

Introduction

Wisdom has been highly praised by philosophers, psychologists, politicians, religious leaders, poets, and the general public.¹ Wisdom is assumed to be something the possession of which enables one to deliberate, act, and live well. However, what exactly is this “something”? And if there is such a thing, how can we human beings acquire and maintain it?

According to the view held by philosophers (e.g., Nozick 1989; Tiberius 2008; Swartwood 2013; Grimm 2015) and psychologists (e.g., Baltes and Staudinger 2000; Sternberg 2001),² a person *S* is wise if and only if *S* knows how to live well. This view highlights two features of wisdom: first, wisdom is concerned with well-being; second, wisdom is a kind of knowledge-how. But what is such knowledge-how like? Is it a skill, or a knack? What does a wise person know about well-being? What kind of theory can be developed from the view that wisdom is knowing how to live well? What difficulties does a knowing-how view of wisdom encounter? Philosophers and psychologists have not yet brought these issues and problems to the fore and dealt with them in a systematic way. For example, psychologists who view wisdom as skill do not recognize the theoretical difficulties in conceptualizing wisdom as skill (such as the objections addressed in Sections 4 and 5 of this Element). Philosophers who view wisdom as skill keep the issue about what a wise person knows about well-being as implicit as possible, and tell us little about how wisdom can be learned and improved *as a skill*. This Element aims to develop and defend a theory of wisdom – the *expertise theory* of wisdom – in a systematic manner and by reference to contemporary studies of knowledge-how, skill, and expertise.

This Element consists of three parts. Part I, “A Skill Theory of Wisdom Presented,” consists of one section (Section 1), which details the motivations and arguments underlying the skill model of wisdom and proposes a version of the skill model.

Part II, “The Theory Developed,” consists of two sections. To examine the nature of wisdom qua skill more deeply and to develop the expertise theory of wisdom presented in Section 1, we address two issues in this context.

The first issue pertains to whether wisdom requires articulacy, that is, whether a wise person qua an expert is required to possess an articulate skill that takes his

¹ It is often assumed that there are two distinct kinds of wisdom: theoretical wisdom (*sophia*) and practical wisdom (*phronesis*). However, Jason Baehr (2012) argues that this distinction is not as sharp as some philosophers believe. In this Element, this issue is left aside, and the term “wisdom” is always used to refer to practical wisdom unless otherwise noted.

² According to psychologists Ferrari and Kim, “[a]lthough there are many definitions of wisdom, we find a surprising consensus in the scientific literature. At the most general level, this consensus is well-summarized by Grimm (2015), for whom wisdom concerns knowledge of how to live the best life” (Ferrari and Kim 2019: 347).

or her practical skill of living as its object of explanation. To address this issue, we discuss two competing accounts of expertise in Section 2 and argue for a perspective that views wisdom as exhibiting two levels: a combination of a first-order practical skill and a second-order articulate skill.

The second issue pertains to the content of wisdom, in particular to what is known by a wise person regarding well-being. Section 3 develops a fully articulated theory of wisdom by integrating the expertise theory of wisdom (in its partially articulated form) with the *success theory of well-being*, arguing that wisdom is a (complex) skill that is conducive to well-being, which is conceived of in terms of overall attitude success.

Part III, “The Theory Defended,” consists of two sections. The preceding sections establish the expertise theory of wisdom, which exemplifies a skill model of wisdom. However, two types of objections can be raised to the skill model of wisdom in general and the expertise theory of wisdom in particular.

The first type of objection argues that certain distinct features are present in wisdom but not in skill. A special case of this type of objection is the claim that a person with wisdom can and should deliberate about the (final) end being pursued, but a person with a particular skill cannot deliberate about the (final) end of that skill (and even if he or she can, he or she is not required to do so). I call this the Deliberation Objection. Section 4 aims to respond to the Deliberation Objection by showing how an expert in a field can and should deliberate about the end being pursued.

The second type of objection argues that certain distinct features are present in skill but not in wisdom. A special case of this type of objection is the claim that skill has sufficient feedback for learning and improvement, but wisdom has no such feedback. I call this the Feedback Objection. Section 5 aims to respond to the Feedback Objection by showing that the argument for it is not as sound as it appears to be. The underlying aim of Section 5 is to illustrate the way in which wisdom can be acquired.

Part I A Skill Theory of Wisdom Presented

1 Wisdom as Knowing How to Live Well

1.1 The Skill Model of Wisdom in Philosophy

A wise person *knows how* to live well. Such know-how involves a special kind of practical reasoning – *good reasoning* regarding how to live well (happily or virtuously). Contemporary philosophers have contributed to the development of the skill model of wisdom, according to which the distinctive features of

wisdom (or the practical reasoning of a prudent or virtuous person) can be explicated in terms of the distinctive features of skill (*techne* or expertise).³

There are several merits of the skill model of wisdom. The first is that the concept of wisdom, which might seem elusive to us at the outset, can be approached by means of the concept of skill, a concept with which we are more or less familiar. The second merit is that the skill model of wisdom can be empirically grounded with the aid of empirical, scientific studies of skill acquisition and expert performance.⁴ An empirically grounded theory of wisdom, if correctly constructed, can “[yield] a viable epistemology in which moral knowledge is shown to be a species of a general kind of knowledge that is not philosophically suspect” (Bloomfield 2000: 23), or “give us insight into the development of virtue” (Stichter 2007: 184). The third merit is that the skill model of wisdom has the capacity to *guide* rather than merely to explain human life, although the skill model also acknowledges Robert Nozick’s (1989: 270) claim that “[w]isdom does not guarantee success in achieving life’s important goals, however, just as a high probability does not guarantee truth.” For the skill model, wisdom, like skill, does not guarantee certain success but merely reliable success.

Some terminological and conceptual issues must be addressed at this point to avoid unnecessary worry and confusion. First, advocates of the skill model use somewhat different terms to express their views: “the skill analogy for *virtue*” (Annas 1993, 1995), “the skill model of *virtue*” (Stichter 2007), and “the expert skill model of *wisdom*” (Swartwood 2013). Some might worry that the subject matter of the skill models proposed by these authors differs: for Annas and Stichter, the subject matter is moral virtue, while for Swartwood, the subject matter is wisdom. In one respect, their models focus on a nearly identical object: The object that Annas and Stichter attempt to model by the concept of skill is good *practical reasoning* in the context of a virtuous life, and the object that Swartwood attempts to model is good *practical reasoning* in the context of a good life. Thus, although some philosophers use the term “skill model of *virtue*,” this term can be treated as an abbreviation for the phrase “the skill model of *good practical reasoning* in virtue,” whose main conception (i.e., good practical reasoning) is closely linked to wisdom.⁵

³ Such philosophers include Annas (1995, 2011a); Bloomfield (2000, 2001, 2014); Hursthouse (2006); Stichter (2007, 2018); Russell (2009, 2012); Swartwood (2013); Tsai (2016, 2020, 2022a); and Swartwood and Tiberius (2019).

⁴ For empirical studies of expertise, see Ericsson et al. (2006).

⁵ Although there is reason to separate the skill model of *virtue* from the skill model of *wisdom* (this reason, briefly stated, is that wisdom is not skill because the goal of wisdom is vague or contentious; see Jacobson [2005] and Stichter [2018]; and for a critical discussion, see Section 5.4), this reason does not affect our use of the theoretical resources of the skill model

Second, to be clear, I distinguish three different understandings of the thesis that wisdom is skill: First, wisdom is identical to skill (which I call the Identity Thesis); second, wisdom is analogous to skill (which I call the Analogy Thesis);⁶ and third, wisdom is a species of skill (which I call the Species Thesis). The Identity Thesis is too strong because it stipulates that all instances of skill should be treated as instances of wisdom. As we know, there are putative instances of skill that are not instances of wisdom. The Analogy Thesis is too modest because it does not provide or imply any ontological status for wisdom. The notion of analogy – such as in the context of the city–soul analogy in Plato’s *Republic* – conveys no ontological import from source objects to target objects.⁷ The skill model of wisdom that I develop and defend in this Element endorses the Species Thesis. That said, I nevertheless draw on resources from the Identity Thesis and the Analogy Thesis to highlight and justify certain ideas that are shared by all skill models of wisdom (for example, the merits mentioned above are shared by all skill models of wisdom).

1.2 The Skill Model of Wisdom in Psychology

One motivation for engaging with the skill model of wisdom in philosophy is that this model can serve as a conceptual foundation for the skill model of wisdom in psychology. Paul Bloomfield observes that “[a]lthough it is uncommon for philosophers today to think of the virtues as skill, . . . there is good evidence from empirical psychology that supports this thinking, about wisdom in particular” (Bloomfield 2014: 225). He mentions the works of Paul Baltes and Ursula Staudinger, who propose the Berlin wisdom paradigm, which defines wisdom as “expertise in the fundamental pragmatics of life” (Baltes and Staudinger 2000),⁸ as well as the work of Robert Sternberg, who proposes the balance theory of wisdom, which defines wisdom as “the application of successful intelligence and creativity as mediated by values toward the

of virtue to discuss and develop the skill model of wisdom. The ultimate goal of virtue, in fact, can be the same as the goal of wisdom, that is, to live a good life. So, the goal of virtue is vague as well. If virtue, so understood, can be a skill, so can wisdom. Thus, either both virtue and wisdom are skills or neither are.

⁶ Compare Annas’s formulation of the analogy: “The idea that the practical reasoning of the virtuous person shares important features with that of the expert in a practical skill is often referred to simply as the skill analogy” (Annas 2011a: 2).

⁷ However, for Annas, “Some readers may come to think that ‘analogy’ is not the best term for a relation so close that some have come to think of virtue as itself being a kind of skill; but what is most important is to bring out the shared features and their importance” (Annas 2011a: 2).

⁸ According to the Berlin wisdom paradigm, “Wisdom-related knowledge and skills can be characterized by a family of five criteria: (1) rich factual knowledge about life, (2) rich procedural knowledge about life, (3) life span contextualism, (4) value relativism, and (5) awareness and management of uncertainty” (Staudinger 2010: 1861).

achievement of a common good through a balance among (a) intrapersonal, (b) interpersonal, and (c) extrapersonal interests” (Sternberg 2003: 152). Both the Berlin wisdom paradigm and the balance theory of wisdom can be classified as examples of the skill model of wisdom because they view wisdom as a kind of expertise or intelligence.

What can the skill model of wisdom in philosophy contribute to the skill model of wisdom in psychology? Psychologists Sternberg and Glück believe that “it would be a serious mistake to leave the study of wisdom exclusively to philosophers (and in fact, even fewer philosophers than psychologists actually study wisdom nowadays!),” but they also claim that “[p]sychology as well as philosophy has a great deal to contribute to the study of wisdom. The philosophical and psychological approaches are complementary, with each providing insights that the other would be likely to miss” (Sternberg and Glück 2019: 787). Sternberg and Glück do not identify the element that is supposed to be missing from psychology. However, philosophers might have something to say regarding this lack.

The implicit-theories approach and the explicit-theories approach are two methodological approaches in psychology to understanding “intelligence,” “creativity,” and “wisdom.” Implicit theories in general, according to Sternberg, “are constructions by people (whether psychologists or laypersons) that reside in the minds of these individuals. Such theories need to be discovered rather than invented because they already exist, in some form, in people’s heads” (Sternberg 1985: 608). In contrast, explicit theories in general “are constructions of psychologists or other scientists that are based on or at least tested on data collected from people performing tasks presumed to measure psychological functioning” (Sternberg 1985: 607). Applying to the psychology of wisdom, “implicit theories of wisdom are the conceptions of wisdom that laypersons hold, and explicit theories of wisdom are those that are constructed and tested by psychologists and other experts” (Bluck and Glück 2005: 90).

Regarding the implicit-theoretical approach to wisdom, which searches for and studies laypersons’ conceptions of wisdom, John Kekes complains that

no scientists, jurists, or historians would dream of answering difficult questions in their field by asking randomly selected people . . . People who know take it for granted that difficult questions have difficult answers and that randomly selected people lack the knowledge even to understand the difficulties involved in the questions let alone give reasonable answers to them. But psychologists assume that randomly selected people can tell what wisdom is. In nothing I have read is this assumption stated or justified. (Kekes 2020: 50)

Swartwood and Tiberius agree with Kekes since they claim that “implicit theories of wisdom on their own will not provide us with a plausible account of wisdom” (Swartwood and Tiberius 2019: 20).⁹

It is obvious that implicit theories of wisdom are not argument-driven but rather data-driven; they are concerned with what people believe about wisdom, regardless of whether these beliefs are justified. In my view, explicit theories of wisdom too may not be entirely argument-driven, because they can be overridden by implicit theories of wisdom (cf. the following: “Still, an explicit theory of wisdom that was totally inconsistent with laypeople’s understanding of the term would be hard to defend” [Bluck and Glück 2005: 91]). Neither the implicit-theories approach nor the explicit-theories approach to wisdom *aims to* address such reason-demanding questions; both approaches are designed to be more data-driven than argument-driven.

If examples of the skill model of wisdom in psychology, such as the Berlin wisdom paradigm and the balance theory, are methodologically founded upon the implicit-theories and the explicit-theories approaches, they have conceptual deficiencies. The skill model of wisdom in philosophy can be a conceptual foundation for the psychology of wisdom because the former aims to explore the fundamental conceptual issues that any particular skill model of wisdom must eventually encounter, including issues such as why and whether wisdom is skill, why rich knowledge (whether propositional or procedural) is necessary for expertise and wisdom, and why and whether wisdom is anti-wicked, and so on (as readers will see in this Element). These “why” questions about wisdom – or, to put it more generally, reason-demanding questions about wisdom – lie outside the scope of the psychology of wisdom. For example, the skill model of wisdom in psychology does not recognize, let alone respond to, the serious objections against the thesis that wisdom is skill, such as the Deliberation Objection and the Feedback Objection, which are addressed in Sections 4 and 5 of this Element.

1.3 Arguments for the Skill Model of Wisdom

The skill model of wisdom treats wisdom as skill or expertise in living well. Different scholars prefer different labels,¹⁰ formulations, or arguments for the idea that wisdom is skill. The issue of why these scholars prefer one over the

⁹ The reason given by these authors is similar to that given by Kekes: “Lay people’s views of physical laws may be unlikely to be entirely wrong, and a physical theory that was totally inconsistent with them would probably be hard to defend, but that doesn’t do much to show that physicists should start their research by surveying lay views” (Swartwood and Tiberius 2019: 19).

¹⁰ Such labels include the “skill analogy of virtue,” the “skill model of virtue,” and the “expert skill model of wisdom,” as mentioned in Section 1.1.

other is not the main concern here. My aim is to construct an argument that is sufficiently general or abstract to highlight the relationship or connection between wisdom and skill. Consider the following argument:

The General Argument

(P1) A person S is wise if and only if S knows how to live well.

(P2) S knows how to live well if and only if S has skill or expertise in living well.

(C) S is wise if and only if S has skill or expertise in living well.

Let us call this the *General Argument* for the skill model of wisdom. This argument is valid, but its two premises require further explanation.

The view of wisdom stated in (P1) is justified by its being a meaning stipulation. According to Sharon Ryan, “This view captures Aristotle’s basic idea of practical wisdom. It also captures an important aspect of views defended by Nozick, Plato, Garrett, Kekes, Maxwell, Ryan, and Tiberius” (Ryan 2013). I leave the exegesis of these philosophers to Ryan and move on to an issue that she views as difficult (cf. her claim that “an account of what it means to *know how to live well* may prove as difficult a topic as providing an account of wisdom” [Ryan 2013; emphasis mine]): If practical wisdom is knowing how to live well, then what is such knowledge-how?

Fortunately, contemporary epistemology offers resources that allow us to address this issue. According to intellectualism, knowledge-how is a species of knowledge-that (e.g., Stanley and Williamson 2001; Stanley 2011). In contrast, according to anti-intellectualism, knowledge-how is not knowledge-that but is a species of capacity or skill (e.g., Ryle 1949; Hetherington 2011, 2021).¹¹ At first glance, the view stated in (P2) is inclined toward anti-intellectualism. That said, we should be cautious because there are more sophisticated forms of intellectualism and anti-intellectualism about knowledge-how. For example, the notions of skill or expertise expressed in (P2) can be explained with an intellectualist flavor.¹²

¹¹ The account of knowing-how that I endorse in this Element is *Rylean* anti-intellectualism, which is an upgraded or reinterpreted version of Ryle’s anti-intellectualism. According to the Rylean account, knowing-how is a hybrid skill, which is a combination of a first-order practical skill and a second-order intellectual skill. The Rylean account does not disregard the importance of propositional knowledge in a particular instance of know-how. Such propositional knowledge can be used to explain the normative and agential aspects of intelligent action. However, the Rylean account does not treat propositional knowledge as intelligence per se but rather as the *product* of exercising (second-order intellectual) intelligence. Thus construed, the Rylean account of knowing-how, which accommodates the intellectual element of intellectualism, remains anti-intellectualist. For a more detailed argument for the Rylean account, see Tsai (2014).

¹² With regard to the notion of skill or expertise with an intellectualist flavor, see Annas (2011a, 2011b) and Montero (2016).

In the philosophical literature, other arguments have been created to support the skill model of wisdom, such as Jason Swartwood’s (2013) “Core Argument,” which is more complicated than the General Argument. However, the Core Argument can be simplified and reconstructed as follows:

The Simplified Core Argument

(P1) Wisdom is knowing how to live well in the sense of knowing how to conduct oneself.

(P2) Knowing how to conduct oneself is an expert decision-making skill, which is composed of a set of five subskills (intuition, deliberation, metacognition, self-regulation, and self-cultivation).

(C) Wisdom is an expert decision-making skill.

The Simplified Core Argument mirrors the main structure of the General Argument. Details and objections aside, the General Argument, or something like it, can help us understand how and why wisdom can be related to skill.

1.4 The Expertise Theory of Wisdom

1.4.1 Two Characters

Knowing-how, skill, and expertise are goal-oriented. A person with a particular skill or an expert in a particular field can be seen as a person equipped with a sort of particular goal-oriented system, which enables and requires the person to know what he or she, qua an expert in that field, exactly and ultimately should achieve in the field when exercising the skill, and what the best or effective means are to achieve it. Thus, assuming that wisdom is skill or expertise in living well, a wise person knows not only what well-being is but also what the best means or strategies are to achieve it. To put this view more formally:

The goal-oriented character of wisdom qua skill: A person S is wise (i.e., S knows how to live well, or S has skill or expertise in living well) only if (i) S knows what contributes to or constitutes well-being, and (ii) S knows what the best means to achieve well-being are.

This view echoes and *justifies* the views of wisdom espoused by Grimm and Nozick. In his article “Wisdom,” Grimm lists three necessary conditions for knowing how to live well:

On my view knowledge of how to live well is a complex state that can be broken down into various components. In particular, knowing how to live well is constituted by the following further types of knowledge, all of

which . . . are individually necessary for wisdom: (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: 139–140)

In a chapter of his *The Examined Life*, “What Is Wisdom and Why Do Philosophers Love It So?,” Nozick lists several elements of wisdom:

What a wise person needs to know and understand constitutes a varied list: the most important goals and values of life – the ultimate goal, if there is one; what means will reach these goals without too great a cost; what kinds of dangers threaten the achieving of these goals; how to recognize and avoid or minimize these dangers; what different types of human beings are like in their actions and motives (as this presents dangers or opportunities); what is not possible or feasible to achieve (or avoid); how to tell what is appropriate when; knowing when certain goals are sufficiently achieved; what limitations are unavoidable and how to accept them; how to improve oneself and one's relationships with others or society; knowing what the true and unapparent value of various things is; when to take a long-term view; knowing the variety and obduracy of facts, institutions, and human nature; understanding what one's real motives are; how to cope and deal with the major tragedies and dilemmas of life, and with the major good things too. (Nozick 1989: 269)

In Grimm's list, the first and third types of knowledge are knowledge about goals and knowledge about means, respectively. In Nozick's list, knowledge about the first two items is clearly knowledge about goals and knowledge about means. The second type of knowledge in Grimm's list as well as most items in Nozick's list, other than the first two, can be seen as the sort of information that is necessary for or beneficial to knowledge about means, that is, information that helps the subject in question figure out what the best means or strategies to achieve well-being are. Both Grimm and Nozick attribute the goal-oriented character to wisdom, although they do not proclaim the skill model of wisdom.

Another character that wisdom can inherit from know-how, skill, or expertise is the success-conducive character. A person is unlikely to be qualified as an expert in a particular field if the person cannot successfully achieve the goal in that field. For example, a person who, after trying, does not have mobility in aquatic environments is not a swimmer in a normal sense, even if the person has all the propositional knowledge that Michael Phelps has about swimming. (The person might be an expert in *teaching* others how to swim, but this is not the goal of the swimming skill.) Thus, assuming that wisdom is skill or expertise in living well, a person with wisdom must successfully achieve well-being. Let us formulate the view as follows:

The success-conducive character of wisdom qua skill: A person S is wise only if S is reliably successful at acting and living well.

This view of wisdom also echoes and *justifies* certain philosophers' views of wisdom. For example, according to Sharon Ryan,

Philosophers who are attracted to the idea that knowing how to live well is a necessary condition for wisdom might want to simply tack on a success condition to (KLW) [i.e., S is wise iff S knows how to live well] to get around cases in which a person knows all about living well, yet fails to put this knowledge into practice. Something along the lines of the following theory would capture this idea.

Wisdom as Knowing How to, and Succeeding at, Living Well (KLS):
 S is wise iff (i) S knows how to live well, and (ii) S is successful at living well.

The idea of the success condition is that one puts one's knowledge into practice. (Ryan 2013)

Aligning with the proponents of (KLS) stated in the above passage, Grimm adds an application condition to his view of wisdom mentioned earlier:

Notice that I have claimed only that our conditions on wisdom are individually necessary, not jointly sufficient; so it remains to be determined what else needs to be added in order to complete or round out the view. By my lights, the main obvious contender is some sort of application condition: that the wise person not only knows what is good or important for well-being and has effective strategies for achieving these goods, but actually *does* achieve these goods. (Grimm 2015: 152–153)

Philosophers attribute the success-conducive character to wisdom, although they do not explicitly proclaim the skill model of wisdom, let alone justify their conception of wisdom by the characters of skill and expertise.

1.4.2 *The Theory*

Based on what has been said above, a version of the skill model of wisdom, which I shall call the “expertise theory” of wisdom, can be formulated as follows:

The Expertise Theory of Wisdom, v.1

- (T1) S is wise if and only if S has skill or expertise in living well.
- (T2) S is wise only if
 - (i) S knows what contributes to or constitutes well-being;
 - (ii) S knows what the best means to achieve well-being are; and
 - (iii) S is reliably successful at acting and living well (in light of what S knows).

The expertise theory of wisdom *v.1* is composed of two theses: (T1) is supported by the General Argument; (T2-i) and (T2-ii) state the goal-oriented character of