

## Wisdom - The Answer to all the Questions Really Worth Asking

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### Abstract

*Wisdom is an ancient concept with close conceptual relations to human goals, means and problem solving. However, in the recent scientific discourse there has been some confusion about the meaning of "wisdom". In this paper the most prominent definitions are contrasted with each other and a new reading is proposed: Based on an extensive literature review it is proposed that "wisdom" is explanatory knowledge of the fundamental truths in the domain of living well – an orienting knowledge about what is good and right. It is demonstrated that deviations of modern philosophic definitions from this view can be traced back to slight misconceptions of traditional views. Further, in this paper the content of wisdom is specified in more detail as a set of propositions that were (a) claimed by wise men from different cultures and (b) bolstered by empirical psychological research.*

### Introduction

Wisdom is an ancient concept, closely related to fundamental goals, means, and human problem solving (Fischer, 2015; Dörner, 1986; Staudinger & Baltes, 1996; Maercker, 1995; Baumann & Linden, 2008; Sternberg, 2007). In the research literature, wisdom is often associated with affective, reflective, and cognitive aspects such as self-transcendence and love (Le & Levenson, 2005), a reflective attitude (Bluck & Glück, 2005; Thomas, Bangen, Ardel, & Jeste, 2015) and with knowledge of virtue or the common good, applied for the well-being of oneself and others (Baltes & Staudinger, 2000; Baltes & Freund, 2003; Sternberg, 2007; Thomas et al., 2015). However, despite more than two millennia of thought about the meaning of wisdom (e.g., Socrates, 469ad – 399ad) there still seems to be some confusion concerning an adequate definition: Over the last decades multiple definitions have been proposed (see Appendix). Unfortunately, even the definitions proposed by modern philosophers (e.g., Ryan, 1999; Whitcomb, 2010; Grimm, 2014) differ in multiple respects: (1) Some philosophers consider wisdom to be knowledge about how to live well (e.g., Ryan, 1999; Grimm, 2014) others (e.g., Whitcomb, 2010) think of it as a twofold phenomenon containing both explanatory knowledge about the fundamental truths in different impractical domains ("theoretical wisdom") and practical knowledge about how to live well ("practical wisdom"). (2) Some think knowledge is both necessary and sufficient for defining wisdom (Grimm, 2014; Whitcomb, 2010), others think a positive attitude towards life or living well is also a necessary part of the definition (Ryan, 1999). (3) Some think wisdom comprises knowledge about personal and variable things such as one's standing relative to what is good (Grimm, 2014), others don't seem to think so (Ryan, 1999; Whitcomb, 2010).

In the paper at hand I suggest to resolve each of these three conflicts by a majority decision: Based on an extensive literature review, I will demonstrate how many deviations from this rule can be related to slight misconceptions regarding Socrates' or Aristotle's respective views of wisdom (see below). I will argue that, in a wide range of human cultures, "wisdom" is understood as *knowledge of the fundamental truths in the domain of living well – an orienting knowledge about what is good and right*. "Being wise" means realizing wisdom (cf. Ardel, 2004). Being wise implies realizing the true meaning of human virtue (Baltes & Staudinger, 2000) – which is not only something that is prescribed by the community or ancient texts, but something that is preferable for each human being including oneself, because it tends to enhance the well-being of both oneself and one's social environment (e.g., Peterson & Seligman, 2004; Thomas et al., 2015). This in turn, may bring about many of the characteristic features of a wise person – for instance, as a result of this knowledge a wise person may be able to set explicit and virtuous goals that are consistent with his or her implicit motives, which is known to be related to satisfaction (Brunstein et al., 1995), inner peace and lasting happiness (Lyubomirski, 2005).

I suggest, (1) there is only one kind of wisdom and it contains explanatory knowledge about the domain of living well – whereas “practical wisdom” can be considered the ability to apply wisdom to daily life; (2) realizing this knowledge is sufficient for being wise; and (3) knowledge about one's own standing in relation to what is good should not be considered a part of the definition (although it is highly characteristic for wise persons). Further, based on a review of wisdom literature from different cultures, I suggest the content of wisdom (i.e., true justified beliefs about the good life) can be specified in more detail as a list of propositions that (a) were endorsed by wise men of many different cultures and (b) are bolstered by modern psychological research. Last but not least I want to discuss why the pursuit for wisdom seems to have been abandoned as a topic worth studying – even by philosophers<sup>1</sup> (cf., Fenner, 2008) – and why it still deserves attention to solve humans' most fundamental problems.

### ***1) Wisdom is Knowledge about the Good Life***

Most researchers involved in the current discourse base their views on Socrates and/or Aristotle, so I will elaborate on these views of wisdom in some detail (primarily referring to Xenophon's *Memorabilia*, Plato's writings *Crito*, *Republic*, and his *Apology of Socrates*, as well as Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics & Metaphysics*), before I demonstrate that a wide range of different cultures also hold views of wisdom that can consistently be described as knowledge about the good life. Socrates – known as the wisest of men (*Apology* 21a) – preferred knowledge about virtue over knowledge about the physical universe (*Memorabilia* I,1,10-16; *Republic* II, 367e) and some say he never thought about anything else (*Republic* II, 367e). It is a widely held misunderstanding of Socrates' sayings that Socrates claimed to know nothing. Indeed, Socrates said he did not think to know what he did not know (*Apology* 21d & 22d) but he explicitly claimed to know what was virtuous and what was not (e.g., he knew that doing other people wrong – even bad ones – and not learning from better persons, was not virtuous and should be avoided, see *Apology* 28b; *Crito* 49a-e; *Republic* II, 335e). That is, Socrates claimed to know something, but he was aware of not knowing everything. Epistemic humility and accuracy – two attributes that are sometimes associated with wisdom (Ryan, 1999) – may be helpful for gaining this kind of knowledge – and the wisest of men may all have understood the limits of their knowledge and their bounded rationality (*Apology* 23b; cf. Baltes & Staudinger, 2000) – but there is no reason for confusing them with wisdom itself (or for thinking Socrates did so). On the contrary, Socrates' disciple Plato<sup>2</sup> explicitly portrays Socrates' view of wisdom as an advisory knowledge about the best actions towards oneself and others (*Republic* IV, 426a-e) or as „knowledge of what is beneficial for each and for the whole [of the soul's constituents]” (*Republic* IV, 442c).

Plato's disciple Aristotle introduced a momentous distinction between this kind of (theoretical) wisdom and what he called “*phronesis*” (often translated as practical wisdom) – the ability to choose the right means towards good ends in concrete situations (Schwartz & Sharpe, 2006). In the *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle explicitly defined (theoretical) wisdom as a kind of knowledge (*nous* and *episteme*, cf. Aydede, 1998): “The wise man therefore must not only know the conclusions that follow from his first principles [i.e., *episteme*], but also have a true conception of those principles themselves [i.e., *nous*]. (...) it [i.e., wisdom] must be a consummated knowledge of the most exalted objects.” (*Nic.Eth.* 1141a). The distinction between theoretical and practical wisdom may have contributed to some confusion about the content of wisdom: Whitcomb (2010) has argued, “theoretical wisdom” was about explanatory knowledge in an arbitrary impractical domain (e.g., physics or metaphysics) whereas knowledge about how to live well was mere „practical wisdom“. Grimm (2014) rejects that it is possible to give self-contained accounts of both theoretical and practical wisdom and argues there is only a single kind of wisdom – knowledge about what is good, how to achieve what is good, and one's standing in regard to what is good. I propose a slightly different view: I argue, based on Aristotle's elaborations on wisdom in the *Metaphysics*, that Aristotle considered (theoretical) wisdom to be explanatory knowledge about the domain of living well (because the highest good was the most fundamental of principles, see Sternberg, 2005), whereas practical wisdom, in his view, was nothing but the ability to apply this knowledge to everyday live.

<sup>1</sup> This is of special importance, as philosophy literally means the love (*philos*) for wisdom (*sophia*).

<sup>2</sup> Please note Plato may have mixed his own views with those of Socrates in many of his dialogues. In this specific case, I consider this portray of Socrates plausible, because it is consistent with and similar to the views reported in Xenophon's writings (who lists the same set of cardinal virtues – *Memorabilia* III, 9,1-5 – and who relates wisdom to knowledge about the right thing to do – e.g., *Memorabilia* III, 9,4 – as well as to all the good one knows, e.g., *Memorabilia* I,6,13).

Differences to the views of Whitcomb (2010) and Grimm (2014) are subtle: In a way, consistent with Whitcomb's (2010) conceptualization, Aristotle considered theoretical wisdom to be knowledge about certain invariant metaphysical facts (i.e., in contrast to Grimm, 2014, Aristotle did not consider knowledge about one's standing relative to what is good as part of theoretical wisdom). However, in contrast to Whitcomb's (2010) assumption Aristotle considered the highest knowledge – the content of theoretical wisdom – to be a kind of „theology“ which did not exclude (but was all about) the question of what is good (Met. 1026a): „Thus it is clear that Wisdom is knowledge of certain principles and causes (...) And that science [of wisdom] is supreme, and superior to the subsidiary, which knows for what end each action is to be done; i.e. the good in each particular case, and in general the highest good in the whole of nature. Thus as a result of all the above considerations the term which we are investigating falls under the same science, which must speculate about first principles and causes; for the good, i.e. the end, is one of the causes.“ (Met., 982a-b). That is, the highest good<sup>3</sup>, according to Aristotle, was the single most fundamental principle – and thus the content of wisdom – that drives all action as it is urged for: „For the final cause is (a) some being for whose good an action is done, and (b) something at which the action aims; and of these the latter exists among unchangeable entities though the former does not. The final cause, then, produces motion as being loved, but all other things move by being moved“ (Met. 1072a). Please note, contrary to modern physics Aristotle thought the unmoved mover to be a final telos, not a first cause (and Aristotle explicitly considers it more fundamental than other speculative philosophies such as physics and mathematics, which are subordinate parts of wisdom, Met. 1026a). According to Aristotle, wisdom is knowledge about the most general, explanatory and superior truths; it is difficult to comprehend and desirable in itself (Met. 982a).

Thus, the central element of wisdom – according to the positions of both Socrates and Aristotle – is “the best one knows” (Memorabilia I, 6,13): true justified beliefs about the good life. Whoever fully realizes what is good and right – so the common assumption – would never prefer to do anything else (Memorabilia III, 9, 5; Met. 1072a). To test the connectivity of this definition of wisdom, I reviewed wisdom literature from christian (New Testament), jewish (Old Testament), muslim (Quran), hindu (Bhagavad Gita), buddhist (Mulamadhyamakakarika) and confucian (LunYü) traditions. Based on each of these texts, I found the meaning of wisdom to be consistent with the definition proposed above. Let me illustrate this point by a few examples:

- Confucius said wisdom<sup>4</sup> was knowledge about humans and how to make them virtuous (LunYü XII, 22). Wisdom can be acquired by hearing a lot, and following the good of what one hears (LunYü VII, 27).
- In the Old Testament, Salomon asked God for understanding good and evil – and became wise according to his wish (1. Kings 3, 9-12). Moses said, the 10 commandments – probably the most famous proscriptions related to a good life – would become known as the wisdom of the jews (Deuteronomium 4, 5-6). God himself is quoted to have said: “The fear of the Lord [which implies living according to the ten commandments, cf. Exodus 20,20]- that is wisdom, and to shun evil is understanding” (Job 28,28).
- In the New Testament true wisdom – which is indicated by good conduct (Jas 3,13) – is often contrasted with human (1. Cor 2,13), earthly & unspiritual kinds of wisdom (Jas, 3,15). “But the wisdom that comes from heaven [personified in Jesus Christ, (1. Cor 1,24)] is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere” (Jas 3,17).
- In the muslim Quran, certain instructions and proscriptions are explicitly referred to as a part of Allah's wisdom, as they are followed by the words: “That is, from what your Lord has revealed to you, of wisdom of Allah, revealed to humans!” (Quran, 17:39).
- According to the hindu Bhagavad Gita, striving for personal gratification is delusional, but nevertheless wise men are not inactive – they know their duty and act for the better of mankind (Gita III, 25)
- In buddhism wisdom is associated with knowing the four noble truths – please note the fourth noble truth is basically an instruction of how to live well – and with seeing things as they really are (Garfield, 1995; Saṃyutta Nikāya 56, 11, Dhammapada 38). The Buddha said: “If you encounter someone who is intelligent, shows you what is to be avoided, and gives reproof where it is due, follow that wise person as you would someone who reveals hidden treasures. It will be better, not worse, for you.” (Dhammapada 76)

<sup>3</sup> For Aristotle the highest good was eudaimonia (Nic.Eth. I,13; I,5) and the corresponding way of living was contemplation (Nic.Eth. X,I). Thus, even in Aristotle's view (theoretical) wisdom is knowledge about how to live well (Met. 982ab), and practical wisdom is the ability to apply this knowledge to concrete circumstances in daily life - a virtue of judgment (Nic.Eth. 1141b).

<sup>4</sup> There are several places in the LunYü, where wisdom is explicitly referred to: XII,22; VII,27; cf. V,14; V,17; V,19; V, 20; VI,20; VII,27; IX,28; XIV,19; XIV,30; XV,7; XVII,8; cf. Gia Yü 9,7.

Thus, in all the cultures examined so far, the core of wisdom is knowledge about how to live well. There may be even more cultures that could be reviewed to bolster my claim<sup>5</sup> (e.g., Egypt, Taoist or Native American wisdom literature), but a complete review would be beyond the scope of this paper. For now it may be sufficient to note a wide range of human cultures have defined wisdom consistent with the way I propose to define it in this paper.

## **2) Propositions that Constitute Human Wisdom**

Many researchers agree that knowledge about how to live well is a central element of wisdom (Ryan, 1999; Whicomb, 2010; Baltes & Freund, 2003; Grimm, 2014). Nevertheless, in the modern research literature there is hardly an attempt to identify some of these true justified beliefs about the domain of the good life. This may have several reasons: Some true justified beliefs about living well may be true only for individuals with specific values in specific contexts, and no mortal may ever know them for sure (cf. Baltes & Staudinger, 2000). Additionally, according to some researchers (e.g., Baltes & Staudinger, 2000) besides explicit declarative knowledge wisdom may also contain implicit procedural knowledge (related to understanding declarative knowledge) that may reveal itself in real life but that may not be explicated easily (Kuppermann, 2005). However, based on the abundant wisdom literature available, I am confident that at least some contents of wisdom are both propositional and true for every human being – independent of one's values and context. In the current section I try to specify some of these propositions (claimed to be true by wise<sup>6</sup> men from different cultures) in more detail in order to demonstrate that there is wide agreement across cultures regarding some of the central contents of wisdom. Most eminently, the „golden rule“ to treat others as one would like others to treat oneself can – in slight variations – be found in texts of wise men such as Confucius (LunYü XV, 23); Buddha (Saṃyutta Nikāya 55,7; Dhammapada 131-132), Socrates (Republic I, 335e; Crito, 49c), or Jesus (Luk 6,31; Mat 22, 34-40; Mat 25,40). Table 1 contains a list of propositions that were – in different wordings – endorsed by wise men from different cultures. Please note, the list is not meant to be conclusive (neither with regard to propositions nor with regard to wise men) and I explicitly encourage future research to expand it.

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<sup>5</sup> In some traditions additional kinds of knowledge (e.g., knowledge about biological taxonomies) seem to be associated with the concept of wisdom (e.g., Met. 1026a; or the deuterocanonical book of Wisdom 7, 17-22), but when they are, they are usually (a) not explicitly referred to as defining features or (b) explicitly subordinated to knowledge about the good life.

<sup>6</sup> Socrates was claimed to be the wisest of men by the Oracle of Delphi (Apology 21a), Jesus was claimed to be wise by St. Paul (Col, 2,1-3), Luke (2,52 & 11,31) and the Quran (5:110 & 43:63). Buddha is said to have obtained wisdom (Garfield, 1995) and Confucius is frequently mentioned as an exemplar of a wise man (Kuppermann, 2005).

**Table 1: Propositions that were known to wise men from different cultures**

	Proposition	Socrates	Jesus	Confucius	Buddha
1	It is recommendable to treat others as you would like others to treat yourself	Republic I, 335e; Crito, 49c	Luk 6,31; Mat 22, 34-40; Mat 25,40	Lun Yü XV, 23	Saṃyutta Nikāya 55,7; Dhammapada 131-132
2	Material things don't bring lasting happiness - because they are impermeable and don't satisfy on the long run	Memorabilia IV,2,9;	Mat, 6,19;	Lun Yü, VI,17 & IX,16	Saṃyutta Nikāya 56,11 & 56,41 Dhammapada 186
3	Virtue is to be preferred over material treasures - material treasures should not be aspired or avoided as long as they distract from being virtuous	Memorabilia I,6,1-10; Apology,30b;	Mat 6,19; Luke 6,24;	Lun Yü IV,5&9&16, XVI,5	Saṃyutta Nikāya 17,1-43 & 56, 34; Dhammapada 75
4	Virtuous thoughts and actions (e.g., temperance, bravery, justice and wisdom) bring lasting happiness because they instantiate what is best in oneself and are always directed at becoming better (in a way that is consistent with one's values)	Memorabilia I,6,9; III,9,1-15;	Mat 6,20+Mat 7,21; cf. Wis,8,7;	Lun Yü IV,2 & VII,14; & XII,4	Saṃyutta Nikāya 56, 35; Dhammapada 16
5	Fate does not always reward virtue with material things – at least not immediately so – , but it is irrational to not accept fate (the things that just happen, some may call it “God’s will”) as it is	Memorabilia IV,3,14;	Luke 22,42; Cf. Job 1,20 + Job 2,10;	Lun Yü VII,11	Dhammapada 83; 120
6	It is beneficial for oneself to respect father and mother, because they did more for oneself than anyone else ever can do	Memorabilia II, 2,1-14;	Mat 15,4;	Lun Yü II, 5-8	Saṃyutta Nikāya 56, 61-131
7	It is easier but not preferable to observe the errors of others than to observe one's own errors	Memorabilia III,7,9;	Mat 7,3	Lun Yü I,16;IV,17	Dhammapada 50
8	Knowledge about social beings is more important than knowledge about dead parts of the physical universe	Memorabilia I,1,11-12;	Mat 24, 35	Lun Yü XI,11	Saṃyutta Nikāya 56,7-8;
9	Hatred ceases by love and good deeds, not by hatred and bad deeds –therefore the greatest commandment is to love each other	Memorabilia I, 2,10	Joh, 13,34; Matth. 22,35-40	Lun Yü I,6; IV, 6; XV,23	Dhammapada 5
10	Good people (and children) make good company	Memorabilia II,4,5	Mat, 19-14	Lun Yü IV,1	Dhammapada 85;206
11	Death is nothing to fear, for either it will be simply the end of consciousness or it will be a new experience. Not knowing about it for sure motivates virtuous behavior here and now	Apology 40b-42a;	Mat 24, 9-13	Gia Yü VIII,17	Saṃyutta Nikāya 56,7-8;
12	Confronting the thought of death, and thinking it through, can relief from the fear of and orientation towards death (allowing for a focus on more important things in life)	Republic I, 329c-d & 330c-331a	Joh 8,51-52	Lun Yü XII, 7	Dhammapada 21-22

However, as Table 1 demonstrates, there is a large number of propositions that have been stated by wise men from four highly heterogeneous cultures. This seems to be a promising first step for identifying propositions that – supposed they are true (see next section) – definitely can be considered wise.

Additionally, there are many propositions that may be considered wise, but that happen to not be stated by at least four wise men. One illustrative example may be the proposition “Everybody is motivated/likely to spend a certain fraction of his or her possession – and at the end of the day no member of the community will have to be hungry – if the poor make the first step”. This proposition seems to have been known to Jesus (Mat 14,13-21, Mat 15,32-39) as well as Socrates (Memorabilia III,14,1& II,3, 2), and it may be considered wise. Nevertheless, to my knowledge there is no sufficient evidence to decide whether other wise men such as Confucius or the Buddha considered them to be true or justified as well. Thus, in the remainder of this paper I’ll focus on the wise propositions in Table 1, knowing the list is not (and won’t ever be) complete.

### 3) Empirical Evidence for the truth of Wise Propositions

In the previous section I gathered some of the propositions that can be found in wisdom literature of different cultures. But is there empirical evidence that any of them are true? Aren't there cultural differences in the values each culture endorses? As truth is an important aspect associated with the content of wisdom, the following list highlights some of the most important findings produced by research on wisdom, virtues and well-being. Again, this list is far from being exhaustive and a complete review of the evidence would be beyond the scope of this paper. Also, additional research may be necessary to conclusively proof any of the propositions listed in Table 1.

Nevertheless, I consider a list of empirical evidence informative for evaluating the propositions. For instance, with regard to the universality of virtues, research on human virtue revealed a set of human virtues (e.g., wisdom) that are endorsed by a wide range of cultures (Dahlsgaard et al., 2004; Biswas-Diener, 2006; McGrath, R. E., 2015)<sup>7</sup>. This glimpse of empirical evidence sheds a new light on the question if propositions about the good life could possibly be true across a wide range of cultures.

In a similar vein, there seems to be empirical evidence to bolster each of the propositions in Table 1. For instance:

- (1) Caring for others at least as much as for oneself seems to be related to happiness: Lyubomirsky et al. (2005) report, happy people tend to be less self-centered, relatively more cooperative, prosocial, charitable and other-centered. Likewise the capacity to love, that is, "Valuing close relations with others, in particular those in which sharing and caring are reciprocated; being close to people" (Park et al., 2004, p.606), is closely related to different measures of life satisfaction and subjective well-being (e.g., Park et al., 2004; Ruch et al., 2010).
- (2) Correlations between material circumstances (e.g., wealth) and well-being tend to be comparatively small (Seligman, 2004). Additionally, with regard to a wide range of circumstances Diener (2000) reports empirical evidence in favor of a "hedonic treadmill effect": people tend to adapt over time to a wide variety of circumstances (e.g., winning a lottery, spinal cord injuries, being fired or promoted) and return to their original level of happiness (cf. Lyubomirsky et al., 2005).
- (3) Virtues and values can moderate the effect of income on well-being (Malka & Chatman, 2003; del Mar Salinas-Jiménez, M., Artés, J., & Salinas-Jiménez, J., 2010) and for most virtues there seems to be no indication for diminishing returns (Park et al., 2004). Thus it may be more efficient to strive for virtue than to strive for wealth.
- (4) Lyubomirsky et al. (2005) argue that, with regard to the hedonic treadmill-effect (see above), there is less adaptation to intentional thoughts and actions because they are episodic, they can be varied (e.g., adapted to contextual factors or increasing aspiration levels), and they are usually accompanied by conscious awareness and mental effort which can directly counteract adaptation (cf. Sheldon & Lyubomirsky, 2006; Seligman, 2004). Especially self-concordant<sup>8</sup> actions are associated with subjective well-being. Relatedly, self-reported character strengths and virtues are consistently related to life satisfaction (with correlations up to  $r = .59$ ; Park et al., 2004; compare Lounsbury et al., 2009; Ruch et al., 2010). Additionally, experimental studies seem to bolster a causal effect of acting virtuous (e.g., Seligman, Steen, Park, & Peterson, 2005; Proyer, Ruch, & Buschor, 2012).
- (5) The immediate reward of virtue seems to be psychological well-being instead of wealth or pleasure (Konow & Earley, 2008). Consistent with this idea, subjects, who pursue not only pleasure but also meaning and engagement, tend to be happier than people who pursue only pleasure. All three orientations are correlated to life satisfaction ( $r_{\text{pleasure}} = .17$ ;  $r_{\text{meaning}} = .26$ ;  $r_{\text{engagement}} = .30$ ) and each of them has a significant unique contribution to explaining life satisfaction (Peterson, Park, & Seligman, 2005; cf. Huta & Ryan, 2010). Further, Brdar & Kashdan (2010) report a positive correlation between wisdom/perspective and spirituality ( $r = .40$ ).
- (6) Perceived attachment to parents correlates with self-perceived strengths and well-being. Additionally, it seems like a low attachment to parents cannot be compensated by attachment to peers (Raja, McGee, & Stanton, 1992).

<sup>7</sup> Some of them are explicitly endorsed by all the cultures examined, others are implicit in the narratives of a culture (and explicitly mentioned in other cultures) and none of them are contradicted by a single culture examined.

<sup>8</sup> Brunstein et al. (1995) report correlations between emotional well-being and the interaction of implicit and explicit motives: People whose explicit motives – consciously set goals – match their implicit motives tend to be happier.

- (7) There is a “robust and reliable tendency of actor's self-attributions to be less dispositional (internal) and more situational (external) than observers' attributions of the same behaviours” commonly known as the “actor-observer-bias” (Fiedler, Sermin, & Finkenauer, 1995, p.525). This bias has to be taken account of to arrive at adequate attributions (for the close relation of this proposition to wisdom, cf. the “reflective dimension of wisdom”, Ardel, 2003).
- (8) Wisdom as knowledge about the most important truths contains knowledge about virtues and their effect on well-being – instead of physical or metaphysical knowledge (see above). According to its content, wisdom – the most perfect of all virtues (Dahlsgaard et al., 2005) – also is correlated to subjective and psychological well-being (Thomas et al., 2015).
- (9) Forgiveness – understood as letting go of resentment toward an offender and replacing the resentment with mindful awareness and empathy – is known to be an effective antidote to one’s own anger (Fitzgibbons, & Richard, 1986) and to transcend clinging to past hurts and resentment (Menahem & Love, 2013). It may also be related to ceasing hatred of others, but this obviously depends on moderating circumstances.
- (10) Observational learning is a central aspect in social situations (e.g., Brown, Treviño, & Harrison, 2005; Bandura, Grusec, & Menlove, 1966). In particular, role models are known to influence moral attitudes and behavior and can reinforce both ethical and unethical climates (Lumpkin, 2008; Sims & Brinkman, 2008).
- (11) According to Ardel (2003) among elderly wisdom is inversely correlated with fear of death ( $r = -.56$ ) and depression ( $r = -.59$ ), as well as highly correlated with well-being ( $r = .45$ ) and a purpose in life ( $r = .61$ ). Wisdom/perspective also seems to be positively related to all kinds of character strengths ( $r = .25 - .73$ ; Brdar & Kashdan, 2010)
- (12) Similar to Ardel (2003), Kastenbaum (2006) reports evidence that a sense for purpose and meaning in one's life is negatively correlated to death-anxiety. Additionally, in a series of studies Brandtstädter et al. (2010) report evidence that experimentally inducing mortality salience reduces the perceived importance of egocentric, extrinsic and instrumental goals and promotes a focus on intrinsic self-transcendent and value-rational goals. This implies that confronting the thought of death results in a focus on things that are even more important than oneself.

To summarize, there is some empirical evidence in favor of each of the propositions listed in Table 1. Especially, there is a wide agreement between human cultures concerning what is virtuous, that virtuous thought and action is a promising way to increase various facets of well-being, and that material wealth and circumstances are less promising in this regard. As wisdom contains knowledge about virtues and their effect on happiness, and can be considered the highest of virtues itself – wisdom also contributes to various aspects of well-being (e.g., because a wise person's explicit goals can be assumed to be consistent with his or her implicit motives as a result of this knowledge).

#### 4) Discussion

In the current paper I demonstrated that wisdom is defined as explanatory knowledge about how to live well. For the sake of clarity I suggest to separate this defining feature from characteristic features that are typical of wise persons (e.g., epistemic humility, authentic happiness, concern for others, reflective attitudes and a need for cognition, cf. Bluck & Glück, 2005; Ardel, 2003; Seligman, 2004), even if certain characteristic features may be reliable and valid indicators of being wise (Glück et al., 2013; Ardel, 2003, Thomas et al., 2015). Beside a definition of wisdom, in Table 1 I suggested a list of propositions that (a) were held to be true by wise men from multiple cultures each and (b) are bolstered by modern empirical research. In a way, wisdom as defined in this paper may be understood as knowledge about the “fundamental pragmatics of life” (i.e., knowledge about the most important<sup>9</sup> goals and how to reach them, Baltes & Smith, 1990), although I agree with Ardel (2004) that simply *having* this kind of knowledge is not sufficient for *being wise*, for the knowledge “remains intellectual or theoretical knowledge until its inherent wisdom is realized by a person” (Ardel, 2004, p.260). Nevertheless, this kind of knowledge is the defining feature of wisdom, central to the teachings of a wide range of different philosophies and religions (please note many wise men were founders of religions), and it is bolstered by scientific evidence.

<sup>9</sup> Please note, in contrast to the definition proposed above, Baltes & Smith (1990) did not explicitly relate the “fundamental pragmatics” to the “good life” (but see Baltes & Staudinger, 2000).

Wisdom may be considered the solution to the most important problems of mankind. Unfortunately, few people seem to know it is: If you ask Google for the "highest good" you will get answers such as "health" or "money" and many people would unwisely prefer both of them over virtue. Why are so many decisions at odds with wisdom? In part this may simply be due to a lack of wisdom: many people think happiness may be achieved by minimizing effort of any kind. Deeply engaging in questions about the meaning of life may be associated with wisdom, but it may not be considered to be the way to happiness (in fact many psychologists may think of it as a typical symptom of depressive episodes).

In part this may be the result of misconceptions that are not recognized as such: the words of wise men can easily be misunderstood<sup>10</sup> if metaphorical language and unusual meanings are not taken into account (e.g., words like "death" or "life" in the New Testament may prematurely be understood in biological terms) and the concept of wisdom may sound like a religious and unscientific one (which is ironic, because it was conceptualized by philosophers as the highest form of science). In part, the misappreciation of wisdom may also be the result of "false prophets" (e.g., many people who – literally or metaphorically – preached water and drank wine damaged the image of wisdom and made it look like opium for the masses) and people who want to make money by deceiving others (e.g., many companies make pretty images that are intended to make consumers believe happiness can be bought). The former may have damaged the believe in wisdom as a cure to the most fundamental problems of life, whereas the latter may have fostered the false belief in cheap alternatives - why should anyone take the effort of becoming wise, if he or she could buy happiness for a few bucks? Of course, even many philosophers may have contributed to a lack of belief in wisdom themselves by proposing a series of misleading definitions (some of them inconsistent with the information these definitions were based upon, see above) and by ultimately turning away from wisdom-related knowledge (Fenner, 2008). Last but not least, our educational system contributes to the status quo – as neither teachers nor ministers of education seem to sufficiently understand what wisdom is and why or how wisdom should be taught.

So how can we turn the current situation into a desirable one? In order to solve the problems mentioned above – besides living well and virtuous ourselves – we need to conduct and distribute proper empirical research based on reliable theoretical frameworks. For in spite of all the ignorance, lies and laughter about wisdom, there already is abundant wisdom literature and empirical evidence to convince everyone who is really interested in the topic. The scientific discourse should take these aspects into account in order to be convincing and trustworthy. In my opinion – and I hope after reading these lines you consider it true and justified as well – wisdom is the answer to all the questions worth asking, and all the knowledge worth knowing. I hope scientists and practitioners who read these lines, follow my call and contribute research on what constitutes the body of knowledge commonly referred to as „wisdom“. Independent of religious preferences (or aversions) everyone should be keen to know what the Buddha knew when he initiated his ever-lasting smile.

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### ***Appendix***

Exemplary definitions of wisdom proposed by philosophers and psychologists since 1999:

- Ryan (1999, p.135) defines the wisdom of a person S at time t: „S is wise at t iff at t (i) S knows, in general [i.1., in a wide variety of circumstances], how to live well [i.e., how to maximize the value of her own life at t], and (ii) S has a general appreciation of the true value of living well.“
- Baltes & Staudinger (2000, p.122) suggest the following definition: “wisdom in this paradigm is defined as an expert knowledge system concerning the fundamental pragmatics of life. These include knowledge and judgment about the meaning and conduct of life and the orchestration of human development toward excellence while attending conjointly to personal and collective well-being.”

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<sup>10</sup> Even simple terms like “happiness” may be misunderstood by many people (e.g., as something incompatible with lasting satisfaction).



- Ardel (2003, p.276) defines wisdom as “a latent variable with cognitive, reflective, and affective effect indicators. Although it might be difficult or even impossible to measure wisdom per se through a standardized self-administered questionnaire, it is hypothesized that wisdom can be assessed indirectly through indicators that are essential elements of the latent variable wisdom.”
- Baltes & Freund (2003, p.251) define wisdom as follows: „theoretical wisdom, which is knowledge about what is good and right for humans, and the application and realization of this knowledge in the conduct of one’s life (practical wisdom) is purported to produce happiness and life satisfaction.”
- Sternberg (2007, p.38) defines wisdom as follows: “Wisdom is defined here as the use of successful intelligence, creativity, and knowledge as mediated by values to (a) seek to reach a common good (b) by balancing intrapersonal (one’s own), interpersonal (others’), and extrapersonal (organizational, institutional, and/or spiritual) interests (c) over the short and long term to (d) adapt to, shape, and select environments.”
- Whitcomb (2010, p.102) defines wisdom as a twofold phenomenon: „There are two kinds of wisdom: practical and theoretical: (...) It [wisdom] is a twofold phenomenon concerning on the one hand, knowledge of how to live well [i.e., practical wisdom] and, on the other hand, explanatory knowledge of the fundamental truths in a domain [i.e., theoretical wisdom].”
- Grimm (2014, p.1) defines wisdom as follows: „I argue that wisdom consists in knowledge of how to live well, and that this knowledge of how to live well is constituted by further kinds of knowledge [e.g., knowledge of (i) what is good or important for well-being, (ii) one’s standing relative to what is good or important for well-being, and (iii) a strategy for obtaining what is good or important for well-being.]”
- Fischer (2015, p.35) defines wisdom as follows: “In Western research traditions, ‘wisdom’ can be understood as knowledge and deep understanding of the most important truths – i.e., ‘knowledge about what is good and right for humans’ (Baltes & Freund, 2003, p.251).”

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