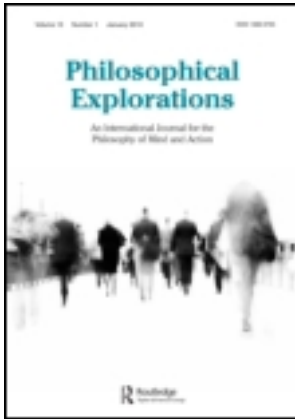


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Publisher: Routledge

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Philosophical Explorations

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rpex20>

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Available online: 26 Aug 2011

To cite this article: Valerie Tiberius & Jason Swartwood (2011): Wisdom revisited: a case study in normative theorizing, *Philosophical Explorations*, 14:3, 277-295

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13869795.2011.594961>

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Wisdom revisited: a case study in normative theorizing

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Extensive discussions of practical wisdom are relatively rare in the philosophical literature these days. This is strange given the theoretical and practical importance of wisdom and, indeed, the etymology of the word “philosophy”. In this paper, we remedy this inattention by proposing a methodology for developing a theory of wisdom and using this methodology to outline a viable theory. The methodology we favor is a version of wide reflective equilibrium. We begin with psychological research on folk intuitions about wisdom, which helps us to avoid problems caused by reliance on the possibly idiosyncratic intuitions of professional philosophers. The folk theory is then elaborated in light of theoretical desiderata and further empirical research on human cognitive capacities. The resulting view emphasizes policies that the wise person adopts in order to cope with the many obstacles to making good choices.

Keywords: practical wisdom; wide reflective equilibrium; normativity; Aristotle; intuitions; empirically informed ethics

1. Introduction

We philosophers can rarely resist telling undergraduates about the roots of our name: we are lovers of wisdom. And yet one rarely hears wisdom discussed by professional philosophers as a serious topic of intellectual inquiry outside of discussions of Aristotle.¹ The leading moral philosophy journal *Ethics* has not published an article on wisdom since 1949, and while a very important book of the last century does have the word “wise” in its title (and while it contains a lot of wisdom), it is not a book about wisdom.² What explains our neglect of the topic?

It certainly is not lack of importance. Practical wisdom (our focus in this paper) is the intellectual virtue that enables a person to deliberate well about how to live; it includes knowledge or understanding of what the right goals are in human life and the reasoning ability that allows the wise person to apply this knowledge to come to a good decision about what to do. It is central to virtue ethics and relevant to any discussion of how to live a good life. Furthermore, once we acknowledge the importance of practical wisdom (henceforth “wisdom”), we are faced with numerous questions: What kind of knowledge is involved in wisdom? Does the wise person apply principles or decide on a case-by-case basis? Does being wise

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†This paper began as part of a larger project under Tiberius’s direction, so she is listed as first author. However, the final product is the result of the authors’ equal mutual effort; hence, authorship is equal.

entail having the right motives? Does it entail having the other virtues? Clearly, wisdom is not ignored because there is nothing to say.³

Whatever the reason for philosophers' neglect of wisdom, there is a genuine puzzle about how to go about developing a theory of wisdom. The puzzle is how we can avoid two initially compelling, but ultimately misguided, methodological temptations.

The first temptation is to think that a good account of wisdom needs to be based upon a substantive moral theory. Having wisdom, the thought goes, includes having moral knowledge, so if we are going to give an account of wisdom we first need to identify the set of rules and principles that tell us how we should live. We might even go further and say that the possession of this propositional knowledge is not only necessary but sufficient for having wisdom: wisdom is the possession of a set of principles that can be applied in any situation to tell us what to do.

There are at least two reasons we should not give in to this first temptation. First, it is better to do without controversial premises if one can and it is unclear why we should assume that nothing substantial or important can be said about wisdom without presupposing a particular moral theory. Even if we ultimately want our moral theory to cohere with our theory of wisdom, we need not think saying something substantial about wisdom requires deciding beforehand whether, for example, Utilitarians or Kantians have got things right. Indeed, given that philosophers are unlikely to agree any time soon on which moral theory is the right one, it is fruitful to explore what can be said about wisdom despite the disagreement in normative ethics.

Second, the suggestion that having propositional knowledge is sufficient for being wise is problematic. Given the complexity of moral life and decisions, the wise person's understanding of what to do cannot be completely captured in any code of moral rules that deductively implies the right choice (McDowell 1979). Acknowledging that wise understanding is not codifiable in this way is the motivation behind the most prominent philosophical model of wisdom, the perceptual model. According to Hursthouse's helpful synopsis (2006, 285), "what we may call 'the perceptual model' takes the special knowledge the *phronimos* has to be (akin to) a perceptual capacity to see correctly what he is to do or what acting well is in a particular situation". According to this model, a complete explanation of wise decisions must make reference to a wise person's sensitivity to real reasons for action.

We agree with the Aristotelians that wisdom does not consist in the knowledge of principles that determine what to do in every situation. (We remain neutral on more ambitious claims about uncodifiability.) However, while the perceptual model does illuminate this important feature of wisdom, proponents of the model have not yet explained how it generates any practical guidance about how to make wise decisions. This may be due to an interest (at least on the part of McDowell 1979, 331) in using practical wisdom to illuminate the nature of right action, which leads to a focus on the wise person as a perfect judge of what to do. For this reason, we think it is fruitful to explore other ways to investigate wisdom that help us tackle problems beyond those addressed by the perceptual model.⁴

The second temptation when theorizing about wisdom is to start with the theorists' intuitions about wisdom. This is a standard approach to characterizing a virtue: one begins with paradigm cases of it and generalizes from there. But there are concerns about taking intuitions as the starting point for theorizing about normative concepts. Intuitions may be influenced by forces we would take to be distorting, if we could see them clearly (Sinnott-Armstrong 2008). Further, philosophers' intuitions in particular may be idiosyncratic or atypical, and this is a problem if we seek a normative account of wisdom that has broad appeal.

How, then, can we theorize well about wisdom without assuming a moral theory or relying on our own (possibly biased or parochial) intuitions? In this paper, we address this question by outlining a methodology for developing a good philosophical account of wisdom. We begin with the default methodology in normative theory: wide reflective equilibrium (WRE). WRE is a coherentist methodology that seeks to reach an equilibrium among our considered moral judgments (or intuitions) about cases, our moral principles, and background theories (Daniels 1979; Rawls 1951, 1971, 2001). As we will argue, there is good reason to use this method for constructing normative theories. In short, the reason is that the method is the best way to produce a rationally compelling account of wisdom. A theory of wisdom (like normative theories in general) ought to present an ideal that people would, after appropriate reflection, have reason to aspire to. For this reason, our methodology begins by examining psychological research on the folk theory of wisdom. Beginning with the folk theory of wisdom and subjecting it to rational scrutiny will make it clear why the resulting account of wisdom is one people in general have reason to endorse.

Our use of a coherentist methodology is bound to elicit some standard objections. One of the main complaints against coherentist methodologies such as WRE is that there are many possible coherent accounts and no objective way to judge which one is the best. A related complaint is that coherence methods may result in nothing but coherent falsehoods if the initial starting points are unreliable (see, e.g. Brandt 1979; Singer 2005). These are large problems and we cannot fully address them here. What we hope to do is to show by example that our version of WRE is a sound method for constructing an account of wisdom that satisfies the constraints any such normative theory ought to meet.

We therefore have two main goals in this paper: (1) to articulate the main components of a theory of wisdom and (2) to suggest a way of approaching the study of practical wisdom that does not presuppose the defense of a particular moral theory or utilize parochial intuitions. These two goals are inextricably related, since the plausibility of our methodology lends credence to the theory of wisdom that we develop through its use. The paper also has a larger, underlying aim: (3) to demonstrate one way in which psychological research can be incorporated into the construction of a normative theory. Our view, as we will show by example, is that such research can inform philosophical theorizing, though it cannot stand on its own if normative conclusions are to be reached.

We will begin in Section 2 with an overview of our methodology and the four criteria a good account of wisdom must meet. In Section 3 we use the methodology: through a critical survey of the literature on the folk theory of wisdom, we begin the philosophical work by extracting an initial account of wisdom with broad appeal. In Section 4, we explain the role of philosophy in developing this initial account of wisdom into a thoroughgoing theory. We highlight and develop some of the main components of the account in Section 5, and in Section 6 we consider some objections.

2. Overview of the methodology

Our argument begins with background theoretical constraints on what counts as a good theory of wisdom. We identify four such constraints, according to which a good theory of wisdom will be

- (1) *Rationally compelling*: the theory ought to describe an ideal of wisdom that people have (justifying) reason to aspire to.

- (2) *Empirically adequate*: the theory ought to make only plausible assumptions about human psychology and behavior. (For example, the theory should not prescribe types of reasoning that, as a matter of psychological fact, undermine a person's ability to make good decisions.)
- (3) *Action-guiding*: the theory should have enough substance to ground prescriptions that provide guidance for specific problems and situations.
- (4) *Neutral with respect to moral theories*: the theory should not presume the truth of a particular moral theory or theory of value; it should make as few contentious assumptions about values as possible.⁵

The first three constraints describe desirable features of a normative ideal of wisdom. According to the first, a good theory of wisdom is one that people have good reason to aspire to. We can understand this constraint in terms of what we would take ourselves to have reason to aspire to upon reflection. The second constraint can be seen as an implication of the first. We have reason to aspire to an ideal of wisdom only insofar as, after informed reflection on human psychological capacities and limitations, it is actually possible for people to achieve it to some degree or other. The third constraint notes that, if possible, a good account of wisdom will be one that we can use to regulate and guide our attempts to develop wisdom and make wise choices.

The fourth constraint is important because it gives the theory broader appeal without having to defend controversial assumptions and makes it compatible with a variety of moral outlooks. We take this constraint to be weaker than the first three, since we may ultimately want coherence between our moral theory and our theory of wisdom. Substantial progress towards this goal can be made, however, if we start by seeking a theory of wisdom that does not presuppose a particular moral theory.

If a good theory of wisdom is one that meets these constraints, what method should we use to get such a theory? Whatever method we use, we will want to avoid starting only with our own parochial intuitions about what wisdom is.⁶ This is for reasons already discussed in the introduction: there is no obvious reason to think that a theory constructed on the basis of philosophers' intuitions will be one that people in general will find rationally compelling.

For this reason, we begin developing our account of wisdom by examining psychological studies of people's ideas about what wisdom is and who has it.⁷ We examine this research on the folk theory and extract an initial account of wisdom. This extraction involves the philosophical work of isolating and clarifying the components of the folk theory. We then refine the folk theory by showing how the components of wisdom correspond to distinct goals and policies of wisdom, which comprise the ultimate theory. We conclude by assessing how well the resulting theory of wisdom satisfies the constraints we've set out in the current section. This begins the work of ensuring that the resulting theory of wisdom is one that we would reflectively endorse after considering alternative views about wisdom.

3. The folk theory of wisdom

In this section, we review the literature on implicit theories of wisdom in order to identify some important features of what we will call "the folk theory" and to arrive at an initial characterization of wisdom.⁸ Since few philosophers will be familiar with this research, we have opted for a reasonably detailed review.

Studies of implicit theories of wisdom tell us about the features of people's notions of wisdom. As Sternberg (a prominent figure in the psychological study of wisdom) puts it, "[i]mplicit theories are constructions by people (whether psychologists or laypersons) that reside in the minds of these individuals" (1985, 608; cf. Bluck and Glück 2005, 86). A test of an implicit theory is "whether it accurately and fully reflects the notions [of wisdom] people have in their heads, and the ways in which these notions are systematized" (Sternberg 1985, 625); we can determine this by studying people's "communications" regarding wisdom (1985, 608).⁹

Bluck and Glück identify three main ways that implicit theories are currently investigated, and these different types of studies can tell us different things about people's implicit theories. Studies of the first type, which Bluck and Glück call "*Descriptor-Rating Studies*" (2005, 91), tell us about the ways people understand the notion of wisdom in abstraction from applications to particular people. In these studies, people rate how "related" and "central" various characteristics are to wisdom and wise people in general. Studies of the second type could be called "Personal Experience Studies", since they involve asking people to identify persons from their own lives who are wise or to identify events that demonstrate their own wisdom. These studies tell us about how wisdom "is perceived spontaneously in people's lives" (102), since they describe the ways people use the notion of wisdom to describe their experiences of themselves and others. The third type, "Experimental Studies", involve experimental manipulations of the conditions in which attributions of wisdom are made. These studies tell us about "what causes a person's perception of someone as wise" (103), since they describe the differential causal factors that lead people to judge people or actions to be wise or unwise.

Given our interest in constructing a normative theory, we focus on the first two types of studies. Personal Experience and Descriptor-Rating Studies give us information about how people conceptualize wisdom. Experimental Studies, on the other hand, give us information about the *causes* of people's judgments about wisdom that may or may not be endorsed by the subjects as part of their own theory of wisdom. The Experimental Studies might reveal that the notion of wisdom that people think is guiding their actions is not the one that actually does. For instance, people might think that wisdom is not intrinsically linked to any particular gender, but in fact their judgments about who is wise seem to reveal otherwise (Bluck and Glück 2005, 98). The Descriptor-Rating and Personal Experience Studies tell us about what people consciously acknowledge to be wise, so they bear more directly on the question of what sort of wisdom people endorse as an ideal. Given the aim of constructing a *normative* theory of wisdom, these studies are more relevant for our purposes.

So what do the Descriptor-Rating and Personal Experience Studies reveal about the folk theory of wisdom? Our review of the literature reveals four key components: deep understanding, reflective capacities, problem-solving capacities, and motivations to live well and help others live well.¹⁰

Deep understanding is a well-documented component of wisdom.¹¹ According to the folk theory, the kind of understanding wise people have seems to be an understanding of the practical challenges and choices people face, the personal and moral values people have, the ways in which these values affect the choices they make, and the difficulties (whether emotional or intellectual) involved in making choices or solving problems. This includes, but is not limited to, knowledge of oneself (e.g. motivations, emotions, habits, skills, intellectual and physical limitations, and personal and moral values), knowledge of others (what they like and what they are like), general knowledge (often relevant to practical concerns and to understanding what makes life meaningful), and knowledge of the actual and possible differences in people's values and perspectives. Importantly, a person

with *deep understanding* knows what matters and can make appropriate distinctions and connections between the various things that matter in life.

Reflective capacities, we will say, are the capacities that help someone develop this deep understanding.¹² Wise people can assimilate information from a variety of sources, such as experience, reflection, and advice from other people.¹³ They are also “able to put old information, theories, and so forth, together in a new way” (Sternberg 1985, 616).¹⁴ Further, a wise person’s understanding of the nature of life challenges and choices includes an ability to connect abstract characterizations of these problems to particular cases (Bluck and Glück 2004, 564–6; Sternberg 1985, 616). So a wise person has reflective capacities that help her come to a comprehensive, thoughtful and accurate understanding of the nature of life’s challenges and choices.

Importantly, the studies reveal that wise reflective capacities and deep understanding are understood to be dynamic rather than static: a wise person is never finished developing her understanding of how things are and what matters. This fact about wisdom makes sense of an apparent tension between the different studies’ results. Some studies reveal that people think wise people can stand by their values and goals (Glück et al. 2005, 200) while other studies reveal that wise people are able to decide how to re-evaluate and change their values as needed over time (Montgomery et al. 2002, 153). We think the tension here resolves when we acknowledge that the notion of understanding given by the folk theory is dynamic. A wise person is one who guides her actions by her values but also refines and re-assesses her values as needed. Indeed, most studies emphasize that wise people can take the long-term view of the relationship between their actions, values and priorities, can be self-critical and admit mistakes, and are open to new information that may lead them to change their values.¹⁵ Here is one place where the folk theory departs from the perceptual model insofar as the perceptual model understands wisdom as the ideal or perfect capacity to discern reasons.

Problem-solving capacities are also an important component of the ordinary notion of wisdom. Wise people are good at putting their deep understanding to use: they have the ability to apply their deep understanding to their own lives and to the lives of others in order to solve problems.¹⁶ Wise people can use their understanding of the general nature of these life choices and their solutions to benefit particular individuals. They are also able to judge what legitimate personal and moral values are at stake and to make choices that live up to this set of values.¹⁷ The capacities involved in a successful application of one’s deep understanding are problem-solving skills, then, since they are skills that enable a person to produce good outcomes in response to her own and others’ goals, options, and challenges.

Although reflective capacities and problem-solving capacities might seem primarily to involve feats of reasoning, they both have affective and experiential dimensions. Reflective capacities are partly affective, since reflecting on what matters, according to any plausible understanding of the nature of value, will require being emotionally attuned. Problem-solving capacities also have an affective dimension, since applying the right strategies and solutions to one’s own life challenges and choices requires that a wise person be able to manage her own and others’ emotions. In order to help others apply these strategies, a wise person needs to have certain social skills, like the ability to understand and respond appropriately to others’ emotions and concerns (see Glück et al. 2005, 200). In addition to this affective dimension, reflective and problem-solving capacities have an experiential dimension. Studies consistently reveal that people think life experiences play an important role in the development of wisdom (Bluck and Glück 2005, 96). In particular, studies seem to indicate that wise people are those who have gained understanding from their

experiences and have learned how to apply this understanding to their own and others' lives in a successful way.¹⁸

Finally, the *motivation to choose well and to help others choose well* is one of the components of the folk theory of wisdom. The concern to make good choices for oneself is implied by the other components of wisdom because wise people *use* their capacities and act wisely. As we have noted, Bluck and Glück's meta-analysis suggests that self-determination and assertion are an important part of the folk theory of wisdom. Wise people are motivated to navigate life's choices by applying their reflective and problem-solving skills. The motivation to help others choose well is implied by the fact that a wise person provides guidance to others and has concern for others. A wise person is kind (Jason et al. 2001, 593) and "[d]isplays concern for others" (Sternberg 1985, 616). Further, a wise person's concern for others takes the form of a concern to help them make good decisions and solve problems well. According to one study, wise people want to provide compassionate guidance to others and people are identified as wise when they help others decide whether they are living according to the right values and principles (Montgomery et al. 2002, 153).

We have so far argued that the folk theory of wisdom includes four key components: deep understanding, reflective capacities, problem-solving capacities, and the motivation to choose well and help others choose well. This is the characterization of wisdom with which we shall begin:

Wisdom is the will and the ability to make good choices and help guide others to do so in virtue of a deep understanding of complex human problems that one has arrived at through reflection and experience.

One thing to notice about this characterization of wisdom is that it is wisdom in a particular context, namely, the context of solving "life problems". One might speak about wisdom in other specific contexts; for example, there might be wise consumers, wise doctors, or wise political leaders. We think that wisdom in the context of solving life problems is the right focus, because it is something everyone needs and, as studies reveal, it is an important part of people's ordinary notion of wisdom. But it is worth noting as we develop the account that wisdom in other contexts may have different elements.

For our purposes, the importance of taking our starting point from the folk theory is that this strategy makes wisdom an ideal that people already have. But there are some concerns about this claim. First, one might object that the psychological research we have discussed does not demonstrate that each and every person takes the above characterization to be an ideal. There are, after all, individual differences among respondents and, further, not much has been done to show that this notion of wisdom has cross-cultural appeal. This is a worry we think can be answered, though we can give a better answer to it in Section 6 when we have more of the theory of wisdom on the table. For now, suffice it to say that there is reason to be optimistic that the theory will have broad, though not universal appeal, which we take to be the best we can hope for. Second, one might worry that "wisdom" is a strange concept for people and that their responses to questions about it on psychologists' surveys are therefore not reliable.¹⁹ Our response here is that given the congruity in the responses of the hundreds of people who participated in the implicit theories studies, it does seem that people are homing in on *some* ideal of character that has to do with making choices in the face of complex human problems. Whether people most naturally use the word "wisdom" to describe this ideal is not really important for our purposes.

4. Developing the folk theory of wisdom

The folk theory and the characterization of wisdom we have drawn from it give us our starting point. The folk theory's emphasis on deep understanding fits well with the perceptual model of wisdom, but the folk theory also draws our attention to features that have been overlooked. Reflectiveness and helpfulness, in particular, are components of the folk theory that are not emphasized by the perceptual model. Of course, the fact that something is part of the folk theory of wisdom does not mean it is part of the best philosophical theory. Indeed, the constraints on a good theory of wisdom, listed above, show why we should not just rest with the unadulterated folk theory.

First, the components of the ordinary notion of wisdom may need further elaboration before they have action-guiding implications. For example, it is unclear what counts as deep understanding and what someone should do to develop her reflective capacities or problem-solving skills. Second, the folk theory may contain components that are unachievable or impossible to pursue together. For example, the kind of deep understanding and knowledge that wisdom entails according to implicit theories might not be achievable for ordinary human beings, or it could turn out that being a good reasoner is not compatible with making good decisions about complex matters.²⁰ Here, the richness of the folk theory is indeed one of the reasons we need further analysis.²¹ These two problems are related. Just how "reflective capacities", "reasoning", or "deep understanding" are understood in practice will, in part, determine whether they constitute achievable goals. Finally, the folk theory needs to cohere well with relevant philosophical background theories if it is going to survive reflective scrutiny. The folk theory is only worth aspiring to if it, for example, fits well with our best accounts of the good life. Our constraints on a good theory of wisdom, then, prevent us from resting content with the folk theory.

In the next section, we begin the work of developing the folk theory of wisdom. To do so, we employ two strategies. First, we pay attention to background psychological theories of human capacities in order to ensure that our theory does not rest on false empirical assumptions. Second, we shift the emphasis from talk of the features of the folk theory to a discussion of the goals and policies that are part of wisdom. This is important because it provides precision and makes the normative structure of the resulting account of wisdom explicit. Wisdom is a normative ideal, which we take to imply that it can be fruitfully construed as a network of rational objectives and the various means used to meet these objectives. Making this structure explicit helps reveal why a wise person would have good reasons to conduct her/his life in certain ways. In turn, this will help us to make sure that our account of wisdom provides a justified and attainable ideal.

We will refer to a wise person's *goals* as the general objectives that wise people intentionally work towards and use as reasons in guiding and evaluating themselves and their actions. *Policies* are general plans of action designed to accomplish goals; they guide action over the long term and recommend particular, context-sensitive strategies.

In suggesting that the folk theory needs to be elaborated in this way, we are invoking a distinction between a definition of wisdom and a *theory* of wisdom. Just as for Rawls (1971) the theory of justice starts with an abstract characterization of justice that becomes less and less abstract as the theory develops, so too for wisdom. Of course, as the theory becomes thicker and less abstract, its recommendations may also become more context dependent. We think it is a good thing for a theory of wisdom to incorporate context-specific guidance, in part because the folk notion seems to include a good dose of specificity. In addition, adding specific, context-sensitive detail strengthens the coherence justification of the theory by making it more likely that points of connection will be found within the

theory and with other relevant theories. So developing a theory of wisdom is different from the task of providing an abstract definition of wisdom. (If someone were to suggest that, in effect, our theory of wisdom includes its *application*, we would take this as a friendly interpretation of our project.)

5. Policies of wisdom

As we begin to construct a philosophical theory of wisdom that includes the four components of the folk theory, we run into some problems. The goals inherent in wisdom are fairly straightforward: a wise person aims to make good choices, to help others make good choices, and to develop and maintain the understanding, abilities and motivations associated with wisdom. But the means to achieving these goals are not so simple to specify, since there are many difficult obstacles to good decision-making.

First and foremost, we are limited and the subject matter is vast. In particular, our powers of reasoning are often inadequate to the task of thinking through problems with many variables in a finite period of time (Lehrer 2009). Second, we are subject to biases that affect our ability to make good decisions for ourselves and others. Biases, such as availability bias and confirmation bias, are one sort of impediment to good decisions (Tversky and Kahneman 1974). These biases, in various ways, affect our understanding and our ability to apply it in context. Availability bias (roughly, the tendency to estimate the probability of an outcome based on the evidence that is salient in the moment) can lead us to make decisions that are not well-informed, because what is most salient at the moment might not be representative. Confirmation bias (the tendency to seek evidence that confirms what we already think and to ignore contravening evidence) can lead us to think we understand how things are when we do not. Egocentric bias in perspective-taking is another harmful bias. Studies (and real life experience) have shown that when we try to put ourselves in other people's shoes we assume that their shoes feel very much like our own (Epley and Caruso 2009). We are not good at imagining how things are from another person's point of view and this often has a detrimental effect on our ability to help others decide well.

These limitations complicate thinking of deep understanding and reflectiveness as components of wisdom. Deep understanding cannot be the same thing as knowledge, because there is just too much to know. Reflectiveness cannot be defined in terms of a habit of reflecting carefully on one's reasons, because explicit reflection is inadequate to the tasks of uncovering biases and computing multiple variables in a short period of time. How should a theory of wisdom accommodate this information? We suggest thinking of wisdom in terms of long-term policies that a wise person adopts in order to manage these limitations. In this section, we articulate three broad policies that are the most crucial for wisdom in the context of solving life problems, given what people are like: a policy of justification, and policies of cultivating open-mindedness and humility. These policies do not constitute an exhaustive account of the policies of wisdom, but they are central components.

A crucial policy for achieving deep understanding is what we will call a *policy of justification*: the wise person seeks to develop explanations of what matters for whom and why, and this helps her/him make good judgments about how people should deal with life's challenges and problems.

Whether she/he is choosing for her/himself or advising another person, a wise person needs the capacity to judge what is at stake and what is at stake from the perspective of the relevant parties. She/he also needs to be able to distinguish values worth promoting (whether hers/his or someone else's) from mere pseudo-values. Further, she/he needs to be able to prioritize the values at stake and to apply these values to the problem at hand.

The relevant policy for making and applying such judgments is a policy of justification that guides us to construct an explanatory framework or story that provides a basis for making distinctions among values. We construct such stories by reflecting on what matters and how these values fit together to comprise a good life for ourselves and for others. A good justificatory story need not be highly intellectual or detailed; it provides reasons for judgments about values and has enough structure to give guidance, but it must also have a flexible enough structure to allow accommodating new information.²² (Justificatory stories can have different shapes and still play the role needed by wisdom. Because we want to avoid making substantive assumptions about values, we do not intend to defend any particular story.)

In our view, then, the kind of reflection that a wise person engages in is reflection about what matters to whom and why. This reflection is partly normative, but it also requires thinking about the facts – what people are like, how they differ from each other, and how the various circumstances in which people find themselves bear on normative questions. This is not reflection that should be engaged in all the time, nor does it involve processing multiple variables quickly. Some research on decision-making suggests that reflecting on the reasons for a choice right before making it tends to lead to decreased satisfaction with that choice later (e.g. Wilson, Hodges, and LaFleur 1984).²³ This research contributes to the case for thinking that reflection on what matters should be done in a calm, cool moment when one has the liberty to think things through. The results of this reflection provide a background against which more automatic decisions can be made.²⁴

Before moving on to describe the other two policies of wisdom, we need to address some potential objections to our claim that wisdom involves a policy of justification. The first objection concerns the fact that the policy of justification focuses on the process by which the wise person gains deep understanding. One might think that the focus on process is misguided and that we would be better off identifying the content of the knowledge that wise people have. This approach would be impractical, however.²⁵ While coming up with a list of things the wise person knows would allow us to put meat on the bones of a vague idea, it is not helpful in making “deep understanding” action-guiding. Consider an analogy to programming a robot to navigate through normal, crowded spaces. Apparently, the wrong way to go about doing this is to try to give the robot propositional knowledge about the spaces it has to navigate. There are simply too many facts and variables to know. Moreover, giving the robot a list of facts about the kitchen, for example, does not help it when it moves to the living room. The problem for wisdom is similar: there are simply too many facts to know and too many possible future changes of circumstance to make it plausible to think of a wise person’s deep understanding in terms of knowledge of facts. When it comes to evaluative understanding there is a further problem with thinking of wisdom in terms of knowledge, which we discussed above: this way of going would require us to make substantive and possibly contentious assumptions about the good. So two of the constraints on a good theory of wisdom (action-guidingness and neutrality with respect to moral theories) lend support to a process-oriented account of the deep understanding involved in wisdom.

For this reason, we suggest thinking about the kind of deep understanding that is necessary for practical wisdom by analogy to the kind of understanding that is often thought to belong to theoretical wisdom: namely, as an ability to give a justificatory explanation of what one believes and to fit new evidence into this framework as it arrives.²⁶

The second objection to the justificatory policy is that it is too intellectual. We anticipate little resistance to the idea that a wise person needs to be able to make various discriminations among values, but some might reject the idea that this requires any explanatory

ability or justificatory narrative. Wise people *feel* or *intuit* their way to good decisions, one might think;²⁷ making wise choices does not require explanation, justification and reasons. Indeed there does seem to be a tension in our tendencies to admire: sometimes we favor what has been called “peasant virtue” and sometimes we admire more the person who understands the reasons for what she/he does.²⁸

We have no position on this issue with respect to virtue in general, but we are taking a more intellectualist stance about wisdom for three reasons. First, we think the criterion of action-guidingness favors our view. If wisdom consists in a natural ability to distinguish good from bad by feeling or intuition, without engaging in any reasoning, then it is quite unclear how it could be developed or taught. A policy of thinking about what matters and constructing an explanation for the differences among values gives a person who wants to become wise something at which to aim, which will help her to decide when her feelings conflict. Now it might be suggested that a *perfectly* wise person (if there could be such a thing) never has conflicting feelings; she/he always sees the relevant distinctions correctly and has no need for explanations and justifications. But, as we have said before, we think that wisdom should be conceived of in a way that allows it to be developed by people who will never be perfectly wise, which, after all, is just about all of us.²⁹

The second reason for our stance is that the justificatory policy helps a wise person give good advice. Advice that is given without any justification is unlikely to help people make good decisions, particularly when the advisee does not already agree with the advisor and needs to be persuaded. Without justification, advisees would have no way to know that the wise person is making the right discriminations. Third, the folk theory of wisdom does take the kind of thoughtfulness and reflection that are captured by the policy of justification to be an integral part of wisdom; given our methodology, we would prefer to save this component if possible.³⁰

A policy of justification, then, is an important part of wisdom. Nevertheless, it is not the only important policy. For one thing, a wise person has to overcome biases that affect judgment and we may be subject to these biases even in a cool reflective moment. What is worse, we tend to be unaware of both when and how we are subject to biases that may hinder good decision-making. It is not hard to see how reducing bias would help someone meet the goals of wisdom: it would help them make decisions based upon knowledge and appropriate understanding rather than prejudice and distorted evidence,³¹ and it would help them give advice not colored by an egocentric tendency to assume falsely that other people’s situations are like their own. Though the best established result about overcoming bias in the psychological literature is negative (counting on one’s power of conscious correction does not work), psychologists have begun to discover some good ways of overcoming bias (see Lilienfeld, Ammirati, and Landfield 2009 for a review). For example, employing meta-cognitive rules such as “consider the opposite” has been shown to work to overcome confirmation bias (Lord, Lepper, and Preston 1984).

We think the crucial policies for wisdom are policies of cultivating epistemic humility and open-mindedness, since these policies aim to help a person identify and reduce biases that affect good decision-making. Epistemic humility is a disposition not to make unwarranted inferences based upon an exaggerated estimation of one’s own intellectual powers (Roberts and Wood 2007). In order to think we ought to do something to overcome our biases, we need to have a certain amount of humility about our capacities to take evidence at face value and see clearly how things are for other people. (Notice that our emphasis on humility echoes the Socratic ideal of wisdom as knowing what you do not know.) Once we admit the possibility of weakness, we also need to have an open mind to other sources of evidence about how things might actually be. We can think of open-mindedness as the

disposition “to take seriously the views of others, especially when those views are in conflict with one’s own” (Riggs 2010, 177). Foolish decisions that result, for example, from a failure to consider the evidence beyond what one happens to remember at the moment or what is easy to believe, could be prevented by humility and open-mindedness. Similarly, bad advice is often the result of an unwillingness to admit that you do not really understand another person’s situation well enough to give advice. Trying to maintain an open mind to how things might look different from another person’s perspective will help us to give advice that is better in tune with the real situation of the beneficiary of our advice.³²

Open-mindedness is sometimes defined so as to include humility: an open-minded person must be willing to admit that she/he could be wrong (Riggs 2010). These two virtues hang together. In order to see the value in having an open mind we have to have humility about what we know, and in order to develop humility we have to be open to considering new perspectives and new information. We think it is worth distinguishing the two since one emphasizes a person’s attitudes toward her/his own cognitive capacities and the other focuses on attitudes toward external sources of information. But this distinction is only of minor importance. The important point for our purposes is that a wise person would have a policy of cultivating and maintaining both. Notice that the meta-cognitive strategies psychologists have discovered to be effective in overcoming biases can be useful strategies as part of a general policy of developing humility and open-mindedness. It might work this way: a person committed to developing wisdom has a vague sense that her judgment is subject to biases, which inclines her to use the “consider the alternative rule”, which in turn makes her more aware of her cognitive shortcomings and deepens her commitment to epistemic humility. The policy of justification also works in tandem with humility and open-mindedness. In the moments when we do reflect on what matters, we will be helped by humility about how much we really understand what things are like from another’s point of view and by openness to other people’s stories about what matters to them. Further, our commitment to humility and open-mindedness will be confirmed by reflection on their importance to making good decisions and being helpful to others.

We have argued in this section that the folk theory of wisdom, developed with attention to key theoretical constraints and to the obstacles to good choice, gives rise to an account of wisdom according to which a wise person aims to choose well for her/himself, to guide others in a helpful way, and to maintain the capacities of wisdom by adopting policies of open-mindedness, humility, and the reflective justification of values. This elaborates our working definition from Section 3, but the full theory goes beyond this schema to include characterizations of the relevant policies, how they work together, and how they might be achieved. We do not claim that our list of policies is exhaustive; there may be other elements of wisdom and further policies that a wise person would adopt. But we do claim that the policies we have identified are central and vital to wisdom, given well-known human liabilities.

Our argument has helped us address two concerns about reliance on the folk theory, which we mentioned in Section 4. First, our focus on policies ensures that the resulting account of wisdom is attainable and action-guiding. If deep understanding and insight required something approaching omniscience, wisdom would be unattainable, but in the view we are defending, omniscience is not required for wisdom. Second, by organizing the account around related goals and policies, we hope to have given some reason to think that wisdom is a coherent ideal the components of which can be pursued together. A final concern is that our ordinary understanding of wisdom, the folk theory, is not a reliable guide to what wisdom really is. We now turn to this worry.

6. Taking stock: wisdom and WRE

So far we have argued that a certain conception of wisdom follows from a philosophical elaboration of the folk theory. Some might worry that this is a barren accomplishment. Why should we think that the folk theory of wisdom is a reliable starting point for the process of developing a good theory of practical wisdom?³³ Why think that what people understand wisdom to be tells us anything about what wisdom actually is?

On one way of taking this objection it makes the meta-ethical assumption that there is a truth about wisdom that is independent of us, which intuitions may or may not reliably track. The notion of reliability as applied to our judgments about *normative* concepts can mislead, however; put this way the meta-ethical assumption of the objection is a mistake. We think that when it comes to an ideal such as wisdom, we are not looking for something “out there”, something independent of our concerns that our folk notion may or may not track. Rather, we are looking for an ideal that captures what we aspire to; we want an ideal that is to some extent already ours. This is just the point that a theory of wisdom is a normative theory: if it is normative, then it must provide reasons that are both motivating for us and that justify the recommended course of action. The most straightforward way to develop this sort of motivating and justifying ideal is to start with the notion of wisdom that people already care about. Indeed, it seems implausible to think that an account of wisdom could be normative in this way if it were entirely divorced from the ideals of conduct and choice we actually have.

There is another way to take the objection. One might agree that normative ideals have to have *some* connection to what people already care about, but still think that starting with folk intuitions is a mistake because folk intuitions may embody errors about what is actually good for us. If an ideal of character is really to be reason-giving, it cannot represent a false view about what traits are good for us to have. So, the real issue here is whether our methodology has sufficient critical resources for coping with this possibility. We think it has, though we cannot provide a full demonstration of that here (that would be a very large project).

As we noted earlier, our methodology is a version of wide (as opposed to narrow) reflective equilibrium. While a narrow version of our methodology would merely seek to make the folk’s intuitions about wisdom into a coherent (i.e. systematic and consistent) whole, our wide version seeks to make the folk theory not only internally coherent but coherent with our best empirical and philosophical background theories on related subjects. The wide scope of the equilibrium means that we have a mechanism for rejecting *any* intuition that is an unreliable guide. If there are reasons to think parts (or, perhaps, all) of the folk theory should be rejected, then our methodology takes these into account. We have already demonstrated how the folk theory could be refined so that it is consistent with empirical research on the biases and limitations of human reasoning. Further work would seek coherence between the resulting theory of wisdom and meta-ethical theories (e.g. theories that explain what makes normative ideals correct), normative ethical theories of well-being or flourishing,³⁴ and competing theories of wisdom. By subjecting the folk theory to critical scrutiny in this way, we make it more likely that faulty intuitions will be removed and that the resulting conception of wisdom does indeed represent an ideal of character.

The account of wisdom we provide in this paper is an attractive one, then, because it presents a rationally compelling and action-guiding ideal that is consistent with empirical and philosophical background theories. A fully comprehensive account of wisdom would require more work than we have done here; it would require elaboration of all the policies and strategies relevant to the goals of wisdom. But we hope to have provided

enough detail to show the promise both of our preliminary account of wisdom and of the methodology we have used to develop it. Indeed, we hope our preliminary account is sufficiently detailed to show that a broad range of people will have reason to aspire to wisdom as we have described it. This means that we can now dispense with a final worry that we broached earlier.

In Section 3, we considered the worry that the number of people for whom the account really does present a normative ideal might be small. We might wonder, for instance, if there will be numerous individuals or even entire cultures that do not share the components of the folk theory we have described. Such people would seem to have no reason to cultivate the sort of wisdom we have elaborated based upon that folk theory.

We have two general sorts of responses to this worry. The first response is concessive. It is certainly possible that a particular person's or culture's theory of wisdom could be so radically different from the folk theory we have discussed that they will have no reason to aspire to wisdom as we have defined it. We are not sure why this should be seen as a particular deficiency in our account, however, since it seems to be a problem that might plague any normative theory. Furthermore, it is difficult to see how a different methodology would produce a normative ideal that has broader appeal. So we concede that some people may not have reason to aspire to the sort of wisdom we have discussed, but we maintain that this result is not damning for our theory.

Our second response is less concessive. There is good reason to think that our theory would appeal even to people who do not endorse all the elements of the folk theory. This becomes clearer when we attend to the three main routes by which such a person could acquire a reason to aspire to wisdom in our sense. First, if a person's theory of wisdom contains *some* components of the folk theory but not others, our arguments could give them reasons to accept further goals, policies and strategies that they did not initially take to be part of wisdom. For instance, for someone who thinks wisdom involves being contemplative and being able to give good advice, but who does not think wise people need any ability to justify their advice or decisions, our arguments give reasons to think that a wise person does need to engage in some justification of her/his evaluative judgments. Second, someone who has a theory of wisdom that is so undeveloped that it only vaguely resembles the folk theory would have reason to adopt our account because of how it would help to clarify what matters in wisdom. Finally, someone could have a reason to reject her/his whole theory of wisdom in favor of our theory if the goals inherent in the former seem less desirable upon reflection, or if the account of wisdom we provide seems more likely to be conducive to living a good life. Since our account has the potential to appeal even to people who do not start out with the same folk theory, it promises to be a normative ideal with broad scope.

7. Conclusion

This paper began with the observation that philosophers have had very little to say about wisdom. The philosophical work that does exist is overwhelmingly in the Aristotelian tradition and takes interpretation of Aristotle as its starting point. One of the goals of this paper has been to show that there is another fruitful strategy for investigating the nature of wisdom. Our strategy has been to use WRE in a way that takes seriously the empirical studies of wisdom and decision-making.

Philosophers' inattention to the various ways empirical psychological results can (and should) inform normative theorizing has gotten them into trouble recently, for example, with those who argue that virtue ethics rests on a shaky empirical foundation (Doris

2005; Harman 1999). That said, normative theories are not empirical theories. The process of critical reflection on and refinement of our ideals that is characteristic of philosophical inquiry is crucial to the defense of reason-giving claims. A good normative theory, then, must be empirically informed *and* reflectively sound.

The methodology we describe recommends an interdisciplinary research program that would help to achieve theories like this. Any work on wisdom that follows our lead will have to be interdisciplinary at least insofar as one needs to be aware of both the philosophical and empirical theories that are likely to constrain how the folk theory is refined. For example, one next step in the project we have outlined would be to investigate empirically the kinds of policies that derive from our philosophical account in order to ascertain whether these policies are indeed practical and instrumentally valuable. Further philosophical work is needed too, for example, on the relationship between our theory of wisdom and the most defensible theory of well-being or flourishing. Our hope is that this kind of work, over the long term, will yield a comprehensive theory of wisdom that is both empirically sound and philosophically sensible. In the short term, we hope that our contribution will encourage philosophers to take wisdom seriously again.

Acknowledgements

For helpful discussion and comments, we would like to thank Mike Bishop, John Doris, Eddy Nahmias, MaryEllen VanDerHeyden, the students in Prof. Tiberius' graduate seminar on practical wisdom at the University of Minnesota (Fall semester 2010), and audiences at the University of Minnesota's Center for Bioethics, the 2009 Epistemic Virtues and Values Conference in Bled, Slovenia, the Minnesota Philosophical Society, the Moral Psychology Research Group, and the Philosophy Department at the University of South Carolina. For support of the research on this paper, we would like to thank the University of Chicago Defining Wisdom Project and the Templeton Foundation.

Notes

1. The existing literature on wisdom is dominated by those who take Aristotle's views of practical wisdom as their starting point (see, e.g. Broadie 1991; Hursthouse 2006; Kekes 1995; McDowell 1979, 1998; Stohr 2006). Much of this work is extremely valuable and our own theory has been influenced by it, but we do think it worth considering alternative approaches to studying wisdom.
2. The paper is a review of books that touch on wisdom, not all of which are written by philosophers (Wick 1949). The book in question is Gibbard's (1990) *Wise choices, apt feelings*.
3. Alternatively, philosophers may have the idea that we have broken wisdom down into its component parts, which are discussed and debated. When we talk about practical reasoning, moral principles, decision theory, intellectual virtues, and so on, we are talking about wisdom. If it is true that wisdom has been dissected in this way, it is conspicuous that no one has put the pieces back together.
4. Not all Aristotelians favor the perceptual model and some (Hursthouse in particular) are very concerned with the development of wisdom for imperfect beings. Our account is sympathetic with this interpretation of Aristotle, though we think it is worth exploring the prospects for a theory that does not take interpretation of Aristotle as its starting point.
5. For a defense of this kind of neutrality constraint in a related domain (good accounts of moral inquiry), see DePaul (1993, 170–2).
6. By intuitions we mean the considered judgments (of various levels of generality) about wisdom that a person makes prior to theorizing.
7. Interestingly, a relatively recent trend in African philosophy has been to inform professional philosophical inquiry by paying attention to the indigenous sages (see Masolo 2008).

8. Judith Glück, a leading psychologist in this field, agrees that “folk theory” would be a better term than “implicit theory” given the unwanted associations of “implicit theory” with unconscious processes (personal communication, June 25, 2009).
9. Explicit theories, on the other hand, are “constructions of psychologists and other scientists that are based on or at least tested on data collected from people performing tasks presumed to measure psychological functioning” (Sternberg 1985, 607; cf. Bluck and Glück 2005, 89). For examples of studies using explicit theories, see Baltes and Staudinger (2000), Staudinger, Smith, and Baltes (1994) and Mickler and Staudinger (2008). Psychologists sometimes like to say that implicit theories are the theories lay people hold, and explicit theories are the implicit theories of experts (see Ardelit 2005, xiii; Bluck and Glück 2005, 90).
10. Bluck and Glück identify seven components in their meta-analysis: cognitive ability, insight, reflective attitude, concern for others, real-world problem-solving skills, guidance, and self-determination/assertion (2005, 91–2, 95–6). We have simplified their list.
11. Nearly all studies list good or accurate judgment as part of wisdom (Bluck and Glück 2005, 95; Jason et al. 2001, 595; Montgomery, Barber, and McKee 2002, 145; Sternberg 1985, 616). Denney, Dew, and Kroupa (1995, 42, Table V) found that wisdom is associated with understanding “what things really matter”. Jason et al. (2001, 593) identifies a wise person as one who “[s]ees meaning and purpose in life”, which seems to be a kind of evaluative understanding (see also Notes 15 and 16).
12. The studies reveal the centrality of what we might call an ability to seek out and acknowledge the truth about important matters. For example, Sternberg (1985, 616) lists the ability to “offer solutions that are on the side of right and truth” as part of people’s implicit theories, and Jason et al. (2001, 593) lists “[a]ppreciation for things as they are, without embellishment” as part of implicit theories. Bluck and Glück (2004) found that wisdom was associated with an ability to engage in “reflective meaning making about the self and the world” (566) and to learn things about “philosophy of life” (568).
13. Sternberg (1985, 616) finds several relevant abilities in implicit theories: for example, “reasoning ability”, “[learning] from other people’s mistakes”, and “the ability to understand and interpret his or her environment”. Bluck and Glück (2004, 566–8) found that wisdom was associated with an ability to perform “autobiographical reasoning” based upon one’s experiences and memories over time.
14. Most of the studies emphasize that wise persons have gained their deep understanding through their own extensive thought and reflection (see, e.g. Clayton and Birren 1980, 117; Glück et al. 2005, 200; Montgomery, Barber, and McKee 2002, 144; Sternberg 1985, 616).
15. Sternberg (1985, 616) found that people think a wise person is one who can make mistakes, learn from them, and move on and can “changes [his or her] mind on basis of experience” (see also Glück et al. 2005, 200). Studies also revealed that introspection and reflection provided a standard by which people judged how their life was going. Clayton and Birren (1980, 130) found that wisdom was associated with a “reflective component” involving introspection. Montgomery, Barber, and McKee 2002 (150) found that people thought that “the meaning of a wise choice, or wise moment, was revealed and recognized in the perspective of time”, that is, that a choice or a set of values was recognized as the right one after time and subsequent contemplation (see also 152–3). Bluck and Glück (2004, 567) found that wisdom was associated with the ability to develop a “story” or narrative of one’s life that guides future choices.
16. Bluck and Glück (2004, 565–7) found that wisdom is associated with the ability to connect what is important in particular events with general lessons about life. Montgomery, Barber, and McKee (2002, 145) lists knowledge about “how to conduct one’s affairs” as an aspect of wisdom, and this includes the ability to utilize both “formal learning” and “practical life savvy”; experience also helped them apply this knowledge well (146–7).
17. Glück et al. performed studies that reveal people typically associate wisdom with “life decisions”, “reactions to negative events”, and “life management” (2005, 202). Several studies reveal that wise persons excel in their ability to deal with personal and moral problems and that they have well-developed personal and moral values (e.g. Denney, Dew, and Kroupa et al. 1995, 44; Montgomery, Barber, and McKee 2002, 146–50).
18. For example, Montgomery, Barber, and McKee explained experience’s role in the folk theory in this way: “Knowledge becomes more helpful in showing the way in a broader array of more ambiguous life issues when it is enhanced by experience” (2002, 146). Compare the role of experience Sternberg found in the folk theory: a wise person “has age, maturity, or long

experience”, “[l]earns and remembers and gains information from past mistakes or successes”, and “[c]hanges [her] mind on [the] basis of experience” (1985, 616). These findings are generally representative of the studies we have cited.

19. We thank John Doris for pointing out this concern.
20. This may turn out to be the case if reasoning is thought of as a capacity to weigh pros and cons, and if good decisions are not produced by thinking in this way (cf. Wilson 2002; Wilson and Dunn 1986, 2004; Wilson, Hodges, and LaFleur 1984; Wilson and Kraft 1993; Wilson, Kraft, and Dunn 1989; Wilson et al. 1993).
21. Compare Graham and Horgan (1998) who argue that this is one of the things philosophical analysis can contribute to what they take to be the empirical project of understanding our concepts.
22. For a more detailed account, see Tiberius (2008). This justificatory story is not what Broadie (1991) calls a “Grand End,” which is a detailed plan that provides the major premise of practical syllogisms. Broadie persuasively argues against the Grand End picture of wisdom as an interpretation of Aristotle and as a view about wisdom. Also, compare Hursthouse (2006, 305) on what she calls the “ethical aspect” of practical wisdom, which requires that we “reflect on our life as a whole and how our competing and perhaps incommensurable concerns can be encompassed within the realization of the ideal life of virtuous activity at which we are aiming”.
23. See also Footnote 20. See Tiberius (2009) for an analysis of this literature.
24. For an empirical argument that prior conscious reasoning partially determines which intuitions emerge and which automatic processes are engaged, see Pizarro and Bloom (2003).
25. Hursthouse (2006) agrees that this would be a mistaken approach, though for some different reasons.
26. See Roberts and Wood (2007, 42–50) for a discussion. See also Zagzebski (1996) for an attempt to define knowledge in terms of the exercise of intellectual virtues like humility and open-mindedness.
27. Consider Tolstoy’s Levin in *Anna Karenina*: “When Levin thought about what he was and what he was living for he found no answer and fell into despair; but when he stopped asking himself about it he seemed to know both what he was and what he was living for, since he acted and lived firmly and definitely” (1981, 838).
28. We thank Tim Chappell, Sandy Goldberg and John Doris for helpful discussion of this point.
29. Hursthouse (2006, 288) makes a similar criticism of the perceptual model of wisdom advocated by McDowell (1979).
30. The fact that the folk theory includes this component makes us think that the aforementioned tension is less evident in the case of wisdom. Consider that while we do talk about “the wisdom of children”, we do not tend to talk about *wise children*.
31. This is not to say that people are best off eliminating every shred of bias and distortion of the facts in their reasoning. For example, see Tiberius (2008) for a discussion of the advisability of positive self-illusions.
32. Of course epistemic humility and open-mindedness are not easy to put into practice responsibly. Feminist epistemologists have identified and discussed some of the most pernicious obstacles to seeing what things are like for others (see, e.g. Fricker 2007; Young 1997). In this paper, our intention is only to sketch a theory of wisdom that follows from our methodology. The fully developed theory would have to take account of these and other obstacles.
33. Psychologists who study wisdom have argued that a plausible account of wisdom will be informed by implicit theories, but these arguments have (understandably) not made it clear why implicit theories can be the basis for a *normative* account of wisdom (see, e.g. Bluck and Glück 2005: 90–1; Sternberg 1985).
34. We think it is not difficult to argue that our conception of wisdom would be found worthwhile according to the leading theories of well-being (informed desire satisfaction theory, life satisfaction theory, and eudaimonism). To make the argument here, however, would take too much space.

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