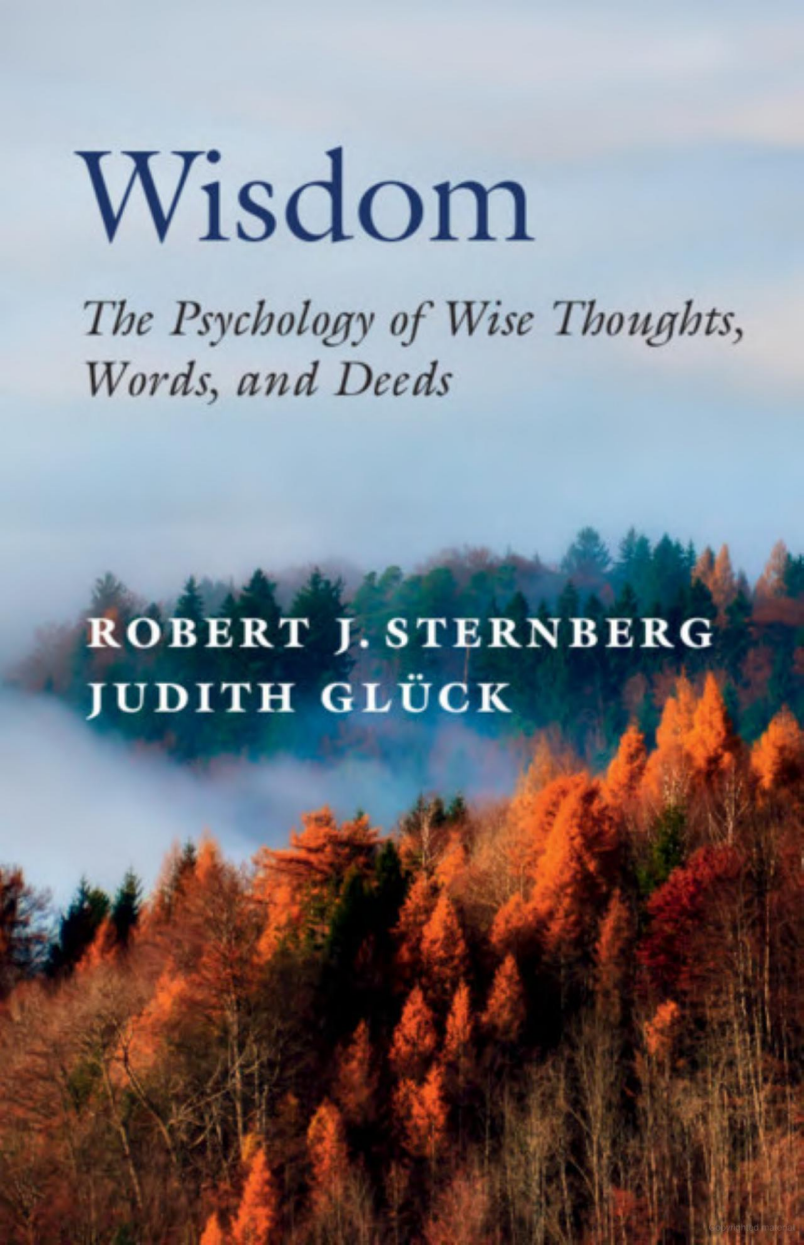
Wisdom

The Psychology of Wise Thoughts, Words, and Deeds



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Preface

During the twentieth century, intelligence quotients (IQs) increased, worldwide, by roughly thirty points. Such gains, according to James Flynn, reflect the greater cognitive skills needed to adapt to the environment as it evolved over the course of the century. The gains may result from changes in education, parenting, nutrition, and other factors. On this view, IQs might rise or fall over time, depending on the cognitive skills that a particular environment requires.

Impressive though these gains are, they might leave one baffled regarding how *maladaptive* people have been to their environment. The failure seems to go beyond intelligence of any kind, because a common feature of many of these problems is *intelligent* people failing to exert *wisdom*.

The goal of this book is to present a brief introduction to wisdom, primarily but not exclusively, from a psychological point of view.

Motivation for This Book

The basic motivation for this book is that *wisdom* is the essential psychological attribute that, more than any other, is needed to understand and solve the problems facing the world today. The unique mission of this book will be to present to educated readers – students, laypersons, and experts alike – in brief and readable form what is known about wisdom and why it is important to both individuals and the world.

Wisdom has been defined in many different ways, but a common feature of many definitions is a focus on the balance of not only cognitive but also emotional and motivational elements applied to achieve a common good. Wisdom serves well not only in the kind of individual problem-solving measured by existing tests of intelligence but also in collective problem-solving for the various problems facing the world.

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The intended audience for this book is students, educated laypersons, and professionals interested in wisdom or just in how the world can take a better approach to solving the problems confronting it.

Our book is divided into eight chapters plus an epilogue.

In Chapter 1, "What Is Wisdom?," we discuss what wisdom is. We especially emphasize the importance of seeking a common good by finding a balance among intrapersonal (one's own), interpersonal (others'), and extrapersonal (larger) interests.

In Chapter 2, "Why Is Wisdom Important and Why Doesn't Society Always See It That Way?," we discuss the great importance of wisdom to society and why society's other priorities not only overshadow wisdom but, sometimes, actually work against wisdom.

In Chapter 3, "How Has Wisdom Been Studied in Psychology?," we show how the way psychologists have conceptualized and studied wisdom has evolved over time. We review various psychological approaches to wisdom.

In Chapter 4, "How Is Wisdom Measured?," we discuss the major approaches to measuring wisdom, both self-report and performance-based. The chapter gives examples of the types of questions used and how responses to the questions are scored.

In Chapter 5, "How Does Wisdom Develop?," we review theories and empirical findings on the development of wisdom over the life span. The chapter looks at how wisdom is related to age and which individual resources foster the development of wisdom from experience.

In Chapter 6, "How Do We Cultivate Wisdom?," we review attempts to teach for wisdom, both general and discipline-specific. The chapter also discusses principles of teaching for wisdom.

In Chapter 7, "How Is Wisdom Related to Other Psychological Characteristics?," we review the literature on the relation of wisdom to other psychological characteristics, focusing on intelligence, personality, emotions, well-being, and morality.

In Chapter 8, "Am I Wise?," we present a self-assessment whereby readers can assess their own wisdom and consider as well how they might increase their wisdom.

In the Epilogue, we briefly discuss why wisdom, perhaps more than any other psychological construct, is important for the future of the world. Without it, the future of the world, or at least the role of humans in it, will be very much in doubt. We also discuss what the

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world can do to focus more on developing wisdom in young people as well as adults.

We are grateful to our editors at Cambridge, David Repetto and Steven Acerra, for their support of this book project, and to Emily Watton for her assistance in editing. We also wish to express our gratitude to our many past collaborators in our research on wisdom for their contributions to our thinking. Finally, we wish to thank our families for their patience while we worked on this book.

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an option, were Paul to have a sibling, but we do not know if that is the case. So, two options might make good sense.

A first option would be for Paul's mother to move in with Paul and his family on a trial basis, say, for six months. This would be a short-term solution. They all try it out for a while to see whether, for all parties, it would be a viable long-term solution. If so, they are set. If not, they reconsider their options in six months.

A second possible wise solution would be for Paul to find a place for his mother to live, at least for the short-term, that is near him. Paul could make a plan together with his wife about getting external help in case her health deteriorates. They might think about ways to compensate for his reduced availability for childcare and other family needs. They could try this plan out for six months and then see whether it appears to be working.

Again, in wisdom-based problems, there rarely is a unique, perfect solution. Rather, one tries to come as close as possible to an optimal solution, realizing that when complex human needs are involved, no one solution is likely to optimize on all dimensions.

The definition of wisdom is somewhat complex. Let's use the example of Paul's story and others to unpack some of the features of our definition of wisdom.

1.1.1 The Common Good

First, *wise people seek a common good*. One of us has been teaching a course on leadership for many years and has concluded that the main way you can distinguish good from not so good leaders is in who they are looking out for. Bad leaders always have one person in mind – themselves. They may say they care about others; they may do things that seem to show care for others; they even may appear to be sad when hearing about the misfortunes of others. But in the end, they always look out for #1 – themselves. When they help others, it is to help themselves or merely to demonstrate overtly but falsely how caring and considerate they are. When they listen to others, it is to figure out what's in it for them. When they act in ways to benefit others, they always have themselves in mind first. Just as criminologists sometimes say that to figure out the perpetrators of a crime, you should follow the money, to figure out who is wise, you should follow the benefits – whom is the leader trying to benefit, and in particular, is it

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anyone beyond him- or herself, or those who immediately can benefit him- or herself?

When the world tests our wisdom, the tests are very unlike the multiple-choice and short-answer tests that often dominate assessment in schools. There is no black-and-white – there are no clear-cut right and wrong answers. Mostly, there are lots of shades of gray. With no one to tell you what the common good is, you have to figure it out for yourself. And figuring it out is a major part of wisdom.

One reason why it is hard to figure out the common good is that we all so easily confuse our own interests and those of members of our "tribe" with the good of everyone. From medieval Crusaders bent on converting people to Christianity, for their supposed own good, to Western troops fighting in Vietnam or other Southeast Asian nations to impose a Western version of democracy, people historically have seen the common good through self-interest. Truly wise people actively seek a common good freed from the blinders of that self-interest.

Another reason why it is hard to define the common good is that what we believe is good for someone may not be what they think is good for them. Parents of adolescents, for example, often feel that they know better than their children what the children should and should not do. Wise parents take their children's own perspectives very seriously. They may indeed know better, but they also know that young people have to learn things for themselves. Therefore, they look for solutions that balance the adolescents' needs with their own beliefs.

In the case of Paul, in Box 1.1, seeking a common good meant that Paul looked out for the interests of everyone who had a stake in the problem, and not just, say, of himself or his mother.

1.1.2 Balancing Interests

Wise people seek to balance all interests involved in a problem, including larger interests that go beyond the personal or interpersonal, such as the interests of their community, of their nation, or of the world. They are willing to recognize their self-interests and to take such self-interest in account; but unlike with many people, their consideration of a decision does not end with self-interest or the interest of those like themselves – their tribe. Rather, they balance their own interests with many other interests. That is the only way in which a common good can be achieved.

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Balancing interests requires active and reflective listening. Too often, we all are eager to assume that our interests are the same as those of other people, and that if other people don't recognize that, it's too bad for them. Unfortunately, schools often tolerate or even encourage this kind of egocentric thinking. When one of us was young, the picture we were given of the rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union was very simple: The United States represented good, the Soviet Union bad; end of story. The comic-book character Superman was introduced to television as standing for "truth, justice, and the American Way." We learned that the US government spoke the truth and the Soviets lied, spreading propaganda shamelessly. The truth, of course, was more complex. Joseph McCarthy, the irresponsible senator from Wisconsin who claimed to see a Communist plot almost everywhere he looked, hardly stood for truth or justice. Many people, most notably in the movie industry, lost reputations and jobs because of "Red baiting."[3]

Are things better today? It's not clear. Former President Donald Trump told 16,241 lies as of January 20, 2020,[4] and then it appears most newspapers pretty much stopped counting. (The number passed 20,000 by July 2020.[5]) The continual lying during his administration bothered those who opposed him and did not seem to bother those who favored him – or at least, did not bother them much. Many politicians today seem as self-interested as they ever have been, perhaps more so.[6]

Sometimes, it is not even clear to people that they are impinging upon other people's interests. A recent example is unvaccinated young people and even older people who, ignoring warnings about COVID-19, have congregated in public places.[7] For some of them, their slogan seems to be "If I get COVID-19, I get COVID-19."[8] The problem, of course, is not just their getting COVID-19. Some people drink themselves to death; some smoke themselves to death. The problem with COVID-19 is the toll on other people. The younger people ignoring COVID-19 warnings may get away with a mild form of the illness (or they may not). But the people they infect may get much sicker and may die. These spring breakers do not seem seriously to consider the effects of their behavior on other people or on larger entities, such as the collective health of the people around them. Of course, the problem is not limited to spring-breakers. As of the end of December 2020, the number of COVID-19 cases in the world is at about 80 million and the number of deaths closing in on 2 million.[9]

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This lack of wise foresight applies not only to individuals. An almost incredible example of ignoring the common good is that early in 2020, when COVID-19 first broke out, states in the United States were competing with each other and with the federal government for masks, ventilators, and other supplies, as were entities in other countries, which were competing with each other and with other countries.[10] A similar pattern emerged at the end of 2020, when countries started competing for vaccines. If there ever has been a time to represent larger interests that transcend individual interests, certainly a pandemic is one of those times. Global cooperation is needed to defy COVID-19. But many people clearly have trouble rising to the occasion. In perhaps the saddest cases, leaders deny that there even is a problem, dismissing a possibly deadly virus as a variant of the common cold.[11]

The COVID-19 pandemic actually exposed unwise leaders all over the world in a remarkably accurate way. The virus best came under control in countries whose leaders took a wise approach; it went out of control in countries whose leaders took less wise or unwise approaches to controlling the virus. Leaders who were willing to listen to experts' advice and to put the interests of their country first were better able to find a reasonable balance between the economic needs and the health needs of their populations. These countries better got COVID-19 under control. In other countries, where leaders dismissed the problem or responded unwisely – for example, valuing their conception of economic interests or of how to get re-elected over health concerns – the numbers of cases increased exponentially.

In the case of Paul, in Box 1.1, balancing interests meant considering his own interests, his mother's interests, and the interests of his immediate and extended family. Other people's interests might have been involved as well. For example, Paul's mother might be involved in community activities that benefit from her presence and would lose out if she were to move to another location. A wise solution would identify all relevant interests and figure out the best possible balance among them.

1.1.3 Long-Term and Short-Term

Wise people look toward long-term outcomes as well as short-term outcomes. In a society that almost idolizes the short term, considering the long term is a problem. For example, White House economists

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published a study in September 2019 warning about the devastating impact a pandemic would have upon the economy and general well-being of the United States. [12] The report went unheeded. Indeed, President Donald Trump disbanded a National Security Council (NSC) task force charged with preparing for a pandemic.[13] This is much like the Chinese local governments that tried to hide the pandemic when it first started to take hold in China.[14] One can see, in the short term, why local officials would want to cover their rear flank, so to speak, so that the local outbreak would not be viewed as their fault. But such cover-ups, in China and elsewhere, have contributed greatly to the spread of the pandemic. In the long run, the result is devastating. Social unrest is better than widespread loss of life.

Oddly, this whole problem was anticipated by, of all writers, the inventors of the fictional comic-book character Superman. The series begins on the planet Krypton, where a notable scientist, Jor-El, warns that the planet is about to implode. Despite obvious empirical evidence, such as geological tremors, people not only reject Jor-El's words but make him an outcast. It is too late, he realizes, to save him and his wife, but he has a small model spaceship available, which he uses to send his son, Kal-El, to Earth, where the son becomes, first, Superboy, and then Superman.

The Superman story is fictional, of course, but the resemblance to the antecedents of the COVID-19 fiasco is remarkable. Experts have been warning not just since 2019, but back to the SARS epidemic of 2002–2003 and earlier, of the danger of a global pandemic.[15] Yet, when an actual pandemic arrived, only countries that had actually been afflicted by SARS in 2002–2003 were reasonably prepared, and even some of them were not ready. Those that were prepared had gained some wisdom from their earlier experience. Some of those countries, such as Singapore or Taiwan, better contained the virus while others, such as the United States, listened to blustering and sometimes lies on the part of its top leaders.[16]

Wastewater disposal by injecting the waste deep underground is yet another example of the adverse consequences of short-term thinking. Since the practice began, the incidence of earthquakes in Oklahoma, USA, a state in which one of us used to live, has greatly increased.[17] There used to be few earthquakes in Oklahoma. Now there are more earthquakes in Oklahoma than in the state of the United States most known for earthquakes, California. Was the short-term water-waste-

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as the common good, however. As an example, a positive ethical value would be "act toward others as you would have them act toward you." The common good would be the results of applying that value to real-world behavior.

Why does Paul, in Box 1.1, even care about his mother? In addition to childhood attachment, he probably feels that it would be ethically wrong just to ignore her needs, given that she took care of him when he was a child. At the same time, he has other ethical obligations – toward his wife, his children, and his job. In any case, if Paul is a wise person, he will try to make his decision based not just on his love for his family but also on what he considers as ethically right and wrong. At what point does his ethical obligation to take care of a person in need (his mother) become unfair toward another person (his wife)?

In a series of recent studies in the lab of one of us, participants were asked to fill out a value scale twice: once for themselves and once as they thought a very wise person would.[18] We wanted to find out which values people consider as typical for wise individuals. If you want to try out an abbreviated version of our study, fill out the short questionnaire in Box 1.2.

The results of our study were quite clear. First, independent of their own value orientations, participants believed that wise individuals are benevolent, that is, similar to Person A: reliable and trustworthy members of their group who are devoted to the welfare of the group members. Wise people's concerns go beyond their own group's concerns, however. Our participants also believed that wise persons are universalistic, that is, similar to Person E: They accept and tolerate people who are different from themselves – people who are not part of their own group – and they are committed to equality, justice, and protection for all the people in the world. Even participants who were rather low in universalism themselves described wise persons as more universalistic. Third, our participants believed that wise people are similar to Person C: They value self-direction. They want to be free to make their own decisions and to cultivate their own ideas and abilities. Wise people do not blindly follow leaders; they think for themselves.

One value was consistently associated with *low* wisdom in our study, and that value was power. According to our participants, wise people are not at all interested in having power over others, as Person F is. If they become leaders (Jesus Christ, Martin Luther King, or Nelson

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Box 1.2 Judging How Similar a Particular Person Is to a Wise Person

Here are six brief descriptions of fictitious persons. Please judge for each description how similar that person is to you and how similar that person is to a very wise person. Use a scale from 1 = not at all similar to 7 = very similar.

A considers it very important to help the people around him or her and to care for their well-being.
How similar is A to you? . . . . . .
How similar is A to a very wise person? . . . . . .
B considers it very important to show her or his abilities and to be admired by other people for his/her achievements.
How similar is B to you? . . . . . .
How similar is B to a very wise person? . . . . . .
C considers it very important to make his or her own decisions and to do things in his or her own original way.
How similar is C to you? . . . . . .
How similar is C to a very wise person? . . . . . .
D considers it very important to live in secure surroundings and to be protected by a strong government that defends its citizens.
How similar is D to you? . . . . . .
How similar is D to a very wise person? . . . . . .
E considers it very important to listen to people who are different from her/him and wants people everywhere in the world to have equal opportunities in life.
How similar is E to you? . . . . . .
How similar is E to a very wise person? . . . . . .
F considers it very important to get respect from others and to have other people do what he or she says.
How similar is F to you? . . . . . .
How similar is F to a very wise person? . . . . . .

Source: Adapted from the Portrait Value Questionnaire.[19]

Mandela are often named as examples of wise leaders[20]), it is because they want to serve their people and change the world for the better, not because they strive for power. In some of our studies, participants also considered wise persons to care little about achievement (Person B) and

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Box 1.3 Lawrence Kohlberg's Heinz Dilemma

A woman was on her deathbed. There was one drug that the doctors thought might save her. It was a form of radium that a druggist in the same town had recently discovered. The drug was expensive to make, but the druggist was charging ten times what the drug cost him to produce. He paid $200 for the radium and charged $2,000 for a small dose of the drug. The sick woman's husband, Heinz, went to everyone he knew to borrow the money, but he could only get together about $1,000, which is half of what it cost. He told the druggist that his wife was dying and asked him to sell it cheaper or let him pay later. But the druggist said: "No, I discovered the drug and I'm going to make money from it." So, Heinz got desperate and broke into the man's laboratory to steal the drug for his wife. Should Heinz have broken into the laboratory to steal the drug for his wife? Why or why not?

their own security (Person D). In other words, most people think that wise people are motivated by positive ethical values. They put the needs of others over their own selfishness[21] instead of striving for power, achievement, or security for themselves.

But wise people do not differ from others only in the values they pursue. They also differ in the ways in which they think about difficult ethical questions. We sometimes view ethics in wisdom-based decisions as a fairly simple matter. We might believe that, as children or young adults, we learned some basic principles and guidelines and then simply need to apply them to difficult decisions. For example, one of the Ten Commandments in the Bible is "Thou shalt not steal." Most of us do not view ourselves as crooks! But consider the problem depicted in Box 1.3, which was presented by the late Lawrence Kohlberg.[22]

In Kohlberg's view, those facing the Heinz dilemma should be evaluated on the basis of their moral reasoning, not on the basis of whether or not they think Heinz should steal the drug. What Kohlberg believed to be important was how they argued for stealing or not stealing the drug. For example, someone who says that Heinz should steal the drug because Heinz needs his wife to cook his meals would be at a lower level of moral reasoning than someone who says that

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Heinz should steal the drug because the druggist is being greedy, asking more money for the drug than he deserves. But both would be at a lower level of moral reasoning than someone who says Heinz should steal the drug because saving a human life is more important than the intellectual or other property rights of the individual who developed the drug.

Specifically, Kohlberg suggested that there are three levels of moral reasoning, which he referred to as preconventional, conventional, and postconventional. Each level shows a qualitatively different style of moral reasoning.

At the preconventional level, people's moral judgments are influenced by obedience and self-interest. Their thinking is very basic. They do what the church, the government, the police, or whoever, tells them to do, because they are afraid of getting caught and punished. If they do not expect to get caught, they might just as well act immorally. Looking out for their own self-interest, they will be obedient whenever obedience serves to maximize their own gains.

The conventional level in Kohlberg's theory is characterized by thinking that is conformist and guided by law and order. Conventional moral thinkers look to their neighbors to see what they do. They do not feel a strong need to think for themselves. Typical conventional thinkers have also internalized the idea that one does what the law tells them to do – there is nothing more to think about. If the law is unjust – return slaves to their owners, turn in Jews or Romani to the Nazis – they will still follow the laws. This is the most common level of moral reasoning among adults.

This kind of thinking is a step above blind obedience. Rather than just doing what they are told, conventional moral thinkers give thought to what they do – but that thought tends to be heavily guided by their social and cultural context. They know that rules are social contracts rather than given truths, but they prefer following the norms of wherever they are over questioning those norms. The problem is that when those norms are flawed or even severely misguided – for example, in supporting slavery – they will follow the norms anyway, not because they are merely obedient, but because they do what others do.

William H. Whyte captured the essence of conventional moral thinking in his book, *The Organization Man*, about corporations and the people who bought into the norms with which they were

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presented during the years of the Eisenhower administration.[23] The book noted how so many men gave up their autonomy and individuality to large organizations in exchange for the 1950s American dream, for example, of a suburban house, a white picket fence, and a family with two (or perhaps the average 2 ½) children. The book is often seen as not very relevant today, in that the dream of the suburban house is, for many people, gone, as is acceptance of the norms of large organizations. But we believe that the point of the book was bigger than this. It was that people, often unthinkingly, give up their autonomy to follow a convention. Today, many people believe whatever their political, religious, or other ideologicals leaders tell them, without much or any regard for the plausibility of what they are accepting as true.

The highest level of moral judgment in Kohlberg's theory is post-conventional. Reasoners at this level are seeing themselves as an active part of the social contract. Those who reach the highest level of moral reasoning aim to follow universal principles of justice – in other words, what they believe is right and just, regardless of what one or another government says. These are the people who would not care what an unjust government or demagogic president or corrupt court system says about what is right or true: They would be guided by principles that transcend whoever happens to be in power at a given time.

The Heinz dilemma illustrates how ethical and wisdom-requiring problems often are fraught. They do not lend themselves to easy solutions simply by applying some fixed rule. At the moment we are writing, medical doctors are facing related dilemmas. Many patients are sick with COVID-19 and some are close to death. ICU beds are in short supply. How does a doctor decide who should get an ICU bed? Doctors have taken a Hippocratic oath to do no harm. But in these cases, when resources are limited, someone may be harmed as a result. On the one hand, no responsible doctor would want to be responsible for a death. But, on the other hand, resources are limited. In many countries, medical associations have developed systems that allow doctors to make such decisions according to predefined rules. Similarly, government officials have to decide in what order to give groups of people a vaccine against COVID-19. There are no easy answers. Sometimes, (hopefully) wise systems can replace individual wisdom.

So far, we have seen that wise people care about the so-called self-transcendent values – such as benevolence, universalism, and

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he made mistakes in learning words on a list. Each time the learner made a mistake, he would be shocked, and the level of shock would increase as the experiment proceeded. The panel had written on it shock levels ranging from 10 volts to 200, 300, and 450 volts, indicating extremely high levels of shock. In fact, the machine was a fake – it delivered no shocks at all.

Predictably, the learner started making mistakes. At first, this mattered little. But after a while, the learner started emitting sounds suggesting he was in pain. As the level of supposed shock increased, the sounds became louder and more suggestive of pain. At higher levels, the learner showed signs of extreme distress and eventually seemed to start showing signs of heart problems, which he had indicated before the experiment he was prone to. Finally, he went silent. He might have been dead.

What about the teachers? They reacted in different ways. Most showed signs of distress, which became more extreme as the experiment went on. The experimenter, upon hearing objections from the teachers, had a standardized series of responses. The responses started out simply with encouragement to proceed. Then the experimenter went on to assuring the teacher that the experiment was safe and that he, the experimenter, took responsibility for the learner's health. Finally, the experimenter told the teacher that he must go on administering the shocks; he had no choice, or so the experimenter told him.

A major outcome of the experiment was the percentage of subjects that continued administering shocks until the end, where the learner might have been dead. A panel of psychiatrists was asked to estimate what percentage of teachers would go on to the end of the supposed shock panel. The panel predicted, for the most part, that the percentage would be fewer than 1 percent of teachers.

In fact, roughly two-thirds of teachers took their participants to the end. This experiment became famous not only because the results were so stunning but also because the main result has been replicated (see, e.g., www.apa.org/monitor/2009/03/milgram). In other words, the result appears to be robust.

The Milgram experiments show how many people will do something that they clearly know is wrong – inflict harm on someone else – simply out of obedience. The very day one of us is revising this chapter, there is a story in the *New York Times*, "I'm haunted by what I did as a lawyer in the Trump Justice Department."[30] The contexts of unwise

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and unethical actions change; the existence of problems giving rise to such actions does not. Moreover, recent conceptual replications have shown that the Milgram result replicated as well in 2009 as it did in the past[31]. As some scholars have said, people can act like sheep – even highly educated people whom one would expect to show more critical thinking and to be more willing to exercise their free will![32]

In the end, autocrats like Hitler and Mussolini did not get to positions of top leadership only because of uneducated people. The educated ones either suspended their critical thinking or, in two words, sold out, much as is happening today in many countries around the world as a new generation of would-be autocrats take over one country after another.

Why is it so difficult to actually act ethically in a challenging situation? There are eight steps in rendering an ethical action in a wisdom-requiring difficult situation.[33]

1. **Recognizing that there is a problem.** Wise people are alert to the existence of problems. One cannot solve a problem if one does not recognize that there is a problem. For example, with COVID-19, many government officials were slow to recognize that there even was a problem, with President Donald Trump minimizing the issue until the accumulation of cases made it a pressing political problem for him and not just a problem of humanity for all. At the time of our writing these words, Jair Bolsonaro of Brazil still refuses to recognize the scope of the problem.
2. **Defining the problem.** Once a person or group recognizes there is a problem to be solved, they have to figure out exactly what the problem is. Once governments recognized that COVID-19 was a problem, they had to grapple with the issue of exactly what the pandemic meant for their nations. Few leaders were able quickly to grasp just how serious the problem was. They did not realize initially that the virus is highly contagious, that it can be spread through numerous means, that it would cause many deaths especially in the elderly and the infirm, and that the economic situations of their countries would deteriorate so rapidly. So, even after they recognized that there was a problem, a lot of time needed to be spent on figuring out the dimensions of the problem. And inevitably, some segments of the leadership and of the populace were in denial. They were not ready to admit the scope of the problem and refused to socially distance themselves, resulting in the even faster

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diffusion of the virus. They were not willing to listen to experts telling them just how bad things might turn out. President Trump, for example, announced that the virus was just going to disappear. Unfortunately, magical thinking does not solve medical problems and did not solve this one.

3. **Identifying the problem as personally relevant.** There was a widespread failure of leaders to recognize the issue as personally relevant for their leadership. Donald Trump initially dismissed COVID-19 as a Chinese problem and continued, even as the virus became a worldwide pandemic, to stoke xenophobic resentment by referring to it this way.[34] For several weeks before that, Trump, Boris Johnson in Great Britain, and many leaders continued to view the problem as a Chinese one. The problem, of course, was that with worldwide travel as easy as it was, the virus quickly spread around the world. Most leadership failures are unfortunate. This one was catastrophic, with more than 34 million cases of COVID-19 in the United States as of July, 2021.[35] It is important to recognize and define a problem, but unless you see it as relevant to your role as a leader, you cannot propose a wise and ethical solution. President Donald Trump later contracted COVID-19, and learned nothing from the experience. People can't learn if they don't want to.
4. **Identifying a problem as sufficiently serious to be worth pursuing.** To make a wise and ethical decision about a problem, one must first decide that the problem is even worth tackling. We all are constantly beset by problematical situations in our lives. But some of the problems, although personally relevant, are simply not worth our attention. For example, siblings close in age (one of us has triplets) get into arguments with unpleasant frequency. The smallest issues can set them off. When is it worth parents' intervening and when does the parent make a wiser decision *not* to intervene and to let the children work out the problem themselves? Indeed, many problems in the world, sooner or later, do work themselves out; others do not. Part of wisdom is deciding which is which.
5. **Deciding which ethical rules or guidelines apply.** At home or in school or in church, we may learn a variety of ethical guidelines, such as not to purposely harm people or not to cheat. In a situation requiring wise and ethical reasoning, one needs to figure out which ethical rules apply. It is fairly easy in some situations: In taking a

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test, don't look over at your neighbor's work and don't look at answers you wrote on a piece of paper that you keep hidden in your pocket. But in more complex situations, it is not as easy to know which rules apply and how one should decide between them. The Hippocratic oath says first to do no harm, but if one is able to save the lives of some COVID-19 patients but not of others, someone is going to get harmed. Does the rule apply? Or is there some other rule to apply, such as to do the least harm possible or to help the most people possible or to help those who need help most? But what does it mean to help those who most need help? What if someone really needs help but has little or no possibility of survival? Should one help such a person over someone who may need help less but who has some chance of survival? Experienced professionals are paid the big bucks, at least in theory, because they should be better at making such decisions, but are they? People with a lot of life experience may find a rule, but then run into trouble in the next step of the cycle. As mentioned earlier, in many professions, including medicine, rule systems have been developed in order to take such decisions off the shoulders of individual professionals. But there may be exceptions where following the guidelines may still cause harm. As wise individuals are typically postconventional thinkers, they will follow such rules only if they do not go against fundamental ethical principles.

6. **Deciding how to apply the relevant rule.** Even if one has decided what ethical rule or guideline is relevant, it can be difficult to apply the rule, as in the case of two people who need help but cannot both be helped because of a lack of resources. As professors, we, the authors, sometimes find ourselves in situations that stretch our wisdom to its limits. For example, a student was once about to fail one of our courses. Such failures are unfortunate, but they happen. Then the student came to see the professor to explain that the student needed the course to graduate and that the student also was going through extremely trying family circumstances. How does one deal with such a situation in a way that is fair both toward that student but also toward other students? Applying any kind of general rule is difficult in such instances.
7. **Preparing for adverse consequences in case one acts wisely and ethically.** In an ideal world, good behavior always would be rewarded, and bad behavior penalized. In the real world, President

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Trump readily and regularly pardoned lawbreakers convicted of serious crimes[36] and fired ethical staff members.[37] He then was rewarded with overwhelming support from highly religious white evangelical voters who profess to be serious believers in the teachings of Christ.[38] In the real world, ethical actions often are punished. People lose jobs, as did the captain of the Navy vessel USS *Theodore Roosevelt* after seeking to protect his sailors by publicly warning that COVID-19 infection was rampant on his ship and sufficient help was not forthcoming.[39] Indeed, whistleblowers often are demoted or fired.[40] Acting wisely and ethically, therefore, may be the right thing to do, but it is not always the rewarded thing to do, at least in the short run.

8. **Act.** One can be a wise and ethical thinker without being a wise and ethical actor. In the end, wisdom and ethics have to be judged by acts, not merely by thoughts. For example, in the time of the Nazis, many people wanted to help members of persecuted groups, but in the end, did not for fear of the consequences to themselves and their families. As another example, a doctor came from northern New Hampshire to help save lives during New York City's COVID-19 crisis. He wanted to stay with his brother in the brother's co-op. The co-op board refused to allow him in the building.[41] Their notion of the "common good" seems to have extended only to the sense of wellbeing of residents of the building, rather than to saving lives in their own city. They probably knew how incredibly selfish they were being. They didn't care. The situation was so fraught that the resident of the building asked the *New York Times* not to publish the address of the building for fear that the co-op board would retaliate against him. Wisdom and ethics here, as in so many places, are easier to exercise in theory than in practice.

In sum, wise judgment is strongly influenced by ethics. Wise individuals care about a greater good, not just about their own benefit. They do not simply obey rules but try to follow universal ethical principles. Most importantly, they not only think wisely, but are also able to act wisely, even in the face of resistance.

1.1.6 Adaptation, Shaping, and Selection

Wise judgment requires some kind of response to the environment – in particular, to adapt, shape, or select.

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Finally, one can argue about whether intelligence or even creativity is value free – we believe they are not – but one certainly cannot argue that wisdom is value-free. Wisdom involves the application of positive ethical values and the concept does not even make sense in the absence of values, because those values determine in part what is wise. How much should one value the life of a fetus in comparison with the life of a mother? How much should one value one's own life in comparison with the lives of others? How much should one value economic prosperity in comparison with making sure that every individual has sufficient economic resources? How much should one value the rights of minority-group members in comparison with the rights of majority-group members?

Any way one looks at wisdom, values creep in. Many of those values may be universal, but how they are applied may not be. For example, every culture values human life, but whose lives are valued more than others? How does one compare the value of the individual to the value of the collective?

Values clearly matter. What makes wisdom important is that it expresses how judgments can be made that reflect the best values we all have to offer. In the next chapter, we discuss why wisdom is important, in general, and why it gets so much less attention in psychology and in society than it deserves.

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