

## Constructivism and Wise Judgment

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### Abstract

In this paper I introduce a version of constructivism that relies on a theory of practical wisdom. *Wise judgment constructivism* is a type of constructivism because it takes correct judgments about what we have “all-in” reason to do to be the result of a process we can follow, where our interest in the results of this process stems from our practical concerns. To fully defend the theory would require a comprehensive account of wisdom, which is not available. Instead, I describe a constructivist methodology for defending an account of wisdom and outline its main features. This gives us enough to see what wise judgment constructivism would look like, why it might be an attractive theory, and how it different from other versions of constructivism.

### 1. Introduction

Should you brush your dog’s teeth? My dogs absolutely hate teeth-brushing, but not doing so means they have to undergo general anesthesia every couple of years to have them cleaned at the vet, which they also hate. How hard should you try to avoid eating eggs from caged chickens? Is it enough to buy free range eggs for home or should you also never eat another commercially baked cookie? Every member of a university department should do their share of service, but what exactly is your share? Must you accept nominations to important university committees in addition to your departmental service? Helping out family and friends is important too, but what if you are asked for financial help from a family member who has a history of gambling or drinking away his money? Or what if you are asked for your “honest opinion” about a friend’s disastrous new dating partner? Or asked to choose sides in a conflict between two friends, one of whom has deeply hurt the other but in a way that you cannot entirely blame her? What to do?

This question – “What to do?” or “What should I do?” – is a starting point in ethical theory. Kant thought it was *the* primary practical question. And for good reason: surveying the examples above, it does seem obvious that we confront this question on a regular basis. When we do – when we ask ourselves what we should do with family members who need help, or dogs who need teeth-brushing – we very quickly confront the need to know what is at stake or *what matters*. What matters to dogs: not being tortured by their own people or not having to spend a day at the vet? What matters to your friend: your honest opinion or your support? Is not contributing to the market for eggs worth refusing a piece of birthday cake at a friend’s party? Is meeting a family obligation worth the risk of enabling an unreliable relative? These are the kinds of questions we ask ourselves when we think about what we should do:

questions about what matters to us, what matters to those affected by our actions, and what matters more or less.

What I've just described are practical problems. There are many things that matter, more or less, and we are therefore subject to many competing demands. These various demands are often of different kinds (moral, prudential, and so on). When trying to decide what kind of professional service to do there are reasons of fairness, friendship, contractual obligation, and one's own mental health to be considered. When trying to decide what to eat, there can be considerations of animal welfare, environmental impact, physical health, and courtesy to the people who have prepared the food. We are often in situations in which we need to know what we should do all things considered. What ought we to do in the face of competing (and sometimes apparently incommensurable) demands? Or, in other words, what do we have the best all-in reason to do? Before we can answer this question in specific cases, we need to know what all-in reasons are, how to understand them in an illuminating way.

In this paper I explore an answer according to which good all-in reasons are the product of wise judgment. Lest this seem like an exercise in explaining the obscure in terms of the incomprehensible, let me explain that 'wise' here does not refer to a mysterious faculty of perception.<sup>1</sup> Rather, wise judgment is just judgment in accordance with the norms of excellent judgment, and though this does turn out to be complicated, I don't think it is obscure. As I will explain (in section 3), the theory we end up with is a kind of constructivism, which I will call wise judgment constructivism or WJC. An important feature of WJC is the acknowledgement that the norms of good judgment are multiple and cannot be reduced entirely to non-normative terms. I spend some time (in section 2) discussing what a good account of wisdom is for the purposes of playing a role in constructivism. I can't defend that theory here, but I do try to explain why doing so isn't at all hopeless. But first, in the next section, I'll say more to motivate this turn to wisdom in the first place.

## **1. Why Wisdom?**

Even in the brief descriptions of our opening examples one thing we can notice is the messiness or complexity of our questions about what to do. Is there anyone else in the family who could help out the troubled relative? Are you in a family that takes turns helping him and is it your turn? How much help does he really need? Is there some reason to hope that he might be setting out on a different path this time? Is it time for an intervention? Would an intervention work? What would you have to sacrifice to help? Who else would this sacrifice affect? "What should I do?" when a dissipated relative asks for help leads to many other complicated questions. Even if we start with certain basic assumptions about what matters, we aren't out of

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<sup>1</sup> Some interpretations of Aristotle (for instance, McDowell 1979) make wisdom seem mysterious in this way.

the woods. If we believe that respecting people's rational capacities is what matters, we invite questions about how to respect someone whose current choices are not rational. If we are convinced that happiness is what matters, we invite questions about what happiness really is and how to weigh one person's happiness against another. These are not simple questions, but there's an even bigger issue lurking, which is that most of us are likely to think that many things matter in this case: happiness, respect, family obligation, and self-interest all seem to be important to making a good decision here.

We might think that moral philosophy, which has much to say about what matters, should help us figure out what to do in the kinds of examples we've been discussing. But ethical theories synthesize and systematize. Because of this, they promise to simplify choices; this is their advantage. If we approach problem like the ones we have considered so far with a single theory in hand we risk filtering out some of the relevant mess. To focus on happiness is to miss the issues of fairness and obligation. To focus on respect misses the important contribution that friendship makes to happiness. It isn't that Utilitarians *cannot* account for the value of respect, or that Kantians *cannot* make room for the value of happiness. They can and they have, but insofar as they do, they lose the advantage of simplifying matters. Moreover, insofar as some of the relevant considerations in our cases are not moral, moral theories will not take them into account. My point here is to motivate an approach to thinking about all-in reasons that makes sense of the complexity of things by design, not to argue that traditional ethical theories are untenable.

In addition to complexity, there is another feature of our practical problems that we should notice. It is not just that we need to know what to do, we need to know what matters and therefore what we *should* do. This means that the answers to our practical problems have to be ones we can recognize as a good answers, something authoritative that really answers our questions rather than just offering an option to be considered. We need something that puts an end to consideration so that we can act with some confidence that we're doing the right thing, or at least that we're doing the best we can.<sup>2</sup>

One thing we sometimes do when we're in search of a good answer to a complex problem is to look for advice. We look for an advisor who is good at apprehending the nuanced details of a situation and understanding what's at stake. In other words, we could say, we look for someone with some *wisdom*. Wisdom might be a strange word to modern ears. We don't use the word much and we don't go around talking about who is wise or unwise. But if wisdom is just excellent judgment about what matters, then we do look for wisdom and it is important.

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. Korsgaard: "There [in Kant's argument for the categorical imperative] the problem is the one set by the fact of free agency. It's nothing less than the problem of what is to be done" (2003: 116).

Indeed it is just what's needed to answer our various "What should I do?" questions in a way that we can have confidence in the answers.

The trouble with this solution is that there don't seem to be many wise people. I suspect that most of us can identify a few people in our lives whose counsel we would seek in difficult circumstances, but I also suspect that we recognize the limitations of these advisors. We often ask advice from more than one person in order to correct for the biases and weaknesses of a single advisor. Most of us would probably not be willing to say that even our most trusted advisors have anything approaching perfect wisdom.

Now we might think that we don't really need wisdom or wise people, but instead we need to know what wise people know (or what a wise person would know, if one existed). Perhaps if we knew what values are associated with wisdom, we could then apply this knowledge to our practical questions and find good answers to them without thinking any further about wisdom. For instance, if we knew that the wise always valued other people's happiness more than their own, this would give us some guidance about questions about what to do when what we want most conflicts with what our loved ones want most. We could even see this as one way of describing what moral theories are doing: specifying particular values or principles is like articulating the knowledge of the wise.

The problem with this strategy is that it's very unclear how we would figure out what values wisdom entails, particularly at a sharp enough level of detail that this information would actually be useful. We might be able to say that wise people value other people's happiness, but we don't have grounds for concluding that in every set of circumstances, a wise person will put someone else's interests above her own. This is a strong claim about the value of happiness (and, I suspect, a false one) that would require argument to establish; it isn't something we can know about wisdom without thinking more about what wisdom is.

Not that there aren't any arguments we can use to gain insight into the values that are associated with wisdom. We could argue that certain values are part of the concept of wisdom, or that because wisdom is a virtue that is conducive to flourishing, it must be associated with values that are tied to flourishing. Or we could argue on empirical grounds that people who have certain wisdom-related skills also have a certain set of values. But none of these kinds of arguments will lead us to insight about "wise values" without making some rather substantial assumptions about what wisdom is. We would end up making assumptions about the concept, or about flourishing, or about the wisdom-related skills. If we want to answer our ethical questions by appeal to wisdom, we can't bypass thinking about what it is to make judgments about what matters in an excellent way.

In this section I hope to have demonstrated the rationale for attending to wisdom. What we need now is to think about what wisdom is.

## **2. Wisdom and Good Judgment**

One might think that wisdom is such a difficult notion that it is hopeless to think that we could use it to illuminate other normative notions. I think this is pessimistic. Certainly, it would be overly optimistic to think one could defend a comprehensive account of wisdom in one section of a single paper, but we can take some first steps that I hope will demonstrate the promise of the project. What I can do in this section is to articulate an approach to defining wisdom and sketch the likely results of applying it that will meet the needs of wise judgment constructivism.

The methodology I propose is a version of the method of wide reflective equilibrium (Daniels 1979) that constructs an account of wisdom by integrating both normative argument and empirical data.<sup>3</sup> Psychological accounts of what people actually think wisdom is – so-called “implicit theories” of wisdom, or “folk theories” as I shall call them – play the role that moral intuitions or considered judgments play in standard applications of wide reflective equilibrium (WRE). Four key components of wisdom emerge from the research on folk theories of wisdom: deep understanding (about complex human problems, in particular), reflective capacities, problem solving capacities, and the motivation to make good decisions and to help others do so too.<sup>4</sup>

Beginning with the folk theory ensures that our account of wisdom will be importantly related to an ideal that people actually have. But it would certainly be a mistake to think we can stop at the folk theory. The folk theory may not be at an equilibrium point, after all. To reach equilibrium, WRE requires that we be prepared to jettison or revise components of the folk theory that are misguided or in conflict with each other. Hence the folk theory needs to be examined and, possibly, refined and supplemented.

The folk theory can be supplemented by philosophical arguments that test and elucidate it against various theoretical constraints, which take the place of moral principles in standard applications of WRE. Given our purposes, there are three important theoretical constraints on the process of finding an equilibrium about wisdom. First, if our account of wisdom is going to be responsive to the rationale for our interest in it, it must be a theory that makes wise judgment something that we (those of us who seek answers to the question “what should I do?”) recognize as authoritative. Wisdom, in other words, must be normative for us. Second,

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<sup>3</sup> This methodology was developed with Jason Swartwood in our paper “Wisdom Revisited” (2011).

<sup>4</sup> For an excellent overview of the implicit theory research in psychology see Bluck and Glueck (2005). This distillation of the folk theories is already somewhat theoretically laden. In order to make sense of their data, psychologists must use some criteria in order to group responses together and make sensible generalizations.

an account of wisdom should be detailed enough to make action-guiding recommendations. A good account of wisdom will have enough substance to ground prescriptions that provide guidance in particular situations.<sup>5</sup> Third, an account of wisdom should be empirically sound; it should not make implausible claims about human nature or false assumptions about our capacities. For example, it should not prescribe processes of reasoning that, as a matter of psychological fact, undermine a person's ability to make good choices.

So the best account of wisdom will be normative, action-guiding, and empirically sound. The first constraint is the most important for the purpose of developing wise judgment constructivism, because the conception of wise judgment must answer to our practical concerns about reasons if it is to provide a helpful understanding of what our all-in reasons are. As Lenman (this volume, p. XXX), quoting the Confucian *Chung-Yung*, says, "If the Way were remote from humanity, it would not be the Way." Starting with the facts about the folk concept of wisdom helps to ensure that the way is not remote from humanity. The idea here is that starting with the folk theory of wisdom ensures a sound deliberative route from the ideal of wisdom back to something people actually care about and this helps to ensure that the judgments of the wise (understood according to our theory) are ones we find authoritative or reason giving. We will find them authoritative because they represent what our own judgments would be if they were improved along the lines that we regard as improvements.

We arrive at a more refined account of wisdom by thinking about how the components of the folk theory can be realized together as a coherent ideal composed of wise objectives (goals) and the norms of good judgment the following of which will accomplish these objectives. In particular, the conception of wisdom that results from this methodology includes three basic goals that a wise person has: to decide well, to help others decide well, and to develop and maintain the understanding, abilities and motivations associated with wisdom. We then consider how to meet these goals and how to understand the four components of the folk theory in the context of the vast amount of information that is relevant to making good choices and the serious limitations to which our understanding is subject. Given these factors, the kind of deep understanding possessed by a wise person cannot be near-omniscience, rather it must have to do with strategies for dealing with how little we can ever know.

Similarly, given the ways that explicit reflection can distort decision making, the kind of reflection that is part of wisdom must acknowledge the limits of our higher order cognitive processes. 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.

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<sup>5</sup> One might take this to be implied by the requirement of normativity, but I think it worth separating action-guiding from reason-giving to emphasize the point that the theory needs to avoid vagueness so that it will generate specific prescriptions (which is a distinct matter from whether its prescriptions have authority).

Wilson, Hodges and LaFleur 1984). This kind of research can contribute to the case for a strategy of reflecting on values when one is not confronted with a choice that has to be made and going with your gut in the heat of the moment. Notice that the argument for this strategy would be informed by background empirical theories about good decision making. Given the importance of emotions to values, another useful strategy would be one that helps you tune into your feelings – for example, by paying attention to physiological clues. In short, the wise person engages in reflective thinking at the right time so that the act of reflection does not end up undermining her convictions or distorting her preferences.

With these thoughts in mind, we can say that wisdom includes several broad, interrelated norms the following of which is necessary for deciding well: overcoming biases; humility about what one knows, and open-mindedness to other people and the lessons of experience; empathy with others; and appropriate reflectiveness about our reasons.<sup>6</sup> Wise judgment, then, is characterized by a complex set of norms many of which must be themselves characterized in normative terms. A wise person follows these norms in order to identify what matters and to reach and justify a decision about what to do. Often, following these norms requires cultivating and maintaining long-term policies and short-term strategies for coping with our limitations. For example, we tend not to overcome cognitive biases upon learning that we have them; rather, what works is following rules of thumb, which require the adoption of a long-term strategy or policy.<sup>7</sup> The wise person identifies the relevant considerations by making sure that her judgments conform to all the norms of good judgment in the best possible way. She puts these reasons together to form a justification for her judgment about what one has best all-in reason to do in the circumstances. For example, if the wise person were to decide that she ought to brush her dog's teeth, she would have a justification for this judgment in terms of the reasons that favor this action (for example, preventing pain and not shirking an obligation in the face of minor inconvenience).

Now, one might agree that a wise person needs to be able to make these various discriminations among values, but disagree that this requires any justification or explanatory ability. Wise people, one might argue, *feel* or *intuit* their way to good decisions, they do not need to be able to justify their judgments by appeal to supporting reasons. One might ground this criticism in the philosophical tradition that emphasizes the importance of sentiment and emotion to moral judgment, or one might ground it in recent psychological research that highlights some of the shortcomings of reflection and reasoning (see Tiberius 2009 for a critical discussion of this literature).

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<sup>6</sup> This last requires deliberative skill, which is a component of wisdom emphasized by Rosalind Hursthouse (2006). It also requires achieving and maintaining proper perspective, a part of wisdom which I focus on in *The Reflective Life* (2008). The importance of empathy to wisdom is emphasized by Stohr (2006).

<sup>7</sup> For a review of the psychological literature on overcoming biases see Lilienfeld et. al. 2009.

We can admit that emotions and intuition are very important to wise judgment without abandoning reflection and explanatory ability altogether. Emotions can be an important source of reasons for valuing what we value and emotional responsiveness to others is absolutely essential to understanding what matters to them. Further, we are sometimes better off deciding intuitively than by engaging in a process of counting pros and cons. But these admissions do not obviate the need for a justification about what matters in general. Certainly we shouldn't reflect on what matters all the time, but justification is needed in the background if a person is to be able to aim at cultivating wisdom, to make decisions when her heart is conflicted, and to advise others who need reasons to trust her advice.

We now have a sketch of an account of wisdom. An example might help to make the preceding rather abstract discussion more concrete. Imagine Professor Smith trying to decide whether to take a new job as the director of a research center at her university. Insofar as Smith is wise, she has to this point been open to many sources of information and humble about what she knows. This means that she has learned some things about her own skills from paying attention to others' reactions toward her. In particular, she has learned that she is more organized than most and actually thrives in positions of great responsibility. Smith also has the ability to empathize with her family (who would get less of her attention if she took this job), her philosophy colleagues (who would get even less attention), and the University administrators who are asking her to step up. Further, she sees that her family's concerns about her time are legitimate and represent values that are also important to her, but her colleagues' concerns are rather selfish and fail to acknowledge the greater value of the work she would do at the Center. Smith understands the importance of work-life balance and has strong, stable commitments to the values of family relationships, challenging herself, and contributing to causes she believes in. Finally, her emotions are in tune with these values – she doesn't long for escape or daydream about becoming a professional wind-surfer. She takes these basic values to structure her life and she sees no reason to make revisions. Smith has some wisdom. Whatever she decides, she will justify her decision about what she has most reason to do by appeal to the particular reasons that stem from her stable and reflective assessment of what matters. Anticipating the role that wisdom plays in a constructivist theory, we can say that whatever Smith decides, insofar as she is wise her judgment about what she ought to do will be warranted and she will indeed have all-in reason to do what she judges she ought.

With this sketch of wisdom in hand, the next step in reaching wide reflective equilibrium would be to evaluate the preliminary account of wisdom (and, eventually, the more comprehensive conception) against background theories and theoretical constraints. The constraints I mentioned at the beginning of this section were that a good account of wisdom should be normative, empirically sound and action guiding. The fact that the basis for the refined theory is the theory of wisdom makes it plausible that the refined theory is reason-giving for anyone

who endorses the standards of wise judgment in the ordinary conception. The refined theory is empirically sound by design, because it takes into account information about what we are like in order to specify the relevant norms, policies and strategies. The practical action-guidingness of the account will be difficult to evaluate before we have a more comprehensive version, but there seems to be no reason to think that wise judgment as understood here would not result in specific conclusions in practical contexts. Turning to matter of background theories, an account of wisdom ought to be acceptable from the standpoint of compelling theories of the good life. Though I can't make the argument here, it seems reasonable to suppose that an account of wisdom that highlights deep understanding, reflective capacities, problem solving skills, and appropriate motivations will fare well when seen from the standpoint of either objective or idealized-subjective theories of the good life.

There is much more work to be done. My purpose in this paper is not to defend an account of wisdom; rather, it is to sketch the methodology for developing such an account in order to explain its role in constructivism. Certainly, the account of wisdom would have to be developed far beyond its current form for wise judgment constructivism to be thoroughly evaluated. But even at this early stage of development there are a few points in favor of the approach. First, notice that many of the components of wisdom extend to the case of theoretical judgment, which is a bonus. For example, it is a familiar thought that good belief formation requires open-mindedness, freedom from bias and epistemic humility.<sup>8</sup> This adds to the case for thinking that wisdom might shed light on the question of what counts as a good all-in reason, because it means that the norms of wisdom have a different (perhaps broader) base than the norms for our target notion. Second, an account of wisdom that is grounded in the folk theory will provide norms for judgments about good reasons that people can see as authoritative, and therefore as answering to their actual practical concerns. In the context of constructivism about good reasons, this is a plus because according to constructivist theories speaking to our practical concerns (rather than "representing reality" or "capturing the truth") is at the heart of normative theory.

### **3. Wise Judgment Constructivism**

The basic idea behind wise judgment constructivism is that we understand good all-in reasons by appeal to the deliberations of a wise person, that is, by appeal to judgment that is in accordance with all the norms of good judgment. Wise judgment constructivism is a normative theory that elucidates one normative notion (good all-in reasons) by appeal to others (wisdom and the norms of wise judgment). According to wise judgment constructivism, good all-in reasons are the reasons that are arrived at through a process of wise judgment.

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<sup>8</sup> These are indeed virtues emphasized by virtue epistemologists. See Zagzebski (1996), Roberts and Wood (2007).

Wise judgment constructivism builds on the insight that made ideal observer theories attractive. Here's Firth: "In analyzing ethical statements, for example, we must try to determine the characteristics of an ideal observer by examining the procedures which we actually regard, implicitly or explicitly, as the rational ones for *deciding* ethical questions" (1952, 332). The advantage of taking seriously what we actually regard as the features of good judgment is that we will end up with an account that answers our practical problem by furnishing reasons that we can act on with confidence. But because ideal observer theories have typically wanted to *reduce* ethical notions to natural ones, they took this insight to an extreme that was unsustainable.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, this extreme does not accurately reflect what we actually regard as rational procedures for deciding: if the research on folk theories of wisdom is any evidence, the omniscient, omnipercipient, disinterested, dispassionate, consistent and otherwise normal creature does not, in fact, represent our views about good judgment.

Instead, we take wise judges to care about other people and about giving them good advice, we think that wise people have knowledge about certain important topics but not about everything, and we take wisdom to include skills of decision making and problem solving that one develops with experience. A theory that begins with what we actually take excellent judgment to be will be better suited to meet our practical concerns and to provide satisfying answers to our questions about what to do.

### 3.1. Locating Wise Judgment Constructivism on the Map

It will be helpful to distinguish wise judgment constructivism from some other views with which it might be confused.

First, consider the classic ideal observer theory just alluded to above according to which correct ethical statements are identified with the ethically salient reactions of an omniscient, omnipercipient, disinterested, dispassionate, consistent and otherwise normal judge (Firth 1952). If the right account of wisdom were one that took the above features as the defining features of wisdom, WJC would be an ideal observer theory. However, this is not the case. The best account of wisdom does not take wisdom to be comprised of characteristics that can be defined non-normatively, because norms must be employed in attributions of wisdom. For example, wisdom requires that people reflect in the *right way*, at the *appropriate* time. Humility and open-mindedness are also normative insofar as each must be appropriately engaged, for example, at the mean between the extremes of arrogance and self-abnegation, or pig-headedness and irresolution. Further, since wisdom is a virtue, the components of wisdom include skills, policies and strategies that are cultivated and employed by an agent (rather than just characteristics possessed by an agent as in the Ideal Observer theory). The best account of

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<sup>9</sup> This restates an argument I made in Tiberius 1997. See also Rosati 1995.

wisdom makes it normative “all the way down”. WJC does not reduce claims about all-in reasons to claims about natural facts; rather, it explains one kind of normative claim (about all-in reasons) in terms of another (about practical wisdom).

The recognition that wisdom is a virtue invites the thought that wise judgment constructivism is an Aristotelian theory. Indeed, my analysis of wisdom as a virtue is Aristotelian in some respects. A virtue is a set of dispositions, skills and habits that comprise an ideal that it makes sense to take as a goal of character development. Further, wisdom is importantly related to human flourishing: one criterion of success for an account of wisdom, on my view, is how well wisdom conceived in its terms contributes to an overall good life for a person. Nevertheless, the theory I am proposing also differs from a traditional Aristotelian theory in important respects. I do not define wisdom by appeal to an independently normative conception of human nature, nor do I rely on any claims about a human *telos*. Moreover, I do not assume that there is such a thing as perfect wisdom to which correct judgments about reasons are tied. Rather, on my view, the warrant we have in our judgments varies with the degree to which they are the result of wise deliberation, which itself comes in degrees.<sup>10</sup>

The fact that WJC understands good reasons in terms of a process of deliberation characterized in normative terms is some evidence that it is indeed a form of constructivism. The idea that sound normative judgments are to be understood in terms of the results of a process of reasoning (rather than the other way around) is a core element of constructivist theories. Another key feature of constructivist theories is that they take our interest in the results of these processes of reasoning to be practical rather than theoretical. This is true of wise judgment constructivism: it is our practical problem of needing to know what to do in the face of competing considerations that gives us an interest in the results of wise judgment.<sup>11</sup>

Finally, it is worth saying something about the difference between WJC and other versions of constructivism. The best developed versions of first-order, normative constructivism are theories of our moral duties to other people. As the main proponent of the view has acknowledged, what we owe to each other does not exhaust the normative domain and hence contractualist theories might not answer all of our questions about what we ought to do

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<sup>10</sup> Not all Aristotelian views make these assumptions, of course. Insofar as Aristotelian views do not need to make such assumptions, WJC might count as a kind of Aristotelianism. For a constructivism theory that is explicitly Aristotelian see LeBar (2008).

<sup>11</sup> WJC is therefore a constructivist theory according to Lenman’s (this volume, p. XXX) careful definition of constructivism: “Constructivist views understand correct normative views of the relevant kind (political, ethical, normative) as those which are the upshot of some procedure or criterion, where (a) that procedure or criterion is one followable or applicable by human beings where (b) that procedure or criterion is itself characterized in normative terms invoking ideals of e.g. rationality or reasonableness and (c) applying the procedure or criterion is taken as determining or constitutive of that correctness rather than as tracking a correctness conceived as prior and independent to it and (d) where the rationale for our taking an interest in whatever the procedure or criterion in question delivers is conceived of as speaking to distinctively practical as opposed to theoretical concerns.”

(Scanlon 1998). We have reasons to do many things that don't have to do with our moral duties to others: personal reasons, perfectionist reasons, reasons of friendship, aesthetic reasons, and so on. How these reasons bear on what we ought to do in a particular situation is often an important question. There may also be some moral reasons that do not fit neatly into the contractualist framework (I'm inclined to think the reasons we have to be vegetarian are reasons of this sort). Further, unless one thinks that all moral reasons are necessarily overriding, moral reasons will at least sometimes have to be compared to these other kinds of reasons in order to determine what one ought to do. The version of constructivism I am proposing is intended to answer the first person question about what we ought to do, where the relevant considerations appear pluralistic and messy.<sup>12</sup> It is not a theory about our duties to each other nor does it make the justification of judgments about reasons essentially social. Instead, it is a normative theory about good reasons that takes the wise judgment of an individual deliberator as central to the understanding of correct judgments about good all-in reasons.

The comparison to other versions of constructivism invites a question about how deeply constructivist WJC really is. In Yonatan Shemmer's terms (this volume), is it local (according to which only part of the normative domain is constructed) or global (according to which all our norms are constructed)?<sup>13</sup> It might look as if WJC is a local version of constructivism because it explains one normative domain in terms of another: good reasons are explained in terms of norms of good judgment. This would be so if the norms of good judgment were *presupposed* by WJC, that is, if these norms were taken to have independent authority. Indeed, one could imagine a version of WJC that starts with an independent account of wisdom and builds a local, constructivist theory of practical reasons on the basis of this independent theory. But this is not the case for the account of wisdom I have proposed. I have proposed that we use wide reflective equilibrium to identify the norms of wise judgment, beginning with the commitments to ideals that we already have. On this view, then, the norms of wise judgment are also constructed. Further, WJC is Neurathian (again, in Shemmer's terms) because we start with the norms we already have (in our folk theory) and work from there, improving, modifying and revising as needed. Seen as a global theory, WJC lays out the pattern that our various norms need to be in to sustain stable claims to normativity; in other words (to continue with the metaphor) WJC provides instructions for Neurathian boat repair that doesn't sink itself.

An important feature of unrestricted constructivism is, as Lenman (this volume) puts it, that "applying the procedure or criterion is taken as determining or constitutive of that correctness rather than as tracking a correctness conceived as prior and independent to it". That wise

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<sup>12</sup> So, my project here is in the same vein as Thomas Hill's (1989) attempt to extend constructivism to a larger normative domain. Hill takes a Kantian path, relying on the ideal of the Kingdom of Ends.

<sup>13</sup> Street (2009) makes a similar distinction between restricted and unrestricted forms of constructivism.

judgment constructivism takes this to be so has been implied, since I have not explicitly assumed any independent truth that wise judgment is tracking. However, one might object that the notion of wisdom does implicitly assume an independent normative truth to which wise judges are responsive. This would be true if the only way to understand wisdom were by appeal to a special sensitivity to reasons that is analogous to visual perception. If the view is that the wise person “sees” all the relevant considerations in the circumstances, then there is something to be seen or grasped that must be identified prior to the judgment of the wise. Part of the point of providing a sketch of an account of wisdom that does not take Aristotle as its starting point was to show that the perceptual model is not the only way to think about wisdom.

Wise judgment constructivism suggests a particular understanding of the constructivist thesis we have just been considering (i.e., the thesis that the procedure is constitutive of correctness rather than tracking correctness). When a wise person aims to figure out what to do, her answer will refer to reasons. For example, the wise person who decides to lend money to her dissipated nephew may justify this decision by appeal to reasons of family obligation or preventing harm to the nephew. If giving money to the nephew is the right thing to do in this case, then it is the right thing to do *because it avoids harm and meets an obligation*. At this point we might ask what makes *these* reasons the right ones to follow in this case? The answer WJC gives to this question is that these are the right reasons in virtue of their being identified by the process of wise judgment. Wise judgment constructivism has two stages: (1) good reasons for action are identified through a process of wise judgment and (2) norms of wise judgment are identified through a process of wide reflective equilibrium. WJC can say, then, that what makes it the right thing to do to lend money to the nephew is that it prevents harm and meets a family obligation. We do not have to say that the reason to give money to the nephew is “constructed” as if the wise person makes it the case by fiat. The wise person does not make it up; rather, she must offer reasons for her judgment. It is because her judgment follows the norms of good judgment that her judgments have authority, but this does not mean that the reasons for helping the nephew must themselves make reference to the wise person’s process of judgment.<sup>14</sup>

### 3.2. Some Questions about WJC

Good all-in reasons are reasons that are arrived at through a process of wise judgment. This formulation raises a question: whose wise judgment is relevant? Does the theory say that what I have good reason to do is what I would judge that I have reason to do if I were wise? Or does it say that what I have good reason to do is what would be judged that I have reason to do

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<sup>14</sup> I take the argument in this paragraph to be a version of the dialectical strategy Wallace attributes to Korsgaard (this volume, p. XXX)

by the perfectly wise person? Is there even a difference between the two views? The first thing we need to make clear is that either answer can allow for significant variation in what reasons different people have. Even if you think that the status of some consideration as a good all-in reason depends on its being arrived at by a perfectly wise agent, you could still think that perfectly wise agents judge that different people have different reasons depending on their values and goals. So, to take our example from before, a perfectly wise person may judge that Professor Smith has most reason to accept the administrative position, while one of her colleagues has most reason to refuse.

The second point to make clear is that given the role wisdom is supposed to play in a constructivist theory, the wise judgment in question has to be one that the agent whose reasons are at issue can recognize as wise. In other words, the important thing is that it must be a process that follows standards that are recognized by the agent as standards of excellent judgment. If this is not the case, the agent won't have the right kind of interest in the results of the process.

With these two qualifications in mind, we can see that the question of *whose* wise judgment is relevant is relatively inconsequential. The important variables are whether all the standards of excellent judgment are being observed and how well or to what degree. An agent looking to the theory for guidance could apply these standards to her own judgment or to the judgment of another person (perhaps someone she is looking to for advice). Further, in articulating an account of wisdom we aim to define a theory on behalf of many who share important commitments. We aim to answer shared questions on the assumption that the answers will speak to everyone for whom the question has significance. This also makes the question of who the wise judge is less important.

Of course, WJC cannot rule out the possibility of disagreements in practice among people who are not fully wise. How does WJC treat these disagreements? When there are differences in practice, WJC can explain these differences by appeal to the failure to follow the right norms. It might seem that the account of wisdom I have sketched will not have the resources to explain disagreement in this way, because it does not include a list of wise values. One might think that if the account of wisdom does not specify the values of the wise, then some disagreements will just result from different inputs (in the form of different values) as opposed to any failure to adhere to the norms of excellent judgment. But the fact that the account of wisdom does not specify what values a wise person must have does not mean that there are no constraints on what values are included in wisdom. This is so because the procedural norms of wisdom also constrain judgments about basic values in such a way that when there are differences in judgments about reasons that result from differences in basic values, these differences can be explained by reference to norms of, say, open-mindedness, humility, or responsiveness to the

facts. The account of wisdom does not specify substantive values, but people who make judgments about what counts as wise do make assumptions about values. When we perceive differences in judgment that seem to be due to differences in basic values, we can assume either that these basic values were not arrived at wisely, or that these different values are equally wise and hence that there is a set of reasons that are equally good.

Granted, WJC cannot rule out in principle disagreements that are due to different initial commitments that will not change when all the norms of good judgment are followed. So, there might be disagreements between wise people that are not merely practical (that is, differences that cannot be removed by ensuring that all the norms of excellent judgment were followed). The question about this possibility is whether it undermines the authority of all-in reasons as characterized by WJC. It seems to me that it does not undermine the authority of a claim about what someone has all-in reason to do from the point of view of that person, because the person would have no reason to reject the wise judgment of the person with her own initial commitments who follows all the norms of good judgment. If she did have such a reason, it would be because there was some norm that recommends rejecting or revising something about her position. So, WJC might imply a certain amount of relativism, but the range of cases that must be interpreted as allowing for relativism will be limited by the norms of good judgment, and what relativism is left need not undermine the authority of reasons on the view.

To this point, my aim has been to accommodate the idea that we need to be able to explain disagreements in practice in a way that doesn't undermine the authority of the judgments we take to be the product of wisdom. But one might think that the disagreement of others is something to be heeded, not explained away. The observation draws attention to the fact that the version of constructivism I have described differs from more familiar versions insofar as it does not make justification *to others* an essential ingredient of the process. Is this a problem? One might think so because it means that correct norms according to WJC are less constrained than correct norms according to a contractualist version of constructivism and so WJC will be less likely than social versions of constructivism to capture the apparent objectivity of claims about good reasons. Correct norms, according to WJC float more freely (one might think) and therefore it amounts to a less compelling version of constructivism. Moreover, the apparent indeterminacy about reasons in this version of constructivism seems to undermine the confidence that wise judgment is supposed to secure. There are several ways to respond to this challenge.

The first is to point out that social, contractualist versions of constructivism have their own problems, given the claims about reasonableness on which they must rely. The constraint on correct moral judgment that is imposed by social versions of constructivism is not, after all, that

your judgments must be justifiable to other actual people. Rather, the constraint requires that your judgments be justifiable to *reasonable* others who are similar to you insofar as they seek mutually acceptable grounds for their claims. This has the result of weakening the constraint on appropriate judgment in such a way that some of our questions about what we ought to do are not answered. For example, consider the question of whether one ought to stop eating certain animals. In my experience, there is disagreement among reasonable (in the above sense) people about this question. Further, what I think is wrong with the judgment of others who do not share my views (e.g., that there are good reasons not to eat pigs) does not have to do with their reasonableness as usually understood by social versions of constructivism. Here is a case where wise judgment constructivism allows us to think about the appropriateness of some moral judgments in ways that seem more suited to the subject matter. I can say that my reasons not to eat pigs are good reasons because people who disagree with me are lacking wisdom in their judgments – they exhibit bias, fail to appreciate relevant information, or fail to distinguish what matters more from what matters less.

Second, we can point out that the two forms of constructivism aren't mutually exclusive. Indeed, WJC may need to be supplemented in order to account for certain kinds of reasons. I am inclined to think that when it comes to judgments about what we owe to each other, philosophers such as Scanlon and Lenman are correct. One way for wise judgment constructivism to handle this point would be to argue that when it comes to such judgments wisdom requires offering reasons that could not be reasonably rejected by others committed to coming to agreement with you. In other words, the thought would be that the account of wisdom sketched here would have to be supplemented to count as a theory of *moral* wisdom. If wise judgment constructivism and contractualism can be put together in this way, then worries about WJC as an alternative to contractualism are misplaced.

The third response to the challenge is to emphasize the significance of the constraints that do come from a theory of wise judgment. Along these lines, a point that deserves emphasis is that even though wisdom is not defined in terms of hypothetical agreement with others, the wise person certainly does not ignore the views of others. A wise person must be able to see things from other people's perspectives in order to see what matters to them and give good advice. She must be open-minded about new sources of evidence and humble about what she doesn't know. She must also be committed to overcoming biases in decision making that are extremely difficult to detect in oneself. All of these facts about wisdom suggest that a wise person will be solicitous of and attentive to the opinions of others.

Finally, the fact that the reasons arrived at through the process of wise judgment are good reasons upon which we are justified in acting does not rule out the possibility of error, and the

possibility of error is an important reason not to ignore disagreement with others.<sup>15</sup> We can have enough confidence in our reasons to see our practical problem as solved, even while we acknowledge the possibility that we've made a mistake. Notice that room for this possibility is created by the fact that the norms of wise judgment are themselves described normatively: even once we have arrived at our best judgment about what we have reason to do, it is open to us to think that we could have reflected more appropriately, that our empathy was not as well-tuned as it could have been, that we misjudged the relevance of one fact and put too little weight on another, and so on.

#### **4. Conclusion**

According to wise judgment constructivism, what you have the best all-in reason to do is what you would judge yourself to have reason to do if you were judging wisely. You get better at discerning good reasons by developing and applying the capacities necessary for wisdom or by looking to those who have. We ensure that these wise judgments answer to our practical concern – the concern to sort through the mess and arrive at a judgment we can act on with confidence – by taking people's actual norms for good judgment, as revealed by the folk theory, as the starting point for theorizing about wisdom.

All-in reasons, on this view, are best understood in terms of other normative notions, in particular, a process of wise judgment that itself can only be described by employing normative terms and defended by employing a constructivist procedure (WRE). Wise judgment constructivism doesn't answer all of our questions about reasons, of course. One might want to know what judgments about reasons are semantically. One might want to know how norms are represented psychologically. Or, one might want to know what the explanation is for why reduction isn't feasible. I take it that WJC is compatible with at least a few different answers. An advantage of WJC is that it promises to illuminate what all-in reasons are in a way that responds to our practical concerns without our having to resolve the semantic and psychological debates.

Of course, at this stage of the development of wise judgment constructivism, even many of the questions that the theory is supposed to answer are still unanswered. Insofar as the view is promising, though, I hope to have made a case for shifting philosophical attention to developing an empirically informed, but normatively significant account of good decision making, a shift away from metaphysics toward epistemology. If suitably developed, wise judgment constructivism would have the same attractive features of any constructivist theory – metaphysical modesty without simple reduction and the ability to explain the motivating force

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<sup>15</sup> On the importance of leaving room for the possibility of error see Wallace, this volume.

of normative claims – with the added benefit of broader scope in terms of the kinds of reasons it can be used to illuminate.

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