

# Practical Wisdom, Well-Being, and Success

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## Funding information

Ministry of Science and Technology,  
Taiwan, Grant/Award Number: MOST  
109-2410-H-001-097-MY3

## Abstract

What is practical wisdom? What does a practically wise person know? It is widely held that a person is practically wise if and only if the person knows how to live well, and that a person knows how to live well only if the person knows what is good or important for well-being. The question is: What *is* it that contributes to or constitutes well-being known by a wise person? A theory of wisdom without a substantive answer to this question can never be seriously tested and used in practice. In this paper, I propose a fully articulated theory of wisdom by integrating the skill theory of wisdom with the success theory of well-being, arguing that practical wisdom is a skill conducive to well-being conceived as attitude success.

## KEYWORDS

attitude success, evil, goal achievement, skill, wisdom

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

In philosophy, it is widely held that a person is practically wise if and only if the person knows how to live well, and that a person knows how to live well only if the person knows what is good or important for well-being, or what is a worthwhile end to pursue (c.f. Nozick 1989; Tiberius 2008; Swartwood 2013; Grimm 2015). The question that remains is: What *is* it that contributes to or constitutes well-being known by a wise person? Not all theories of wisdom<sup>1</sup> address this question. Using Stephen Grimm's terminologies, a theory of wisdom is *fully articulated* "if it not only invokes notions like

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<sup>1</sup>In this paper, the term "wisdom" means practical wisdom, unless otherwise specified.

‘what is important for well-being’ but also tells us what *is* important for well-being”; such a theory will opt for a “particular view about what is more or less important for well-being, or about what is most important, or about how broadly the notion of well-being should be understood” (Grimm 2015: 142). Otherwise, a theory of wisdom is *partially articulated*.

In the wisdom literature, philosophers either leave the above question aside (that is, they are satisfied with or limited to partially articulated theories of wisdom) or presuppose, implicitly or explicitly, a particular conception of well-being without considering the philosophical debates about well-being. In the latter case, philosophers often attribute the Aristotelian conception of well-being to a wise person. However, eudaimonism is just one of many theories of well-being. Why are hedonism or informed desire theories not considered? Is it because eudaimonism is the only theory of well-being that can fit a theory of wisdom? (If so, can we thus exclude all other alternative theories of well-being because the conceptions of a good life they offer are not of the sort of life that a wise person would recognize as good?)

At any rate, a fully articulated theory of wisdom has more theoretical virtue and practical merit than a partially articulated theory, which can never be seriously tested and used in practice. With regard to the theoretical dimension, a fully articulated theory of wisdom can be more testable (or falsifiable) because it is more substantial. With regard to the practical dimension, a fully articulated theory of wisdom, if it is correct, can be used to guide a person who wants to be practically wise or who wants to identify or determine an exemplar of practical wisdom.

How can we construct a fully articulated theory of wisdom? In principle, we can combine any partially articulated theory of wisdom with any theory of well-being. Therefore, there are many possible fully articulated theories of wisdom. However, being a possible theory is one thing, and being a reasonable theory is another. The purpose of this paper is to make possible and sensible a fully articulated theory of wisdom that integrates the (partially articulated) *skill theory* of wisdom with the *success theory* of well-being. The reason or motivation for engaging with the skill theory of wisdom is that it is unified within itself and with neighboring disciplines. First, the skill theory of wisdom, as I shall show, is unified within itself in the sense that it seeks to explain what underlies wisdom and how wisdom works within a single framework in which the idea of skill and its characters integrate the constituents of wisdom into a related whole rather than a collection of rich but discrete elements. Second, the skill theory of wisdom is unified in the further sense that it can be part of an interdisciplinary study of wisdom; in particular, it can be the foundation of psychological theories of wisdom. Paul Bloomfield observes that “[a]lthough it is uncommon for philosophers today to think of the virtues as skill, ... there is good evidence from empirical psychology that supports this thinking, about wisdom in particular” (Bloomfield 2014: 225). He mentions the works of Paul Baltes and Ursula Staudinger, who propose the Berlin wisdom paradigm, defining wisdom as “expertise in the fundamental pragmatics of life” (Baltes & Staudinger 2000), and Robert Sternberg, who proposes the balance theory of wisdom. However, these “skill theories of wisdom”<sup>2</sup> in psychology face the problem of explaining none or little of their conceptual foundation. Regarding the Berlin wisdom paradigm, according to which “Wisdom-related knowledge and skills can be characterized by a family of five criteria: (1) rich factual knowledge about life, (2) rich procedural knowledge about life, (3) life span contextualism, (4) value relativism, and (5) awareness and management of uncertainty” (Staudinger 2010: 1861), John Kekes complains that “Nothing I have read explains why these ‘criteria’ are selected rather than others; what the ‘rich knowledge’ includes and excludes; what ‘life span contextualism’ means; why ... wisdom is supposed to be committed to value relativism; and what the management of uncertainty consists in” (Kekes 2020: 48). Regarding the balance theory, according to which “Wisdom is defined as the application of successful intelligence and

<sup>2</sup>I use quotation marks, here and later, because they are not yet in the full-fledged sense of the term from a philosophical perspective.

creativity as mediated by values toward the achievement of a common good through a balance among (a) intrapersonal, (b) interpersonal, and (c) extrapersonal interests” (Sternberg 2003: 152), Kekes comments that “Sternberg does not explain what these aspects of the balanced theory actually are, how conflicts between the various aspects can be reasonably resolved, and how we are to distinguish between successful and unsuccessful intelligence, creativity, and adaptation” (Kekes 2020: 50). If Bloomfield’s observation and Keke’s verdict are correct, then the two major psychological theories of wisdom are a kind of “skill theories of wisdom” but have conceptual deficiencies. The skill theory of wisdom in philosophy, and in this paper, can be a conceptual foundation of psychological theories of wisdom because it aims to explore the fundamental conceptual issues that any skill-oriented theory of wisdom will eventually encounter, issues such as why, and whether, wisdom is a skill, why rich knowledge (propositional or procedural) is necessary for expertise and wisdom, “why wisdom is supposed to be committed to value relativism” (as Kekes asks), and why, and whether, wisdom is anti-wicked, among others.<sup>3</sup>

The structure of this paper is as follows. In Section 2, I sketch the skill theory of wisdom in its partially articulated form. In Section 3, I outline the success theory of well-being and integrate it as a part of the skill theory of wisdom. In Sections 4 and 5, I anticipate and respond to two possible objections to the fully articulated skill theory of wisdom constructed in Section 3. In Section 6, I conclude by addressing the philosophy of wisdom and its relation to the psychology of wisdom.

## 2 | THE SKILL THEORY OF WISDOM INTRODUCED

### 2.1 | An argument

The skill theory of wisdom defines practical wisdom as skill or expertise in living well. Different scholars prefer different labels,<sup>4</sup> formulations, or arguments for the idea that wisdom is a skill. The issue of why they prefer one over the other is not the main concern of this paper. My aim here is to construct an argument that is general or abstract enough to show the relationship or connection between wisdom and skill. Consider the following argument:

#### The General Argument

- (P1) A person S is practically wise if and only if S knows how to live well.
- (P2) S knows how to live well if and only if S has skill or expertise in living well.
- (C) S is practically wise if and only if S has skill or expertise in living well.

Let us call this the *General Argument* for the skill theory of wisdom. This argument is valid, but its two premises require more explanation. The view of wisdom stated (P1) is justified by its being a meaning stipulation. According to Sharon Ryan, “This view captures Aristotle’s basic idea of practical wisdom. It also captures an important aspect of views defended by Nozick, Plato, Garrett, Kekes, Maxwell, Ryan, and Tiberius” (Ryan 2013). I leave exegesis of these philosophers to Ryan and move on to the issue that she finds difficult (cf. “an account of what it means to know how to live well may prove as difficult a topic as providing an account of

<sup>3</sup>Swartwood and Tiberius provide another argument for interdisciplinary cooperation between philosophy and psychology to the effect that “because wisdom is an *ideal* (something we *ought* to strive for rather than merely a description of how things actually are), empirical science alone cannot give a plausible account of it” (Swartwood & Tiberius 2019: 11).

<sup>4</sup>In the literature there are labels such as the “skill analogy” of virtue (Annas 1995, 2011a), the “skill model” of virtue (Stichter 2007, 2018), and the “expert skill model” of wisdom (Swartwood 2013).

wisdom” [Ryan 2013]): If practical wisdom is knowing how to live well, then what is such knowing how? Fortunately, contemporary epistemology has resources to tackle this issue. According to intellectualism, knowing how is a species of knowing that (e.g., Stanley & Williamson 2001; Stanley 2011). In contrast, according to anti-intellectualism, knowing how is not knowing that but is a species of capacities or skills (e.g., Ryle 1949). At first glance, the view stated in (P2) is inclined towards anti-intellectualism. That said, we should be cautious because there are sophisticated forms of intellectualism and anti-intellectualism about knowing how. For example, the notions of skill or expertise in (P2) can be explained with an intellectualist flavor.<sup>5</sup>

In the philosophy literature, there are other arguments for the skill theory of wisdom, such as Jason Swartwood’s “Core Argument” (2013), which is more complicated than the General Argument. However, the Core Argument can be simplified and reconstructed as follows:

1. Practical wisdom is knowing how to live well in the sense of knowing how to conduct oneself.
2. Knowing how to conduct oneself is an expert decision-making skill, which is composed of a set of five sub-skills (intuitive, deliberative, meta-cognitive, self-regulative, and self-cultivation).
3. Practical wisdom is an expert decision-making skill.

This simplified version of the Core Argument mirrors the main structure of the General Argument. Details and objections aside, the General Argument, or something like it, can help us understand how and why practical wisdom can possibly be related to skill.

## 2.2 | Two characters

Know-how, skill, and expertise are goal-oriented. A person with a particular skill or an expert in a particular field can be seen as a person equipped with a sort of particular goal-oriented system, which enables and requires the person to know what he, *qua* an expert in that field, exactly and ultimately should achieve in the field when exercising the skill, and what the best or effective means are to achieve it. Thus, assuming that practical wisdom is skill or expertise in living well, a person with practical wisdom knows or must know not only what well-being is but also what the best means or strategies are to achieve it. To put this view more formally:

### **The goal-oriented character of wisdom *qua* skill**

A person *S* is practically wise (i.e., *S* knows how to live well, or *S* has skill in living well) only if (i) *S* knows what contributes to or constitutes well-being, and (ii) *S* knows what the best means are to achieve well-being.

This view echoes and *justifies* Grimm’s and Nozick’s views of wisdom. In his article “Wisdom”, Grimm lists three necessary conditions for knowing how to live well:

On my view knowledge of how to live well is a complex state that can be broken down into various components. In particular, knowing how to live well is constituted by the following further types of knowledge, all of which ... are individually necessary for wisdom: (1) Knowledge of what is good or important for well-being. (2) Knowledge of

<sup>5</sup>With regard to the notion of skill or expertise with an intellectualist flavor, see Annas (2011a, 2011b), especially for her articulacy requirement for skill, and Montero (2016), especially for her cognition-in-action principle.

one's standing relative to what is good or important for well-being. (3) Knowledge of a strategy for obtaining what is good or important for well-being. (Grimm 2015: 139-140)

In a chapter of his *The Examined Life*, "What Is Wisdom and Why Do Philosophers Love It So?", Nozick lists several elements of practical wisdom:

What a wise person needs to know and understand constitutes a varied list: the most important goals and values of life – the ultimate goal, if there is one; what means will reach these goals without too great a cost; what kinds of dangers threaten the achieving of these goals; how to recognize and avoid or minimize these dangers; what different types of human beings are like in their actions and motives (as this presents dangers or opportunities); what is not possible or feasible to achieve (or avoid); how to tell what is appropriate when; knowing when certain goals are sufficiently achieved; what limitations are unavoidable and how to accept them; how to improve oneself and one's relationships with others or society; knowing what the true and unapparent value of various things is; when to take a long-term view; knowing the variety and obduracy of facts, institutions, and human nature; understanding what one's real motives are; how to cope and deal with the major tragedies and dilemmas of life, and with the major good things too. (Nozick 1989: 269)

In Grimm's list, the first and third types of knowledge are knowledge about goals and knowledge about means, respectively. In Nozick's list, knowledge about the first two items is clearly knowledge about goals and knowledge about means. The second type of knowledge in Grimm's list, and most items in Nozick's list except the first two, can be seen as the sort of information necessary for or beneficial to knowledge about means, i.e., information that helps the subject in question figure out what the best means or strategies are to achieve well-being. Both Grimm and Nozick attribute the goal-oriented character to wisdom, although they do not proclaim the skill theory of wisdom.

Another character that wisdom can inherit from know-how, skill, or expertise is the success-conducive character. A person is unlikely to be qualified as an expert in a particular field if the person cannot successfully achieve the goal in that field. For example, a person who, after trying, does not have mobility in aquatic environments is not a swimmer in a normal sense, even if the person has all the propositional knowledge that Michael Phelps has about swimming. (The person might be an expert in *teaching* others how to swim, but this is not the goal of the swimming skill.) Thus, assuming that practical wisdom is skill or expertise in living well, a person with practical wisdom must successfully achieve well-being. Let us formulate the view as follows:

### **The success-conducive character of wisdom *qua* skill**

A person S is practically wise only if S is successful at living well.

This view of wisdom also echoes and *justifies* some philosophers' views of wisdom. For example, according to Sharon Ryan,

Philosophers who are attracted to the idea that knowing how to live well is a necessary condition for wisdom might want to simply tack on a success condition to (KLW) [i.e., S is wise iff S knows how to live well] to get around cases in which a person knows all about living well, yet fails to put this knowledge into practice. Something along the lines of the following theory would capture this idea.

**Wisdom as Knowing How to, and Succeeding at, Living Well (KLS):**

*S* is wise iff (i) *S* knows how to live well, and (ii) *S* is successful at living well.

The idea of the success condition is that one puts one's knowledge into practice. (Ryan 2013)

Aligning with the proponents of (KLS) stated in the above passage, Grimm adds an application condition to his view of wisdom mentioned above:

Notice that I have claimed only that our conditions on wisdom are individually necessary, not jointly sufficient; so it remains to be determined what else needs to be added in order to complete or round out the view. By my lights, the main obvious contender is some sort of application condition: that the wise person not only knows what is good or important for well-being and has effective strategies for achieving these goods, but actually *does* achieve these goods. (Grimm 2015: 152-153)

Philosophers attribute the success-conducive character to wisdom, although they do not explicitly proclaim the skill theory of wisdom, let alone justify their conception of wisdom by the characters of skill and expertise.

## 2.3 | The theory

Based on what has been said above, the skill theory of wisdom can be formulated as follows:

### The Skill Theory of Wisdom (STW)

(T1) *S* is practically wise if and only if *S* has skill in living well.

(T2) *S* is practically wise only if

- (i) *S* knows what contributes to or constitutes well-being;
- (ii) *S* knows what the best means are to achieve well-being;
- (iii) *S* is successful at living well (in light of what *S* knows).

STW is composed of two theses. (T1) is supported by the General Argument. (T2-i) and (T2-ii) state the goal-oriented character of wisdom *qua* skill, which is supported by (T1) and the goal-oriented character of *skill*. (T2-iii) states the success-conducive character of wisdom *qua* skill, which is supported by (T1) and the success-conducive character of *skill*. Note that STW at this stage is still not a fully articulated theory of wisdom because its atomic clause (i) does not tell us what is actually known by *S* about what it is that contributes to or constitutes well-being.

## 3 | THE SKILL THEORY OF WISDOM FULLY ARTICULATED

### 3.1 | Some possible fully articulated skill theories of wisdom

As said in Section 1, we can in principle construct a fully articulated theory of wisdom by combining any partially articulated theory of wisdom with any theory of well-being. The conditional (T2-i)

can be further specified with the assistance of hedonism, desire satisfaction theories, or objective list theories (let us call these three main positions on well-being “the Big Three”; see Alexandrova 2017) as follows:

(T2- $i_h$ ) S is practically wise only if S knows that *pleasure* contributes to or constitutes well-being.

(T2- $i_d$ ) S is practically wise only if S knows that *desire satisfaction* contributes to or constitutes well-being.

(T2- $i_o$ ) S is practically wise only if S knows that *objective goods* contribute to or constitute well-being.

Now we can have several possible fully articulated skill theories of wisdom, such as  $STW_h$  (composed of (T1), (T2- $i_h$ ), (T2-ii), and (T-2iii)),  $STW_d$  (composed of (T1), (T2- $i_d$ ), (T2-ii), and (T-2iii)), and  $STW_o$  (composed of (T1), (T2- $i_o$ ), (T2-ii), and (T-2iii)).

However, as said in Section 1, to be possible is one thing, while to be reasonable is another.  $STW_h$ ,  $STW_d$ , and  $STW_o$  can be shown to be problematic due to the widespread objections to the Big Three. A brief and general overview of these objections is as follows:

- Hedonism is wrong because things other than mental states matter.
- Desire fulfilment theories are wrong because people can desire what is bad for them.
- Objective list theories are wrong because a person may not benefit from a given good. (Alexandrova 2017: 28)

Assuming that the objections are well-grounded,  $STW_h$ ,  $STW_d$ , and  $STW_o$  are problematic because there are counterexamples to (T2- $i_h$ ), (T2- $i_d$ ), and (T2- $i_o$ )—counterexamples in the form that S is practically wise, but S does not *know* that such-and-such contributes to or constitutes well-being (S does not know, because what is “known” or believed by S about what it is that contributes to or constitutes well-being is wrong).<sup>6</sup>

If a fully articulated STW should be made not only possible but also sensible, then a true or a more defensible theory of well-being is required. Is there such a theory? In what follows, I shall introduce and develop the success theory of well-being. Before proceeding, I shall make some remarks. I do not pretend that the Big Three cannot be further modified into more sophisticated versions to overcome the objections (but there are also more sophisticated versions of the earlier objections). Nor do I think that the success theory of well-being is the only game in town. My preference for the success theory of well-being is based on two reasons. First, the objections for the Big Three are not independent: they involve two underlying dialectical intuitions used to evaluate a theory of well-being. The best way for a defensible theory of well-being to deal with intuitions is not to embrace one and reject another, but to accommodate both. In this respect, the success theory can do the job. Second, if what we pursue is a unified theory that tells us not only what a practically wise person knows about well-being but also *how* she knows or deliberates about well-being, then a combination of the skill theory of wisdom

<sup>6</sup>If S is practically wise, then S *knows*—rather than merely justifiedly believes—what constitutes well-being. Here, I am inclined to agree with Grimm that “what is required for wisdom is indeed *knowledge* of how to live well, as opposed to some epistemic standing short of knowledge, such as having rational (though perhaps mistaken) beliefs about how to live well” (Grimm 2015: 139).

and the success theory of well-being can achieve the aim. I shall return to these two reasons in the appropriate context.

### 3.2 | A better, fully articulated skill theory of wisdom

The “success theory”<sup>7</sup> of well-being is introduced and developed by Simon Keller (2004, 2009), who is driven by improving the debate on well-being. In his diagnosis of the three standard theories of welfare, i.e., the mental state theory, the desire theory, and the objective list theory (corresponding to the Big Three), Keller finds that there are two intuitions underlying the debate among various theories of well-being, which can be classified either as subjectivism (claiming, roughly speaking, that “your welfare is entirely a matter of your own attitudes” [Keller 2009: 660]) or objectivism (claiming, roughly speaking, that “we can know something about your welfare without referring to your attitudes” [Keller 2009: 660]). In opposition to the former class, anti-subjectivist intuition says that “there is no guarantee that an individual’s attitudes will pick out the things that are truly in her best interests” (Keller 2009: 662). In opposition to the latter class, anti-objectivist intuition says that “your welfare—what is good *for you*—must have a very intimate connection with you; it must arise from or be grounded in facts about you” (Keller 2009: 662). To accommodate both intuitions, Keller proposes the following:

We should try to come up with an account on which an individual’s welfare is linked to the standards for success set constitutively by certain of her attitudes. If such an account could be found, it might ground the individual’s welfare in his own attitudes, and hence meet anti-objectivist intuitions, but do so without identifying the individual’s welfare simply with whatever happens to be the objects of his attitudes, and hence meet anti-subjectivist intuitions. (Keller 2009: 668)

The success theory emerges at this stage. One of the tasks to implement the proposal and construct the success theory is to “identify attitudes that by nature set conditions for their own success and failure” (Keller 2009: 668). Keller identifies at least four kinds of attitudes that generate standards for their own success and failure: beliefs, goals, evaluative attitudes, and the attitude of immediately liking an experience.<sup>8</sup> Let us call such attitudes “teleological attitudes” (because they all aim at something) and explain more thoroughly the first two kinds of attitudes. For Keller, there are constitutive facts about beliefs and goals: beliefs aim at truth, and goals aim at achievement. Based on these facts, the standard for a belief’s own success and failure is truth: a belief is successful when it is true or represents reality. The standard for a goal’s own success and failure is achievement: a goal is successful when it is achieved. With this explanation in hand, we can see more clearly why the success theory has the potential to meet both anti-subjectivist intuition and anti-objectivist intuition. First, the success theory specifies that a person’s

<sup>7</sup>The term “success theory” is coined not by Keller himself but by Alexandrova (2017: 161). In this paper I use the term “success theory”, although I prefer the term “attitude success theory” for the sake of accuracy. (In its ordinary usage, “success” might be equated with something that most people desire, such as wealth and power. This usage might mislead some readers about what success means in the present paper. According to the success theory presented in the main text, a poor man is successful if what he desires is a fully Stoic life.)

<sup>8</sup>In his 2004 paper, Keller considers only one kind of attitude: goals. Bradford calls the view that “achievement, or something like it, is *all* there is to well-being” (2016: 798; emphasis mine) “achievementism” about well-being. We should note that achievementism so defined is not the same as, nor a subset of, the success theory of well-being.

well-being *must be* linked with her own (teleological) attitudes, such as her beliefs and goals. Anti-objectivist intuition is thus met. Second, however, there is no way to say that the person's well-being is thus simply determined by her own attitudes because truth (the standard for a belief's success and failure) and achievement (the standard for a goal's success and failure) are not the sort of thing that can be determined by the person's attitudes. Anti-subjectivist intuition is thus met.

Now, we can proceed to the core claim of the success theory:

An individual has a high level of welfare to the extent that she is successful, in a certain sense. To be successful in that sense is to have attitudes that do well according to the standards they constitutively set for themselves. (Keller 2009: 674).

Briefly, to live well is to live successfully in a certain sense.<sup>9</sup> I shall say more about the success theory later. Here, I shall only introduce a new version of the fully articulated skill theory of wisdom by incorporating the success theory into STW, formulated as follows:

### The Skill Theory of Wisdom, plus the Success Theory of Well-Being (STW<sub>s</sub>)

(T1) S is practically wise if and only if S has skill in living well.

(T2) S is practically wise only if

- (i<sub>s</sub>) S knows that *attitude success* contributes to or constitutes well-being;
- (ii) S knows what the best means are to achieve well-being;
- (iii) S is successful at living well (in light of what S knows).

STW<sub>s</sub> is theoretically better than STW<sub>h</sub>, STW<sub>d</sub>, and STW<sub>o</sub> because its component theory of well-being is more defensible than that of the Big Three in that the success theory of well-being can accommodate both anti-subjectivist intuition and anti-objectivist intuition to avoid counterexamples that the Big Three encounters. In the next section, I anticipate two possible objections to STW<sub>s</sub>.

## 4 | THE SKILL THEORY OF WISDOM CHALLENGED

### 4.1 | The objection from bad-for-oneself achievements

The first objection is that STW<sub>s</sub> is problematic because (T2-i<sub>s</sub>)—i.e., S is practically wise only if S knows that attitude success contributes to or constitutes well-being—is false. The objection goes as follows. It is possible that S is practically wise but does not *know* that attitude success contributes to or constitutes well-being. S does not know this because there are cases in which a person's attitude success (such as his belief's being true, desire's being satisfied, or goal's being achieved) does not

<sup>9</sup>As said above, Keller identifies four kinds of (teleological) attitudes that by nature set standards for their own success and failure: beliefs, goals, evaluative attitudes, and the attitude of immediately liking an experience. I would like add a fifth to the class of teleological attitudes: desires. Keller excludes "desires" as one of the teleological attitudes but we should note that he says "mere desires": "By mere desires, I mean desires that do not count as goals. I might desire a Geelong victory, but that does not mean that I take it as a goal. Mere desires, I think, do not have constitutive aims" (2009: 671). Most of what Keller says about "(mere) desires" can best be replaced by "wishes" or "hopes". Compare this with Alan Goldman's notion of desire and illustration: "The primary function of desire is dispositional or motivational—desire is a state that prototypically aims to bring about its own satisfaction"; "we ... tend to use different terms: I hope or wish for good weather, while 'I desire good weather' is somewhat unnatural" (Goldman 2018: 158).

contribute to or constitute his well-being. Take goal achievement as an example. It seems that there is a kind of goal achievement the possession of which is bad for the possessor's well-being, such as achievements of self-destructive or irrational goals (e.g., eating a bowl of gravel) or the great achievements of the following kind: "It is hard to imagine that the wellbeing of Sir Robert Falcon Scott and his team was improved by their fateful journey to the South Pole. Yet reaching the South Pole was nonetheless a great achievement" (Bradford 2016: 795). Let us call these achievements "bad-for-oneself achievements",<sup>10</sup> regardless of whether they are of the trivial type or the great type. Since the success theory is wrong due to the existence of bad-for-oneself achievements, (T2-i<sub>s</sub>) is false, and accordingly, STW<sub>s</sub> is problematic.

## 4.2 | The objection from evil-but-good-for-oneself achievement

The second objection is that STW<sub>s</sub> is problematic because it allows that a wise person can do evil, and it thus conflicts with our intuition that wisdom and evil are incompatible. In her discussion of the value of achievement, Gwen Bradford says that "there is another sense in which achievements can be bad: they can result in, say, death and destruction. Let us call these evil achievements ... If all achievements are valuable insofar as they contribute to the wellbeing of the achiever, this entails that evil achievements benefit the achiever" (Bradford 2016: 800). Let us call evil achievements that benefit their achiever "evil-but-good-for-oneself achievements". Now, the objection to STW<sub>s</sub> goes as follows. First, according to STW<sub>s</sub>, a practically wise person S knows that attitude success contributes to or constitutes well-being. Since goal achievement is a kind of attitude success and evil-but-good-for-oneself achievements are a kind of goal achievement, S knows that evil-but-good-for-oneself achievements contribute to well-being. Second, according to STW<sub>s</sub>, a practically wise person S is successful at living well in light of what S knows. If S indeed knows that there are particular evil achievements the possession of which contributes to his well-being, then S should put what he knows into practice rather than just knowing it. If so, it seems that STW<sub>s</sub> allows that a practically wise person can do evil. Yet this conflicts with our intuition that wisdom and evil are incompatible.

## 5 | THE SKILL THEORY OF WISDOM ELABORATED

The above two objections have something in common: they both appeal to certain kinds of attitude success to undermine STW<sub>s</sub>. A proponent of STW<sub>s</sub> can respond to the two objections by restricting the scope of attitude success stated in STW<sub>s</sub>. For example, STW<sub>s</sub> can exclude bad-for-oneself achievements and evil-but-good-for-oneself achievements from its scope of attitude success. This response, however, does not delve into the nature of well-being and wisdom. The proponent of STW<sub>s</sub> who initiates the response must tell us *exactly why* a particular kind of attitude success does not or cannot constitute well-being and wisdom, or show us the *mechanism* among attitude success, well-being, and wisdom. To achieve this, I shall address the following two issues on behalf of the proponent of STW<sub>s</sub>: First, in what sense is a bad-for-oneself achievement "bad" for the person in question? Second, in what sense is an evil-but-good-for-oneself achievement "good" for the person in question, especially if the person is a practically wise person?

<sup>10</sup>Cf. Bradford (2016) in which she uses the term "bad-for-you achievements".

## 5.1 | Wisdom and overall attitude success

Assume that there is a person who has a goal to smoke ten more cigars per day and does enjoy smoking when he smokes (Winston Churchill?). If the achievement of such a goal is “bad” for the person, why is it bad? According to the success theory of well-being proposed by Keller, “the achievement of stupid, irrational, and self-destructive goals does indeed make a contribution to a certain aspect of welfare (it makes you more successful relative to the standards set by your own goals), but it is a contribution that is usually outweighed by its other effects, whether on that very aspect of welfare (perhaps it prevents you from achieving other, more important goals) or on others (perhaps it causes a great deal of pain)” (Keller 2009: 678). The achievement of the goal of smoking ten more cigars per day is bad for the person not because the goal *in itself* is bad but because it prevents too many attitude successes that are or could be possessed by the person (say, the achievement of the goal of being healthy, which is always the basis of many other attitude successes).

Now we can see that the success theory of well-being is *self-contained* in the sense that the theory, in explaining why a bad-for-oneself achievement is bad, is not required to posit a further fundamental substance beyond attitude success; all that is required to explain one’s well-being remains the idea of attitude success. Assume that a person’s well-being is constituted by a dynamic set of attitude successes. A particular attitude success, actual or potential, is bad for the person’s well-being if and only if the particular attitude success reduces or would reduce the set of attitude successes to a considerable extent.<sup>11</sup> So construed, it is *logically* possible that the goals of eating a bowl of gravel, smoking ten more cigars per day, or reaching the South Pole in a journey similar to Scott’s are not bad for a person’s well-being *if* the achievement of any one or all of these goals does not or cannot reduce the person’s set of attitude successes to any considerable extent. However, this is *this-worldly* impossible: as human beings, our attitude successes are often related to each other in the physical, psychological, or social dimensions.

From the discussion above, we find that although *each* attitude success matters to well-being, *overall* attitude success matters more to well-being.<sup>12</sup> To incorporate this finding into our theory, STW<sub>s</sub> can be elaborated as follows:

<sup>11</sup>A person’s set of attitude successes is reduced in the sense that some attitude successes in the set are removed from the set and returned to the person’s set of attitudes. A *reduced* set of attitude successes of a person must be compared to the set of attitudes of the same person.

<sup>12</sup>Two notes here. First, although Keller does not say “overall attitude success matters more to well-being”, he does have a similar view when he says: “[I]f eating gravel is a goal of such a nature that achieving it means setting back your welfare in some different respect, then that is something to be said against that goal, from the point of view of your welfare; it would be better if you had a goal whose achievement is consistent with your doing well in all other respects” (Keller 2009: 678). Second, some might criticize that the formulation “overall attitude success matters more to well-being” (or “consistency in all respects matters more to well-being”) is misleading, because what *ultimately* matters is still *individual* attitude success. Indeed, in some case, the aim of pursuing overall attitude success is to make *each* actual (or potential) attitude success as secure (or achievable) as possible. In such a case, the formulation, the critic might suggest, should be clarified as “overall attitude success *instrumentally* matters more to well-being”. However, in some case, the aim of pursuing overall attitude success is not merely to make each attitude success secure but also to put attitude successes in a certain structure to form the “shape of a life”, which matters to well-being over and above the sum of attitude successes within it. In such a case, “overall attitude success *non-instrumentally* matters more to well-being”. To encompass both cases, I leave the formulation as it is; and under this formulation, the function of overall attitude success remains, that is, it has the right to override a particular attitude success.

## The Skill Theory of Wisdom, plus the Success Theory of Well-Being (STW<sub>s\*</sub>)

(T1) S is practically wise if and only if S has skill in living well.

(T2) S is practically wise only if

- (i<sub>s\*</sub>) S knows that *overall* attitude success contributes to or constitutes well-being;
- (ii) S knows what the best means are to achieve well-being;
- (iii) S is successful at living well (in light of what S knows).

The mechanism among attitude success, well-being, and wisdom is now clearer. First, a person's well-being is constituted by a dynamic set of attitude successes. That is, each attitude success in the set matters to the person's well-being. Second, when a particular attitude success, actual or potential, reduces or would reduce the set of attitude successes to a considerable extent, that particular attitude success is deemed bad for the person's well-being. That is, overall attitude success matters more to the person's well-being. Third, overall attitude success does not emerge automatically; it is practical wisdom, as I shall propose, that functions as an excellent evaluator, director, and mediator of attitude successes, *which do not evaluate and organize themselves*, so as to achieve, sustain, and enhance overall attitude success.

### 5.2 | Wisdom and anti-wickedness

Let us turn to the question asking in what sense an evil-but-good-for-oneself achievement is "good" for the person in question, especially when the person is a practically wise person.

From the point of view that each attitude success matters to well-being, it is clear that a person's evil achievement is good for the person insofar as his goal is achieved. However, from the point of view that overall attitude success matters more to well-being, it is not yet clear that the person's evil achievement is good for the person. A definite answer partly depends on whether the person's evil achievement reduces his set of attitude successes. There are two response alternatives: yes, or no. If the response is the former, then evil achievement is bad for the person. If the response is the latter, then evil achievement is not bad (and might be good) for the person. In the second case, evil achievement might be "doubly good" for the person (i.e., good for the person because the goal is achieved, and good for the person because the person's set of attitude successes is not reduced).

Now let us consider how a practically wise person would do when encountering the two alternatives. If an evil achievement is bad for the practically wise person, then the wise person, in order to achieve and sustain his overall attitude success, must prevent or remove this evil achievement from his set of attitude successes. If an evil achievement might be "doubly good" for the practically wise person, then there seems to be no reason for the wise person to prevent or remove it from his set of attitude successes. This, in turn, seems to justify that a practically wise person can do evil, which is in conflict with our intuition that wisdom and evil are incompatible. Is our intuition wrong?

According to Dennis Whitcomb, "[m]any theorists suggest that it is impossible for wise people to be wicked", but he confesses that "[t]he only argument for this view that I know of is the argument from the claim that wisdom is a virtue" (2011: 103). Here is the argument, let us call it the argument from virtue, that Whitcomb offers (2011: 103; with my reconstruction):

1. Virtues are reliably acted on by whoever possesses them.
2. Wisdom is a virtue by which one knows how to live well.
3. Wisdom is reliably acted on by whoever possesses it so as to live well. (From 1 & 2)

4. Reliably acting so as to live well is incompatible with being wicked.
5. Wisdom is incompatible with being wicked. (From 3 & 4)

Whitcomb does not accept the argument from virtue because he argues that virtue-theoretic accounts of wisdom are mistaken. I have another reason for doubting this argument: the fourth proposition is not self-evident. Accordingly, the conclusion that wisdom is incompatible with being wicked is not persuasive. So, are wisdom and evil compatible?<sup>13</sup>

Whitcomb constructs a new argument for the view that wisdom and evil are incompatible:

Nonetheless, every writer about wisdom that I know of subscribes to some sort of anti-wickedness condition, at least tacitly. Furthermore, it is hard to think of actual characters in the history of literature and film, or even in our own personal lives, who are both wise and wicked. Save sinister characters like Goethe's Mephistopheles and perhaps Machiavelli, I can't think of any such characters. I conclude from these observations that if one is wise, it is unlikely that one is also evil. (Whitcomb 2011: 103)

This argument is based on unthinkability or inconceivability, which can be presented as follows: It is hard to conceive of a person who is both wise and evil (or, it is weakly conceivable that a person is both wise and evil);<sup>14</sup> therefore, it is improbable for a person to be both wise and evil. Let us call this the argument from weak inconceivability (hereafter, AWI).<sup>15</sup> Now, compare it with the argument from strong inconceivability (hereafter, ASI), which can be presented as follows: It is strongly inconceivable that a person is both wise and evil; therefore, it is impossible for a person to be both wise and evil. Both arguments aim to show that wisdom and evil are incompatible but with different ranges of applicability (i.e., being applicable merely to the actual world or to all possible worlds). ASI leaves no room for the possibility of being both wise and evil, whereas AWI makes room for this possibility, though remote. Regarding these two arguments, I side with AWI rather than ASI due to argumentative considerations. ASI, if valid, must assume that inconceivability implies impossibility, which, in turn, assumes that we can conceive of every possibility; in contrast, AWI has no such *controversial* assumptions. Directed by this comparison, AWI is less vulnerable to criticism, and its conclusion can be enhanced by emphasizing its character as follows: it is improbable, but not impossible, for a wise person to do evil.

In addition to the argument from virtue and the argument from inconceivability (either ASI or AWI), there is a third related<sup>16</sup> argument associated with wisdom and its correlative; call it the argument from definition:

<sup>13</sup>In one aspect, Whitcomb indeed thinks so: "The devil is evil but nonetheless wise. He was wise as an angel, and through no loss of knowledge but, rather, through some sort of affective restructuring tried and failed to take over the throne. And mere affective changes accompanied by no loss of knowledge should not remove one's wisdom. So, wisdom and evil are compatible" (Whitcomb 2011: 103).

<sup>14</sup>Below is a list of nominations for wise persons: Ghandi, Confucius, Jesus Christ, M. L. King, Socrates, Mother Theresa, Solomon, Buddha, Pope, Oprah Winfrey, Winston Churchill, Dali Lama, Ann Landers, Nelson Mandela, and Queen Elizabeth (cf. Paulhus et al. 2002: 1053). Can they be thought of as being evil persons?

<sup>15</sup>My usage of the terms "strong inconceivability" and "weak inconceivability", here and later, conforms roughly to that of Tim Bayan, who suggests that "[a] scenario is strongly inconceivable for S when S seems to see that it is impossible, whereas a scenario is weakly inconceivable for S when S cannot see that it is possible" (Bayne 2010: 43). That S cannot see that it is possible does not entail that S seems to see that it is impossible.

<sup>16</sup>I use the word "related" because some might argue that "wisdom is good" is not identical to "wisdom is anti-wicked".

Wisdom could not fall short of The Good because if it did, it would not be wisdom. Saying that wisdom is good would then be like saying that a triangle is three-sided. Nothing could show that a triangle is not three-sided, nor that wisdom is not good. (Kekes 2020: 59)

That is, the view that wisdom is good is true *by definition*. (By the same token, one can argue that wisdom is anti-wicked because this is true *by definition*.) The argument from definition, however, is not persuasive. We still wonder what the reason is for choosing a particular definition rather than another. As Kekes says, “This would not be a *reason* for thinking that wisdom is good but a stipulative definition ... that ignores the question of what makes the connection between wisdom and The Good necessary” (Kekes 2020: 59; emphasis original).

Based on the above, the objection from evil-but-good-for-oneself achievement can be defused. The kernel of the objection is the intuition that wisdom and evil are necessarily incompatible. The intuition, however, is ungrounded (if not groundless) because the arguments for it (such as the argument from virtue, ASI, and the argument from definition) have been shown to be problematic for a variety of reasons. What is left is AWI. However, strictly speaking, AWI does not support the intuition and accordingly does not reject the skill theory of wisdom constructed in the previous sections (either  $STW_s$  or  $STW_{s*}$ ). In fact, both AWI and  $STW_{s*}$  make room for the possibility, though very remote, of being both wise and evil.

My explanation of the relationship between wisdom and evil is as follows. As I have argued above, a practically wise person can do evil when the evil achievement is doubly good for the wise person; that is, it is possible for a wise person to do evil. However, I suggest that this is a logical possibility, rather than an actual possibility, because, as Whitcomb observes, there is no such exemplar in the actual world. But why is there no actual exemplar of a person who is both wise and evil? An explanation, or hypothesis, for the observed phenomenon that all practically wise persons in our actual world are anti-wicked is, I suggest, that *all evil achievements are bad for the well-being of the practically wise persons in our actual world*. Recall that if an evil achievement is bad for a practically wise person, then in order to achieve and sustain his overall attitude success, the wise person must prevent or remove this evil achievement from his set of attitude successes. Briefly, if an evil achievement is bad for the practically wise person’s overall attitude success, the wise person *qua* wise must be anti-wicked.

But how is it possible that all evil achievements are bad for the well-being of practically wise persons in our actual world? This is possible if all practically wise persons in our actual world have a special set of attitude successes that could be easily reduced to a considerable extent by an evil achievement. For example, and in particular, if a practically wise person has an attitude of *promoting others’ well-being* inside his set of attitude successes,<sup>17</sup> and the achievement of the very attitude has an integrated relationship with other attitude successes in the set, then such an integrated set is sensitive to and can be considerably reduced by an evil achievement, which is generally understood as an achievement of *harming the well-being of other people*.

I have completed my responses to the two objections raised in Section 4. As we see, the objections help us to elaborate, rather than undermine, the skill theory of wisdom.

<sup>17</sup>Promoting others’ well-being does not entail sacrificing one’s well-being or overall attitude successes. We can, following Zagzebski (2017), distinguish sages (we admire them for their acts of wisdom) from saints (we admire them for their acts of self-sacrifice).

## 6 | CONCLUSION

Let me conclude with two remarks, one regarding the philosophy of wisdom and another regarding the psychology of wisdom.

First, the underlying concern of this paper is the nature of practical wisdom, and the underlying questions are fundamental and familiar: What is practical wisdom? What does a practically wise person know? To fully address these questions in the philosophy of wisdom, I have developed and argued for a fully articulated theory of wisdom by integrating the skill theory of wisdom with the success theory of well-being. According to this theory, that is,  $STW_{s*}$ , a person is practically wise if and only if he has skill in living well, which is constituted by his knowing that overall attitude success constitutes well-being, knowing what the best means are to achieve well-being, and being successful at living well in light of what he knows.  $STW_{s*}$  is structural in that it has two supplements: the Base and the Extension. The Base of  $STW_{s*}$ , or the metatheory of  $STW_{s*}$ , consists of the General Argument, the goal-oriented character and success-conducive character of wisdom *qua* skill, and the others-caring feature of wisdom. The Base of  $STW_{s*}$  can explain certain platitudes about practical wisdom, such as that a practically wise person must think about the ends and means, must put what he knows about well-being into practice, and must be anti-wicked. The Extension of  $STW_{s*}$  (most of which is stated in Section 5) is about the *mechanism* among attitude success, well-being, and wisdom, which can be summarized as follows: (a) well-being is constituted by a dynamic set of attitude successes; (b) the set of attitude successes can be enhanced or reduced (relative to the set of attitudes); (c) each attitude success matters to the set of attitude successes; (d) overall attitude success matters more to the set of attitude successes; (e) certain attitude successes can reduce the set of attitude successes to a considerable extent; (f) practical wisdom is the good evaluator, director, and mediator of attitude successes to achieve, sustain, and enhance overall attitude success; and (g) all practically wise persons in our actual world have a certain kind of set of attitude successes that could be easily reduced to a considerable extent by an evil achievement.

Second, psychologists Sternberg and Glück say that “it would be a serious mistake to leave the study of wisdom exclusively to philosophers (and in fact, even fewer philosophers than psychologists actually study wisdom nowadays!)”, but they also think, “Psychology as well as philosophy has a great deal to contribute to the study of wisdom. The philosophical and psychological approaches are complementary, with each providing insights that the other would be likely to miss” (2019: 787). But in what way are they complementary? I have suggested in Section 1 that the philosophy of wisdom can be, and if possible, should be the conceptual foundation of the psychology of wisdom. The philosophy of wisdom in general and the skill theory of wisdom in particular address issues such as why wisdom is a skill, why propositional and procedural knowledge are necessary for wisdom, why and whether wisdom is anti-wicked, and so on (as readers can see in this paper). However, these “why” questions about wisdom—or to put it more generally, reason-demanding questions about wisdom—are outside the field of the psychology of wisdom. Some might think that this is so because of psychologists’ neglect.<sup>18</sup> However, I think there is a more substantial reason for psychologists’ “neglect”: neither the implicit-theories approach nor the explicit-theories approach to wisdom *aims to* address

<sup>18</sup>For example, we see that Kekes’s comments on the psychology of wisdom are expressed in ways such as “*Nothing I have read explains why these ‘criteria’ are selected rather than others*”, “*Nor is there an explanation of how psychologists could evaluate their subjects’ richness of knowledge*”, and “*Nothing explains why psychological researchers assume that their subjects know ... what wisdom is*” (Kekes 2020: 48-49; all emphases mine).

reason-demanding questions; both approaches are designed to be more data-driven than argument-driven.<sup>19</sup> There is no need to debate whether the psychology of wisdom *can* answer the related reason-demanding questions about wisdom; the point is that the questions in themselves are legitimate for the study of wisdom regardless of what discipline it represents.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for *PPR* for extremely helpful comments and insightful suggestions. I would also like to thank Ruey-yuan Wu, Shane Ryan, Norman Teng, Daisy Ku, Peter Tsu, Hsi-heng Cheng, and Chon Ip Ng for very helpful discussions. This work was supported by the Ministry of Science and Technology, Taiwan (Grant No. MOST 109-2410-H-001-097-MY3).

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<sup>19</sup>The implicit-theories approach and the explicit-theories approach are two kinds of psychological approaches to understanding “intelligence”, “creativity”, and “wisdom”. Implicit theories in general, according to Sternberg, “are constructions by people (whether psychologists or laypersons) that reside in the minds of these individuals. Such theories need to be discovered rather than invented because they already exist, in some form, in people’s heads” (Sternberg 1985: 608). In contrast, explicit theories in general “are constructions of psychologists or other scientists that are based on or at least tested on data collected from people performing tasks presumed to measure psychological functioning” (Sternberg 1985: 607). Applying to the case of wisdom, “implicit theories of wisdom are the conceptions of wisdom that laypersons hold, and explicit theories of wisdom are those that are constructed and tested by psychologists and other experts” (Bluck & Glück 2005: 90). Therefore, it is obvious that implicit theories of wisdom are not argument-driven, but data-driven; they are concerned with what people think about wisdom, rather than whether people are justified in believing what they think about wisdom. Explicit theories of wisdom may not be entirely argument-driven either, because it can be overridden by implicit theories of wisdom (c.f., “Still, an explicit theory of wisdom that was totally inconsistent with laypeople’s understanding of the term would be hard to defend” [Bluck & Glück 2005: 91]).

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**How to cite this article:** Tsai C.-h. Practical Wisdom, Well-Being, and Success. *Philo Phenomenol Res.* 2021;00:1–17. <https://doi.org/10.1111/phpr.12797>