PHILOSOPHICAL FOUNDATIONS OF WISDOM

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I.   INTRODUCTION: WISDOM AND MORAL PHILOSOPHY

Wisdom is something we all have reason to care about. Indeed, many ancient and contemporary moral philosophers, whose goal is to seek well-reasoned answers to questions about how we ought to live, have concluded that wisdom is a central component of a well-lived life. This has led them to explore questions like: Are there different kinds of wisdom? What kind of a state is wisdom? Is wisdom a kind of knowledge or understanding, or is it a skill or a complex set of dispositions? How does wisdom relate to other virtues (excellent traits)? What kind(s) of reasoning, if any, do wise people engage in to decide what to do? What role do emotions and knowledge play in wisdom? Can people actually develop wisdom? If so, how? Contemporary moral philosophers, sometimes building on or responding to the ancients, continue to examine answers to these questions. In this chapter we'll provide an overview of some of the most prominent answers and the arguments for them, focusing especially on contemporary work that bears on the interdisciplinary study of wisdom.

The questions just mentioned are about the *nature* of wisdom. Recent interest in wisdom from psychologists raises new questions about the appropriate *methods* for studying wisdom.[1] Philosophy and empirical science are sometimes treated as adversaries. Often, this is because their proper domains of inquiry are contested. In some cases, methods and objects of inquiry that were once viewed as part of philosophy are now considered solely the purview

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[1] See, for instance, Ardelt (2003, 2004), Baltes and Staudinger (2000), Baltes et al.(1995), Bassett (2011), Bluck and Glück (2005), Sternberg (2004).

of science. For instance, ancient Greek philosophers such as Thales, Epicurus, and Aristotle rejected mythological explanations of the world in favor of rationally defensible naturalistic explanations (Irwin 1989, 20). These attempts at 'natural philosophy' were precursors to, and have been replaced by, contemporary empirical sciences like biology and physics. This raises a question about wisdom: is it the proper object of empirical psychology, philosophy, or a combination of the two? Contemporary moral philosophers have lately grappled with questions about whether and how empirical research is relevant to moral philosophy,[2] and we will describe how this work bears on this (philosophical) question about methodologies for studying wisdom. Although there is no consensus among philosophers about the proper method for studying wisdom, we will explain why many moral philosophers believe that a plausible account of wisdom requires combining the methods of both philosophy and empirical psychology.

We will begin in section II with some preliminary clarifications that help us better understand the type of wisdom that will be our focus: practical wisdom. *Practical wisdom* is a reliable understanding of how we ought to conduct ourselves, and we distinguish this from two other types of wisdom: wisdom as epistemic humility and theoretical wisdom. Then, in section III, we will discuss the methodological question about wisdom and argue 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.[3] This will allow us to evaluate various methods used by psychologists and philosophers for studying wisdom and to suggest that a plausible method must combine empirical research and philosophical reasoning. In section IV we will survey some prominent ancient and

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[2] For some representative works, see Berker (2009), Doris (2002), Greene (2002, 2003), Harman (1999), Haybron (2008), Tiberius (2013), Tiberius (2008).
[3] Philosophers would call "wisdom" a *normative concept*, because it evaluates or prescribes a way of being. Since "normative" has a different meaning in the social sciences, we will avoid the word here.

contemporary answers to questions about the nature and development of wisdom. We will conclude in section V with some reflections on the prospects for interdisciplinary study of wisdom.

II.   PRELIMINARY CLARIFICATIONS: THREE TYPES OF WISDOM

Practical wisdom, which is an understanding of how one ought to live and conduct oneself, is the kind of wisdom that will be our focus. To provide a basic starting definition of this type of wisdom, it will help to distinguish it from other types of wisdom that have been of interest to philosophers.

The Epistemic Humility View of Wisdom

Socrates, who is often seen as the founder of Western moral philosophy, had a view of wisdom that, though tied to idiosyncratic aspects of his life, merits some attention. His life, which we can glimpse through the dialogues of his student Plato, was largely taken up with philosophical discussions about how we ought to live. Instead of engaging in the activities expected of free men in Athens (politics, for example), Socrates engaged in philosophizing: He found people who claimed to be wise and subjected their views to rational scrutiny to see if they had the wisdom he sought.

At his trial for corrupting the youth and denying the traditional gods, Socrates related the impetus for his inquiry: His friend Chaerephon asked the Oracle at Delphi whether anyone was wiser than Socrates. To Socrates's puzzlement, the oracle answered in the negative. Since he did not think he knew "anything worthwhile" (*Apology* 21d), Socrates concluded that the god Apollo, through the oracle, was proclaiming the value of knowing

what you don't know (*Apology* 23b). Socrates had a sort of "human wisdom" (*Apology* 20d) because he understood that he knew nothing about the most important things – "wisdom or truth or the best possible state of your soul" (*Apology* 29e-30a). He thus interpreted the oracle's proclamation as a divine order to practice philosophy to help others achieve the same sort of result: to go about Athens examining himself and others to see if they really did care for those most important things and if they really did have the wisdom they claimed to have. By questioning his interlocutors, he revealed they could not justify their own views about how one ought to live or what was good or virtuous and that they had not attained the goodness they claimed to have (*Apology* 29e). Indeed, in Plato's *Hippias Major* (304c-e) he emphasizes that he puts his own views to the same test.

Wisdom was thus a central part of Socrates' philosophical practice: he believed that by testing and examining himself and others he could promote one kind of wisdom (an awareness of his ignorance of the most important things) that would spur the pursuit of another kind of wisdom (a deep and articulate understanding of what's good and virtuous). This practice inspired the devotion of various young men who sought to emulate him and – perhaps aided by his eccentricity, public satires of his character, and political conditions – led to his receiving the death sentence.

Socrates' account of his 'human wisdom' thus gives us what we could call the *Epistemic Humility View* of wisdom: wisdom is, on this view, an awareness of ignorance of the most important things, like the nature of a good and virtuous life.[4] But, it would be hard to see how awareness of your lack of understanding would be valuable unless it pushed you to more effectively pursue that understanding. If Jones, despite being aware of his ignorance of the most important things, cares not a whit for self-improvement or understanding what's

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[4] "Epistemic" comes from the Greek word for knowledge *episteme*. Epistemology is the philosophical study of the nature, grounds, and sources of knowledge.

important, this hardly seems to be the kind of valuable state that merits calling him wise (Ryan 2014). Indeed, Socrates made it clear that his 'human wisdom' was valuable insofar as it motivated us to seek out another kind of wisdom: a deep understanding of the most important things.

Practical vs. Theoretical Wisdom

Examination of Socrates' view thus gives us a plausible general conception of wisdom: wisdom is a deep and valuable understanding of the most important things in life. We can further narrow our target by following Aristotle in distinguishing between two types of wisdom: practical wisdom (*phronesis*) and theoretical wisdom (*sophia*) (*NE*, Bk VI, vii).[5] Aristotle states that one difference between the two is that that practical wisdom (unlike theoretical wisdom) "is about human concerns, about things open to deliberation" (*NE* 1141b 10). Although it can be challenging to interpret this claim in a way that provides a clear distinction between the two types of wisdom (Baehr 2012), we can start by suggesting that practical wisdom is understanding of how things *ought* to be (how we ought to live, and what is good and why), while theoretical wisdom is understanding of how the world and the creatures in it *actually are*. On this view, the difference between practical and theoretical wisdom is in their objects: Practical wisdom is understanding of *prescriptive* truths or reasons (truths about how we *ought* to conduct ourselves, or reasons we *ought* to conduct ourselves in certain ways), while theoretical wisdom is understanding of *descriptive* truths (truths about how things *actually are* or tend to be).

To see the difference, we can imagine cases in which a person has one type of wisdom but lacks another. A polymath scientist may have a profound understanding of how

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[5] All quotations from Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics are from Aristotle (1999).

the universe came to be, the physical laws that govern it, and even a reliably predictive understanding of how people tend to be and behave. This would perhaps qualify as theoretical wisdom, but without further argument it need not imply that the person understands how they ought to conduct themselves: Despite their deep understanding of the ways things (and people) work, they might still be foolish or vicious and have little grasp of what actually matters for living a good human life. So, as we'll explain in more detail in section III, having theoretical wisdom is not sufficient for having practical wisdom.

Of course, knowing truths about how the world is will often be relevant for understanding how we ought to conduct ourselves. For instance, acting well requires an accurate understanding of what we or others have done and our own or others' intentions and feelings (Hursthouse 2006, 291). So, a full grasp of how we ought to live will require a grasp of *some* descriptive facts, in combination with a grasp of prescriptive truths telling us which of those facts matter and what they imply about how we ought to live. But, there are various descriptive facts (such the chemical laws governing plastic formation, general relativity theory, or the social structure of ancient Mesopotamia) that, in most cases, we need not grasp to live well. So, having theoretical wisdom – a deep and comprehensive grasp of how the world is and works – is not necessary for practical wisdom.

Reflection on these cases provides us with a rough distinction between practical and theoretical wisdom, but it raises other questions about the relationship between the two. For instance, does one type of wisdom have a more ultimate or final value than the other? Is one type of wisdom aimed, in part at least, at achieving the other? Aristotle argued that the best kind of life for a human being will be one of study aimed at theoretical wisdom and that practical wisdom will aim at achieving this (see *NE* Bk VI and X; Pakaluk 2005, chaps. 7, 11). The ancient Stoics viewed theoretical wisdom as necessary for practical wisdom, since they believed morality derived in some sense from natural laws describing human nature and

its place in the universe (Baltzly 2014, sec. 5). There are a variety of other views one could take, but we'll leave aside that discussion here, focusing instead on arguments about the nature and development of practical wisdom.

It is also worth noting that we do sometimes use the word "wisdom" to refer to deep and valuable understanding in a specific domain. For example, we might call a doctor wise who possesses medical wisdom even though he or she is quite foolish in personal life. But as Aristotle notes in his *Nicomachean Ethics* (*NE* 1141a), the virtue of wisdom is usually thought to be more general than this: a person must have deep enough understanding about enough of the most important things to be called wise in general rather than merely in a particular area. This more general notion of practical wisdom, which we all have reason to care about, is the kind that will be our focus.

III.   METHODOLOGICAL QUESTIONS ABOUT WISDOM

Our focus is on philosophical arguments that attempt to give well-reasoned answers to questions about practical wisdom (hereafter simply 'wisdom'), which is the understanding that enables us to make reliably good decisions about how we ought to live and conduct ourselves. What is practical wisdom like, and how will it manifest itself in real people? How can we develop it? It can be tempting to think that because wisdom is a type of understanding, it is therefore a psychological state and so can be studied with empirical methods alone. Psychologists have well-established experimental and observational methods for investigating psychological traits and abilities. Philosophy, some might think, is unnecessary here. Can we say the same about wisdom: Are the methods of empirical psychology alone sufficient to give us a plausible account of wisdom?

Scottish philosopher David Hume (1711-1776) provided an argument that many philosophers think gives us a negative answer to this question. Hume's insight was that conclusions how things *ought* to be do not follow from purely descriptive premises about how the world actually *is*. More pithily: You cannot derive an 'ought' from any number of 'is's. By understanding Hume's insight and how it applies to accounts of wisdom, we can see the problems faced by attempts to study wisdom by empirical methods unaided by philosophical reasoning.

Hume's insight

There are a variety of interpretations of Hume's insight that an 'ought' doesn't follow from an 'is,' but the basic idea can be put fairly simply by focusing on particular actions.[6] Consider a claim about an action you ought not to do, such as 'you ought not drive while intoxicated.' We might think that the truth of this claim is implied by, and can be settled by, empirical findings: driving while intoxicated puts others and oneself at increased risk of injury and/or death. This would give us the following simple argument:

1. Driving while intoxicated puts others and oneself at increased risk of injury and/or death.

    So, you ought not drive while intoxicated.

This argument is invalid: even if the premise is true, the conclusion could still be false. The mere fact that drinking and driving actually has particular effects doesn't logically entail anything about whether we *ought* to do it; in order to draw conclusions about what we

ought to do we would need to add a claim about which effects (if any) matter and ought or ought not be pursued. For instance, we could make the argument valid by this addition:

1. Driving while intoxicated puts others and oneself at increased risk of injury and/or death.

2. You ought not put yourself and others at increased risk of injury and/or death.
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   So, you ought not drive while intoxicated.

This argument makes a valid inference – if the premises are true, then the conclusion has to be true, too. However, the prescriptive conclusion is now no longer justified by purely empirical premises. The empirical premise (1) is now supplemented by a prescriptive premise: premise (2), which makes a claim about what we ought or ought not do. And, these points hold for all other similar arguments: a prescriptive conclusion about what we ought to do will not be implied by empirical premises alone, because those empirical premises will need to be supplemented by at least one prescriptive premise. Put more simply, you'll never validly infer an 'ought' conclusion unless you've got an 'ought' in at least one of the premises.[7]

Many moral philosophers think this shows that empirical research alone cannot settle questions about how we ought to conduct ourselves or about what's good, bad, right or wrong. For instance, even if empirical research were to show that hiding a regretted infidelity was more likely to lead to more happiness in marriages, that wouldn't eliminate all the ethical questions you might have if you found yourself deciding whether to admit you'd made such a mistake: is it these consequences that matter or some others, or is there something other than consequences – such as principles – that we should attend to?

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[7] For more detailed discussion of the question of how science is and isn't relevant to ethics and moral psychology, see Tiberius (2015).

Empirical research can tell us various things about the nature and consequences of our ways of being or behaving, but which of those things matter and why are not empirical questions.

Hume's insight applied to wisdom

This point applies not just to claims about what we ought to do, but also to claims about virtues such as wisdom, which are claims are about what kind of person we ought to be or how we ought to cultivate our character. Wisdom is a *prescriptive ideal* in the sense that it is a state that we *ought* to cultivate or promote: By definition, it is worthwhile and we have reason to work towards achieving it. So, even if we describe a particular state in detail using well-designed empirical studies, it would not count as a plausible view of wisdom (as an account of actual or genuine wisdom) unless we can argue that it is valuable in the way characteristic of wisdom. And, the question of what makes something valuable in that way is not something that can be discovered empirically. What makes a state or characteristic one we ought to pursue or one that fills the valuable role of wisdom is a philosophical question. Given that the answers to this question are many and contentious – and subject to disagreement between and within cultures, lay people, and experts – we will need more than empirical research to get good answers to our questions about wisdom.

Some might be tempted to reply that these disagreements about wisdom actually show that it is amenable to study using empirical methods alone. The disagreements about what wisdom is, they might argue, imply there's nothing over and above cultural attitudes that make something or someone wise; instead, whether you are actually wise depends solely on your culture's attitudes. On this view, which we can call *the Simple Cultural Relativist View*, what's actually wise is determined by culture: What makes a person actually wise is whether they have the traits and characteristics that their culture views as wise. Does genuine wisdom

involve impartial concern for both strangers and family, or does a wise person recognize special obligations to family and friends? Is a wise person concerned with maintaining authoritarian hierarchies and rigid gender roles, or not? Can a wise person articulate and justify their decisions, or are they made mostly intuitively? The Simple Cultural Relativist View implies that what's the case for you (what it actually takes for you to be wise) depends on what your culture says. If this view were plausible, then we could use empirical methods alone (such as the methods of sociology and anthropology) to determine what wisdom is.

Is Simple Cultural Relativism plausible? Not terribly, which may explain why it is not a widely held view amongst philosophers. However, it furnishes a nice example of how philosophical arguments about prescriptive theories proceed, which is often by identifying and assessing the implications of the position and the arguments for it.

Take first the argument (described above) for Simple Cultural Relativism. The argument states that the existence of cultural disagreements about wisdom implies that there are no truths about wisdom independent of culture. But this does not follow: The mere fact that people disagree about what's the case in a subject doesn't imply that what's actually the case is determined by cultural attitudes (Rachels 1999, chap. 2). For instance, disagreement about the causes of global warming doesn't imply that our culture's attitudes determine whether our view of the causes is correct or not, disagreement about the number of gods doesn't imply that "there is one God" is true when uttered by someone from a monotheistic culture but false when uttered by someone from an atheistic culture; disagreement about whether spirits or germs are the cause of disease doesn't imply that the actual etiology of disease depends on our attitudes, and so on. The existence of disagreement by itself is no better reason to think that what's actually wise depends on cultural attitudes than it is to think that truths about those other subjects depend on cultural attitudes. (For a similar reason, we shouldn't expect to identify what's actually wise merely by looking for what cultures agree

upon. If we look back far enough, there was significant agreement that women's subordination and some forms of slavery and servitude were moral, but that doesn't indicate that those practices were actually moral or wise.)

These problems with the usual argument for Simple Cultural Relativism suggest that we don't yet have reason to think the view is true; indeed, the view also has some implausible implications that suggest we should conclude it is false.[8] The most troubling is that it implies that whatever your culture views as wise is therefore actually wise, even if your culture endorses Nazism, slavery, the denial of women's suffrage, authoritarianism, ethnocentrism or strict adherence to an oppressive caste system. It also implies that it makes no sense to criticize or praise your culture's view of wisdom (because there is no standard other than cultural attitudes by which to judge such a view) and that there is no such thing as progress in a culture's view of wisdom (because there is no standard by which to comparatively evaluate cultural attitudes at two different times). Probably wisdom will require being sensitive to cultural attitudes at certain times and in certain ways, but there is good reason to be skeptical about the idea that cultural attitudes wholly determine what is wise.

So, if we want to say that criticizing or praising a culture's view of wisdom makes sense, or that being a sexist advocate of slavery who derogates presumed inferiors is not wise even if a whole culture were convinced otherwise, then we should reject Simple Cultural Relativism.[9] More importantly, for our purposes, whether we should accept the idea that the definition is entirely relative to culture is a philosophical question, not a scientific one.

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[8] For more discussion of Cultural Relativism (also known as Metaethical Moral Relativism) and the objections to it, see Gowans (2016). There are more sophisticated forms of relativism that may be able to avoid the problems we've discussed. See, for example, Harman (1975), Prinz (2007), and Wong (2006).
[9] The value relativism that is a component of the model of wisdom described in Baltes and Staudinger (2000) seems compatible with this point.

Moreover, as we'll see, it is a philosophical question that has implications for the relevance of wisdom science to study of the virtue of wisdom.

Summary of methodological lessons for studying wisdom

Ideals like wisdom tell us how we *ought* to be and how we ought to conduct ourselves. Perh naps there is a set of criteria that is empirically measurable that we could use to determine who has wisdom, what other characteristics correlate with wisdom, how wisdom can be developed, and so on. Indeed, we should hope this is the case. But we can't determine empirically which set of criteria provides a reasonable, compelling, action-guiding, account of wisdom in the first place.

It is important to note that this does not show that empirical research is irrelevant to the study of prescriptive concepts such as wisdom. There are a number of ways that empirical research could be relevant to the study of wisdom.[10] For instance, many philosophers who defend an Aristotelian theory of ethics (which we'll discuss in section IV) describe virtue as both attainable for humans and also composed of highly stable dispositions to act in the right ways and for the right reasons across a variety of situations. But some moral philosophers have argued that research in social psychology show these claims to be false: Human behavior seems highly influenced by situational factors, and this finding seems to undermine the claim that the highly stable dispositions supposed to constitute virtue and wisdom are ones we can actually acquire (Doris 2002; Harman 1999). Whether this challenge to the particular views of virtue succeeds in undermining those views is a question still being discussed (Tiberius 2015, chap. 7). Regardless, this example illustrates one way in

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[10] See Tiberius (2015, chap. 12).

which empirical research is clearly relevant to the study of normative concepts like wisdom: prescriptive accounts of virtues such as wisdom often make empirical assumptions.

Implications for psychological methods for studying wisdom

These methodological lessons have important implications for the methods psychologists use to study wisdom. In particular, they show that the two main methods – empirical study of implicit and explicit theories of wisdom – require significant interdisciplinary cooperation between philosophy and psychology if they are to succeed.

We can distinguish between two main types of psychological theories of wisdom: explicit theories and implicit theories (Bluck & Glück 2005; Sternberg 1985). While *implicit theories* are representations of what lay people view wisdom to be,[11] *explicit theories* are "those that are constructed and tested by psychologists and other experts" (Bluck & Glück 2005, 90). The basic difference is that implicit theories aim to capture what lay people think wisdom is, while explicit theories operationalize wisdom based upon the views of experts (people trained to understand and evaluate a variety of historically important views of wisdom and related concepts) and then use empirical methods to see who manifests wisdom thus understood, what other traits or environmental features it correlates with, and what influences its development.

To develop and study implicit theories (which we might also call *folk theories* or *folk perceptions of wisdom*), psychologists use various research designs (experimental and

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[11] Of course, it might be controversial who counts as an expert on wisdom. We would want to figure out whether the expertise we're looking for is expertise on what wisdom actually is or merely expertise in understanding and evaluating the views of wisdom that prominent thinkers have held. If it's the latter we're looking for, then experts could be more easily identified. If it's the former, you might worry that wise people are the only experts on what wisdom actually is, and then we have the problem that we need to identify the wise before we can ask them what wisdom is.

otherwise) to find out what characteristics lay people view as wise, which particular individuals lay people nominate as wise, or the way people see wisdom operating in their own lives (Bluck & Glück 2005, 91–203). Given what we've said about wisdom being an ideal, we should ask: what role, if any, do implicit theories have in providing us an account of what wisdom genuinely is? The examples we gave above indicate that we should admit it is possible to have a mistaken view of what wisdom is: we should admit there is, in principle, a difference between what wisdom actually is and what it is perceived to be. So: can implicit theories tell us about genuine wisdom?

Psychologists Susan Bluck and Judith Glück argue that they can:

> The notion that an entire culture would carry around an organized construct of wisdom that is wrong, or incorrect, is a slightly bizarre one. It suggests that human language and thought do not reflect reality. Especially with a construct that in itself is defined by culture, rather than by a biological substrate, it seems odd to argue that what people in that culture think wisdom is could be entirely wrong. One can certainly argue that there may be limitations to any single person's concept of wisdom, or perhaps that it is difficult to truly know what wisdom is without being wise … Still, an explicit theory of wisdom that was totally inconsistent with laypeople's understanding of the term would be hard to defend. There is an additional reason for accepting that implicit theories of wisdom reflect real wisdom: implicit and explicit, lay and expert definitions of wisdom converge in a basic sense on the same set of features as central in defining wisdom. Thus, at least in terms of lay and expert definitions of wisdom, no strong dichotomy exists. (2005, 90–91)

One argument suggested in this passage for the claim that implicit theories of wisdom are reliable guides to actual wisdom is that implicit theories are unlikely to be "entirely wrong." But this sets too low a bar. Lay people's views of physical laws may be unlikely to be entirely wrong, and a physical theory that was totally inconsistent with them would probably be hard to defend, but that doesn't do much to show that physicists should start their research by surveying lay views. Similarly, we need to show that implicit theories of wisdom are to

some significant degree reliable – that what the folk *think* is wise tends to *actually be* wise – if we're going to include them in our method for inquiring about genuine wisdom. And, it's difficult to see how we could determine their reliability without already having an account of wisdom that we have independent reason to think is reliable. Another argument that might be derived from the passage is that wisdom is defined by culture, but this is a view that, as we argued above, could not be the whole story about wisdom.

Though we don't accept these two strands of argument in the above passage, we do agree with Bluck and Glück that the folk understanding of wisdom is not a bad place to begin. We think, however, that implicit views are in need of significant improvement even if they are somewhat reliable starting points for inquiry. Wisdom is, by all accounts, a lofty ideal: Only a comparatively small number of people have achieved a significant amount of it. So, we should expect that both expert and lay people's views about the nature of wisdom (not to mention their understanding of what matters in particular situations and why) to be incomplete, to have components that lack justification, and to contain some inconsistencies (Tiberius and Swartwood 2011). If this is so, significant work would be required to make implicit theories into a rationally justifiable ideal worthy of being called genuine wisdom.

The upshot of these arguments is that implicit theories of wisdom on their own will not provide us with a plausible account of wisdom. At the very least, we need to subject the implicit theories to scrutiny to see if the elements in them are worth aspiring to and hang together in a consistent way. In our work, we (Tiberius & Swartwood 2011) describe a method for doing just this. On our view, we work toward a plausible view of wisdom by articulating the central elements of wisdom as identified in implicit theories, and then working back and forth between these elements and relevant empirical and philosophical theories (e.g. empirical theories of human decision-making and philosophical accounts of a

good life), revising and specifying them until we have a view that is action-guiding, rationally compelling, and empirically adequate (2011, 279–80).

This provides a more indirect way in which implicit theories could be used to arrive at a plausible account of wisdom. Instead of attempting to derive an account of what wisdom is directly from folk perceptions of wisdom, we could see those folk perceptions as starting material that we refine through reflection on its fit with other empirical and philosophical views we find compelling. This method is thus a way of specifying Bluck and Glück's suggestions that "an explicit theory of wisdom that was totally inconsistent with laypeople's understanding of the term would be hard to defend" and that implicit theories of wisdom can be used to test explicit theories (2005, 91).

The other main method contemporary psychologists use to study wisdom is developing and empirically testing explicit theories of wisdom: theories developed by "experts" such as psychologists or philosophers. Given the methodological points from this section, it is clear that this method will only lead us to a plausible account of wisdom if the theory chosen and applied has a compelling philosophical rationale. So, at the very least, there is reason for philosophers and psychologists to engage more directly with one another when developing and testing these theories.

IV.   PHILOSOPHICAL VIEWS OF THE NATURE OF WISDOM

Wisdom is thus an ideal that minimally can be described as the understanding of how one ought to conduct oneself. But developing this general definition into an account that is practically useful and theoretically interesting requires answering a variety of additional questions: What kind of state is wisdom? What role does wisdom play in the moral life?

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What are the components of wisdom? How can wisdom be developed? Here we'll survey some prominent philosophical answers to these questions.

Wisdom's role in the moral life

Describing wisdom as a type of understanding marks it out as an intellectual virtue: an excellence of mind. But how should we characterize it?

Philosophers who study virtue tend to argue that wisdom has a particularly central role in the moral life. For all philosophers who study virtue, virtue is central or necessary for human flourishing. Some – Virtue Ethicists – even argue that we can define right action in terms of the virtues, of which wisdom is the most central.[12]

To conduct ourselves well and to live well, we need to deal well with a variety of valuable ends of human action. We have to understand when to tell others the truth, when and how to promote others' well-being and how to balance it with our own, what respect requires, when being partial to a friend's interests is important and when it's not, how we should use humor in social situations, and so on. Human life is filled with a variety of values, ends, and goals. Virtue Ethics takes us to have a variety of character traits that can conflict with each other if they aren't guided by wisdom. In tough situations where the rest of us might see an impossible conflict between loyalty and honesty, for instance, the wise person grasps when honesty requires refusing to protect a friend's secret. And, choosing well doesn't just mean exhibiting the correct external behavior: It also requires coordination of

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[12] This puts Virtue Ethics in competition with the two main alternative theories of what conduct is right or wrong and why: Utilitarianism and Deontology. We're here describing one prominent version of the Virtue Ethical view defended, for example, by Hursthouse (1999), but there are various disputes and disagreements among Virtue Ethicists. For an overview of some of the debates and differences, see Hursthouse and Pettigrove (2016). For an accessible and historically sensitive comparison of ancient accounts of the nature and importance of wisdom, see Kamtekar (2013).

thoughts, feelings, motivations, and reasons for acting. When your friend keeps you company after you have suffered an emotionally difficult loss, her conduct is more admirable (and more virtuous) when it is done out concern for your well-being than when it is done out of the desire to receive accolades.

What we need to live well, then, is to be disposed to respond well to all of the reasons that confront us from the various things that are of value. To do this we need character virtues like compassion, honesty, loyalty, self-respect, wittiness, and so on. Each of the virtues can be described as a deep disposition to think, feel, behave, and be motivated in the right ways, at the right times, and for the right reasons in its particular domain (Aristotle 1999, 1109a25; Rosalind Hursthouse and Pettigrove 2016). For example, someone with the virtue of honesty is disposed to tell the truth at the right times, in the right ways, and for the right reasons: They know when sharing their unsolicited opinion is important and when it isn't, when the pain caused by the hard truth matters and when it doesn't, and so on. Instead of playing the fool for attention's sake, humiliating others for social gain, or sitting stolidly when humor would bring the group together, someone with the virtue of wittiness reliably useshumor in social situations at the right times, in the right ways, and for the right reasons.

But, if honesty governs truth-telling and compassion governs threats to others' well-being, what happens when they conflict? What happens when honesty seems to recommend telling your uncle the truth about his ridiculous hat, but compassion seems to recommend lying? According to the Aristotelian Virtue Ethicists, these conflicts do not exist for the person with wisdom, because a wise person has a comprehensive grasp of what matters in situations that would befuddle the rest of us.

Being a virtuous person – someone with all the character virtues, including wisdom – is thus a lofty goal that admits of degrees. The wise person has an understanding of what the

particular character virtues require in particular situations. But philosophers disagree about

which character virtues are required for living a good human life. Aristotelian accounts

admit of many relevant virtues, including virtues (like wittiness) that might sound foreign to

contemporary ears. Ancient Chinese philosophers in the Confucian tradition (such as Kongzi

and Mengzi) focus on a smaller catalog of virtues, such as wisdom, benevolence, propriety,

and righteousness (Ivanhoe 2002; Jiyuan 2006; Van Norden 2007; Mengzi 2008; Jiyuan

2006).[13] Some Christian views seek to validate that faith is a virtue (Jeffrey 2017), while

David Hume describes "[c]elibacy, fasting, penance, mortification, self-denial, humility,

silence, solitude" as vices (2006, 258). Feminist philosophers have grappled with questions

about how virtue and wisdom would manifest themselves in conditions of oppression and

injustice (Tessman 2001). Some philosophers have argued that we should add to the

traditional catalog some new virtues that describe the ways a wise person would utilize racial

categories in times of racial injustice (Blum 2007). Virtue Ethicists also disagree in

characterizations of particular virtues, for instance whether acting out of anger is ever

virtuous.[14]

This disagreement about the number and nature of the individual character virtues is

in some cases an implication of different standards for sorting character traits into virtues and

vices. Some philosophers have worked to specify Aristotle's suggestion that the virtues are

the character traits that are conducive to *eudaimonia* (flourishing, or living a good human

life). Various ways of filling out this claim have been defended, including that the virtues are

the traits that promote exercising well certain characteristically human rational, social and/or

sensory capacities (Kraut 2009; Foot 2003), or that they are the traits that promote a list of

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[13] See Van Norden (2007) for an examination of the similarities and differences between ancient Greek virtue ethics and the moral views of ancient Chinese philosophers.

[14] There is an especially interesting contrast between Buddhist views, on the one hand, and Aristotelian views, on the other (Vernezze 2008). See also, for example, Bell (2009), Nussbaum (2016), and Pettigrove (2012).

specific goods or ends (Hursthouse 1999, chap. 9). Martha Nussbaum argues that this last strategy can be used to generate a list of virtues that plausibly applies to all people regardless of their culture or context (Nussbaum 2008, 2001). Others argue that the virtues are identifiable solely by direct reference to excellent or admirable individuals (Olberding 2008; Zagzebski 2010).[15]

But, regardless of the catalogue of character virtues they subscribe to, Virtue Ethicists often describe practical wisdom as a sort of master virtue that controls and guides the other virtues. Interestingly, both Aristotle and Mengzi[16] use helpful archery metaphors to illustrate the sense in which wisdom is a master virtue:

> Moreover, there are many ways to be in error – for badness is proper to the indeterminate, as the Pythagoreans pictured it, and good to the determinate. But there is only way to be correct. That is why error is easy and correctness is difficult, since it is easy to miss the target and difficult to hit it. And so for this reason also excels and deficiency are proper to vice, the mean to virtue; 'for we are noble in only one way, but bad in all sorts of ways.' (*NE* 1106a30-35)

> Wisdom may be compared to skillfulness. Sagacity may be compared to strength. It is like shooting an arrow from beyond a hundred paces: its making it there is due to your strength, but its hitting the bull's-eye is not due to your strength. (*Mengzi* 5B1.7)

One thing Aristotle and Mengzi are saying in these passages is that decisions about how to conduct oneself admit of various deviations from the ideal, much as shots of an arrow can miss the bulls-eye in varying distances and directions. It is all too easy to use humor, for instance, in a way that derails group goals rather than in a way that motivates effective collaboration. Practical wisdom is the understanding of what matters and how to achieve it, both in general and in particular situations, that enables us to navigate such choices reliably

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[15] These are only a few of the options. For examples of other accounts of how to identify the character traits that are virtues, see Adams (2008), Hill (2012), Slote (2001), Swanton (2003), Van Norden (2007).
[16] All quotations from *Mengzi* are from Mengzi (2008).

well by guiding us to live out our commitments in the right ways, much as archery skill enables us to harness our strength for a bulls-eye.

Wisdom and the unity of the virtues

Aristotle argued that wisdom is a master virtue in a stronger sense, and his claim – known as "the unity of the virtues" – has been subject to much contemporary analysis and discussion. Aristotle claimed the virtues are unified in the sense that having one virtue requires having them all, and having practical wisdom is both necessary and sufficient for having all the virtues (*NE* 1144b30, *NE* 1145a2).

The argument for the unity of the virtues claim can be sketched briefly.[17] Having one virtue requires having them all because acting on the reasons relevant for having one virtue requires having a grasp of the reasons relevant to other virtues. Having the virtue of compassion, for instance, requires responding to threats to others' well-being in the right ways, at the right times, and for the right reasons. And, knowing when a particular response to such a threat is really the right one requires knowing when other considerations are not relevant. For instance, responding compassionately in cases where a friend or loved one tearfully admits to wronging someone requires a grasp not only of what would promote their or others' well-being but also when promoting their well-being is less relevant than other considerations, such as those of respect, honesty, or justice. Having a full, cross-situational grasp of reasons relevant to one virtue thus requires a grasp of the reasons relevant to all the others. Wisdom is this grasp of reasons and its possession differentiates the reasoned decisions of the virtuous from, for instance, someone who merely does what they've been

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[17] Prominent contemporary versions of the argument, similar to the one described here, can be found in McDowell (1979) and Wolf (2007).

taught. Having wisdom is thus necessary for being fully virtuous. Wisdom is also sufficient for being virtuous because if someone has this robust cross-situational grasp of reasons (with its inherent motivational component), then they will reliably do the right thing, at the right time, for the reasons.

Despite this apparently compelling argument, the unity of the virtues claim seems to contradict our common-sense evaluative judgments of people's character (Wolf 2007, 146). We often describe people as, for instance, being brave but lacking compassion, being compassionate but lacking self-respect, or being respectful and compassionate but lacking temperance. If these judgments are correct, then people perhaps can have one virtue without having all the others and the unity of the virtues thesis is false.

This puts us in a dilemma: if we reject the unity of the virtues, then it becomes harder to accept the attractive claim that wisdom, as a prescriptive ideal, is a single state of understanding that guides a virtuous person's behavior. If we accept the unity of the virtues, then it becomes hard to justify our seemingly warranted common-sense judgments about the mixes of virtue and vice we see in people.

There are various ways we could respond to this problem. Some philosophers argue that we should reject the unity of the virtues and accept what some have called the *disunity of the virtues* (the idea that we can have one virtue without having any of the others) or even accept the *incompatibility of the virtues* (the idea that having certain virtues makes it impossible to have certain others) (Badhwar 1996, 307). These views imply that we need not have wisdom to be virtuous (Badhwar 1996, 308).

Most Virtue Ethicists take a different tack, however, and offer some modified version of the unity of the virtues that they think avoids the problems with the traditional version. Rosalind Hursthouse argues for a limited unity of the virtues, according to which "anyone

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who possessed one virtue will have all the others to some degree, albeit, in some cases, a pretty limited one" (1999, 156). This version of the claim limits the degree to which you have to have other virtues if you have one. On this view, for instance, you need not fully grasp how to respond to threats to others' well-being to have the virtue of honesty, but you can't be totally blind to those considerations, either.

Another way to modify the claim is to argue that the virtues are unified in localized domains of a person's life (home, work, family, friends, etc.) but not in the global sense that covers all situations the agent might face. Neera Badhwar uses the example of a wise statesman who "has a deep understanding of people in general, and of the political and cultural needs of a nation" but who "lacks experience with children" (1996, 315). Such a person may be a wise statesman but not a wise caretaker, because his actions and emotional reactions towards children will often fall short of being, for instance, compassionate and respectful. The traditional unity of the virtues claim implies this sort of person lacks wisdom, but Badhwar argues it would be more plausible to say that "a person may be wise and virtuous in some domains without being wise or virtuous in all (where not being wise and virtuous, it is important to remember, does not mean being foolish and vicious)" (1996, 315). To have compassion in the domain of collegial interactions, you need to have all the other virtues with respect to that domain but you need not have those virtues with respect to other domains (such as in interactions with family and friends).

Instead of limiting the degree to which one virtue requires the others or limiting the unity requirement to particular domains of life, Susan Wolf argues that "in order for a person to possess one virtue perfectly and completely, she must possess the knowledge – holistic knowledge of what matters – that is necessary for them all" (2007, 163). According to this view, having one virtue fully requires having the knowledge relevant to all the other virtues but not necessarily the virtues themselves. Having the virtue of compassion, for instance,

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requires having a grasp of when threats to others' well-being matter and what ought to be done about them, which implies that they also have the knowledge relevant to the other virtues. For instance, they also know when considerations of others' well-being justify parting with one's money to help them (2007, 162). But, having that knowledge does not imply that the person will have the disposition to part with their money in the way they know they should: without this disposition, the person lacks the virtue of generosity, even though they have the knowledge relevant to it.

Deciding whether and how the virtues are unified is important not only because of its implications for our judgments about ourselves and others but also because it affects the prospects for studying wisdom empirically. If there is a disunity of the virtues, then wisdom is not necessary for integrating the other virtues. This does not necessarily imply wisdom is unimportant, but it does imply wisdom is much less special than it may have seemed. If there is a unity of the virtues, then practical wisdom, as a comprehensive and reliable cross-situational grasp of what to do, will be challenging to infer from the kind of minimal behavioral and introspective evidence we usually have about people we interact with (or, in the case of psychologists, the people we study). If there is a limited unity of the virtues, then this could influence whether and how wisdom can be operationalized. Philosophical arguments about the unity of the virtues thus have bearing on the psychological study of wisdom.

Components of wisdom

In addition to questions about the nature of wisdom, philosophers have sought to examine the components of wisdom: the motivations, habits, dispositions, beliefs, knowledge, or abilities that make up wise understanding. Psychologists who study wisdom have identified a variety

of components, including relationship skills and emotional intelligence. Philosophers have focused much of their attention on principles, reasoning, and reflection.

What kinds of reasoning and reflection will a wise person employ to determine how to conduct herself? Moral philosophers in general differ on the kind of moral reasoning they think is required for moral decision-making, with some arguing that good reasoning requires developing and applying moral principles (general moral rules) to particular cases and others arguing that attention to the particulars of situations is primary.

One particularly influential idea has been that wisdom is, or at least includes, a reliable quasi-perceptual capacity to recognize reasons for action (McDowell 2001, 51; Nussbaum 1990, 2001, 3:300). According to this view, a wise person has a reliable sensitivity to reasons for action such that, for instance, she correctly *sees* her colleague's routine and unwarranted exclusion from important decisions as a reason to advocate on his behalf. On John McDowell's view (1979), this perceptual sensitivity has both a cognitive and a motivational aspect: it represents the action as something to be done for a reason (even if it's merely that it's kind or respectful) and this representation motivates action. In addition, this perceptual capacity "silences" other competing alternatives: when confronted with a family member's racist joke, for instance, staying silent is not even perceived as an option. Julia Peters argues that this idea that virtue is a sensitivity to reasons that silences competing alternatives helps to capture important points about wisdom. Among other things, it helps fill out Aristotle's distinction between being fully virtuous (someone who reliably does the right thing for the right reasons without having to struggle against temptations to do otherwise) and merely continent (someone who does the right thing for the right reasons but only after struggling against a temptation to do otherwise) (2013, 72).

Another particularly influential idea, originally suggested by Aristotle and defended by contemporary philosophers like John McDowell and Rosalind Hursthouse, is that a wise person's understanding is *uncodifiable*: it is not possible to come up with a set of moral principles that a non-virtuous person could use to derive good guidance in any particular situation (Hursthouse 1999, 39–40).[18] Morality is too complex, Virtue Ethicists argue, to capture with such a set of principles.

For instance, someone might try to defend the following moral principle: An action is right when, of all the actions possible in a situation, it could be expected to produce the most total long-term happiness when the effects on everyone are added up.[19] If this principle accurately described what matters in all situations, then a non-virtuous person could use it to derive (after suitable inquiry into the likely consequences of different actions) reliable guidance about what to do.

Virtue Ethicists argue that principles like this do not succeed in codifying wise understanding. One argument for this conclusion is that all such sets of principles seem to fail the tests moral philosophers put them to: in at least some cases, they provide guidance that we judge to be deficient when we're thinking clearly. As Hursthouse puts it, there is an "increasing sense that the enterprise of coming up with such a set of rules or principles has failed" (1999, 40).

Julia Annas provides additional arguments against codifiability. Annas (2004) argues that calls for the codifiability of wise understanding assume the "computer manual model" of moral theories. According to the computer manual model of a theory of right action, a theory of right action is supposed to do the work of figuring out what to do in a particular situation

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[18] In some of Plato's dialogues (e.g. *Hippias Major*), Socrates appears to be searching for a definition of virtue that could do this.

[19] This is a very simplistic version of a moral theory known as Act-Utilitarianism. For more sophisticated versions of Utilitarianism, see for example Hooker (2000), Railton (1988, 1984), Singer (2011).

for us by having answers for what to do and why given some description of the situation. Annas makes a number of arguments against the computer manual model: It would implausibly imply that it is possible for a clever teenager who lacks life experience and hasn't engaged in any useful reflection on what matters to use the theory to reliably do the right thing, and that it would be possible for a vicious advisor to use it to give us reliably good guidance.

If Virtue Ethicists are correct that wise understanding is uncodifiable, then that would imply that a reliable understanding of how to conduct oneself must be acquired through some sort of experience and reflection.[20]

But what kind of reflection? Part of developing full virtue is being brought up to care about the right things, such as honesty, justice, kindness, self-respect, and so on. But fully developing virtue requires developing practical wisdom, which requires experience and reflection that further hones and specifies a person's grasp of what matters. For example, children may have an innate concern for others (they have *feelings* of compassion). But this is not sufficient for the *virtue* of compassion, because children are still prone to show concern at the wrong times, in the wrong ways, and for the wrong reasons. Reflection is required to develop these feelings of concern into a disposition to respond (in our thoughts, feelings, motivations, and actions) to threats to others' well-being in the right ways, at the right times, and for the right reasons. Aristotle thought we need reflection that focuses both on the universal and the on the particulars of situations (*NE* 1141b10-15, 1142a14).

A wise person needs to reflect on the particular in the sense that they need to specify which of the particular details of a situation matter and what this implies about how we ought

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[20] For additional detailed and influential arguments that wise understanding is not codifiable, see the work of Martha Nussbaum (e.g Nussbaum 1990). Feminist philosophers have also argued that understanding how one ought to act requires attention to the particulars rather than merely application of abstract principles.

to conduct ourselves in that situation. Although Aristotle appears to claim that wise

reflection doesn't deliberate about the ends of our actions but simply the means to them,

many philosophers think this claim is best interpreted to allow for reflection that specifies our

ends (Richardson 1990): to develop wisdom, we may not need to deliberate about whether

kindness is important but we do need to deliberate to specify what kindness requires in this

situation or that.

Virtue Ethical views inspired by ancient Chinese philosophers describe a reasoning

process through which attention to particulars can build a person's understanding of what

matters. Mencius describes virtue development as the process of "extending" the "sprouts"

of the virtues. We develop compassion, for instance, by engaging in reflection that extends

our care for others in the right ways in the right situations (Ivanhoe 2002). David Wong

argues that analogical reasoning (evaluating a challenging situation or action by determining

if it is relevantly similar to another one we have a better grasp of) is one way this extension

could take place (2002).[21] This mode of argument is also often applied in contemporary

applied ethics, which is the part of moral philosophy that evaluates arguments about

particular moral issues.[22] For instance, to decide whether you ought to text while driving, it

might help to consider whether there is any relevant difference between doing that and

driving drunk (Swartwood 2017). Or, to determine whether you ought to vote for a candidate

who rejects anti-discrimination laws protecting LGBTQ people, you could reflect on whether

there is any relevant difference between those laws and laws prohibiting racial or religious

discrimination (Corvino, Anderson, and Girgis 2017, 99–102, 247–51). By examining and

reflecting on a variety of different analogies, a person can hone their understanding of what

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[21] For a demonstration, written for a non-philosophical audience, of how to analyze and evaluate moral arguments from analogy, see Swartwood (2017). For an argument that even fanciful (invented or hypothetical) examples can be a useful part of this kind of reasoning, see Stoner and Swartwood (2017).
[22] For just a few of the many interesting moral arguments from analogy discussed by professional philosophers, see Norcross (2004) and Thomson (1971).

matters and also work towards ensuring that their judgments about particular cases are justified and consistent with one another.

In addition to reflection on the particulars, Aristotle also claimed that developing wisdom requires reflection on the universal. One way to interpret this claim is as recommending a grasp of general rules or principles describing what matters. While many Virtue Ethicists agree that developing wisdom thus requires reflection, they disagree about the extent to which wisdom requires having a consciously accessible grasp of moral principles and whether and how this grasp is applied in deliberation. On one view (known as *particularism*), what is primary is attention to particulars of situations (Dancy 2001), while other views emphasize the necessity of grasping at least some general moral principles (though not ones that codify wise understanding).

A related dispute regards whether a wise person would have a consciously accessible and comprehensive (but not necessarily codifiable) picture (or "blueprint") of a good life. This blueprint could take different forms: a description of a person of ideal character, a set of weighted general principles describing the conduct that comprises a good life (Russell 2009, 27), or a general description of the values constitutive of a good life and how they fit together (Tiberius 2008, 65). Following Daniel Russell (2009, 27–30, n. 46), we can distinguish between two types of blueprint views: views that see the blueprint being directly applied in decision-making and views that assign the blueprint a more indirect role.

According to what we could call *Direct Blueprint Views*, a wise person deliberates about what to do in particular situations by applying her consciously accessible blueprint. By imagining how an idealized virtuous person would handle the situation, or by specifying the implications of weighted principles governing a good life, she can decide how to respond when (for instance) a senior colleague makes a sexist joke at a conference. Various

objections have been leveled at the Direct Blueprint View: Daniel Russell argues, for instance, that it ascribes to the wise a totally unfamiliar type of practical reasoning, its depiction of deliberation is mysterious, and it implies an overly intellectual and elitist view of wisdom (2009, 27–9; see also Broadie 1993, chap. 4).

According to another view, which we could call *the Indirect Blueprint View*, a wise person has a blueprint that indirectly improves her decisions about particular situations by helping her see what matters most in a particular situation. According to Valerie Tiberius (2008), for instance, a wise person has a conception of a good life that locates her various values and how they are related with respect to mutual support and relative priority. This conception of a good life must have some structure, but it need not have a particular structure such as that of a detailed plan, and it must be flexible enough to allow the person to learn from experience. A wise person's conception of a good life is not the kind of blueprint that could be used to deduce what to do in a particular context. Rather, it is a rough map of values that guides the shifts in our attention from one value to another, depending on the particular situation. The Indirect Blueprint View is supposed to avoid the problems of the Direct View while accounting for the complexity and coherence of a wise person's understanding (Tiberius 2008, 65; Kristjánsson 2015, 100) and explaining how developing wisdom enables a person to distinguish plausible conceptions of the good life from seemingly-attractive imposters (Kraut 1993, 374).

In addition to reasoning and reflection skills, many philosophers emphasize the essential role of emotions and other traits or dispositions in wise understanding. For instance, Martha Nussbaum (1990) and Karen Stohr (2006) argue that moral imagination and empathy are important components of wise understanding that enable us to deal with the complexities of social interactions. Valerie Tiberius (2008) in her discussion of what she calls reflective wisdom – the kind of wisdom required to live a good life from one's own point of view –

argues that this kind of wisdom requires various habits and dispositions that allow us to recognize and respond appropriately to our values. Reflective wisdom comprises enough self-awareness to know what matters to us and what our obstacles are to obtaining it, the ability to conform our emotional reactions and motivations to this knowledge of what matters, and the ability to shift our attention among our various values depending on the context.

Skill analogies

The task of developing wisdom has struck some as similar to the task of developing more ordinary practical skills. This has led some philosophers to pursue an analogy that occupied the ancients: if we could show that wisdom is similar in relevant ways to certain practical skills (Aristotle and Plato considered examples like medicine or ship-building), then we could learn about wisdom by looking at the more readily available direct evidence about the nature and development of those skills.

These *skill analogies* promise to illuminate contentious concepts like wisdom and virtue by drawing comparisons between them and more ordinary and better-understood skills. The point is not to claim that virtue is identical to these other skills but instead that it is similar in relevant and revealing ways. Interestingly, some of the competing contemporary versions of this analogy imply significantly different pictures of the nature and components of virtue.

Julia Annas (1995, 2011) has made a sustained defense of a version of the skill analogy inspired by Plato. Annas argues that virtue is analogous to tennis, piano playing, and other practical skills distinguished by "the need to learn and the drive to aspire" (2011, 25). These skills are developed first by engaging in practice with feedback from experts and then

by undertaking continued intelligent and self-guided reflection aimed at grasping the principles governing successful performance (2011, 20, 25). By arguing that virtue is relevantly similar, Annas develops a picture of virtue as a comprehensive and articulate grasp of principles of good conduct acquired through motivated and intelligent conscious reflection.

Matthew Stichter argues (2007, 2011, 2015), contra Annas, that an analogy to practical skills vindicates a less intellectual picture of virtue. His view, which is inspired by Aristotle, draws upon accounts of expertise according to which skills in areas like driving are acquired primarily through experience rather than reflection on principles, and expert decision making is driven by intuition (immediate, affect-laden, relatively effortless judgments made without conscious reasoning) rather than consciously applied reasoning (2007, 192).[23] While Stichter does not think that wisdom is a skill (2016, 215), he does think we can learn much about the nature of character virtues by examining how they compare to practical skills.

The skill analogy promises to illuminate the nature of virtue (and by extension, at least in Annas's case, the nature of wisdom). But this promise remains unfulfilled as long as we are unable to choose between competing versions of the analogy that generate significantly different results. To make good on the skill analogy we need philosophical argument that establishes that virtue and/or wisdom is similar in the relevant ways to some type of more ordinary skill, and we need reliable empirical evidence about the nature and development of that type of skill.

Jason Swartwood (2013b, 2013a) has defended a version of the analogy that he argues tells us important things about wisdom while also resolving the conflict between Annas and Stichter. According to this *expert skill model of wisdom*, wisdom is the same type of

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[23] Stichter (2007) focuses on the work of Dreyfus and Dreyfus (1991) and Dreyfus (1997).

understanding constitutive of expert decision-making skills in areas like firefighting, teaching, and tactical decision-making. By developing the analogy in a way that isolates a specific set of skills that have been subject to up-to-date empirical research, Swartwood argues we can work towards a philosophically sensible, empirically plausible, and practically useful defense of a skill analogy.

As with all skill analogies, Swartwood's argument for the expert skill model of wisdom has two main components: a philosophical argument for the conclusion that wisdom is the same kind of understanding as certain types of expert decision-making skills, and an analysis of the empirical literature on the nature of those skills.

The philosophical argument starts by identifying the kind of achievement wisdom is. Wise people understand how to conduct themselves, all-things-considered: they are able to make decisions that appropriately express their commitments to justice, self-respect, honesty, and the like, even in situations that would befuddle the rest of us. The domain of all-things-considered decisions is a *domain of complex choice* and *challenging performance*: the challenge is not only that the factors that make for a good choice are many, varied, and interact in complex ways; we also need to coordinate our motivation and affect so that we end up actually doing the right thing for the right reasons. The next step of the argument is to argue that wisdom is relevantly similar to expert decision-making skill in areas like firefighting, military tactics, teaching (etc.), because both wisdom and those skills involve an understanding of how to conduct oneself in a domain of complex choice and challenging performance. The point is not that wisdom is identical to expert decision-making skill in those areas or that expert decision-makers in those areas are wise (many experts are not!). Instead, as with all skill analogies, the point is that wise understanding is similar to expert decision-making skill in those areas in ways that are relevant to determining what wisdom is like in real people and how they can develop it.

The next step in the argument is to provide an account of the nature of expert decision-making skills in the relevant areas. According to Swartwood (2013b, 517–20), prominent psychological research on naturalized decision-making reveals that expert decision-making skill in areas of complex choice and challenging performance can be analyzed into a number of component abilities:[24]

- *Intuitive ability*: an expert is often able to identify what she ought to do quickly, effortlessly, and without conscious deliberation.

- *Deliberative ability*: an expert is able to use slow, effortful, consciously accessible processes to search for and evaluate what she ought to do when an intuitive identification is lacking or inadequate.

- *Meta-cognitive ability*: an expert is able to identify when and how to rely on intuition and deliberation.

- *Self-regulative ability*: an expert is able to identify how to affect her environment, behavior, affect, and motivations so that she can successfully do what she has identified she ought to do.

- *Self-cultivation ability*: an expert is able to identify how to tailor her practice and experience in order to make her intuitive, deliberative, and self-regulative abilities even more reliable over the long-run.

This analysis of the empirical literature then generates analogous conclusions about wisdom if the philosophical argument is sound: It implies, for instance, that wise people will likely use a combination of conscious reflection (of the kind described in the previous section of this paper) and intuition to make decisions (2013b, 523–24).[25] Thus, if Swartwood's

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[24] Swartwood relies especially on the work of Daniel Kahneman (2011), and Gary Klein (1997, 2007, 2008, 2009; Kahneman and Klein 2009), and others working on dual processing models of decision-making and naturalized decision-making research (e.g. Ericsson and Lehmann 1996; Ericsson et al. 2006; Ericsson 2008; Feltovich, Prietula, and Ericsson 2006). Research on tacit knowledge may also be relevant. See, e.g., Cianciolo et al (2006; 2006), Sternberg and Horvath (1999).

[25] It's important to note that the skill analogies are not claiming that wise people get feedback on their decisions in exactly the same way as, for instance, firefighters do. The research on expert decision-making indicates that experts develop their reliable intuition by feedback on the regularities governing their area of expertise (Kahneman and Klein 2009). For a firefighter (for instance), this can come in the form of seeing whether what was expected to happen actually happened (did that fire cave the roof in?) or from reflection on whether the outcome best achieved the goals of firefighting. For wisdom (and even a lot of other practical

argument is a good one, it resolves the disagreement between Annas and Stichter about the roles of intuition and reflection in wisdom.

By drawing connections between wisdom and better understood skills, skill analogies like those defended by Annas, Stichter and Swartwood promise to give us philosophically sensible and empirically plausible answers to questions about the nature and development of wisdom, including the nature of wise deliberation or the extent to which a wise person has a consciously accessible blueprint of a good life.

Determining whether any of these skill analogies succeeds requires determining both whether wisdom or virtue is relevantly similar to the specific skills (or types of skills) identified and whether the empirical evidence actually shows that those skills have the features they're claimed to have. Various objections have been raised to skill analogies in general and to specific versions of the analogy, and many focus on trying to identify a relevant difference between the identified skills and wisdom.[26]

One important objection to skill analogies in general concerns the role of motivation in virtues like wisdom: some argue that wisdom is not a decision-making skill because, unlike skills, a person cannot have it but fail to act on it (Kekes 1995, 30; Stalnaker 2010, 408; Mengzi 2008, xxxiii; Zagzebski 1996). If a firefighter prefers to let a building burn rather than applying her understanding to stop it, or if a piano player refuses ever to play again, that need not imply they lack expert skill. On the other hand, someone who had no

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skills – see Klein (2009)), mere observation is insufficient to provide feedback, because part of making wise decisions is determining what features of a situation matter: is it the consequences (if so, which ones?), the nature of the action, or what? Feedback on our understanding of what matters will have to come in part from the sort of reflection discussed earlier in this section. That kind of reflection, done well, would help hone the wise person's intuitive abilities while also providing a conscious grasp of some important principles she can use in reflection on tough or novel cases. The point is that while defenders of skill analogies need to claim that both the wise and experts get feedback through experience and reflection they need not claim that the feedback is acquired in exactly the same way.

[26] For discussion of objections of this kind, see, for example, Annas (2003, chap. 3), Jacobson (2005), and Swartwood (2013b, 524–26, 2013a, chap. 4).

desire to do what she rightly saw as kind (respectful, etc.) would to that degree lack wisdom. This seems to imply that wisdom requires a motivational component that skills lack.

There are several ways a defender of a skill analogy might reply to this objection (Swartwood 2013b, 525–26). She might admit that we need to add a motivational component to fully describe wisdom but deny that this undermines the analogy. Even if we need to add a motivational component, perhaps the analogy still shows, for instance, that wisdom includes the five decision-making skills described by Swartwood or is developed through the kind of reflection described by Annas. Alternatively, she could argue that the objection fails to identify a difference between wisdom and expert decision-making skills, because those decision-making skills similarly require motivating affective responses that have been shaped through experience and reflection.

Recently, additional objections have been raised to Swartwood's version of the skill analogy that might also bear on some of the others. Kristján Kristjánsson argues that, unlike expert decision-making skills, wisdom requires grappling with "existential questions" such as whether a particular job, occupation, relationship or project is really conducive to a good life (2015, 98, 101). In a similar vein, Matthew Stichter argues that, unlike wisdom, expert decision-making skills do not "involve making value judgments about the worth of the end being pursued" (2016, 211; Hacker-Wright 2015, 986). If this is an actual difference between the two types of understanding, then we could reasonably expect wisdom to require significantly different reasoning and reflection capacities. And, if we avoid implausibly relativistic views of the nature of wisdom (like Simple Cultural Relativism), we'll have to admit that wisdom requires critically scrutinizing the value of the ends and goals one inherits from their culture, community, and family.

The most plausible route for defending the expert skill model against this objection, then, is to argue that reflection on the value of ends is part of expert decision-making skill in at least some domains. This may well hold true of some expert decision-making skills but not others: critically reflecting on the value of grading or discussion practices may be necessary for expertise in teaching, for instance, even if similar critical scrutiny is not required for expertise in some other areas. By examining whether wisdom is relevantly similar to any expert decision-making skills in this way, we can determine whether we need to further specify the expert skill model or whether (having learned something important about wisdom) we should reject it.

This brief overview reveals why skill analogies offer one possible framework for the interdisciplinary study of wisdom: they offer the possibility of an empirically tractable and philosophically sound account of what wisdom is and how it can be developed by real people. Importantly, determining whether any versions of the analogy succeed is an interdisciplinary task.

V.   CONCLUSION: INTERDISCIPLINARY STUDY OF WISDOM

In her discussion of the unity of the virtues, philosopher Susan Wolf concludes:

> Our philosophical positions are refined and improved by subjecting them to the demand that they be reconciled with the observations of ordinary life as well as social science, and our descriptions and interpretations of daily life and empirical studies are refined and improved by requiring them to consider the challenges that come from ethical and other philosophical argument. (2007, 167)

By reviewing philosophical work on wisdom we've seen that the same point applies to wisdom. Accounts of wisdom simultaneously prescribe ways of being and also make assumptions about what humans beings are like. Providing a plausible account of what

wisdom is and how we can develop it thus requires applying the tools both of philosophy and empirical psychology. Wolf is clearly correct that "[t]here is not, at this point at least, a formula for how to work in this interdisciplinary area" (2007, 166).[27] But, what is equally clear is that we are not without a variety of promising answers to questions about the nature of wisdom and interdisciplinary frameworks for exploring them.

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[27] In fact, philosophers have described a method, known as Wide Reflective Equilibrium, that provides a method for integrating empirical and philosophical work when studying prescriptive ideals such as wisdom. For an overview of the method (and some objections to it), see Daniels (2016).

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