A LITTLE WISDOM CAN BE A DANGEROUS THING:

THE TRAPS AND SEDUCTIONS OF WISDOM

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ABSTRACT: Wisdom is usually regarded, both historically and in contemporary research, as an unalloyed good. But is wisdom *always* beneficial? Or could it, like other virtues, sometimes be misunderstood and misused? This article reviews evidence—from the world's religions, contemplative practices, psychologies, and philosophies, as well as from contemporary research—suggesting that wise insights and practices can have their traps and seductions. The article identifies six types of such traps: cognitive, emotional, developmental, egocentric, social, and those associated with altered states of consciousness. Many traps can lead to opposites of wisdom, and there are several kinds of opposites. Traps are more likely to occur with initial rather than mature insights, and when unbalanced by other virtues. Specific wise insights and practices require further wise insights and virtues to balance, complement, and protect them.

> The fool doth think he is wise, but the wise man knows himself to be a fool
> Shakespeare (c. 1600/1991) (*As You Like It*, 1.3. 31-32)

Wisdom has long been revered as one of life's greatest gifts, a master virtue that guides and crowns a life well lived. The Book of Proverbs, for example, exclaims that wisdom "is more precious than jewels, and nothing you desire can compare to her" (Bible NRS. Proverbs 3:15). Many others agree, and most contemporary research seems to assume that wisdom is an unalloyed good (Sternberg & Glück, 2019). However, here is an obvious question: Is wisdom *always* beneficial? Or can it sometimes produce problems and even inflame pathologies?

After all, other virtues can sometimes be problematic, especially if insufficiently developed and unbalanced by other virtues. For example, Stoic philosophers argued for *antakolouthia*: the idea that every virtue requires other virtues to complement and complete it (Murphy, 1992). Confucius gave a graphic example, saying that, "Possessed of courage but devoid of morality, a gentlemen will make trouble while a small man will be a brigand" (Lau, 1979, p. 148).

When unbalanced by other strengths, virtues can spawn vices. Could this also be true of wisdom? Sadly, it could. Not so much in its mature forms, which integrate many perspectives and profound insights into life, and embody well-honed life skills. Certainly, however, the earliest sparks of wisdom such as initial insights can be tricky, especially when not yet deeply understood, integrated, or balanced.

Researchers often discuss wisdom as though it were a single entity. However, it is clearly a multifaceted capacity with distinct subtypes (Walsh, 2011). To keep things simple, we can note that both Western philosophy and Buddhist psychology

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identify two similar major subtypes. These are insight/understanding (*sophia* and *prajna*) and practical wisdom (*phronesis* and Buddhism's *upaya*, which is usually translated as "skillful means"). Combining these two elements leads to the understanding and definition of wisdom (Walsh, 2015a), which underlies this article:

• *Wisdom* is deep nuanced insight and understanding of oneself and the central existential issues of life, plus practical skill in responding effectively and benevolently.

It seems that specific kinds of wisdom need to be balanced by both other virtues and by other kinds of wisdom. For example, insight into the extent of suffering in life is crucial for living wisely and compassionately. Yet the recognition of suffering can lead to pessimism and despair (Benatar, 2018) unless balanced by other insights, such as how to alleviate suffering, and by other virtues such as compassion and joy (Goldstein, 2020). Without these balances, initial wise insights can be misunderstood and misused, and then fall prey to at least six types of traps: cognitive, emotional, developmental, egocentric, social, and those associated with altered states of consciousness.

My understanding of these traps draws from multiple sources. These include decades of studying the world's psychological, philosophical, and wisdom literatures—which are all too rich in accounts of human foibles—as well as decades of practicing, teaching, and researching both psychotherapy and contemplative practices such as meditation. Additional sources include specific dialogues with other psychotherapists and meditation teachers, as well as research studies on contemplative practices and problems, advanced stages of adult development, psychedelic use, and altered states of consciousness. Of course, as a human being, I have fallen into all too many of these traps myself, and so have considerable personal knowledge of them.

Cognitive Traps: When Insights are Misunderstood or Misused

In one of history's most famous poems on learning, Alexander Pope (1963) wrote in 1711:

A little learning is a dangerous thing;

Drink deep, or taste not the Pierian spring:

There shallow draughts intoxicate the brain,

And drinking largely sobers us again.

Pope was onto something important: initial insights, either intellectual or sapiential, can cause problems. They can intoxicate when overvalued, inflame pride when used for ego aggrandizement, and close the mind to further learning and deeper insights.

Overlooking Greater Depths

Many insights can be appreciated at successively greater depths. For example, one can recognize that all things change. However, one may not recognize that at deeper levels, all experience is in constant flux, or deeper still, that one's apparently stable egoic self-sense is actually a continuously changing kaleidoscope of evanescent thoughts, feelings, and images (Goldstein, 2020). Worse, one can not only overlook deeper levels of subtlety and significance, but also believe one has seen as deeply as possible (Schumacher, 1977). It is a safe bet that there are usually deeper levels and implications awaiting recognition.

Unintegrated Insights

Deep insights can transform lives and civilizations. Just think of Confucius' insights into healthy relationships, or slavery abolitionists' insights into the worth and dignity of all people. Yet to be truly transformative, insights cannot remain as merely abstract ideas and tidy theories. Rather, they need to be integrated through a multistep process. First, insights have to be carefully investigated, their implications explored, and then allowed to displace outdated beliefs and misunderstandings. Next, they must be integrated into a richer, deeper, broader understanding of life, and finally expressed in skillful behavior.

Contemplatives long ago discovered how to foster this integration and transformation through reflection and meditation. For example, Confucians, Buddhists, and yogis all recommend specific cycles of assimilation. It begins with first listening to teachings or studying wise texts, then reflecting on them intellectually, and finally meditating on them with clear penetrating awareness, a cycle which Christians call *lectio divina* or sacred reading (Hall, 1988). Unless they are integrated, potentially envisioning insights have little transformative power. As Mohammed said, "Whoever has not learned from his experience is not wise"(Angha, 1995, p. 89).

Reorientation or Disorientation?

Deep insights cannot only reorient. They can also disorient, and they can do this in several ways. For example, they can undermine cherished beliefs, reveal the arbitrariness of social conventions, unveil the groundlessness of assumptions, and demonstrate the precariousness of existence. Disorientation can happen at different levels with successively deep insights, and we will consider deillusionment, groundlessness, and ineffability.

Deillusionment

For many people, middle age brings a disconcerting discovery about their life:

A man discovers how much of it has been based on illusions, and he is faced with the task of de-illusionment. . .. a recognition that long-held assumptions and beliefs about self and world are not true. (Levinson, 1978, p. 192)

Such discoveries include the facts that one will not live forever, and will probably not change the world much, or be long remembered. These recognitions can be disorienting, even depressing, at first. However, ideally they clear the way for more realistic, healthy, and mature understandings of one's self and life. Consequently, "The loss of illusions is thus a desirable and normal result of maturity"(Levinson, 1978, p. 193); moreover, not only a result of maturity, but also a cause of maturity and wisdom.

Groundlessness: Nowhere to Stand

Deeper and more challenging than deillusionment is the apprehension of what existentialists call "groundlessness." This is the recognition that one's beliefs, understandings, and values are not solidly grounded in unquestionable truths and bedrock reality. Rather, our entire worldview—our understanding of our self, life, and world; as well as our resulting values, choices, and priorities—are all only assumptions, our best guesses about the way things are and should be (Yalom, 1980). They are all merely mental constructions based on fallible assumptions. Most of these assumptions are plagiarized from the surrounding culture, since in childhood and at conventional adult stages of development, we largely accept our culture's conventions, myths, and mores as unquestionable truths (Killen & Smetana, 2006).

We mold these innumerable assumptions into a more or less coherent worldview: a mental map, picture, and story about the world and ourselves (Naugle, 2002). Then we slumber in anesthetic comfort, assuming that our map of reality is reality, rather than merely a rough and ready mental representation of reality. Then we live in, as, and from this mental representation, blithely unaware that we are role playing and sleep walking in a virtual reality of our own making.

Existentialists describe the choice to deny our role in constructing our maps, meanings, and values as "bad faith" (Satre) or "inauthenticity" (Heidegger) (Yalom, 1980).[1]

This inauthenticity is tragic yet understandable. For to really recognize the groundless self-constructed nature of our understanding and values is no small challenge. It requires acknowledging and living with the uncertainty and mystery of life, and then asking anew life's most fundamental questions, such as: How and how much can I really know? Who and what am I? What really matters? How should I live and relate? In short, it requires recognizing groundlessness and mystery, and then taking a new level of responsibility for one's identity and life (Yalom, 1980).

Not surprisingly, these recognitions can initially provoke profound anxiety, or better angst, which in extreme cases can explode into an existential crisis. For as

Susanne Cook- Greuter (2013) points out, "Now there is truly no place to stand on. One... must embrace one's need for meaning while, simultaneously, understanding the futility of such an endeavor" (p. 81).

This is why existentialists emphasize the importance of courage (Yalom, 1980), first for seeing deeply into life (sophic wisdom), and then for living authentically in accordance with what is seen (practical wisdom). Both sophic and practical wisdom require courage.

Ineffability: The Limits of Thinking and Language

Deeper still than groundlessness is the Buddhist recognition of *shunyata*—often translated as emptiness, but also as ineffability. This penetrating contemplative insight—which is the basis of Madhyamika, "the central philosophy of Buddhism" (Murti, 1960)—recognizes that experiences and phenomena cannot be fully comprehended or described by any concept. At bottom, all phenomena are transconceptual and ineffable.

We can certainly apply names. However, no name does justice to the numberless dimensions, endless richness, boundless interconnections, or bottomless mystery of the universe, or anything in it. As usual, the Taoist sage Lao Tzu said it beautifully:

Existence is beyond the power of words to define:

Terms may be used but none of them are absolute....

if name be needed, wonder names them both:

From wonder into wonder Existence opens (Bynner, 1962, p. 25)

Language is perhaps humankind's greatest invention, and has enabled humans to create civilizations and a worldwide networked superintelligence that can save lives, change the world, and comprehend the cosmos. Yet despite its miraculous capacities, language is doubly problematic (Kasulis, 1981). It is fundamentally limited in ways we do not usually recognize, and can also entrance and condition us.

However, three capacities—precise philosophical analysis, profound contemplative insight, and maturation to the concept aware stage of ego development—can each unveil these linguistic limitations, and reveal that the fundamental nature of phenomena can never be fully grasped conceptually or conveyed linguistically (Wilber, 2017). Rather, this nature is inconceivable and inexpressible because, "The ultimate nature of reality transcends all concepts of what it might be" (Gyamtso, 2003, p. 106). As Radhakrishnan (1989), who was both an eminent philosopher and president of India put it, "the real transcends, surrounds, and overflows our miserable categories" (p. 43).

Thus, it is not only that our usual beliefs and understandings of the world may be erroneous. It is that the elements which constitute our beliefs and understandings—such as our thoughts, concepts, and language—are inadequate to fully capture and encode the fundamental nature of the world or ourselves. Consequently, no belief, understanding, concept, or thought does full justice to what it attempts to describe. All phenomena and experiences are radically transconceptual.

This recognition can be deeply disorienting. Yet contemplatives in general and Buddhists in particular spend years cultivating and refining such recognitions. But why? Why destabilize everything from one's self-image to one's trust in thought and language?

Because these recognitions liberate and disembed us, first from false beliefs about ourselves and the world, and then from the hypnotic trance of concepts and language. Recognizing the ineffable transconceptual nature of phenomena is liberating because we are largely conditioned and compelled, not just by things per se, but by our concepts and beliefs about them. When we see through the conceptual overlay to the fundamental ineffable nature of things, then we are no longer so compelled by our thoughts and beliefs about these things.

Even the most compelling and destructive reactions are undercut because as Nagarjuna, one of Buddhism's greatest philosophers put it, "Greed, hatred, bewilderment depend on what is conceived as desirable, despicable or confusing"(Batchelor, 2000, p. 150). Buddhists regard this recognition of the ineffability of all phenomena as profoundly liberating and as a crucial kind of wisdom—transconceptual wisdom or *prajna* (Batchelor, 2000; Gyamtso, 2003).

The Traps of Disorienting Insights

Deillusionment, groundlessness, and *shunyata* can eventually be deeply liberating. However, they can initially be deeply disorienting. They disorient because they strip away our individual, conventional, and conceptual assumptions, and leave us feeling naked, ungrounded, and unfamiliar. This can be deeply unsettling and anxiety provoking, and after my own initial experience of ineffability my teacher immediately asked, "Was there fear?"

Yes there was, and one trap is to retreat into distraction and unconsciousness rather than face and learn from the disorientation and fear. Sadly, conventional culture offers almost no understanding or support for those navigating these challenges. However, culture does offer numerous ways—from television and trivia to consumerism and chemicals—to distract and go unconscious. As a result, growth stops, stagnation ensues, and metapathologies such as cynicism and meaninglessness flourish (Maslow, 1971).

Yet always the possibility of further growth remains. Then one recognizes that disorientation, confusion, paradox, and even polydox are not necessarily signs of pathology and of something having gone awry. Rather, they can be the natural result of standing in a liminal phase. This is the phase of having let go of an old

limited and limiting belief system, but not yet having formulated a new more accurate and comprehensive one that integrates one's new insights. This is one of many reasons why becoming wiser requires becoming comfortable with confusion and not knowing.

The entrance to Japanese Buddhist temples often features a demonic figure on either side. "These are called guardians of Truth and their names are Paradox and Confusion" (Hagen, 2003, p. 3). Those would attain wisdom and liberation must pass through both. Paradox, confusion, and disorientation can be doorways to wisdom.

Conclusions About Disorientation

Each of these three ground shaking insights—deillusionment, groundlessness, and ineffability—are successively deeper insights into the ways we make and mistake our world. Each is an increasingly profound recognition that what we usually take to be reality are only maps of reality. Those maps—and even the elements from which they are woven; elements such as beliefs, language, and concepts—are only representations, merely mental signs and symbols. As such, they can be useful pointers but can also distort and entrance.

Those who contemplate these insights deeply may increasingly recognize representations for what they are, and eventually transcend and disidentify from them. Such contemplatives can then rest peacefully in and as the awareness behind all representations, able to create and use them as needed, but no longer entranced by them (Rabjam, 2001). Resting as pure awareness can occur for contemplatives in witness states of consciousness, or in exceptionally developmentally mature adults at the unitive stage of adult development. Such people are "Tuned to rather than preoccupied with whatever enters awareness" (Cook-Greuter, 2013, p. 87).

The Power and Traps of Being Able to Take Multiple Perspectives

For much of life, we largely accept our perspectives and interpretations of the world without question. How we see and what we see are simply assumed to be true, and there is little recognition of the possibility or value of taking other perspectives. This is the basis of dogmatism—an unwise stance by any measure, and for Buddhists "any dogmatic position is incompatible with freedom" (Batchelor, 2000, p. 67).

However, as psychological development increases, so does the capacity to adopt multiple perspectives, and this capacity is central to psychological maturation and wisdom (Lapsley, 2006; Walsh, 2015b). This capacity takes a major step at the first postconventional stage of ego development known as the pluralist or self-questioning stage. It is pluralist because one now recognizes that there are always multiple perspectives and interpretations one can take on any situation (Wilber, 2017). In addition, one "can no longer disregard the enormous diversity of people and their beliefs, values, and preferences. They all seem equally valid and

worthy of consideration" (Cook-Greuter, 2013, p. 53). This is a major developmental achievement that may be crucial for wisdom.

However, it can also be overwhelming. For while one can now recognize multiple perspectives, one cannot yet fully integrate them into a coherent metaperspective. That is a more demanding mental task which requires further development (Wilber, 2017). This disjunction—between the ability to recognize multiple perspectives but the inability to fully integrate them—can spawn multiple misunderstandings and wisdom traps:

The first is *perspectival overwhelm* in which a person feels disoriented and overwhelmed by the multiplicity of apparently conflicting perspectives and interpretations that they now recognize. The second wisdom trap is to assume that, since one cannot effectively evaluate and compare these perspectives and the interpretations they offer, they must be of equal value and validity. This stance correctly recognizes that there are always multiple perspectives and interpretations one can take on anything. However, it incorrectly concludes that they must be equally valid. As Ken Wilber puts it, this "thoroughly confuses the fact that no perspective is final with the notion that all perspectives are therefore simply equal" (Wilber, 1995, p. 202).

This equality claim can devolve further. Then it becomes the belief that, if one cannot evaluate different perspectives and their accompanying beliefs and values, one should avoid any judging or ranking of different perspectives, beliefs, and values. At the extreme, this becomes the claim that one should avoid all judging and all value hierarchies. We can call this "the evaluation avoidance trap." Unfortunately, no evaluation means no discernment, which means no wisdom.

The attempt to avoid judgment stems from a well-intentioned desire not to belittle any individual or group. However, it is based on at least two major errors. First, it conflates two distinct meanings of "judgment": condemnation and discernment. Condemnation leads to anger and righteousness in the judger, as well as guilt and defensiveness in those judged, all of which inhibit wisdom.

In contrast, discernment recognizes and acknowledges differences, but does not condemn them. It thereby fosters wisdom since discernment is a key element and a cause of wisdom (Walsh, 2015a). Moreover, the claim that one should avoid all value judgements is itself a value judgement, and is therefore a *performative contradiction*: a statement that, by being stated contradicts itself.

These assumptions easily slide into the postmodern belief that there is no truth; there are only social constructions. In fact, the claim that "there is no truth….summarizes the message of virtually all truly postmodern writers" (Wilber, 2017, p. 5).

If there are no universal truths or values, then it follows, for many postmodern and critical theorists, that all universal truth claims or moral principles are only power plays (Pluckrose & Lindsay, 2020). They are merely attempts—either overtly

through force or covertly through ideology—to impose some one's or some group's beliefs and values on others.

Not surprisingly, these confused assumptions result in a confused sense of groundlessness

and overwhelm, which Wilber calls *aperspectival madness*. It is aperspectival because no perspective can be evaluated as better, truer, or more moral than another. It is madness because these assumptions result "in massive self-contradictions and incoherency" (Wilber, 2017, p. 8). These assumptions underlie some of the excesses of postmodernism, which Wilber considers an expression of the pluralist stage of development.

One way out of this conceptual confusion is through further growth to the *integral-aperspectival* stage of development (Wilber, 1995; 1998). It is aperspectival in that it does not fixate on any one perspective, and integral because it integrates multiple perspectives into a coherent metaperspective.

At this later stage of development, one can coordinate insights from multiple perspectives. One can intuitively evaluate their value and validity, weight them accordingly, integrate them into an encompassing metaperspective, and therefore respond more appropriately and wisely. With this, one grows in both sophic and practical wisdom (Walsh, 2015b).

Even at this stage, there are two further wisdom traps. The first is to assume that any perspective is final or complete. The second is to stop the process of opening to further perspectives and possibilities (Almaas, 2014) since "reality is limitless in the way that it reveals itself" (Maiwandi, 2014, p. xi). Advanced perspectival wisdom recognizes that all perspectives and even metaperspectives are limited, and "no view or combination of views, no matter how consistent, can completely exhaust the truth of reality" (Maiwandi, 2014, p. xii). Accordingly, one's new metaperspective can be integrated with other metaperspectives to create meta-metaperspectives in an open ended process of discovery in which one finds that "each loss of one's viewpoint is a progress" (Satprem, 1968, p. 84), And "there is no particular point of view that we need to hold on to and grasp"(Adyashanti, 2008, p. 96).

For such contemplatives, the final perspectival stance and corresponding wisdom is to stand open to all perspectives but attached to none. For Hua Yen Buddhism this is described as the "round view" and for the contemporary sage, Almaas, it is the "view of totality" (Almaas, 2017; Chang, 1971).

Overvaluing Insights

Deep insights can be life changing. Yet deep insights can both empower and overpower. Swept up in a moment of inspiration, it is easy to overestimate its depth, implications, transformative power, and enduring impact.

Yet no insight is final. No matter how deep and impactful, further insights and implications always await discovery. Moreover, as psychotherapists keep discovering, insights do not necessarily produce personal transformation (Corsini & Wedding, 2019). Often insights must first be carefully investigated, digested, and integrated.

In addition, all insights eventually fade, and to cling to them is to stagnate. As the Zen teacher Adyashanti (2000) warns, "even the greatest revelations must not be clung to, or you'll end up with a head full of memories and a heart empty of substance. The truth is ever new, existing only in the now" (p. 96).

Yet though insights eventually fade, they can point the way to deeper insights, understanding, and wisdom if used skillfully. "Held properly, these experiences begin to function as 'strange attractors', pulling us toward our future through the increased awareness they bring. We may not be able to fully actualize these experiences immediately… but they bend the trajectory of our lives"(Bache, 2019, p. 205). At their deepest, insights open into a self-catalyzing flow of further insights that flower into "a life of ceaseless discovery" (Almaas, 2014).

Superficial and Destructive Interpretations

As the saying goes, "anything that can be misused will be misused," and sadly, insights are no exception. Insights can be valid and potentially valuable, yet still be misinterpreted and misused.

For example, consider the principle of *karma*—the Indian and Taoist philosophy of causation—which has recently migrated into popular Western culture. At its heart, it contains a valid and valuable insight: our intentions and actions, especially moral ones, condition the mind and create corresponding consequences. As the English proverb puts it, "As you sow, so shall you reap." Interpreted wisely, this recognition becomes a spur to live ethically, kindly, and wisely, and the Indian philosopher Radhakrishnan (1989) even suggested, "There is no doctrine that is so valuable in life and conduct as the karma theory"(p. 249).

Yet when interpreted superficially, foolishly, or defensively, the same insight becomes a trap. For example, it can be used to avoid responsibility, "it's just my karma to be this way"; to blame others for their plight, "it's their karma to be poor"; and to deny one's responsibility to help. This is foolishness, the opposite of practical wisdom.

An insight can be valid and profound, yet still used foolishly. To be used wisely and well, insights must be supported by both other insights and by benevolent intentions. Wisdom requires other wisdoms and virtues to flourish fully.

Clinging to Outdated Skills

Today's problems are often yesterday's solutions. All of us cling to certain outdated beliefs and defensive maneuvers that may have served us well in childhood, but

now only limit and hurt us. Growth requires not only releasing old beliefs, but also outdated understandings and skills.

Subtle versions of this trap can occur even in exceptionally wise and mature individuals, such as when they persist in using practices that once fostered their growth, but now hinder it. The Buddha offered a classic parable of this. Imagine, he said, a person wanting to cross a river who built a raft, crossed from one shore to the other, but then continued their journey carrying the raft on their head. "What do you think?" asked the Buddha. "By doing so, would that man be doing what should be done... with that raft?" (Ñāṇamoli & Bodhi, 1995, p. 228). Even aspects of Buddhist wisdom and practices are to be relinquished when outgrown.

Even skillful practices can sometimes become outdated and problematic. For example, in learning to manage challenging emotions such as anger, it may initially be very skillful to apply antidotes such as relaxation, forgiveness, love, or compassion. Indeed, much psychotherapy and initial meditation involves learning such skills.

However, advanced meditators may be able to merely witness anger equanimously, and allow it to dissolve in the healing light of awareness (Brown, 2006), since "awareness—by and of itself—can be curative" (Perls, 1969, p. 16). At this stage, actively inducing antidotes, even benevolent ones, may agitate the mind, perpetuate a belief that experiencing anger is bad, and stir up unnecessary mental conflict. In the words of Longchenpa, one of Tibet's greatest sages, applying antidotes at this stage, "would be like wanting to make water clearer yet stirring it with a stick; antidotes themselves are just as much as something to be abandoned as they are something used to abandon something else" (Rabjam, 2001, p. 297).

Wisdom sees that specific insights and practical wisdom skills are best applied at specific times and stages of development. This is an example of a broader principle: wise insights and practices require other insights to contextualize them, and to recognize when and where to apply them appropriately. This is a central principle of practical wisdom.

Limiting Beliefs

  We are what we think (The Buddha) (Byrom, 1976, p. 3)

Thoughts are powerful, and unrecognized thoughts even more so. For unrecognized thoughts become unquestioned beliefs, and beliefs become presuppositions which filter perception and interpretation, shape our understanding of the world, and constitute our self-concept and world view.

In short, beliefs are thoughts about reality that we mistake for reality. Such beliefs easily become self-fulfilling prophecies, determining who and what we believe we are, what we can and cannot do, and what we can and cannot become. As Henry Ford is thought to have said, "Whether you think you can or you think you can't—

you are right." These ideas are the basis of both cognitive therapy and of multiple meditations which focus on recognizing thoughts (Corsini & Wedding, 2019).

Limiting beliefs are especially damaging. These are beliefs that circumscribe potentials and limit possibilities by telling us that we cannot do or be something that we are actually capable of. Common limiting beliefs include: "I can't…", "I could never…", "I'm too… to be able to do…"

Extreme limiting beliefs create pathology, and a well-known example is the "cognitive triad" of depression (Corsini & Wedding, 2019). This consists of three limiting beliefs about oneself, the world, and the future: thoughts such as "I'm bad, the world is overwhelming, and it's always going to be this way.

Some limiting beliefs are based on valuable gems of wisdom about human nature. However, when insights about human nature are mistaken for insights about the limits of human nature, then potentials are overlooked and possibilities circumscribed. Widespread examples include limiting beliefs about psychological conflict and development.

Freud famously recognized the power and pervasiveness of intrapsychic conflicts. He unveiled conflicts between the cravings of the instinctual id and the constraints imposed by the superego, as well as conflicts between the conscious and unconscious aspects of the psyche. Freud's discovery was an invaluable insight into human nature and it raised the bar for wisdom. No longer could one simply assume, as had Socrates, that knowing the good would automatically lead to seeking it, because less noble unconscious motives, carefully hidden from awareness by psychological defenses, can all too easily subvert good intentions. Freud and most psychoanalysts assumed that such conflict is never ending and inescapable, and that intrapsychic "conflict is an inexorable dimension of the human condition" (Arlow, 1969, p. 19).

Yet for over two thousand years, contemplatives observed that motives and emotions can be gradually purified until benevolent motives and emotions are dominant and relatively unconflicted. For example, classical Buddhist psychology claims that advanced adepts at the penultimate and final stages of enlightenment are free of sexual or aggressive impulses and corresponding painful emotions. That is a dramatic claim! Yet a Rorschach study of an exceptionally advanced female adept found "no evidence of sexual or aggressive drive conflicts" (Brown & Engler, 1986, p. 214).

The psychoanalytic finding that instinctual drives, defenses, and conflict are universal may be an accurate and valuable jewel of clinical wisdom for people at conventional stages of development. However, to assume that such dynamics remain universal at later stages may be an erroneous limiting belief that obscures developmental possibilities and human potentials.

Similarly for cognitive development. To summarize briefly: Piaget brilliantly mapped cognitive development from childhood into adult formal operational cognition, which was widely assumed as the summit of developmental possibilities.

However, many psychologists have identified postformal stages, such as Ken Wilber's (2000a) "vision logic," and Harvard's Michael Commons has mapped four such stages: systematic, metasystematic, paradigmatic, and crossparadigmatic (see Freinacht, 2017 for an accessible review).

In each of these examples, and others that follow, an important insight into human nature was mistaken for an insight about the limits of human nature. A valuable jewel of wisdom was thereby degraded into a limiting belief, which underestimates, obscures, and hinders human development and potentials. As the psychologist, Gordon Allport (1964) concluded:

> By their own theories of human nature, psychologists have the power of elevating or degrading that same nature. Debasing assumptions debase human beings; generous assumptions exalt them. (p. 36)

The remedy for limiting beliefs is to recognize them for what they are: simply assumptions, and dysfunctional ones at that.

Life Ideals and Goals

Ideals can be wise or unwise, and even wise ideals can be used unwisely and create painful traps. Certain ideals are far more conducive to psychological health and wellbeing than others (Emmons, 1999). In general, beneficial ideals and their goals tend to be:

• *Eudaimonic* (seeking meaning and self-actualization) rather that hedonic (material and sensory pleasures)
• *Intimacy seeking* rather than power seeking,
• *Intrinsic* (obtaining satisfaction from activities themselves) rather than extrinsic (aiming for external rewards such as fame or fortune
• *Generative* (creative and contributory).

We can consider these as wise ideals, since they enhance wellbeing for oneself and others. By contrast, "the 'America Dream' of fame, fortune, and image….may represent not a dream but a nightmare" because of "its inability to provide lasting satisfaction" (Emmons, 1999, p. 49).

Yet even wise goals and ideals can be misused and create suffering. Used unwisely, ideals degrade into goals that must be attained, and so become "golden chains" (Vaughan, 2005). Worse, if the goals are perfectionistic and virtually impossible to attain, then even wise ideals can become sources of guilt, despair, and unworthiness. This misuse of even wise ideals is a frequent trap I see in counseling idealistic beginning psychotherapists and meditators.

Understood and used wisely, ideals are used like compasses or North stars that offer direction and inspiration for life. Yet wisdom sees that, like the North Star, profound ideals are never fully reached, but only approached.

Challenging Emotions: Traps or Opportunities?

"Those who are not able to attain the Dao are those whose minds are not clear and who are still slaves of their emotions." (Wong, 1992, p. 55)

Deep insights into life and oneself naturally evoke powerful emotions. Wonder, awe, gratitude, and delight are natural responses, but so too are painful emotions such as fear and angst, sadness and regret, bewilderment and despair. Angst arises as old certainties crumble, while fear can flood in on recognizing the precariousness of life. Sadness and regret wash through when we recognize the world's enormous suffering and ways we have exacerbated it. Bewilderment overwhelms us when novel insights and emotional reactions flood in too fast to assimilate, while disappointment arises as we realize that most insights eventually fade, and fail to effect the longed for transformations of ourselves, let alone of society and the world.

Painful as these emotional reactions to insights may be, they are neither pathological nor inherently problematic. Rather, they are signs of growth. For they stem from recognizing the far-reaching implications of these insights for one's life. If these powerful emotions are recognized for what they are, then faced and explored, they can become sources of further insights. Rather than being stopping points, they can be stepping stones to further insights and greater wisdom, which is why Tibetan Buddhism recommends, "look for wisdom within your disturbing emotions" (Goldfield, 2014, p. 117).

However, challenging emotions can easily evoke unwise responses that result in pain and pathology. The general principle is that any defensive maneuver to avoid recognizing and feeling such emotions—any attempt to go unconscious via denial, distraction, repression, or anesthetizing oneself in any way—is a sure route to stagnation and the foreclosure of further wisdom (Yalom, 1980). Such defenses reduce awareness, prevent learning, derail growth, and blinker wisdom. Like other defenses, they reduce the acute pain of disturbing discoveries, but ensure the chronic pain of constricted awareness. For example, consider two challenging emotional response to deep insight: angst and responses to the enormity of suffering.

Angst

Angst is the dis-ease or stress that results from recognizing the precariousness of life, our limited ability to understand and control it, and yet the inescapable necessity of making life choices while never being certain what will result (Cooper, 1990). No wonder existentialists believe, as Heidegger put it, that human nature "is anxious in the very depths of its Being" (Jones, 1975a, p. 314).

Existentialists also agree that this anxiety is usually barred from consciousness by strong defenses (Yalom, 1980).These defenses and the unconsciousness they evoke are the roots of unwise responses to life's existential challenges. For they guarantee

that one will live with reduced and distorted awareness, and so will not recognize life as it really is. This is to live inauthentically and to curtail psychological growth.

Yet sooner or later, these defenses are breached, either unwillingly by a confrontation such as with death or uncertainty, or willingly by courageously acknowledging the true nature of life and the inevitability of mystery and death. When the realities of life, mystery, and death are willingly acknowledged and explored, both angst and the seeds of wisdom are born.

Yet this angst is *not*, as it is often mistaken for, a sign of pathology. Rather, it is a sign of health and a call to authenticity, maturity, and emerging wisdom. For as Ken Wilber put it, angst "is not sickness but truth" and arises when one is no longer "denying or repressing the actual and precarious nature of existence itself" (Wilber, 1982, p. 62).

Like the initial terrors of groundlessness and ineffability, angst is a sign of deep insight into the realities of life. Consequently, existentialists argue that "*Angst* is not something to be 'treated'; on the contrary, we need to be called to it, and away from a state of tranquilization" (Cooper, 1990, p. 14). Responding wisely to angst and other challenging existential emotions requires that one recognize them, open to their implications, and then increasingly align one's life and values with the realities they unveil.

Responses to Suffering

"As deeply as man sees into life he also sees into suffering" —Friedrich Nietzsche

We are usually heavily defended against recognizing the extent of suffering in the world. (Becker, 1973). But sooner or later it happens—a life threatening illness, the loss of a loved one, the horrors of disaster or war—and life overwhelms even the most rigid defenses.

Then the mental flood gates open, and the incomprehensible enormity of the world's suffering floods in—the hundreds of millions who are helpless, homeless, and hungry; the tens of millions of wandering refugees, the countless sick and insane, poor and oppressed, fearful and depressed. "Who can conceive the number and severity of the punishments which afflict the human race?" lamented St. Augustine (Jones, 1969, p.112). And every hour over six thousand people die, tens of thousands are left grieving, and over one hundred and twenty thousand animals and fish are mercilessly killed and consumed, with our final hour soon to come (Worldometer, n.d.).

So powerful is this recognition that it can either overwhelm or inspire. If it overwhelms, it can evoke horror, despair, desperate defensiveness, and superficial distraction. In fact, many existentialist philosophers and wisdom traditions concur that much of conventional life and culture represent a desperate attempt to deny,

defend against, and distract from this recognition (Becker, 1973). Despairing reactions to suffering have birthed moods and movements such as:

• *Weltschmerz* ("world weariness" or deep sadness at the imperfection of life)
• Romantic melancholy (that the world fails to live up to one's ideals)
• Philosophical pessimism (which argues that life's sufferings outweigh its joys)
• Or even antinatalism (the belief that life is so painful that it's better not to be born or give birth) (Benatar, 2018).

Yet numerous sages agree that recognizing the pervasiveness of suffering can be one of life's most important and transformative insights. For it can inspire a lifelong search for wisdom and ways to heal, and two of history's most famous examples are Confucius and the Buddha.

Confucius was sickened by the extent of social turmoil and conflict, and devoted his life to discovering how people could live together harmoniously and upliftingly (Yu-lan, 1948). For him, the ideal response to the world's suffering is exemplified by the sage who "cultivates himself so as to ease the lot of all people..." (Gardner, 2007, p. 42). Thereby, concluded his followers, "the sage brings to perfection human relations" (Mencius).... "Great indeed is the Way of the sage" (Gardner, 2007, pp. 74, 127).

Similarly, the Buddha was horrified by realizing the inevitability of sickness, suffering, and death, and their implications for life. This realization evoked a three-fold cluster of emotions classically called *samvega,* which galvanized him into a lifelong quest for wisdom, awakening, and healing. *Samvega* is a combination of:

• Shock and dismay at recognizing the superficiality and futility of conventional living.
• A chastening recognition of having been so blind for so long, and complicit in this blindness.
• A compelling urgency to find a better way of living and being (Thanissaro, 1999).

Like Confucius, the Buddha concluded that this better way centered on an inner transformation that cultivates multiple strengths and virtues, and expresses them through compassionate service of others. Both men thereby transformed the oppressive shock of recognizing the enormity of the world's suffering into a quest to discover how to alleviate it, and their quests subsequently benefited billions. Recognizing the extent of suffering in life is a profound insight and a potential foundation for wisdom, so profound that the Buddha enshrined it in his First Noble Truth, which states that suffering is an inherent aspect of life.

Yet wise insights do not guarantee wise responses. In fact, wise responses require several further steps. First, is opening to the suffering. Next comes investigating it and its causes so as to discover ways to alleviate it. Third is using it as a lifelong motivational spur to avoid frittering away one's life in trivia and superficiality, and to cultivate one's skills and capacities so as to become an effective healer and teacher. For Buddhists, the net result of these responses is an understanding of the

extent of suffering and its causes, plus a compassionate commitment to alleviate it, and to develop the skills to do so. These insights and commitments are synthesized in the Boddhisatva aspiration: the aspiration to awaken and develop one's capacity as fully as possible so as to help heal and awaken all conscious creatures as fully as possible.

Are Some Emotional Responses (to Wisdom) Inevitably Problematic?

Initial insights and glimmerings of wisdom can spark certain emotional responses—such as pride, righteousness, anger, and guilt—that are deeply problematic and potentially destructive. Pride in one's new insights, and a sense of superiority over those who are less enlightened—sometimes called "spiritual materialism" or "spiritual narcissism"—are common traps on the long road to wisdom (Kaufman, 2021; Trungpa, 1973). Worse, they can easily evoke anger when one's greater wisdom goes unrecognized, and righteousness when others fail to live up to one's new standards.

Then there is guilt. But why would anyone feel guilty over novel insights, deeper understanding, and growing wisdom? Two reasons: the past and the future.

The past, because new insights can reveal how one could have lived better, hurt oneself and others less, and helped more. That recognition can evoke healthy regret and a commitment to live better. However, it can also evoke unhealthy guilt, which is regret plus self-attack, such as "I should have done better, I'm bad, and I deserve to be punished." We might call these three beliefs "the cognitive guilt triad" since they seem to underlie so much guilt.

The future, because new insights reveal new possibilities which carry responsibilities and require responses. For new insights into life and oneself reveal how one can better live, love, relate, and help. To fail to live up to one's new vision of possibilities is now to live immaturely and inauthentically. Shamans describe this as "refusing one's calling" and claim that it can result in sickness and insanity (Walsh, 2007).

One cost of this inauthenticity is guilt. Not unwarranted neurotic guilt, but rather existential guilt in which, as Irvin Yalom (1980) puts it "The victim is one's own potential self" (p. 285). As Maslow famously said, "If you deliberately plan to be less than you are capable of being then I warn you that you will be deeply unhappy for the rest of your life" (Maslow, 1971, p. 36).

Of course, living up to one's insights and the potentials they reveal is challenging. For as Maslow pointed out, "We fear our highest possibilities (as well as our lowest ones). … we fear our best as well as our worst" (Maslow, 1971, p. 35). In fact, we more than fear our highest possibilities (including wisdom); we may actively defend against becoming them. Such potentials may be resisted and repressed using a variety of psychodynamic defenses (Yalom, 1980), including specific defenses against maturity and potentials such as *evasion of growth* (Angyal,1953) or the

repression of the sublime (Desoille, as cited in Ferrucci, 1982). We might call these "*metadefenses*:" defenses against metamotives and potentials.

The antidote includes a combination of compassion and commitment. Compassion for one's own humanity and ambivalence, and commitment to live more fully into one's vision of all that one is called to be.

But, there are further possibilities. At advanced levels of practice, even problematic emotions such as pride and jealousy can be transformed into positive qualities when their deeper nature is recognized, and they can even transmute into types of wisdom (Holecek, 2009). No emotion is inevitably problematic.

States of Consciousness

"Knowledge is different in different states of consciousness. . . . our level of consciousness completely determines how much of the truth we see in any given situation" (Alistair Shearer, Translator of the Yoga Sutras) (Shearer, 1969, p. 26).

Insights can emerge at any moment. However, some are more likely to emerge in specific states of consciousness. For example, mindful states can be highly sensitive, and therefore especially receptive to wisdom enhancing intuitions and insights (Walsh & Vaughan, 2019). These are state-specific insights, and people who can access multiple states—such as shamanic, yogic, meditative, or lucid dreaming—may therefore access more insights and develop greater wisdom (Goleman, 1996; Holecek, 2016; Walsh, 2015a).

This principle has been recognized for millennia, and some contemplatives even claim that alternate states of consciousness and the practices that induce them are essential for wisdom. "One who does not meditate cannot have wisdom" claimed the Jewish sage, Rabbi Nachman (Buber & Kaufmann, 1970, p. 151). Likewise the Eskimo shaman, Igjukarjuk—whose initiation included a month of solitude and fasting in the Arctic wilderness—concluded that "the only true wisdom lives far from mankind, out in the great loneliness" (Ostermann, 1952, p. 99).

There are many states of consciousness and they can be rich resources for cultivating wisdom. However, altered states also have their traps, multiple traps, that include the following.

State Blindness and The Single State Fallacy

Anthropologists divide cultures into polyphasic and monophasic. Most of the world's cultures are polyphasic, meaning that people value and draw their understanding of life from multiple states of consciousness (Bourguignon, 1973). Such states include those associated with dreaming, music, fasting, solitude, psychedelics, meditation, and more, and the insights they afford are highly valued.

By contrast, monophasic cultures value and derive their world view almost exclusively from the usual waking state, and the modern West is the major example (Laughlin et al., 1992). Monophasic cultures and individuals suffer from what we can call "*state blindness*" or "*the single state fallacy*." Such cultures overlook a rich wisdom resource; an oversight strongly evident in academic wisdom research where alternate states of consciousness are almost never mentioned, despite their central role in so many wisdom traditions (Walsh, 2015a).

Yet Western culture is slowly transitioning as more people discover the benefits of altered states such as lucid dreaming, or contemplative practices such as meditation and yoga, which are currently practiced by some fourteen percent of U.S adults (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2018). The most famous example is William James who was profoundly impacted by his experiences with nitrous oxide, and concluded:

> One conclusion was forced upon my mind at that time, and my impression of its truth has ever since remained unshaken. It is that our normal waking consciousness, rational consciousness as we call it, is but one special type of consciousness, whilst all about it, parted from it by the filmiest of screens, there lie potential forms of consciousness entirely different. We may go through life without suspecting their existence; but apply the requisite stimulus, and at a touch they are there in all their completeness, definite types of mentality which probably somewhere have their field of application and adaptation. No account of the universe in its totality can be final which leaves these other forms of consciousness quite disregarded. (James, 1958, p. 298)

Cognicentrism and the Intellectual Supremacy Fallacy

The intellect is obviously a priceless tool for both acquiring and expressing wisdom. Contemporary research demonstrates that intellectual reflection on one's life can foster wisdom (Glück, 2019; Westrate, 2019), and wisdom traditions systematically refine intellectual reflection and discernment using methods such as:

• Alternating periods of textual study and reflection e.g., Confucianism
• Dialogue as in Socratic dialectic, Tibetan Buddhist Dharma debate, and Jewish *chavrusas* (study groups).
• Meditatively enhanced reflection as in Christian *meditatio* and yogic *manana* (Kalton, 1988; Walsh, 2014)

However, the seductive power of the intellect plus Western culture's emphasis on it can result in two closely related wisdom traps. The first assumes that intellectual understanding constitutes the only type of insight or sophic wisdom. It therefore overlooks other types of wisdom such as intuitive and transconceptual wisdoms (Walsh, 2011).

The second trap is cognicentrism. This assumes that the intellect provides the best, or even only, method for acquiring valid knowledge and wisdom (Ferrer, 2017). This is an epistemological monism that overlooks or even dismisses other epistemic

modes such as somatic, intuitive, emotional, imaginal, and contemplative. These epistemic modes offer valuable knowledge and wisdom that can complement conceptual understanding, and can also be analyzed by the intellect to generate further conceptual understanding. Even Aristotle—one of history's greatest intellectual geniuses and most important thinkers on wisdom—held that sophia requires both knowledge (*episteme*) and intuition (*nous*) (Aristotle, 2009).

Anti-intellectualism

The opposite trap is anti-intellectualism. Anti-intellectualism can be merely a cynical political ploy to dismiss authoritative adversaries, such as with current populist authoritarian governments and antiscience movements. It may also start benignly as a wise recognition of the limits of intellectual knowledge and of the importance of other modes of knowledge.

However, this recognition can slide into a foolish denigration or even dismissal of intellectual knowledge, and anti-intellectualism is a recurrent trap beginning with historical Romanticism (Ferrer, 2017). Contemporary examples include some types of countercultural experientialism, schools of psychotherapy such as Gestalt therapy whose founder, Fritz Perls, famously urged people to lose your mind and come to your senses, and Critical Race Theory's distrust of rationality as a tool of white supremacy (Pluckrose & Lindsay, 2020).

Fortunately, there are wiser approaches, and wisdom requires forging "a middle path that avoids the pitfalls of both cognicentrism and anti-intellectualism" (Ferrer, 2017, p. 140). The most sophisticated approach may be Ken Wilber's (2006) integral epistemological pluralism. This recognizes multiple epistemological sources (intellectual, intuitive, hermeneutic, contemplative, and more), draws from each appropriately, and integrates all of them systematically.

Transconceptual Blindness

For contemplatives, perhaps the most enwisening mode of knowing is transconceptual (Walsh, 2015a). Contemplatives are certainly able to use the intellect as needed, but are also able to volitionally calm its usually incessant activity. This enables them to gain a direct intuitional apprehension of that which is usually obscured by the intellect and its conceptual web—hence "transconceptual" (Walsh, 2011, 2014; Wilber, 2017). In Western philosophical terms, this is knowledge (or wisdom) by direct acquaintance rather than by indirect intellectual description.

For contemplatives, this kind of knowing unveils an extremely important form of wisdom: transconceptual wisdom, which "is insight based knowing, which…. is transconceptual and transrational" (Feuerstein, 2014, pp. 90-91). This transconceptual wisdom is variously known as *ma'rifah* (interior knowledge, Islam), *liang-chi* (Confucian innate knowledge or primordial awareness), *pratyabhijna* (Kashmir Shaivism's recognition), *jnana* (yoga's liberating

knowledge), *prajna* and *yeshe* (Buddhism's transconceptual knowing and primordial awareness/wisdom), and some uses of Christianity's *gnosis* (Mishra, 1993; Walsh, 2014; Wei-ming, 1985). The fact that this wisdom is transconceptual is the basis for statements such as "The wise are completely free from all concepts about the true nature of reality" (Gyamtso, 2003, p. 42), Chuang Tsu's claim that "Great Tao is beyond description" (Feng & English, 1974, p. 38), and Heraclitus' "Of all the words yet spoken, none come quite as far as wisdom" (Heraclitus, 2001, p. 13).

Transconceptual wisdom is regarded as enormously important because it enables the profound transformations variously described as for example, enlightenment, liberation, *satori*, *moksha*, the Jade Pure Realm, *fana*, and more (Walsh, 2014; Wilber, 2006, 2017) .Contemplative traditions therefore regard overlooking transconceptual knowing and wisdom as a major trap which precludes enlightenment. We can call this the trap of "transconceptual blindness." This trap is widespread in Western culture and academia, and transconceptual wisdom is almost never mentioned by wisdom researchers (Trowbridge, 2011).

A related trap is to attempt to realize this wisdom by using intellectual analysis rather than by transconceptual intuition. As the third Zen patriarch strongly emphasized, "To seek Mind [pure awareness] with the (discriminating) mind [the intellect] is the greatest of all mistakes," (Sengstan, n.d.)

Adaequatio: Overlooking Deeper Understandings

What we see and understand depends on what we are. A baby, a high school student, and a physicist examining a book on quantum physics will have very different experiences and degrees of comprehension. Without the requisite experience, training, and maturity, the symbols on the page are merely what Immanuel Kant called "empty concepts," and for such a person the deeper world of meaning to which they refer "simply does not exist. This is the Great Truth of adaequatio"' (Schumacher, 1977, p. 61). The deeper the wisdom, the more this limitation on comprehension applies, and Tibetan Buddhism describes profound wisdom as being "self-secret."

Robert Sternberg (1990) opened his first book on wisdom with the pointed statement, "Thus, we cannot quite comprehend the nature of wisdom because of our own lack of it" (p. 3). This is an ancient recognition, and many sages and traditions emphasize that wise texts and teachings can be understood at multiple levels depending on the maturity of the reader. Christian, Jewish, and Tibetan Buddhist contemplative traditions all describe four levels of successively deeper understanding and interpretation. For Christians, these are the literal, ethical, allegorical, and anagogical, while for Tibetan Buddhism they are the outer, inner, secret, and innermost levels of understanding (Wilber, 1995, 2017).

The crucial point of adaequatio is this: When wise insights, teachings, and actions come from insights, states of consciousness, or stages of developments beyond our own, we may overlook their deeper implications, and also overlook the fact that we

are overlooking them (Freinacht, 2017). Then "the result is not factual error but something much more serious: an inadequate and impoverished view of reality" (Schumacher, 1977, p. 42). The trap of adaequatio is to assume that our current depth of understanding represents the deepest possible comprehension.

The Seductions of Powerful States of Consciousness

Some altered states can be so powerful and ecstatic, their insights so apparently profound, that it is easy to be seduced by them. The first seduction is to assume that the states are more advanced than they are, e.g., the Buddhist mistake of "pseudonirvana." The second seduction is to become attached to these states and their insights, a trap which Buddhism calls the "corruption of insight" (Goldstein, 2020). Both traps hinder the unfolding of further insights and growth, and Adyashanti (2006) warns that "Fascination with states leads only to bondage and dependency" (p. 25).

States of consciousness are only temporary, and even the most beatific and beneficial can be lost. This can precipitate a sense of loss and desolation described in Christianity as "the dark night of the soul" (Underhill, 1911/2002). Wisdom recognizes this desolation as feedback about attachment, works to release it, and learns from whatever experiences arise.

Wisdom also recognizes that temporary altered states are not the final goal. The challenge is to transform temporary altered states into enduring altered traits, peak experiences into plateau experiences, epiphanies into personality, and flashes of illumination into abiding light. Specific traditions describe this as extending temporary "transcendental consciousness" into enduring "cosmic consciousness" (Transcendental Meditation), a state (*hal*) into a stage (*maqam*) (Sufism), or a "unitive experience" into a "unitive life" (Christianity) (Frager, 1999; Underhill, 1911/2002; Wilber, 2017).

Failing to Evaluate Insights

Insights in altered states can seem to be, and sometimes are, both important and profound. Yet these insights can seem so convincing that it is easy to assume them to be "Truths" to be believed, instead of hypotheses to be tested. This is especially true when insights appear to emanate from transpersonal sources. These sources can include inner voices, visions, or teachers such as Socrates' daimon, the yogi's "inner teacher," Jewish contemplatives' *maggid*, or Carl Jung's inner guide who "conveyed to me many an illuminating idea" (Jung, 1961, pp. 183-184). Such insights can indeed be valid and valuable, as Socrates, Jung, and many others have attested.

Yet wisdom sees that all insights—from any state or stage—need to be thoroughly tested, first by personal reflection, then by consultation with wise counselors, and finally in the cauldron of life. Christian contemplatives call this testing of insights "the discernment of thoughts" and consider it essential in order to avoid "spiritual

delusion" (Pagels, 2003). As for science, so too for wisdom: all discoveries need to be recognized as provisional and always open to testing and revision.

Developmental Traps

> Development theory describes the unfolding of human potential towards deeper understanding, wisdom, and effectiveness…. Each new stage has its own strength and deeper insights as well as its stage-specific vulnerabilities – Susanne Cook-Greuter, developmental psychologist. (Cook-Greuter, 2013, pp. 2, 17)

Psychological development is one of humankind's great hopes. For each successive stage unfolds new capacities and potentials; richer understandings of the world, of oneself, and of others; as well as fresh options for creative and contributory responses. The stages of adult development have been mapped for multiple psychological dimensions, including cognitive, ego, moral, motivational, faith, defenses, and more (Demick & Andreoletti, 2003; Fowler, 1981; Freinacht, 2017; Killen & Smetana, 2006; Wilber, 2000a). Developmental maps are also found in the world's contemplative traditions, especially for stages associated with meditation practice (Wilber, 2000a, 2017).

The novel capacities acquired at each new stage vary according to the dimension of development. However, in general, each successive stage offers a richer comprehension of oneself and the world that is more nuanced, complex, independent, and individuated (Cook-Greuter, 2013). Consequently, people are able to respond more sensitively, appropriately, and effectively (Berger, 2012). These are capacities that are obviously central to wisdom, and there are many reasons to think that greater maturity and wisdom may be linked (Cook-Greuter, 2013; Walsh, 2015a). However, as yet, research findings are limited (Krafcik, 2015).

Each new stage also creates new traps, since development can go awry, potentials can become pathologies, and novel capacities can be misused. We might call this "the dialectic of development," a process in which each successive stage brings new capacities online that solve certain problems, yet simultaneously create the potential for new ones.

Some traps can occur at any stage, while others are stage-specific. Two major general traps include developmental blindness and cross-level confusion.

Developmental Blindness

A culture wide trap—which spawns many others—is developmental blindness: the failure to recognize adult development or even its possibility (Freinacht, 2017). When a culture is developmentally blind, it offers no understanding of and little encouragement for growth beyond conventional levels. Enculturation—through formal schooling and informal interactions—pulls individuals up to conventional

stages, but offers no vision of postconventional possibilities, let alone maps of these stages or ways to actualize them. Consequently, developmentally blind cultures act like magnets—pulling people up towards conventional levels but effectively retarding postconventional development beyond them (Wilber, 2000a). Overlooking the possibility and importance of adult psychological development may be one of the greatest wisdom traps.

Mistaking Conventional Possibilities for All Possibilities

Any symbol, idea, or institution can be interpreted and understood from multiple levels. Yet when the possibility of development is not recognized, then one level— usually the conventional level— is mistaken for the totality of possibilities. For example, religion may be seen as merely conventional mythic faith, Christmas as only an overly commercialized holiday, or marriage rigidly understood as a commitment to, for example, "love, honor, and obey till death do us part." This is the fallacy of assuming that a particular level of development is all that development can offer, and is what Wilber (2000a) calls "the level-line fallacy," with line being a line or module of development.

Several further traps can ensue. For example, if people wisely recognize the limitations of conventional understandings, they may condemn, not just the level-specific understandings, but the whole symbol, idea, or institution. Then all religion may be diagnosed as merely the opiate of the masses (Karl Marx), and Christmas may be dismissed as "Bah humbug" (Scrooge).

A poignant personal example for me involved marriage. As a teenager in Australia, where divorce was practically impossible, I saw countless unhappy marriages and vowed never to marry. Only two decades later in psychotherapy did I finally realized that marriage could hold whatever meaning my partner and I agreed on for it: an insight that made possible a beautiful thirty-two year marriage.

Other traps follow from overlooking further developmental possibilities. For example, Western culture usually overlooks postconventional religion together with its contemplative practices for training the mind, inducing altered states, and unveiling transconceptual insights and wisdom. Likewise, Christmas is rarely recognized as a symbol of and call to give birth to transcendental consciousness. Similarly, our culture often overlooks the possibility of committed relationship as an opportunity for mutually supporting learning, growth, awakening, and contribution. Recognizing development allows the recognition of further possibilities.

Cross-Level Confusion

Unaware of development, people at different stages tend to regard each other with puzzlement at best, and pathologizing at worst. For people at later stages, those at earlier stages can be frustrating because of their tendency to overlook nuances and complexities in people and situations, and to view things in concrete conventional

black and white ways. Consequently, earlier stage people may be regarded as shallow, simplistic, uncreative, obtuse, or incompetent (Berger, 2012).

Conversely, people at later stages are also misunderstood. They may seem vague, overly abstract, preoccupied with unnecessary complexities, difficult to understand, and hard to pin down (Berger, 2012). All this because

> earlier stages cannot see what the later stages see; they see only caricature, flattened versions of what's going on. And, what's more, they will arduously insist that their flattened version of reality is the real deal, whereas the more complex picture is unnecessarily complicated, false, mistaken—or just plain weird. For this simple reason, we seldom realize when we are being out-complexed, i.e., that someone thinks and acts with higher complexity than we do. (Freinacht, 2017, p. 388)

To use Robert Kegan's (1994) phrase, stages later than our own—together with their insights and wisdom—are largely "over our heads." When development is unrecognized, people at different stages are like ships passing in the night, each missing or dismissing what they do not comprehend. As Ken Wilber puts it:

> This is why many arguments are not really a matter of better objective evidence, but of the subjective level of those arguing…. It is also why cross-level debates are rarely resolved, and all parties usually feel unheard and unappreciated. (Wilber, 2000b, p. 14)

Cross level debates can also spawn obdurate organizational and cultural conflicts (Rooke & Torbert, 2005). Worse, many of today's major cultural conflicts seem to reflect unrecognized cross-level talk between three major cultural groups with successive developmental centers of gravity. These are the traditional, modern, and postmodern stages, with a small metamodern or integral group possibly emerging (Freinacht, 2017; Killen & Smetana, 2006; Wilber, 2000a). Fortunately, there is initial evidence that developmental awareness can help defuse such group conflicts, but much more work is needed (Linscott & Beck, 1991; Rooke & Torbert, 2005).

Stage-Specific Traps

Each stage has its own pitfalls. For example, consider Robert Kegan's fourth stage of complexity capacity: the "self-authoring mind" (Kegan, 1994). Here the individual has grown beyond the previous "socialized mind" or group centric stage in which people look to and depend on others for values and guidance, and consequently live in fear of offending.

Self-authoring people have matured to a new level of independence, trust their own values and judgments, and often have a strong sense of personal mission or calling. However, they can easily fall into believing that their values and ways of seeing things are obviously correct. They may then feel frustrated when others fail to see things similarly, become righteous and inflexible, and assume that earlier stages and ways of being are signs of stupidity or laziness (Berger, 2012). Consequently,

they may demand that these people shape up and grow up—not recognizing how slow and demanding such development can be.

This demand is a common trap for psychotherapists. Most therapists know little about adult development, and are at a self-authorizing stage themselves (Pratt, 1998). Consequently, they may push their patients to relate from this stage by becoming independent and taking responsibility, without recognizing what a developmental leap this requires (Kegan, 1994). For a classic demonstration of this trap see the famous film, *Three Approaches to Psychotherapy*. In it, three psychotherapy giants—Carl Rogers, Fritz Perls, and Albert Ellis—all demonstrate this trap to varying degrees.

Egocentric Appropriation

Anything that can be misused will be. (Proverb)

Ideally, wise insights spark further insights, spur growth, and reduce egocentricity. Yet insights occur in humans, and humans are notoriously adept at misusing experiences to preserve old ways and bolter egocentricity. Many is the time I have had a valuable insight in meditation, and then moments later caught myself proudly fantasizing about how best to announce it to the world. Buddhists call this "spiritual materialism" (Trungpa, 1973) while psychologists label it as "spiritual narcissism" (Kaufman, 2021).

Whatever the name, the results are the same: a misuse of potentially enwisening insights to foster egocentricity and foolishness. This foolishness can take many forms including inflation, rationalization, dogmatism, and more.

Inflation

Deep insights can easily lead to feelings of specialness, and Christian contemplatives warn that "Knowledge is usually followed by conceit and envy, especially in the beginning" (Kadloubovsky & Palmer, 1976, p. 340). The Buddha exquisitely described the egoic appropriation of insights and resulting inflation as follows:

> Whatever a fool learns, only makes him duller. Knowledge cleaves his head. For then he wants recognition, a place before other people.... "Let everyone look to me for direction"....such is his swelling pride. (Byrom, 1976, pp. 25, 29)

Even budding sages can fall prey to inflation, and Hakuin, who eventually became one of Zen's greatest teachers, confessed that after an early satori: "My pride soared up like a majestic mountain, my arrogance surged forward like the tide. Smugly I thought to myself: 'In the past two or three hundred years no one could have accomplished such a marvelous breakthrough as this'" (Kasulis, 1981, p. 107). Fortunately, Hakuin continued practicing and had many further satoris that dissolved, first his pride, and eventually his ego.

Not everyone is so fortunate, and the Book of Proverbs (26:12) warns, "Do you see a man who is wise in his own eyes? There is more hope for a fool than for him." Most inflation is less dramatic, but any sense of specialness about one's insights or the scope of one's wisdom is a warning sign.

Assuming that Understanding Traps Guarantees Immunity from Them

It is tempting to believe that an intellectual understanding of traps will protect us from falling into them. Yet psychodynamics may easily overpower initial insights. For example, learning about death denial, the ego's craving for specialness, or innate tendencies towards racism can be valuable first steps to reduce them. However, since defenses operate unconsciously and are not easily recognized in oneself, wise friends and counselors are invaluable allies for recognizing and remedying them.

Spiritual Bypass

According to John Welwood, this ego trick uses spiritual practices and insights as a defense to avoid facing issues such as relationship or work problems (Masters, 2010; Picciotto & Fon, 2018; Welwood, 2000). It seems that almost anything, including wise insights and skills can be used in the service of defense.

Rationalization

Insights can also be used to rationalize egocentric or even unethical behavior. For example, if insights fuel a sense of superiority, they can be used to justify entitlement and "neurotic claims," which are beliefs that one deserves special treatment (Horney, 1990).

Even profound insights such as the recognition of ineffability and nonduality can be used for rationalization. After all, if all seeming opposites are only mental constructions overlaid on an underlying unity or nonduality (Deutsch, 1969), and if as Shakespeare put it, "there is nothing either good or bad but thinking makes it so" (Hamlet II, 2), then why shouldn't I do what I want? This is why these advanced recognitions are usually not taught until students have cultivated virtues such as ethics and compassion, and so are less easily seduced by egocentric rationalizations.

When played out politically, rationalizing the misuse of wise insights can have horrendous consequences. A notorious example was the misuse of profound Buddhist ideas by some Japanese Zen teachers to justify nationalism, racism, and eventually World War II (Victoria, 2006).

A cognitive mechanism underlying this trap is the exclusive adoption of one perspective, in this case nonduality, and applying it to situations where dualistic

discernment is required. Wiser is to recognize the value of both duality and nonduality, and then apply each appropriately.

The application of the most helpful insight and perspective to a situation so as to elicit the most beneficial response is a critical element of practical wisdom. This is what Confucians call *yi* or appropriateness, and according to Confucius, "For the excellent person, it is *yi* that is supreme" (Analects, 17:23; Yu, 2006, p. 335). Likewise, the Confusion sage Mencius claimed that wisdom is to "understand what is appropriate" (Yu, 2006, p. 343).

Dogmatism

"Convictions are more dangerous enemies of truth than lies" (Friedrich Nietzsche) (Nietzche, 1996, p. 179).

Deep insights can seem overwhelmingly important and unquestionably true (at least initially). If one now has The Truth, then of course all doubts and insecurities can be swept aside (spiritual bypass), and one's own specialness is affirmed (inflation). It then seems entirely reasonable (rationalization) to proclaim this insight as The Truth, and to dismiss other claims as merely misguided mistakes (dogmatism).

The initial insight may be valid. Yet so may many other insights, and Jainism—which inspired Gandhi's openness to multiple cultures and traditions—offers a wonderfully encompassing perspective. Jainism exposes a pluralistic metaphysics called *anekāntavāda*. This is the recognition that there are always multiple perspectives and understandings one can hold about any phenomenon, and no understanding—or even the sum of multiple understandings—is complete. Therefore, all attempts to express the nature of reality are *naya* (partial expressions), even though they may be *syāt* (valid in some respects) (Anekāntavāda, 2022).

A cautious skepticism towards all truth claims—such as by Jainism or the ancient Greek skeptical philosophy of Pyrrhonism—is an excellent antidote to both inflation and dogmatism. According to the philosopher David Hume, "a small tincture of Pyrrhonism" removes dogmatism and pride, and replaces them with a "degree of doubt, caution and modesty" (Herman, 1990, p. 170).

No insight or understanding—nor any psychology or philosophy built on it—is complete or final. There are always further insights, complementary understandings, and deeper questions. This recognition undercuts dogmatism, opens the mind to the radical mystery which underlies all insights, and fosters epistemic humility, a foundational element of wisdom (Tiberius & Swartwood, 2019).

Studies of wise people find that they openly profess how much they don't know (Krafcik, 2015). Socrates is the great Western exemplar of epistemic humility, while more recently the philosopher-sage Huston Smith (2010), who published his

autobiography on his 90th birthday, concluded it with the words, "We are born in mystery, we live in mystery, and we die in mystery" (p. 196).

Social Traps

A little wisdom can be a dangerous thing, not only for individuals, but also for societies and even civilizations. Any insight can be misused, and the consequences metastasize when played out across societies. This can be part of the "dialectic of progress" which recognizes that cultural advances may solve some old problems yet also create new ones (Habermas, 1979).

For example, valuable insights into the sources of psychological and social suffering can inspire new psychotherapies, social movements, and the growth of collective understanding and wisdom. Consider, for example, Freud's recognition of the unconscious and psychological defenses that led to psychoanalysis, or the many feminists whose recognitions of the pervasiveness and costs of sexism birthed successive waves of feminism.

Reductionism and the Single Cause Fallacy

Yet even valuable healing insights can be misused or enthusiastically overused, and so produce new problems and pathologies. One of the most common overuses is what we can call "the single cause fallacy." This is the assumption that a single cause—usually the newly discovered one—is the primary or even sole cause creating a problem.

Yet minds and societies are supremely complex, and most outcomes are "overdetermined," meaning that they are caused or determined by a large network of interacting causes. To focus exclusively on a single cause and corresponding cure—whether a psychological defense, or factors such as economics, class, race, gender, genetics, or…it is a long list—is to oversimplify, and therefore to overlook the complexity of everything from human nature to societies.

This oversimplification is a common trap, and it has played out in multiple psychotherapies, social innovations, and liberation movements. For example, successive waves of psychoanalytic, behavioral, social, and biological approaches have washed through psychiatry, respectively emphasizing psychological defenses, reinforcers, social, and biological factors as THE cause of psychopathology, and as the appropriate focus for its treatment (Shorter, 1997). Each approach offers valuable insights into the cause and cure of psychological distress. Yet their adherents often minimized or even overlooked numerous other causes.

At its extreme, this trap of fixating on only one dimension or cause, and then reducing things to it extends even to human nature. Human beings are then seen as, for example, the stimulus-response machines of radical behaviorism, the "wet computers" of artificial intelligence, as "no more than the behavior of a vast

assembly of nerve cells and their associated molecules" (Nobel Prize Winner, Francis Crick, 1994, pp. 241-242), or as "robot vehicles blindly programmed to preserve the selfish molecules known as genes." (Dawkins, 1976, p. 151).

This radical reductionism or "nothing but-ism" reduces human nature and behavior to nothing but a single process and assumes that we can best be understood, explained, and helped by focusing on that one process. No wonder the psychiatrist Viktor Frankl warned that, "Today nihilism is camouflaged as nothing-butness" (Schumacher, 1977, p. 42).

Of course, reductionists differ widely and debate vociferously on what this single all-explaining process is. The correct answer is "none and all." *None* in that no one component or process can adequately explain the behavior of complex systems due to their many components and innumerable interactions. *All* because all these components, processes, and interactions play a role (*Complex System*, 2020).

Reductionism is a seductive cognitive trap, which overvalues and overgeneralizes otherwise important insights and nuggets of wisdom. Multiple social liberation movements have fallen into this trap. Each has identified an important cause of social dysfunction, yet has assumed it is the major or sole cause of the dysfunction, while minimizing or ignoring other causes. We can call this "the single cause fallacy."

This leads to the subsequent trap of "the single solution fallacy," which is also known as "single action bias." This fallacy assumes that a single action or intervention—such as enforcing economic equality will be sufficient to eradicate complex problems.[2]

The granddaddy of such movements is Marxism, which correctly identified economic factors and social class divisions as crucial causes of inequality, injustice, and suffering. Yet it largely overlooked other sources of suffering, such as unequal race and gender relations, and tended to see a wide array of social and cultural phenomena—even art, psychology, and philosophy—as primarily expressions of underlying economic forces. In its communist instantiations, fervent believers felt justified in inflicting its "truth" on the world, at the cost of some 60 million lives and inconceivable suffering (Courtois et al., 1999).

A controversial contemporary example of partial social wisdom that has sometimes been misused is *critical theory*. This is an approach to understanding inequality and injustice, which has created considerable cultural conflict, and divided much of the United States. Critical theory sees power and privilege as dominating and deforming virtually all social interactions (Pluckrose & Lindsay, 2020).

Are power and privilege important and potentially oppressive social dynamics? Absolutely! Does privilege often go unnoticed by those who possess it? Certainly (Choudhury, 2021). These recognitions are important social insights and potential sources of cultural wisdom and healing.

Yet these same insights can become problematic when overgeneralized or absolutized. For example, are these dynamics *always* operative? Perhaps not. Are whites invariably racist, *always* maneuvering—sometimes consciously, sometimes unconsciously—to preserve their power and privilege as Robin DiAngelo (2019) claims? Probably not.

And is it true, as some critical theorists argue, that claims such as these are unquestionably true, and that to disagree only reveals one's oppressive defensiveness and biases (Pluckrose & Lindsay, 2020)? Again, probably not.

Critical theory and its many offspring—such as critical race theory, gender studies, queer theory, post colonialism, disability studies, and fat studies—mix valuable insights about power and privilege with a potpourri of dysfunctional beliefs and practices. The result is a sometimes helpful but sometimes problematic mix of ideologies and practices. Examples from disability and fat studies include the beliefs that those with disabilities should reject stigma and feel worthwhile (absolutely!), should celebrate their different ableness (perhaps), and should resist medical and social pressures to treat their disabilities, such as by reducing obesity or having their children's deafness healed (dubious and potentially dangerous).

In each case, wise and potentially liberating insights into social stigma and oppression are undermined by dysfunctional beliefs. Well-intentioned liberating insights are thereby deformed into a depressing and paranoid view of people and society. At worst, this increases social divisions, pathologizes non minorities, inflames backlashes, and becomes a new form of oppression when those who question critical theory are pathologized or canceled (Lukanoff & Haidt, 2019; Pluckrose & Lindsay, 2020).

The Deforming Principles Underlying Social Traps

How does a valuable insight—a novel potentially liberating nugget of cultural wisdom—become deformed into a new form of conflict? First, people forget that behavior and society are inconceivably complex—the product of innumerable forces and dynamics. Then they search for their chosen dynamic, and usually find it. Yet they forget that it is only one of many dynamics, and that finding it does not mean that it is the most powerful, or even a powerful, cause of the problem. In addition, confirmation bias ensures that what one wants and expects to find, one will find. Zeroing in one factor as *the* cause satisfies the psychological need for simplicity, clarity, and certainty, but at the cost of richer, wiser, more nuanced and helpful understandings.

This oversimplification probably results from several psychological processes. These include confirmation bias, intolerance of ambiguity, the need for conceptual closure, and complexity overload. This oversimplifying focus on a single cause may also have developmental roots. It may reflect formal operational stage linear thinking, rather than later stage systematic or metasystematic cognition which can appreciate the multivariate interactions characterizing complex systems (Freinacht,

2017). If this oversimplification is mistaken for The Truth, a truth so important that one is justified in enforcing it on others, then the stage is set for disaster.

Wisdom Opposites

Researchers often assume that there is only one opposite of wisdom, namely foolishness (Sternberg & Glück, 2019). However, there are multiple varieties of wisdom, and each may have its opposite. The two main varieties of wisdom are practical (Greek phronesis) and sophic knowing (Greek sophia), and sophic knowing includes the subtypes of intuitive insight, conceptual understanding, and transconceptual knowing (Walsh, 2011). Therefore, the opposites:

• of practical wisdom is foolishness
• of conceptual understanding can include misunderstanding, confusion, or factual ignorance
• of wise intuition is erroneous intuition
• while the opposite of transrational wisdom is variously translated as ignorance, delusion, or unconsciousness (the Hindu and Buddhist avidya), as duality (Kashmir Shaivism's ajnana),or as non-awareness (Buddhist Dzogchen's marigpa).

Many of the wisdom traps discussed in this article can be seen as examples of one or more of these wisdom opposites.

Treating Traps

Like so many other sections, this one could easily be an article or even a book. Here, I can only introduce some general therapeutic principles.

Potential traps can be pleasurably egosyntonic, such as pride and inflation, or painfully egodystonic, such as anxiety and confusion. In both cases, much depends on how the person interprets and responds to these challenges. Skillful responses to traps recognize, heal, and learn from them.

However, unskillful responses misinterpret and misuse them. For example, if insights are accepted as prideful proof of one's specialness and superiority, then problems and pathologies ensue (Caplan, 1999). Similarly, if egodystonic feelings of confusion resulting from the loss of an outdated identity or worldview are misinterpreted as pathologies or as proof of one's unworthiness, then a learning and growth opportunity is missed, and pain and pathology result.

Ideally, such traps will be recognized for what they are, usually with the aid of teachers or counselors, as common byways on the road to wisdom and maturity. Contemplative traditions as well as contemporary psychotherapies such as existential, transpersonal, and integral therapies agree that recognizing and reframing such experiences as developmental challenges and potential opportunities, rather than as signs of pathology and inadequacy, is crucial (Forman, 2010; Wilber, 2017).

Here is where wise teachers, counselors, and peers can be invaluable. Traditionally, wisdom teachers have usually been mature contemplative practitioners. Known by such names as shamans, Indian gurus, Christian abbas, Jewish *tzadiks*, Sufi sheikhs, or Zen roshis—their qualifications stem from their own deep contemplative practice, acquired wisdom, and certification by their own teacher(s) and tradition (Walsh, 2014). Increasingly, such teachers may be complemented by existentially or contemplatively informed psychotherapists, and a few teachers are emerging who are both advanced contemplatives and trained psychotherapists (Caplan, 2002). However, there is no good housekeeping seal of approval for wisdom or spiritual teachers; pretenders exist, and so *caveat emptor*.

Good wisdom teachers perform multiple functions. Those relevant to wisdom traps include first, evaluating students' insights and depth of understanding, informally through dialogue, and formally through tests such as koans. Teachers also need to diagnose their students' traps, and differentiate them from psychopathologies such as preexisting personality disorders. Then they need to provide explanations and feedback about traps and suggest corrective insights and practices. Those wisdom traps which result from initial shallow unintegrated insights are often best treated by encouraging further practice to deepen the initial insights and to integrate them with complementary insights (Cortright, 1997; Forman, 2010; Friedman & Hartelius, 2015).

Egosytonic traps such as inflation and claims to "premature immaculation," as meditators sometimes jocularly call them, can be the most difficult to get students to recognize, and a classic Zen story offers a useful antidote. It describes a student barging into their teacher's room to breathlessly announce that they had seen a vision of a golden Buddha radiating light. To which the teacher nonchalantly replied, "Don't worry. If you keep practicing it will go away" (Walsh, 1999). Woe to any student who becomes so inflated that their teachers' warnings are interpreted as signs of the teachers' incompetence and failure to recognize the true profundity of the student, their wisdom, and their awakening.

Ideally, students enmeshed in a wisdom trap will consider their teachers' feedback deeply, continue their training, cultivate complementary virtues such as humility and compassion, and perhaps enter psychotherapy to deal with particularly challenging issues.

At best, these students will learn from their traps and grow in wisdom, and thereby transform obstacles into opportunities for further growth.

Can Civilization Survive the Greatest Wisdom Trap?

"History teaches that men and nations behave wisely once they have exhausted all other alternatives" Abba Ebban, Israeli Statesman (cited in Udall, 1989, p.133).

This article has focused on some of the traps that come from acquiring (limited amounts of) wisdom. However, no article on this topic would be complete without emphasizing that the most dangerous of all contemporary wisdom traps is the

imbalance between humankind's enormous technological power and limited wisdom. This imbalance is both tragic and dangerous because virtually all the crises of our time urgently require wisdom (Sternberg et al., 2019).

These crises now include major threats to our ecology and civilization. There is a very real possibility of civilizational collapse and of "a ghastly future" for humankind (Bradshaw et al., 2021). The external threats range widely from, for example, pollution to ecological disruption, biodiversity loss, resource depletion, climate change, weapons of mass destruction, and more (Ord, 2020). However, there are also psychological, cultural, social, and informational threats that fuel the external ones, and together all these threats constitute the "metacrisis" of our time (Rowson, 2021; Rowson & Pascal, 2021).This metacrisis stems from and expresses multiple complex interdependent causes (Hedlund & Esbjörn-Hargens, 2022; Walsh & Dupuy, 2023), whose psychological roots include individual and collective psychological pathologies and immaturities, and a drastic dearth of wisdom (Freinacht, 2017; Loy, 2018b; Sternberg et al., 2019). For a transpersonal overview of such issues see Cunningham (2022).

Like the Sorcerer's Apprentice, humankind now possess enormous power yet little wisdom, and this is a recipe for disaster. We have become nuclear giants and technological wizards while remaining ethical adolescents and wisdom infants, and this imbalance may destroy us. For as Robert Sternberg (2003), former president of the American Psychological Association lamented, "If there is anything the world needs, it is wisdom. Without it, I exaggerate not at all in saying that very soon there may be no world" (p. xviii). Humankind is in a race between sagacity and catastrophe.

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ENDNOTES

[1] However, existentialists overlook an important developmental nuance. Most foundational assumptions are adopted unconsciously in childhood. Only in adulthood—after mature cognitive capacities such as the abilities to introspect and self-reflect come online—is there the possibility of questioning one's assumptions. Only then can one consciously reconstruct one's understanding, choose one's values, and take responsibility for one's choices (Cook-Greuter, 2013). Authenticity requires a degree of mental maturity.

The tendency to mistakenly assume that people are capable of mental tasks that are actually beyond their developmental level is a trap, which I call *the assuming maturity fallacy*, or more alliteratively, *the assuming maturity mistake*. When this mistake specifically involves underestimating the cognitive development required for a task, Zachary Stein (2022) calls it *the cognitive maturity fallacy*. Both fallacies are specific examples of *the Dunning-Kruger effect*. This is the tendency of people who have little expertise in a field to overestimate themselves, or more relevant to these fallacies, of those with high levels to underestimate themselves and to overestimate the expertise of others (Dunning-Kruger effect, 2022).

[2] *The single solution fallacy* and *the single cause fallacy* are two of three reductive fallacies that I collectively call "*single focus fallacies*." The three individual single focus *fallacies* are:

• The *single issue fallacy* which assumes that a single challenge, e.g., climate change, is *the* issue.

• The *single cause fallacy* falsely assumes that a problem or problems stem predominately or exclusively from a single cause.

• The *single solution fallacy* assumes that a single action or solution is sufficient

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