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## ON DEFINING WISDOM

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### ABSTRACT

Many gerontologists propose definitions of wisdom. Usually these are "empirical," as opposed to a-priori or "real" definitions. In this article we defend an a-priori definition of wisdom. We briefly explain a-priori and empirical definitions, and how they relate to each other in research. After rejecting two classical a-priori definitions of wisdom, we present and defend our own, and examine its ability to predict key findings of recent empirical studies. Finally, we describe some implications of our approach for future empirical studies of wisdom.

A-priori definitions are not based directly on public observation, but express intuitive insight into the essence of the thing being defined (Aristotle, 1942b; Cohen & Nagel, 1934; Copi, 1982; Searles, 1968). Empirical definitions identify some publicly observed or observable thing, such as the actual usage in an observed population of a word being defined (Copi, 1982; Mill, 1887; Searles, 1968). We count phenomenological definitions of subjective states as a-priori because the observations they rest on—intuitive insight into one's own inner state—are not public and, as such, are not replicable in the sense normally associated with empirical inquiry. Two of the studies we examine (Birren & Fisher, 1990; Taranto, 1989) defined wisdom based on their syntheses of key observations in empirical studies conducted by others. The other three (Baltes & Smith, 1990; Clayton & Birren, 1980; Sternberg, 1990) observed selected populations and defined wisdom in terms of characteristics which those populations associate with it.

In research there is a dialectic between a-priori and empirical definitions. An a-priori definition of the thing being investigated guides identification of the

research problem, the selection of examples, and the evaluation of outcomes. Empirical outcomes, in turn, guide further development of the a-priori definition or concept. The role of the concept is well expressed in what is arguably a *locus classicus* for the logic of definition, found in Plato's *Euthyphro* (trans. 1973b, 6e):

Socrates: What is piety? . . .

Euthyphro: . . . prosecuting anyone who is guilty of murder, sacrilege or any similar crime . . .

Socrates: Remember that I did not ask you to give me two or three examples of piety, but to explain the general idea which makes all pious things to be pious. Do you not recollect that there is one idea which makes the pious, pious, and the impious, impious? Tell me what is the nature of this idea, and then I shall have a standard to which I may look.

In this article we contribute to this dialectic by developing an a-priori definition of wisdom which, if successful, can have a useful influence on empirical research.

### CLASSICAL DEFINITIONS

In his *Metaphysics*, Aristotle states that wisdom is knowledge of first principles: ". . . all men suppose what is called Wisdom to deal with the first causes and principles of things." He urges his reader to "inquire of what kind are the causes and principles, the knowledge of which is Wisdom," concluding that the science of wisdom ". . . must be a science that investigates the first principles and causes . . ." (see Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, 1942a, 1942b). Knowing the proper ends of things is part of wisdom, precisely because the end of a thing is one of its fundamental principles or "first causes." This way of defining wisdom was influential throughout the middle ages, the Renaissance, and even in such early modern philosophers as Descartes (Aquinas, trans. 1944; Owens, 1951; Rice, 1958). All variations on this definition fail to say *why* the kind of knowledge being considered is not just another case of (admittedly important) knowledge. What is it about knowledge of fundamental principles that makes it not just more knowledge, but that special kind of knowledge or understanding we call "wisdom"? The honorific label "wisdom" suggests that the knowledge in question should embody some special virtue or achievement. What is the special achievement intimated by that label? And why is it embodied (if it is) in knowledge of first principles?

The same question applies to Plato's famous characterization of wisdom in the *Apology*, in which Socrates is said to be wise in knowing he didn't know (Plato, trans. 1973a). We do sometimes know that we don't know. But we should question whether and why this knowledge can count as "wisdom." Why isn't it simply knowledge—like knowing that Albuquerque is in New Mexico? I know

that I don't know where the word "alligator" originated. Surely this isn't wisdom. Why then should Socrates' "knowing he didn't know" count as wisdom?

The context of the *Apology* suggests an answer. Socrates claims his bit of wisdom as part of telling his life story to the jury. He tells of many youthful false hopes dashed as he went from one famous person to another hoping to find wisdom. So there is an intimation of insight hard won from engagement with life, and therefore of knowledge that is not exclusively cognitive but involving a broader experience. Indeed, in another work—*The Republic*—Plato goes further by explicitly describing wisdom as including distinguishable cognitive, conative, and affective dimensions. Discussing the former prisoner who has achieved cognitive success in the world of Ideas, he writes (Plato, trans. 1941, 516d):

Then if he called to mind his fellow prisoners and what passed for wisdom in his former dwelling-place, he would surely think himself happy in the change and be sorry for them . . . Would our released prisoner be likely to envy the men exalted to honor and power in the cave? Would he not feel like Homer's Achilles, that he would far sooner "be on earth as a hired servant in the house of a landless man" or endure anything rather than go back to his old beliefs and live in the old way?

Recognizing that wisdom may involve conative and affective dimensions in addition to cognition, is a definite advance, as we shall see in what follows. But it does not amount to a clear definition of it. In particular, it does not say why or when knowing (say) that I don't know something, whether it be a multidimensional form of knowing or not, counts as wisdom. We shall try to answer this question in developing our own definition, to which we turn now.

### "SEEING THROUGH ILLUSION"

We suggest that wisdom does not lie in *what* one knows, but in *how* one knows. The special thing about Socrates' knowing—what makes it count as wisdom—is that it can be acquired only by overcoming a strong inclination to believe the opposite. The inclination he overcame is our near-universal readiness to believe that one who excels in a technical field must also have answers to other kinds of questions. It is the strong tendency to believe, for example, that a skilled and famed obstetrician would (for that reason) know if abortion were right or wrong, or that a famous and respected politician would (for that reason) know whether God is "on our side." Wisdom is knowledge that comes from overcoming this kind of illusion. On this account, then, a "metacognition" consisting in knowing that I don't know where the word "alligator" came from is not wisdom because having that knowledge does not rest on my overcoming a powerful, widely shared temptation to think I do not know that.

That wisdom requires seeing through illusion explains why it is plausible to characterize it as knowledge of first principles. If there are first principles, knowledge of them would be "wisdom" only because we are strongly inclined to take the illusory appearances of things as reality, and/or because equally illusory images of those principles, such as Parmenides' unchangeable One or Heraclitus' unabiding flux, seductively beckon to us. Knowing "first principles" always turns out to be knowing a reality behind some appealing but unreal appearance. For example, Aristotle states that what wisdom knows is hardest for us to know *because* it is "furthest from perception" (Aristotle, 1942a). And if, as empiricists say, there are *no* "underlying" first principles, or if, as sceptics say, we cannot know about such principles, then wisdom will lie, not simply in knowing one or another of these alleged facts, but in overcoming a strong "metaphysical" propensity of the mind to believe that there are such principles and that we can know them; in short, the seductive "conceits of reason."

We shall now offer a more detailed description of the experience we intend to denote by the phrase "seeing through illusion." It can be described in terms of an example adapted from one of Jean Piaget's experiments with children (Piaget, 1952). Piaget asked five-year-old children to arrange a row of six pennies on a table, and next to them a row of six buttons, as follows:

pennies:    O   O   O   O   O   O

buttons:    O   O   O   O   O   O

When asked whether there are more pennies or more buttons, the child answers that there are the same number of each. Piaget then asked the child to spread the buttons out, as follows:

pennies:    O   O   O   O   O   O

buttons:    O   O   O   O   O   O

Now when asked whether there are more pennies or more buttons, the child invariably declares that there are more buttons. Piaget concluded that the child thinks there are more buttons because the row of buttons *takes up more space*—a tempting, understandable, and (among children of that age) a universal error.

We adults immediately recognize this as a hopeless illusion. This insight is not a one-dimensional, exclusively cognitive state. It is a state of integrated awareness with three distinguishable aspects. The first of these is the pellucid clarity of the cognitive awareness that "takes up more space" is irrelevant to the question at issue. Second, there is a conative awareness of immunity to the same

error—we are free of any and all inclination or temptation to think that because the buttons take up more space, there must be more of them. Third, there is an affective sympathy with the child's mistaken notion that "takes up more space" implies "more buttons." On learning that the child thinks more space means more buttons, we do not gasp in disapproval of the child's folly. Instead we feel, in a detached, distant way, the power that the same error might exert on our own minds in similar circumstances. These three distinguishable aspects of the experience we are calling "seeing through an illusion" are "integrated" in the sense that they do not present themselves subjectively as separate and independent of each other, but as dimensions of a single experience.

We suggest that an adult's position, relative to the child in the "more buttons" issue, is a good model for what wisdom is. In contrast to most illusions that wisdom is concerned with, we outgrow this one naturally, without effort. We suggest, however, that three aspects of the case—the pellucid insight that a belief is illusory, the freedom from further temptation by or vulnerability to the error, and the empathetic identification with those who are prey to the illusion—together constitute the essence of wisdom. Together they constitute that special achievement which sets wisdom apart from knowledge that is not wisdom. We shall refer to the state of mind featuring these three things as "seeing through illusion."

### UNIFYING THE "MOTLEY" OF WISDOM

If "seeing through illusion" is the distinguishing trait of wisdom, then thinking of wisdom in that way should help us resolve conceptual problems associated with wisdom. One such problem is what could be called the "motley" of wisdom—the difficulty of unifying its multiple forms under one concept (Collins, 1961). It is not easy to identify a common feature that will unite theoretical and practical wisdom, secular and divine wisdom, the wisdom of age, the wisdom of the psalms, and even the wisdom of such maxims as "waste not, want not." We suggest, however, that these things do share a unifying common characteristic; namely, that the knowledge they feature is achieved by seeing through illusion.

In theoretical wisdom, the illusions seen through are ones that hide or obscure theoretical truth. Recall the child in Piaget's experiment for whom "takes up more space" implies "more buttons." Seeing through that illusion is an instance of theoretical wisdom. More generally, theoretical wisdom is seeing through the many tricks of the mind which obscure the truth from us. This includes all insights recommended to us by all theoretical thinkers. It is not possible, for example, to name a philosopher whose main endeavor is not to lead the reader to see through what that philosopher identifies as one or another of what we have been calling "illusions." East or West, ancient or modern, from Lao Tze to Socrates, from Krishnamurthi to Dewey or Wittgenstein, it is ever a matter of

leading some blind prisoner out of a dark cave or some allegedly perplexed fly out of the fly bottle.

Practical wisdom is knowing what to do where some powerful illusion must be overcome to get the best result. For example, knowing the relative importance to our national interests of a war and Zaire and a strike in Kingston would be wisdom only where it rests on seeing through one or more of the many self-deceptions, distractions, and other illusions that loom on every side of such issues. On a personal level, practical wisdom in (say) the important matter of diet would not simply be knowing such things as that you should control your consumption of saturated fats. That, so characterized, is just another bit of knowledge. Practical wisdom would be knowing this in a way that includes pellucid clarity about the implications of cardiovascular risks, freedom from the universal temptation to avoid, postpone, and compromise action on the issue, yet having an insider's awareness of that temptation.

Our account also explains what people mean by Divine wisdom, and the contrasting idea of "secular" wisdom (Aristotle, 1942a; Aquinas, trans. 1944; Rice, 1958). When people say that God allows suffering and death in this world "in His Divine wisdom," they do not mean only that God knows that suffering is good and we do not. They allude to *how* God knows this. Whereas to our mere human minds suffering and death seem thoroughly evil and absurd, God sees through this illusory suggestion of our limited perspective to a redeeming good. When people claim to participate in a share of Divine wisdom, in religious illumination, they do not mean "I have some additional information," but some variation of "I was blind, and now I see." Secular wisdom—that wisdom which natural man can have without divine inspiration or grace—is usually analyzed in terms of practice of moral virtues, and notably prudence (Rice, 1958). The virtues are expressions of wisdom in living, under the definition of wisdom we are proposing, because they are our means of overcoming the easier, powerfully seductive vices. Temperance is wise because excessive indulgence is harmful and yet both attractive and easy. In other words, what we have been calling an illusion. One is wise in acting temperately when, and to the extent that, one is acting *on the basis of* seeing through that illusion.

Our account also explains the wisdom ascribed to cryptic aphorisms like Zen koans and sage epithets such as "Waste not, want not." One imputes wisdom to such things to the extent that they have the ability, through eloquence or other rhetorical force, to shake up our torpid states of mind and thereby dispel illusion. The counsel: "a stitch in time saves nine" is a "wise" counsel, not because it is in general true, but because its catchy air helps expose the illusory comfort of procrastination.

The dependence of wisdom on seeing through illusion also explains the persistent folk idea that wisdom can come with age (Blanshard, 1967; Byrne, 1976; Godlovich, 1981; Manheimer, 1992; Perry, 1942; Schaie, 1977/1978; Staude, 1981; Sternberg, 1990). This notion, true or not, expresses the idea that, often,

we learn to see through illusions only by suffering through them. The teachings of life experience do not, on this view, consist only in accumulated information, but include instances of separating seductive appearance from reality. In a stronger version, it imputes to age an improved ability to make such distinctions. In Schopenhauer's quaint metaphor, in youth we see the dazzling embroidery of life from the front, while in old age we see the stitchwork behind (Schopenhauer, trans. 1970). At the same time, a strength of our definition is that it does not rule out, but easily accommodates, the possibility of wisdom in young people. The concept of seeing through illusion carries no implication of a *necessary* connection with age.

Understanding the role of seeing through illusion as the basis of wisdom clarifies the relation of wisdom to temptation. It is often said or implied that wisdom is associated with the ability to *resist* temptation (Birren & Fisher, 1990; Godlovich, 1981). This is a mistake. In the *Apology*, Socrates does not struggle to *resist* the temptation to think that those who are technically expert are also knowledgeable outside their fields. Instead he is presented as one who at one time fell victim to that illusion but is no longer tempted by it, as one who has transcended it. His early delusion is part of the review of his intellectual development he is relating to the jury (see Plato, trans. 1973a):

. . . I approached one of those who had a reputation for being wise, for there, I thought, if anywhere, I should test the revelation and prove the oracle was wrong: "Here is one wiser than I, and you said I was wiser."  
 You see I must show you my wanderings, as one who had my own labors to prove the oracle was unimpeachable. For after the statesmen, I approached the poets . . . and all the rest as well. There I expected to find myself caught in the act as more ignorant than they were (p. 7).

He states that he is "ashamed" to report to the jury how taken in he had been. But, though he has experienced the illusion in question, and knows first hand what it is like, he clearly has moved beyond it, in the sense that at the time of his speaking it no longer has any significant attraction for him. This same transcendence of—as opposed resistance to—temptation is found wherever we can lay claim to a bit of wisdom. You may decide not to drive because you have had a lot to drink. But you cannot be doing this *from wisdom* if you are *soto voce* struggling with the idea that alcohol does not impair your judgment. Again, you may forgo an attractive teenager's invitation to a lost weekend. But if you are struggling with and resisting the attractions of the proposition, you cannot be foregoing it *from wisdom*, but from some other basis of action, such as fidelity to your marriage vow or fear of legal consequences. That does not mean we cannot congratulate you for making the "wise choice." Indeed you made the wise choice, and you did the wise thing. But not *from wisdom*. Just as it is one thing to do the moral thing (tell the truth) and another to act morally, or act from reasons of morality, so it is one thing to make the wise choice or do the wise



thing and another to do these things from wisdom (Godlovich, 1981). Action of the latter sort includes freedom from the relevant illusion and its seductive appeal.

Finally, there is conceptual anomaly about wisdom which needs explanation. It is the oddity of the statement "I am wise." We tolerate "She is a wise person," but not "I am wise." In general, we draw back from self-ascriptions of wisdom. This is understandable if wisdom is seeing through illusion. The statement "I am wise" then means "I am good at seeing through illusions." This strikes us as self-undermining, because the false impression that we have such an ability is itself one of the most pervasive and recalcitrant human illusions. Closer to true wisdom would be the opposite assessment of my situation: "I am vulnerable to mix-ups and mistakes."

Another oddity in the statement "I am wise" is its suggestion that I have seen through *all* illusion. That suggestion, however faint, is not credible. Any claim to wisdom cries out for qualification as to the respect in which it is being claimed. I am *wiser than* you (I have a *bit* of wisdom) *in that* you think one can time the stock market while I have seen through *that* particular illusion. This model, together with the reasonable premise that illusion is pervasive in life, explains why such qualification is necessary. The ability to resolve this anomaly, then, in addition to its power to identify the distinguishing trait of wisdom and to unify its multifarious forms, argues for defining wisdom as "seeing through illusion."

### TESTING AN A-PRIORI DEFINITION OF WISDOM VIS-À-VIS EMPIRICAL STUDIES

An a-priori definition of wisdom can be tested by its ability plausibly to predict key assumptions and findings of empirical studies. If "seeing through illusion" is the essence of wisdom, then characterizations of wisdom in empirical studies ought to reflect that.

James Birren and Laurel Fisher (1990) reviewed a number of empirical studies, took note of traits empirically found to be popularly associated with wisdom, and then attempted to synthesize those empirical findings and the proposed definitions of various investigators in a definition of their own:

Wisdom is the *integration of the affective, conative, and cognitive aspects* of human abilities in response to life's tasks and problems. Wisdom is a balance between the opposing valences of intense emotion and detachment, action and inaction, and knowledge and doubts (p. 326).

Our definition predicts that wisdom will be seen as multidimensional because seeing through illusion is multidimensional. Its cognitive dimension lies in the understanding that a given judgment or course of action is illusory; its affective dimension lies in its characteristic empathy with those who are trapped in

illusion; its conative dimension lies in its freedom from an illusion, the willingness to forgo the solicitation of an illusion. Birren and Fisher (1990) report that wisdom is associated with "life's problems" and with "balance" between "opposing valences" such as "intense emotion and detachment." This kind of characterization is predicted by our definition. For such opposing valences are notoriously sources of illusion in our thinking and action. Imputing "imbalance" to the mind or personality is another way of imputing illusion. It is only when intense emotion (say, anger) creates an illusory basis for action or for judgment that we need to bring it into "balance" with a more "detached" view. A "detached" view, in this sense not of one devoid of passion but in counterpoise to it, presumably means a view which sees through the excessive influence that emotion bids to have on judgment or action. Further, balancing anger with "an opposite valence" reflects *wisdom* (as opposed, say, to a wish to avoid conflict), only when the balance is achieved by seeing through an illusion created by the anger. If "balancing" of some sort comes not from mastery of illusion but from something like the desire to avoid conflict, one might well do the wise thing (refrain from cursing your boss or from striking someone), but not from wisdom or wise insight.

The same implicit reference to the phenomenon of illusion and the need to see through it explains Birren's and Fisher's position that wisdom lies in "integration" of cognitive, affective, conative, and reflective abilities. This is what we would expect if wisdom is seeing through illusion, because these things resist integration, contending with each other for an illusory, one-dimensional dominance of thought and behavior. Notoriously, people are prone to give one or another of these capacities too great emphasis, with unhealthy exclusion or muting of the others. This subtle but universal tendency is a good example of what we have been calling "illusion," so our definition predicts that people will associate the ability to overcome it with wisdom.

Maria Taranto (1985) proposed a definition of wisdom in much the same spirit as Birren and Fisher (1990). She reviewed a number of efforts by empirical researchers to identify attributes or traits which common opinion associates with wisdom. Age, experience, intuition, common sense, empathy, and knowledge were found to be such traits. Attempting to distill the key underlying theme in these studies, Taranto proposes a definition of wisdom as "knowing our human limitations" (p. 15). It would be folly to imagine that one of us could write the Great American Novel or mount a credible campaign for the presidency of Russia; wisdom lies in knowing our limits.

In our view, this definition fails to sufficiently specify *what kind* of knowledge of human limitations would count as wisdom. The necessary further specificity can only be provided by the concept of seeing through illusion.

For example, everyone knows that human beings are mortal, and we each know that we are ourselves subject to illness and death. This is surely knowledge of our human limitations. But at the same time there is a powerful illusion to the

contrary, which is manifest, for example, in the universal tendency to assume "it can't (or anyway won't) happen to me." This illusion lies behind unsafe driving, such unhealthy practices as habitual smoking, and so on. Even the overweight two-pack-a-day smoker knows that he has health limits, that he is mortal and subject to cardiovascular disease. He knows it perhaps better than most people. Yet he is not wise in this matter. Why not? Because he does not know his limitations *in the way* that dissolves the illusion of invulnerability. The illusion lives its own vigorous life right alongside the constant awareness of and even worry about increasing probability of illness and even death. Our smoker will acquire wisdom, as distinct from mere knowledge of his limitations, when he sees the illusion of invulnerability for what it is, so that it releases its hold on his mind and behavior. In short, when his wishes, emotional direction and choices are *integrated* with his knowledge. So what is plausible in Taranto's definition depends on the unarticulated assumption that the knowledge of human limitations she refers to is also *seeing through the illusions* related to our limits.

Taranto's definition is clearly intended to represent wisdom as knowledge that keeps us from foolishly attempting to go beyond our limits. Her "knowledge of human limitations" is knowledge of where our limits are so that we do not foolishly try to go beyond them. She does not consider the other side of the same coin; namely knowledge of where we are not limited, knowledge which will keep us from stopping short of our possibilities. The point is that in the endeavor that Taranto envisages as wisdom's own, the endeavor to know where we must stop short, is also subject to illusion. Knowledge of when a customary or accepted limit is illusory, just the opposite of what Taranto has in mind, will also be wisdom when it is a case of seeing through the pessimist's illusion that "it can't be done." This again suggests that it is the seeing through illusions about human limits that counts as wisdom, and not knowing about them as distinct from seeing through illusion.

Robert J. Sternberg draws on empirical data to identify unique features that differentiate intelligence, creativity, and wisdom (Sternberg, 1990). The resulting characterizations of wisdom are predicted by our conception of wisdom as seeing through illusion.

One difference between intelligence, creativity, and wisdom concerns how knowledge is used. Sternberg asserts that intelligent people recall, analyze, and use knowledge effectively. Creative people push the limits of knowledge beyond what is currently known. Wise people probe "inside" knowledge to find its "deeper" meaning. They understand what they do and do not know, and the limits of what can be known.

One of the characteristics attributed to wisdom here (knowing what you do and do not know) was addressed in our discussion of Socrates. We argued that this kind of metacognition is wisdom only if it is also seeing through illusion. That seeing illusion is what Sternberg has in mind is indicated by his use of the metaphor "probes inside" knowledge, which implies an illusory, relatively

superficial “outside” to be seen through to a relatively hidden, real, “inside.” Sternberg states that, in addition to knowing what they *do* and *do not* know, wise persons will also know what *can* and *cannot* be known. Here again qualification is crucial. Suppose I know that Fermat’s last theorem cannot be known at this time because I have just read that in the encyclopedia of mathematics. If I use this to correctly answer a test question the next day, my mathematics instructor can say “He knows that Fermat cannot be known.” I have knowledge of what cannot be known, but it is not wisdom. When we think of knowledge of what cannot be known *as an instance of wisdom*, we are imagining our common human weakness for overestimating the reach of our knowledge. If I merely *avoid* this illusion (e.g., I do not read the relevant literature or attend mathematics lectures, and so avoid the folly of a recent mistaken trend of thinking that chaos theory will reveal Fermat’s proof), I will do the wise thing (continue believing it can’t be proven), but not *from wisdom*. To count as wisdom, my knowing that a given thing cannot be known must be based on seeing through an illusion that that thing can be known.

A second set of distinguishing differences for Sternberg concerns how information is processed. An intelligent person uses automatic thought processes to deal efficiently with routine or familiar tasks. A creative person “eschews” automatization, finding it uninteresting and preferring to deal with what is novel and nonroutine. A wise individual “. . . resists automatization of thought but seeks to understand it in others.” Our definition predicts this, because “automatic thinking” so easily becomes a kind of illusion; namely the illusion of seeing things as wholly predictable on the basis of the limited ideas I happen to embrace now.

Thirdly, intelligence, creativity, and wisdom differ in terms of intellectual style. Using the metaphor of the structure of government, Sternberg proposes that intelligent people are like executives; they apply rules and engage in problem solving. Creative people are like legislators; they decide what to do and make up new ways of doing things. Wise people are like judges; they are evaluative, though not rigidly judgmental. In comparison, seeing through illusion is inherently a judgment about how things really are. Our judgment that there are the same number of pennies and buttons, and that “takes up more space” is not relevant to “more buttons or more pennies,” is not tentative or hypothetical, but rather categorically settled. So was Socrates’ rejection of his earlier confidence in technological knowledge as a basis of insight into life problems. Seeing through an illusion includes making a judgment that puts matters to rest. This does not mean that the judgment is rigid, in the sense of being beyond reversal or qualification in the light of further experience. What it does mean is that one has no need to seek such further experience and no justification for doing so. To continue actively trying to falsify the belief would be to reject the claim to have formed it on the basis of seeing through illusion. So if wisdom is seeing through illusion, then we would expect it to have the quality of finalizing judgment suggested by Sternberg’s “judicial” metaphor.

Fourth, for Sternberg wisdom does not reject or seek to eliminate ambiguity, but has a distinctive tolerance for it. We can better see what this means by imagining its opposite. Imagine someone who does not, or does not sufficiently, recognize the inevitability of uncertainty and doubt in basic life issues. Such a person then supposes that there is a certain answer to such questions as how much discipline children need, whether it is more important to invest in the future or to seize the pleasure of the moment, whether candidate A is better for the country than candidate B, and so on. But this is precisely being caught up in an illusion. One who thinks there is more certainty than there is in such matters is not lacking in information about life, but in perspective. His need is not for more information of the same type he already has but for a perspective shift dispelling the illusion that certainty is achievable where it is not.

Fifth, intelligent, creative and wise people differ in motivation. The intelligent person is motivated to know and understand more and more things. He or she wants to see things differently from how they are viewed by others. A wise person is motivated to understand things "deeply," to get at the "underlying" meaning of things. From what has been said above, it will be obvious enough how we would argue that the metaphors of "deep" and "underlying" objects of understanding presume the concept of seeing through an illusory surface.

Vivian Clayton and James Birren (1980) revealed an unexpected anomaly that is useful for testing our definition. It is that while younger and middle-aged people strongly associate wisdom with old age, this association is far weaker among older individuals:

... older individuals ... did not judge themselves as possessing more or less wisdom than did the middle-aged or younger individuals, though the two younger groups attributed wisdom to the older persons (p. 130).

Our explication of wisdom explains this outcome. We have argued above that if wisdom is seeing through illusion, then we would expect *self ascription* of wisdom to be avoided because it has a self-undermining logic. One would then expect older people to shrink from claiming or implying any special connection between wisdom and persons their own age.

Another finding in Clayton and Birren's study is the association of wisdom with the trait "understanding" in the sense of "empathy." This trait is also predicted by our definition, because, according to it, wisdom with respect to a given illusion includes empathy with those who continue to suffer from it through personal, "inside" awareness of what the illusion is like.

Paul Baltes and Jacqui Smith (1990) characterize wisdom conceived as a body of knowledge, rather than wisdom as a characteristic of individuals. Our definition predicts the main features of their work.

Baltes and Smith specify the "domain" of wisdom as the "fundamental pragmatics of life." This means that it is "knowledge about the conduct of life and

the human condition," and about "important matters of life, their interpretation and management" (1990). Characterizing the domain further, they indicate that its knowledge is conveyed roughly by such folk proverbs as "appearances are deceptive," "look before you leap," and the Chinese "it takes a long journey to find out which horse is strongest." This is a domain predicted by our definition. For, as we have seen, sayings such as these aim at dispelling what we have called "illusions." Baltes' and Smith's frequent references to "the human condition," "fundamental problems of life" and their characterization of wisdom as "exceptional insight into life matters and good judgment and advice about difficult life problems," also suggest problems caused by our universal human tendency to illusion. Shifting momentarily from knowledge system to wise person, they suggest that the "expert" in life problems (i.e., the wise person) has knowledge "beyond that which is already part of the standardized body of knowledge." This characterization is predicted by our definition, because our definition requires the wise person to "go beyond" standardized content of any given knowledge system in the specific sense of seeing through illusions inherent in the issues of that knowledge system. In this way our definition gives concrete meaning to "going beyond" conventional knowledge, an idea that is notably abstract in Baltes' and Smith's account.

Baltes and Smith identify five characteristics we should expect to find in any "wisdom-related" body of knowledge. The first two are a rich factual knowledge and a rich procedural knowledge of the material within that body of knowledge. Because there are characteristics of a knowledge "system" they are not stipulated as necessary conditions for all individual instances of wisdom. The point is rather to express a general expectation that most wise persons will have and draw on rich knowledge of the human situation. Our definition predicts this expectation, given the reasonable assumption that the capacity to see through the illusions of life tends to increase as a function of experience.

Baltes and Smith's third characteristic of "wisdom-related" bodies of knowledge is "life span contextualism"; that is, "an understanding that life development and life events are embedded in multiple life span contexts . . . involving thematic . . . and temporal relationships." It includes . . . "the understanding that life span contexts are not always coordinated but can involve tension and conflict" (Baltes & Smith, 1990). Going further, they write:

Taken as a whole, an understanding of life span contextualism involves knowledge about ontogenetic and historical changes in the coordination, relative salience, and priority of life themes and their implications for the specification of the ends and means of life. For example, how does one balance career priorities with family and leisure priorities (pp. 102-103)?

If we take the concrete example to reveal what is meant by the quite abstract description that precedes it, then clearly our definition predicts that wisdom

would be "life span contextualistic." For what is the *problem* of "balancing" conflicting priorities, conceived as "an important (fundamental) life problem" except the problem made for us by the seductive way some values recommend themselves to us as deserving a bigger place in our lives than they really do? It is the problem of seeing through such illusions as believing that career success, or money, for example, can deliver the satisfaction in life they often falsely promise.

The fourth characteristic Baltes and Smith (1990) attribute to a wisdom-related knowledge system is relativism. The wise person will, in general, show "an appropriate sensitivity to differences in individual and cultural goals, values and priorities," and will ". . . show sufficient value flexibility when interpreting life histories and life decisions of others . . ." (p. 102). Consider what mistake, on this account, the wise person avoids. She will avoid, for example, giving advice (concerning a *difficult life problem* or *difficult problem of human condition*) from (say) a Christian perspective, when what the advised person and/or society needs is advice from (say) a Hindu, or Buddhist, atheist, or some such alternative perspective. This kind of mistake implies an illusory narrowness of outlook, an illusory assumption that one's own life perspective is universal, or at least more far reaching than it really is. Further, Baltes and Smith do not contemplate an absolute relativism; the wise person shows "sufficient" value flexibility ". . . despite a core set of possibly 'invariant' human values." The wisdom-related system of knowledge, then, will feature a line where relative values end and invariant values begin. In general, wise individuals will know when it is right to relativize a judgment to some particularistic context and when not. Now in the context of one confronting difficult life problems, such knowledge is always a matter of seeing through the appearances of what seems to be absolute (or relative) but is not so, to the real nature of the situation as relative (or absolute). A woman struggling with the life problem of whether to have an abortion might be struggling precisely with the simultaneous appearance of an absolute right to life *versus* relativizing that right to other important values. Wisdom, if there is such a thing in this matter, would be seeing through the illusory appearance of right on whichever side it exists.

Baltes and Smith's fifth characteristic of wisdom-related knowledge is "insight into the uncertainties and doubts surrounding life matters," including both ". . . the recognition of uncertainty and . . . its management." How this is predicted by our definition will be evident from our discussion of a parallel point in the work of Baltes and Smith concerning tolerance for uncertainty.

The model of wisdom offered by Baltes and Smith is subtle and complex. We cannot relate our proposed definition to all its many aspects. But its ability to predict the important aspects of their model described above should add to the definition's *prima facie* credibility.

### IMPLICATIONS FOR EMPIRICAL RESEARCH

Defining wisdom as "seeing through illusion" has implications for empirical research. One is that it will be useful to take note of findings in empirical studies that would be predicted by our definition, because points of agreement between it and a given empirical study can add confirmation to both. Of special interest are anomalies of the kind revealed by Clayton and Birren's work (1980), with a view to determining if those anomalies would be expected on the premise that wisdom is seeing through illusion. The presence of such an anomaly in an empirical study becomes a strength rather than a liability if it is explained by our definition. Also, empirical studies might be refined at points of explicit or implicit conflict with our definition. For example, in their definition, Birren and Fisher say that a wise person "resists overwhelming emotion" (1990, p. 332). As will be evident from our earlier discussion of seeing through illusion, we do not think that a wise person, in a moment of wise judgment, is *resisting* illusory emotion, but transcending it. Socrates is not *resisting* the temptation to overestimate the reach of technical knowledge. His wisdom in this matter includes his having gone beyond that temptation. If I am offered a syringe of heroin, accompanied by a promise of ecstatic pleasure, I may *do the wise thing* by forgoing it. But I do not forgo it *from wisdom* if all the while I am *resisting* a strong desire to "shoot-up." In this case, wisdom consists, according to our definition, of seeing through the folly of this act in such a way that it loses its appeal, as the thought ". . . more space, more buttons . . ." is not tempting to the adult who considers it. Such points of difference may indicate need for a change in our definition, but equally may call for refinement of empirical work.

Baltes and Smith have called for a program of research which will examine wisdom "on several levels of analysis" (1990, p. 88). We have tried to contribute to that effort by addressing wisdom on the level, neglected but unavoidable in any analysis, of a-priori definition.

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