

The Rosewood Report on Practical Wisdom

At the end of July, 2010, a small group of philosophers and psychologists (see participant list at the end of this report) met at the Rosewood Inn in Hastings, Minnesota to talk about wisdom.¹ The workshop included five sessions. The first four were organized around presentations by a philosopher and a psychologist on the capacities of practical wisdom. At the fifth and final session on Sunday morning six of us settled down to try to summarize what we had learned. This report focuses on that conversation, which was informed by earlier events. In writing this report, I have sometimes indicated who said what in order to give the feel of the conversation, but this report is not a transcript. I have taken some liberties with the order of things, provided some background where necessary, and added my own reflections about emerging points of consensus.

1. How do we define wisdom?

A variety of different characterizations of wisdom were employed throughout the weekend. Simone takes wisdom to be akin to self-knowledge. Tori, drawing on George Eliot's novel *Middlemarch*, takes the development of wisdom to require progress along two dimensions: moral energy that sustains our drive to action and moral vision that informs us about what it's like to be another. Michael liked this idea that wisdom involves a kind of discounting of one's selfish interests and added that wisdom should also include a temporal discount function that mitigates our tendency to downplay future consequences of our actions. Judith favors the MORE model of wisdom, which defines wisdom in terms of **M**astery (where this includes an appreciation of the lack of control that we have over much of our lives), **O**penness to experience, **R**eflectiveness, and **E**mpathy/Emotion. Eddy defines wisdom as the psychological capacities involved in decision making and action control that contribute to people living good or flourishing lives. Valerie thinks of wisdom similarly, as the skills, habits and dispositions that are necessary for judging and choosing what matters.

What do we make of this apparent jumble of definitions? In discussion, we realized that we have more in common than at first appeared. First of all, some of the definitions include others. We could summarize the most abstract definition of wisdom this way:

Practical wisdom consists in the capacities needed to make good judgments about what matters in life and to bring one's actions into accordance, insofar as this is in one's control.

This general definition encompasses the MORE model, as long as the capacities listed in MORE are the ones that are needed for judging what matters and acting accordingly. Further, MORE can accommodate some of the other characterizations of wisdom. Insofar as self-knowledge is a kind of reflection, it would be accommodated by MORE. Eliot's conception of wisdom is also compatible with MORE, since it makes empathy a central capacity of wisdom. Social and temporal discounting functions can also be seen as reflective capacities and hence would also fit into this model.

What we have, then, is (1) an abstract philosophical definition, which tells us what we're looking for without listing the particular capacities, (2) a general psychological definition, which lists the central capacities, and (3) detailed specifications of the required capacities. These different kinds of definitions no doubt reflect the different interests that researchers have.

¹ The workshop was funded by a grant from the University of Chicago's Defining Wisdom Project and the John Templeton Foundation. Thanks are also due to the Minnesota Center for Philosophy of Science for administrative assistance.

One point of disagreement that came up in our discussion had to do with the fact that Eddy and Valerie proposed definitions that include *normative* terms. Both Eddy and Valerie see wisdom as importantly related to what it is to live *well*, to achieve things in life that are good or worthwhile. Some of the psychologists in the group worried about how to operationalize and test conceptions of wisdom that include a normative component.

But once we see how a normative definition is compatible with an empirical definition (such as MORE), we should be less worried. Moreover, 'wisdom' is a normative concept; the word indicates an ideal of character. Therefore, it is important that however wisdom is operationalized and measured it should be connected to states of character that are *worth* having. We can ensure both normative significance and empirical testability by distinguishing and employing all three kinds of definitions mentioned above.

2. Is wisdom just one thing?

The fact that wisdom does seem to involve so many capacities (empathy, self-knowledge, reflection, and so on) made some of us worry that wisdom is too amorphous. If wisdom just colonizes every useful capacity we have, it doesn't really seem like a single virtue.

Different answers to this worry were expressed. A first thought was that since wisdom concerns judgment and decision making in particular, it will not include every virtue. Generosity, for example, might seem unnecessary for good decision making. But this way of thinking didn't hold up for two reasons. First, virtues that aren't virtues *of judgment* can nevertheless improve judgment by changing the inputs to the process. For example, generosity can improve decision making when others' needs are at stake by ensuring that generous actions are presented as attractive and viable options. Second, we agreed that practical wisdom involves not just good judgment but also acting consistently with that judgment. If this is the case, then many virtues are necessary for wisdom. As Tori pointed out, even courage seems like something that could be cultivated as part of the project of becoming wiser, because courage helps us to bring our actions in line with what we think is important.

Simine's answer was to deny that there is really a problem here: why not just think that wisdom is everything good that is in our control? One reason has to do with problems that have come up for the unity of the virtues. The thesis of the unity of the virtues says that you can't have any virtue without having practical wisdom and if you have practical wisdom, you have all the other virtues. Plato held this view, but it is not a popular position now, because there seems to be a lot of evidence that people can be virtuous in one dimension without being virtuous in all. For example, some people are very kind but not courageous, or temperate but not generous.

Our discussion led us to favor the view that there is a limited kind of unity, an asymmetrical unity such that you can't have wisdom without having the other virtues, though you can have the other virtues (to some degree) without having wisdom. One could interpret this view in one of two ways: First, one could hold that wisdom is comprised of the other virtues such that any virtue is a part of wisdom. Or, second, one could hold that wisdom only comprises those virtues that have to do with deliberation, judgment, and decision making; virtues that have to do with producing appropriate action may contribute to the same end as wisdom but they are not a part of wisdom. It may not matter much which of these interpretations one takes. One might even think that wisdom has a narrow and a broad sense so that both views get something right. We can think of it in its narrow sense when we want to distinguish it from other virtues that we want to discuss separately, but we can also think of it in its broad sense when we are thinking about who has wisdom and we find ourselves reluctant to ascribe real wisdom to people who lack action-oriented virtues like courage.

3. What kind of reflection should we think of as part of wisdom?

Michael, Eddy, Rachana and Simine all presented studies that could be taken to undermine the effectiveness of reflection. Michael showed us that people are not very good at following the principles they endorse when making judgments about punishment. Eddy reminded us (and confirmed – despite some clever experiments designed to make the folk look more principled!) that people make moral judgments on the basis of intuitions and then rationalize them after the fact. Rachana discussed studies that demonstrate our poor introspective access to the causes of our behavior. Simine told us that in all the attempts her lab has made to help people become more accurate in their self-attributions of traits, nothing has worked. After all this, Valerie worried that the psychological evidence against reflection was becoming overwhelming. If our capacities for reflection are so hopeless, how can we maintain that (1) wisdom is a trait everyone can aspire to develop and (2) that wise people make better judgments in virtue of their being more reflective?

In response, several in the group expressed some persuasive optimism about people. We do change things about ourselves after thinking and reflecting on what needs to be changed, they pointed out, and there are people who learn from advice, improve their judgments, and so on. It might be that the evidence against reflection shows that wisdom is even more difficult to achieve than we thought, but this does not mean it is impossible for people to learn and improve by conscious effort.

Tori offered a different kind of response to the problem. She pointed out that there are different tasks you might give your reflective capacities: first-order reflection on particular decisions or second-order reflection on policies for living, habits for overcoming biases. We can use our reflective capacities to self-regulate in the long term, even if we can't use them to overcome biases in the heat of the moment. This idea that wisdom involves the adoption of long term policies of self-improvement, and that reflection should be thought of in terms of its role in such policies, is also a theme in Valerie's work. Simine concurred, adding that what wisdom seems to demand is the ability to reflect on the kind of process you use to come to a decision. For example, we can decide ahead of time not to make an important decision quickly but to give ourselves a few days for all the variables to sink in. Adopting this policy is wise; someone who hasn't adopted or followed the policy may not be able to make a wise decision in the time she has to do it.

4. Do people have wisdom naturally or does it require effort?

Simine observed that there are people who are good by chance, but virtues have to have a certain modal robustness (that is, when we say that someone is wise, it seems to follow that they would have been wise even if their circumstances had been somewhat different). The thought here, which many of us shared, is that people become wise through an effortful process, not just by lucking into the right attitudes.

One process in particular that some think is relevant to producing wisdom is the process of dealing with trauma. You have to "go through the fire" to become wise. Is this true? Is it even true that this is what people tend to think about wisdom? According to Judith, two thirds of the folk think you have to have confronted a lot of difficulty to become wise. The third who don't think you need trial by fire think that you can learn wisdom from books or experts. Paul Baltes and Monica Ardelt (two psychologists who work on wisdom) split with the folk: Baltes is on the side of the one third, whereas Ardelt emphasizes the need for traumatic events.

Tori observed that what difficult times do is they shake your views about your own strengths and capacities and this sheds light on yourself that you can't get in any other way. But Tori also pointed out that reading novels can help by making you think "OK, there are good ways of going through this, there are bad ways of going through this..." Importantly, reading novels can help us with experiences we haven't had yet. Reading about how characters deal with dying, for example, can help us think about how to deal with dying ourselves, even if we're not yet at that stage of life. This point about literature reveals a middle ground between the two opposing views mentioned above. Learning wisdom from reflecting on our own lives and the lives of others (including fictional characters) does require an effortful process, but it does not require literally going through a traumatic experience. So, wisdom could require conscious effort without requiring traumatic events.

The view that fits best with the group's consensus thus far is that traumatic experiences can help to encourage the development of wisdom (by giving you a perspective you would not otherwise have had), but these experiences are not necessary since the perspective can be achieved in other ways (e.g., through reading and reflection). This leaves open the question about whether there could be "natural" wisdom. Given the group's emphasis on reflection as a component of wisdom, it seems unlikely that people who make no conscious effort (to understand themselves, other people, what matters in life) could really be wise.

In our discussion of trial by fire we noticed that one of the important elements of such trials is that you come to realize that you don't have control over everything. Eddy wondered about a tension between the view that wisdom requires trial by fire where you lose your sense of control and our earlier discussion of the view that wisdom involves what is under your control. This prompted some discussion about the importance of knowing the difference between what's under your control and what isn't. Michael observed that this capacity is highlighted in cognitive-behavior therapy and also in Stoic philosophy. It also comes up in the serenity prayer, which asks for the wisdom to know the difference between what we can change and what we can't. We might call this kind of knowledge "agential humility". Agential humility is analogous to epistemic humility, which is a trait that virtue epistemologists think is crucial to theoretical wisdom: it's important to know what we don't know, just as it's important to know what we don't control.

Another concern expressed about this idea that wisdom involves agential humility was that it might be culturally bounded. Simine asked whether this realism about control applies to everyone or just to people in certain cultures, since in really difficult environments it might be better not to be aware of how little control you have. What if the reality is that you have no power? Positive illusions may be healthy in such environments. Others in the group chimed in, expressing some discomfort with the Stoic and Buddhist view that the natural endpoint is to be passive or accepting of your lot.

It is possible to take a moderate position here. One could say that agential humility is a good thing because it prevents the frustration of trying to control things you can't control, but that how much humility is required depends on your circumstances. This view sits well with the group's way of thinking about wisdom as a set of capacities. If wisdom is made up of a variety of capacities, the relative priority of the different capacities could depend on individual and cultural differences. Thinking along these lines, the capacities that allow a person to control her actions would be balanced against the capacities that allow a person to accept what she cannot control. In an environment in which a person has highly effective agency, wisdom may demand a different balance of capacities than in an environment in which a person's agency is curtailed. On the assumption that both agential humility and the capacities of action control are important for wisdom, we would not recommend the very extreme humility

associated with Buddhism or Stoicism; rather, the view of wisdom we favor recommends a balance, though the precise nature of the balance could vary.

The idea that wisdom requires effort – that we have to *try* to develop wisdom – invited a challenge from Simine who thought that there’s something wrong with deciding to pursue wisdom. Judith observed the similarity to the point that a wise person would never describe herself as wise. The thought here was that there’s something narcissistic or overly pointy-headed (or perhaps arrogant) about the (stereotyped) moral philosopher who wants to find out what the right principles are and become wise. It seems that such a person wants the wrong thing: one should want to respect people, make other people happy, engage in valuable pursuits, have satisfying relationships, but not *because* these things are recommended by a principle or part of the quest for wisdom.

In response to this challenge, Michael drew a helpful distinction between two different questions that seem to be at issue. First, there is the matter of a person’s *reasons* for pursuing wisdom. Is the person’s concern just with improving herself for the sake of improving herself? This does seem narcissistic. But a person’s reasons for wanting to be more wise could have to do with making better choices so that her own life and the lives of those she cares about go better. This seems less problematic. Second, there is the matter of whether there is an end that we’re moving toward and can achieve in our pursuit of wisdom or whether it is an ongoing process that doesn’t have a stopping point. One might think that the mistake in setting out to achieve wisdom is that wisdom isn’t something that can be gotten hold of; it is, rather, a way of approaching problems that one has to engage over and over. (The group did seem to favor thinking about practical wisdom as a process, and it was noted that “quests for wisdom” are less objectionable when it comes to theoretical wisdom.)

5. Are there experts in wisdom? Do wise people give good advice?

We began with a question about sources of wisdom. Eddy raised this question because of an interest in introducing students (or readers of an anthology on wisdom) to “pieces of wisdom”, the accumulated wisdom of the experts. If we’re looking for wisdom, it does seem to make sense to go to people who have done some hard thinking about it. But our brief discussion of this topic did not reveal any surprises about sources of wisdom. This may reflect a difficulty in identifying sources that everyone will agree contain wisdom. Or, it may be that the group’s inclination to think of wisdom in terms of a process that is served by a set of psychological capacities made it difficult for us to think of sources containing “nuggets of wisdom”. A psychological capacities model is not inconsistent with there being nuggets of wisdom, but it does represent an emphasis on process rather than outcome (and nuggets of wisdom are an outcome).

This question about sources led quickly to a conversation about advice-giving and the complexities involved in giving good advice. Advising requires knowing the psychology of the person you’re giving advice to, including (and perhaps especially) that person’s weaknesses. One of the complexities of advice giving has to do with the fact that the person you’re advising may not be capable of rational persuasion. Given this, it seems that sometimes an adviser needs to lie to people, or trick them, so that they can do the right thing or so that they can take the advice (or ask for it) later.

Another complexity is that, as Tori put it “we’re struggling all the time”. So, part of what you’re doing when you practice giving advice is developing good strategies: you see what works, what doesn’t, and you try again. Judith pointed out that this is another temporal dimension of wisdom: being a wise adviser requires adopting long term strategies and giving up the illusion that you can control what other people do. Tori saw this as a contrast to Aristotle’s view that the wise person does the right thing, in the

right way, at the right time (and so on). In fact, wisdom and wise advising may have more to do with learning from mistakes than with doing the right thing, in the right way at the right time.

The discussion of advice led us to a conversation about the difference between being able to live a wise life and being able to give good advice. Can there be “wisdom coaches” who aren’t themselves wise? Given experiences that most of us have had (of friends, therapists, and teachers) perhaps we shouldn’t be surprised if some people are wise advisers yet not good at living their own lives. But, as Simine observed, there’s a continuum: a reasonable position to take is that people who are good advisers but not wise in their own lives are not as wise as people who can do both.

6. How do you measure wisdom?

Given the observation made earlier (that wise people would not identify themselves as wise), it seems obvious that you can’t measure wisdom by self-report. But why is it that we think wise people wouldn’t self-identify as wise? Simine suggested that attributing wisdom to oneself might suggest egocentrism, or an inability to take someone else’s perspective, both of which would be incompatible with wisdom. We next considered the suggestion that we turn to the reports of friends or family. In Simine’s work on self-knowledge she has shown that friends and family members are more accurate judges of certain attributes; perhaps this could be true of wisdom. According to Judith, though, people are really good at faking wisdom – that is, at saying things that sound wise enough to fool other people. People might not be able to fool those closest to them, but on the other hand, the people closest to us may be more likely to know our faults and hence less likely to think we’re wise. If this is true, the attribution of wisdom by the people closest to you might set too high a standard.

Michael raised the concern that we shouldn’t use difficulties in measurement as an excuse for looser definitions. He suggested the hypothesis that you can’t get high inter-rater reliability without a deductively defined construct. Simine thought this hypothesis was unnecessarily limiting, though, because we can have a very functional idea of what a construct is without being able to verbalize it. She told us about the “Brunswick lens model” which can be used to figure out, post-hoc, what attributes people are using when they identify someone as wise, by consensus. Even if the raters (those making the ascription of wisdom) can’t themselves articulate what makes them think someone is wise, we can examine what attributes correlate with being seen as wise (by consensus) and therefore make some informed guesses about what cues people are using to judge wisdom.

Wisdom seems a very tricky thing to measure. Drawing on our previous topics, it might be that the fact that wisdom has a broad sense that includes many other virtues makes it more difficult to measure. If people have this broad sense in mind when they think about who is wise, they may be reluctant to attribute wisdom to anyone who isn’t perfect. Further, if wisdom is a set of capacities, attributions of wisdom may vary depending on which capacities are emphasized at the moment of assessment. Perhaps some of these problems could be answered by spelling out the capacities that are involved in wisdom and measuring them separately. This would miss the integrative aspect of wisdom – the fact that a wise person manages to balance the various capacities in an appropriate way – but it would help achieve more accurate measure of some aspects.

7. Conclusion

Our last topic of conversation was the future of the group. It was remarkable, and extremely gratifying to me, the organizer of the workshop, how much enthusiasm people felt about meeting again and staying in touch. I don’t think I was alone in feeling surprised and delighted by the sense of accomplishment and intellectual excitement that the weekend produced. As the organizer I have

thought a lot about what made this weekend so successful and such a good learning experience for us all. My assessment is that it had something to do with the place – we were in pleasant surroundings, without many distractions, sharing all our meals and our free time. It had something to do with our having a sense of a shared project, yet different skills and bases of knowledge. It also had a lot to do with the people. It seemed to me (speaking for the other eight participants), that everyone possessed a lack of arrogance and a sincere willingness to listen to each other, in addition to a sense of humor and gratitude for the privilege of spending a weekend with smart people talking about interesting topics in lovely surroundings. The conversation reported here would not have been the same without these qualities.

Indeed, enthusiasm about the workshop was so heartfelt that it looks like there will be a continuation of the “Rosewood Group”. We now have an online resource for sharing papers and questions, and we hope to have another meeting in 2011. As can be seen from this report, there are many topics of mutual interest that could form the basis for future meetings. One possible topic that hasn’t been mentioned yet, which we discussed very briefly, is the relationship between wisdom and humor. Everyone seemed to think there is an interesting relationship. One suggestion was that wisdom and humor draw on the same kinds of capacities for different purposes. Others seemed to think that sometimes humor is the wisest response to a situation or that having a wise perspective on a situation could be facilitated by having a sense of humor. I am optimistic that whatever particular topics we discuss, we can build on the substantial agreement about wisdom reached during the Rosewood workshop to make real progress in the study of wisdom.

Valerie Tiberius

Workshop Participants and Topics

Values

- Judith Glück (Alpen-Adria Universität, Psychology)
- Valerie Tiberius (University of Minnesota, Philosophy)

Moral Judgment (autonomy)

- Eddy Nahmias (Georgia State University, Philosophy and Neuroscience)
- Michael Sargent (Bates College, Psychology)

Self-Knowledge

- Simine Vazire (Washington University, Psychology)
- Rachana Kamtekar (University of Arizona, Philosophy)

Development of the Capacities of Wisdom

- Victoria McGeer (Princeton University, Philosophy)

Also participating:

- Melissa Koenig, University of Minnesota, Institute for Child Development
- Jason Swartwood, Graduate Assistant, University of Minnesota, Philosophy