believe that individuals are acting wisely (or unwisely) when this version of wisdom points instead to the social situations they jointly constitute. The personal wisdom attributed to key actors in these situations may derive from their impacts on their fellows, from the ethical integrity which convinces them to follow wise courses to the engagingness and ease with which they are helped towards what Ferrari, Peskin, Petro, and Weststrate (2010) term an understanding of the human condition.

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**Part III**  
**Self-Transcendent and Contemplative**  
**Wisdom**

# The Transpersonal in Personal Wisdom

Michael R. Levenson and Carolyn M. Aldwin

Wisdom has returned to psychology, as a topic of study at least, and several approaches have been advanced, some very general and perhaps somewhat vague, and others quite specific. Wisdom has been understood in a number of quite different ways each of which has some domain-specific validity. Indeed, “wisdom” has such a broad range of denotation that it is difficult to use the term in a general way. Let it suffice to say that it seems to be agreed that there is more than one kind of wisdom. It is not our purpose in this chapter to review these approaches, especially in view of their having been reviewed quite ably elsewhere (cf. Staudinger & Glück, 2011; Sternberg & Jordon, 2005). Rather, we wish to present a view that begins in the domain of “personal wisdom” and aims to use such wisdom as a method of self-development through self-transcendence. This view is consistent with Kaplan’s (1983) definition of development as “moving toward perfection.” It also partakes of McKee and Barber’s (1999) definition of wisdom as “seeing through illusion.” It is our position that the authoritative sources in this approach are to be found in the contemplative traditions of each of the world’s religions.

The strategy we have adopted is to extend Ardelt’s (2003) characterization of wisdom in terms of the cognitive, reflective, and affective domains to include the contemplative domain. Naturally, cognition, reflection, affect, and motivation are implicated in contemplative practice as indeed they are in all psychological processes. Also, contemplative practice takes many forms, as we shall see. Moreover, wisdom is not necessarily the product of an identifiable contemplative practice. A large literature has documented psychological growth arising from stressful life events (Aldwin, 2007), trauma (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004), and loss resulting from old age or illness (Tornstam, 1994). Although an increased inclination to

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M.R. Levenson (✉) • C.M. Aldwin  
Department of Human Development and Family Sciences, Oregon State University,  
Corvallis, OR, USA  
e-mail: [Rick.Levenson@oregonstate.edu](mailto:Rick.Levenson@oregonstate.edu); [Carolyn.Aldwin@oregonstate.edu](mailto:Carolyn.Aldwin@oregonstate.edu)

contemplation may underlie such growth, it may occur without formal contemplative practice.

Nowhere else than in the contemplative traditions, central to the world's religions, do we find human development, specifically adult development, distinguished quite so clearly from mere change. The contemplative traditions take the position that human development is teleological (cf. Overton, 2006). They are also concerned, not with the methodology of studying such change (except insofar as evidence of it can only be adequately assessed by one who has previously undergone such transformation), but rather concerned with methods of facilitating it. Indeed, this difference in intent sets the contemplative psychologies apart from the academic psychologies.

Insofar as modern clinical psychology is concerned, Jung (1933) recognized this, and his own analytic psychology is intended to be transformational from a contemplative perspective. Psychotherapies tend to be oriented to *adjustment*, to *exploration and insight into one's present psychological structure*, or to *transformation*. Contemporary "brief" therapies are of the first kind. They seek to resolve a specific problem. In this sense, they are analogous to medical therapies that seek to cure or control a specific disease. The second kind seeks to explore a self in distress and to interpret the distress in a way that offers insight and relief from the consequences of a lack of self-knowledge. An example is the existential psychology of Rollo May (1969, 1983). The third kind begins with self-knowledge but proceeds to transformation.

Contemplatives are specialists in development toward the transpersonal, expressed in practices (meditation, acts of generosity, truthful speech, avoidance of doing harm), qualities of mind (humility, openheartedness, gratitude, forgiveness, and equanimity, unselfish love, agility of thought unimpeded by rigid categories, lack of hatred), and impartial compassion and ethical behavior. These are not exhaustive but are certainly illustrative. In these practices, the contemplative moves toward perfection in the sense of direct experience and actions based on such experience. Meditation and other practices (and there are many) move the practitioner toward wisdom which can, in this context, be defined as *higher consciousness* which is a suitable translation of the Sanskrit term *prajna*. Every contemplative tradition employs practices that reduce the weight and increase the buoyancy of consciousness. Higher consciousness is "higher" because it has relatively few conditioned constraints. Such conditioned constraints are the heritage of genetics and culture, the "biopsychosocial" package that confines us in a state that restricts the range of awareness. Loosening these constraints makes transpersonal experience possible.

The region of transpersonal experience is "more than personal" (cf. Scotton, 1996), and, from the perspective of seeing through illusion, transpersonal experience begins to dissolve false distinctions that limit me to "my personal concerns." Put another way, "my personal concerns" move toward impartial, universal concerns.

Models of human development have typically emphasized either a lock-step process in which developmental stages are universal, teleological, invariant in

sequence, and more or less irreversible (e.g., Erikson, 1963) or, alternatively, a process of age-appropriate role transitions (e.g., Neugarten, Moore, & Lowe, 1968). Levenson and Crumpler (1996) offered an alternative “liberative” model of development that defined development as increasing freedom from the constraints of both biological and social determinism. This model of development is consistent with the practice of *mindfulness*, in both the contemplative psychologies noted above and in the contemporary mindfulness psychology presented by Langer (1989). Both are concerned with freedom from fixed ideas, automatic thinking and acting, and from the need to establish thickly walled categories. The most problematic category is the self, sitting squarely and stolidly in the center of experience. *Decentering* the self (cf. Kohlberg & Ryncarz, 1990) is the method of self-transcendence. I will elaborate on self-transcendence and the liberative model below. They should not be thought of as marginalizing the self. Indeed, the self “offstage” is stronger than the self “onstage” because it is freed from the pressures of the spotlight of self-consciousness.

Central to mindfulness, in whatever context it is presented, is *insight*. Insight is awakening. It is awakening us to our own habits of thinking and reacting. It is a nonjudgmental self-awareness that permits a “meta-experience,” an experience of how we experience. It is a “looking inward” that frees us to experience “the world,” beginning with ourselves, in new ways. For example, Langer, describing mindlessness and antidotes to it that can lead us to mindfulness, points out that we have been taught to think in terms of scarcity. There is never enough to go around; we are forever “competing for scarce resources.” An important insight in this context is that the ultimate resources are satisfaction and happiness which are not necessarily “scarce.” David Loy (1996) observed that unrefined human psychology is based on a sense of “lack,” ultimately the experience of a lack of a solid foundation for our own being. From his Buddhist perspective, transcendence, Loy argues, is a deconstruction of the “autonomy of *self-consciousness*” and its attendant “socially conditioned metaphysical system we know as everyday reality” (Loy, p. 103, 133). Possessions, achievements, and relationships do not, in themselves, produce happiness and equanimity, and their absence does not necessarily equal suffering.

Insight and wisdom presuppose a theory of the self. The theory of the self presented by Buddhism is generally thought to treat the self as basically without independent existence. It is a construct and clinging to that construct causes suffering. The Buddhist theory is strikingly similar to that of William James (1983, p. 279) delightful description of the empirical self. “*A man’s Me is the sum total of all that he CAN call his*, not only his body and his psychic powers, but his clothes and his house, his wife and children, his ancestors and friends, his reputation and works, his lands and horses, and yacht and bank-account.” His happiness waxes and wanes with the fortunes of these “possessions.” If I may be forgiven a slightly divergent observation, this theory of the empirical self can become transpersonal by the addition of three words after “bank account,” specifically “and everything else.” This will become more obvious as we proceed.

Other contemplative perspectives, including Vedanta, Sufism, and, arguably, Christian mysticism (cf. Pagels, 2003), refer to the presence of a “higher” self that is

the source of wisdom or higher consciousness. Access to this higher self is based on purification or *clarification* of the self. Helminski (1992, p. 13), writing from a Sufi perspective, argued that “the conscious mind is largely identified with the false self, which is the product of fear and selfishness.” He also remarked that “a spiritual teaching is to some extent a critique of personality and conventional social conditioning” (p. 43). From a Christian contemplative perspective, Keating (1999, p. 41) described self-transcendence as bringing oneself to nothing, that is, ceasing “to identify with the tyranny of our emotional programs for happiness and the limitations of our cultural conditioning.”

## The Vertical Turn

In all cases, insight requires work on the self or our concept of the self. “Higher consciousness” is a strong metaphor in that we can often see better from high places. We can see ourselves (and everything else) better from a “higher place” than the self, hence self-transcendence. From the viewpoint of the contemplative psychologies, we are trapped in ourselves. To use a metaphor from climbing, in the face of a “crux,” we must place ourselves uncompromisingly on the vertical dimension of experience that our biosocial conditioning discourages, just as we must ease our fear of heights in order to negotiate steep places. This is the function of contemplative psychologies. Their practice can lead to a different way of experiencing (Steinbock, 2007). The difference need not be dramatic in order to be effective. It can be a subtle change of perspective, a seeing through the illusion that there is “no other way.” Once we realize that we ourselves are not absolutes, we may find that we have removed the mote from our own eye, the mote that by its nature we don’t see, and we can then discover the obvious route. It is important to point out the importance of such a shift in the experience of the vertical or self-transcendent as they are experienced in the contemplative traditions.

The contemplative traditions obviously differ in their religious settings, and this can make them appear to be irreconcilably different in essence. I argue most emphatically that they are not as different as they appear to be. Indeed, if they were, they would not be potentially universal and thus would merely reflect the conflicting views of different religious cultures. This rather hopeless alternative would, if true, suggest probably lethally irreconcilable differences between the various human cultures. The argument presented here in this chapter is that there is a candidate for a universalizable theory of wisdom that is presented in the contemplative psychologies. It also appears in part in some contemporary theories of development.

Because of his deep understanding of multiple contemplative systems and his virtuosity as a linguist, Toshihiko Izutsu made an invaluable contribution to the study of comparative contemplative systems. Although a thorough appreciation of the work of Izutsu is beyond the scope of this chapter, he presented evidence for the fundamental unity of contemplative practice in systems that seem radically

different from each other. The basis of this unity is the unity of being itself. No author better describes the *doctrine* of the unity of being and makes clear the basis of the doctrine in *practice*. Izutsu's *Toward a Philosophy of Zen Buddhism* (1977), a collection of essays written over many years and very much influenced by his practice and study of Zen, and his *Creation and the Timeless Order of Things* (1994), representing a Sufi philosophy, support a unitive consciousness from what might appear to be the most disparate possible religious perspectives, as does his masterpiece *Sufism and Taoism* (1983).

Another valuable approach is presented by Sachiko Murata (2004) in her commentary on Liu Chih's "Islamic Neoconfucianism" in which she also reminds us that unity of being is fundamental to Taoism. It would appear that in the vertical domain, the mountain is wide at the bottom, permitting climbers to start from positions that are far apart and invisible to each other but gathering at a point at the summit. The same mountain, a unity, expresses itself in a multiplicity of "routes." Self-transcendence is consciousness "gaining elevation." The "climb" in this case is not a physical act but a psychospiritual one that nevertheless can certainly be aided by bodily action that is also an integral part of practice. The unity can only be experienced directly at or near the summit of the mountain. Even though Buddhism's concept of "emptiness" seems radically different from "oneness of being," it does not mean a nihilistic voidness which would render life meaningless. Rather, it is more correctly translated as "freedom" in the sense intended in the liberative approach and self-transcendence. In Japanese, the Chinese character that expresses Buddhist emptiness is also the character for air or sky.

## A Theory That Integrates Different Traditions

Curnow (1999) reported on a search for common aspects of the world's wisdom traditions. These traditions are situated in philosophical, religious, and psychological contexts. He acknowledged that there is more than one kind of wisdom. However, he placed greatest emphasis on the aspects of wisdom that are related to the transcendent or vertical qualities of experience. In the world's wisdom traditions, largely situated in the contemplative psychologies or, more properly, in exemplary practitioners, Curnow found four consistent themes that appeared to form the core features of wisdom. They are *self-knowledge*, *detachment*, *self-integration*, and *self-transcendence*. In thinking of wisdom as self-transcendence from a developmental viewpoint, Levenson, Jennings, Aldwin, and Shiraiishi (2005) theorized that these core features are developmental stages, in the order presented by Curnow (see above). Moreover, we regarded them as recursive, such that self-transcendence is not a final, once and for all outcome, but as leading to greater self-knowledge, detachment, self-integration, and self-transcendence. Thus, these stages are revisited repeatedly in a lifetime. The more frequently one "climbs the mountain," the greater is one's knowledge of it and the more firmly one is established at the higher level.

Self-transcendence is most certainly not self-disappearance. While it is true that in some contemplative practices, including deep meditative states, the self is not self-evident, this is equally true in sleep. In dreams, one's self is often not present to experience. Nevertheless, self returns to view, but, increasingly, consciousness does not experience by means of the self but is aware of the self as a medium of experience, not *the* source of experience. It is the most intimate medium of experience, but it is also increasingly blended with the rest of experience such that we recognize ourselves *as* experience. In some forms of meditation, mystical experience can emerge in which distinction is lost between self and other. The great Sufi poet, Jalaluddin Rumi, excelled in the description of such states (Ergin & Johnson, 2006). Self-transcendence is really self-renewal or self-refreshment. Looking around at those who have recently been publicly considered the most self-transcendent or illuminated among us, such as the Mother Theresa, Nelson Mandela, Ghandi, Martin Luther King, Tenzin Palmo, and Tenzin Gyatso (the Dalai Lama), one is impressed simultaneously by their strength of self and their selflessness.

The core features of wisdom presented by Curnow are not reducible to propositional knowledge. Thus, they are not primarily concerned with knowing or philosophical wisdom or with doing or practical wisdom but, rather, with *being*. In this connection, Curnow draws attention to the writings of Gabriel Marcel. Marcel's vision of transcendence "emphasizes a vertical rather than a horizontal going beyond, a transcendence toward a height" (Treanor, 2010, p. 5), ultimately toward the unattainable absolute being (Marcel, 1973). Thus, it is a mode of being, in contrast to "having." It is most certainly not an abstraction. For Marcel, it would appear that absolute being is the ultimate value and that self-transcendence is the only means of approaching this ultimate value. As Curnow observed, wisdom (as self-transcendence) is the path to happiness in its full sense which contributes to the happiness of all, including oneself. Wisdom, in this sense, is the only source of morality, and happiness is the result of fully moral being. This mode of being is different from utilitarian ethics which is an ethics of behavior calculated to sustain one's own satisfaction (cf. Keown, 2001). The latter, of course, involves consideration of the welfare of others but only insofar as that consideration is consistent with the priority of one's own satisfaction. It is also different from the moralism of the self-consciously pious, the merely prudent, or the culturally confined who are guided by fear.

## **The Axial Age, Self-Transcendence, and Expanding Circle Morality**

Templeton and Eccles (2008) have given recent expression to a value and a practice that arose in what Jaspers (1953) referred to as the Axial Age, the formative period of the world of the past two millennia. Jaspers was strongly influenced by the writings on Asian religion by Max Weber. Jaspers was a psychologist as well as a



historian and philosopher, and Armstrong (2006) has foregrounded and expanded upon the psychological revolution of the Axial Age that he described. Important figures in this revolution were Confucius, Plato, Socrates, Lao Tzu, Buddha, and others, including, of course, Moses and Jesus. The principal feature of the Axial Age is a universalism of values and morals. Armstrong also argued that this age saw the birth of the transcendence of self-interest and of empathy with others outside one's own community. To say the least, we continue to struggle with the implications of this revolution.

A number of useful contributions have been presented in a collection of papers entitled *Transcending Self-Interest: Psychological Explorations of the Quiet Ego* (Wayment & Bauer, 2008). In one of the most interesting of these contributions that is consistent with several others in this collection, Ardel (2008) argued that self-development, which can originate in the pursuit of self-enhancement, may lead to a recognition of the disquieting effects of setting the self apart. In mindfulness, the phenomenal self begins to dissolve. Her case studies indicated that this is indeed the case. Mindfulness, including self-awareness and openness to learning from experience, led to self-development as self-transcendence, a quieter ego, love, and concern for all. Openness and decreasing the volume of one's ego leaves room for inclusiveness.

Leary, Tipsord, and Tate (2008) refer to an "allo-inclusive identity." Such an identity includes not only other persons and cultures but the ecosystem. This is nothing short of the "deep ecology" articulated by Arne Naess in a very large body of writing (cf. Naess, 2008). Leary et al. found that scores on the Allo-Inclusive (AI) Identity Scale that related to people were negatively associated with power and that the AI Scale that related to the natural world was positively associated with environmental protection and being part of nature. High AI scores were related to greater compassion, ecological sensitivity, and spirituality but were not significantly related to self-direction, achievement, power, or hedonism. The authors regard this as a puzzle, but perhaps it is not so puzzling after all if we consider Ardel's argument that in self-seeking, we discover the limits of self-seeking.

Conn (1997) traced the dialectic of person and self in the history of philosophy, synthesized as self as the interior person. The phenomenal self is freed to merge with other interiorities in the insight that interiority is a world in itself. It is this interior world that is the concern of the transpersonal. However, such a free self is not a shrunken self but a strong self the strength of which is expressed in the striving for self-transcendence.

## **Expanding Moral Inclusiveness**

The theory of expanding circle morality (ECM, Templeton & Eccles, 2008) provides one point of access to this promise. A similar idea has occurred to many thinkers ancient and modern. The impartial compassion that is the hallmark of Mahayana Buddhism is an ancient case in point. An early example of ecological

ethics is found in the writing of Christopher Stone (1988/2010) who argued that we do have the right to stand legally for those who or which cannot speak for themselves. The key concerns are with values and our obligations to others. The victim of a disaster who expresses a lack of interest in the consequences of other catastrophes does not exhibit the self-transcendence that characterizes ECM. As suggested by Stone and others, ECM is not restricted to people. It is a universal morality that holds each of us responsible for the well-being of all others. It is the moral aspect of Indra's Net that, in the *Flower Ornament Sutra* (Cleary, 1993) is described as composed of mirrors, each of which reflects the entire universe and each other mirror as well (cf. Chang, 1971). The clear message that each particle represents the whole has direct moral implications. It is the same message is contained in the Christian scripture: "Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me" (adapted from translations of Matthew 25:40, New International Version, 2010, <http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Matthew+25%3A31-46&version=NIV>. Accessed December 17, 2010). The obverse or "other side" of this coin is expressed in the moral implication of the Sufi appraisal of the unity of being in which "Whatever I do, I do to myself" (Bayman, 2001, p. 92).

## Practice

If wisdom is a way of being rather than a possession, how is it cultivated? The contemplative traditions are centrally concerned with *practice*. Most of us are aware of meditation as a spiritual practice, and some have benefited from meditation as a therapeutic intervention. What is not so widely understood is the vast array of methods of meditation, on the one hand, and the remarkable similarity of the purposes of the methods. Meditation can be recitation of a mantram, with different names but identical methods across contemplative traditions (Easwaran, 2008). This may include attention to some aspect of the "environment" that is seamlessly integrated with our own bodies, such as: the breath, walking or running mindfully. Practice reminds us that *we are experience*. Meditation is whatever we do mindfully, including everything from washing the dishes to climbing mountains to caring for the hopelessly ill. Indeed, the proof of the cause (practice) is in the effect. It is especially crucial that we recognize that authentic practice, be it prayer of the heart, sitting Zazen, or contemplating the magic of the wilderness, arises from a sense of the sacred and, if the contemplatives are to be believed, strengthens that sense.

## The Place of Self-Transcendence in Human Development

What interest is served by self-transcendence? Habermas (1971) wrote of the growing domination of the scientific/technical and the communicative/organizational "knowledge constitutive interests" in the modern era. In Habermas' view,

these interests have grown at the expense of the “emancipator knowledge constitutive interest.” The latter clearly refers to human freedom, but the nature freedom is open to interpretation. Perhaps taking liberties with Habermas’ intent, Levenson and Crumpler (1996), as noted above, developed an alternative model of human development to the two predominant models called the “ontogenetic” and the “sociogenic.” The former emphasizes universal stages of human development that are predetermined. They are, to some degree, shaped by culture but cannot be eclipsed by sociocultural forces. They are based on a biological model of growth and differentiation and are thus deterministic “from the inside.” The sociogenic model is comprised of theories that posit sociocultural determinism. Obviously, structures must be in place that can process social forces but the latter are predominant. Perhaps the best known sociogenic theory is Neugarten, Moore, and Lowe (1968), which, in place of development, posits change through adaptation to new age-appropriate roles. Levenson and Crumpler take the position that development, in the form of decreasing social and biological determinism, is universally possible but widely variable in its attainment.

## **Authenticity: Wisdom as Self-Transcendence**

Psychologists are concerned with categories or domains of experience such as perception, motivation, cognition, affect, and, sometimes, consciousness itself. Each can be subdivided into more limited domains, but self-transcendence is based on the integration rather than the subdivision of psychological functions and, by virtue of such integration, the development of a real self that recognizes its limitation and strives to transcend itself. This is quite alien to Nietzsche’s monstrous and brutal “superman,” no doubt a product of Nietzsche’s advancing mental illness (cf. Bayman, 2001). As remarked earlier, self-transcendence is a psychospiritual weight loss strategy. It is a “lightening up” in the sense both of losing heaviness and being illuminated. It is transparency. The self-transcendent person has moved from childish simplicity through complexity to mature simplicity. Each step in this process is a transformational change (Overton, 2006).

The freedom to be one’s authentic self requires self-transcendence. It may appear at first that exemplars of self-transcendence, because they have relatively unconditioned experiences, are more similar to each other than are others who have not. That this is not the case is easily inferred from the logic of unconditioned experience. One whose responses are less conditioned, who is less at the mercy of established categories, is freer to respond appropriately to the circumstances that he/she confronts or creates. From this viewpoint, wise persons are free to express the individual differences called for by their unique circumstances and individual gifts. It is this ability to act in the appropriate way, not the conventional way, which expresses wisdom. Moving outside one’s self to experience the other’s reality is an expression of self-transcendence. These abilities – mindfulness and empathy – work together in the process of development.

## Seeing Through Illusion

McKee and Barber (1999) presented an insight into mature simplicity and transformational change. They regard stages of human psychospiritual development as processes of “seeing through illusion.” Theirs is a lifespan theory in that illusions are relevant to specific life stages. In normal childhood, such illusions are both inevitable and inevitably “seen through.” For example, few would dispute that a child’s ability to conserve quantity represents seeing through the illusion that shape necessarily affects quantity and that such a transformation is essential to normal cognitive development. Seeing through illusion can be criticized by those who do not wish to acknowledge a privileged insight into the nature of illusion (Baltes, personal communication, October 17, 2001). However, teleological theorizing that posits transformational change must specify a preferred outcome or set of outcomes (Overton, 2006).

McKee and Barber simply observed that seeing through illusion can happen throughout the lifespan, although it may be less probable in adulthood. Note that transformational psychological changes do not necessarily entail structural changes in the brain (Kohlberg, 1973; Overton, 2010). It is sometimes difficult to recognize illusions that can be “seen through” in adulthood. Consider the egocentric bias in the attribution of causes of behavior, especially in the cases of success or failure. Put simply and casually, “If I succeed, it is because I am gifted and/or conscientious; if you succeed, it is more likely because you were given unfair advantages. If I fail, it is because I was victimized by circumstance or treated unfairly; if you fail, it is because you lack ability and/or conscientiousness.”

The existence of this “self-serving bias” was introduced into social psychology by Miller and Ross (1975) and reviewed more recently by Suls, Lemos, and Stewart (2002), although recognition of this bias certainly antedates contemporary psychology. It is a good example for present purposes because seeing through it requires a measure of self-transcendence. Because this bias occurs at a later age than the failure to conserve volume, it is more nuanced. Indeed, it has been thought to be influenced by culture with it being less likely to occur in collectivist cultures (such as those of East Asia) than in individualist cultures such as the USA (Miller, 1984). However, it may be that only the justifications for bias differ between individualist and collectivist cultures. In the USA, the unfortunate are frequently deemed the authors of their bad fortune in their present lives, whereas in South and East Asia, misfortune (and good fortune) is often attributed to the workings of *karma* across lifetimes. These workings are impersonal in the sense that they are not necessarily the fault of the person immediately suffering the consequences nor the responsibility of the better positioned. This actually bodes worse for the unfortunate in Asian cultures than does the Western individualist bias. In the latter, at least the less fortunate can be “helped.” In any case, bias is bias, regardless of its justification, and blaming victims is a hallmark of the undeveloped human.

Ultimately, the self is a “curse” (Leary, 2004) when it colonizes consciousness, subordinating all other considerations to its own promotion. Self-promotion is self-deception and that is the great illusion to be “seen through.”

## Spiritual Evolution

In our paper on the liberative model of human development, Levenson and Crumpler (1996) posed the question “who needs adult development?” We then listed some of the more appalling recent human “achievements” which can be easily updated to include a thriving slave trade, seemingly interminable wars, failing economies resulting directly from a level of greed that would have embarrassed even the most ruthless robber barons of yesteryear, and accelerating ecocide, all of which are “viewed with grave concern” but continue unabated. The question can be reiterated and extended to include wisdom. Who needs it, what kind of wisdom would result in noticeable improvement in the human condition, and how do we attain it?

In a recent book entitled, *Spiritual Evolution: How We Are Wired for Faith, Hope and Love*, Vaillant (2008) presented a relentlessly optimistic interpretation of human evolution, in which he described three stages: the biological, the cultural, and, now, the human developmental stage. He correctly argued that cultural development is a function of human (individual) development. Where we differ is in the method. Vaillant (p. 41) states that “Evolution . . . began more than 200 million years ago when faithless, walnut-brained, untrusting, humorless, cold-blooded reptiles slowly evolved into warm-blooded, child-nurturing, faithful, hopeful, large-brained mammals capable of play, joy, attachment, and trust in their parents to care for them rather than do them for lunch.” He thus celebrates the loving, compassionate, hopeful, and fabulously intelligent humans into which we have evolved in contrast to our slimy, vicious, uncaring, and really stupid reptilian ancestors. Reptiles still exist despite our warm, loving efforts to drive many of their species to extinction. They have proved to be quite resilient. However, it is the fuzzy, flightless bipeds (us), not the nasty old reptiles, who commit mass murder and genocide in the name of the greater good or national defense, species genocide, and ecocide in the name of economic development. We are the ones who accept the widening chasm between the rich and the poor in our own communities and in the world as a whole. We are the ones who have deliberately developed the means to wipe out life on earth. Perhaps, as we once speculated, the roaches and ants would survive and perhaps some reptiles too.

We do not wish to be unkind to Professor Vaillant or to his thesis. Vaillant certainly acknowledged that we are far from perfect but he averred that we are on the road to continuous improvement, perhaps even to perfection, as Kaplan (1983) put it. As stated earlier, we differ with him on the question of method. Our ingeniously contrived imperfections contain the seed of potentially great achievements, in that both reflect the development of free choice through conscious

evolution. However, we must come to grips with our responsibility for the success or failure of this venture. That is the version of wisdom that we are advancing here. Central to this responsibility is a recognition of the irreducible meaning that pervades everything – the sacred. The word *irreducible* is critical here.

Vaillant is as cheerfully reductionistic as he is relentlessly optimistic. He reduced human and cultural development to brain development rather than acknowledging transactional processes (Overton, 2006). Vaillant acknowledged some of the spiritual virtuosi such as St. John of the Cross but presented their experiences as epiphenomena of brain processes. Vaillant appears unaware of the verticality in experience, that is, the real elevation of spirit that is experienced by contemplatives as mystical, illuminated, or “emptiness” and that result from climbing out of oneself. Real transpersonal experience arises from the activity of what some refer to as “nonlocal mind” (Dossey, 2008), Shunryu Suzuki (1970) as “Big Mind,” Vedantists as Atman, or as God by mystics of the Abrahamic traditions. Steinbock (2007, p. 115) made the critical point that “this vertical dimension of experience *has to be taken on its own terms* and not subordinated to how objects are given to us in perception, or evaluated according to philosophical narrow-mindedness, or accepted or rejected according to presuppositions of religious belief.” Another way of putting this is Overton’s caution against the adoption of “split meta-narratives” which are one-sided accounts of the “real” nature of experience, such as spiritual experience, which is “of course” exclusively to be explained by brain processes.

For Vaillant, our uneven but undeniable progress toward brilliant, hopeful, compassionate, loving, warm fuzziness is the product of nothing more or less than the evolution of brain systems. No mystery here at all. The Axial Age was an epiphenomenon of the evolution of brain structures. Brain science will be the ultimate *deus ex machina* that explains everything about experience. However, the problem with this faith was well stated by Ken Wilber who noted that “the brain is in the body and the body is in the mind” (Wilber, 2000, p. 179). I am not inclined to think that brain science will explain the meaning of our lives, individually or collectively. As far as I can tell, reductionistic science teaches us that we are meaningless products of an accidental universe. This sort of dogma, if proven true (which, as an unfalsifiable hypothesis, it cannot be), would leave us with the task of explaining why, if we are evolving toward the good, we are doing so or even why “the good” is any better than anything else. After all, other reproductively successful species, such as ants, roaches, rats, and mosquitoes, do not appear to be on this path.

## A Modest Hypothesis

We have a rather more parsimonious hypothesis than Vaillant’s and one that is consistent with data but also rather scarier. One aspect of human evolution is that it does appear to be decreasingly dependent on changes in biological structures. Recall Kohlberg’s (1973) realization that transformational psychological change can occur

after structural (biological) maturation is complete. Moreover, as Vaillant appears to acknowledge, human psychological – including moral – evolution seems to be accelerating. Unfortunately, our ability to innovate destructive technologies is also accelerating. Why do we have this control over our own destiny as a species? We cannot use the reductionistic model of gradual evolution to explain its contradiction.

It is not difficult to posit that we have taken (or been granted) control over our own evolution. We can get it right or wrong. Even at the level of brain structures, we must not forget that experience alters brain structures and what we pass down through the generations is our system of education which increasingly encourages knowledge, creativity, and openness to new ways of experiencing the universe. One possible result of such nongenetic inheritance is the increasing acceleration of our manipulative intelligence “for good or evil.” Another is an acceleration of self-knowledge through contemplative practice in its myriad forms and a corresponding reduction in self-centeredness. Meanwhile, deeply held hatreds and the accumulation of methods by which to make them lethal as well as accumulating sophistication in the manipulation of human consciousness are also accelerating.

We are accelerating evolution by nongenetic means that also affects the brains of those in succeeding generations. Such changes can be for good or ill and, I believe, so far have been for both. This is cultural evolution taking command. It is important to note that cultures are created by individuals in collective settings. The individual who sets out to “change the world” can actually do so. If such change is merely a matter of personal choice, we have little chance. If it is personal choice guided by the discernment that is the task of higher consciousness, we have a good chance.

Will compassion and altruism, species, and cultural preservation win out over mindless consumption, genocide, and ecocide? Wisdom as self-transcendence, as transmitted through the contemplative practices associated with all religions, is a light in what, in many ways, appears to be gathering darkness.

The great fourteenth century Tibetan Buddhist Nyingma teacher Longchenpa’s teachings on universal awareness have been summarized as “you are the eyes of the world” (Longchenpa, 2000), commemorated in the great stupa of Kathmandu. If our hypothesis is correct, we can open these “eyes” of wisdom, take in the view, and make choices of profound importance. As the coach of the leading team says near the end of a close game, “it’s our game to lose.” The winning playbook may be that of the contemplative psychologies with the “strategy” of transpersonal, self-transcendent wisdom.

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# The Grinch Who Stole Wisdom

Eleanor Rosch

Dr. Seuss is wise. *How the Grinch Stole Christmas* (Seuss, 1957) could serve as a parable for our time. It can also be seen as a roadmap for the development of contemplative wisdom. The abiding popularity of *How the Grinch Stole Christmas* additionally suggests that contemplative wisdom is more readily available to ordinary people, even children, than is normally thought. This matters because from the point of view of contemplatives in any of the world's philosophies or religions, people are confused about wisdom. The content of the nascent field of wisdom studies, they might say, is largely not wisdom at all but rather what it's like to live in a particular kind of prison cell, a well appointed cell perhaps, but not a place that makes possible either personal satisfaction or deep problem solving. I believe that what the contemplative traditions have to say is important; they offer a different orientation to what personal wisdom is, how to develop it, and how to use it in the world than is presently contained in either our popular culture or our sciences. In order to illustrate this I will examine, in some detail, one contemplative path within Buddhism. Buddhism is particularly useful in this respect because its practices are nontheistic and thus avoid many of the cultural landmines associated with the contemplative aspects of Western religions.

Why focus on the contemplative traditions? Our world is in deep trouble as is amply argued in Nicholas Maxwell's passionate chapter in this volume. This despite the fact that individual people can be well meaning and strive hard to do what they see as good and necessary at any given moment. They form bonds with each other, try to figure out causal relationships from the earliest age, make great efforts to support their families and nurture their children, help one another more than not, strive to get better at what they do, and look for meaning in their lives. Yet all such problem solving seems only to result in social "blowback" as crisis

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E. Rosch (✉)

Department of Psychology, University of California, Berkeley, CA, USA

e-mail: [rosch@berkeley.edu](mailto:rosch@berkeley.edu)

succeeds crisis. Is there another way to look at pressing issues besides advocating more of the same kind of problem solving? For this we need to step back and take a fresh look from outside of the prison, and it is the contemplative traditions that purport to do just that.

How? Einstein once said that problems could never be solved by the same minds that created them. Much of Buddhism consists of developing a new mind or, in later Buddhism, of finding one's original mind. Starting with early Buddhism, I will describe the psychological aspects of how humans become ensnared and the evolution of teachings on how they can get out.

## What Is the Prison?

We start with where we are, not with ideals. Dr. Seuss' children's tale begins on Christmas Eve with the Grinch gnashing his teeth as he gazes down at *Who*-ville, not liking what he sees or how he feels.<sup>1</sup>

The first word of teaching the Buddha is said to have uttered is *dukkha* which means *suffering* or *unsatisfactoriness*. Suffering is also the first of what are called the Four Noble Truths. Notice: suffering is considered a basic truth and a noble one, quite a different attitude toward suffering than is the norm in our society. It can also be a puzzling first truth to Westerners. While we readily understand how people will suffer when they don't get what they want or do get what they don't want, the iconic image of the life of the Buddha (now reasonably well known courtesy of Hollywood) is of someone who had absolutely everything one can imagine wanting and yet was still discontent, in fact discontent enough to leave his palace and begin his journey. (For more material on the early Buddhism to be covered in this section see Buddhaghosa, 1976; Byrom, 1976; Kornfield, 1977; Nyaniponika, 1973; Rahula, 1959; Rosch, 2010; Trungpa, 1976.)

How can getting what one wants still be suffering? To see this requires looking closely at one's experience, something that people do not ordinarily do, in fact may actively avoid. Hence in early Buddhism there were sequences of meditation practices aimed first at calming and stabilizing the mind and later at directing awareness toward moment-to-moment mental functioning in order to develop insight into its nature. (At present in the West all such practices tend to be lumped together under the label *mindfulness*, Rosch, *in press*.) And what were the insights that were to be developed? Some of the first discoveries of insight are called the Three Marks of Existence. They are:

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<sup>1</sup> In lieu of quotations from *How the Grinch Stole Christmas*, the use of which we were sadly unable to arrange, readers may wish to follow along in that charming book (if they still retain it from childhood) or to otherwise obtain and read it.

### ***Mark 1: Impermanence***

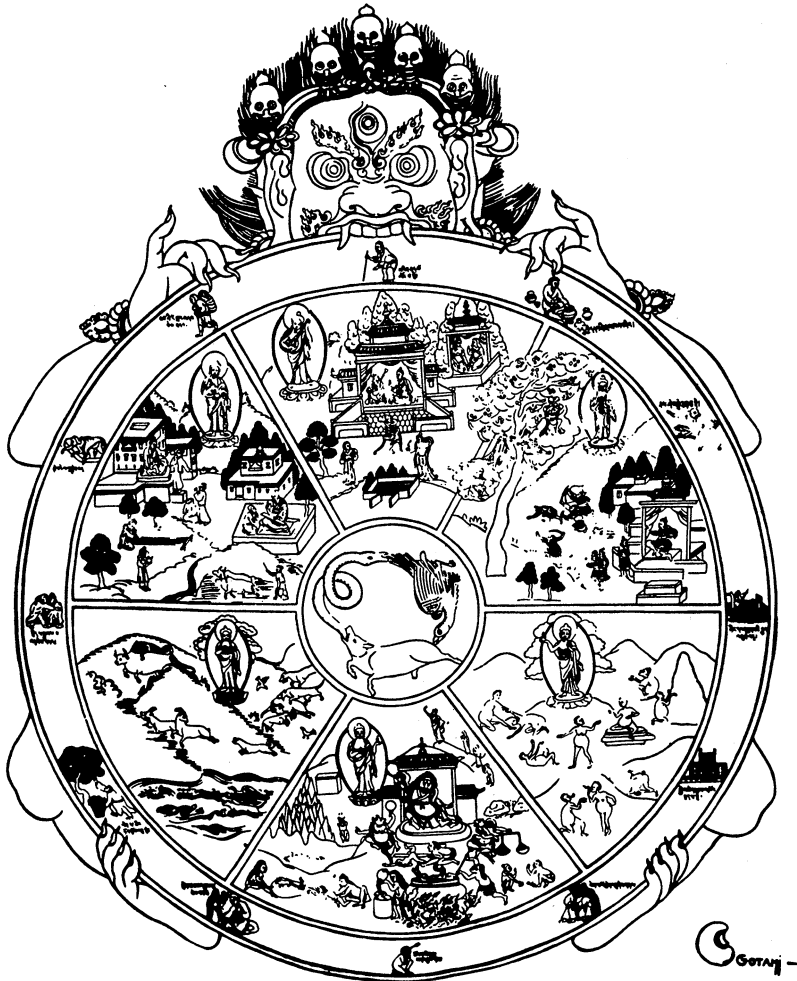
We may think we already know about it. “You’re going to die;” say all religions. Poets notice too: “leaves fall,” “maiden wither.” And, of course, *change* is something on everyone’s mind, wanting it or fearing it. In Buddhism such things are called *gross impermanence*, and while important (one traditional exercise was contemplation of corpses), insight practices were aimed at a subtler form of noticing. Fundamental impermanence, the appreciation of which can change consciousness, was understood to be the moment-to-moment arising and falling, birth and death, of perceptions and thoughts themselves.

### ***Mark 2: Egolessness***

First of all, *ego* in this context does not mean the ego strengths and weaknesses important in clinical psychology. Buddhism was well aware of the integrity and resilience now attributed to a healthy ego in the West and discusses these virtues under other names such as wholesome habits and wisdom attributes. Egolessness is also not the same as the constructs that replace the idea of a real self in cognitive psychology and cognitive science; for example, self-schemas, supervisory structures, and brain states. After all, who is it that is comfortably discoursing on self-schemas and brain states?

What the early Buddhist teaching of egolessness is pointing towards is that when one closely observes moment-to-moment experience, one’s self is seen to not have the solidity and continuity that we imagine. And yet this fantasy self can also be clearly seen as the source of one’s motivations, emotions, and actions. How come?

One answer is given in the teaching of the Five *Skandas* (heaps). (1) Form (*rupa*): We have a body and its senses. Those senses are dualistic; for example, right now when you are looking at these words, there is a subtle sense of a *you* as subject reading the words as object. In this respect, the mind is also a sense; that is, there is the feeling of me as subject experiencing my thoughts and emotions as object. (2) Feeling (*vedana*): Given that we have a body and mind, we also have feelings with positive, negative, and neutral valences. Such feelings become tied to that primitive sense of me as subject. (3) Perception/Impulse (*samjna*): Thus when perception of external and internal objects occurs, it is through the screen of those feelings. Such perception gives rise to impulses to get the positive, not get the negative, and ignore the (irrelevant to Me) neutral. (4) Formation/Concept/Habit (*samskara*): Action follows impulse producing habits. (5) Consciousness (*vijnana*): The outcome is a form of consciousness that consists of self-perpetuating states (whole realms) of desire, grasping, greed and passion for the positive; fear, anger, hatred, and aggression toward the negative; and indifference and ignoring toward the neutral. Atop it all is ignorance of the way the whole system works and, importantly, of its alternatives.



TIBETAN 'WHEEL OF LIFE'  
(Tracing of a Tibetan temple-fresco of Sankar Gompa, Leh)

Fig. 1 Samsara: the Wheel of Life

The result is that as long as we are living from grasping/passion, fear/aggression, and ignorance (called the Three Poisons), we will be trapped within these states of consciousness, cycling endlessly between them. This is the prison. The whole process is called *samsara* and is represented in the iconography of the Wheel of Life shown in Fig. 1. Traditionally, the realms were viewed as actual places into which a sentient being could be born from one lifetime to another as well as states

of mind through which one cycled during a single lifetime. Among Westerners, not surprisingly, it is the latter interpretation that draws most interest and credence.

In the iconography of the realms there are six basic forms, a lower and an upper realm for each of the three poisons (for a more complete account of the realms than is provided here, see Rosch, 2010; Trungpa, 1976). The lower (most painful) realms of aggression are hellish states, both hot hells resembling Christian imagery of hell, and icy cold hells of frozen anger, bitterness, and withdrawal. The lower realm of passion (called the hungry ghost realm) is a state of greed and poverty mentality so extreme that the hungry ghosts (*pretas*) are pictured as creatures with enormous bellies but throats so constricted that they cannot actually swallow any of the sustenance they crave and amass. The lower realm of ignorance (animal realm) consists of states of dullness: just putting one foot ahead of the other, survival without imagination or humor. The upper realms are less painful but equally fraught and, with one potential exception, equally trapped. The upper realm of aggression (jealous gods realm) is a state of comparison, paranoia, and competition, and the upper realm of ignorance (god realm) is a temporarily pleasurable abode brought about by drugs or a bloated ego, from both of which one is going to crash. The best state to be in is human realm, the upper realm of passion, an intelligently desirous state (more about human realm shortly).

Why is samsara a prison; why can't one just walk out? One reason is that each state reinforces and perpetuates itself. You can notice this by paying attention at your next meal. Even if that first bite is as delicious as anticipated, the pleasure is short lived, and one only wants more. Research has, in fact, shown that the maximal reward both for mice and humans is in proximal anticipation not in consumption (Knutson & Greer, 2008). A second reason is that, as long as one is operating within the mind set of *samsara*, there is no place to go except to another of these states. Let's trace out an example: after gaining more and more of something desired, you get so frustrated by never being fully satisfied that you get angry. Now you're in a state of aggression. You act aggressively to get rid of the painful anger, but that doesn't satisfy because it makes you feel more, not less, angry. It also riles up everyone around you so that now they're attacking you, and you have to keep fighting. The dissatisfaction of living in aggression builds until, perhaps, you just don't care anymore and withdraw into indifference and ignorance. You stay in that cut-off state until either a desire surfaces from the inside or a seduction from the outside – and then off you go again as the wheel of life turns.

### ***Mark 3: Suffering***

The result of all this is suffering. While the ills, disappointments, tragedies, and pains of body and mind need no introduction, what the close observation of an insightful mind discovers is that all experiences, all moments of consciousness in *samsara*, are marked by suffering. Grasping for the permanence of what is impermanent leads to suffering. Grasping for a solid self that will be a safe landing

platform for experience where there is none leads to suffering. Obtaining something one wants only feeds further desire, and vanquishing an object of hatred fuels further aggression. Ignoring is beset by uneasiness. Even simple pleasures can be seen to be a form of grasping at fleeting and not all that satisfying straws in the wind.

The one potential bright spot in all of this is human realm. Only in a human frame of mind might one glimpse the inconspicuous prison door with the exit sign above it. Humans are intelligent enough to see that what they are doing doesn't quite work. They may respond first by seeking better objects (a better coat, health, job, spouse, religion, scientific theory. . .) and better ways to get the objects. They can have high ideals and strive to emulate great people. They invent logics and sciences, weave networks of concepts and build models. They even have the concept of *wisdom* and when asked about it, what do they say? They describe someone who is in a human realm state of mind because that is the best and also the limit of what they know. But according to Buddhism and other contemplative paths, this kind of mind is the beginning, not the end of the path.

## How to Get Out of the Prison

### *In Early Buddhism (Theravada: The Speech of the Elders)*

The Grinch's normal state of discontent is brought to such a boil by the immanent approach of Christmas, which for him means the noise, singing, and feasting of the *Whos* (those who live in *Who*-ville), that he feels he must do something about it. He is desperate. Then he gets an idea!

It is close observation of experience that has revealed the prison, and, in the earliest Buddhism, it is this kind of increasingly insightful observation that leads the way out of it. The chains of cause and effect that keep a person bound are called *karma* which operates not just between lives (a teaching on which Westerns are largely agnostic) but within a given life where it can be observed (hit someone, they hit you back; eat one potato chip, eat another). The technical description of such causality (in psychological language, the description of a habit) is a circular chain with 12 interdependent links (*pratityasamutpada* – co-dependent origination). The reason why these chains are so hard to break is that by the time one realizes what one is doing (e.g. eating another potato chip), the conditions for doing so have already happened unnoticed. With strong intention and a stably observant mind, one can start to notice what is happening early enough in the chain to interrupt the automaticity of response and replace unwholesome responses with wholesome ones. For example, one could replace greed with concern for others or inattentiveness with alertness. This will bring better circumstances (good karma) in this and future lives. One can also let a moment of experience occur without responding to it at all, thereby letting the karmic seed that produced it be spent without planting a



new seed. By this kind of meditation, after many lifetimes of practice, one can, perhaps, exit from the mind of the three poisons altogether.

Back to Dr. Seuss. The Grinch's first idea is to take away all the toys and sustenance of the *Whos*, not to follow the usual option of plying them with yet more objects, ideas, theories, and strategies. In religious terminology, this might be called *renunciation* or *purification*. In early Buddhism such an exit was described as entering *nirvana*, never to be reborn. Westerners tend to have little interest in lack of rebirth, and when Theravada Buddhism (the surviving representative of early Buddhism and the dominant form now in Southeast Asia) is taught in the West it is almost always from the point of view of leading a good life now.

### ***In Mahayana Buddhism (Mahayana: Great Vehicle)***

Buddhism evolved, and new forms incorporated and built on the earlier ones. One approach of later Buddhist teachers has been to treat the path to wisdom of an individual practitioner as retracing historical development – a useful conceit to use in this chapter. Mahayana Buddhism is estimated to have begun around 100 A.C.E. in India and eventually spread throughout East Asia. It incorporated the foundational teachings and practices outlined earlier and to them added two new realizations to be discovered by practitioners: emptiness (*shunyata*) and compassion (*karuna*). (For more material on the Mahayana Buddhism to be discussed in this section see Nhat Hanh, 1987; Rosch, 2010; Santideva, 1995; Sprung, 1979; Suzuki, 1970; Trungpa, 1993.)

#### **Shunyata: The Great Clearing**

Because shunyata is usually presented by means of negations, it is slippery to talk about. One thing it has been confused with through history that it clearly is **not** is nihilism. Experiences of existential angst, nausea, meaninglessness, and a cold empty universe are not shunyata under any of its Buddhist meanings. Instead they are interpreted as ego states, conceptual-emotional fantasies about emptiness, the ego's fear of the unknown perhaps or of losing its ground. Under shunyata, things may not exist in the way that we ordinarily think of them, but the texts state very clearly that emptiness does not mean that nothing exists.

Here are some of the main insights to which shunyata is said to point:

1. Shunyata as interdependence. Things do not have a self-nature but arise interdependently with everything else. An inner example is the subject and object of perception. At this moment, you as the one who is reading this sentence, the sentence as the object being read, and the relationship between the two of you all arise interdependently not separately. (Remember that we are talking about experience of the phenomenal world as it arises and passes away

moment by moment.) An outer example of interdependence – and a vividly important one currently – is money. Money literally has no self-nature, but exists through interdependence; that’s why it is so tricky.

Note the expansion of the approach to causality here. Children begin by seeking a billiard-ball-hitting-billiard-ball level of local causality (Gopnik, Meltzoff, & Kuhl, 2001), and most adults never grow out of that. But that’s not the kind of world we live in or the kind of vision needed to cope with that world – as CEOs, environmentalists, and government leaders ignore at their peril (Senge, Scharmer, Jaworski, & Flowers, 2004). Minds capable of tuning into interdependence are needed in society.

2. Shunyata as sudden release. Ever had the following experience? Something is really bothering you; then suddenly you see a clever cartoon about that very topic; you laugh, and ah! – relaxation, ease, all gone, at least for a few moments. Actually each moment releases that way if one looks.
3. Shunyata as Great Doubt. This does not mean a small, cramped, worried doubt about a particular thing, but a vast “seeing through” of conceptual and emotional constructions as a whole – a clearing. Remember the Grinch? He clears out every last thing from the *Whos’* houses: toys, Christmas tree, food. He has to. That’s part of it, the first step forward.
4. Shunyata as no-mind or don’t-know-mind. Deeper than not knowing the answer to a question – though that could be an entry into it.
5. Shunyata as completely open mind. What more can be said about this one?

There are a variety of Mahayana practices aimed at provoking shunyata insights: (a) In formless meditations, an awareness may be encouraged that is more expanded and environmental than the pointillist mindfulness favored in earlier practices. The analogy is made to seeing words in their context of sentences and in the whole text rather than in isolation; one is still seeing the individual words but in an expanded field. (b) Various meditations and contemplations can be taught to awaken the ability to tune into the interdependence of the world. The Vietnamese Zen teacher, activist, and poet Thich Nhat Hanh holds up a piece of paper and talks of all the things that are in this paper. The sun is in the paper, because, without it, the tree from which the paper was made could not have grown; the father of the logger who cut down the tree is in the paper. . . you see where this logic is leading. (c) Practices with specific forms are also used to provoke an open mind: argument, koans, “Dharma combat,” and many others.

Note the qualitative difference between these teachings and the earlier ones. We are beginning to hear about alternatives to samsara and how to find the mind (or *no-mind*) beyond the prison. But shunyata is only half of the story.

## Compassion

When the *Whos* awaken Christmas morning with everything gone, the Grinch listens for their lament, and receives a “shocking surprise.” The *Whos* are singing nonetheless.

That first flash of the open mind of shunyata is also a flash of open heart. It manifests as feelings along the human warmth dimension: e.g. as compassion, friendliness, empathy, love, sympathy, caring, and so on. This is another way in which shunyata is not nihilism; it is understood to be inseparable from compassion “like the two wings of a bird.” Such feelings and the compassionate actions that flow from them differ from similar appearing behavior in human realm in that, united with the vast mind of shunyata, the actions are not based on the business deal mentality of what-will-I-get-out-of-this, but on the interdependent wisdom of what truly needs to be done in this moment. In fact, Mahayana practitioners take Bodhisattva vows not to go off into nirvana, but to be reborn in life after life in order to be of benefit to other sentient beings.

There are a variety of practices to arouse the mind of compassion. The simplest (based on a Theravada loving kindness meditation) is to wish good things for people: for example, health, peacefulness, happiness, or wisdom. Traditionally this would be done first for oneself, then a loved one, friend, neutral, and finally an enemy. A more challenging form of this (*tonglen*) is to breathe in the bad as well as to send out the good. Another practice is to imagine one’s ordinary life activities as benefiting the world as well as oneself. For example, imagine that reading this book on personal wisdom will help others to become wiser, or that by doing your morning exercises (if you have such) you are helping to harmonize the energy of the world.

There are six specific Mahayana virtues called the Six *Paramitas* meaning those activities that take you out of the prison of samsara and “to the other shore.” These are: generosity, discipline, patience, exertion, meditation, and wisdom. Again they are meant to differ from their samsaric counterparts in that ideally they would be practiced as transcendent virtues arising from the mind of shunyata and compassion rather than from the strategies of the mind of samsara. Of course, in reality people do the best they can. For example, there is a Mahayana wedding ceremony in which the bride and groom, sometimes blushing or laughing, offer each other objects representing each of the paramitas vowing to practice them in their marriage.

In some later Mahayana schools, amongst them most Zen, the basic nature is referred to using somewhat positive terms, for example, Buddha nature (*tathagatagarbha*) which might then be described as “empty of samsara but filled with wisdom” (Hookham, 1991). They also begin to speak explicitly of what is beyond the mind of samsara as a source of personal actions. *Non-action* in Zen doesn’t mean becoming a couch potato but acting from the wisdom of *no-mind*.

Lets take stock of the journey so far. First by looking closely at experience, the practitioner comes to see the prison that his mind inhabits and becomes motivated to put that behind him (*renunciation*) and to seek something else. As his awareness

deepens and expands, he “sees through” the supposedly solid, fixed nature of the prison, and with awakened compassion and the skillful means of Mahayana practices begins life as an aspiring Bodhisattva healer of those still imprisoned. But there is more to come regarding the nature of the prison and its alternatives.

### ***In Vajrayana Buddhism***

On Christmas morning, when the Grinch hears the Whos singing, despite his having stripped them of every last Christmas accouterment, he is dumbfounded. His mind stops. He stands still in the snow. Hours pass. Then it comes to him. Christmas, and perhaps life itself, is not just the outer shell in which it is wrapped. Perhaps it “means a little bit more!”

The Vajrayana (Diamond Vehicle) began circa 800 A.C.E. in India. Early forms of it moved into China and Japan, later ones to Tibet. Because it is the Tibetan forms that are known and practiced in the West, I will limit discussion to those. As with Mahayana, Vajrayana incorporates teachings that came before it, adding two basic realizations and a cornucopia of skillful means (i.e. practices) to accomplish these. (For more material on Vajrayana to be discussed in this section see Fremantle, 2001; Ponlop, 2003; Rosch, 2008, 2010; Snellgrove, 1987; Sogyal, 1992; Trungpa, 1991; Tsoknyi, 1998.)

#### **The Natural Primordial State (The Essence)**

There is a primordial state that is all-good, pure, and complete. It is beyond our mind, not created/fabricated by our mind. From that radiates the phenomenal world of experience. This is viewed as knowable by natural awareness, thus statements, such as the above, are considered pointers to it, rather than doctrines.

#### **The Phenomenal World as Wisdom (The Nature)**

Samsara and the entire world that we experience actually consist of the wisdom energies of that radiance. We misunderstand and distort them, but we can wake up to their true nature. In light of this, the whole thing – including experiences of passion, aggression, ignorance, frustration, loss, sadness, suffering, imprisonment, peace, liberation and all the rest – all of it is sacred. When a person can rest in such awareness and come from that place in action, that is true personal wisdom and with it the aspiring Vajrayana bodhisattva gains the power that can move mountains. We can now see how contemplative teachings that at face value might seem abstract or beyond the personal can actually function as intimate (“closer than one’s heart”) personally known wisdom.

### Skillful Means to Accomplish All This

If it's all so good and so potent, why do people avoid it? The answer given is that it is too open, vast, timeless, direct, and brilliantly luminous. People prefer the dull cocoon of the habitual mind of oneself. Therefore much teaching, transmission, and practices are needed – not to add something new but to get people to relax into the basic nature they have been all along.

The role of the Vajrayana teacher (the *lama*) is to act as a conduit for the primordial state and its radiance. The lama gives mind-to-mind transmissions both of deep and of more specific wisdoms. Yes, there does appear to be such a thing, and large numbers of Western students of Tibetan teachers diligently stick to their practices motivated by the glimpses of more enlightened states intermittently provided by one or another of these transmissions. But if such were possible, wouldn't one expect extra sensory perception (ESP) experiments to work? Not necessarily: ESP experiments are looking at a qualitatively different kind of information in a different context with a different quality of mind than these kinds of transmissions (Rosch, 1999). The lama can also give empowerments (*wang*) of various wisdom energies both to the public at large as a general blessing or to his students to do specific practices to help them embody those energies.

The Vajrayana uses a variety of practices with form (called *cataphatic* in religious studies language). These practices are also understood as conduits. This is a different orientation than normally taken in Western activities, including Western religions. For example, if you consider one purpose of sacred texts to be the transmission of wisdom beyond concepts, arguments about whether the texts are to be interpreted literally or metaphorically will seem peculiar and likely not worth killing people over. Many Vajrayana practices with form are *sadhanas*: that is, liturgies in which particular wisdom energies are visualized as deities with accompanying mantras and mudras (gestures). A specialty of the Vajrayana is that the arts, including narratives and the use of all one's senses, are also considered practices with form. In fact, done with the proper mind-set, all the activities of ordinary daily life, including the dreams and dreamless sleep of nightly life, are included as a path of living wisdom.

Vajrayana meditations without form are truly formless. One need do nothing as one sits, knowing each present moment as the fourth moment (*dus bzhi pa*), timeless and sacred.

Note how we have come full circle; in early Buddhism the senses and the activities of ordinary lay life are considered dangerous because they can evoke the three poisons and further enmesh one in the prison of samsara. Now, seen with the eye of pure perception and sacred outlook (*dag snang*) all of that is none other than awake, living wisdom itself; the prison is the garden.

## ***In Shambhala***

Vajrayana Buddhism may be in the process of giving birth to a fourth path called Shambhala. Shambhala was founded by the Tibetan lama Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche in the United States in the mid 1970s from *terma* (received texts), a Tibetan tradition in which texts that are particularly relevant to the circumstances of a specific time and place will appear when needed, usually in the mind stream of a suitable receiver. There are by now Shambhala Centers in major cities in the United States and Canada and in 62 countries altogether. They operate in an interesting conjunction, still being worked out, with the Vajrayana Buddhism from which they emerged. (For more information on the Shambhala material to be discussed in this section see Hayward & Hayward, 1998; Mipham, 2005; Trungpa, 1984, 2001.)

Shambhala includes the Buddhist teachings that came before it as well as some teachings and practices from other traditions. It has three major teachings of its own.

### **Basic Goodness**

Basic goodness is the foundation. In one sense it is a simpler way of speaking of the primordial all-good ground of Vajrayana. However, instead of being the final realization of a long and arduous path, it is boldly proclaimed as the beginning. Remember that this is goodness in experience itself of whatever kind whether gaining or losing, pleasure or pain, enlightenment or confusion, and so on.

### **Confidence Beyond Fear**

Teachings on fear are a central theme in Shambhala. They follow a logical progression. This is an age of fear. When people are not in contact with basic goodness, anxiety and fear arise. People cover the fear with a cocoon of habits and actions. Beyond/below fear is the mind that is gentle and fearless. In Shambhala this is called the warrior's mind, warrior (*pawo*) meaning someone who is beyond aggression. Shambhala and Shambhala Buddhism emphasize practices to reach that mind.

### **Enlightened Society**

This is the teaching that most distinguishes Shambhala from previous Buddhism: an enlightened society is necessary as the container for and manifestation of personal paths to wisdom. Such a society is possible because the ways humans bond with each other and create society do not depend on the motives of samsara in order to function; in fact society will run much better if it is based on goodness rather than

on ignorance, greed, fear, and aggression. Establishing an enlightened society is crucial at this juncture of human history because otherwise the world is headed into a dark age in which human civilization, if it survives at all, will be much diminished. Shambhala enlightened society would be secular and inclusive; it is there to serve and nourish other religions, not just Buddhism; likewise the arts and, in fact, all of human life.

Of course, this is not the first utopian vision: what are the details? Actually it's a work in progress. Currently Shambhala practitioners are trying to figure out the nature of, as well as how to establish, a more enlightened culture and social structure within their own communities. So we can stay tuned.

We have reached the end and perhaps fruition of the long arc of development of the Buddhist understanding of personal wisdom. We end with human life contextualized within timeless basic goodness and the sacred world radiating from it. Practices focus on bringing enlightened energies – such as deep wisdom, kindness, and fearlessness – into oneself and out to the larger world. From the point of view of a mind in samsara, human realm is a prison of struggle, frustration, and suffering. But seen and practiced with the pure perception and sacred outlook of the fruition, the promise is that these very same human activities can be profound and brilliant.

Two closing notes on this: The first is from a commentary on Bellini's painting Saint Francis in the Desert, "The painting stuns with its conception of physical and spiritual vision as one and the same" (Schjeldahl, 2011, p. 19). And then what happens the moment after? Back to the Grinch. The moment his mind opens in the "bright morning light," he turns about face and takes everything back to the Whos: the Christmas trees, the presents, the food. He even joins them in the feast. But it's a different feast now.

## Science and Buddhist Wisdom: The Mindfulness Movement

Part of the mandate of this book was to include discussion of science. The last 30 years have witnessed the ever-expanding use of therapeutic interventions called *mindfulness* and a growth industry of research confirming their benefits and attempting to explain them. Since mindfulness was taken from Buddhist practices, there is a popular tendency to see the research as a forum on Buddhism or on meditation, but most researchers speak of mindfulness as a technique that, although originally a part of Buddhism, is now thankfully stripped of its "philosophy" and "metaphysics" and made scientific.

Research showing the health benefits of Eastern practices began in the 1960s with the mantra meditation of Transcendental Meditation (TM), followed shortly by a scientific re-interpretation of TM in terms of relaxation (Benson, 1975). In 1979 Jon Kabat-Zinn, then at the University of Massachusetts Medical Center, tried out a new approach to help chronic pain patients who were otherwise falling through the cracks of the medical system. He put together a program of meditations,

yoga, and other practices that he had been personally trying, called it Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction (MBSR), and found it to be helpful for these otherwise very difficult patients (Kabat-Zinn, 1990). Since then the use of mindfulness in therapies has burgeoned as has research showing its benefits for a variety of physical and psychological ills as well as for ordinary people without specific clinical diagnoses (Baer, 2006; Brown, Ryan, & Creswell, 2007; Davidson & Begley, 2012; Didonna, 2009; Grossman, Niemann, Schmidt, & Walach, 2004). For purposes of this chapter, what we need to ask is: What is it that is being taught under the label *mindfulness*? How is it being measured? And how might it be relevant, if it is, for the present discussion of personal wisdom in Buddhism?

### ***What Is Mindfulness in Therapeutic Use?***

The pop culture version of mindfulness is “just be in the present moment” (or just pay attention to it). But if you tell a troubled person to just pay attention to what is happening in the present moment, likely all he will see is how bad he feels. And a less troubled person will probably get quickly bored – e.g. what’s so exciting about brushing your teeth? This is why people do not pay attention in the first place. The mind of samsara doesn’t find the present moment either healing or entertaining; it finds it groundless and disconfirming of the fantasy self, and it flees from it. If instead you use Kabat-Zinn’s much cited instruction to pay attention to the present moment without judgment, your troubled or less troubled person cannot do that either because our ordinary mind operates by means of continual judgments. (For example, a research instrument called the *semantic differential* has found, across languages, that the foremost connotative meaning on which words are rated is the good-bad dimension – Osgood, Suci, & Tannenbaum, 1967.) With closer attention to their thoughts, what people see first is the presence of judgment not its absence – as Kabat-Zinn now readily admits in interviews. In short, there is a tendency in both the research and therapeutic communities to think and write about mindfulness as though it were a simple mechanical technique without context that can be administered like a pill. Not so: there has to be an extensive context of teachings and practices to entice, push, and inspire a reluctant mind into a state where it is willing and able to abide, even be nourished, in the present. Such personal wisdom developing contexts are in fact included, though largely unacknowledged, within the clinical and other mindfulness settings being researched.

Most studies on the clinical benefits of mindfulness that meet scientific standards (for example: proper control groups) have been done on Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction and its variants. (Mindfulness Based Cognitive Therapy is MBSR plus cognitive therapy – see Segal, Williams, & Teasdale, 2002; Teasdale & Barnard, 1993). So let us look at what is actually in MBSR. It is an 8-week group program that contains not only sitting meditation using attention to an object (the breath, sensations, feelings, or thoughts) but also: a body scan; hatha yoga postures and/or qi gong exercises; eating three raisins (usually presented as a sensory heightening



exercise); working on participants' attitudes (MBSR leaders insert many things here such as not judging, patience, self trust, non-striving, acceptance, letting go. . .); some communication training (as in Rosenberg, 2003); many teachings (lectures, readings, poetry. . .); interaction with the MBSR leader; a touch of the guru principle (audio tapes of Kabat-Zinn and perhaps others); group discussion and support; homework assignments; pointed analysis of one's habits and emotions in daily life, and discussion and exercises in attention and making choices in daily life. This is anything but a simple technique; it's more like a mini-retreat program.

The MBSR leader's depth of understanding of meditation, mindfulness, minds, people, and all related topics plays a crucial role. After the initial successes of MBSR, Kabat-Zinn generously exported a detailed guide to the program to interested hospitals and clinics. There it was administered by whatever personnel were available, people without necessarily any background. An important fact that is normally overlooked is that, under those conditions, MBSR simply did not work. Initial attempts at Mindfulness Based Cognitive Therapy also did not work; the founders had to first come to Kabat-Zinn for training. Although Kabat-Zinn has long since established prerequisites and training requirements for those who will be leading official MBSR groups, there is much variation in how it is led depending upon the background of the leader. There is more variation yet among teachers of the unofficial offshoots of MBSR. Leading a group like MBSR is a task that draws forth everything that the leader has. Leaders may be from any of the forms of Buddhism; they may be therapists; they might be members of one of the Western religions; they may be veterans of one or more new age groups; they may begin with no background in any of this and receive all their training from Kabat-Zinn. All of this will come into play. It will most likely not be explicit; for example, therapists know they are not doing group therapy in this context, and Buddhist practitioners know they are not presenting Buddhist teachings, many of which are sufficiently contrary to the desires of the samsaric mind that they can easily increase, rather than decrease, stress in the short term. But the overall effect is that what they are transmitting to participants is not simple technique but wisdom, just enough of it to influence participants attitudes, minds, and hearts in a direction that makes being present with their experience less aversive and more positive.

The role of contextual support is even more apparent in two other systems of therapy credited with using mindfulness but that do not explicitly teach meditation. In Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT; Hayes, Strosahl, & Wilson, 1999), patients commit themselves to goals and behaviors in a manner much like taking vows in Buddhism and the Western religions. In Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT; Linehan, 1993a, 1993b), patients are guided toward the part of their mind that is neither intellect nor emotion. DBT thus has the most explicit depth dimension of any of the therapies.

All of the mindfulness research cited so far has been with adults, but there is also a rich new field of mindfulness training with children. This work is being done, even with quite young children, both in classroom settings and at home in conjunction with training for their parents (Rosch, 2008; Saltzman & Goldin, 2011; Wall, 2005). Such work is of particular interest for the argument of this chapter, since it is

obvious to trainers and researchers alike that it takes far more than a simple technique to communicate being present in a meaningful way to a child. The resultant array of imaginative exercises, visualizations, and mindfulness games should be of interest to anyone concerned with education (for example Greenland, 2010; Saltzman & Goldin, 2011; Willard, 2010). The outcome of such trainings is typically measured, not only by self-report from the child, but also by ratings of changes in the child's behavior by teachers and/or parents, converging operations that are rare in adult studies. In addition, perhaps partly because of its practical orientation, mindfulness work with children is often combined with exercises for the development of empathy and compassion, just as it is in Buddhism (Gordon, 2005; Greenland, 2010; Nhat Hanh, Ngheim, & Vriezen, 2011). A good source for learning about all of this work with children, most of which is currently in progress rather than completed, is through the relevant websites (Association for Mindfulness in Education: <http://www.mindfuleducation.org>; Bright Light Foundation: [http://www.brightlightfoundation.net/projects\\_S\\_Ele.html](http://www.brightlightfoundation.net/projects_S_Ele.html); Inner Kids: <http://www.innerkids.org>; Mindfulness in Education Network: <http://www.mindfuled.org>; The Dalai Lama Center for Peace and Education: <http://www.dalailamacenter.org>; The Still Quiet Place: <http://www.stillquietplace.com>).

Mindfulness in therapeutic interventions is not the only kind of research suggesting there may be something measurable in Buddhist wisdom. There is research on long term meditators, the most striking of which comes from the laboratory of Richard Davidson (Davidson, 2002; Davidson & Begley, 2012). Through a lifetime of careful experimentation, Davidson had previously shown the association of a certain kind of positive affect with increased activation of areas of the left prefrontal cortex. This region of the brain was hyper activated, beyond anything he had seen before, in a small sample of Tibetan Buddhist monks. Davidson also found that compassionate thoughts triggered this area of positive emotion in the monks (one in particular) but not in American student research subjects.

Finally, we might recall that the discussion of the Buddhist path was initiated as an example of the innovative potentials of contemplative wisdom. Contemplative paths in Western religions, just as in Eastern, are based on personal practices and experience. That is one reason why such paths in Judaism, Christianity and Islam have long histories of strained relations with their parent religions. However, there is growing interest among Westerners in reclaiming contemplative and meditative aspects of their own Western religions. Examples are Centering Prayer within Christianity (Bourgeault, 2004; Keating, 1996; Pennington, 1982), Jewish meditation within the Jewish renewal movement (Gefen, 1999; Kaplan, 1985), and the enthusiasm of some Westerners for Sufism within Islam (Douglas-Klotz, 2005; Geaves, 2000; Rosch, 2008). There is also a growing body of research on the physical and mental health benefits of contemplative prayer, both in its religious and in some secularized contexts (Pargament, 2011; Plante, 2008, 2010; Wachholtz & Pargament, 2005, 2008), as well as a nascent interest in relationships between contemplative prayer and mindfulness (Stratton, 2011). Bringing the research on

mindfulness back to the context of contemplative practices as a whole might help serve as a corrective to some of the blind spots in the study of mindfulness.

### *The Measurement of Mindfulness*

The previous section dealt with problematic issues in the way mindfulness is assumed to be a simple technique that can be excised from its wisdom context, an assumption that runs counter to the way in which mindfulness is actually taught in the contexts in which the research on its benefits has been performed. These issues again surface in the way mindfulness is measured. There are presently five mindfulness self report scales in general use (for an excellent summary and review of their psychometric properties, see Baer, Smith, Hopkins, Krietemeyer, & Toney, 2006). However, none of these scales measure either the fine-grained observation of experience that underlies the beginning of insight in Buddhism or the penetrating and expansive awareness that forms the basis for its later teachings (Rosch, 2007, *in press*).

What are the scales measuring? As Baer et al. (2006) have shown, the scales as a whole decompose into five separate facets (subscales). Only one of these concerns attention as such, and the actual items that comprise that facet (Rosch, 2007), show that what it is measuring is the extent to which a person is or is not so spaced out as to be dysfunctional. Three other facets measure factors of general psychological well-being or its lack that would be familiar in any clinical system: moderation in emotions, moderation in self criticism, and the ability to label and describe with words. All four of these facets correlate with each other. There is a possible fifth facet composed of items in only two of the scales that a rater could potentially interpret as referring to close observation, but, interestingly, this facet does not correlate with the others for non-meditators. Such a finding likely demonstrates the fact, well known to teachers of Buddhist meditation, that without training, people simply don't know what is going on in their minds and cannot answer such questions. For example, a depressed or compulsive person in the throws of his emotions may think he is closely observing when he is actually swimming in repetitious fantasies. Paradoxically, someone who is already somewhat mindful and aware may rate himself low on this dimension because he is aware of his many lapses. The whole area of measurement of mindfulness needs serious re-thinking.

But the existing mindfulness scales get research results; what is happening? I believe that what the scales are measuring is what psychology knows how to measure: a cluster of variables defining good mental adjustment in our culture. Naturally they correlate with each other and with other measures of health versus pathology. What is new is the finding that not being seriously spaced out is one of those variables. This is a valuable addition to clinical knowledge – though note that there is no evidence that it is the primary or originating factor. What these scales cannot measure is the distinction between someone who is just in contact enough with his environment to be functional and someone who is actually developing the

Buddhist style mindfulness/awareness that trainings such as MBSR purport to be developing. In Buddhist terms, the scales might be considered a measure of the extent to which a person spends time in human realm rather than in a hellish, hungry ghost or any of the other alternative possible mindsets. So we are back where we started with human realm definitions of wisdom, with all of their inadequacies, that this chapter has attempted to elucidate.

### *Psychological Explanations of Mindfulness*

Nowhere is this tension more manifest than in the explanations of mindfulness and its clinical benefits offered by psychological researchers (for example see Martin & Erber, 2007, whole issue). These generally consist of first providing a respectable psychological name, such as *emotional regulation*, for mindfulness effects followed by an inclusive and well-reasoned treatise on the research and theory supporting that name as an important psychological variable. If one wonders about that variable's connection to mindfulness, one finds, somewhere in the article or book, usually in the introduction, a statement of the need to rid mindfulness of the philosophical, metaphysical or mystical baggage that it might bring from its origins. Providing already existing psychological constructs is a way to cleanse mindfulness and make it scientific. Such explanations are exorcisms, not science.

This is a deep problem. Contemporary psychologists, flush with new research technology such as functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) of the brain, tend to assume their activities philosophy free. What they overlook is the powerful and pervasive metaphysics of their field, namely reductionist materialism (and within that usually the sub-sect we could call *brainism*). What is most disturbing about this is the assumption that our present experimental psychology knows all we need to know and that any new phenomenon must be explained by the constructs already within its boundaries. How are we going to learn anything new that way? Where is the open, questioning mind that science is supposed to foster (and that drew me, personally, to science in the first place)? Could any scientist with knowledge of history conscientiously believe that the understanding of our sciences, as those sciences are at this moment in time, will remain immutably fixed?

There are, in fact, experiences on the Buddhist path that vividly illuminate our metaphysics as only that. Even a glimpse of the Great Doubt or open mind of shunyata makes practitioners quite sensitive to such matters. Other phenomena challenge our localized view of mind. Tibetan lamas, as already noted, give mind-to-mind transmission of wisdom states. Furthermore, at death, high lamas enter what is called *death samadhi*, a state that can last for days or longer. Though the lama is clearly clinically dead (no brain activity, no vital signs, body starting to decay), his heart center will remain slightly warm, and he emanates even more powerful mind transmissions than when alive (Rosch, 1999). Once present for such an event, people do not blindly accept psychology's assumptions about the nature of human minds.

## Concluding Remark

What was it that happened to the Grinch? The Whos say that his small heart grew “three sizes” that morning.

Wisdom is not small. It is not a plaything. It should not be studied like the proverbial drunk looking for his key under the street light even though he dropped it in the bushes because he can see better under the light. It may be precisely those aspects of wisdom, Buddhist or otherwise, that go beyond our scientific boxes and even beyond our minds that have any hope of freeing us from foolishness and of addressing the unsolvable problems of our times.

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# Wisdom of the East and West: A Relational Developmental Systems Perspective

Masami Takahashi

The origin of wisdom may be traced to the time when humans began to reflect on their own thoughts. Various surviving manuscripts of ancient civilizations from Egypt to Mesopotamia to China reveal a sustained analysis of this concept (Berthrong, 2008; Curnow, 2010). With its long tail of historical nuances accumulated throughout the centuries across different regions of the world, it is not surprising that wisdom is one of our most elusive concepts.

In the field of psychology, wisdom remains one of those constructs used freely in everyday conversation, but sometimes shunned by, and often used inconsistently in, academic dialogues. As a result, research on wisdom has been overlooked. Avoiding wisdom altogether often occurs because much of the scientific academic world thinks of wisdom as being too “metaphysical” for legitimate scientific inquiry. The inconsistency is due to the fact that definitions of wisdom remain highly context dependent. Despite these problems, since the publication of a seminal paper by Clayton and Birren in 1980, a number of social scientists have been investigating wisdom through a variety of scientific research approaches. One such approach explores the problem through *implicit definitions*—i.e., a common sense understanding of the meaning of the wisdom concept. This approach has been based on the assumption that any scientific construct necessarily reflects the implicit theory of the scientist himself/herself and such theories need to be relatively congruent with the definitions generated by lay people. Several studies have demonstrated that the definitions of the wisdom concept vary significantly across gender (Orwoll & Perlmutter, 1990), age (Clayton & Birren, 1980), and occupation (Sternberg, 1986). Early research was limited by the fact that studies were conducted only in the U.S. or Europe (Staudinger & Glück, 2011; Takahashi & Bordia, 2000). Subsequently, a series of cross-cultural studies were conducted that included Hispanic Americans (Valdez, 1994), Tibetan Buddhist monks (Levitt, 1999), Taiwanese Chinese (Yang, 2001), and Japanese (Takayama, 2002). In

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M. Takahashi (✉)

Department of Psychology, Northeastern Illinois University, Chicago, IL, USA

e-mail: [m-takahashi@neiu.edu](mailto:m-takahashi@neiu.edu)



general, these studies reveal the unsurprising finding that implicit definitions of wisdom are largely determined by contextual factors such as gender, age, occupation, and cultural context.

Another approach that social scientists have taken in this field is the examination of historical documents in order to establish the meanings of wisdom during a given era. This line of research that Holliday and Chandler (1986) call *intellectual archeology* covers a broad historical landscape from ancient Egypt to modern Japan. The general conclusion drawn from this research is that the meaning of wisdom varies largely with the *zeitgeist* and with different features of a given culture such as its myth, politics, religion, and moral values.

These different approaches were designed to arrive at a definition of this elusive concept, wisdom, with the expectation that a definitive concept of wisdom would facilitate the development of explicit theories and further empirical tests of hypotheses derived from explicit theories. Paradoxically, the results have led to fragmentation rather than integration.

Mickler and Staudinger (2008) have recently proposed a novel approach to wisdom research but one that entails the same problem of fragmentation. Mickler and Staudinger argue for both distinguishing between and keeping distinct what they refer to as personal wisdom and general wisdom. Mickler and Staudinger base their argument on their own research which suggests that the two areas demonstrate different age trends and correlate differentially with several indicators of personal maturity (e.g., ego development) and subjective well-being (e.g., life satisfaction). Mickler and Staudinger's position is that personal wisdom is an intimate insight into one's own life, whereas general wisdom is a large knowledge database about life in general. For example, if one is in distress, he or she uses personal wisdom to draw strength to overcome the obstacle. On the other hand, if someone else is in trouble, a person may use the general wisdom to help that person. Unlike personal wisdom, general wisdom is a type of analytical tool used primarily to solve general problems of others. As such, a person with general wisdom is detached from the situation with minimal emotional involvement so that he or she can draw a logical and practical conclusion. In the ultimate form, general wisdom can well be a "collectively anchored product" (Baltes & Staudinger, 2000, p. 130) or extensive written materials, such as the Holy Bible or legal texts, that are "too large and complex to be stored in one individual's mind" (Staudinger & Baltes, 1996, p. 748). Baltes and Staudinger (2000) thus claim that individuals can never attain wisdom *per se* but should simply be regarded as "weak carriers of wisdom" (p. 130).

Although such "collectively anchored products" may have been viewed as wisdom proper in the past within a small tribe or clan, and while applying its literal translation to a disputed situation may have quite effectively solved the issue in those circumstances, the effort to compartmentalize wisdom into smaller subtypes is controversial. Particularly when virtually anyone can have access to an infinite amount of information and knowledge, literally at his/her fingertips, a person with a huge information database does not seem particularly wise. To put it differently, one still has to know *what* to google before one actually googles.

A further problem with splitting personal wisdom from general wisdom is raised by Ardel (2004) who argues that wisdom, by definition, must be personal; otherwise, the concept would lose its core meaning and merge into related but distinct concepts such as knowledge and intelligence. As Ardel states, “wisdom-related knowledge has to be realized by an individual through a reflection on personal experiences to be called wisdom and that the wisdom-related knowledge that is written down in texts remains theoretical or intellectual knowledge until a person re-transforms it into wisdom” (p. 305). Whether a crisis is falling upon us or someone else, it is still a person who uses, abuses, or even ignores the available information.

From a culturally inclusive developmental system perspective—based on both ancient and contemporary interpretations of wisdom in the Western and Eastern traditions—wisdom should be viewed relationally (Overton, 2010) as two poles of an inclusive psychological process. Historically, however, much of the past wisdom literature split the concept into separate elements similar to personal wisdom and general wisdom. In this chapter, I will describe a culturally inclusive developmental concept of wisdom followed by a brief summary of the historical roots of the concept. After this summary, I will present a review of the etymology and transformation of wisdom in the East with a particular focus on the Buddhist tradition. Although the original conceptualization of wisdom in this tradition was based on a non-split or relational epistemology (Overton, 2006), the meaning of the concept moved to a split and exclusive epistemology as the Buddhist texts were repeatedly rewritten over the years and eventually yielded dichotomies such as the personal wisdom-general wisdom split.

Further, within any given culture, the explicit or implicit acceptance of this epistemological transformation has had a significant impact on the culture’s current everyday understanding of wisdom (i.e., implicit theories). That is, those who retain the ancient relational epistemology maintain an inclusive understanding, whereas those who have adopted the split epistemology maintain an exclusive understanding. As a consequence, exclusivists are more likely than the inclusivists to view wisdom as a “product,” or perhaps as expert knowledge, that can be “collectively anchored.” Finally, in the context of this epistemological discussion, I will explore the historical influence on contemporary implicit theories and provide a cross-cultural research example of this influence.

## **Culturally Inclusive Wisdom**

We had proposed a culturally inclusive developmental system framework of wisdom integrating both the Western and Eastern interpretations (Takahashi & Overton, 2005). From this perspective, wisdom is understood as two moments of the same psychological process: a synthetic mode and analytic mode. The synthetic mode—partially derived from the early traditional Eastern view of wisdom—is an experience-based, expansive mental process that constitutes the “expression” of an

underlying psychological organization that undergoes through a series of dialectic transformations over a life course. In this process, the human mind is understood to be a dynamic self-organizing and self-regulating system that develops toward higher states of differentiation and integration through its action-in-the-world.

Two features of the synthetic mode require highlighting. First, the synthetic/transformational aspect of wisdom is the result of a developmental process that generates/produces a highly reflective and adaptive level of ego or consciousness, and action-in-the-world is the mechanism of this process. Wisdom reflects a highly differentiated and highly integrated level of awareness about self and others; individuals who attain this level of subject-object awareness have traditionally been referred to in the personality literature as “interindividual” (Kegan, 1982), “self-actualized” (Maslow, 1971), and “fully functioning” (Rogers, 1959).

Second, the synthetic/integrative feature of wisdom points specifically to the end state of the transformational developmental process (i.e., to the mature form of a well-coordinated human mind). As Erikson points out, wisdom is “an increased sense of inner unity” (1959, p. 51) that involves various psychological domains including cognition, emotion, intuition, and interpersonal interaction. For example, a wise person is consistently able to regulate his/her own emotions in an interpersonal relationship while having a keen insight and understanding of the emotions of the self and others. As a result, the person is often sought after by others for sound advice and discreet judgment.

The analytic mode complements the synthetic mode. It explicitly concerns not the “expression” of some underlying psychological system but the “instrumental” or “adaptive” part of observed behavior. For example, the analytic mode focuses on various information-processing functions (including a specific knowledge database and the capability to utilize it) in order to attain practical goals in life (e.g., problem solving).

While several previous research had defined wisdom exclusively from a Western perspective focusing on the analytic mode (e.g., Arlin, 1990; Baltes, Lindenberger, & Staudinger, 1998; Sternberg, 1998), the culturally inclusive framework was conceptualized partially based on the interpretations of the Western and Eastern historical literature (Takahashi, 2000). The dominant Western tradition understood wisdom from a “split” epistemological perspective and defined exclusively as a high level of analytical skills. For example, in ancient Greece, wisdom was believed to be a type of knowledge—whether it is philosophical (*sophia*), practical (*phronesis*), or scientific (*episteme*)—possessed by a small group of elite citizens such as philosophers and statesmen (Robinson, 2000). Similarly, later teaching in Judeo-Christian tradition during the Medieval and the early Renaissance period recognized the importance of human knowledge as a part of wisdom. However, unlike the Greek definition, it was the divine knowledge gained through a strict adherence to the God that gave humans the ultimate wisdom (Assmann, 1994). The fact that the Western intellectual tradition has emphasized literacy and logic and has produced numerous writings that continue to be influential today (e.g., Biblical Hermeneutics, Greek literature, etc.) may also have contributed to the idea that wisdom is not necessarily a personal quality but a general property or a type of knowledge.

In contrast, the Eastern philosophies such as Hinduism, Buddhism, and Taoism emphasize the “non-split” relational epistemology and value both the analytical and synthetic components as two sides of the same coin. While having knowledge is important, it is also necessary that a wise person has cognitive, emotional, interpersonal, and intuitive understanding. This inclusive ideology comes from one of the most ancient Hindu texts, the *Vedas*. Although different versions and interpretations exist, the original Vedic texts were written sometime around 1500–1000 B.C. Vedic cosmology stresses the origin of the universe not as a split (e.g., light and darkness, heaven and hell) but as a unity (Paranjpe, 1984). Unlike a clear demarcation of the Creator and the creation in the conventional Judeo-Christian teaching, the Eastern tradition based on *Vedas* often espouses the idea of unity even between god and people. For example, in Hinduism an ordinary person who becomes enlightened, or who has achieved “true selfness” (i.e., *Ātman*), is regarded as indistinguishable from the god or the supreme spirit, Brahman (Bhaskarananda, 1994). Similarly, Buddhism also adopts this non-split epistemology and claims that Buddha and the universe are not discernable from each other. This is not to say that an enlightened one is a demigod or the son of God, but the content of the universe such as people, objects, and phenomena is God itself (Tachikawa, 1995).

Historically as scholars explored the *Vedas* and other related Eastern texts, their interpretations of the teachings became increasingly compartmentalized. In the following section, I will focus specifically on the Buddhist conceptualization of wisdom in Japan, which was originally thought of as an experience-based, non-split religious teaching valuing both analytical and synthetic aspects, but due to abused and misinterpreted meanings during the early to mid-twentieth century, the concept became dogmatic and fragmented. These abuses were first perpetrated by the imperial military government until the end of WWII, and then by a propaganda campaign executed by extreme right-wing factions (Rohlen, 1979). Over the last several decades, as the people became disillusioned with concepts associated with religion but continued seeking existential meanings of life, constructs like wisdom that had their etymological roots in religion were revived in an experience-based and secularized form. That is, the current interpretation of wisdom in Japan embraces the remnant of the ancient inclusive epistemology, taking both the synthetic and analytic modes into account, without its religious implications (Takahashi & Bordia, 2000; Takahashi & Overton, 2002).

## Transformation of Wisdom in the East

When Buddha became enlightened and began teaching around 600 BC, he spoke a language similar to Pali (Mizuno, 1982), a language of commoners in the current region of India, Pakistan, and Nepal. His teaching was primarily concerned with *pañña*. It is a female noun later translated into Chinese by Zhi Lou Jia Chen in 179 AD as the wisdom of Buddhism or the knowledge required for enlightenment

(般若) (Hirai, 2009). However, *pañña* is not simply a type of knowledge or cognitive function, but rather, it should be interpreted as an essential property of the experience of enlightenment itself because in Buddhism—as in the contemporary relational developmental systems perspective of psychology—knowledge and action are inseparable. So it was then believed that *pañña* must be complemented by compassionate action (*maitra-cittatā* or 慈悲), a male noun. Compassion is the procedural part of the enlightenment (方便) referring to the most profound form of friendship or unconditional embracing of all beings. In other words, Buddha was regarded as a wise or enlightened one, not only because of his expanded consciousness regarding knowledge of wisdom, but also because of his subsequent deeds to save others with his teaching. Both the knowledge and action of Buddha are *sine qua non* for *pañña*, and both must be realized by a person (Takasaki, 2000).

As Buddha's teaching spread beyond common people to elites and scholars, numerous manuscripts were produced in Sanskrit, a language that is more formal than Pali and, along with Latin and Greek, one of the most widely used since antiquity. In this scholastic language tradition, the concept of ancient wisdom (i.e., pre-Buddhism) was originally expressed as *vid*,<sup>1</sup> a verb implying a type of religious or transcendental knowing. It may be translated as “knowing directly with emotion” (Takasaki, 2000). It also means “revealing” or “waking up” (覺) as Buddha himself literally woke up from an ordinary consciousness to a higher level of super-conscious state. In other words, *vid* is not a logical or scientific knowledge but an inclusive knowing that one must experience bodily, much like the concept of “embodiment” found in the contemporary relational developmental systems perspective.

Furthermore, it is this type of experiential knowing that the Buddhist teaching emphasizes the most. The short text of *Prajñā-pāramitā-hṛdaya* (般若心經), which literally translates as “Heart of the Perfection of Transcendent Wisdom (commonly known as the Heart Sutra),” one of the most important and widely read Mahayana Buddhist wisdom texts translated in Chinese by Xuanzang in 649AD, is illustrative of this point (Nakamura & Kino, 1960). While this text describes the core teaching of Buddhism (e.g., karma, suffering, noble paths, impermanence, and moderation) within a context of a colloquial conversation between Buddha and Śāriputra, his main disciple, the entirety of the text consists of 269 Chinese characters, approximately 1/6 page long. More importantly, in the last section of the text where Buddha tries to explain what wisdom really is, he uses a phrase with no apparent meanings (e.g., 羯諦羯諦波羅羯諦 or “gate, gate, pāragate”). From the context, several interpretations of its meaning have been inferred including a congratulatory yell to those who achieved *nirvana* or the sound (or lack of sound) of the universe. In other words, this text emphasizes that wisdom in the Buddhist tradition values not words themselves but the experience that followers have *with* the text through regular recitation and meditation. *Zen* Buddhism is even more extreme. It avoids analyzing and dissecting its respective texts because doing so was believed to dilute

<sup>1</sup> Whereas *veda* is a noun for *vid*, the *Vedas* refer to a body of ancient Hindu texts.

the very teaching *Zen* practitioners were trying to disseminate. For example, one of the main *Zen* tenets is to simply avoid the written texts—the analytical representation of its teaching—as a pedagogical means (不立文字 or “*furyumonji*”) (Nitobe, 1993). Instead, people who seek wisdom are expected to *personally* experience life in a specific way by following certain behavioral codes transferred orally across generations.

With an increasing popularity of Buddhism after his death, relevant manuscripts were reinterpreted and rewritten numerous times in various scholastic traditions. As a consequence, the meaning of wisdom as divine knowledge was transformed from a religious and mystical knowing of *vid* to a more practical and logical knowledge of *jñā*. Unlike *vid*, *jñā*, a verb stem, denotes “to recognize” and is regarded as a type of cognitive knowledge in the “head” and might be used to describe “information processing” in cognitive science and in other more applied fields. Further, *jñā* is a derivative of *jñāna* and *prajñā*. The former may be translated as “knowing” or the “function of knowing,” while the latter denotes “knowing ahead (pra = pre)” or “predicting.” In short, the words *jñāna* and *prajñā* are synonyms denoting cognitive knowing or what one might call the general wisdom of Buddhism. On the other hand, *vid* implies a private, experiential knowledge of enlightenment or the personal wisdom of Buddhism.

Around 200 BC, Ashoka, a Buddhist and the first unifier of ancient India, propagated Buddhism beyond India (Seneviratna, 1994). The teaching eventually reached China during Emperor Míng’s reign around 1 AD (Hill, 2009). By this time, these two types of knowing, *jñāna* and *prajñā*, replaced the original conceptualization of wisdom as *vid* and had been translated into Chinese (as 智 and 慧, respectively), and a combined word, 智慧, became known as the wisdom of Buddhism. For this reason, the concept of wisdom came to be associated with less of an emphasis on inclusivity and personal experience involving cognition, emotion, intuition, and other psychological processes, and more of an emphasis on knowledge per se, with accentuated with analytical and practical properties (Takasaki, 2000).

In summary, as a consequence of the multiple historical rewritings of the Buddhist texts, the concept of wisdom was transformed from one originally based on non-split epistemology to one more highly compartmentalized and exclusive. As a result, some of the Buddhist interpretations may now be seen as quite similar to those of personal wisdom and general wisdom.

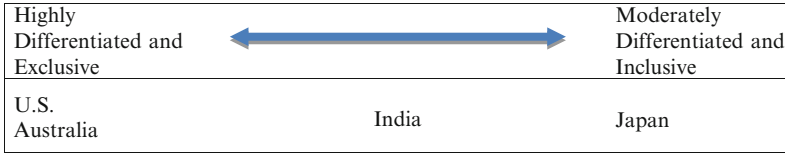
Further, the extent to which this transformation of meanings over time has been explicitly or implicitly accepted within a given culture, seems to have influenced how lay people of the culture understand the concept today (i.e., their implicit theories). That is, people who adhere to the older, non-split epistemology understand the meaning of wisdom as inclusive, whereas those who have the historical transformations as their epistemological context understand wisdom as a more highly compartmentalized and exclusive concept. Consequently, the latter group is more likely than the former group to conceptualize wisdom as a “product,” or perhaps as knowledge, that can be “collectively anchored.”

## Historical Influence on Contemporary Implicit Theories

Among the many regions in the East that have been influenced by Buddhism, present-day India and Japan demonstrate two unique cases in their own rights. Although Buddhism originated in the northern region of India, it is almost extinct there today, accounting for less than 1 % of the population. However, more than 99.9 % of the population practice specific religions such as Hinduism (80.5 %) that share the ancient *Vedic* non-split ideology (Government of India, 2010). Still today, religions in India constitute the critical subsoil on which principles of politics, ethics, and other fields are nourished. As religions penetrate into many practical spheres, however, the religious doctrines are constantly and increasingly narrowly reanalyzed and reinterpreted to conform to the dominant secular narratives (Clothey, 2006; Crossette, 1993). The political turmoil seen around the nation is illustrative of the discord caused by the secular (e.g., regional and political) and religious narratives shaping each other to fit into their respective agenda (Sathyamurthy, 1996).

In contrast to India, although a large majority of Japanese report themselves to be Buddhists and/or Shintoists, only a small minority actually identify themselves as adherents of a specific religious faith (29.1 %) or the member of a particular religious organization (8.8 %; Ishii, 2005). This inconsistency is due to a discrepancy between religious practice and religious faith. That is, many in Japan engage in rituals that were once regarded as religious but no longer require a specific faith or commitment to be practiced. For example, it is quite common across generations to celebrate one's birth at a Shinto shrine, marry in a Christian church, and be buried at a Buddhist temple. In Japan, wisdom is also no longer expressed as the original Chinese characters, 智慧, with exclusive religious semantics, but as a set of new, secularized, and simplified characters, 知恵 (in fact, 慧 is no longer recognized as a part of Japanese lexicon). This "new wisdom" maintains the ancient and inclusive connotation of the "non-split" epistemology that emphasizes personal properties and experiences, and is clearly distinguished from related analytical concepts such as intelligence and knowledge that resemble general wisdom (Takahashi & Bordia, 2000).

When different cultural-historical interpretations of wisdom are laid out on a continuum from exclusive to inclusive, contemporary implicit definitions also seem to overlay that continuum. That is, a contemporary common sense understanding of wisdom is often narrow and highly compartmentalized within the culture wherein wisdom has been historically defined as such, while the opposite is the case where wisdom is defined more inclusively. Takahashi and Bordia (2000) conducted a cross-cultural comparison of implicit theories of wisdom involving different cultural-historical traditions. In this investigation, the countries of Australia, India, Japan, and the USA were selected for study based on an assumption that the Australians/Americans and Indians/Japanese respectively represent what are generally defined as the Western and Eastern cultures. While acknowledging the danger in oversimplifying the world into an East-West



**Fig. 1** Exclusive-inclusive continuum of wisdom definitions for Australia, India, Japan, and the U.S.

dichotomy, the aim of the study was to show a pattern of different conceptualizations of wisdom within these broadly defined regions/cultures. Furthermore, these four groups could also be viewed in terms of their cultural-historical emphasis on the non-split relational epistemology (Fig. 1). At the far end, the “Western” samples regard wisdom not as an integration of analytic and synthetic characteristics but as a high level of analytical skills accumulated through one’s life experience. In its extreme form, they might accept wisdom as highly logical literary products that contain knowledge and expert advice.

On the other end of the continuum, contemporary Japanese represent a very secular culture, yet its fundamental epistemology derives from the non-split tradition of the ancient East. Like many other concepts historically associated with religion (e.g., spirituality), the concept of wisdom in contemporary Japan is only moderately articulated in public dialogue and often regarded as mystical, vague, and inclusive (Takahashi & Ide, 2004). The contemporary Indian culture represents a point somewhere in the middle of the non-split relational epistemology continuum. Although non-split epistemology was embraced in the past, a constant reanalysis and scrutiny of religious doctrines seem to have created more highly analytical and practical interpretations (often in English) of their respective epistemology than those of the past (Crossette, 1993).

In the study, a total of 217 young adults from these four countries were asked to rate the similarity of seven pre-generated personality descriptors: *aged*, *awakened*, *discreet*, *experienced*, *intuitive*, *knowledgeable*, and *wise*. They were also asked to select the preferred adjective for an ideal self. The results of multidimensional scaling, along with a cluster analysis, revealed that the Americans and Australians had an almost identical result and regarded *wise* as most closely associated with *knowledgeable* and *experienced*. Further, for the descriptors of an ideal self, both the Americans and Australians selected *wise* and *knowledgeable* as the most preferred, while *discreet* and *aged* were the least preferred. These findings indicate that the Western understanding of wisdom still emphasizes analytical features such as a broad knowledge database that can also be seen as a “collectively anchored product” (i.e., general wisdom).

In contrast, there are some uniquely Eastern patterns found in both the Indian and Japanese groups. First, although both Western and Eastern samples viewed *wise* and *experienced* to be similar in meaning, only the latter group viewed *experienced* and *aged* as closely associated as well. In other words, what is valued in the East is not any experience per se but those personal experiences that must be



accumulated through the lifelong developmental process. Second, whereas *wise* is closely associated with *knowledgeable* in the West, the Indian and Japanese view *wise* as most closely associated with *discreet*, characteristics often used in a broader situation that requires both analytical and synthetic skills such as prudence and judiciousness. These results clearly suggest then that wisdom in the East is interpreted not as a “general” product but as a personal experience that is, by definition, realized by that person.

There are subtle differences, however, between the Indian and Japanese samples in semantically defining wisdom and in how they choose adjectives for an ideal self. First, for Indians, *knowledgeable* played a significant role in the understanding of wisdom, although not to the same extent as in the case of Americans and Australians. While *knowledgeable* and *wise* belonged to different clusters for Japanese (i.e., *wise/discreet* vs. *knowledgeable/aged/experienced*), for Indians *knowledgeable* and *wise* were within one large cluster (*wise/discreet/awakened/knowledge*). Further, *knowledgeable* was selected by Indians as the second preferred adjective to describe an ideal self, compared to the sixth for the Japanese. By the same token, *discreet* was selected as the second preferred for the Japanese and fourth for the Indians. These findings suggest that while the conceptualization of wisdom is more similar than different between Indian and Japanese when juxtaposed with the American and Australian samples combined, Indians regarded wisdom more as an analytical concept (e.g., a broad knowledge database) that can be anchored as some sort of wisdom treatise than did the Japanese sample. That is, the concept of wisdom is likely to be viewed in terms of general properties in India, while the contemporary definition of wisdom in Japan emphasizes personal properties (e.g., emotions, intuition) that are essential in sustaining one’s prudence and discretion.

On the empirical level, the culturally inclusive developmental system has been explored from several approaches. For example, Takahashi and Overton (2002) carried out a cross-cultural study examining the synthetic and analytical dimensions of wisdom among middle-aged and older American and Japanese adults and found that older adults, regardless of their cultural background, generally outperformed the middle-aged counterparts on both wisdom dimensions. Similarly, Ardel proposed a three-dimensional personality characteristic model of wisdom (1997, 2004) based on a model postulated by Clayton and Birren (1980) and revealed in a study that not only analytical but also synthetic dimension—reflective and affective characteristics—of wisdom were associated with life satisfaction of older adults. Other empirical approaches to wisdom that incorporate the inclusive developmental system model include those of post-formal operation (e.g., Sinnott, 1998), emotion/cognition integration (e.g., Scheibe & Blanchard-Fields, 2009), and the dynamic systems (e.g., Labouvie-Vief, Gruhn, & Moras, 2009). In essence, these studies demonstrate that both the analytic and the synthetic dimensions are important in understanding the functioning of wisdom.

Even after three decades of rigorous research, wisdom still remains one of the most challenging constructs for social scientists. Its definition is elusive, to say the least, because people in different cultures throughout various eras have had their

unique perspectives and understandings of wisdom. As mentioned earlier, Mickler and Staudinger (2008) have recently proposed a new distinction between personal wisdom, concerned with a personal insight into one's own life and general wisdom, concerned with general properties of wisdom which could also be a "product" such as written manuscripts. While it remains controversial to split wisdom into subcategories, it may be valid to recognize these as two poles of the same relational matrix. In this chapter, I have reviewed historical understandings of wisdom in Buddhism and showed two distinctive interpretations within that tradition that correspond to personal wisdom and general wisdom. On the one hand, *vid* denotes the original ancient wisdom that must be realized by an individual during the enlightenment process, a personal wisdom. On the other hand, *jñā* represents a type of general cognitive knowledge and information contained in the numerous wisdom texts, and as such it is a detached knowledge with an emphasis on general properties, a general wisdom.

Furthermore, when implicit theories are compared across cultures, the more a culture identifies itself with the split epistemology, with compartmentalized theories of religion and mythology (such as Western and to some extent Indian culture), the more people regard wisdom as general properties that can be defined in terms of culturally anchored products. In contrast, the more a culture identifies itself with the non-split relational epistemology (e.g., Japan), the more the concept of wisdom is likely to be understood in terms of personal properties that require multiple levels of psychological functioning that must be realized by that individual.

The relational framework I propose here sidesteps debates over the semantic dichotomies of personal wisdom and general wisdom by recognizing them as parts of an integrated whole; it thus facilitates legitimately related lines of wisdom research that can cooperate scientifically rather than compete semantically. For example, it would be interesting to examine wisdom's association with the concept of spirituality, a direction that is gaining increasing interest in the field of gerontology. Do wisdom and spirituality share the same underlying developmental system? What contextual factors mediate the expression of these constructs? With an inclusive relational approach to wisdom and related concepts such as spirituality, we may gain a better grasp of what these concepts truly means.

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# The Paradoxical Nature of Personal Wisdom and Its Relation to Human Development in the Reflective, Cognitive, and Affective Domains

Monika Ardelt, W. Andrew Achenbaum, and Hunhui Oh

Although wisdom occupies a prominent place in ancient religious traditions and philosophies of human development (Birren & Svensson, 2005; Jeste & Vahia, 2008; Osbeck & Robinson, 2005), modern scientific inquiries into this subject have mostly ignored the concept (Blanchard-Fields & Norris, 1995; Chandler & Holliday, 1990). Only recently have a number of contemporary investigators begun to apply the concept of wisdom to the study of human growth (e.g., Ardelt, 2000a, 2000b, 2008b; Baltes & Freund, 2003; Baltes & Staudinger, 2000; Clayton & Birren, 1980; Dittmann-Kohli & Baltes, 1990; Helson & Srivastava, 2002; Sternberg, 1998). However, despite numerous attempts to refine the concept of wisdom, a uniform definition does not yet exist (Ardelt & Oh, 2010; Baltes & Smith, 2008; Kramer, 1990). It still holds true that “. . . wisdom as a concept remains wonderful and wondrous but not very clear” (Taranto, 1989, p. 2).

One reason for the difficulties in defining wisdom might be that the concept invites contradictory emphases (Moody, 1986). In his book, *Wisdom: From Philosophy to Neuroscience*, Stephen S. Hall (2010, p. 11) pointed out the inherent contradictions of wisdom:

Wisdom is based upon knowledge, but part of the physics of wisdom is shaped by uncertainty. Action is important, but so is judicious inaction. Emotion is central to wisdom, yet emotional detachment is indispensable. A wise act in one context may be sheer folly in another.

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M. Ardelt (✉)

Department of Sociology and Criminology & Law, University of Florida,  
Gainesville, FL, USA  
e-mail: [ardelt@ufl.edu](mailto:ardelt@ufl.edu)

W.A. Achenbaum

Graduate School of Social Work, University of Houston, Houston, TX, USA  
e-mail: [wachenba@Central.UH.EDU](mailto:wachenba@Central.UH.EDU)

H. Oh

School of Social Work, St. Ambrose University, USA  
e-mail: [ohhunhui@sau.edu](mailto:ohhunhui@sau.edu)

The goal of this chapter is to elaborate varied dimensions of the concept of wisdom by highlighting how the realms of reflection, cognition, and affection fit together. Although a generally accepted definition of wisdom has not been developed, there is a growing consensus among philosophers, theologians, social scientists, and lay people that, at minimum, wisdom evolves in reflective, cognitive, and affective dimensions (e.g., Achenbaum & Orwoll, 1991; Ardel, 2011b; Ardel & Oh, 2010; Jeste et al., 2010; Kekes, 1995; Manheimer, 1992; Meeks & Jeste, 2009; Sternberg & Jordan, 2005).

The *reflective dimension* of wisdom entails the ability to look at phenomena and events from multiple perspectives without trying to deny any unpleasant truths or to blame other people or circumstances for one's own situation. A person's subjectivity and projections, particularly the tendency to blame other people and circumstances for failures and to attribute successes to one's own abilities rather than judging phenomena and events in an objective manner (Bradley, 1978; Sherwood, 1981), are a major obstacle to this endeavor. Self-examination and reflective thinking are required if one is to become aware and ultimately transcend one's subjectivity and projections and see through illusions (Kekes, 1995; Kramer, 2000; Levitt, 1999; McKee & Barber, 1999; Sternberg, 1998). Reflective and self-reflective thinking leads individuals to discover the deeper causes of phenomena and events and understand the complex and sometimes contradictory nature of human behavior (Clayton, 1982; Csikszentmihalyi & Rathunde, 1990; Labouvie-Vief, 1990; Staudinger, Dörner, & Mickler, 2005). The *cognitive dimension* of wisdom refers to an understanding of the intrapersonal and interpersonal aspects of life and a desire to know the truth about the significance and deeper meaning of phenomena and events (Ardel, 2000b; Blanchard-Fields & Norris, 1995; Kekes, 1983; Osbeck & Robinson, 2005). A deeper insight into one's own and others' motives and behavior, in turn, tends to reduce one's self-centeredness and to increase sympathetic and compassionate love for others (Ardel, 2000b; Clayton & Birren, 1980; Csikszentmihalyi & Nakamura, 2005; Kramer, 1990; Levitt, 1999; Orwoll & Achenbaum, 1993), which characterizes the *affective dimension* of wisdom.

We propose that the development of wisdom entails an iterative process that ultimately transforms the individual (Achenbaum & Orwoll, 1991; Hall, 2010; Kekes, 1983; Moody, 1986). The seeker of wisdom will encounter a number of paradoxes that cannot be resolved, such as Socrates' realization "I know that I do not know." Rather, the gradual acceptance of these paradoxes will lead a person to the deepest essence of wisdom: liberation, truth, and love (see Fig. 1). We illustrate that process through respondents' quotes from previous qualitative studies on wisdom and the life stories of Siddhartha Gautama, who became the Buddha after his enlightenment experience (see also Takahashi, 2012). Although we know that many stories surrounding his persona are myths and legends rather than historical facts, there seems to be a consensus that Siddhartha Gautama was indeed a historical figure (Armstrong, 2001; Carmody & Carmody, 1994; Ikeda, 1976; Nakamura,



**Fig. 1** A tripartite model of wisdom

1977; Thomas, 1949). Yet, for the purpose of this chapter, the historical facts of the stories are less important than the lessons that the stories convey in illustrating the paradoxical nature of wisdom.

## The Paradoxical Process of Growing Wiser

### *Reflective Dimension: Liberation*

The reflective wisdom dimension refers to self-examination, self-awareness, and the ability to look at phenomena and events from different perspectives to see through illusions and projections and discover what lies beyond surface appearances (Ardelt, 2000b; Kekes, 1995; Levitt, 1999; McKee & Barber, 1999; Orwoll & Perlmutter, 1990). Yet, the most prominent paradox of wisdom is that wise people know that they do not know, which prompts them to search for an even deeper truth. Self-examination, self-awareness, and self-reflection require a will-not-to-will and an act of nonaction—that is, a will to engage in those practices in order to observe objectively rather than to act with the purpose of achieving a certain goal (Hart, 1987; Pascual-Leone, 1990). Self-reflective unbiased observations enable people to discover the deeper causes of phenomena and events and to become aware, accept, and ultimately transcend their subjectivity and projections (Clayton, 1982; Csikszentmihalyi & Rathunde, 1990; Kramer, 1990). The loss of subjectivity and projections, in turn, results in greater wisdom through a reduction in self-centeredness. Yet, human limitations, such as subjectivity, projections, and self-centeredness, can only be transcended through their acceptance.

### **I Know that I Do Not Know**

A person in search of knowledge and truth will soon be confronted with a major paradox: the more one knows, the more one knows that one does not know. In fact, the awareness of not knowing is the result of knowledge, not the lack of it. Wise persons know that there are multiple ways to perceive phenomena and events

(Csikszentmihalyi & Rathunde, 1990; Kramer, 1990; Taranto, 1989). Each newly gained perspective allows them to discern a path ahead, intersected by many more avenues as yet unexplored. Arlin (1990, p. 230) summarized this paradox in the following statement:

Knowing what one does not know can be represented by the questions one asks, the doubts one has, and the ambiguities one tolerates. This type of knowing is the gift of one who has thought deeply in a domain and has a substantial knowledge based within that domain.

Hence, wise people know that they most likely will never grasp truth in its entirety no matter how hard they might try, although they appear knowledgeable and experienced to others (Arlin, 1990; Hall, 2010; Kitchener & Brenner, 1990; Sternberg, 2005). For example, in a qualitative study that asked college students to compare the characteristics of knowledgeable/intelligent persons with those of wise individuals (Ardelt, 2008a, pp. 98–99), one student wrote

Now when I think of a wise individual I think of Yoda from the movie Star Wars. This type of character is usually an elder being... They have knowledge and intelligence though not only by studying it, but they have experienced it as well... They have the answer to every question you ask and possibly even put it in a way that makes total sense to you. When this person tells you something you say “aha”. You feel and should feel that it’s an honor that you can meet one of these types. They are very understanding of the youth and . . . they are very patient... They just know what to do, when to do it, and how it should be done. What makes the wise great is that they don’t ever think they know it all. The wise will continue to grow even more than you could imagine.

The acceptance of that paradox implies an acceptance of human limitations. This, in turn, indicates the realization of an important truth and, hence, a significant step toward wisdom.

An illustration of this paradox is the early life of Siddhartha Gautama, before he became the Buddha. Siddhartha Gautama was born somewhere between 563 and 463 B.C.E. (the exact birth date is not clear) in the foothills of the Himalayas (southern Nepal) as the son of Shudhodana, the king of the Shakyas (Carmody & Carmody, 1994; Kohn, 1994; Nakamura, 1977; Ñanamoli, 2001). As told in *Nidāna Kathā*, seers prophesied that he would either become a great monarch or, if he renounced the worldly life and followed the spiritual path, attain the final spiritual goal, enlightenment, which means the end of all suffering and the end of the circle of birth and rebirth (Armstrong, 2001; Hakeda & De Bary, 1969; Mitchell, 1989; Ñanamoli, 2001). Hearing those prophecies, King Shudhodana tried everything to shelter his son from the harsher realities of life and to provide him with all the royal luxuries that he could offer. He hoped that a life of luxury would make Siddhartha more inclined to pursue the worldly rather than the spiritual path so that the first rather than the second prophecy would be fulfilled. As the Buddha later told his followers,

I was delicate, O monks, extremely delicate, excessively delicate. In my father’s dwelling lotus-pools had been made, in one, blue lotuses, in another red, in another white, all for my sake. I used no sandalwood that was not of Benares, my dress was of Benares cloth, my tunic, my under-robe, and cloak. Night and day a white parasol was held over me so that I should not be touched by cold or heat, by dust or weeds or dew. (Anguttara-nikāya, i 145, as cited in Thomas, 1949, p. 47)



Siddhartha lived a sheltered existence, but King Shudhodana could not prevent his son from seeing old age, illness, and death (Nakamura, 1977; Ñanamoli, 2001; Thomas, 1949). Although those experiences expanded Siddhartha's knowledge of life, he simultaneously realized how little he knew about the meaning of existence and the reason for life's sufferings, uncertainties, and vulnerabilities. This insight prompted him to search for the path of liberation from all suffering.

### A Will-Not-to-Will and an Act of Nonaction

Since ultimate wisdom is an ideal state that is virtually impossible to obtain, persons who are very eager to become wise might despair if they fail to succeed, resulting in an unbalanced mind, which makes unbiased self-examination, self-awareness, and self-reflection even more difficult (Hart, 1987). Yet, individuals in pursuit of wisdom need a strong will to persist in order to transcend their subjectivity and projections. Without that determination, it would be impossible to overcome obstacles or to endure setbacks (Kramer, 1990). However, it is not a self-centered will but rather a "will-not-to-will" (Pascual-Leone, 1990) that fosters the acquisition of wisdom. Wise persons do not try to impose their own will on the world, not even their will to grow wiser. They use their will to continue on the path to wisdom despite the difficulty of the task.

Growth in wisdom is primarily achieved through an act of nonaction: to observe and accept reality as it is, including the reality that ultimate wisdom is virtually impossible to obtain (Hall, 2010). An individual in search of wisdom needs to learn to accept the experience of the present moment in its totality without reacting either with craving or aversion, not even a craving for more wisdom or an aversion toward ignorance (Hart, 1987). By mindfully observing and accepting the present moment, what Tolle (2004) called *The Power of NOW*, one gains insight into the true nature of things including one's own self and, thereby, grows in wisdom. For example, in a study on age differences in wisdom (Ardelt, 2010, p. 202), an older woman with relatively high wisdom scores explained that only after accepting the fact that her sister was an alcoholic was she able to grow psychologically.

[O]ver a period of years [I] have really gotten to accepting the situation [with the sister] and accepting her as, you know, if it's her choice, if she wants to live that way, that's her problem, not mine. I can't do anything about it. So that's kind of the best thing I have done actually [in a] lifetime, finally started growing up... It felt like almost if it hadn't been for my sister, I never would have gotten there. So, it turned out to be a really good thing.

Life experiences by themselves are not enough to gain wisdom. Individuals first have to accept an experience and the life lesson that it entails before they can grow in wisdom (Achenbaum & Orwoll, 1991; Ardel, 2000b, 2005). This does not mean, however, that a wise person is doomed to a life of nonaction. On the contrary, people whose behavior is not determined by cravings or aversions and who can face the reality of the present moment are truly free to act wisely—that is, in a way that is optimal for themselves and others instead of merely reacting to a subjectively

perceived situation (Hart, 1987). For example, in a qualitative study on how wise people cope with crises and obstacles in their lives (Ardelt, 2005, p. 12), a wise older man made it clear that to act freely, one first needs to reflect on, accept, and take responsibility for one's emotions.

I've had as much bad things to happen as good things, but I've never allowed any outside force to take possession of my being... Every time something happens, I say where does that feeling come from? If it comes from within you, then you need to handle it. You can handle it. I can't make you angry. You get angry. I can't make you embarrassed. You get embarrassed. (laughing) . . . I mean, it's silly, but you think of it, if it is a feeling that comes from within, I am responsible to control it.

In contrast to most individuals, wise persons do not simply react to their projections of outside forces and, therefore, are able to weigh the pros and cons of a particular course of action in an objective manner. However, to reach such a state of objectivity and wisdom, one first needs to develop a calm and balanced mind through the practice of nonaction or pure reflection without reaction (Hall, 2010).

For example, Siddhartha Gautama developed a strong will to find liberation from human suffering after witnessing old age, sickness, and death (Carmody & Carmody, 1994; Kohn, 1994; Ñanamoli, 2001). At the age of 29, after his son, who would give his father a potential heir to the throne, was born, he decided to abandon the wealth, power, comfort, and luxury of a royal existence to become a homeless monk in search of enlightenment. Because Siddhartha's family was affluent, he knew that his wife and son would be materially secure even without his presence. In fact, a man abandoning his family to become a spiritual seeker was not unusual during Buddha's time, but according to the *Kautilīya-Arthasāstra* (Vol. II Chap. I), he had to be wealthy enough to guarantee his wife and children's livelihood in his absence (Nakamura, 1977).

According to the *Mahāsaccaka-Sutta* or the *Majjhima-Nikāya*, Siddhartha first practiced meditation with two spiritual teachers who had reached the highest form of spiritual attainment known at this time. Ālāra Kālāma taught the state called nonexistence or nothingness, because nothing that existed in ordinary experience was comparable to this state (Armstrong, 2001), and Uddaka Rāmaputta taught an even higher state that is variously translated as neither thought nor nonthought, neither perception nor nonperception, or neither consciousness nor nonconsciousness (Armstrong, 2001; Nakamura, 1977; Ñanamoli, 2001; Thomas, 1949). Although Siddhartha attained both of these spiritual states in a relatively short period of time, he felt that they did not bring him liberation from all suffering. Disappointed, he left his teachers. His strong will to find a path to liberation prompted him to engage in various rigorous ascetic practices, such as holding his breath for long periods of time and severe fasting, but none of those techniques led to the eradication of all cravings, aversions, and ignorance. Finally, at the age of 35, Siddhartha remembered a time as a child when he was left alone sitting in the cool shade of a rose apple tree and spontaneously started to meditate.

[Q]uite secluded from sensual desires, secluded from unwholesome things I had entered upon and abode in the first meditation, which is accompanied by thinking and exploring, with happiness and pleasure born of seclusion. I thought: “Might that be the way to enlightenment?” Then, following up that memory, there came the recognition that this was the way to enlightenment. Then I thought: “Why am I afraid of such pleasure? It is pleasure that has nothing to do with sensual desires and unwholesome things.” (*Majjhima-Nikāya*, 36, as cited in Ñanamoli, 2001, p. 21)

After strengthening his body with food, Siddhartha developed a will-not-to-will and practiced the “middle way”—that is, he neither indulged in sensory pleasures nor tortured his body. He simply observed and accepted the observed reality without reacting to it. Yet, he was determined to meditate until he had attained enlightenment and realized the end of all suffering. Later, Buddha explained the act of pure observation without reactive evaluation as follows:

In your seeing, there should be only seeing; in your hearing nothing but hearing; in your smelling, tasting, touching nothing but smelling, tasting, touching; in your cognizing, nothing but cognizing. When contact occurs through any of the six bases of sensory experience, there should be no valuation, no conditioned perception. Once perception starts evaluating any experience as good or bad, one sees the world in a distorted way because of one’s old blind reactions. In order to free the mind from all conditioning, one must learn to stop evaluating on the basis of past reactions and to be aware, without evaluating and without reacting. (based on *Udāna*, I. x, story of Bāhiya Dārucīriya, also found in *Dhammapada Commentary*, VIII. 2 (verse 101); as cited in Hart, 1987, p. 117)

When his underlying conditionings of craving for pleasant sensation, of aversion toward unpleasant sensation, and of ignorance toward neutral sensation are eradicated, the meditator is called one who is totally free of underlying conditionings, who has seen the truth, who has cut off all craving and aversion, who has broken all bondages, who has fully realized the illusory nature of the ego, who has made an end of suffering. (*Samyutta Nikāya* XXXVI (II). i. 3, *Pahāna Sutta*, as cited in Hart, 1987, p. 156)

Enlightenment or ultimate wisdom can only be attained through meditative acts of nonaction by cultivating a will-not-to-will.

## Loss Is Gain

Wisdom is realized through reflection on experiences, and according to Gadamer (1960), each true experience (i.e., an experience that reveals something new) negates an expectation. Hence, wisdom is gained through failed expectations (Jarvis, 1992) and the loss of illusions, attachments, and aversions (Levenson, Aldwin, & Cupertino, 2001; McKee & Barber, 1999). This might explain why wisdom is often gained through loss and suffering (Ardelt, 2005; Kinnier, Tribbensee, Rose, & Vaughan, 2001; Randall & Kenyon, 2001). Loss and suffering provide the opportunity to see the world and the meaning of life in a new light, which can lead to greater self-knowledge, a reduction in self-centeredness, and stress-related growth (Aldwin, 2007; Aldwin, Levenson, & Kelly, 2009; Glück & Bluck, 2012; Park & Fenster, 2004). For instance, in a qualitative study that explored the pathways to self-transcendence of relatively wise elders (Ardelt,

2008b, p. 227), a woman recounted how her divorce at the age of 32 helped her turn her superficial, pleasure-filled life in a more spiritual and deeper direction.

I was young and full of life and energy, and my energies were always on the dance floor or parties or whatever. I was having a good time. I thought that that was the good time. I had my cigarettes and my beer or whatever, a cocktail, as they call it. If things happened I'd say "Oh Lord, why did this have to happen to me? Oh Lord, take that and don't let it happen to me." Now I understand. Things happen to everybody. And some things are supposed to happen to you, because if you don't have anything happen, you don't need to pray... And when God gets ready for you to stop all that foolishness, He'll stop it. So yes, I've learned, and I've learned how to pray.

Similarly and as explained in greater detail below, Krsā Gautamī learned through the loss of her infant son and the guidance of Buddha that no human being is sheltered from the pain of death and suffering. The experience prompted her to follow Buddha's teachings to transcend illusions, attachments, and aversions. She eventually became fully liberated and taught many others the path to the cessation of all suffering (Mitchell, 1989).

However, the negation of expectations does not need to be negative. Subjectivity and projections are the result of selective perception and an unwillingness to give up expectations and assumptions in light of new information (Heller, 1984). Hence, it can be liberating and a source of joy to shed false assumptions, especially if they prevent personal growth (Csikszentmihalyi & Nakamura, 2005; Csikszentmihalyi & Rathunde, 1990; Hanna & Ottens, 1995; Levenson et al., 2001). For example, a man who suspects that his wife cheats on him might feel relieved when he discovers that his jealousy is not grounded in his wife's behavior but in his own misperceptions of reality.

Whereas the loss of false expectations, subjectivity, projections, and illusions results in psychological gain, there is a danger that worldly gain and success might lead to a loss of wisdom. Wisdom is not dependent on worldly success or cleverness (Dittmann-Kohli & Baltes, 1990; Sternberg, 1998) nor is it related to personal power and importance or the mere accumulation of information (Ardelt, 2000b, 2008a). In fact, one of the outstanding characteristics of self-transcendent wise elders was their humility and gratitude (Ardelt, 2008b). A self-centered ego, by contrast, is likely to thwart growth in wisdom, as one student illustrated when comparing a wise person with a knowledgeable/intelligent individual (Ardelt, 2008a, p. 99).

If you compare the Dalai Lama with someone like Donald Trump you'll find that while Trump's life basically revolves around his ego, the Dalai Lama has a perfect grasp on his... Knowledgeable people in general do a lot more speaking than they do listening, when listening is what in fact makes someone wise. To be a listener (or a wise person), you must be able to separate your self from your ego, which is in fact hard to do, and which is exactly what the Dalai Lama has done. Without having an excessive ego or overbearing pride, one can truly open oneself up to learning from others and every event they experience in their lives.

Success might have a detrimental effect on the attainment of wisdom insofar as it causes pride, a sense of self-importance, and the illusion of understanding

(Meacham, 1990). For example, one student described a knowledgeable/intelligent individual as follows (Ardelt, 2008a, p. 99):

[T]his person I hold as the most intelligent and knowledgeable individual I know . . . is the most ambitious, most promising, smartest and most driven person I have ever known, but he lacked wisdom, compassion, and the big picture. He now attends Harvard and serves jail time in the summers.

This does not mean that wise people need to avoid worldly success. Paradoxically, wise people are likely to be successful in their endeavors because they perceive reality more clearly and know how to deal with the vicissitudes of life (Ardelt, 2005). Yet, if worldly success, power, or fame becomes more important than the pursuit of wisdom, self-centeredness and subjectivity will again increase, resulting in a loss of wisdom (Meacham, 1990).

Prince Siddhartha Gautama left his home, family, power, and wealth to become a homeless monk and gain enlightenment. His enlightenment experience illustrates how a loss of subjectivity, projections, self-centeredness, and even pleasure increases wisdom:

Now having taken solid food and gained strength, without sensual desires, without evil ideas I attained and abode in the first trance of joy and pleasure, arising from seclusion and combined with reasoning and investigation. With the ceasing of reasoning and investigation I attained and abode in the second trance of joy and pleasure arising from concentration, with internal serenity and fixing of the mind on one point without reasoning and investigation. With equanimity towards joy and aversion I abode mindful and conscious, and experienced bodily pleasure, what the noble ones describe as “dwelling with equanimity, mindful and happily,” and attained and abode in the third trance. Abandoning pleasure and abandoning pain, even before the disappearance of elation and depression, I attained and abode in the fourth trance, which is without pain and pleasure, and with purity of mindfulness and equanimity. (*Majjhima-Nikāya* i. 21, as cited in Thomas, 1949, pp. 66–67)

The above-described event occurred in the first part of the night. In the second part of the night, the Buddha examined the laws of karma (cause and effect) and reincarnation, and in the third part of the night, he explored the path to enlightenment and liberation from all suffering, which reverses the law of cause and effect. Buddha finally realized the ultimate truth: the chain of events that causes human suffering and the reversed path to the liberation of suffering:

If ignorance is eradicated and completely ceases, reaction ceases;  
 if reaction ceases, consciousness ceases;  
 if consciousness ceases, mind-and-matter cease;  
 if mind-and-matter cease, the six senses cease;  
 if the six senses cease, contact ceases;  
 if contact ceases, sensation ceases;  
 if sensation ceases, craving and aversion cease;  
 if craving and aversion cease, attachment ceases;  
 if attachment ceases, the process of becoming ceases;  
 if the process of becoming ceases; birth ceases;  
 if birth ceases, decay and death cease, together with sorrow, lamentation, physical and mental suffering and tribulations.

Thus this entire mass of suffering ceases. (*Majjhima-Nikāya*, 38, as cited in Hart, 1987, p. 50)

Reflecting his right understanding, the great hermit arose before the world as the Buddha, the Enlightened One. He found self (*atman*) nowhere, as the fire whose fuel has been exhausted. . . . For seven days, the Buddha with serene mind contemplated [the Truth that he had attained] and gazed at the Bodhi tree without blinking: “Here on this spot I have fulfilled my cherished goal; I now rest at ease in the dharma of selflessness” (*Buddhacarita*, as cited in Hakeda & De Bary, 1969, p. 69).

What the Buddha discovered through his enlightenment experience was the complete cause-and-effect chain of existence and how this thread can be reversed to gain liberation from suffering (see also Rosch, 2012). The key for “turning the wheel in the opposite direction” is the development of equanimity and the practice of nonreaction to any sensation that arises, which requires the absolute acceptance of the reality of the present moment (Hart, 1987). Hence, enlightenment entails (1) self-reflection and self-examination, (2) the eradication of ignorance, that is, the loss of all subjective projections and illusions through the complete acceptance of the present moment, and (3) the loss of a sense of self to realize the ultimate truth that lies beyond mind and matter.

### **Liberation Through the Acceptance of Limitations**

The main goal of wisdom, from ancient to modern times, has been the comprehension of human nature with all its paradoxes and contradictions and the understanding of the interrelatedness of all aspects of life and the ultimate causes and consequences of events (Clayton, 1982; Csikszentmihalyi & Rathunde, 1990; Taranto, 1989). The major obstacles in this pursuit are subjectivity and projections. Perceptions tend to be biased through a filter of subjectivity and cultural and personal projections, which necessarily lead to a distorted truth (Emerson, 2001; Hart, 1987). Self-centeredness prevents individuals from seeing reality “as it is” (Maslow, 1970), that is, to perceive reality without subjective distortions or a “myside bias” (Sternberg, 2012).

The attainment of wisdom requires the transcendence of subjectivity and projections. This, however, can only be accomplished by first becoming aware of one’s subjectivity and projections through the practice of self-examination and self-awareness (Achenbaum & Orwoll, 1991; Clayton, 1982; Kekes, 1995; Levitt, 1999). The task requires an unbiased and balanced mind that is open to all kinds of experiences, including the awareness of one’s subjective projections. As Kramer (1990, p. 296) observed, “paradoxically, it is the awareness of one’s subjectivity—or one’s projections—that allows one to begin the task of overcoming that subjectivity.”

If people are able to observe their behavior objectively and with equanimity, they will become aware of their projections and can try to transcend them. However, without an awareness of their subjectivity, they might feel no need to reflect on their behavior. Hence, the question arises how subjective projections initially are recognized. Kramer (1990) suggested that crises and obstacles in people’s lives have the potential to initiate that dialectical process within them. Very often, the

resolution of crises and the removal of obstacles necessitate a change in perspective. Sometimes, seeing or listening afresh is instructive. Changes in perception normally require the transcendence of certain projections, which, in turn, tends to cause a decrease in self-centeredness and an increase in maturity and wisdom. For example, a student explained how her uncle grew in wisdom by learning from obstacles in his own life and from others (Ardelt, 2008a, p. 91).

Although my [wise] uncle often talks about times he has failed or done the wrong thing, he has a hopeful spirit about him that he knows he isn't supposed to know how to do everything in this world correctly, but can provide insight into what he has learned from himself and those around him. He is somewhat quiet in that he notices little things about himself, he is self-observant, but also notices what others do as well.

Not surprisingly, it is quite difficult to overcome all projections. Whereas equanimity and objectivity are necessary to transcend one's projections, true equanimity and objectivity can only be achieved *after* all projections are transcended. Furthermore, although people can obtain a broader perspective, human senses are too limited in nature to unveil the ultimate truth behind phenomena and events (Kramer, 1990; Sternberg, 1990b). In general, we are only able to perceive selected slices of reality, although the selection might vary from "narrow-mindedness" to "openness to all kinds of experiences" (Levenson & Crumpler, 1996). With the exception of rare individuals who have attained full enlightenment, such as Buddha, most people in search of wisdom have to accept that they will never be completely wise. Yet, paradoxically, only the acceptance of projections enables a person to pursue their transcendence (Kramer).

Self-centeredness, subjectivity, and projections also prevent people from facing death, which might be considered the ultimate human limitation. Erikson (1964, p. 133) defined wisdom as "...detached concern with life itself in the face of death itself." A wise person is able to face the human limitations that accompany the aging process, such as social, physical, and mental losses, with equanimity and acceptance rather than despair (Erikson, 1982). Wise individuals are not afraid of death and dying but tend to be content until the very end of life, because they understand and accept life's limitations (Ardelt, 2003, 2007; Kekes, 1983). Taranto (1989, p. 16) wrote, "...with acceptance, detachment, and humor about failing physical and social potential, aged people may still take charge of their lives and develop a new level of autonomy, because such an attitude makes one impervious to the vicissitudes of life." For example, one male self-transcendent, wise elder observed (Ardelt, 2008b, p. 226),

When you're young in life you're a radical. You've got your physical strength, and you depend on that a lot. As you grow older, a heart attack, arthritis, a wreck or something brings you closer to the spiritual. So as the physical gets weaker, the spiritual gets stronger until, I guess, when you're about my age, you're right there.

Only someone who can accept the reality of death can truly live (Kekes, 1983). A qualitative study of middle-aged cancer survivors showed when people are aware of the finitude of life, they consider each minute a valuable and precious gift that

should not be wasted (Ardelt, Ai, & Eichenberger, 2008). As Kekes (1983, p. 280) declared,

The significance of death is not merely that it puts an end to one's projects, but also that one's projects should be selected and pursued in the light of the knowledge that this will happen. . . . What a wise man knows . . . is how to construct a pattern that, given the human situation, is likely to lead to a good life.

Paradoxically, only individuals who can fully accept their human limitation, including the realities of the aging process and the finality of life, can really be free to live life to the fullest. For example, through his enlightenment experience, Buddha discovered that whatever arises will eventually cease to exist and that everything is in a constant process of change, including body, mind, and self. Yet, people do not tend to take those limitations into account in their daily lives. Buddha taught that suffering results from the attachment to things that are impermanent, including body, mind, and self. However, by accepting and observing the changing, impermanent nature of everything that exists, attachments gradually lose their strength and the liberation from suffering becomes possible (Hart, 1987; Kohn, 1994; Ñanamoli, 2001). Hence, liberation requires the acceptance of limitations.

### ***Cognitive Dimension: Truth***

The cognitive wisdom dimension represents a deep understanding of the intrapersonal and interpersonal aspects of existence (Ardelt, 2000b). Wise persons are able to give sound and sage advice because they take the unpredictability and uncertainty of life into account. Consequently, wise people might sometimes appear foolish. Paradoxically, fools might be able to give sage advice by repeating the timeless and universal truths that wise people have taught and that can be found in books or proverbs, all without truly understanding or benefiting from the advice themselves. Whereas the essence of wisdom is timeless and universal, in its concrete expression it is relative and changing, because it needs to be realized and experienced in a specific context to have any transformative effects.

### **Wise Judgment in the Face of Uncertainty**

Wise persons are aware of the fact that “. . . uncertainty is ‘the natural habitat of human life’ although the desire to escape uncertainty has been the main engine of human pursuits” (Bauman, 2008, p. 18). Wise individuals, however, possess expertise in dealing with the cognitive, emotional, and behavioral aspects of uncertainty (Brugman, 2000). By accepting the limitations of knowledge and the inherent uncertainty of life, the wise are able to give sage advice, especially in the areas of intrapersonal and interpersonal matters (Ardelt, 2008a; Kitchener & Brenner,



1990). Because wise persons perceive phenomena and events from multiple perspectives, they are likely to detect the deeper causes of a problem and how it is related to the larger social context and to a person's whole life course (Baltes & Staudinger, 2000; Dittmann-Kohli & Baltes, 1990; Montgomery, Barber, & McKee, 2002). According to Kitchener and Brenner (1990, p. 226), wise people arrive at reflective judgments:

Such judgments reflect a recognition of the limits of personal knowledge, an acknowledgment of the general uncertainty that characterizes human knowing, and a humility about one's own judgments in the face of such limitations... Although ... [these people] recognize the uncertainty of knowing and the relativity of multiple perspectives, they can overcome this relativity, find the shared meaning, evaluate the alternative interpretations, and develop a synthetic view that offers, at least, a tentative solution for the difficult problem at hand.

Whereas the value of technical and procedural advice varies proportionally with the amount of useful information the advice giver has, wise judgments depend on the advice giver's acceptance of human limitations and weaknesses, including the negative and contradictory aspects of human nature. Wise people are able to understand and advise others because they understand and have accepted their own limitations and weaknesses. As Weinsheimer (1985, pp. 165–166) explained, "Understanding always involves projecting oneself. What we understand therefore is ourselves, and thus how we understand ourselves has an effect on everything else we understand." This means that our subjective projections determine our understanding of ourselves, others, and reality. Only by seeing through the illusion of our subjectivity and projections are we able to perceive ourselves, others, and reality in a nonbiased, nonjudgmental, and untainted way and understand that other people struggle with the same subjective projections (Kramer, 1990; McKee & Barber, 1999; Randall & Kenyon, 2001). To overcome our subjective projections, we need to look at ourselves unflinchingly and objectively and acknowledge our shortcomings and contradictions. The acceptance of our human limitations, in turn, decreases our need for projections and the need to defend an idealized image of the self. The resulting reduction in self-centeredness, combined with an understanding of the imperfections of human nature, tends to result in greater compassion and sympathy toward others (Ardelt, 2000b, 2008a; Helson & Srivastava, 2002). Other-centeredness, compassion, and sympathetic empathy are the pillars of sage advice (Montgomery et al., 2002). Indeed, giving wise advice was one of the most prominent characteristics students mentioned when describing a wise person. For example, one student wrote (Ardelt, 2008a, pp. 86–87)

My mother is someone I would describe as wise. I didn't really start discovering the benefits of having a wise parent until about my late teenage years, when all that "real life stuff" finally started occurring in my life and I needed some guidance, some direction. That's what my mother always gives me ... my mother really goes beyond just looking at things as black and white, right or wrong ... for her, there are always many aspects to every lesson I ever grew up learning in my house.

It is important to note that wise persons are not just good problem solvers in a mundane sense. Their problem solving and advice giving is always directed toward personal growth.

There are many stories of how Gautama Buddha gave wise advice to people who sought his help after his enlightenment (see also Ferrari, Weststrate, & Petro, 2012). One famous story, recorded in the *Therīgāthā*, is about a woman, Krsā Gautamī, who would not accept the death of her infant son (Mitchell, 1989; Thomas, 1949). She carried the dead son in her arms and asked people for medicine to heal him. One man told her that she should go to Buddha to ask for medicine. She followed his advice and asked Buddha to cure her son. Buddha, full of compassion and sympathetic love, empathetically understood that the deep sorrow and agony of a mother who had just lost her only child would not allow her to accept the reality of death. Therefore, he did not tell her that the boy was dead and that no medicine was able to cure him. Neither did he try to comfort her by suggesting that she might have another son in the future. Instead, he said, “You have done well to come here for medicine, Krsā Gautamī. Go into the city and get a handful of mustard seeds.” And then the Perfect One added: “The mustard seeds must be taken from a house where no one has lost a child, husband, parent, or friend” (Mitchell, 1989, p. 108).

Krsā Gautamī was overjoyed when she heard this. She went from house to house to ask for the mustard seeds, and although everyone was willing to help, she was not able to find a family where death had not visited in the past. By evening, she was able to look at the reality of her situation objectively, and she understood the lecture that Buddha had given her. “How selfish am I in my grief!” she thought. “Death is universal; yet even in this valley of death there is a Path that leads to Deathlessness him who has surrendered all thought of self!” (Mitchell, 1989, p. 108).

Krsā Gautamī buried her son and returned to the Buddha to ask for guidance and support. The Buddha taught her about the impermanence of all things, the reality of suffering, and how to gain peace and liberation from the pain of grief and all suffering by developing equanimity and nonattachment and following the path that leads to enlightenment. According to the story, Krsā Gautamī became the first woman who attained enlightenment under the guidance of the Buddha (Mitchell, 1989).

### **The Foolishness of the Wise and the Wisdom of Fools**

Because truth is not necessarily straightforward but can be approached from a variety of perspectives, the advice wise people give might sometimes sound foolish to others. Conversely, a wise statement does not indicate the depth of a person’s grasp of wisdom (Ardelt, 2004a; Sternberg, 2012). After all, sage advice can be given by fools. It is not simply what a person says but the intent with which a judgment is offered that distinguishes a wise individual from a fool. As Kekes (1983, p. 286) explains

A fool can learn to say all the things a wise man says, and to say them on the same occasions. The difference between them is that the wise man is prompted to say what he does, because he recognizes the significance of human limitations and possibilities, because he is guided in his actions by their significance, and because he is able to exercise good judgment in hard cases, while the fool is mouthing clichés.

Fools might speak wise words without a deeper understanding of their meaning, but perceptive listeners can discern the underlying truth. Conversely, if people are deaf to the wisdom of others, even the wisest words are rendered meaningless. In fact, wisdom per se cannot be taught directly or communicated, for example, through books or proverbs (Ardelt, 2004a; Blanchard-Fields & Norris, 1995; Schwartz & Sharpe, 2006). Since books, proverbs, and wise sayings only contain descriptive knowledge, readers must develop their own deeper interpretative knowledge for wisdom to emerge. Descriptive knowledge consists of a simple description of facts, whereas interpretative knowledge necessitates a deeper understanding of the descriptively known facts, which ultimately leads to a transformation of the individual (Kekes, 1983).

Because wisdom cannot be taught directly, wise teachers often “trick” their disciples into understanding and sometimes might deem it necessary to act like a fool to get a particular point across (e.g., Hanna & Ottens, 1995; Randall & Kenyon, 2001; Yamada, 1979). The difference between a sage and a fool is that wise individuals know what they are doing, whereas fools give sage advice accidentally without truly understanding or benefiting from the advice.

For example, the way Buddha taught depended on the mental state of his students. On one occasion, he simply held up a flower and smiled. This particular gesture might have looked foolish to others, but it brought complete realization of the truth to the one student for whom it was intended (Kohn, 1994). By contrast, the story of Buddha’s brother-in-law (or first cousin), Devadatta, who tried to take over Buddha’s role by imitating his words and gestures without having progressed on the path to wisdom himself, illustrates that fools will not enjoy long-lasting success (Kohn, 1994; Ñanamoli, 2001). According to the *Vinaya Pitaka*, Devadatta was more interested in power, honor, and renown than in liberation from all suffering. His goal was to become the leader of the *Sangha* (i.e., the community of monks who followed Buddha’s teachings), and he devised several schemes to kill the Buddha with the help of Prince Ajātasattu, his benefactor. After all assassination attempts failed, Devadatta challenged Buddha to introduce stricter rules for the monks (to be forest dwellers only, to eat only begged-for almsfood, to wear refuse rags, to be tree-root dwellers, and not to eat any meat or fish), which Buddha refused to implement. Devadatta then used Buddha’s rebuke to create a schism in the *Sangha*. He went to the community of monks, convinced 500 newly anointed members to follow the stricter rules and departed with them. When Buddha heard about the departure of Devadatta with the 500 monks, he sent his chief disciples Sāriputta and Moggallāna after them.

Devadatta was sitting teaching the Dhamma [path to enlightenment] surrounded by a large assembly. He saw the venerable Sāriputta and the venerable Moggallāna coming in the distance. He told the bhikkhus [monks]: “See, bhikkhus, the Dhamma is well proclaimed by

me. Even the monk Gotama's chief disciples, Sāriputta and Moggallāna, come to me and come over to my teaching."

... Now when Devadatta had instructed, urged, roused and encouraged the bhikkhus with talk on the Dhamma for much of the night, he said to the venerable Sāriputta: "Friend Sāriputta, the Sangha of bhikkhus is still free from fatigue and drowsiness. Perhaps a talk on the Dhamma may occur to you. My back is paining me, so I will rest it."

"Even so, friend," the venerable Sāriputta replied. Then Devadatta laid out his cloak of patches folded in four, and he lay down on his right side in the lion's sleeping pose, one foot overlapping the other. But he was tired, and he dropped off to sleep for a while, forgetful and not fully aware. (*Vinaya Pitaka Cullavagga*, 7:4, as cited in Nanamoli, 2001, pp. 268–269)

After Devadatta had fallen asleep, Sāriputta and Moggallāna taught the assembled monks Buddha's true teachings and then led them back to the Buddha. When Devadatta awoke and found out what happened, he got so upset that he vomited blood. Although Devadatta initially gained many followers by imitating the Buddha, he was ultimately discredited, abandoned, and died in disgrace, because even many of his followers came to realize that he valued authority over authenticity (Kohn, 1994; Nanamoli, 2001).

### Wisdom Is Timeless and Universal yet Relative and Changing

Wisdom is timeless and universal (Clayton, 1982; Csikszentmihalyi & Rathunde, 1990; Levenson & Crumpler, 1996), because it provides universal answers to universal questions that are concerned with the basic predicaments of human existence, such as the meaning and purpose of life, physical and mental suffering, loss, and ultimately death. Since those issues are universal, wise solutions related to those issues need to be universal as well (Assmann, 1994; Holliday & Chandler, 1986).

However, wisdom is also flexible and fluid, resembling a process of becoming more than a state of being (Blanchard-Fields & Norris, 1995; Clayton & Birren, 1980; Csikszentmihalyi & Rathunde, 1990). In fact, openness to experience has been one of the most consistent correlates (Ardelt, 2011a; Glück & Bluck, 2012; Le, 2011; Levenson, Jennings, Aldwin, & Shiraishi, 2005; Mickler & Staudinger, 2008; Staudinger, Maciel, Smith, & Baltes, 1998) and predictors of wisdom (Helson & Srivastava, 2002; Wink & Helson, 1997). Because one goal in the pursuit of wisdom is the comprehension of the true or deeper meaning of phenomena and events (Chandler & Holliday, 1990; Sternberg, 1990b), wisdom cannot be gained by simply hearing or reading about its timeless and universal truths, but rather must be *realized* to be understood (Ardelt, 2004b; Hall, 2010; Moody, 1986). According to Kekes (1983), the knowledge inherent in wisdom is not necessarily new knowledge but newly understood or *interpretative* knowledge. Interpretative knowledge illuminates the personal significance and meaning of generally known facts. For example, everyone knows that humans are mortal. However, to really understand the significance and meaning of the fact that I as well as all my loved ones will die someday requires interpretative knowledge or wisdom (see the example of Krsṇā

Gautamī above). Wisdom has to be *realized* through a reflection on personal experiences, which will transform the individual in the process (Achenbaum & Orwoll, 1991; Ardel, 2000b; Ferrari et al., 2012; Glück & Bluck, 2012; Csikszentmihalyi & Nakamura, 2005; Yang, 2008a). For example, after his mother died, a wise elder realized the universal truth that he was not grieving for the deceased but his own sense of loss, which ultimately helped him to overcome his grief (Ardelt, 2005, p. 14).

[I had t]he thought that: why am I fretting? You're fretting for yourself. That's selfishness. That is selfish of you. Because you're really crying for yourself. You're missing her. But Mother is at peace. She got tired. And I guess that's the time when you do as much as you can do or want to do. You're ready. You're not going to hasten it or do anything to cause it, but you're ready. And she had told us she was ready, so what are you crying for? And for a short time I worked on it badly, but I don't cry anymore.

Although the essence of wisdom is timeless and universal, concrete expressions of wisdom are context specific and depend on the level and mode of understanding of the people involved (Jacobs, 1989; Schwartz & Sharpe, 2006). This paradox might explain why expressions of wisdom vary across cultures (Edmondson, 2012; Takahashi, 2000, 2012; Takahashi & Overton, 2005). For example, the manifestations of wisdom in developing countries or in Eastern societies can be somewhat different from its manifestations in Western cultures (Jeste & Vahia, 2008; Takahashi & Bordia, 2000; Yang, 2001). The techniques teachers use to convey their wisdom are influenced by the unique circumstances of the situation, such as the cultural customs, religious traditions and practices, and the mental states of the persons who impart and seek wisdom (Birren & Svensson, 2005). Yet, the deeper meaning and underlying truth of those expressions of wisdom are invariant to time and place (Jacobs, 1989; Levitt, 1999). The wiser individuals become, the more they will recognize that all wise men and women across different historical times and cultures teach the same universal truths. In fact, because wisdom is universal, it can function as a bridge between generations as well as between people from different social and ethnic backgrounds (Clayton, 1982), but the concrete expression of wisdom always depends on the situation and the people involved (Jacobs, 1989; Schwartz & Sharpe, 2006).

For example, the essence of Buddha's teaching remains relevant and valid today, even though numerous social and political changes have taken place during the last 2,500 years. Millions subscribe to the *four noble truths* that (1) life is suffering, (2) the cause of suffering is craving and attachment, (3) removal of craving and attachment means the end of suffering, and (4) to end suffering, one needs to follow the *noble eightfold path*: right views, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration (e.g., Ñanamoli, 2001). Although Buddha's teachings are conveyed to individuals in different terms and forms than 2,500 years ago, for example, through books, tapes, the internet, and films, rather than recited by a monk in *Sutra* form, the general path to ultimate wisdom and the end of all suffering remains the same. In fact, mindfulness or *Vipassana* meditation, which has become quite popular in recent years (e.g., Baer, 2003; Chiesa & Serretti, 2009; Grossman, Niemann, Schmidt, & Walach, 2004;

Rosch, 2012), contains the essence of the original practice that the Buddha taught (Hart, 1987).

### ***Affective Dimension: Love***

Self-reflective thinking leads to deeper insights into one's own and others' motives and behavior and to a reduction in self-centeredness, subjectivity, and projections, which, in turn, are likely to increase a person's sympathetic and compassionate love toward others (Ardelt, 2000b; Csikszentmihalyi & Nakamura, 2005; Levitt, 1999; Pascual-Leone, 1990). One important step in the development of wisdom and compassionate love is the acceptance of reality, including one's own and other people's faults and limitations. This does not mean, however, that a wise person will lead a life of indifferent acceptance and nonaction. On the contrary, such an individual is free to engage in actions that truly benefit others (Baltes & Staudinger, 2000; Kekes, 1995; Kupperman, 2005). A wise person does not unconsciously react to external and internal stimuli. By acknowledging and accepting external and internal forces, wise persons are able to weaken their power and ultimately change reality.

### **Self-Development Through Selflessness**

Truly wise people, such as the Buddha, tend to be the most psychologically developed individuals. They are mature, psychologically healthy, autonomous, and fully liberated from all external and internal forces (Ardelt, 2000b; Csikszentmihalyi & Rathunde, 1990; Levenson & Crumpler, 1996; Mickler & Staudinger, 2008; Pascual-Leone, 1990). Through the development of equanimity and the complete mindful acceptance of the present moment, wise persons achieve inner peace (Ardelt, 2005; Hart, 1987). Yet, a wise person is also *selfless*—that is, free from any attachments to the self (Carmody & Carmody, 1994; Curnow, 1999; Layard, 2007; Levenson et al., 2001; Takahashi, 2000). How can we explain the paradox that the highest level of self-development necessitates the dissolution of a sense of self?

Wise individuals' selflessness is not equivalent to low self-esteem or a low sense of self-confidence (Helson & Srivastava, 2002). Maslow (1970, p. 200) even pointed out that "...the best way to transcend the ego is via having a strong identity." There is a dialectical relationship between selflessness and self-knowledge (Levenson & Crumpler, 1996; Levitt, 1999). Only individuals who know who they are can overcome their self-centeredness. The quest for self-development and wisdom initiates a process of self-knowledge that reveals the illusory nature of the self (Ardelt, 2008b). People on the path to wisdom realize that the self is not a stable entity but a social construct (Mead, 1934; Metzinger, 2003) that consists of attachments and aversions to social identities, personality

characteristics, behavioral tendencies, etc. (Levenson et al., 2001). Through the practice of mindful self-reflection and self-examination and the direct experience and acceptance of reality with its ever-changing nature, the attachments and aversions of the egotistical self gradually dissolve, which results in greater concern for the well-being of all and an altruistic, all-encompassing love (Achenbaum & Orwoll, 1991; Helson & Srivastava, 2002; Maslow, 1970; Rosch, 2012; Takahashi, 2000). For example, when describing wise exemplars, two students wrote (Ardelt, 2008a, p. 100)

[My wise] grandfather shows a lot of sympathy and compassion for people. He never holds grudges and always knows what is best for everyone. He never seems concerned about his own welfare, but more concerned about the welfare of the people around him.

Amongst the many lessons my [wise] great grandfather taught me, the most valuable was the one that I learned watching him live his daily life. In every situation, my great grandfather looked for the good in people. He always put himself on the line for others and truly knew the value of charity. He was extremely self-less and caring.

Hence, wise people's self-development ultimately leads to selflessness or self-transcendence manifested in thoughts, feelings, and deeds toward the benefit of all rather than only their own self-interests (Kupperman, 2005; Levenson & Aldwin, 2012; Levitt, 1999; Rosch, 2012).

For example, the *Anguttara Nikāya* relates the story of a *Brahmin* who, after encountering the Buddha meditating under a tree, asked him whether he was a god, an angel, a spirit, or a human being. The Buddha answered that he was neither. By attaining enlightenment, he had overcome his egotism, transcended the self, and was able to live entirely for others, at peace and in harmony with the world (Armstrong, 2001).

Such a death to self was not a darkness, however frightening it might seem to an outsider; it made people fully aware of their own nature, so that they lived at the peak of their capacity. How should the *brahmin* categorize the Buddha? "Remember me," the Buddha told him, "as one who has woken up." (*Anguttara Nikāya*, 4:36, as cited in Armstrong, 2001, p. 161)

Buddha's enlightenment experience resulted in a feeling of all-encompassing love for all beings. Out of compassion, Buddha started to teach the path to enlightenment to others to relieve them from their miseries, and he continued to do so for the rest of his life (Carmody & Carmody, 1994; Ñānamoli, 2001). Even at the moment of his death at the age of 80 and without regard to his own discomfort, he taught the path to enlightenment to a young ascetic who eagerly asked about the realization of the ultimate truth and the cessation of all suffering (Kohn, 1994; Ñānamoli, 2001; Thomas, 1949). Enlightenment, which is considered the highest form of spiritual self-development, resulted in selflessness.

### **Involvement Through Detachment**

Wise people tend to observe reality with equanimity and detachment, as it really is and not as they would like it to be (Hart, 1987; Levenson et al., 2001; Maslow, 1970).

Yet, they are not indifferent to the fates of others (Csikszentmihalyi & Nakamura, 2005). On the contrary, because wise individuals have transcended their self-centeredness, subjectivity, and projections, they experience sympathetic and compassionate love toward others (Achenbaum & Orwoll, 1991; Kramer, 1990; Orwoll & Achenbaum, 1993). They are more concerned about collective and universal issues than about their own personal well-being (Clayton, 1982; Kupperman, 2005; Sternberg, 1998). Moreover, their public involvement in collective and universal issues is often more effective than that of others because they can see reality more clearly and objectively (Levenson et al.).

Wise people know not only what they *should* do to benefit themselves and others (Clayton, 1982) but also what they should *not* do, especially in critical or difficult life situations (Ardelt, 2008a; Kekes, 1983, 1995). They are less distracted and influenced by egotistical concerns and, therefore, can concentrate all their energy and effort on the realization of the common good (Yang, 2008b). Yet, while wise individuals feel sympathy and compassion for others, they are not overwhelmed by emotions but maintain a calm and balanced mind even in extreme situations (Ardelt, 2005, 2008a; Csikszentmihalyi & Rathunde, 1990; Hart, 1987). For example, a student reported (Ardelt, 2008a, p. 85)

[One] reason I consider my grandfather to be wise is his composure. He is always very even keeled and I have never honestly seen him get worked up about anything. Even at times of absolute joy all one sees is a very satisfied smile. I believe that this is an important mark of wisdom as he understands that there is always going to be good and bad events in one's life and that fussing about it changes nothing. Furthermore, he is able to live by this in addition to understanding it. The balance he lives his life by is ultimately the reason I consider him to be wise.

Wise people manifest what Erikson (1964, p. 133) called a “detached concern with life.” They are involved, but at the same time, they also remain detached and do not, for instance, seek to control other people's lives (Randall & Kenyon, 2001).

There are many stories of how Buddha and his disciples changed the attitudes and behavior of people who came in contact with Buddha's teachings. One example is the story of the attempted assassination of the Buddha (Ñanamoli, 2001). According to the *Vinaya Pitaka*, Devadatta convinced Prince Ajātasattu to send a man to kill the Buddha. To eliminate all traces of their involvement, Devadatta ordered two other men to kill the man on his return, four men to kill the two men, eight men to kill the four, and sixteen men to kill the eight.

Then the one man took his sword and shield and fixed his bow and quiver, and he went to where the Blessed One was. But as he drew near, he grew frightened, till he stood still, his body quite rigid. The Blessed One saw him thus and said to him: “Come, friend, do not be afraid.” Then the man laid aside his sword and shield and put down his bow and quiver. He went up to the Blessed One and prostrated himself at his feet, saying: “Lord, I have transgressed, I have done wrong like a fool confused and blundering, since I came here with evil intent, with intent to do murder. Lord, may the Blessed One forgive my transgression as such for restraint in the future.”

“Surely, friend, you have transgressed, you have done wrong like a fool confused and blundering, since you came here with evil intent, with intent to do murder. But since you see your transgression as such and so act in accordance with the Dhamma, we forgive it; for



it is growth in the Noble One's Discipline when a man sees a transgression as such and so acts in accordance with the Dhamma and enters upon restraint for the future." (*Vinaya Pitaka Cullavagga* 7:3, as cited in Ñanamoli, 2001, pp. 260–261)

The Buddha taught the man the path to enlightenment, and after he understood the wisdom of the path, he asked to be accepted as one of Buddha's followers. The Buddha consented and told him to leave by a different path. When the two men waited in vain for the one man they had been instructed to kill, they followed up the path until they encountered the Buddha sitting under a tree.

They went up to him and after paying homage to him, they sat down at one side. The Blessed One gave them progressive instruction. Eventually, they said: "Magnificent, Lord! . . . Let the Blessed One receive us as his followers. . . ."

Then the Blessed One dismissed them by another path. The same thing happened with the four, the eight and the sixteen men. (*Vinaya Pitaka Cullavagga* 7:3, cited in Ñanamoli, 2001, p. 261)

Loving-kindness, sympathy, and compassion were Buddha's major tools for accomplishing change in others. His goal was not to force his teachings on the world, to accumulate a large number of followers, or to establish a powerful religious sect but to relieve the suffering of humankind. People who were ready to see the truth that he taught could easily follow his teachings, but Buddha was equally resigned to the fact that many chose not to pursue the path to wisdom and enlightenment (Armstrong, 2001; Carmody & Carmody, 1994).

### Change Through Acceptance

Although one goal of wisdom is to perceive and accept reality as it is (Carmody & Carmody, 1994; Hart, 1987; Maslow, 1970), paradoxically, the process of acquiring wisdom changes one's self, one's sense of reality, and ultimately reality itself. Individuals typically perceive themselves and the world through a veil of subjectivity and projections. When people manage to accept and objectively observe the reality of the present moment, however, the nature of phenomena and events change for them, including the phenomenon of the self, which initiates a process of self-transformation (Achenbaum & Orwoll, 1991; Assmann, 1994; Gadamer, 1960). Their self-centeredness and egotism decrease, and they develop more empathy, sympathy, and compassion for others. This, in turn, is likely to improve their general relationships with others (Achenbaum & Orwoll, 1991; Ardel, 2000a, 2008a). Because wise individuals can see reality more clearly by having transcended their own subjectivity and projections, they are not offended and hurt, even if they become the target of other people's negative projections and adverse behavior (Hart). Instead of reacting with negativity, such as anger, rejection, or depression, wise persons empathetically understand other people's limited perspectives and, therefore, are likely to respond to their negative behavior with forgiveness and compassionate love (Ardel, 2008b). In the process, wise individuals often are able to help others overcome their subjective projections

and negative emotions, particularly in difficult life situations. Moreover, the compassionate love that emanates from wise persons tends to have a profound positive effect on people who come in contact with them (Ardelt, 2008a). As one student wrote (Ardelt, p. 100)

The Dalai Lama . . . in many ways is the epitome of wisdom. In listening to many of the Dalai Lama's [talks] you immediately feel an overwhelming sense of humbleness and kindness emanating from his teachings. At the core of his beliefs is always radiating compassion and love to each [and] every life form you come in contact with. . . . Not surprisingly, you will find that the large majority of people immediately fall in love with the Dalai Lama upon either seeing him speak or simply exposing themselves to his valuable lessons in life.

In this manner, a wise individual gradually improves the world. For example, by observing and accepting the truth within himself without reacting with either craving or aversion, Siddhartha Gautama became the Buddha, the Enlightened One, a completely changed person (Carmody & Carmody, 1994; Kohn, 1994; Ñanamoli, 2001). Through his teachings on perceiving and accepting the reality of the present moment, he changed and still continues to change many people in search of wisdom and enlightenment (see the above examples of Krsā Gautamī and the reformed assassins). Hence, through acceptance and loving-kindness rather than a political or social revolution, Gautama Buddha changed the world.

## Conclusion

This chapter explored the paradoxes of personal wisdom in its reflective, cognitive, and affective domains. In the reflective domain, building on the classical insight "I know that I do not know," we explained why the development of wisdom requires a will-not-to-will and an act of nonaction, how loss can be gain, and how liberation can be attained through the acceptance of limitations. In the cognitive domain, we discussed how wise judgment is possible in the face of uncertainty, the difference between the wisdom of fools and the foolishness of the wise, and how wisdom is simultaneously timeless and universal yet relative and changing. Finally, in the affective domain, we described how self-development leads to selflessness, how wise people are involved while remaining detached, and how an acceptance of reality changes reality. People who follow the paradoxical path to wisdom will gain liberation from internal and external forces, get closer to the truth, and develop unconditional love.

Yet, how can we judge a person's degree of wisdom if it consists of a collection of paradoxes? Without attempting to assess the paradoxes of wisdom directly, we have tried to measure the underlying reflective, cognitive, and affective dimensions of the paradoxes by developing a self-administered *three-dimensional wisdom scale* (3D-WS; Ardel, 2003). The 12 items of the *reflective wisdom dimension* assess the ability and willingness to look at phenomena and events from different perspectives (e.g., I always try to look at all sides of a problem) and the absence of bitterness,

subjectivity, and projections (e.g., things often go wrong for me by no fault of my own—reversed). The 14 items of the *cognitive wisdom dimension* capture in a reverse way a deep understanding of life and the desire to know the truth, by measuring the ability or willingness to understand a situation or phenomenon thoroughly (e.g., ignorance is bliss—reversed), knowledge of the positive and negative aspects of human nature (e.g., people are either good or bad—reversed), an acknowledgement of ambiguity and uncertainty in life (e.g., there is only one right way to do anything—reversed), and the ability to make important decisions despite life’s unpredictability and uncertainties (I am hesitant about making important decisions after thinking about them—reversed). The 13 items of the *compassionate wisdom dimension* gauge the presence of positive, caring, and nurturant emotions and behavior (e.g., sometimes I feel a real compassion for everyone), including the motivation to invest in other people’s well-being (e.g., if I see people in need, I try to help them one way or another), and the absence of indifferent or negative emotions and behavior toward others (e.g., I am annoyed by unhappy people who just feel sorry for themselves—reversed). Wisdom, assessed by the 3D-WS, has been found to be positively related to self-compassion, self-acceptance, humor, emotional regulation, mindfulness, savoring, mastery, autonomy, purpose in life, personal growth, optimism, curiosity/exploration, openness to experiences, extroversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, pro-social values, forgiveness, positive relations, life satisfaction, general well-being, and happiness and negatively associated with neuroticism and depressive symptoms (Ardelt, 2003, 2011a; Bailey & Russell, 2008; Beaumont, 2011; Bergsma & Ardel, 2012; Ferrari, Kahn, Benayon, & Nero, 2011; Le, 2011; Mansfield, McLean, & Lilgendahl, 2010; Neff, Rude, & Kirkpatrick, 2007).

Although most people profess to believe in the value of wisdom and wise judgments for themselves and their leaders (Assmann, 1994; Taranto, 1989), paradoxically, most modern societies do not make much effort to harvest and increase the wisdom of their citizens (Hall, 2010). As Clayton and Birren (1980, p. 131) stated, “Presently, our technological society encourages productivity rather than reflection and values problem-solving abilities rather than perceiving the assets of a broad questioning approach.” Growth in technical knowledge, economic affluence, and cognitive abilities appear to be more important in modern society than the nurturing of wisdom, but to solve societal problems in an interconnected complex world requires not only technical expertise but also wisdom (Etheredge, 2005; Maxwell, 2012). Layard (2005, p. 75) noted, “We face the paradox; in many ways life is better than fifty years ago. We have unprecedented wealth, better health and nicer jobs. Yet we are not happier.” According to Howard (2010), modern societies are characterized by *paradexity*, that is, the convergence of paradox and complexity, which individuals experience as (a) a depersonalization of social interactions while connecting to an ever increasing number of people through technical devices, such as e-mail, texting, and social network sites; (b) an overabundance of information without being able to separate useful information from “noise”; (c) an acceleration of technological innovations and “time saving” electronic devices that leave no time for reflection and solitude; and (d) an increasing

sense of fragmentation and loss of a physically close community amidst growing universal interconnectedness. To deal with paradoxity, Howard suggests that governments and businesses need to invest in the development of (a) wisdom to foster deep thinking and reflection, (b) mindfulness to pay closer attention to the present moment, (c) conversation skills to learn how to listen and conduct meaningful conversations with others that tackle the big rather than the trivial questions of life, and (d) a deep human interaction economy to meet others' needs in an emotionally engaging and fulfilling way.

Yet, the pursuit of wisdom is too often considered to be a private task, whereas society actively sponsors the acquisition of intellectual capital through the education system. To succeed as a society in the area of paradoxity, however, schools and universities should not only promote the acquisition of intellectual knowledge and technical know-how but also the development of wisdom (Brown, 2004; Ferrari & Potworowski, 2008; Maxwell, 2012; Reznitskaya & Sternberg, 2004). Although wisdom cannot be taught in the same way as intellectual knowledge and technical expertise, it can be taught indirectly by helping students to view and experience the world from many different angles so that they learn to make wise decisions and develop empathy and compassion for others (Bailey & Russell, 2008; Sternberg, 2001). We need wise politicians and business leaders who are concerned about collective and universal issues, consider the short-term as well as the long-ranging consequences of their actions to optimize the common good, and feel a strong sense of responsibility for present and future generations across the globe (Etheredge, 2005; Rowley, 2006; Solomon, Marshall, & Gardner, 2005; Sternberg, 2007; Yang, 2012). Such leaders engage in moral and ethical behavior that is directed toward the benefit of humankind rather than their own benefit and that of a selected group of people in power (Kekes, 1995; Kupperman, 2005; Sternberg, 2012). In spite of all those advantages, however, schools and universities rarely try to promote the acquisition of wisdom (Jax, 2005; Maxwell, 2012; Sternberg, 2001). Yet, an encouraging sign is the growing trend of introducing schoolchildren and college students to the practice of mindfulness meditation (Astin, 1997; Holland, 2006; Kabat-Zinn, 2000; Oman et al., 2007; Oman, Shapiro, Thoresen, Plante, & Flinders, 2008; Saltzman & Goldin, 2008; Wall, 2005), which was the main meditation technique that Buddha taught to his followers (Hart, 1987; Shapiro & Carlson, 2009). Students who learn to be mindfully present in the moment are likely to become more open to new experiences, better able to deal with daily stressors and adversity, more understanding, accepting, and compassionate toward themselves and others, and better future leaders (Hooker & Fodor, 2008).

We conclude this chapter with one last paradox: we need wisdom to understand wisdom. As Sternberg (1990a, p. 3) remarked,

To understand wisdom fully and correctly probably requires more wisdom than any of us have. Thus, we cannot quite comprehend the nature of wisdom because of our own lack of it. But if scientists were to demand total understanding, they would quickly be out of their jobs, because total understanding is something we can fancy we are approaching, but it is almost certainly not something we can ever achieve ... the recognition that total understanding will always elude us is itself a sign of wisdom.

It is probably safe to assume that none of the researchers who have tried to comprehend and define wisdom (the authors included) is completely wise. Hence, all attempts to describe wisdom remain necessarily incomplete. However, by combining our diverse incomplete perspectives, we might arrive at a definition of wisdom that is more comprehensive than a single insight alone. In this regard, the scientific endeavor resembles the quest for wisdom: by looking at a phenomenon from different perspectives, we become aware of our own subjectivity and gain a more complete picture of the phenomenon in question.

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**Part IV**  
**The Transformative Potential of Wisdom**  
**Inquiry**

# Wisdom: Object of Study or Basic Aim of Inquiry?

Nicholas Maxwell

## The Need for Wisdom

That the world urgently needs more wisdom can hardly be doubted the moment one considers recent history and the global crises we face. There is the George Bush led “war on terrorism” and the excesses to which that led: Guantanamo Bay, the Afghanistan war and the Iraq war. Bin Laden no doubt hoped the attack on the twin towers in New York would provoke the USA and its allies to over-react. What actually happened must have exceeded his wildest hopes. Then again there is the credit crunch of 2008 and the world-wide recession it caused. A few voices warned of the lunacy of over-extended credit of banks, but they were ignored. The great army of bankers and economists round the world saw no impending disaster, even though it was all but bound to occur, sooner or later. As the population of the earth continues to grow and more and more countries industrialize, so the global consumption of oil and coal steeply rises. The world will not soon run out of coal, but oil is another matter. Many experts estimate that we have already used up half the world’s supply of oil, and what remains will be increasingly difficult to extract. As demand for oil increases and supply decreases, oil will become increasingly expensive, partly because demand exceeds supply and partly because oil becomes increasingly difficult to extract. The world’s industry, transport and economy will face a crisis of epic proportions – one which stares us in the face, but for which we have done little to prepare. In the meantime, increasing consumption of oil and coal leads to increasing emissions of CO<sub>2</sub> into the atmosphere – aided by burning of vast tracts of forests so that the land may be used for agriculture. We know we are rapidly increasing the amount of CO<sub>2</sub> in the atmosphere, we know that this will tend to lead to a warmer climate as CO<sub>2</sub> is a greenhouse gas, and we know the average temperature of the earth is increasing. We know that this will lead to disaster:

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N. Maxwell (✉)

Department of Science and Technology Studies, University College London, London, UK  
e-mail: [nicholas.maxwell@ucl.ac.uk](mailto:nicholas.maxwell@ucl.ac.uk)

melting glaciers and ice at the poles, rising sea levels and flooding of densely populated land, increasingly frequent and intense storms, floods and drought and vast tracts of the earth eventually becoming uninhabitable. Millions, possibly billions, will die as a result unless we rapidly decrease CO<sub>2</sub> emissions globally. All this is known – and yet, so far, we have been unable to act effectively on this knowledge – and many still deny that there is a problem. On the one hand, we strive to promote industrial and economic development even though we know, on the other hand that, as conducted at present, this will lead to catastrophe.

These, no doubt, are the kind of considerations that led Robert Sternberg to say recently, “If there is anything the world needs, it is wisdom. Without it, I exaggerate not at all in saying that very soon, there may be no world”.<sup>1</sup> And these, no doubt, are leading considerations that have led Sternberg and others, recently, to initiate and develop the scientific study of wisdom. If the world is to acquire vitally needed wisdom – so it is implicitly assumed – we first need to know what wisdom is, and how it is to be acquired. We need – it is assumed – more *scientific knowledge* about wisdom.

I first became aware of this new field of the scientific study of wisdom as a result of the publication of Sternberg’s book *Wisdom: Its Nature, Origins, and Development*<sup>2</sup> in 1990, to which 19 researchers contributed, including Sternberg himself. Since then, there has been an upsurge in scientific research into wisdom.<sup>3</sup> Allied to this, no doubt, is the University of Chicago’s Arête Initiative, a \$2 million research programme on “the nature and benefits of wisdom” which seeks in part to arrive at a definition of wisdom.<sup>4</sup>

Does this upsurge in scientific research into wisdom constitute an adequate response to the global crises we face? The rationale behind the research is clear. If we are to manage our planetary affairs in wiser ways than we have done in the recent past, we urgently need more wisdom in the world. In order to discover how we might achieve this, what we need, it would seem, is more knowledge and understanding about the nature of wisdom, what it is, what its origins are and how it is to be acquired and developed. Hence the growth in research that seeks to define wisdom and improve our scientific knowledge and understanding of it.

All this seems reasonable enough, and yet, I shall argue, it represents a seriously inadequate response to the crises we face. Something far more radical is required than an increase in knowledge about wisdom. What we need is a radical transformation in the aims and methods, the whole character of science and of academic inquiry more generally, so that the basic aim of academia becomes to seek and

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<sup>1</sup> Sternberg (2003, p. xviii).

<sup>2</sup> Sternberg (1990).

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Smith and Baltes (1990), Baltes and Staudinger (1993), Staudinger and Baltes (1996), Sternberg (1998), Baltes and Staudinger (2000), Kunzmann and Baltes (2003), Le (2008); Trowbridge (2008), Yang (2008a, 2008b). See also works referred to by these papers. I am grateful to Richard Trowbridge for drawing my attention to many of these papers.

<sup>4</sup> See <http://wisdomresearch.org/>. This website has a long list of publications on wisdom that have appeared since Sternberg (1990).

promote wisdom. Instead of seeking more knowledge about wisdom, all of rational inquiry needs to become devoted to acquiring and promoting wisdom.

## What Is Wisdom?

Before I plunge into expounding my main argument – we urgently need to bring about a revolution in universities so that their basic task becomes to seek and promote wisdom and not just acquire and apply knowledge – I must first make a few comments about the approach I hold to be an inadequate response to the problems we face: improving knowledge about wisdom.

This approach may seem to require, as a first step, that we define wisdom correctly. On this point, indeed, there seems to be general agreement. Those who seek to improve knowledge about wisdom, even *scientific* knowledge, do indeed seem to take seriously the task of defining wisdom correctly.<sup>5</sup> The arête initiative, already mentioned, actually has as its title “defining wisdom”.<sup>6</sup> The first question to answer correctly, it seems, is “What is wisdom?”

All this assumes, however, that wisdom has some kind of essential nature that is capable of being captured in the correct definition of “wisdom”. But this Aristotelian idea has been devastatingly criticized and demolished by Karl Popper.<sup>7</sup> In seeking the correct answer to “What is wisdom?” the correct definition of wisdom, we are chasing a will-o-the-wisp. What “wisdom” means may, quite legitimately, depend on context and purpose. It is up to us to decide what, precisely, we choose to mean by “wisdom”, depending on what our purpose is. And indeed, those who take the task of defining wisdom seriously have come up with a great variety of definitions.<sup>8</sup> What needs to be appreciated is that there can be no such thing as *the correct* definition of wisdom: the search for it is the search for something that does not exist.

What implications does this have for the endeavour of improving knowledge – even *scientific* knowledge – about wisdom? Just this. Do not engage in the hollow task of trying to arrive at the *correct* definition of wisdom. Avoid defining wisdom in a detailed, precise, narrow way because, if this definition is taken seriously in subsequent work, it will mean results will be restricted to this narrow definition. Those who do research in the field of acquiring knowledge about wisdom would

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<sup>5</sup> In his *The Scientific Approach to Wisdom*, Richard Trowbridge asserts “Defining wisdom remains a major concern for scholars in all fields with an interest in the concept” (Trowbridge, 2005, p. 3).

<sup>6</sup> See <http://wisdomresearch.org/> (accessed February 2011).

<sup>7</sup> See Popper’s decisive critique of this Aristotelian conception of definition: Popper (1962, vol. 2, Ch. 11, Section 2, pp. 9–21).

<sup>8</sup> See Richard Trowbridge, “Definitions of Wisdom”, (<http://wisdomcenteredlife.org/definitions.aspx>; accessed February 2011).

perhaps do well to agree on a broad, loose and inclusive definition, if definition has to be formulated at all.

At this point, it may be objected that I criticize the whole notion of defining “wisdom” and yet put forward just such a definition. Should I not practice what I preach?

Let me explain. The argument I am about to expound, in the next section (about the need to bring about a revolution in the aims and methods of academia), was first developed entirely independently of the notion of wisdom.<sup>9</sup> Subsequently, having come to appreciate that the basic intellectual and humanitarian aim of the academic enterprise ought to be, not just knowledge, but rather to help people realize what is of value to them in life, I cast around for a word to stand in for this aim. It struck me that “wisdom” might not be too inappropriate (although I was aware that the word has connotations at odds with the use I intended to make of it). So, for me, “wisdom” is merely a technical term. It is just shorthand for “the capacity and the active desire to realize – apprehend and make real – what is of value in life, for oneself and others”. What really matters, in my view, is that academia should be rationally organized and devoted to pursuing that aim. That it is called “wisdom” is no more than an afterthought, a secondary matter of no real significance.

Thus I am not engaged in “defining wisdom” in any serious way, at all. I am merely using the word as shorthand for something that I do hold to be of great importance, just indicated.

Having removed myself from the enterprise of “defining wisdom”, I would, however, like to make the following remark in favour of my definition. It successfully encompasses all other serious definitions. There would seem to be one point that all those concerned with wisdom, in one way or another, agree on: wisdom is something that it is of great value to possess. This means that anyone wise in my sense (i) will also be wise in all these other senses (ii) *unless being wise in one or other of these other senses is incompatible with something realizable that is of great value in life*. If (i) is true, then these other notions of wisdom are included in the one I have put forward. If (ii) is true, then the other notions of wisdom are inadequate *if we take realizing what is of most value in life to be common to all serious conceptions of wisdom (including mine)*. The great virtue of my definition of wisdom is that, because it ties wisdom to the capacity to realize what is of value but leaves what is of value entirely open, this definition encompasses all other definitions that hold wisdom to be of value or the means to realization of what is of value.

All this is directly relevant to those concerned with *personal wisdom*, as I shall argue below.

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<sup>9</sup>The first exposition is to be found in Maxwell (1976). In that book I wrote of a “people’s rational science of delight and compassion” – a part of the subtitle of the book – and did not employ the word “wisdom” in the argument at all.



## The Irrationality of Academic Inquiry

With this interlude concerning what wisdom means over, I return to the main business in hand, the need to develop academia so that it seeks and promotes wisdom, the enterprise of improving knowledge about wisdom within the status quo being no substitute.

What the approach of seeking to improve knowledge about wisdom overlooks is the profound, structural irrationality of academic inquiry as at present constituted. It is this structural irrationality of our institutions of learning and research that is in part responsible for the creation of our current global problems and our current incapacity to resolve them intelligently, effectively and humanely. More precisely, these failures stem from the immense success of science and technology allied to their being embedded in a kind of academic enterprise that violates the most elementary requirements for rationality conceivable. It is this situation which demands that we bring about a revolution in our universities to cure them of their wholesale damaging irrationality. Academic inquiry needs to be transformed so that the basic aim becomes not just to acquire knowledge but rather to seek and promote wisdom – wisdom being, as I have said, the capacity and the active desire to realize what is of value in life, for oneself and others, wisdom thus including knowledge and technological know-how, but much else besides. Improving knowledge about wisdom is not enough.

It is not always appreciated that almost all of our current global problems have been made possible by the immense success of modern scientific and technological research. It is this success which makes possible modern industry and agriculture, modern hygiene and medicine; these in turn lead to population growth; to destruction of natural habitats and rapid extinction of species; to modern armaments and the horrific lethal character of modern war and terrorism; to immense differences in wealth and power around the globe; to pollution of earth, sea and air; and above all, of course, to global warming. All these dire features of our modern world have been made possible by the rapid growth of science and technology since the birth of modern science in the seventeenth century. Science and technology are even implicated in the rapid spread of AIDS, AIDS being spread by modern travel.

There are those who blame science, or scientific rationality, for our problems but that profoundly misses the point. It is not science that is the problem but rather science *dissociated from a more fundamental concern to help humanity resolve problems of living in increasingly cooperatively rational ways.*<sup>10</sup> Again, the problem is not too much reason, but not enough. Scientific rationality, so-called, is actually a species of damaging *irrationality* masquerading as rationality. Academic inquiry, as it mostly exists at present, devoted to the growth of knowledge and technological know-how – *knowledge-inquiry* as I shall call it – is actually profoundly irrational when judged from the standpoint of contributing to human welfare. Judged from this all-important standpoint, knowledge-inquiry violates

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<sup>10</sup>“Cooperative rationality” is discussed below.

three of the four most elementary, uncontroversial rules of reason that one can conceive of (to be indicated in a moment). And that knowledge-inquiry is grossly irrational in this way has everything to do with its tendency to generate the kind of global problems considered above. Instead of false simulacra of reason, what we so urgently need is authentic reason devoted to the growth of wisdom.

Knowledge-inquiry demands that a sharp split be made between the social or humanitarian aims of inquiry and the *intellectual* aim. The intellectual aim is to acquire knowledge of truth, nothing being presupposed about the truth. Only those considerations may enter into the intellectual domain of inquiry relevant to the determination of truth – claims to knowledge, results of observation and experiment, arguments designed to establish truth or falsity. Feelings and desires, values, ideals, political and religious views, expressions of hopes and fears, cries of pain and articulation of problems of living: all these must be ruthlessly excluded from the intellectual domain of inquiry as having no relevance to the pursuit of knowledge – although of course inquiry can seek to develop factual knowledge about these things, within psychology, sociology or anthropology. Within natural science, an even more severe censorship system operates: an idea, in order to enter into the intellectual domain of science, must be an empirically testable claim to factual knowledge.

The basic idea of knowledge-inquiry, then, is this. First, knowledge is to be acquired; then it can be applied to help solve social problems. For this to work, authentic objective knowledge must be acquired. Almost paradoxically, human values and aspirations must be excluded from the intellectual domain of inquiry so that genuine factual knowledge is acquired and inquiry can be of genuine human value and can be capable of helping us realize our human aspirations.<sup>11</sup>

This is the conception of inquiry which, I claim, violates reason in a wholesale, structural and damaging manner and, as a result, has an inherent tendency to help generate new problems of living.

What do I mean by “reason”? As I use the term here, rationality appeals to the idea that there are general methods, rules or strategies which, if put into practice, give us our best chance, other things being equal, of solving our problems, realizing our aims. Rationality is an aid to success, but does not guarantee success and does not determine what needs to be done.

Four elementary rules of reason, alluded to above, are the following:

1. Articulate and seek to improve the articulation of the basic problem(s) to be solved.
2. Propose and critically assess alternative possible solutions.

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<sup>11</sup> For a much more detailed exposition of knowledge-inquiry or “the philosophy of knowledge”, see Maxwell (1984 or 2007, Chapter 2). For evidence that knowledge-inquiry prevails in academia, see Maxwell (1984 or 2007, Chapter 6; 2000). I do not claim that everything in academia accords with the edicts of knowledge-inquiry. My claim is, rather, that this is the only candidate for rational inquiry in the public arena; it is the dominant view, exercising an all-pervasive influence over academe. Work that does not conform to its edicts has to struggle to survive.

3. When necessary, break up the basic problem to be solved into a number of *specialized* problems – preliminary, simpler, analogous, subordinate problems – (to be tackled in accordance with rules (1) and (2)) in an attempt to work gradually towards a solution to the basic problem to be solved.
4. Interconnect attempts to solve the basic problem and specialized problems so that basic problem-solving may guide, and be guided by, specialized problem-solving.

Two preliminary points now need to be made.

First, granted that academic inquiry has, as its fundamental aim, to help promote human welfare by intellectual and educational means,<sup>12</sup> then the *problems* that inquiry fundamentally ought to try to help solve are problems of living, problems of action. From the standpoint of achieving what is of value in life, it is what we *do*, or refrain from doing, that ultimately matters. Even where new knowledge and technological know-how are relevant to the achievement of what is of value – as they are in medicine or agriculture, for example – it is always what this new knowledge or technological know-how enables us to *do* that matters. All the global problems discussed above require, for their resolution, not merely new knowledge, but rather new policies, new institutions, new ways of living. Scientific knowledge and associated technological know-how have, if anything, as we have seen, contributed to the creation of these problems in the first place. Thus, problems of living – problems of poverty, ill-health, injustice and deprivation – are solved by what we do or refrain from doing; they are not solved by the mere provision of knowledge (except when a problem of living *is* a problem of knowledge).

Second, in order to achieve what is of value in life more successfully than we do at present, we need to discover how to resolve conflicts and problems of living in more *cooperatively rational* ways than we do at present. There is a spectrum of ways in which conflicts can be resolved, from murder or all out war at the violent end of the spectrum, via enslavement, threat of murder or war, threats of a less extreme kind, manipulation, bargaining, voting, to cooperative rationality at the other end of the spectrum, those involved seeking, by rational means, to arrive at that course of action which does the best justice to the interests of all those involved. A basic task for a kind of academic inquiry that seeks to help promote

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<sup>12</sup> This assumption may be challenged. Does not academic inquiry seek knowledge for its own sake – it may be asked – whether it helps promote human welfare or not? Elsewhere (Maxwell, 2007, pp. 17–19, 70–5, 205–13) I have argued that wisdom-inquiry does better justice than knowledge-inquiry to *both* aspects of inquiry, pure and applied. The basic aim of inquiry, according to wisdom-inquiry, is to help us realize what is of value in life, “realize” meaning both “apprehend” and “make real”. “Realize” thus accommodates both aspects of inquiry, “pure” research or “knowledge pursued for its own sake” on the one hand, and technological or “mission-oriented” research on the other – both, ideally, seeking to contribute to what is of value in human life. Wisdom-inquiry, like sight, is there to help us find our way around. And like sight, wisdom-inquiry is of value to us in two ways: for its intrinsic value and for practical purposes. The first is almost more precious than the second.

human welfare must be to discover how conflict resolution can be moved away from the violent end of the spectrum towards the cooperatively rational end.<sup>13</sup>

Granted this and granted that the above four rules of reason are put into practice, then, at the most fundamental level, academic inquiry needs to:

1. Articulate and seek to improve the articulation of personal, social and global problems of living that need to be solved if the quality of human life is to be enhanced (including those indicated above).
2. Propose and critically assess alternative possible solutions – alternative possible *actions, policies, political programmes, legislative proposals, ideologies and philosophies of life*.

In addition, of course, academic inquiry must:

3. Break up the basic problems of living into subordinate, specialized problems – in particular, specialized problems of knowledge and technology.
4. Interconnect basic and specialized problem-solving.

Academic inquiry as it mostly exists at present puts (3) into practice to splendid effect. The intricate maze of specialized disciplines devoted to improving knowledge and technological know-how that go to make up current academic inquiry is the result. But, disastrously, what we have at present, academic inquiry devoted primarily to improving knowledge, fails to put (1), (2) and (4) into practice. In pursuing knowledge, academic inquiry may articulate problems of knowledge and propose and critically assess possible solutions, possible claims to knowledge – factual theses, observational and experimental results and theories. But, as we have seen, problems of *knowledge* are not (in general) problems of *living*, and solutions to problems of *knowledge* are not (in general) solutions to problems of *living*. In so far as academia does at present put (1) and (2) into practice, in departments of social science and policy studies, it does so only at the periphery and not as its central, fundamental intellectual task.

In short, academic inquiry devoted primarily to the pursuit of knowledge, when construed as having the basic humanitarian aim of helping to enhance the quality of human life by intellectual means, fails to put the two most elementary rules of reason into practice (rules (1) and (2)). Academic inquiry fails to do (at a fundamental level) what it most needs to do, namely, (1) articulate problems of living and (2) propose and critically assess possible solutions. And furthermore, as a result of failing to explore the basic problems that need to be solved, academic inquiry cannot put the fourth rule of rational problem-solving into practice either, namely, (4) interconnect basic and specialized problem-solving. As I have remarked, *three* of the four most elementary rules of rational problem-solving are violated. (For a

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<sup>13</sup> For more detailed discussion of cooperative rationality, see Maxwell (1984, pp. 109–110, 156–7, 161–2, 164–6, 183–99 and 254–5; or 2007, pp. 121–2, 181, 185, 188–190, 206–222 and 275–6).

more detailed development of this argument, see Maxwell, 1980, 1984 or 2004, 2007, 2010.)

This gross structural irrationality of contemporary academic inquiry has profoundly damaging consequences for humanity. As I have pointed out above, granted that our aim is to contribute to human welfare by intellectual means, the basic problems we need to solve are problems of living and problems of action, not problems of knowledge. In failing to give intellectual priority to problems of living, knowledge-inquiry fails to tackle what most needs to be tackled in order to contribute to human welfare. Furthermore, in devoting itself to acquiring knowledge in a way that is unrelated to sustained concern about what humanity's most urgent problems are, as a result of failing to put (1) and (2) into practice and thus failing to put (4) into practice as well, the danger is that scientific and technological research will respond to the interests of the powerful and the wealthy, rather than to the interests of the poor, of those most in need. Scientists, officially seeking knowledge of truth *per se*, have no official grounds for objecting if those who fund research – governments and industry – decide that the truth to be sought will reflect their interests, rather than the interests of the world's poor. And priorities of scientific research, globally, do indeed reflect the interests of the first world, rather than those of the third world.<sup>14</sup>

Knowledge and technology successfully pursued in a way that is not rationally subordinated to the tackling of more fundamental problems of living, through the failure to put (1), (2) and (4) into practice, is bound to lead to the kind of global problems discussed above, problems that arise as a result of newly acquired powers to act being divorced from the ability to act wisely. The creation of our current global problems, and our inability to respond adequately to these problems, has much to do, in other words, with the long-standing, rarely noticed, structural *irrationality* of our institutions and traditions of learning, devoted as they are to acquiring knowledge dissociated from learning how to tackle our problems of living in more cooperatively rational ways. Knowledge-inquiry, because of its irrationality, is designed to *intensify*, not help *solve*, our current global problems.<sup>15</sup>

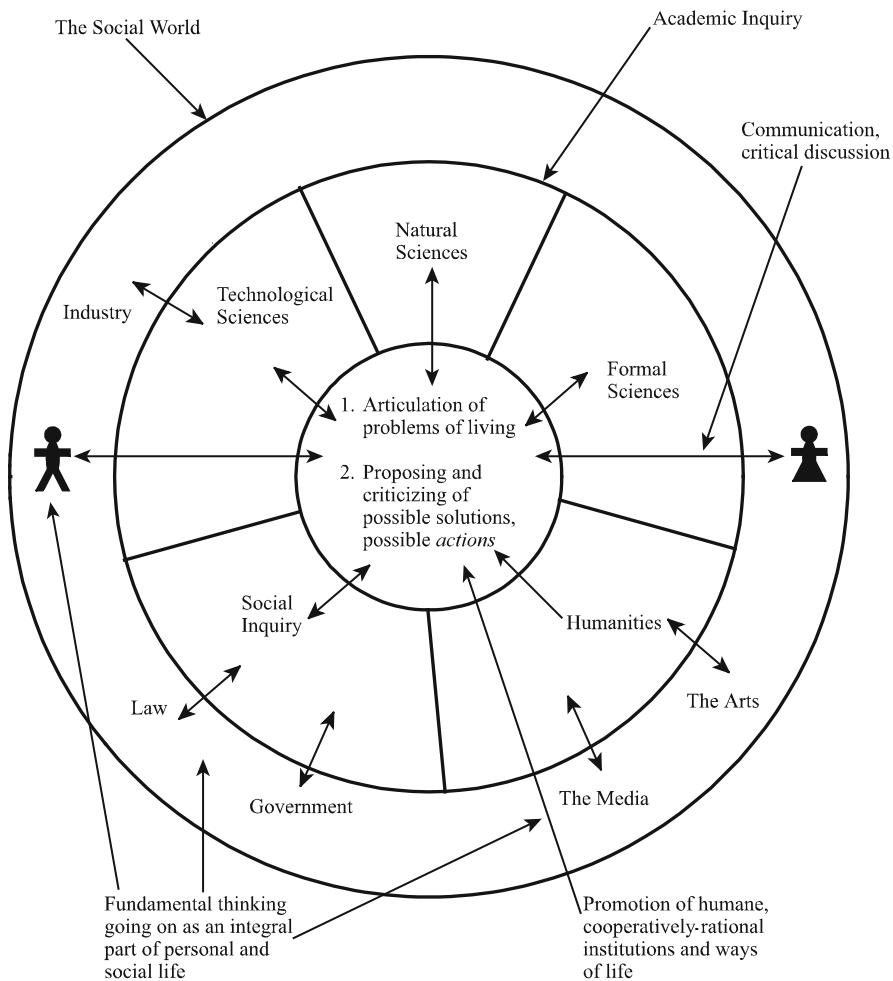
## Wisdom-Inquiry

At once the question arises: What would a kind of inquiry be like that *is* devoted, in a genuinely rational way, to promoting human welfare by intellectual means? I shall call such a hypothetical kind of inquiry *wisdom-inquiry*, to stand in contrast to knowledge-inquiry.

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<sup>14</sup> Funds devoted to military research, in the USA, UK and some other wealthy countries, are especially disturbing, see Langley (2005) and Smith (2003).

<sup>15</sup> See Maxwell (1984 or 2007, Chapter 3) for a much more detailed discussion of the damaging social repercussions of knowledge-inquiry.



**Fig. 1** Wisdom-inquiry implementing problem-solving rationality

As a first step at characterizing wisdom-inquiry, we may take knowledge-inquiry (at its best) and modify it just sufficiently to ensure that all four elementary rules of rational problem-solving, indicated above, are built into its intellectual and institutional structure; see Fig. 1.

The primary change that needs to be made is to ensure that academic inquiry implements rules (1) and (2). It becomes the fundamental task of social inquiry and the humanities (1) to articulate, and seek to improve the articulation of our problems of living and (2) to propose and critically assess possible solutions, from the standpoint of their practicality and desirability. In particular, social inquiry has the task of discovering how conflicts may be resolved in less violent, more cooperatively rational ways. It also has the task of promoting such tackling of

problems of living in the social world beyond academe. Social inquiry is, thus, neither primarily social *science* nor primarily concerned to acquire knowledge of the social world; its primary task is to promote more cooperatively rational tackling of problems of living in the social world. Pursued in this way, social inquiry is intellectually more fundamental than the natural and technological sciences, which tackle subordinate problems of knowledge, understanding and technology, in accordance with rule (3). In Fig. 1, implementation of rule (3) is represented by the specialized problem-solving of the natural, technological and formal sciences and more specialized aspects of social inquiry and the humanities. Rule (4) is represented by the two-way arrows linking fundamental and specialized problem-solving, each influencing the other.

One can go further. According to this view, the thinking that we engage in as we live, in seeking to realize what is of value to us, is intellectually more fundamental than the whole of academic inquiry (which has, as its basic purpose, to help cooperatively rational thinking and problem-solving in life to flourish). Academic thought emerges as a kind of specialization of personal and social thinking in life, the result of implementing rule (3); this means there needs to be a two-way interplay of ideas, arguments and experiences between the social world and academia, in accordance with rule (4). This is represented, in Fig. 1, by the two-way arrows linking academic inquiry and the social world.

The natural and technological sciences need to recognize three domains of discussion: evidence, theory and aims. Discussion of aims seeks to identify that highly problematic region of overlap between that which is discoverable and that which it is of value to discover. Discussion of what it is of value to discover interacts with social inquiry, in accordance with rule (4).<sup>16</sup>

## The Enlightenment Programme

So much for my first argument in support of wisdom-inquiry. I come now to my second argument, which appeals to and modifies the Enlightenment programme of learning from scientific progress how to achieve social progress towards an enlightened world.

In order to implement this programme properly, it is essential to get the following three steps right:

1. The progress-achieving methods of science need to be correctly identified.
2. These methods need to be correctly generalized so that they become fruitfully applicable to any human endeavour, whatever the aims may be, and not just applicable to the endeavour of improving knowledge.

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<sup>16</sup> See also my (1980; 1984 or 2007, Chaps. 4 and 7; 2004, Chaps. 3 and 4; 2010, Chaps. 2, 6 and 9).

3. The correctly generalized progress-achieving methods then need to be exploited correctly in the great human endeavour of trying to make social progress towards an enlightened, wise, civilized world.

Unfortunately, the *philosophes* of the French Enlightenment got all three points wrong.<sup>17</sup> And as a result, these blunders, undetected and uncorrected, are built into the intellectual-institutional structure of academia as it exists today.<sup>18</sup>

First, the *philosophes* failed to capture correctly the progress-achieving methods of natural science. From D'Alembert in the eighteenth century to Popper in the twentieth (Popper, 1959, 1963), the widely held view, amongst both scientists and philosophers, has been (and continues to be) that science proceeds by assessing theories impartially in the light of evidence, *no permanent assumption being accepted by science about the universe independently of evidence*. But this standard empiricist view is untenable. If taken literally, it would instantly bring science to a standstill. For, given any accepted theory of physics, T, Newtonian theory say, or quantum theory, endlessly many empirically more successful rivals can be concocted which agree with T about observed phenomena but disagree arbitrarily about some unobserved phenomena. Physics would be drowned in an ocean of such empirically more successful rival theories.

In practice, these rivals are excluded because they are disastrously disunified. *Two* considerations govern acceptance of theories in physics: empirical success and unity. But in persistently accepting unified theories, to the extent of rejecting disunified rivals that are just as, or even more, empirically successful, physics makes a big persistent assumption about the universe. The universe is such that all disunified theories are false. It has some kind of unified dynamic structure. It is physically comprehensible in the sense that explanations for phenomena exist to be discovered.

But this untestable (and thus metaphysical) assumption that the universe is comprehensible is profoundly problematic. Science is obliged to assume, but does not know, that the universe is comprehensible. Much less does it know that the universe is comprehensible in this or that way. A glance at the history of physics reveals that ideas have changed dramatically over time. In the seventeenth century,

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<sup>17</sup> In their lives they fought dictatorial power, authoritarianism, superstition, dogma, injustice and intolerance with weapons no more lethal than those of argument and wit. In their lives they put something close to wisdom-inquiry into practice. It was in thinking that the intellectual task was to develop social science alongside natural science that they went wrong. See Gay (1973) for a magnificent account of what the *philosophes* did, and did not, achieve.

<sup>18</sup> The blunders of the *philosophes* are not entirely undetected. Karl Popper, in his first four works, makes substantial improvements to the traditional Enlightenment programme (although Popper does not himself present his work in this fashion). Popper first improves traditional conceptions of the progress-achieving methods of science (Popper, 1959). This conception, *falsificationism*, is then generalized to become *critical rationalism*. This is then applied to social, political and philosophical problems (Popper, 1961, 1962, 1963). The version of the Enlightenment programme about to be outlined here can be regarded as a radical improvement of Popper's version, see Maxwell (2004, Chapter 3).



there was the idea that the universe consists of corpuscles, minute billiard balls, which interact only by contact. This gave way to the idea that the universe consists of point-particles surrounded by rigid, spherically symmetrical fields of force, which in turn gave way to the idea that there is one unified self-interacting field, varying smoothly throughout space and time. Nowadays, we have the idea that everything is made up of minute quantum strings embedded in 10 or 11 dimensions of space-time. Some kind of assumption along these lines must be made, but given the historical record and given that any such assumption concerns the ultimate nature of the universe, that of which we are most ignorant, it is only reasonable to conclude that it is almost bound to be false.

The way to overcome this fundamental dilemma inherent in the scientific enterprise is to construe physics as making a hierarchy of metaphysical assumptions concerning the comprehensibility and knowability of the universe, these assumptions asserting less and less as one goes up the hierarchy, and thus becoming more and more likely to be true; see Fig. 2. In this way, a framework of relatively insubstantial, unproblematic, fixed assumptions and associated methods is created within which much more substantial and problematic assumptions and associated methods can be changed, and indeed improved, as scientific knowledge improves. Put another way, a framework of relatively unspecific, unproblematic, fixed *aims* and methods is created within which much more specific and problematic aims and methods evolve as scientific knowledge evolves. (A basic aim of science is to discover in what precise way the universe is comprehensible, this aim evolving as assumptions about comprehensibility evolve.) There is positive feedback between improving knowledge and improving aims and methods, improving knowledge about how to improve knowledge. This is the nub of scientific rationality, the methodological key to the unprecedented success of science.<sup>19</sup> Science adapts its nature to what it discovers about the nature of the universe (see Maxwell, 1974, 1976, 1984 or 1998, 2004, 2005a, 2007).

So much for the first blunder of the traditional Enlightenment and how to put it right.

Second, having failed to identify the methods of science correctly, the *philosophes* naturally failed to generalize these methods properly. They failed to appreciate that the idea of representing the problematic aims (and associated methods) of science in the form of a hierarchy can be generalized and applied fruitfully to other worthwhile enterprises besides science. Many other enterprises have problematic aims – problematic because aims conflict and because what we seek may be unrealizable, undesirable or *both*. Such enterprises, with problematic

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<sup>19</sup> Natural science has made such astonishing progress in improving knowledge and understanding of nature because it has put something like the hierarchical methodology, indicated here, into scientific practice. Officially, however, scientists continue to hold the standard empiricist view that no untestable metaphysical theses concerning the comprehensibility and knowability of the universe are accepted as a part of scientific knowledge. As I have argued elsewhere (Maxwell, 2004, Chapter 2), science would be even more successful, in a number of ways, if scientists adopted and explicitly implemented the hierarchical methodology indicated here.

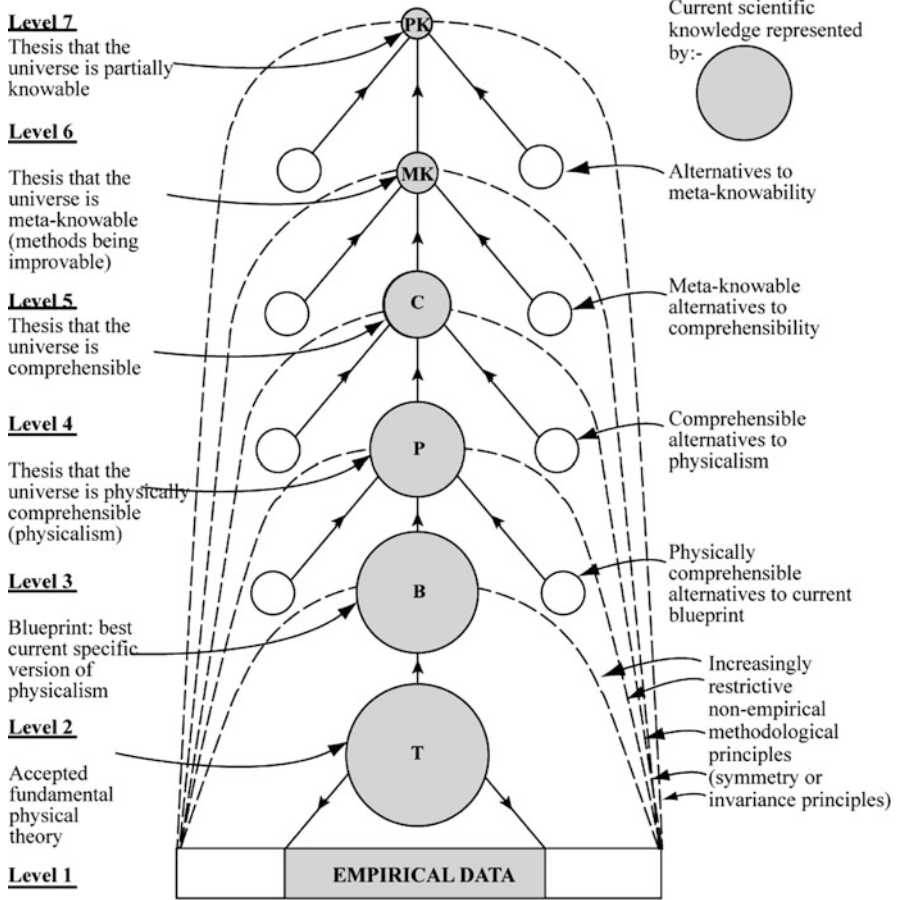


Fig. 2 Hierarchical conception of science

aims, would benefit from employing a hierarchical methodology, generalized from that of science, thus making it possible to improve aims and methods as the enterprise proceeds. There is the hope that, as a result of exploiting in life methods generalized from those employed with such success in science, some of the astonishing success of science might be exported into other worthwhile human endeavours, with problematic aims quite different from those of science.

Third, and most disastrously of all, the *philosophes* failed completely to try to apply such generalized, hierarchical progress-achieving methods to the immense, and profoundly problematic enterprise of making social progress towards an enlightened, wise world. The aim of such an enterprise is notoriously problematic. For all sorts of reasons, what constitutes a good world, an enlightened, wise or civilized world, attainable and genuinely desirable, must be inherently and

permanently problematic.<sup>20</sup> Here, above all, it is essential to employ the generalized version of the hierarchical, progress-achieving methods of science, designed specifically to facilitate progress when basic aims are problematic; see Fig. 3. It is just this that the *philosophes* failed to do. Instead of applying the hierarchical methodology to *social life*, the *philosophes* sought to apply a seriously defective conception of scientific method to *social science*, to the task of making progress towards not a *better world* but to better *knowledge* of the social world. And this ancient blunder is still built into the institutional and intellectual structure of academia today, inherent in the current character of social science (Maxwell, 1984 or 2007, Chapters 3, 6 and 7; 2004, Chapters 3 and 4).

Properly implemented, in short, the Enlightenment idea of learning from scientific progress how to achieve social progress towards an enlightened world would involve developing social inquiry, not primarily as social *science*, but as social *methodology*, or social *philosophy*. A basic task would be to get into personal and social life and into other institutions besides that of science – into government, industry, agriculture, commerce, the media, law, education and international relations – hierarchical, progress-achieving methods (designed to improve problematic aims) arrived at by generalizing the methods of science. A basic task for academic inquiry as a whole would be to help humanity learn how to resolve its conflicts and problems of living in more just, cooperatively rational ways than at present.<sup>21</sup> This task would be intellectually more fundamental than the scientific task of acquiring knowledge. Social inquiry would be intellectually more fundamental than physics. Academia would be a kind of people's civil service, doing openly for the public what actual civil services are supposed to do in secret for governments. Academia would have just sufficient power (but no more) to retain its independence from government, industry, the press, public opinion and other centres of power and influence in the social world. It would seek to learn from,

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<sup>20</sup> There are a number of ways of highlighting the inherently problematic character of the aim of creating civilization. People have very different ideas as to what does constitute civilization. Most views about what constitutes Utopia, an ideally civilized society, have been unrealizable and profoundly undesirable. People's interests, values and ideals clash. Even values that, one may hold, ought to be a part of civilization may clash. Thus, freedom and equality, even though inter-related, may nevertheless clash. It would be an odd notion of individual freedom which held that freedom was for some and not for others, and yet if equality is pursued too single-mindedly, this will undermine individual freedom and will even undermine equality, in that a privileged class will be required to enforce equality on the rest, as in the old Soviet Union. A basic aim of legislation for civilization, we may well hold, ought to be increase freedom by restricting it: this brings out the inherently problematic, paradoxical character of the aim of achieving civilization. One thinker who has stressed the inherently problematic, contradictory character of the idea of civilization is Isaiah Berlin; see, for example, Berlin (1980, pp. 74–9). Berlin thought the problem could not be solved; I, on the contrary, hold that the hierarchical methodology indicated here provides us with the means to learn how to improve our solution to it in real life.

<sup>21</sup> I must emphasize that it is not just a question of reforming universities: schools need to put wisdom-inquiry into practice as well. See my (2005b).

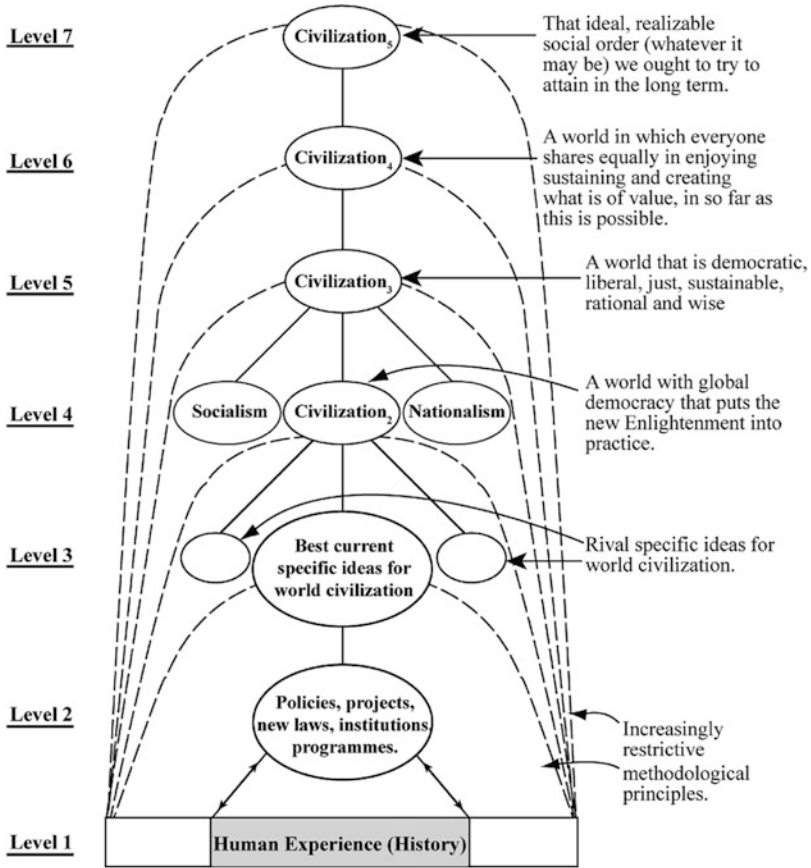


Fig. 3 Hierarchical social methodology generalized from science

educate and argue with the great social world beyond, but would not dictate. Academic thought would be pursued as a specialized, subordinate part of what is really important and fundamental: the thinking that goes on, individually, socially and institutionally, in the social world, guiding individual, social and institutional actions and life. The fundamental intellectual and humanitarian aim of inquiry would be to help humanity acquire wisdom – wisdom being the capacity to realize (apprehend and create) what is of value in life, for oneself and others, wisdom thus including knowledge and technological know-how but much else besides.

One outcome of getting into social and institutional life the kind of aim-evolving, hierarchical methodology indicated above, generalized from science, is that it becomes possible for us to develop and assess rival philosophies of life as a part of social life, somewhat as theories are developed and assessed within science. Such a hierarchical methodology provides a framework within which competing

views about what our aims and methods in life should be – competing religious, political and moral views – may be cooperatively assessed and tested against broadly agreed, unspecific aims (high up in the hierarchy of aims) and the experience of personal and social life. There is the possibility of cooperatively and progressively improving *such philosophies of life* (views about what is of value in life and how it is to be achieved) much as *theories* are cooperatively and progressively improved in science. In science, ideally, theories are critically assessed with respect to each other, with respect to metaphysical ideas concerning the comprehensibility of the universe and with respect to *experience* (observational and experimental results). In a somewhat analogous way, diverse philosophies of life may be critically assessed with respect to each other, with respect to relatively uncontroversial, agreed ideas about aims and what is of value and with respect to *experience* – what we do, achieve, fail to achieve, enjoy and suffer – the aim being to improve philosophies of life (and more specific philosophies of more specific enterprises within life such as government, education or art) so that they offer greater help with the realization of what is of value in life. This hierarchical methodology is especially relevant to the task of resolving conflicts about aims and ideals, as it helps disentangle agreement (high up in the hierarchy) and disagreement (more likely to be low down in the hierarchy).

Wisdom-inquiry, because of its greater rigour, has intellectual standards that are, in important respects, different from those of knowledge-inquiry. Whereas knowledge-inquiry demands that emotions and desires, values, human ideals and aspirations and philosophies of life be excluded from the intellectual domain of inquiry, wisdom-inquiry requires that they be included. In order to discover what is of value in life, it is essential that we attend to our feelings and desires. But not everything we desire is desirable, and not everything that feels good is good. Feelings, desires and values need to be subjected to critical scrutiny. And of course feelings, desires and values must not be permitted to influence judgements of factual truth and falsity. Wisdom-inquiry embodies a synthesis of traditional Rationalism and Romanticism. It includes elements from both, and it improves on both. It incorporates Romantic ideals of integrity, having to do with motivational and emotional honesty, and honesty about desires and aims, and at the same time it incorporates traditional Rationalist ideals of integrity, having to do with respect for objective fact, knowledge and valid argument. Traditional Rationalism takes its inspiration from science and method; Romanticism takes its inspiration from art, from imagination and from passion. Wisdom-inquiry holds art to have a fundamental rational role in inquiry, in revealing what is of value and unmasking false values, but science, too, is of fundamental importance. What we need, for wisdom, is an interplay of sceptical rationality and emotion, an interplay of mind and heart, so that we may develop mindful hearts and heartfelt minds. It is time we healed the great rift in our culture, so graphically depicted by Snow (1986).

All in all, if the Enlightenment revolution had been carried through properly, the three steps indicated above being correctly implemented, the outcome would have

been a kind of academic inquiry very different from what we have at present, inquiry devoted primarily to the intellectual aim of acquiring knowledge.<sup>22</sup>

Transforming universities so that they put wisdom-inquiry into practice is, potentially, vastly more effective in helping us create a wise world than is the current programme of improving knowledge about wisdom within existing knowledge-inquiry, discussed above. For wisdom-inquiry dedicates the whole of academia to the task of creating a wiser world. Not only does wisdom-inquiry transform education so that it helps individuals acquire wisdom; perhaps even more important, wisdom-inquiry devotes itself to transforming other institutions – government, industry, agriculture, the law, the media and so on – so that they become wiser in their aims and actions, and at the same time provides the methodological means to achieve this, namely, the hierarchical methodology depicted in Fig. 3. Research that seeks to improve knowledge about the nature of wisdom should of course continue, but, judged as a response to the problem of the lack of wisdom in the world, it is no substitute for, and does not stand comparison with, the vital task of transforming academia so that it puts wisdom-inquiry into practice.<sup>23</sup>

But what, it may be asked, has all this to do with *personal wisdom*, the theme of this book?

It needs to be appreciated that the greatest obstacle to the growth of wisdom – *personal wisdom*, as well as *institutional wisdom*, *social wisdom*, and even *global wisdom* – is, quite simply, the long-standing, gross, structural irrationality of knowledge-inquiry, built as it is into the institutional structure of our schools and universities. Transform schools and universities so that they come to put more rigorous wisdom-inquiry into educational and research practice, and wisdom (personal and social) would flourish in our world.

As we have seen, wisdom-inquiry requires that values, feelings and desires are expressed and critically scrutinized within the intellectual domain of inquiry, since realizing what is of value rationally requires that this is done. But knowledge-inquiry demands that values, feelings and desires be excluded from the intellectual domain of inquiry so that objective factual knowledge may be acquired. As a result, knowledge-inquiry splits off the mind from the heart, thought from feeling and desire, with the result that thought comes to be driven by unacknowledged, unexamined values, feelings and desires, rarely of the best, and wisdom founders. The growth of personal wisdom is sabotaged. Knowledge-inquiry also fails to promote

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<sup>22</sup> For further details about wisdom-inquiry, see my (1976; 1980; 2000; 2004, Chaps. 3 and 4; 2010, Chaps. 2, 6 and 9; and, above all, 1984 or 2007). I should add that, despite the major differences between knowledge-inquiry and wisdom-inquiry, touching almost every aspect of the academic enterprise, nevertheless there are also broad areas of agreement in the two conceptions of inquiry. Both, for example, stress the great value of the pursuit of knowledge, both for its own sake and for the sake of applications; both value reason and evidence in assessing claims to knowledge; both hold that values, desires and feelings should not influence judgements about what is factually true and false.

<sup>23</sup> The two endeavours overlap in the field of education; see, for example, Sternberg Reznitskaya, and Jarvin (2008).

wisdom in failing to give priority to (i) the task of proposing and critically examining possible solutions to problems of living – possible actions, policies, political programmes and philosophies of life – and (ii) the task of articulating and critically examining problematic aims – personal, institutional, social and global. Both are central and fundamental within wisdom-inquiry.

If our concern is help wisdom to flourish in the world, at personal, social and global levels, *the* deed we need to perform is to transform our institutions of learning so that they come to put wisdom-inquiry into practice.

## The Revolution Is Underway

During the last 10–20 years, a number of developments have taken place in universities that can be regarded as the first steps towards putting wisdom-inquiry into academic practice. In what follows, I concentrate on developments in the UK.

Amongst the most significant of these are the creation of departments, institutions and research centres concerned with social policy, with problems of environmental degradation, climate change, poverty, injustice and war and with such matters as medical ethics and community health.<sup>24</sup> For example, a number of departments and research centres concerned in one way or another with policy issues have been created at my own university of University College London during the last 20 years.

More recently, UCL has organized research into four broad themes: global health, sustainable cities, intercultural interactions and well-being. On its website, under the heading Grand Challenges, UCL puts the matter like this:

The world is in crisis. Billions of us suffer from illness and disease, despite applicable preventions and cures. Life in our cities is under threat from dysfunctionality and climate change. The prospect of global peace and cooperation remains under assault from tensions between our nations, faiths and cultures. Our quality of life – actual and perceived – diminishes despite technological advances. These are global problems, and we must resolve them if future generations are to be provided with the opportunity to flourish.

In 2010, UCL's Grand Challenges Programme produced a policy document entitled "Developing a culture of wisdom at UCL".<sup>25</sup>

At Cambridge University, there have been somewhat similar developments. Here too one can see the first hints of the institutional structure of wisdom-inquiry being superimposed upon the existing structure of *knowledge-inquiry*. As we have seen, wisdom-inquiry puts the intellectual tackling of problems of living at the heart of academic inquiry, this activity being conducted in such a way that it both influences and is influenced by more specialized research. Knowledge-inquiry, by

<sup>24</sup> See Iredale (2007) and Macdonald (2009) for developments of this point.

<sup>25</sup> See [http://www.ucl.ac.uk/public-policy/public\\_policy\\_publications/UCL\\_-\\_Culture\\_of\\_wisdom.pdf](http://www.ucl.ac.uk/public-policy/public_policy_publications/UCL_-_Culture_of_wisdom.pdf).

contrast, organizes intellectual activity into the conventional departments of knowledge: physics, chemistry, biology, history and the rest, in turn subdivided, again and again, into ever more narrow, specialized research disciplines. But this knowledge-inquiry structure of ever more specialized research is hopelessly inappropriate when it comes to tackling our major problems of living. In order to tackle environmental problems, for example, in a rational and effective way, specialized research into a multitude of different fields, from geology, engineering and economics to climate science, biology, architecture and metallurgy, needs to be connected to, and coordinated with, the different aspects of environmental problems. The sheer urgency of environmental problems has, it seems, forced Cambridge University to create the beginnings of wisdom-inquiry organization to deal with the issue. The “Cambridge Environmental Initiative” (CEI), launched in December 2004, distinguishes seven fields associated with environmental problems: conservation, climate change, energy, society, water waste built environment and industry, natural hazards, society, and technology, and under these headings, coordinates some 102 research groups working on specialized aspects of environmental issues in some 25 different (knowledge-inquiry) departments (see [www.cei.group.cam.ac.uk/](http://www.cei.group.cam.ac.uk/)). The CEI holds seminars, workshops and public lectures to put specialized research workers in diverse fields in touch with one another and to inform the public. There is also a CEI newsletter.

A similar coordinating, interdisciplinary initiative exists at Oxford University. This is the School of Geography and the Environment, founded in 2005 under another name. This is made up of five research “clusters”, two previously established research centres, the Environmental Change Institute (founded in 1991) and the Transport Studies Institute, and three interdepartmental research programmes, the African Environments Programme the Oxford Centre for Water Research and the Oxford branch of the Tyndall Centre (see below). The school has links with other such research centres, for example, the UK Climate Impact Programme and the UK Energy Research Centre.

At Oxford University there is also the James Martin 21st Century School, founded in 2005 to “formulate new concepts, policies and technologies that will make the future a better place to be”. It is made up of 15 institutes devoted to research that ranges from ageing, armed conflict, cancer therapy and carbon reduction to nanoscience, oceans, science innovation and society, the future of the mind and the future of humanity. At Oxford, there is also the Smith School of Enterprise and the Environment, founded in 2008 to help government and industry tackle the challenges of the twentieth century, especially those associated with climate change.

All these developments, surely echoed in many universities all over the world, can be regarded as first steps towards implementing wisdom-inquiry.

Equally impressive is the John Tyndall Centre for Climate Change Research, founded by 28 scientists from 10 different universities or institutions in 2000. It is based in six British universities, has links with six others and is funded by three research councils, NERC, EPSRC and ESRC (environment, engineering and social economic research). It “brings together scientists, economists, engineers and social



scientists, who together are working to develop sustainable responses to climate change through trans-disciplinary research and dialogue on both a national and international level – not just within the research community, but also with business leaders, policy advisors, the media and the public in general” ([www.tyndall.ac.uk/general/about.shtml](http://www.tyndall.ac.uk/general/about.shtml)). All this is strikingly in accordance with basic features of wisdom-inquiry.<sup>26</sup> We have here, perhaps, the real beginnings of wisdom-inquiry being put into academic practice.

A similar organization, modelled on the Tyndall Centre, is the UK Energy Research Centre (UKERC), launched in 2004, and also funded by the three research councils, NERC, EPSRC and ESRC. Its mission is to be a “centre of research, and source of authoritative information and leadership, on sustainable energy systems” ([www.ukerc.ac.uk/](http://www.ukerc.ac.uk/)). It coordinates research in some 12 British universities or research institutions. UKERC has created the National Energy Research Network (NERN), which seeks to link up the entire energy community, including people from academia, government, NGOs and business.

Another possible indication of a modest step towards wisdom-inquiry is the growth of peace studies and conflict resolution research. In Britain, the Peace Studies Department at Bradford University has “quadrupled in size” since 1984 (Professor Paul Rogers, personal communication) and is now the largest university department in this field in the world. INCORE, an International Conflict Research project, was established in 1993 at the University of Ulster, in Northern Ireland, in conjunction with the United Nations University. It develops conflict resolution strategies and aims to influence policymakers and others involved in conflict resolution. Like the newly created environmental institutions just considered, it is highly interdisciplinary in character, in that it coordinates work done in history, policy studies, politics, international affairs, sociology, geography, architecture, communications and social work as well as in peace and conflict studies. The Oxford Research Group, established in 1982, is an independent think tank which “seeks to develop effective methods whereby people can bring about positive change on issues of national and international security by non-violent means” ([www.oxfordresearchgroup.org.uk/](http://www.oxfordresearchgroup.org.uk/)). It has links with a number of universities in Britain. Peace studies have also grown during the period we are considering at Sussex University, King’s College London, Leeds University, Coventry University and London Metropolitan University. Centres in the field in Britain created since 1984 include the Centre for Peace and Reconciliation Studies at Warwick University founded in 1999; the Desmond Tutu Centre for War and Peace, established in 2004 at Liverpool Hope University; the Praxis Centre at Leeds Metropolitan University, launched in 2004; the Crime and Conflict Centre at Middlesex University; and the International Boundaries Research Unit, founded in 1989 at Durham University.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> See Tyndall Centre (2006).

<sup>27</sup> For an account of the birth and growth of peace studies in universities, see Rogers (2006).

Additional indications of a general movement towards aspects of wisdom-inquiry are the following. Demos, a British independent think tank, has, in recent years, convened conferences on the need for more public participation in discussion about aims and priorities of scientific research and greater openness of science to the public.<sup>28</sup> This has been taken up by The Royal Society which, in 2004, published a report on potential benefits and hazards of nanotechnology produced by a group consisting of both scientists and non-scientists. The Royal Society has also created a “Science in Society Programme” in 2000, with the aims of promoting “dialogue with society”, of involving “society positively in influencing and sharing responsibility for policy on scientific matters”, and of embracing “a culture of openness in decision-making” which takes into account “the values and attitudes of the public”. A similar initiative is the “science in society” research programme funded by the Economic and Social Research Council which has, in the autumn of 2007, come up with six booklets reporting on various aspects of the relationship between science and society. Many scientists now appreciate that non-scientists ought to contribute to discussion concerning science policy. There is a growing awareness amongst scientists and others of the role that values play in science policy and the importance of subjecting medical and other scientific research to ethical assessment. That universities are becoming increasingly concerned about these issues is indicated by the creation, in recent years, of many departments of “science, technology and society” in the UK, the USA and elsewhere, the intention being that these departments will concern themselves with interactions between science and society.

Even though academia is not organized in such a way as to give intellectual priority to helping humanity tackle its current global problems, academics do nevertheless publish books that tackle these issues, for experts and non-experts alike. For example, in recent years, many books have been published on global warming and what to do about it (see: [www.kings.cam.ac.uk/assets/d/da/Global\\_Warming\\_bibliography.pdf](http://www.kings.cam.ac.uk/assets/d/da/Global_Warming_bibliography.pdf)).

## Conclusion

Humanity is in deep trouble. We urgently need to learn how to make progress towards a wiser, more civilized world. This in turn requires that we possess traditions and institutions of learning rationally designed – *well designed* – to help us achieve this end. It is just this that we do not have at present. What we have instead is natural science and, more broadly, inquiry devoted to acquiring knowledge. Judged from the standpoint of helping us create a better world, knowledge-inquiry of this type is dangerously and damagingly irrational. We need to bring about a major intellectual and institutional revolution in the aims

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<sup>28</sup> See Wilsdon and Willis (2004).

and methods of inquiry, from knowledge-inquiry to wisdom-inquiry. Almost every branch and aspect of academic inquiry needs to change.

This revolution – intellectual, institutional and cultural – if it ever comes about, will be comparable in its long-term impact to that of the Renaissance, the Scientific Revolution or the Enlightenment. The outcome will be traditions and institutions of learning rationally designed to help us acquire wisdom. There are a few scattered signs that this intellectual revolution, from knowledge to wisdom, is already under way, as we have seen. It will need, however, much wider cooperative support – from scientists, scholars, students, research councils, university administrators, vice chancellors, teachers, the media and the general public – if it is to become anything more than what it is at present, a fragmentary and often impotent movement of protest and opposition, often at odds with itself, exercising little influence on the main body of academic work. I can hardly imagine any more important work for anyone associated with academia than, in teaching, learning and research, to help promote this revolution.

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# **Part V**

## **Conclusion**

# The Scientific Study of Personal Wisdom

Michel Ferrari and Nic M. Weststrate

In this concluding chapter, we synthesize some of the main themes found in previous chapters in the volume. We pay particular attention to the various dimensions, exemplars, and paradoxes that contributors raise about wisdom as a topic for scientific inquiry. In the second half of this chapter, we consider what the diversity of opinions presented about wisdom imply for the scientific study of personal wisdom, how to reconcile these approaches, and possible future directions that such a science might take to advance our understanding of wisdom.

## What Is Personal Wisdom?

Current Western understandings of wisdom can be traced back to two strands of ancient thought: one from the Ancient Near East (which includes biblical “wisdom literature”<sup>1</sup>) and the other to Ancient Greek philosophers (i.e., lovers of wisdom). In fact, these two traditions are not completely distinct from each other. Both the Hebrew term *hochma* and the Greek term *sophos* originally refer to a practical skill or know-how. They can apply to material crafts like blacksmithing or boat building but also to a general skill in living a good life. Broadening our focus to include ancient Mesopotamia, we find that the god of wisdom, Ea, was said to have brought all the arts and crafts of civilization to mankind. Taken together, wisdom can be understood as living the best life possible through the use of all of the skills that civilization has accumulated (Curnow, 2010). While in some ways these ancient

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<sup>1</sup> Usually including *Proverbs*, *Job*, *Ecclesiastes* (*Qoheleth*), and, among the Apocrypha, *The Wisdom of Solomon* and *Ecclesiasticus* (*Ben Sirach*).

M. Ferrari (✉) • N.M. Weststrate

Department of Applied Psychology and Human Development, Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto, Bloor Street West 252, M5S 1V6, Toronto, ON, Canada  
e-mail: [michel.ferrari@utoronto.ca](mailto:michel.ferrari@utoronto.ca); [nic.weststrate@utoronto.ca](mailto:nic.weststrate@utoronto.ca)

traditions are very different from modern science, it is striking how well this original understanding of wisdom resonates with the understanding of wisdom developed by different contributors to this book.

Personal wisdom, as approached by science, exemplifies the oldest wisdom traditions, which claim to provide insight and advice into how to live a good life—it is the hope of many contributors that scientific methods can either confirm or advance insights from these wisdom traditions to help people live more fulfilling lives. Perhaps the current distinction between scientific and religious wisdom traditions (i.e., whether wisdom is knowledge derived from lived experience or is the product of a secret revelation known only to scribes or those who are literate) traces its roots to confidence or skepticism over whether human reasoning and personal effort can contribute to a better life or whether one must rely on some higher divine power to fully accomplish this. But at least for the science of wisdom described in the chapters of this book, wisdom is seen as squarely emerging out of a deep knowledge and appreciation of lived experience, which we will explore more fully in the next section.

## What Do Our Contributors Mean by Personal Wisdom?

Staudinger and Glück (2011) reflect a majority view of researchers studying wisdom scientifically when they write that wisdom concerns good judgment that is confined to questions dealing with the uncertainty of life, existential or otherwise. This definition connects to the ancient wisdom traditions just mentioned, but the chapters in this volume show that it is certainly incomplete. In fact, we find a range of approaches to personal wisdom within the chapters of this volume including:

1. Wisdom as decision-making ability (Staudinger; Sternberg)
2. Wisdom as pragmatically relevant insight (Vervaeke & Ferraro)
3. Wisdom as self-transcendent insight (Levenson & Aldwin; Rosch; Takahashi)
4. Wisdom as a set of traits or personality characteristics (Ardelt, Achenbaum, & Oh; Glück & Bluck)
5. Wisdom as a social phenomenon (Edmondson)
6. Wisdom as a narrative process (Ferrari, Weststrate, & Petro)
7. Some combination of these viewpoints (Sanders & Jeste; Wink & Dillon; Yang)

This wide range of approaches reveals that the definition of wisdom, and how to gather evidence for it or to foster it, is far from settled. In his 2005 book, *Wisdom of Ancient Sumer*, Brendt Alster devotes the first 6.5 pages of his introduction to a discussion of various efforts to define wisdom literature as it applies to the writings of the ancient Sumerians, the first civilization to produce what we now consider wisdom writings about the gods and rulers. Likewise, Gammie and Perdue (1990) in their influential edited volume on *The Sage in Ancient Israel and the Near East* conclude by providing a general scheme that is also useful for sifting through the various approaches to wisdom in this volume. The oldest wisdom tradition is

“prudential” (e.g., Proverbs), or parenetic (i.e., exhorts, advises, councils) and can be further divided into instructional or hortatory; the more recent ancient wisdom is skeptical and can be further divided into disputations (e.g., Job) and reflections (e.g., Qoheleth).

Building on Gammie and Perdue’s (1990) basic scheme, the following section proposes two ways to meaningfully organize the approaches to wisdom advanced by contributors to the volume. The first approach is to consider a variety of dimensions on which definitions of wisdom might be situated. The second is to consider exemplars from the historical traditions that inform our understandings of wisdom today and thus relate directly to how our contributors conceive of personal wisdom.

### *Dimensions Along Which Approaches to Wisdom Can Be Situated*

Why is wisdom so difficult to define and to explain? Edmondson suggests, we think rightly, that wisdom is a “range concept,” that is, there may be a family of types of wisdom that share interconnections but not a common analytic definition. Nevertheless, it is still possible to imagine a multidimensional space in which conceptions of wisdom might be situated along a set of dimensions. The following dimensions seem to capture many of the different ways of thinking about personal wisdom described in this book:

- *Interpersonal activity to intrapsychic state of mind.* This first distinction effectively captures the original distinction Staudinger (Mickler & Staudinger, 2008; Staudinger, Dörner & Mickler, 2005) makes between general and personal wisdom: General wisdom is said to be interpersonal, whereas personal wisdom is said to be intrapersonal. Interpersonal wisdom is also central to Edmondson’s ethnographic findings about wisdom in Ireland and other countries.
- *Subjective experience to objective artifact.* This distinction captures Ardel’s (2004) critique of Baltes’ Berlin Wisdom Paradigm (see Baltes & Smith, 2008; Baltes & Staudinger, 2000): Ardel is interested in the ideal subjective experience of wise people, while Baltes believed wisdom can be contained in objective artifacts like books or legal codes. As this is a book about personal wisdom, most of the contributors emphasize the experiential end of this dimension.
- *Self-concern (prudential coping and flourishing) to self-transcendent (selfless concern for all known reality)*—reminiscent of the Aristotelian distinction between phronesis and sophia, respectively. This distinction is foundational to the ideas of Rosch, and Levenson and Aldwin in their chapters.
- *Rational reflection on lived experience to contemplation of experience itself (“intellective” or “mystical” experience).* This distinction is what some contributors feel divides the ordinary wisdom needed to live a successful life in one’s community from the extraordinary wisdom of self-transcendence. It is



in this sense that Rosch and others believe the deepest wisdom must be accessed by a new kind of mind or spirit.

- *Imperfect to (perhaps inhumanly) perfect.* This distinction is often characteristic of the theological distinction between human and divine wisdom and does not really make an appearance in this volume, except perhaps in considering the religious source of wisdom in the figure of Jesus in chapters by Wink and Dillon and Ferrari et al.

Given this conceptual range, no one should expect an analytic definition of wisdom. Rather, wisdom is more of an ideal of which particular exemplars like Jesus or the Buddha are considered perfect examples. Indeed, several chapters rely on exemplars and detailed case studies to understand personal wisdom rather than try to establish an analytic definition of it.

### ***Approaches to Wisdom Illuminated by Historical Exemplars***

As Ferrari et al.'s chapter shows, dimensions tend to cluster together in exemplars and master narratives about wisdom and wise individuals. Assmann (1994) has distinguished four fundamental types of wisdom referred to by Wink and Dillon in their chapter:

1. Solomon: Judicial wisdom of the ruler and judge
2. Polonius: Traditional and conservative humanist wisdom of the fathers
3. Jaques: Reflective and critical wisdom of the outsider
4. Prospero: Productive and instrumental wisdom of the scientist or magician

Three of Assmann's four fundamental types are Shakespearean characters, but actually she could have easily and perhaps more appropriately drawn her exemplars from the Ancient Near Eastern and Ancient Greek wisdom traditions that inspired them. But what is important here is the realization that certain fundamental types or stock characters are considered personally wise in both literature and in historical documents, consistent with Ricoeur's (1992) claim that personal identity (including the identity of being a wise person or behaving wisely) always draws from literature and history.

Several exemplars of wise people are put forward in this volume, including but not limited to those identified by Assmann (1994). We review some of these exemplars here and describe how they relate to various definitions of personal wisdom as presented in the chapters of this book. These exemplars are organized according to Assmann's taxonomy. Readers with no interest in these historical examples may choose to skip this section and proceed to the next main later section that discusses the plausibility of a science of wisdom today. Simply note that exemplars of wisdom cited by chapter authors almost inevitably draw from established philosophical and religious traditions that date back over 2,000 years.

## Judicial Wisdom

*Solomon* (died 931 BCE) is a common exemplar of the wise ruler from the Ancient Near East wisdom tradition. In fact, he is the preeminent exemplar of biblical wisdom and traditionally said to be the author of three of the five wisdom books in the Bible (Proverbs, Qoheleth, and the Wisdom of Solomon). Solomon's wisdom involved good judgment that manifests the will of God on earth but also included a vast knowledge of proverbs, psalms, and general knowledge. Ironically, biblical scholars like Kugel (2007) and Crenshaw (2010) find that the historical Solomon was not particularly wise nor even strongly associated with the wisdom tradition of his time. For example, Solomon's kingdom collapsed a few years after he died because of the massive taxation he imposed on his northern subjects. A better example of this tradition might be the Mesopotamian king *Assurbanipal* (c. 685–627 BCE), who was accomplished in the scribal arts, assembled a vast library in his palace at Nineveh, and was hailed as an exemplary king (Zamazalová, 2011).<sup>2</sup>

The *Buddha* (c. 563–483 BCE), from the Eastern wisdom tradition, is prototypical of a ruler who renounces his throne and worldly power to pursue spiritual power and wisdom (a choice that returns again in the figure of Jesus). Closer to Solomon and Assurbanipal in the Eastern tradition would be the Emperor *Ashoka* (c. 304–232 BCE) who converted to Buddhism, according to legend, after seeing the carnage of a great battle and spent the rest of his reign engaged in great and charitable deeds designed to improve the lives of his subjects. Curiously, although Edmondson mentions this master narrative of the wise ruler, no chapters really draw on it—Takahashi, Ardel et al., and Ferrari et al.'s chapters do discuss the Buddha within a more democratic view of personal wisdom in which people learn to better govern themselves by drawing on the example of historical figures like Christ and Buddha.

## Conservative Humanist Wisdom

The Greco-Roman humanist tradition is exemplified by *Isocrates* (436–338 BCE)—a rhetorician who influenced *Cicero* (106–143 BCE) and *Seneca* (4–65 AD). This view of wisdom addresses the sort of characteristics a wise person should have (i.e., “a knowledge of things human and divine”<sup>3</sup>) in order to live a good life (i.e., act as an ideal citizen). Within this tradition, to contribute effectively to one's political community, the wise are said to require wide-ranging expert knowledge, a passionate commitment to the common good, emotions schooled to virtue, and the rhetorical skills needed to convince others. Edmondson introduces this master

<sup>2</sup> The Mesopotamian king *Sulgi of Ur* (c. 2094–2047 BCE) was the first to describe himself as accomplished in the scribal arts, saying through in royal hymns that he knew Sumerian, Akkadian, and was fluent in several other languages, understood mathematics, and was an accomplished musician and excelled at interpreting the signs in the entrails of sacrificial animals (Frahm, 2011).

<sup>3</sup> Cicero Tusc IV 26.57, de Officio II.2.5, Seneca Letters to Lucilius 89.5.

narrative of wisdom, but it is perfectly consonant with the ideas of Sternberg and Staudinger. It also seems to inspire defining wisdom as an expertise in the fundamental pragmatics of life characteristic of the Berlin paradigm but also adopted by Glück and Bluck, and Vervaeke and Ferraro. More specifically, it encompasses Sternberg's understanding of wisdom as living ethically within a community. Relatedly, this wisdom is associated with the ability to cope with life and live life to its fullest, mentioned by Sanders and Jeste.<sup>4</sup>

This tradition seems closely related to the wisdom of Shakespeare's *Polonius*—characterized by practical advice-giving in everyday life contexts—since this advice is designed to allow people to live successfully and flourish in society. The view that wisdom is a set of instructions given by one generation to the next (parent to child or master to apprentice) is perhaps the oldest wisdom tradition (Alster, 2005), and yet it is not one that is much referred to in the volume.

### Reflective and Critical Wisdom

Plato's *Socrates* (469–399 BCE) saw wisdom as acquired through a continuing critical and reflective self-interrogation engaged in through dialogue and dialectic interaction with others within one's political community (or, by the time of Plato, with other students in his academy). Wisdom here sought better “care of the soul,” but although manifesting a love of wisdom, the Socratic never claims to be “wise” (Edmondson, 2012). This is perhaps a better exemplar of critical wisdom than is the Shakespearean jester, *Jaques*—although the character of Jaques also includes aspects of doubt and melancholy characteristic of an outsider. Such wisdom allows people to adopt an unconventional perspective on reality that seems integral to the understanding of wisdom in many chapters, especially those of Ardel et al., Glück and Bluck, and Ferrari et al. For Vervaeke and Ferraro, in particular, wisdom is not an inert knowledge, but an ability to realize the relevance of information makes wisdom transformative knowledge. And indeed self-transformation is central to wisdom for most contributors, making wisdom inherently *personal* wisdom.

With Neoplatonist philosophers and especially in the approach to wisdom adopted by *Augustine* (354–430 BCE), wisdom involves an inner contemplation of experience that leads us to see through illusion and into a higher or deeper self-transcendent reality.<sup>5</sup> Such authentic self-insight is often the result of having experienced suffering and having grown from it. Using another metaphor, we find Desert Fathers such as *Anthony the Great* (c. 251–356 AD) whose radical retreat

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<sup>4</sup> About the same time, Epicurus (341–270 BCE) and his followers imagined the wise as a hedonic apolitical individual untroubled by the negative and irrational emotions, thoughts, and actions that cause human suffering; such a wise person becomes almost god-like among a small circle of friends. Edmondson proposes this ideal of wisdom, but no contributors seem to draw on it in their proposals for a personal science of wisdom, and it does not seem to fit Assmann's categorization very easily.

<sup>5</sup> A view also associated with Buddhism.

from society was considered a precondition for the purification essential to a personal wisdom—a wisdom that, as Sanders and Jeste put it, is the human embodiment of God. While contributors do not directly address this wisdom tradition, the emphasis by Levenson and Aldwin, Rosch, and others on the contemplative traditions as leading to self-transcendent wisdom seems closest to it.

### **Productive and Instrumental Wisdom**

Finally, the wisdom of Shakespeare's *Prospero* is associated with knowledge of the rules governing the cosmos world, leading to an ability to control it through magic or sorcery (or today, science). This view of wisdom, characteristic of ancient Mesopotamian sages or of Einstein today, is only marginally addressed in the volume. But if understood intrapsychically, as Jung (1921/1971) understood the ancient alchemical pursuit of wisdom, then this wisdom seems to ally itself to self-transcendent wisdom.<sup>6</sup> As Edmondson points out, the Jungian understanding of wisdom expresses the modern expectation that intrapsychic (rather than interpersonal or social) processes are central to personal wisdom, expressed as an authentic and deep understanding of oneself.

There are clearly a wide variety of theoretical models and exemplars of personal wisdom. What does this mean for a science of personal wisdom?—A question that we return to momentarily. Despite this wide array of dimensions and exemplars, or perhaps because of them, wisdom remains paradoxical in a way that defies easy definition.

### ***Paradoxes that Obscure a Unitary Definition of Wisdom***

Wisdom is paradoxical—a point that is central to Ardel et al.'s chapter. The paradoxical nature of wisdom could in part explain why we observe such a diversity of definitions. Here are some of the central paradoxes of wisdom.

*Wisdom is both subjective and objective.* The objective actions of the wise—or even historical documents describing them—carry traces of their subjective experiences of wisdom. For example, the words of the Buddha reflect his experiences, but paradoxically our subjective experiences refer to or critique culturally existing models of what it means to be wise (a point made by Ferrari et al. in their chapter).

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<sup>6</sup>The Daoist alchemist conception of the wise as one who is able to transform himself into an immortal is also far from the contemporary view of what it means to be personally wise. Even if most contributors would agree with the importance of living in harmony with nature that is at the core of this wisdom tradition, their notion of self-transformation is psychological, not physical.

*Wisdom involves both knowledge and uncertainty.* Wise people know what they do not know and act accordingly, either to seek out new information or to accept that some outcomes are inherently uncertain and unknowable. This point is essential to the Berlin and Bremen models of wisdom developed by Staudinger.

*Wisdom is both timely and timeless.* Wisdom is concerned with timeless human predicaments (suffering, death), and yet it is designed to suit particular contexts. It often emerges through reflection on immediate and deeply contextual personal experiences. Both Glück and Bluck and Ferrari et al. emphasize this in their chapters, but it is seen most clearly in the ethnographic descriptions of wisdom presented by Edmondson.

*Wisdom involves both loss and gain.* We gain wisdom sometimes through failed expectations and loss of illusions, attachments, and aversions—losses that can be a source of joy, as Ardel points out, or at least of personal growth as we see in the cases presented by Wink and Dillon.

*Wisdom involves self-development through selflessness (or self-transcendence).* Awareness of one's subjective bias overcomes it. There is a dialectical relationship between selflessness and self-development (Levenson & Crumpler, 1996; Levitt, 1999): Only people with a deep knowledge of themselves and how their identity is socially constructed (including meaningful obligations and responsibilities) can develop personally to the point of overcoming their self-centeredness, a point made by Rosch, Takahashi and by Levenson and Aldwin in their chapters.

*Wisdom requires involvement through detachment.* Lacking egocentric self-centeredness, the wise have a concern for collective well-being that allows them to be both personally detached and collectively engaged in their actions. Levenson and Aldwin make this point in their chapter, but it is perhaps most strongly evident in Sternberg's discussion of teaching to promote ethical leadership.

*Wisdom involves both willful (deliberate) surrender and active nonaction.* Positional/situational power can achieve maximum effect with minimum effort; thus, the freedom to be one's authentic self requires self-transcendence (selflessness). By living in the moment and seeing its potentials clearly, action then becomes personal without being egocentric. This is a point made by Rosch and Takahashi and especially by the life of the Buddha discussed by Ardel et al.

*Wisdom requires change through acceptance.* By accepting how things are, one's perspective changes, and with that, often possibilities for action arise, something integral to Glück and Bluck's understanding of wisdom.

Finally, *we need wisdom to understand wisdom.* This is a point Sternberg has made elsewhere (Sternberg, 1990b). And here we might consider constructivist approaches to human development, especially Vygotsky's (1934/1987) notion of the zone of proximal development according to which we perform better when supported by more expert or more knowledgeable peers or even by externalizing cognitive functions that were originally social. On this view, we should not be surprised if we are wiser when we have a chance to discuss with others or even if we imagine we are doing so (Staudinger, 1996).

## Can There Be a Science of Personal Wisdom?

Can the study of wisdom be its own science—we might call it *sophiology*—and is such a science to be desired? Contributors to this volume seem to believe we need to study wisdom scientifically. They do not pronounce on the question of needing a separate science but are all convinced that the existing social sciences of sociology, anthropology, political science, and psychology—including the psychology of intelligence and developmental psychology—do not fully address how people can develop optimally or how such development can be put to use to make a better world. We suggest that even positive psychology, as understood by Seligman (2011) is what Maxwell calls “inquiry-based,” not wisdom-oriented. This is why Sternberg, in his chapter, is dissatisfied with theories of intelligence that do not look at actual successful living, and Maxwell, in his chapter, calls for a full-scale reform of university education, one that requires a paradigm shift in how we understand science and human development.<sup>7</sup>

While one might grant that wisdom is a legitimate theoretical and practical problem for science, the question remains of how to study it systematically through a scientific method. Contributors propose a wide variety of approaches to a science of personal wisdom reflecting the different subdisciplines of the social and natural sciences. Here are some of the main ways the science of personal wisdom has been investigated within this volume:

- Self-report scales that assess dimensions associated with wisdom (the Three-Dimensional Wisdom Scale for Ardel et al.; MORE dimensions for Glück & Bluck; the Adult Self-Transcendence Scale for Levenson & Aldwin)
- Task performance that demonstrates exceptional judgment or insight (Staudinger; Sternberg; Vervaeke & Ferraro)
- Intellectual history of (e.g., Buddhist) wisdom (Ardelt et al.; Rosch; Takahashi)
- Life history/autobiographical narrative analysis (Ferrari et al.; Wink & Dillon; Yang)
- Ethnography (Edmondson)
- Brain imaging (Sanders & Jeste)
- Institutional critique (Maxwell)

One might despair at the diversity of exemplars and definitions of personal wisdom proposed by contributors to this volume and of the wide varieties of methods used to study it. How can there be anything like a science of wisdom amidst all of this diversity?

We believe that having such a divergent, seemingly incoherent, field is not a problem; in fact, the diversity of approaches is a strength. Perhaps a good analogy is the famous 1921 symposium on intelligence that generated 14 different definitions

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<sup>7</sup> Wisdom is not mere knowledge about successful living, it is a skill that allows the wise to live well in community (including the problem, following Howard (2010), that modern societies are characterized by *paradexity*—i.e., the convergence of paradox and complexity).

of intelligence (and a 1986 follow-up symposium organized by Sternberg generated another set of definitions with only 0.5 correlation to these earlier ones; Sternberg, 1990a). This diversity has not undermined the importance of intelligence as an area of inquiry for over 100 years. If the chapters in this volume are any indication, the science of wisdom seems to be in a very similar situation to the scientific study of intelligence: Not only do definitions of wisdom differ but so do methods of studying it scientifically.

### *Trading Zones for a Science of Wisdom*

In order to effectively address such diversity, it is worth drawing on a notion proposed by Peter Galison (1997) in philosophy of science as it relates to the history of physics—usually considered one of the most stable and fruitful of the sciences and the one that early psychologists like Fechner took as a model for his own efforts at a truly rigorous science of psychology. According to Galison, in order to understand the science of physics, it is important to look at how “trading zones” were established between theory, instruments, and experimenters—an idea he borrows from anthropology.

The idea of trading zone also makes possible a science of wisdom without obliging everyone interested in that science to agree on a common method or even a common understanding of wisdom. Instead, ideas about wisdom and particular research findings become boundary objects that can be traded among different groups in their common pursuit of a science of wisdom, one whose central goal is understanding and promoting human flourishing.

Theories of wisdom necessarily draw on ancient theories and exemplars of wisdom, which is why almost every chapter in the volume mentions ideas and figures from Ancient Greek and Near Eastern traditions or contemporary religions that were founded by figures from that time. Indeed, we expect modern theories of wisdom to refine or challenge these ancient theories of wisdom, assessing them with new instruments in order to document, provoke, or foster particular kinds of experience (or identify the people disposed to have such experiences).

For example, the Berlin paradigm presents a comprehensive theory of factors that contribute to pragmatic wisdom, clearly drawing on the Greek humanist tradition. In so doing, it challenges the Eriksonian “wise-old man” as an object of study for the science of wisdom—a theory with its roots in the Ancient Near East. These two different theories of wisdom both deserve to be investigated. However, the question of method is important. Even if the connection between age and wisdom may ultimately be best understood in terms of expertise, the Berlin paradigm has the problem that the pragmatic expertise it associates with wisdom lacks ecological validity as assessed in vignette tasks (Ardelt, 2004). For this reason, not everyone is ready to accept the Berlin data as an object of trade. By contrast, Bluck and Glück (2004), working generally within the Berlin paradigm of wisdom as life expertise, seem to have more ecologically valid data in the form of

autobiographical narratives. This new source of data for the Berlin theory provides new material to trade and allows a better challenge to Erikson's theory of wisdom as resolving a psychosocial crisis. Staudinger's work on personal wisdom as self-insight characteristic of personal maturity (Mickler & Staudinger, 2008; Staudinger et al., 2005) uses essentially the theory of wisdom proposed by Erikson and Jung but nicely articulated in ways that allow a parallel comparison to the original Berlin data.

Trade disputes can also occur over different self-report instruments to assess wisdom. For example, should Ardel's Three-Dimensional Wisdom Scale (3D-WS) or Webster's Self-Assessed Wisdom Scale (SAWS) be used to assess wisdom (see Ardel, 2011; Taylor, Bates, & Webster, 2011; Webster, Taylor, & Bates, 2011)? The notion of a trading zone shows this question to be misguided. Self-report questionnaires are a particular kind of instrument developed in light of particular theories of wisdom. If different theories are used to construct these instruments, different dimensions and different factors will necessarily be found associated with wisdom. For example Jason and colleagues (Jason et al., 2001; Perry et al., 2002) ultimately identify three wisdom factors (intelligence, harmony, and spirituality) based on the implicit theories of their participants, dimensions that only partially overlap those of Ardel's (2003) 3D-WS: cognition, reflection, and compassion. Jason's dimensions draw more directly from the Near Eastern strand of Western wisdom as *transcendental* (ultimate, intuitive, spiritual wisdom), captured by Jung's theory of wisdom, while Ardel's is closer to *prudential* (circumstantial, experiential) wisdom that ironically is the same humanist wisdom tradition targeted by the Berlin paradigm, but using very different instruments. Webster's (2007) SAWS proposes five aspects as essential to wisdom (experience, emotional regulation, reminiscence [reflection], humor, and openness) that overlap those in Glück and Bluck's MORE model and also seem to consider wisdom prudential.

Likewise, the only partially overlapping list of "neural pillars of wisdom" identified by Hall (2010) and Jeste (Jeste & Harris, 2010; Meeks & Jeste, 2009; Sanders & Jeste, 2012) are all taken from ancient and modern theories of wisdom. The pillars themselves are boundary objects between these theories and the instruments developed by neuroscience to explore them in terms of individual brain function. Neural correlates for wisdom attributes can inform those original theories explaining how wisdom-theory attributes are embodied, but they must be in constant trade with the original theories themselves.

Put another way, the diversity of approaches seen in this volume represents a plurality of methodologies and perspectives and thus requires what Wilber (2006) calls an Integral Methodological Pluralism, since no one approach can measure all aspects of what interests us scientifically about wisdom. Certainly, it is important to measure EEGs or other data associated with "neural pillars of wisdom," as do Sanders and Jeste (2012) or Hall (2010), but still learn nothing about:

1. The phenomenology of the actual experience of wisdom or wise people
2. The developmental knowledge structures required to experience wisdom
3. The specific kinds or styles of judgments wise people make



4. The hermeneutics of how different cultures interpret wisdom insights
5. The formal and informal institutionalization of wisdom insights within different cultures and societies, and how these affect the chances of particular people becoming wise (something that requires social systems analyses)
6. The different time scales that Yang (2012) identifies for wisdom: (a) immediate successful resolution of life's problems and challenges, (b) long-term successful and satisfying management of one's life overall, and (c) generational actualizing of new possibilities for human civilization

Thus, we need to consider many supporting approaches to the science of wisdom without trying to reduce them to a single unitary view.

### Advantages of Free Trade Across Scientific Approaches to Wisdom

Adopting the notion of trading zones allows both Ardel and Baltes to be shown right in their understanding of wisdom from within their own perspectives: Our personal disposition make us more or less likely to be wise in familiar circumstances (Ardelt), but expertise in life matters will determine the stability of our personal disposition to wisdom in times of crisis or novelty (Baltes). Likewise, the question of how such traits and performances are embodied as “neural pillars of wisdom” is a legitimate trading object for neuroscience. However, all these approaches need to be understood in light of ancient wisdom traditions that date back to our earliest historical records and are still best captured by stories and maxims that have the remarkable power to inform our lives when we reflect on them and take them to heart.

To the extent that these disputes over scientific data remain a source of cooperative trading, these different approaches are all to the good, but sometimes it seems that, for example, neuroscientists claim that the correct language of science is at the neural level, a problem that Sanders and Jeste avoid in their own chapter. Still, if everyone has a working brain that uses the pillars of wisdom identified, but not everyone is wise, it is worth examining how the particular operation of wise brains makes them wise. The neuroscience answer to this question can be traded with the answers provided by other research programs, like the Berlin program, or those of Ardel or Glück and Bluck that also set out to answer it.

Likewise, trade disputes can occur over whether or not the contemplative traditions discussed by Levenson and Aldwin, Rosch, and Takahashi identify practices associated with the development or maturity necessary for “extraordinary wisdom.” This may be very different from the “ordinary wisdom”—what Charron (1601) called “humane wisdom”—needed to live a successful life described in chapters by Glück and Bluck, Sternberg, Staudinger, and others. Meditation and other practices are said to lead the practitioner toward wisdom defined as a *higher or deeper level of consciousness*. As Levenson and Aldwin, Vervaeke and Ferraro, and Ardel et al. all agree, meditation is an instrument of choice to promote *insight* or awakening to our own habits of thinking and reacting needed to transcend this

life or see through its illusions. However, even if true, the adequacy of the scientific instruments to assess such insight can be debated. For example, Rosch disputes the scientific usefulness of existing scientific measures of mindfulness.

For Glück and Bluck, wisdom from life experience develops through MORE—mastery, reflection, openness, emotion regulation, and empathy—skills required to nurture and consolidate insights considered essential building blocks to wisdom that may differ at different ages. Wisdom from life experience will require very different skills and capacities from those needed to develop extraordinary wisdom, perhaps through the core features of wisdom identified by Curnow (1999) and Levenson and Aldwin (2012): self-knowledge, detachment, self-integration, and self-transcendence. A theory of extraordinary wisdom also brings in new metaphors such as the notion of decentering the self or of a vertical dimension suggested by the term “self-transcendence.” These concerns may in turn be very different from those that will bring about the sort of wisdom inquiry Maxwell advocates or the self-insight and ethical behavior needed to live well in community that are the focus of chapters by Sternberg, Staudinger, and Maxwell. These “ordinary” forms of humane wisdom can perhaps be developed by reflection on life experiences, as proposed by Staudinger—not unlike the suggestion by Ardel et al., Ferrari et al., and Glück and Bluck that we learn from our experience through autobiographical reasoning. Ferrari et al. note that such reasoning will necessarily make reference to cultural master narratives that are historically embodied in specific people whom we consider to be exemplars of wisdom, a point that resonates with that of Yang in her discussion of wisdom as involving “real-life experiences.” Importantly, such experiences are also bound up with particular religious and spiritual traditions, as Wink and Dillon show in their chapter for this volume.

What this means is that, while questions about the development of wisdom are legitimate objects for trade, particular practices (e.g., mindfulness meditation, or other contemplative practices) will necessarily be instruments designed to provoke experiences that are associated within a certain understanding of wisdom—whether one in line with the Ancient Near Eastern conception of an extraordinary wisdom revealed by God, with the Greek humanist wisdom, or with Buddhist theories of wisdom as insight into the ultimate nature of reality.

## **Future Directions for a Science of Wisdom**

Over 30 years ago, Clayton and Birren (1980) noted that our technological society places a greater emphasis on the cognitive skills necessary for productivity than on the personal wisdom needed to live a good life and create a better world. This led to the paradox that we are materially better-off in Europe and North America than we were 50 years ago, but we are not happier. A main goal of wisdom traditions from ancient to modern times has been to help people better understand human nature and its relationship to the rest of the known cosmos, with all of the paradoxes and

contradictions this entails, and the causes and consequences of human suffering and human flourishing.

Acquiring wisdom is considered essential to optimal human flourishing because it is wisdom that should allow us to live the best life possible—a life in which human potential is actualized and the highest values of human truth, love, and freedom are manifest. Wisdom is what Schwartz and Sharpe (2006) call a “master virtue” that coordinates and calibrates all other virtues. Thus, as Sternberg notes in his chapter, personal wisdom is also essential for ethical behavior, something equally essential to creating a society in which we look out for the common good.

Wisdom is an ideal, but can we chart progress toward it scientifically? We might adapt positive psychology’s notion of a gross happiness product (GHP rather than GDP) that can apply to whole nations (Seligman, 2011) but more modestly to school reform—what we might call, awaiting a better name, a gross wisdom product or GWP. In other words, we need a way to judge what Vervaeke calls the “wisdom to foolishness” ratio of a society—an idea echoed by Walsh (2011), who writes, “The wisdom to foolishness ratio may well be one of the most important cultural factors determining individual and collective wellbeing, and will also determine how much cultures support or suppress the search for wisdom (i.e., whether they are *sophiatrophic* or *sophiatoxic*)” (p. 113). But how should GWP be measured and assessed?

Developing such a measure would precisely be an object of trade within a trading zone set up by different approaches to studying wisdom. GWP assessments of wisdom might be refinements of existing wisdom scales but could also include short answer questions to vignettes modeled on the Berlin tasks and examples of life reflection in light of autobiographical stories or stories of the wisdom of others—not just the extraordinary wisdom of a Buddha or Jesus, but the ordinary wisdom of relatives, friends, and neighbors. And just as Binet and Simon (1905) envisaged intelligence tests that were indicative of school performance, and not an ultimate measure of personal capability, we might imagine measures and assessments of wisdom designed to assess whether people have core insights acknowledged as important to a successful life (ordinary wisdom) and perhaps even point them toward what is needed to achieve extraordinary wisdom, without claiming to judge individual differences in the ability to become wise.

For Maxwell, wisdom will ultimately be developed by transforming institutions of higher learning to improve the quality of social life itself—making a *better world*, not better *knowledge* of the social world. Transforming schools and universities such that they integrate wisdom inquiry into educational and research practice will help personal and social wisdom flourish. According to Maxwell, the intellectual, institutional, and cultural revolution that he envisions would have an equivalent impact to the Renaissance, the scientific revolution, or the Enlightenment in transforming the traditions and institutions of learning. What is also needed is a strategy of knowledge mobilization to help get these wisdom insights and practices to people who can use them to solve the problems they face in their lives.

A science of wisdom aims to be a science that promotes human flourishing, which, as the chapters in this volume reveal, must acknowledge a spiritual side to wisdom. This is in line with historical understanding of wisdom that predates the split between science, art, and religion. Such a science of personal wisdom can be both personally important and practically useful. It can provide ways to measure and assess (and perhaps improve upon) insights from the world's wisdom traditions and find ways to develop formative assessments to help seekers advance along the path to a better life for themselves and for the communities that nurture and sustain them.

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# Biographical and Contact Information

## W. Andrew Achenbaum

Graduate School of Social Work  
University of Houston

E-mail: [wachenba@Central.UH.EDU](mailto:wachenba@Central.UH.EDU)

W. Andrew Achenbaum, Ph.D., a professor of history and social work at the University of Houston, Texas, holds the Gerson & Sabrina Professorship of Global Aging. Dr. Achenbaum previously taught at Canisius College, Carnegie Mellon University, and the University of Michigan, where he was deputy director of its Institute of Gerontology. A former board chair of the National Council on Aging, he is the author of five books and coeditor of eleven more. Achenbaum has just completed a biography of the late Robert N. Butler, M.D.

## Carolyn M. Aldwin

Department of Human Development and Family Sciences  
Oregon State University

E-mail: [Carolyn.Aldwin@oregonstate.edu](mailto:Carolyn.Aldwin@oregonstate.edu)

Carolyn M. Aldwin is a professor in the Department of Human Development and Family Sciences, Oregon State University. She has over 100 publications in developmental health psychology. She is a fellow of both Divisions 20 (Adult Development and Aging) and 38 (Health Psychology) of the American Psychological Association, as well as the Gerontological Society of America, and is currently president of Division 20. Prof. Aldwin is editor of *Research in Human Development* and has authored three books: *Stress, Coping, and Development, 2nd ed.* (Guilford), *Health, Illness, and Optimal Aging* (Sage), and the *Handbook of Health Psychology and Aging* (Guilford).

## Monika Ardelts

Department of Sociology and Criminology & Law

University of Florida

E-mail: [ardelt@ufl.edu](mailto:ardelt@ufl.edu)

Monika Ardelts, Ph.D., is associate professor of sociology at the University of Florida. She is a 1999 Brookdale National Fellow, a 2005 Positive Psychology Templeton Senior Fellow, and a founding faculty member of the Center for Spirituality and Health at the University of Florida. Dr. Ardelts received her Diploma (M.A.) in Sociology from the Johann Wolfgang Goethe-University of Frankfurt/Main in Germany and her Ph.D. in Sociology from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Her research focuses on successful human development across the life course with particular emphasis on the relations between wisdom, spirituality, aging well, and dying well.

## Susan Bluck

Department of Psychology

University of Florida

E-mail: [bluck@ufl.edu](mailto:bluck@ufl.edu)

Susan Bluck obtained her Ph.D. from the School of Social Ecology, University of California, Irvine, and was a post-doctoral fellow at the Max Planck Institute for Human Development in Berlin. She is an associate professor in the Psychology Department at the University of Florida where she runs an active laboratory ([www.psych.ufl.edu/lifestorylab](http://www.psych.ufl.edu/lifestorylab)), investigating lifespan differences and continuities in the everyday functions of autobiographical memory, reminiscence, and the life story. This includes analysis of individuals' memories of having exhibited wisdom in their own lives. Dr. Bluck is a fellow of the Gerontological Society of America and associate editor for Applied Cognitive Psychology.

## Michele Dillon

Department of Sociology

University of New Hampshire

E-mail: [michele.dillon@unh.edu](mailto:michele.dillon@unh.edu)

Michele Dillon, Ph.D., is professor and chair of Department of Sociology at the University of New Hampshire. Her research focuses on religion and culture. Dr. Dillon's publications include *In the Course of a Lifetime: Tracing Religious Belief, Practice, and Change* (coauthor Paul Wink; University of California Press, 2007), *Catholic Identity: Balancing Reason, Faith, and Power* (Cambridge



University Press, 1999), *Debating Divorce: Moral Conflict in Ireland* (University Press of Kentucky, 1993), *Handbook of the Sociology of Religion* (editor; Cambridge University Press, 2003), *Introduction to Sociological Theory* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), and over forty research articles and book chapters. She is president-elect of the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion, past president of the Association for the Sociology of Religion, and past chair of the American Sociological Association section on the sociology of religion.

## **Ricca Edmondson**

School of Political Science and Sociology  
National University of Ireland, Galway  
E-mail: [ricca.edmondson@nuigalway.ie](mailto:ricca.edmondson@nuigalway.ie)

Dr. Ricca Edmondson studied philosophy at the University of Lancaster and argumentation in the social sciences in Oxford before working as a translator in Berlin and carrying out research at the Max Planck Institute for Human Development. She now lectures in the School of Political Science and Sociology at the National University of Ireland, Galway, where her research highlights wisdom and the life course, ethnographic methods, intercultural understanding, and the history of political thought. Her publications include *Rhetoric in Sociology* (1984), *Collective Action in Context: Power, Argumentation and Democracy* (1997), *Environmental Arguing and Cultural Difference: Locations, Fractures and Deliberations* (2007), *Valuing Older People: Towards a Humanist Gerontology* (2009), and *Politics of Practical Reasoning: Integrating Action, Discourse and Argument* (2012).

## **Michel Ferrari**

Department of Applied Psychology and Human Development, Ontario Institute for Studies in Education  
University of Toronto  
E-mail: [michel.ferrari@utoronto.ca](mailto:michel.ferrari@utoronto.ca)

Michel Ferrari teaches developmental and educational psychology at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto. He is interested in developing wisdom throughout the lifespan and is leading an international project on the personal experience of wisdom among younger and older adults in six countries (Canada, USA, India, China, Ukraine, and Serbia). He has also edited or coedited several books including, *Teaching for Wisdom* (Amsterdam: Springer, 2008), and most recently, with Ljiljana Vuletic, *Developmental Relations Among*

*Mind, Brain, and Education: Essays in Honor of Robbie Case* (Amsterdam: Springer, 2010); with Roger Taylor, *Epistemology and Science Education*.

## **Leonardo Ferraro**

Department of Applied Psychology and Human Development, Ontario Institute for Studies in Education

University of Toronto

E-mail: [leonardo.ferraro@utoronto.ca](mailto:leonardo.ferraro@utoronto.ca)

Leonardo Ferraro is currently studying developmental psychology and education at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education. He has taught for over ten years, teaching from the middle school to the undergraduate levels. His areas of interest are rationality, wisdom, and their application to development and education.

## **Judith Glück**

Institut für Psychologie

Alpen-Adria Universität Klagenfurt

E-mail: [Judith.Glueck@aau.at](mailto:Judith.Glueck@aau.at)

Judith is a professor of developmental psychology at University of Klagenfurt, Austria. She received her diploma, doctorate, and *venia legendi* in psychology at the University of Vienna. She also spent three years as a postdoc at the Max Planck Institute of Human Development in Berlin, where Paul Baltes introduced her to wisdom research. Wisdom is Judith's main research focus—she studies how wisdom develops in individual lives, how to measure it in an ecologically valid way, and how wisdom relates to life review. Judith has published in journals including *Annual Review of Psychology*, *Psychology and Aging*, and *Memory & Cognition*.

## **Dilip V. Jeste**

Estelle and Edgar Levi Chair in Aging

Director, Sam and Rose Stein Institute for Research on Aging

Distinguished Professor of Psychiatry & Neurosciences

Director of Education, Clinical and Translational Research Institute

University of California, San Diego

President-Elect, American Psychiatric Association

E-mail: [djeste@ucsd.edu](mailto:djeste@ucsd.edu)

Dilip V. Jeste, M.D., is Estelle and Edgar Levi Chair in Aging, director of the Sam and Rose Stein Institute for Research on Aging, and distinguished professor of

Psychiatry and Neurosciences, University of California, San Diego. He is the president-elect of the American Psychiatric Association. He is a recipient of multiple honors and awards and federal research grants. Dr. Jeste has published ten books and over 600 articles in peer-reviewed journals and books. He is a member of the Institute of Medicine of the National Academy of Sciences, and the editor-in-chief of the American Journal of Geriatric Psychiatry, and is in the ISI list of the “world’s most cited authors”—comprising less than 0.5% of all publishing researchers of the last two decades.

## **Michael R. Levenson**

Department of Human Development and Family Sciences  
Oregon State University

E-mail: [Rick.Levenson@oregonstate.edu](mailto:Rick.Levenson@oregonstate.edu)

Michael R. Levenson is an associate professor in the Program in Human Development and Family Sciences at Oregon State University. He received his Ph.D. in personality and social psychology from the University of California, Irvine. His recent work has been devoted to a long-standing interest in higher levels of adult development. He has spent the last 40 years studying and practicing contemplative psychologies with a personal commitment to Sufism and Tantra. His most recent research focuses on adult development among contemplative nuns, both Christian and Buddhist. He has more than 60 publications.

## **Nicholas Maxwell**

Emeritus Reader, Department of Science and Technology Studies  
University College London

E-mail: [nicholas.maxwell@ucl.ac.uk](mailto:nicholas.maxwell@ucl.ac.uk)

Nicholas Maxwell has devoted much of his working life to arguing that we need to bring about a revolution in academia so that it seeks and promotes wisdom and does not just acquire knowledge. He has published many papers and six books on this theme: *What’s Wrong With Science?*, *From Knowledge to Wisdom*, *The Comprehensibility of the Universe*, *The Human World in the Physical Universe*, *Is Science Neurotic?*, and *Cutting God in Half—And Putting the Pieces Together Again* (see [www.nick-maxwell.demon.co.uk](http://www.nick-maxwell.demon.co.uk)). For thirty years, he taught philosophy of science at University College London, where he is now emeritus reader.

## Hunhui Oh

School of Social Work  
St. Ambrose University  
E-mail: [ohhunhui@sau.edu](mailto:ohhunhui@sau.edu)

Hunhui Oh, MSW, Ph.D., is the 2011 recipient of the Pre-Dissertational Paper Award awarded by the Gerontological Society of America. His research interests include social network analysis, wisdom, aging and the life course, and family. His dissertation looks at human developmental conditions in wisdom virtues development through a cross-cultural comparative frame.

## Anda Petro

Department of Adult Education and Counselling Psychology, Ontario Institute for Studies in Education  
University of Toronto  
E-mail: [anda.petro@utoronto.ca](mailto:anda.petro@utoronto.ca)

Anda Petro is a Masters of Education student in the Adult Education and Community Development graduate program at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto. Anda served as the lead research assistant on three projects led by Dr. Michel Ferrari: a large-scale study on cross-cultural wisdom, a project that investigated wisdom in expert and novice high school English teachers, and English translations of two works based on the French philosopher Charles de Bovelles.

## Eleanor Rosch

Department of Psychology  
University of California, Berkeley  
E-mail: [rosch@berkeley.edu](mailto:rosch@berkeley.edu)

Eleanor Rosch is a professor in the Department of Psychology, Program in Cognitive Science, and the Groups in Religious Studies and Buddhist Studies at the University of California, Berkeley. Her work has been primarily in two areas: understanding the nature and functioning of human concepts and categorization and what the teachings and practices of the traditions that our culture calls religions have to tell psychology (and anyone else who is interested) about the mind.

## **Jeff D. Sanders**

University of California, San Diego  
Stein Institute for Research on Aging  
E-Mail: [j2sanders@ucsd.edu](mailto:j2sanders@ucsd.edu)

Jeff Sanders is an M.D./Ph.D. psychiatrist interested in the molecular neurobiology of higher cognitive functions. As a graduate student, he employed molecular imaging techniques to investigate the regulation of noradrenergic receptors within developing rodent brain. His current research studies neural mechanisms that mediate memory. Specifically, this research employs novel transgenic systems that allow for the imaging of activated circuits during memory formation. When not in the laboratory, he is interested in sculpture and painting murals that incorporate religious as well as scientific imagery. He is still trying to learn how to surf.

## **Ursula M. Staudinger**

Columbia Aging Center  
Mailman School of Public Health, Columbia University  
E-mail: [umstaudinger@columbia.edu](mailto:umstaudinger@columbia.edu)

Dr. Ursula M. Staudinger is a world-renowned lifespan psychologist and aging researcher. Dr. Staudinger is the founding director of the Robert N. Butler Columbia Aging Center (CAC). Before she was the founding Dean of the Jacobs Center on Lifelong Learning of Jacobs University Bremen, a senior researcher at the Max Planck Institute for Human Development and held a professorship at Dresden University. Her research deals with lifespan developmental psychology, plasticity of aging, and personality growth. Ursula Staudinger publishes her work in refereed journals such as *Psychology and Aging* or the *Annual Review of Psychology*. She is a Fellow of APA and APS as well as Vice President of the German National Academy of Sciences. From 2008 to 2010, she served as President of the German Psychological Society.

## **Robert J. Sternberg**

Department of Psychology  
Oklahoma State University  
E-mail: [robert.sternberg@okstate.edu](mailto:robert.sternberg@okstate.edu)

Robert J. Sternberg is provost, senior vice president, and regents professor of psychology and education at Oklahoma State University. He is also honorary professor at Heidelberg University in Germany. Sternberg is a past president of the American Psychological Association and is president of the Federation of Associations of Brain and Behavioral Sciences. His Ph.D. is from Stanford and he holds 12 honorary doctorates.

## Masami Takahashi

Department of Psychology  
Northeastern Illinois University  
E-mail: [m-takahashi@neiu.edu](mailto:m-takahashi@neiu.edu)

Masami Takahashi is an associate professor of psychology and gerontology at Northeastern Illinois University. The author of numerous articles/book chapters both in English and Japanese, Dr. Takahashi studies psychological strengths in late adulthood (e.g., wisdom, spirituality) across cultures and their possible involvement in enhancing longevity among the oldest old. His most recent research explores psychosocial profiles of the former *kamikaze* pilots during WWII with implications in other suicide operations around the world. He also produces and directs documentary films including *Last Kamikaze: Testimonials from the WWII suicide pilots*.

## John Vervaeke

Cognitive Science Program, Department of Psychology, and Buddhism, Psychology, and Mental Health Program  
University of Toronto  
E-mail: [john.vervaeke@utoronto.ca](mailto:john.vervaeke@utoronto.ca)

Dr. John Vervaeke has been teaching at the University of Toronto since 1994. He currently teaches in the cognitive science program, the psychology department, and the Buddhism, psychology and mental health program. He has won and been nominated for several teaching awards. His research interests are relevance realization, insight problem solving, and the nature of general intelligence, consciousness, mindfulness, and wisdom.

## Nic M. Weststrate

Department of Applied Psychology and Human Development, Ontario Institute for Studies in Education  
University of Toronto  
E-mail: [nic.weststrate@utoronto.ca](mailto:nic.weststrate@utoronto.ca)

Nic M. Weststrate, M.A., is a Ph.D. student in the Department of Applied Psychology and Human Development at the University of Toronto. Broadly, his research investigates the stories people tell about their lives. More specifically, his research concerns how individuals construct coherent narrative identities through reflection on self-defining life events—a process referred to as “autobiographical reasoning.” His Ph.D. dissertation focuses specifically on the relations between wisdom and autobiographical reasoning and how these two capacities contribute to well-being

and personality maturity. Nic is a recipient of the Joseph-Armand Bombardier Canada Graduate Scholarship from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.

## **Paul Wink**

Department of Psychology

Wellesley College

E-mail: [pwink@wellesley.edu](mailto:pwink@wellesley.edu)

Paul Wink received his M.A. in clinical psychology from the University of Melbourne, and his Ph.D. in personality psychology from the University of California at Berkeley. He is the Class of 1949 Chair in Ethics and professor and chair of the Psychology Department at Wellesley College. Wink has published extensively in the areas of religiousness and spirituality, adult development, generativity, and narcissism. He is currently involved in research on wisdom funded by the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation. Wink is the coauthor with Michele Dillon of *Religion in Lives over Time*, University of California Press, and coauthor with Jackie James of *The Crown of Life: Dynamics of the Early Post-retirement Period*, Springer Publishing Company. Wink's research has been supported by grants from the Open Society Institute, the Lilly Foundation, the Fetzer Institute, and the Templeton Foundation.

## **Shih-ying Yang**

Department of Educational Policy and Administration

National Chi Nan University

E-mail: [shihying@ncnu.edu.tw](mailto:shihying@ncnu.edu.tw)

Shih-ying Yang is an associate professor in the Department of Educational Policy and Administration at National Chi Nan University in Taiwan. She received her ED. M from Harvard University and Ph.D. in cognitive psychology from Yale University. Her main research interests are in the areas of wisdom, leadership, lifelong learning, and Taiwanese Chinese cultural psychology.

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