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The Varieties of Wisdom: Contemplative, Cross-Cultural, and Integral Contributions

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Contemporary research on wisdom consists of several approaches, inherited from diverse philosophical, religious, and contemplative contributions. This article therefore introduces integral theory to provide an encompassing conceptual framework that can compare approaches and integrate them into a larger picture. Among other things, this facilitates the overdue integration into wisdom research of cross-cultural and contemplative perspectives that offer rich reservoirs of information about wisdom as well as disciplines to cultivate it. Contemplative traditions also point to a further kind of wisdom—a transconceptual seeing into the nature of self and reality—that needs to be included in an expanded category system of the varieties of wisdom.

What is wisdom? This is an ancient question, debated for centuries across campfires and campuses, yielding answers that have varied widely and evolved dramatically. Among the earliest answers were the proverbs of the Egyptian and Hebrew literatures. In later revealed traditions, a recurrent theme is that wisdom is revealed as a divine gift and can be cultivated by pondering and aligning one's life with it.

However, revelation-centered wisdoms do not exhaust the varieties of religious sagacity. All authentic religions—including revealed traditions such as Christianity and Islam—contain contemplative or mystical branches. These are vitally important because they practice contemplative disciplines (e.g., meditation, contemplation, yoga) that foster an array of psychological and spiritual skills such as concentration, emotional maturity, and wisdom. When these skills mature,

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they can culminate in a direct insight into reality that yields a radically different (transrational, transconceptual, or transcendental) kind of wisdom known, for example, as *jnana* (Hinduism), *prajna* (Buddhism), *ma'rifah* (Islam), or *gnosis* (Christianity; Walsh, 2011).

With the emergence of philosophy came the first systematic analyses and divisions into different kinds of wisdom. The most influential have been the Greek distinction between *sophia* (knowledge of first causes) and *phronesis* (practical wisdom), and the analogous Buddhist distinction between *prajna* (transcendental insight) and *upaya* (skillfulness in serving and enlightening others).

The recent emergence of scientific, and especially psychological, research has given birth to new perspectives and definitions of wisdom. It is not surprising that these tend to focus on mental processes and capacities, on what can be measured, and therefore on *phronesis* rather than on *sophia*. My definition of *wisdom*, which I use implicitly in this article but will not have space to explicate, is as follows: "Wisdom is a function of deep insight into, and mature understanding of, the central existential issues of life, together with practical skill in responding to these issues in ways that enhance the deep wellbeing of all those who the responses affect."

Unfortunately, there is little overlap between contemporary definitions, nor between them and earlier views (Trowbridge, 2011). This is not really surprising considering the wide variety of eras, cultures, approaches and perspectives, and given that sagacity "is perhaps the most complex characteristic that can be attributed to individuals or to cultures" (Birren & Svensson, 2005, p. 28).

This overabundance of ideas about the nature of wisdom raises important ontological questions about the nature of wisdom. The first and crucial question is the following: Are all these contemplatives, sages, scholars, and scientists talking about the same thing? Are they simply focusing on different aspects of wisdom, or are there multiple wisdoms? In ontological terms, is wisdom one or many? In other words, are we dealing with a unitary phenomenon or with multiple phenomena?

If sagacity is multiple (i.e., if there are multiple kinds of wisdom), then the next questions are as follows: What is the relation between these kinds of wisdoms? Are they overlapping or discrete? And if discrete, are they incommensurate or integratable?

Let's try to ground these questions in some specific examples. Yoga, for example, claims to culminate in transconceptual wisdom (*jnana*) that is radically and incommensurately distinct from wisdom on the basis of conceptual understanding. This is a claim for two discrete and incommensurate kinds of wisdom.

There also seem to be varying kinds and depths of conceptual wisdom. Yet, these can probably be partly ordered in a developmental hierarchy according to the sequence in which they emerge and the richness of understanding they

encompass. These, then, would be overlapping varieties of wisdom that can be integrated developmentally, an integration that integral theory can facilitate.

INTEGRAL THEORY

Integral theory was birthed in the 1990s by an independent polymath intellectual named Ken Wilber (1996). Since then, it has expanded into an international interdisciplinary movement known as *integral studies*, which has generated considerable interest (as well as some controversy because of its big picture approach and inclusion of topics such as spirituality) (Esbjorn-Hargens, 2010). Its aim is to provide a wide-ranging conceptual framework capable of integrating diverse schools, disciplines, and perspectives.

This synthesis includes multiple Western, non-Western, and contemplative disciplines. This inclusive scope facilitates a central goal of this article: to introduce relevant non-Western and contemplative ideas on wisdom; hence, the article's subtitle, *Contemplative, Cross-Cultural, and Integral Contributions*.

After outlining the integral model, I then explore its implications for our understanding and research of wisdom. In doing so, I offer a large number of ideas, all of which represent hypotheses to be tested. However, rather than turn the text into a tediously repetitive list of qualifiers, I will often simply state or suggest the ideas, with the understanding that all of them are provisional hypotheses to be tested. For fuller accounts of integral theory see Ken Wilber's modestly titled *A Theory of Everything* (2000), especially Chapter 3, *Integral Spirituality* (2006), and his magnum opus *Sex, Ecology, Spirituality* (2001b). Readable introductions include *A Brief History of Everything* (1996) and excellent articles by Esbjörn-Hargens (2009, 2010).

Integral theory emphasizes five major dimensions: (a) domains of reality (the four quadrants), (b) levels of development, (c) lines of development, (d) states of consciousness, and (e) types of personality.

THE FOUR QUADRANTS

Wilber (1996) begins with dimensions or domains of reality. He points out that there are two great realms: subjective and objective, otherwise known as *interior* and *exterior*, or *I* and *It*.

Moreover, individuals are never entirely alone. Rather, they are always related to others and part of collectives. Each individual is therefore a holon: a whole unto itself and a part of something larger. The interior subjective aspect of collectives constitutes intersubjective culture. This is the realm of *We*, of shared experiences, beliefs, and values. The exterior objective aspect of collectives constitutes the

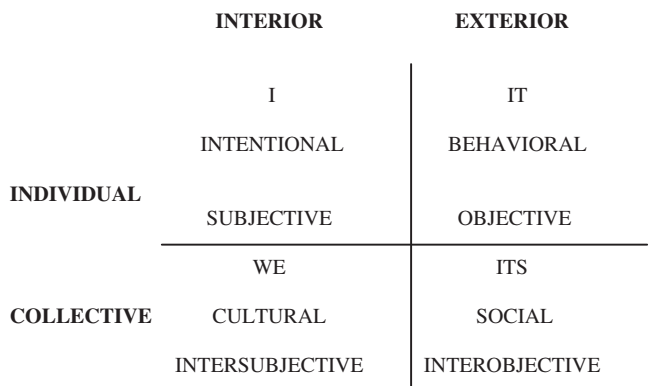


FIGURE 1 The four quadrants.

interobjective domain of social and ecological systems or societies. Together these four domains of reality constitute the four quadrants, as shown in Figure 1.

Each person, each one of us, has all four domains. Each of us has an interior subjective realm of thought and feeling, as well as an outer objective realm of brain and behavior. Each of us also participates in, and is partly constituted by, our intersubjective culture and ethos comprising, for example, collective beliefs and values. At the same time we also participate in, and are partly constituted by, collective material instantiations such as institutions, economics, and books.

The four quadrants are interdependent and irreducible. They are interdependent because they form and inform the others, such that each of us shapes and is shaped by phenomena in all four quadrants. They are irreducible because one cannot adequately explain phenomena in one quadrant in terms of others. For example, one cannot adequately explain subjective experiences, beliefs, and values merely in terms of social structures (e.g., as Marxist economic theory tried to), or in terms of culture (as some postmodernists attempted) or neuroscience (as neural reductionism attempts).

Each quadrant also reflects a perspective, a way of looking, and what aspect we see reflects our perspective. Integral theory argues that understanding any phenomenon adequately requires investigating all of its four quadrants, and using methods appropriate to each quadrant.

For example, suppose you want to research the insights and wisdom cultivated by contemplative practices. Then yes, you can measure electroencephalograms and that will inform you about neural correlates. However, it will tell you nothing about the following:

- the actual experience (for that, one needs meditation and phenomenology)
- the developmental level required to experience it (for that, one needs developmental structuralism)

- how we and our culture interpret these insights (for that, hermeneutics is required)
- how societies instantiate and institutionalize these insights, and then how these institutions determine the likelihood of other people having such insights (that requires social systems analyses)

Integral theory therefore emphasizes the need for a systematic plurality of perspectives and epistemologies—which it calls *integral methodological pluralism*—that systematically applies methodologies appropriate to each of the four quadrants. (Wilber, 2006).

Where is Wisdom?

The four quadrants offer one answer to the question, “Where is wisdom found?” Is it a characteristic of individuals only, or can cultures, societies, and institutions also embody wisdom? Integral theory suggests that aspects and expressions of wisdom are found in all four quadrants.

In individuals, sagacity appears as subjective insights, objective behaviors, and neural modifications. In collectives, wisdom is embedded subjectively in the cultural ethos: the innumerable shared beliefs, values, ethics, and ideas of a culture. These cultural elements embody the insights and understandings of countless individuals past and present. In turn, these collective cultural expressions form and inform (the wisdom of) individuals, so that “cultural memory is the mother of wisdom” (Baltes & Staudinger, 2000, p. 123).

Sapience is also expressed in collectives as objective social constructions that materially embody and institutionalize individual and collective wisdom. Examples include legal and educational systems, and contemplative institutions, as well as art and books. Paul Baltes, who saw wisdom as rare in individuals, stated, “In general, wisdom is foremost a cultural product deposited in books of wisdom rather than in individuals (Baltes, Gluck, & Kunzmann, 2002, p. 331).

Of course, collectives embody not only wisdom, but also much foolishness. The ratio of wisdom to foolishness reflects the past evolution and present maturity of cultures, and is probably of monumental importance in deciding their fate. The wisdom to foolishness ratio may well be one of the most important cultural factors determining individual and collective wellbeing, and will also determine how much cultures support or suppress the search for wisdom (i.e., whether they are *sophiatrophic* or *sophiatoxic*).

In summary, integral theory suggest that we should look for expressions of wisdom in all four quadrants using multiple methods, and ideally using integral methodological pluralism. Further implications will become apparent after we examine other dimensions of the integral model, beginning with levels of development.

DEVELOPMENTAL LEVELS

All things change, and organic things change in remarkable and systematic ways. As individuals, they develop; as collectives, they evolve. Consequently, development and evolution constitute a central dimension of integral theory.

Psychologists often describe development as maturing through three broad levels: preconventional, conventional, and postconventional. Wilber and contemplative disciplines suggest that many developmental lines can mature further into transconventional levels.

Wilber (2006) has been especially interested first in comparing and integrating different developmental theories, and second in mapping the higher reaches of development by integrating psychological research with contemplative reports. The result is the beginning of what he calls a “full spectrum model,” which aims to map development from preconventional childhood stages through conventional adult and then into postconventional adult levels. Beyond this, Wilber explores postpostconventional stages (which I call *transconventional* or *transpersonal*). These higher stages are usually only found in advanced contemplatives, and as yet are rarely recognized or researched by Western psychologists.

Examples of such transconventional/transpersonal stages include Vedanta’s *vijnana mayakosha* (higher mind) and *ananda mayakosha* (bliss mind; Wilber, 2006). Other examples include Cook-Greuter’s (2010) *construct aware* and *unitive* ego stages as well as the remarkable Indian philosopher-sage Aurobindo’s (1982) *higher mind*, *illuminated mind*, *intuitive mind*, and *overmind*.

Transpersonal stages are important for many reasons. First, they point to our developmental potentials. Second, contemplative traditions suggest that these stages are intimately linked to wisdom as both cause and effect. Wise insights, understandings, and behavior are said to foster development to transconventional stages, and these stages then foster further insights. For example, the first practice of Buddhism’s Eight-Fold Path is “Right Understanding,” because without some understanding of life and our existential dilemma, people see no reason to seek wisdom or to undertake contemplative practices. However, once begun, these practices then foster understanding and wisdom through successively deeper stages. Contemplative disciplines have discovered insights, lifestyles, and practices that can catalyze development, even to rare transconventional levels (Walsh, 1999; Walsh & Shapiro, 2006; Walsh & Vaughan, 1993; Wilber, 2000, 2001, 2006). This, of course, is a discovery of monumental significance.

DEVELOPMENTAL LINES

Of course people and minds are not unitary entities. There are multiple mental functions or mental modules, and over time, these develop and are then known

as developmental lines. Examples include cognitive, moral, ego, and perhaps wisdom lines.

Differential Development

Developmental lines are only loosely linked and can therefore develop unevenly in multiple patterns. This raises an obvious question. Is there a characteristic developmental pattern associated with wisdom, and if so, what is it? As yet, we have few clues. For example, wisdom scores seem to be associated with higher levels of intelligence and reflective thinking (Ardelt, 2009; Baltes & Staudinger, 2000). However, it is unclear to what extent these high scores actually reflect higher developmental stages rather than simply strengths or intensities.

The exact relation between wisdom and development may be complex. Researchers have suggested several kinds of relations between wisdom and the developmental levels of specific lines. We explore these relations next.

POSSIBLE RELATIONS BETWEEN DEVELOPMENT AND WISDOM

Wisdom Linked to a Specific Stage

The best known example of linking wisdom to a specific stage is Erik Erikson's famous suggestion that wisdom can most readily emerge in life's final stage (Erikson, Erikson, & Kivnick, 1986). However, there are problems with this idea and with the general approach of tying wisdom to one stage. It is important to note that it suggests that sagacity cannot be expected in previous stages. Yet, research suggests little improvement on wisdom scores with age (Baltes & Staudinger, 2000). Moreover, tying wisdom specifically to life's end runs counter to the painful fact that this is exactly when crucial energetic and social resources are waning. Note also that Erikson's life "stages" refer especially to life "ages." Therefore, Erikson's term *stages* is being used somewhat differently from say, cognitive stages that refer primarily to the complexity and integration of psychological functions and only secondarily to the life age at which these functions appear.

Erikson ruefully confessed in late life that his younger pronouncements on the growth possibilities of old age now felt overly optimistic. In his 80s, he lamented that "the demand to develop Integrity and Wisdom in old age seems to be somewhat unfair, especially when made by middle-aged theorists—as, indeed, we then were" (cited in Hoare, 2000, p. 79). Eventually, he came to see the final goal or achievement of life, not as wisdom, but as faith (Brugman, 2010).

Indian perspectives offer instructive comparisons. In contrast with Erikson, the Buddha lamented the limited progress possible to people taking up contemplative

practices late in life: *ars longa, vita brevis*. In Hinduism, wisdom is esteemed as a lifelong pursuit, although the pursuit takes different forms (e.g., student, householder, renunciate) at different ages.

Wisdom as a Specific (Higher) Stage of a Specific Line

Piaget identified formal operations as the highest stage of cognitive development. However, higher postformal operational stages have been suggested by both contemplative practitioners, such as Aurobindo, and by contemporary researchers, such as Bruner, Flavell, Sinnott, and Wilber. Several researchers have gone further to suggest that wisdom is a function of postformal operational cognition (Kramer, 2003).

Interaction Hypotheses

A recurrent idea in contemporary research is that sagacity arises from interactions among psychological capacities and that the strength or developmental level of the capacities is crucial. Three kinds of interaction are frequently mentioned—combination, balance, and integration—although none has been specified precisely.

Wisdom as a Combination of Capacities

These theories suggest that wisdom emerges from a combination of capacities. For example, Ardel (2009) defined wisdom as a “combination of cognitive, reflective, and affective personality characteristics” (pp. 11–12). However, *combination* is a vague term that tells us little about the nature of the relation or interaction between capacities. The choice of such a bland term is certainly understandable at this early stage of research, but it will hopefully yield to more precise terms as research matures. However, other researchers have suggested particular kinds of relationships between capacities, specifically *balance* and *integration*.

Wisdom from Balance

The central idea of balance theories is that sagacity emerges when two or more capacities are at optimal proportionate levels. For example, Birren and Fisher (1990) suggested that “throughout life, wisdom develops as a balance of cognition, volition (conation), and affect” (p. 321). Several questions immediately emerge:

- A balance of what? For example, what kinds of capacities need to be in proportion? Are they invariably other virtues? Or can they also be neutral capacities such as concentration that can be used for good or bad?

- What aspects of the capacities are crucial? Is it their strength, their developmental level, or both?
- What does balance mean? Presumably, it implies that some sort of proportion between two or more capacities is crucial for the emergence of wisdom. However, what kind of proportion? Obviously, many balance theories will need to be thought through more precisely.

However, their current imprecision does not mean that balance theories are wrong. There are venerable examples in philosophical and contemplative disciplines. For example, “the interdependence of virtues” is an ancient philosophical idea dating to the Stoics, who held that “every virtue requires other virtues to complete it” (Murphy, 1992, p. 558). Likewise, Christian contemplatives claim that “the virtues are linked one to another” (St. Nikodimos & St. Makarios, 1993, p. 160), whereas Confucius warned that “possessed of courage but devoid of morality, a gentleman will make trouble while a small man will be a brigand” (Lau, 1979, p. 148).

However, wisdom balance theories are proposing more than an interdependence of virtues; they are proposing an interdependent emergence of an additional virtue, in this case wisdom. Can we find any specific examples of this kind of emergence? Yes, we can.

Buddhist psychology (*Abhidharma*) describes seven qualities or capacities that are crucial to fostering mental maturation and wisdom: the *seven factors of enlightenment*. These are composed of three calming factors (calm, concentration, and equanimity) and three energizing factors (effort, energy, and rapture), and a superordinate factor of mindfulness.

The calming and energizing factors need to be of comparable strength to balance each other and to avoid the disabling extremes of sleepiness and agitation. Moreover, when all seven are strong and balanced then there is the possibility of a major developmental leap: a leap into transconceptual awareness known as “cessation” and its resultant transconceptual wisdom (Kornfield, 1993). So balance theories can be venerable and valuable, but to be really fruitful they need to be carefully specified.

The best known example of a contemporary balance theory is Sternberg’s (1998). However, to call Sternberg’s proposal a “balance theory of wisdom” is an overstatement for several reasons. For example, it focuses only on practical wisdom (*phronesis*), arguing that “wisdom is procedural knowledge” (Sternberg, 1998, p. 353), and gives little consideration to developmental issues. Sternberg has made many and major contributions, but a real (balance) theory of wisdom will need to be far more encompassing.

Integration Hypotheses

A further kind of interaction between developmental capacities is frequently suggested as essential for sagacity: integration. For example, wisdom is said to result

from the integration of emotion and cognition (Shedlock & Cornelius, 2003) and from an “unusually integrated personality structure” (Orroll & Perlmutter, 1990, p. 160).

However, what does *integration* mean here? Once again, the hypotheses are not specific. Presumably integration implies some sort of harmonious, facilitative interaction between capacities. So, too, does balance. Therefore, does the idea of integration add anything to the idea of balance? If so, none of the integration hypotheses seems to suggest what this addition might be.

However, one possibility is that a mental function might foster (or cease to inhibit) beneficial interactions between other functions. For example, consider the possible role of defense mechanisms in integration and wisdom. Defenses can repress emotions, distort cognition, and redirect motivation in unhealthy, immature ways. They can also dissociate mental functions so that they are no longer readily available.

For example, consider the case of a talented woman with high postformal intelligence, idealistic motives, and a strong tendency to love. Let's also assume she has poor self-image, severe insecurity, and normal neurotic defense mechanisms. Consequently, she displaces her love away from people (who are too threatening) onto animals, represses her idealism (which is incongruent with her poor self-image), and uses her powerful intellect to rationalize her suboptimal behavior. Consequently, her positive emotions, motives, and intellect function suboptimally, and they keep her locked into unhealthy, unsatisfying, and unwise ways of living.

Now let's assume that she goes into psychotherapy. There she gradually improves her self-image, releases insecurity, and adopts more healthy defense mechanisms such as humor, altruism, and sublimation. Now her idealistic motives can be acknowledged, her love expressed, and her intellect used in service of these healthy, mature motives and emotions. As her motives, emotions, and intellect are increasingly aligned toward a common goal (e.g., serving and loving others), we can say they are becoming increasingly integrated. Over time, she may well learn how to achieve her goals more effectively and thereby grow in practical wisdom.

This case example suggests two possible ways in which capacities might become integrated and thereby foster practical wisdom. The first is through healthy psychodynamics, and the second way is through an alignment of capacities toward a common goal. As an aside, the absence of psychodynamics from discussions of wisdom research seems to be a major oversight, because of their power and pervasiveness as well as because ordinary defenses and higher level metadefenses can inhibit exceptional functioning (Maslow, 1970), likely including wisdom.

A Complicating Factor: The Kind of Wisdom

There has been an implicit assumption in combination, balance, and integration hypotheses that all varieties of wisdom require the same kind of balance

or integration. However, different varieties of wisdom may well differ in their requirements. For example, practical wisdom may require far higher levels of altruistic motivation and interpersonal sensitivity than does subjective wisdom. At the very least, when discussing facilitative capacities, we need to specify the kind of wisdom.

Wisdom as an Emergent of Higher Levels of Multiple Lines

Wisdom may emerge when two or more mental capacities become sufficiently mature, healthy, or both. For example, this is an implication of the Berlin group who describe wisdom as excellence in mind and virtue (Baltes & Staudinger, 2000).

A similar emergent principle is also found in contemplative disciplines. For example, they suggest that when multiple capacities and virtues are cultivated sufficiently, a variety of insights into the mind and life can emerge and yield intuitive, conceptual, and transconceptual wisdom. Although contemplative traditions differ in their emphasis on specific capacities and virtues, there is widespread agreement on the importance of seven interdependent capacities: mature ethics, emotions, motives, concentration, generosity, wisdom, and awareness (Walsh, 1999, 2010). Cultivating any subset of these will tend to cultivate others. This is yet another example of the recurrent idea of the interdependence of virtues.

Wisdom as a Distinct Developmental Line

Just as cognition, affect, and motivation are largely separate capacities and developmental lines, so too is wisdom. There is no doubt that wisdom is dependent on many other capacities such as cognition and motivation. However, these other capacities are also complex and interdependent. The psyche functions as an organic whole, and to tease out one capacity is in part an artifact of our focus and methods.

What are the implications of considering wisdom as a distinct developmental line? One is that we would expect to find, not a sudden emergence of wisdom at a specific developmental stage, but rather a continuum or spectrum, although perhaps, like cognition, with different processes and expressions at different stages. Perhaps we might expect a range of expressions from say, survival skills and street cunning at the lower end, to mid-level existential insights, to high-level transconceptual insights and transpersonal philosophizing at the upper end.

Summary of Levels and Lines

When we applied a developmental perspective to different hypotheses about the nature and genesis of wisdom, we discovered the seven major families of hypotheses described earlier.

So, which hypothesis is correct? Well, that's probably the wrong question. First, because what we see and measure as wisdom depends on our perspective. Second, because wisdom is doubtless the product of multiple developmental processes, several of these hypotheses may offer parts of the answer. Third, because there are likely several distinct kinds of wisdom, different processes may contribute differentially to each.

However, it is clear that we need to sharpen our thinking about the developmental nature of wisdom, and that the perspectives and methods we choose will determine what we identify as wisdom and how we understand it.

STATES OF MIND

Whereas stages of development persist, "states of mind"—otherwise known as "states of consciousness"—fluctuate. All of us cycle through multiple states daily, such as those of dreaming and dreamless sleep, as well as waking states that vary in alertness and clarity, for example.

States of mind can be ranked relative to the ordinary waking state according to their functional capacities (Tart, 2001). When we do so, three major classes emerge:

- *Lower states* of reduced function (e.g., delirium, intoxication)
- *Functionally specific states* in which some capacities are enhanced and others reduced (e.g., meditative states of great concentration but reduced perceptual sensitivity)
- *Higher states* that retain usual abilities while including heightened or additional capacities (meditative mindfulness with its heightened introspective and perceptual sensitivity)

Contemplative disciplines make several radical claims about states of mind. First, they suggest that all of us potentially have available to us families of functionally specific and higher states, and that contemplative practices can foster these. Examples from yoga include functionally specific states of intense concentration, such as *nirvikalpa samadhi* and higher states such as *sahaj samadhi*. Moreover, they claim that many of these contemplative states of mind can offer multiple psychological, somatic, and spiritual benefits. These states may heal, catalyze development, cultivate specific capacities such as positive emotions, as well as produce insights, understanding, and wisdom (Goleman, 1996).

In other words, contemplative disciplines suggest that certain kinds of insight, understanding, and wisdom are more likely to occur in specific states of mind, and some may occur only in specific states. For example, "It is axiomatic in the yogic tradition that 'knowledge is different in different states of consciousnesses'"

(Shearer, 1989, p. 26). Likewise, in Taoist contemplation, it is only by reaching a state of stillness and stability through practices such as “entering stillness” or “fasting the heart-mind” that a person can attain “the Great Pure Realm” in which one recognizes that one is actually an integral part of the Tao (Wong, 1997).

So mind states are far more malleable than is usually recognized, there are many more functionally specific and higher states potentially available to us than we recognize, and some of these may foster exceptional capacities, including sapiential ones. However, contemplative traditions aim not just to glimpse altered states and higher perspectives, but to stabilize them. The goal is to transform transient states into enduring traits, higher states into higher stages, peak experiences into plateau experiences, and epiphanies into personalities (Goleman, 1996; Tart, 2001). The religious scholar Huston Smith (1997) suggested that the goal is “to transform flashes of illumination into abiding light.” The result is that brief glimpses extend into continuous vision, novel perspectives become permanent metaperspectives, and new insights develop into enduring understandings.

In short, certain functionally specific and higher states may be doorways through which wisdom—in the form of valuable insights, understandings, perspectives and resultant ways of life—can emerge and find expression. Equally important, contemplative disciplines have developed specific practices and inner technologies to cultivate these states and their insights.

However, there is an important caveat. Obviously, the insights and wisdom of higher developmental stages may not be fully comprehensible to people at earlier stages—this is the phenomenon of *stage-specificity*. So too, the insights and wisdom of higher states may not be fully comprehensible to those without direct experience of them as a result of *state-specificity* (Tart, 2001). In contemplative terms, this wisdom remains “self-secret” (Tibetan Buddhism) or *sod* (hidden, Judaism), until one “opens the eye of contemplation” (Christianity), and develops the necessary “*adaequatio*” (Schumacher, 1977; Walsh, 1990; Walsh & Vaughan, 1993). As Immanuel Kant put it, without the requisite experience our concepts remain “empty.” The crucial implication is that our ability to recognize and use wisdom may depend on our level of development and our experience of relevant states of mind. In short, wisdom may be stage-dependent and state-dependent.

TYPES

The final major dimension of integral theory is *types*. Whereas stages develop and states fluctuate, types tend to persist (Wilber, 2006). They are relatively stable orientations such as Jung’s introversion and extroversion, and the Big Five personality factors.

An obvious question is whether wisdom may be correlated with, or even intimately linked to, certain personality types. For example, could wise people simply be open-minded introverts? Some types (e.g., high intelligence, openmindedness) display modest correlations with wisdom related performance (Baltes & Staudinger, 2000) Yet, wisdom is clearly not simply a (function of) type, and so we need not consider it in detail as we examine the varieties of wisdom.

THE VARIETIES OF WISDOM

For thousands of years, philosophers have distinguished two kinds of individual wisdom: subjective and objective, *sophia* and *phronesis*, and similarly in Buddhism, *prajna* and *upaya*. However, there is an obvious question: Are these two categories sufficient or do we need to add further and more refined distinctions? Let's examine practical wisdom first, and begin by offering a definition that is a subset of the more encompassing definition of general wisdom presented earlier.

Practical Wisdom

Practical wisdom is a function of skill in responding to the central existential issues of life in ways that enhance the deep wellbeing of all those that the responses affect.

Life presents us with a wide array of existential issues that range from survival to personal meaning to social laws and politics. Therefore, an obvious question is "Is practical wisdom significantly domain specific?" In other words, can we be relatively wise in one area of life, and less so, or even foolish, in others?

It certainly appears so. For example, political wisdom is not always accompanied by parental wisdom, as Gandhi—who is widely revered as a saint because of his political activities—painfully demonstrated. He announced that "All of India is my family. . . . But he never quite learned to be a father to his sons." Rather, he expected them to be "junior saints," even to the point of denying them a formal education "on the grounds that character was more precious than learning" (Fischer, 1954, p. 127, 128). The results were less than optimal.

So what accounts for domain differences in practical wisdom? A major factor is probably the different amounts of time and attention given to them with resultant differences in domain relevant knowledge and skills. Gandhi gave enormous amounts of time to his political work and significantly less to his family. Yet, the cognitive processes involved are probably similar across domains. Therefore, it seems reasonable to think of practical wisdom as a single type with multiple expressions.

Subjective Wisdom: The Several Aspects of *Sophia*

However, subjective wisdom is a different matter. The exact nature of *sophia* and how it differs from *phronesis* were ambiguous throughout Greek history, and when I wrote to Trevor Curnow (T. Curnow, personal communication, 2010) seeking clarification, he responded that “tidiness is not out there to be found in the case of *sophia*.” Aristotle described *sophia* as knowledge of first principles or causes (Curnow, 1999, 2011). However, it is not at all clear exactly what kind of knowledge it entails and how it is to be acquired.

There is certainly widespread public belief in the importance of intuition for wisdom. When I’ve spoken on wisdom, a common audience response is as follows:

These intellectual ideas are all very well, but I’ve met some amazing people, such as grandmothers and tribal people, who wouldn’t understand any of this. They can’t tell you how they do it, yet everyone turns to them with their problems and they are respected as wise elders.

This, of course, is tacit knowledge, knowledge that can’t be easily verbalized or communicated, and Sternberg (1998, p. 351) considers it to be “the core of wisdom,” or at least of practical wisdom. This is consistent with two central ideas of intuition, both of which are supported by considerable research: (a) that we can know much more than we can conceptualize and (b) that we can know much more than we know (Meyers, 2004; Vaughan, 1979).

Yet, some wisdom can be communicated; otherwise, there would be no wise books or teachers. Thus, subjective wisdom may comprise tacit and explicit knowledge as well as intuitive and conceptual processes. This suggests that we need to distinguish two kinds of subjective wisdom: intuitive apprehension and conceptual understanding.

Intuitive apprehension may well be sufficient for acquiring much subjective wisdom and expressing it as practical wisdom. Yet, conceptual analysis and understanding can enrich intuitions in multiple ways, such as by examining, extending, and articulating them, drawing out implications, and linking them into networks of insights and ideas. At postformal operational levels, intuition and analysis may merge so that one sees the interconnections of networks of ideas, which is why Wilber (2001) describes this level of cognition as “vision logic” (p. 184). For Aurobindo (1982), this capacity for vision logic emerges at the transpersonal developmental stage which he called the “higher mind,” which “can freely express itself in single ideas, but its most characteristic movement is a mass ideation, a system or totality of truth-seeing at a single view; the relations of idea with idea . . . (p. 940).

So far we have differentiated *sophia*, or subjective wisdom, into two kinds of knowledge and two corresponding cognitive processes for acquiring it. Yet, there

may be further distinctions. For contemplative disciplines insist on the possibility and importance of a radically different subjective wisdom.

The contemplative claim is that specific states of mind permit a direct transconceptual insight into the fundamental nature of self and reality. This insight is said to be neither a conceptually mediated understanding, nor even a cognitively mediated intuition. Rather, it is said to be transconceptual and transrational, a direct apprehension of consciousness by consciousness, Mind by Mind. Examples of one family of such states—states of pure awareness or pure consciousness—include “cessation” (Theravadin Buddhism), *Ayin* (Judaism), “mindless awareness” (Christianity’s Meister Eckhart), “no mind” (Zen), *nirvikalpa samadhi* (yoga), or what Robert Forman (1990) called a “pure consciousness event.” The result is a transconceptual apprehension and wisdom known as, for example, *jnana* (Hinduism), *prajna* (Buddhism), *ma’rifah* (Islam), or *gnosis* (Christianity; Walsh, 2011). This claim of a contemplative apprehension “higher than discursive reasoning” is so widespread that Huxley (1972) named it “The Second Doctrine of the Perennial Philosophy” and claimed that “it is to be found in all the great religions of the world” (p. 15). Transconceptual apprehension has also been an important part of Western philosophy and its understanding of wisdom, although a part almost entirely lost to contemporary academics (Trowbridge, 2011).

So radically distinct is this epistemological mode and the wisdom it yields that it is said that “the wise are completely free from all concepts about the true nature of reality” (Gyatso, 2003, p. 42). However, like intuition, this transconceptual wisdom or gnosis can subsequently be partly elaborated into concepts, and it can even inspire whole psychologies and philosophies such as Buddhist *Abhidharma* psychology and Vedantic philosophy.

It is not surprising that these radical epistemological claims have sparked academic debates about their validity. The best known debate is between constructivists such as Steven Katz and contemplatively sympathetic philosophers such as Robert Forman. Katz (1988) argued that all experience is constructed and limited by historically and culturally situated cognition, and so any and all claims for transconceptual knowing are necessarily false. Yet, the philosopher Donald Rothberg (1989) pointed out that Katz’s argument is itself historically and culturally limited, and thereby supported Forman and others who argued for the validity of “pure consciousness events” (Forman, 1990).

However, the important points for wisdom studies are as follows. Across cultures and centuries, contemplatives have claimed that it is possible to cultivate transconceptual insights and that an extremely important kind of wisdom ensues. This wisdom is radically different from ordinary intuition and conceptual understanding in its nature and results. It is not only illuminating, but also potentially liberating, being capable of significantly healing, deconditioning, and freeing the mind from its conventional “consensus trance” (Tart, 2001). Most important, such wisdom is said to help catalyze an awakening of the mind to radically more mature, healthy, and veridical states variously described as, for

example, enlightenment, liberation, introversion (St. Augustine in Christianity), *Ruach Hakodesh* (Judaism), *fana* (Islam), *satori* (Zen), or the Jade Pure Realm of Taoism (Goleman, 1996; Walsh, 2011; Wong, 1997).

Equally important, contemplatives claim to have developed mental disciplines—sapiential and soteriological technologies—to realize this wisdom. Some of these disciplines recognize and foster all three kinds of subjective wisdom through a specific sequence of practices. For example, in yoga, one first listens to (*sravana*) and reflects on (*manana*) teachings to develop conceptual understanding. Then, one meditates on them (*nididhyasana*) to gain a deeper intuitive apprehension, and last, one enters a state of intense concentration (*samadhi*) in which transconceptual insight (*jnana*) emerges (Free John, 1988). An analogous, although not identical, process occurs with the Christian contemplative practice of *lectio divina*. Here reading (*lectio*) leads to conceptual reflection (*meditatio*), and culminates in interior silence and insight (*contemplatio*) that becomes “too deep for words” (Hall, 1988). An important implication, as with virtues in general, is that different kinds of wisdom may be mutually facilitating.

Another implication is that there may be different kinds of sages: sapiential specialists who might be remarkably wise in one arena, less so in others.

Conclusions About the Varieties of Wisdom

The traditional Western philosophical lumping of all wisdom into only two categories—*sophia* and *phronesis*, subjective and practical—is insufficiently precise. We can retain the category of *phronesis* or practical wisdom for now. However, we need to distinguish at least three epistemologically, cognitively, and phenomenologically distinct modes of subjective wisdom: intuitive apprehension, conceptual understanding, and transconceptual insight.

Are there further distinctions to be made? Probably so. This article provides only an initial exploration, and future studies will doubtless add further refinements, such as developmental analyses and distinguishing among different kinds of intuition. However, for now it is enough to suggest that there are distinct kinds of subjective wisdom, that there are methods to cultivate all of them, that investigating these methods should be a high priority, and that an integral methodological pluralism combining contemplative, phenomenological, and experimental approaches may be an optimal way to research the varieties of wisdom.

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