Wisdom, Sensitivity, and Knowledge

Abstract: Stephen Grimm recently proposed a definition of wisdom that makes essential reference to knowledge of well-being. I think that this is the best definition yet proposed for wisdom. I perform two tasks here. First, I note areas of Grimm’s proposal that I am superior to other approaches. Second, and the main of the article, I suggest major corrections to the well-being account of wisdom. I argue for three points: (i) Grimm notes that conditions 1-3 are not jointly sufficient. He leaves it open as to what else may complete the view. I argue that one should add that the wise person is one who not only has the right kind of knowledge, but has certain dispositions or capacities to apprehend the moral environment correctly - I call this sensitivity. (ii) I argue that Grimm’s second condition is not necessary. Being wise does not require taking note of one's standing in relation to certain goods since that looks self-absorbed. (iii) Lastly, I argue that the first condition is not necessary either since there are tragic dilemma cases the resolution of which do not involve knowledge of well-being - since, by definition of tragic, well-being is significantly compromised either way.

I. Introduction

The very etymology of the term philosophy means love for wisdom. Wisdom is accepted by all to be a valuable epistemic state along with cognates such as understanding and expertise. In virtue of their value and difficulty in achieving, higher-order epistemic states such as wisdom and understanding should be the principle focus of epistemological reflection. Unfortunately, for 21st Century epistemology the focus has largely been on knowledge and even here, the focus has been on perceptual, memorial or testimonial knowledge.

Several very welcome attempts have been made to correct this deficiency including Whitcomb (2011), Ryan (2012) and recently, Grimm (2015).1 Though I think these developments are welcome, most commentators share a common assumption that the important task is defining wisdom. They differ of course in the sense that Grimm wants to define wisdom with reference to knowledge, and Ryan wants to define wisdom with reference to some level of epistemic rationality, etc. But all share the feature of wanting to define wisdom with reference to another epistemic state, i.e., knowledge or rationality, or whatever it may be. I aim to argue that previous commentators are all correct in certain respects; but provide insufficient accounts of what wisdom is.

Grimm relates wisdom to a certain kind of knowledge. This is a plausible starting point insofar as our pre-theoretical intuitions incline us to think that wise people approximate the truth, their judgments are likely correct. Contrast wisdom with what we think understanding involves. Understanding is a

1 See also Stump (2004) and Sherman (2000).
higher-order achievement, but it need not be factive\(^2\) – I can understand the phlogiston theory of heat or the point of a novel, or short story. The claim that understanding is factive (the Factive View) must surmount the following problem. Presumably, the proponent of the Factive View understands the negation of the Factive View. Since, according to the proponent, the negation of the Factive View is false, the proponent understands what she must believe to be false. So, one criterion for understanding is not that one have true beliefs about heat, or about a philosophical view, but that I understand the logical and evidential relations between the disparate elements constituting the theory. For wisdom, things look different; the wise person gives the right guidance and makes correct judgments. By defining wisdom in relation to knowledge, Grimm captures this intuition but, as we shall see, he provides an incomplete analysis.

Wisdom seems to be an epistemic state that includes how to live well. An extremely prescient and calculating person may not be wise. To be wise, one must know how to live well (Birren and Fisher, 1990). Here again, Grimm’s analysis seems to capture this intuition.

Grimm’s analysis of wisdom is that it is a complex epistemic state consisting of three individually necessary aspects:

1. Knowledge of what is good or important for well-being.
2. Knowledge of one’s standing, relative to what is good or important for well-being.
3. Knowledge of a strategy for obtaining what is good or important for well-being. (Grimm, 2015, p.140).

Grimm’s analysis integrates various features most of us would associate with a wise person. In this paper, I note areas of Grimm’s proposal that I believe are beyond reproach. Criticisms of Grimm’s analysis should at least grant these aspects so as to acuminate the discussion on wisdom.

The chief contribution I wish to make is to argue for three points: (1) Grimm is correct that conditions 1-3 are not sufficient.\(^3\) I argue that what would make them sufficient is that the wise person has certain \textit{dispositions or capacities} to apprehend\(^4\) the moral environment correctly. (2) The second point is that the second condition is not necessary. Being wise does not require taking note of her standing in

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\(^2\) For a view that understanding is factive see Hills (2009).

\(^3\) Grimm correctly notes that these conditions are not jointly sufficient. But he suggests that there must be a success condition (he calls it an application condition, p. 152), according to which the wise person actually is successful at living well and obtaining various important goods. This may be true as well, but the success condition paired with the three other conditions is still not jointly sufficient either since neither condition captures the idea of being sensitive.

\(^4\) I choose the term apprehend deliberately and not cognates such as ‘seeing’. I do so because the visual perception metaphor is helpful only to the extent that the apprehension in question is immediate in its phenomenology and basic in terms of being non-inferential. But it is unlike normal visual perception in that it is a task of sorts in that it requires having the right will and emotions. This is made clear in section III below.
relation to certain goods. To do so looks self-absorbed which, is a feature incompatible with being wise. (In conversation, Grimm has proposed a way to avoid this result. I explain his revision below.) (3) The third point is to argue that condition 1 is not necessary either. This third point is more adventurous than the previous two, but is plausible enough to present here. The first and third points are meant to argue that our conception of wisdom should include what I call sensitivity. The wise person according to Grimm will have knowledge, on this much we agree. But there is more, the wise person must have a disposition to resonate with the values in her moral environment. I call this sensitivity and it is not captured by having propositional knowledge.

Before proceeding it is important to locate Grimm’s project in relation to wider reflection on wisdom. There is the project of defining wisdom characteristic of Sharon Ryan (2012) and Dennis Whitcomb (2011). And there is the project of delineating the conditions for achieving or realizing wisdom characteristic of Eleonore Stump (2003) and Margaret Olivia Little (1995). And finally, there is the project of making species distinctions within the notion of wisdom (Baehr, 2012). Grimm’s project lands squarely in the first type of project. This is important since Grimm offers some reflections on how one gets wisdom, namely, through experience. These reflections are incomplete as they stand, but that is not the focus of his project. His analysis should be analyzed for what it is meant to offer.

II. Points of Agreement

The first point of agreement is when Grimm distinguishes between having wisdom and being wise. Having wisdom can come in degrees. Grimm notes that some actual person can be incipiently wise. But being wise is reserved for those rare persons who are fully and completely wise. Being wise involves not only knowing what goods are important for flourishing, but also having attained such goods. Being wise is an achievement; having wisdom involves knowing what one must achieve and has a rough idea of how to achieve it. The significance of this distinction shows up in Grimm’s reply to Sharon Ryan’s argument that wisdom should be defined with reference to rationality, not knowledge. To that discussion I turn.

Grimm’s account requires knowledge of the relevant features of well-being. He defends his knowledge requirement against Ryan’s argument according to which the knowledge requirement is too strong. Ryan entertains at least two important potential counter-examples to the knowledge requirement. First, we can consider cases of scientists who with all their creativity and intelligence still got it wrong. Ptolemy is an example of someone who does all that can be required of one epistemically speaking, but

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5 Grimm’s comments on the pedagogical effect of experience leaves out the possibility that experience can be corrupting (Depaul, 1993, 160-164). However, Grimm could just as easily supplement his explanation of how we may learn wisdom with Depaul’s notion of formative experience (Depaul, 1993). Notably, however, Depaul’s treatment of formative experience aligns better with my understanding of wisdom as requiring sensitivity.
ended up with false astrophysical beliefs. Second, we can consider global skeptical scenarios like that depicted in movies like the *Matrix* according to which Socrates and other accepted sages are wise, but they do not have knowledge because knowledge requires having true beliefs. Bad epistemic luck should not defeat our assessment that such sages are in fact wise.

In reply to skeptical scenarios, Grimm notes the following, “Living in the Matrix would presumably not rob Confucius of his knowledge that things like friendship, fairness, and respect for others are important for well-being. It would not,… rob him of his knowledge that knowledge itself is important for well-being!” (Grimm, 2015, 147). Grimm is noting that even in global skeptical scenarios, there still remain some true beliefs. Even if we live in the Matrix, it would still be the case that true beliefs are valuable and constitutive of the good life even if none of one’s beliefs about the external world are true. If someone thinks that friendship is constitutive of the good life, they have a feature of wisdom. In fact, there are at least two true beliefs even in the Matrix: (i) that friendship, virtue, and whatever else is associated with well-being are good things, and (ii) that such-and-such means are associated with obtaining goods constitutive of well-being. The fact that there are no friends or such states as virtue does not compromise my knowledge that such things are good or that certain means are typically associated with obtaining such goods. Both beliefs can be true even in a Matrix. (That there cannot be virtues in the Matrix is a questionable concession since on some notion of a virtue it *could* be possessed by subjects of consciousness capable of having intentional states). What this means is that being wise may not be possible in the Matrix, but having wisdom is. Consequently, Ryan’s Matrix counter-example is ineffective against Grimm.

In fact, slightly more can be said on Grimm’s behalf. Counter-examples, if they are to function as such, should invite an intuitive response. A problem arises in that the starting intuition that wise people *know* important things is pretty strong. Intuitions on skeptical scenarios have to be *stronger* to function as a counter-example to Grimm’s proposal. Is the Matrix example inert against Grimm’s proposal? There are at least three intuitions I have in regard to the Matrix example.

(a) The sages in the Matrix are *almost* wise.7

(b) They are wise if wisdom is understood to require only rational belief (Ryan’s intuition).

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6 By typical, I mean that in most nearby possible worlds, where one is not in the Matrix, those means would be efficacious.

7 The ‘almost’ here is borrowed from Stephen Hetherington’s observation that in barn façade cases, the agents almost do not know. They get knowledge but barely so. In the present case, ‘almost’ is meant to emphasize that the sages do not lack the person-specific properties associated with wisdom. After all, wisdom is a property of persons not environments. Certain environments can make it difficult or impossible for persons to possess the wisdom-making properties, but this would be no fault of the person as with the Matrix case.
(c) They have wisdom even if knowledge is required, since they know (i) and (ii) above. But they cannot be wise since they cannot realize the goods constitutive of the good life.

Though Grimm admits that he is more disposed to think that putative sages in the Matrix are not wise, for what it is worth, I find myself seeing (a) and (c) as slightly more plausible than (b), and (c) slightly more plausible than (a). In any case, Ryan’s examples fail to override the rather plausible intuition that the wise person has knowledge. The idea that a person can have wisdom while having an overabundance of false beliefs about the good life is counter-intuitive.

In general, I suspect there is no way to resolve the debate between Ryan and Grimm on whether to understand wisdom as requiring knowledge. There seem to be implicit meta-ethical assumptions on both sides. Ryan is inclined to think that having a few false beliefs about living well is consistent with one’s account of wisdom. The moral world is messy, we do the best with our lives trying to learn from our successes and failures. To put the point with some hyperbole, we grope in the dark for what counts as living well. But it strikes all parties to this debate, that some people in contemporary society are wise. On the other hand, the intuition that the wise get it right seems quite plausible as well. This assumption does not entail that there is one kind of life that is fulfilling for everyone. Both Blessed Mother Theresa and Einstein led fulfilling lives. But there is a truth to the matter of whether or not a drug addiction is compatible with living well. Some things are incompatible with human flourishing. Other things are conducive to it, like an education, and still other things are constitutive of it, such as loving others. There is a truth to the matter of what counts as living well, and we can know it even in the setting of a pluralistic environment. So, depending on one’s meta-ethical assumptions, her intuitions on whether wisdom entails knowledge will follow suit. Aside from observing that our intuitions on what counts as wisdom are not foundational, I have nothing to add to the debate in this work.

What about the Ptolemy’s of the world who did all they could epistemically but still ended up with false beliefs? On this point, I am inclined to think that Grimm is right to suppose that getting ones astrophysical beliefs wrong should not impugn their claim to wisdom. Wisdom concerns knowledge of goodness and well-being. Taking this route, however, considers wisdom as domain specific knowledge which requires making distinctions within the notion of wisdom (see Baehr, 2012).

III. Disagreements

In this section I defend adding the condition of sensitivity to Grimm’s proposal to complete the well-being view of wisdom. Sensitivity is the ability or disposition to both apprehend and resonate with ethically salient features of one’s moral environment. A perceptual analogy may be expert equestrians discerning a horse’s canter (Depaul, 1993, 203). Having true beliefs is not enough, having the power to apprehend salient features in one’s environment seems required as well and the latter ability is afforded by sensitivity. My second task is to argue that the second aspect of wisdom (condition 2) is not necessary.
One can imagine persons who clearly qualify as wise, but do not perform separate acts of self-reflection in regard to where they stand in relation to certain goods. In fact, if my example succeeds, it is apparent that in some cases, being self-reflective can be downright self-absorbed. My third task is to question whether the wise person’s knowledge is restricted to what counts as well-being and how to get it. The challenge here focuses on what are called tragic dilemmas according to which any choice is not the “right” choice. In tragic dilemmas, significant goods are compromised no matter what one chooses. Intuitively, however, a wise person will navigate tragic dilemmas better than non-wise persons, and yet, resolving the dilemma will not be a function of her knowledge of well-being – since significant goods are compromised either way. I consider these tasks in order.

a. Conditions 1-3 and Sensitivity

Nancy Sherman reminds us that moral reflection which starts by thinking about principles has started too far downstream. “[A]n ethical theory that begins with the justification of a decision to act begins too far down the road. Preliminary to deciding how to act, one must acknowledge that the situation requires action. The decision must arise from a reading of the circumstances” (Sherman, 1989, 29). The work of applying an ethical principle requires knowing what we are applying it to (Little, 1995), and it is our understanding of the situation as morally charged that alerts us to what principles may apply. Moral perception, Sherman argues, precedes moral judgment, and in some cases can even lead to action bypassing moral judgment altogether. What is moral perception in this context?

Lawrence Blum offers us a set of illustrations of what moral perception is and its role in rendering a moral judgment.

John and Joan are riding in a subway train, seated. There are no empty seats and some people are standing; yet the subway car is not packed so tightly as to be uncomfortable for everyone. One of the passengers standing is a woman in her thirties holding two relatively full shopping bags. John is not particularly paying attention to the woman, but he is cognizant of her. Joan, by contrast, is distinctly aware that the woman is uncomfortable (Blum, 1994, 31-32).

Here are two people who have the same physical perceptual abilities, are situated alike in the same environment, but only for Joan are the moral aspects of the situation salient to her. Blum remarks that what is salient for John is simply that there is a woman who is standing holding two bags; what is salient for Joan is that she is standing holding two bags, and is uncomfortable. “John misses something of the moral reality confronting him” (Blum, 1994, 33). The way Blum tells the story, it is not the case that John misses the moral reality confronting him out of callousness or indifference. Both John and Joan may be committed to the same ethical principles, of relevance here may be the principle of, ‘be polite when the opportunity arises’; or both may be committed virtue theorists who think that civil virtue requires making micro-sacrifices for the good of the community – like giving up one’s seat. As described, John does not
apprehend what Joan apprehends. Of note, if John apprehends what Joan apprehends and fails to act out of callousness, he fails to resonate with the gravity of the woman’s discomfort. Here again, this failure is one of basic apprehension. Blum’s point is not only that there is such a thing as moral perception, according to which we have a basic apprehension of value and disvalue in the world, but also that this perception is required in every formation of a particular moral judgment. What matters is that one sees a situation as calling for politeness or civility. Joan’s “take” on the situation – what is salient for her – is that she sees the woman’s discomfort. That perception paired with her commitment to civility or politeness may issue in an action whereby she gives up her seat for the woman. But there is no “application” as applied ethicists would say, of a principle to an action without first recognizing the situation as calling for a moral response. Even if moral perception is required for moral judgment, does such perception come in degrees? Can we really suppose that one can perfect her moral perception (and therefore have sensitivity) such that sensitivity is a required feature of wisdom? Quite a bit rides on this question since an affirmative answer would entail that some people can be moral authorities (i.e., the wise), which compromises our sympathies with egalitarianism and respect for autonomy. Nevertheless, a good case can be made for our moral perceptual abilities coming in degrees.

Consider another example from Blum (1994). Tim is a white-male who is waiting for a cab at a train station after a long day of traveling. Near him are a black woman and her daughter who also appear to be waiting for a ride. A cab comes by passing up the woman and her daughter and picks up Tim. The way Blum tells the story, Tim is relieved to get the cab and this relief may have frustrated his ability to notice that the cabbie ignored the woman and her daughter. Suppose that Tim knows that racism is bad, and that racial injustices should be prevented or, if already committed, redressed. What Tim does not know, because he does not see, is that (likely) a racist act has just been committed. Contrast Tim with Yasuko (Blum’s name) who sees the event unfold from a distance. Yasuko, however, sees the event and immediately perceives the violation of dignity against the mother and daughter. Suppose, even, that the cabbie is black. Yasuko’s “take” on the situation is that the cabbie by-passed a needy family for reasons

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8 There are a whole host of misunderstandings of moral perception in contemporary philosophy. As should be clear from the example, moral perception does not involve seeing something physical – see previous note on use of the term apprehension. It does not involve supposing that moral properties are queer (Mackie 1977) whatever that objection amounted to; and it does not require commitment to a “mysterious” moral faculty. Deflecting these misunderstandings is not the task of this paper. See Huemer (2005) and especially Roeser (2011) for informative replies to these and other misunderstandings.

9 Another point of agreement with Grimm is his diagnosis of why wisdom, particularly any understanding of wisdom that links it to knowledge of well-being, has been ignored by contemporary philosophy. He notes that wisdom entails moral realism which has witnessed some ascendancy in recent years. Agreed. But the diagnosis should also include that well-being conceptions of wisdom entail the possibility of a moral authority. And that has not witnessed any ascendancy (though see Zagzebski (2012) for good assessment of this issue).
that have nothing to do with the family’s good but for, say, economic reasons – for example, the cabbie thinks that white people tip better. Suppose Yasuko had been victim to indignities because of commercial interests before and this makes her more sensitive to such indignities – she can see them better and resonates with their moral gravity more easily. Blum comments, “[t]his sensitivity cannot be understood simply as a disposition to perform certain actions. It is more pervasive than that, informing her emotional reactions to things, what she notices, what is salient for her, and the like….” (Blum, 1994, 43). Here are examples of people who have different degrees of sensitivity.

Implicit in the characterization of sensitivity so far is that it is not a passive ability. The relation between sensitivity and the moral landscape is not simply like opening one’s eyes and letting the moral data come in. Sensitivity requires a perfection of one’s will and emotions. Margaret Little comments, “The moral landscape will be opaque to those who are in no way moral (Little, 1995, 118).” Being sensitive requires caring about and being attentive to morally salient features in one’s environment. Little continues,

The extent to which one actually cares about and is responsive to moral ends… has enormous impact on how accurately and reliably one sees the moral landscape, because what one is attentive to is deeply influenced by what one cares about, and caring about other than recognizably moral ends will significantly compromise one's propensity to notice the morally relevant set of details (Little, 1995, 123).

Sensitivity is an epistemic power or ability for apprehending value and disvalue and it requires having the right will and affections. It is not an epistemic state but it disposes one to acquire higher-order epistemic states. To be considered wise, one must have sensitivity. It is not enough to know what well-being is and the means to it, for as the story is told, John in the subway case and Tim in the racist cabbie case both know that relieving discomfort of another is good, and that racism is bad and should be prevented or redressed. What they lack in the circumstances is an ability to see a situation as calling for that knowledge, they do not see the moral order in “real time” accurately. The wise person would. Therefore, a necessary condition for having wisdom is having sensitivity.

b. Condition 2 is not necessary

Condition 2 does not appear necessary. My skepticism is informed by something like the self-centeredness objection to virtue theory. Since virtue theory recommends that an agent be concerned about

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10 Karen Jones (1999) defends the view that we can acquire moral knowledge through testimony on grounds that some people are better positioned to know or perceive salient features of one’s moral environment. Jones notes that at least one way in which someone acquires sensitivity to a moral environment is by having experienced victimization in the past. Such an explanation is in line with the idea that empathy mediates our sensitivity to aspects of our moral environment. See also Arne Vetlesen (1994).
her own character and motivational states, the theory can invite the agent toward self-absorption.\textsuperscript{11} Intuitively, the wise person would not be occupied with or perform separate acts of self-reflection on her own standing in relation to well-being. Why? A wise person may be so deeply engrossed in her pursuits that to stop and reflect on her own standing in relation to the good life would be self-absorbed. The example of Andre and Magda Trocme brings out this possibility. Trocme was a mother of four who tirelessly and without much reservation took to rescuing Jews from deportation. She mobilized a broad network of shelters for Jews including the entire town of Le Chambon in France. In all of this activity she maintained her domestic duties, and rarely neglected the care of her own family. Her motives were to procure the safety of others. Andre Trocme describes her thus in \textit{Lest Innocent Blood be Shed}, “Here is a person who cares for others on their own terms, not in order to parade her own virtues, but in order to keep them well” (Quoted from Blum, 1994, 64-5). We can imagine, without cost to our intuition that she was wise, that she never \textit{considered} her standing in relation to well-being. This is not to say that a wise person will not have the ability to self-reflect on her standing. My suggestion is only that she need not do so and continue to count as wise.

In conversation, Grimm has suggested that this second correction is irrelevant since he would drop the second condition anyway – it is redundant. The third condition entails the second. If I have a strategy or devise means to obtain a good G, I must \textit{already know} that I do not possess G. One knows one’s standing in relation to a good already if one is determining means to that good (condition 3). As such, Grimm can avoid the suggestion in condition 2 that one must self-reflect. I grant that this revision avoids my reflections in the previous paragraph.

\textbf{c. Condition 1 is not even necessary}

Is the scope of the wise person’s knowledge exhausted by knowledge of well-being? Is knowledge of well-being even \textit{necessary} for wisdom? I am skeptical that it is.

Consider tragic dilemmas according to which an agent is confronted with a choice between x and y and both x and y involve a compromise of a serious good. Tragic dilemmas need not be irresolvable to count as “tragic.” What makes them tragic is that in resolving the dilemma, “a virtuous agent cannot emerge with her life unmarred” (Hursthouse, 1998, 77). Consider a choice to construct wind turbines to provide clean energy for a significant part of the power grid. Suppose that the wind turbines are proposed for a particularly windy area of the country, and other clean energy sources are not options – it is too far north so solar power is not an option, and the earth’s crust is too thick in that area to support geothermal power. Suppose also, however, that because of the wind vortices, rare migratory birds use that corridor for

\textsuperscript{11} My own view is that the self-centeredness objection to virtue theory misunderstands virtue theory. Self-absorption and self-centeredness are paradigm examples of vices. They are bad because they are bad \textit{ways of being} disposed to the moral life.
migration, and it is known that wind turbines kill a significant number of birds. Here is a case where two goods (zero pollution energy source and survival of rare wildlife) are incompatible, they cannot both be realized. Here is a case where the dilemma can be resolved in one sense, by just picking an option. But in another sense, either choice is wrong. An agent cannot emerge from the dilemma without dirty hands, there will be what theorists call moral residue. The choices one is faced with in tragic cases are not at all ordered to well-being or flourishing since it is unintelligible to say that in choosing either option one acts well.

It may be the case that in understanding the dilemma as tragic, one must have knowledge of well-being. But having wisdom is more than recognizing a dilemma, it involves also the wherewithal to resolve the dilemma. Does resolving a dilemma require knowledge of well-being? It seems that in resolving a dilemma, one is not relying on her knowledge of well-being since either choice is detrimental to well-being. It is true that in recognizing the dilemma, you rely on your knowledge of what is good and contributes to flourishing (zero pollution energy is good but so is the preservation of rare birds). What is needed to resolve the dilemma, however, requires weighing and resonating with the morally salient features and processing them in an excellent (wise) manner. The wise person would emerge from a tragic dilemma without relying on knowledge of well-being, but rather on something like sensitivity characterized above.

The wise person will emerge from a tragic dilemma having resonated with the goods lost; there should be regret, guilt, or remorse over the decision. Tragic dilemmas create moral residue in which, for example, recompense to victims of the decision may be warranted, but they remain victims after the recompense. Resolving a dilemma and resonating with moral residue is not encompassed by knowledge of well-being. It is better captured by the notion of sensitivity where the agent feels the way one ought to feel in response to the tragedy and weighs the goods at stake by a deep apprehension of their relative importance.

There are two related responses to this line of argument. First, it is not a feature of wisdom to resolve tragic dilemmas. If ‘ought implies can,’ and tragic dilemmas cannot be resolved without compromising at least one obligation, no one should be expected to navigate dilemmas better than anyone else. The wise are in the same epistemological boat as the rest of us. A second objection is that if a wise person finds herself in a tragic dilemma at all, that would indicate that she is not wise in the first place. Having wisdom would include knowledge of how to avoid such dilemmas if in fact resolving them is incompatible with living well. Knowledge of well-being would entail knowledge of how to avoid what is contrary to well-being. Grimm’s conditions 1 and 3 would entail avoiding any circumstances detrimental

\[\text{If the reader does not agree I invite the reader to think of others examples. Tragic dilemmas are not hard to find in the real world – think of some public policy or healthcare ethics decisions.}\]
to well-being. And since navigating tragic dilemmas involves, as I am assuming, acting inconsistent with well-being, the wise would know how to avoid such dilemmas.

To the first objection, I am strongly inclined to think that not only would the wise person navigate her way through a tragic dilemma better than non-wise persons, but how one handles a tragic dilemma is a defining feature of wisdom – it separates the wheat from the chaff, the wise from the unwise. Having wisdom is the apex of knowledge about the moral order and our sensitivity to it. To invoke the ought-implies-can principle to level the playing field for both wise and unwise, is assuming that wisdom is co-extensive with and exhausted by our knowledge of our obligations. But there is no independent reason to think this prior to considering how the wise will handle tragic dilemmas. Rather, the wise will navigate dilemmas better than the unwise, even if both are stuck with acting against a moral obligation. Again, this will be a function of the wise person’s sensitivity to the broken obligations, i.e., the moral residue, and in resonating with and processing the morally salient features of the situation in a way better than the unwise.

To the second, tragic dilemmas are not chosen, they are encountered. Real life cases of such dilemmas arise numerous times in the healthcare setting and for those who hold public office. To say that healthcare professionals cannot be wise, since they place themselves in situations where they will confront tragic dilemmas, is implausible.

IV. Conclusion [tentative]

The finished product should look something like the following: Wisdom is

(1) Knowledge of what is good or important for well-being.

(2) Knowledge of a strategy for obtaining what is good or important for well-being.

(3) Sensitivity to the relevant moral values in one’s environment.

[But questions remain. Does not condition 3 entail condition 1? If I’m sensitive to the relevant values in my environment, as I have defined sensitivity above, it would follow that I would have knowledge of what is good or important for well-being. The reason why condition 1 does not entail condition 3 can be illustrated by the John versus Joan example above. John had knowledge of well-being and what is good but did not resonate with his environment. He was insensitive to it. Here’s one way to divide up the territory: sensitivity is an epistemic virtue that perfects our moral intellects in apprehending the goods and values in our environment. But the wise person will also be able to obtain those goods, and be quite successful at doing so. She must, then, have knowledge about the means to those goods. But notice, these are two different abilities, not two different epistemic states. The significance of this point is that any project that tries to define wisdom with respect to subsidiary epistemic states will have provided an insufficient account of wisdom. So, the 1st condition is meant to suggest that this ability (condition 3) is in fact exercised as is required in order to have wisdom.]
True, the wise person will have good epistemic states (i.e. knowledge about… ) but this will be a function of having supercharged cognitive abilities, sensitivity and prudence. Now if this is fair since Grimm is defining wisdom with reference to knowledge and knowledge does rule out lucky guesses. The reliability of one’s faculty that produces the knowledge is assumed. Keep in mind, the problem that defining an epistemic state with reference to epistemic abilities misses out on whether those abilities are exercised. One can have an ability and never exercise it. Such a person would not count as having wisdom; but they would count as being wise.

The distinctive contribution I aim to make is that wisdom must include some notion of sensitivity. Along the way to arguing for this, I have demonstrated that the conditions Grimm outlines are, for the most part, not necessary. My conditions 2 and 3 are the only necessary conditions (in addition to there being an external world, the existence of beings that can have epistemic states, moral facts etc.); and my conditions 1-3 are jointly sufficient. Grimm has offered us a concise, informative and, as argued here, almost complete definition of wisdom. I have argued that having wisdom must include having sensitivity.

References


