PART I

Foundations of Wisdom

1 Race to Samarra

The Critical Importance of Wisdom in the World Today

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An old Mesopotamian tale, as retold by W. Somerset Maugham, tells of a servant who, upon seeing Death eyeing him in a suspicious way in the city of Baghdad, flees to Samarra to escape Death. Soon thereafter, the merchant by whom the servant is employed sees Death lurking in Baghdad. The merchant asks Death why he gave the servant such a strange stare. Death responds that the stare was because he was astonished to see the servant in Baghdad, given that Death had an appointment to rendezvous with the servant the next day in Samarra.

The problem we face globally is that we are creating in our world a race to Samarra. The race we have created is leading us toward the destruction of our world as we have known it. The thesis of this introductory chapter is that we are running the wrong race, and that only wisdom will get us back on track to be in the proper race. Here's why.

Conventional Intelligence Is Not Enough

What, exactly, is intelligence? Intelligence often is seen in terms of adaptation to the environment (Sternberg & Detterman, 1986). Traditionally, it has been viewed in terms of what IQ tests measure or what tests of abstract thinking measure, and the processes underlying such tests (see, e.g., Sternberg, 1985b, 1988). There are broader views (e.g., Sternberg, 2003), but society has yet to adopt them. Even considering conventional views, the construct of intelligence has shown itself to be problematic with respect to its role in society.

First, the good news! Professor James Flynn of the University of Otago has found that during the twentieth century IQs rose worldwide by about 3 points per decade, or roughly 30 points (Flynn, 1987). Even better, in the United States, IQs are continuing to rise (Flynn, 2016). A difference of 30 points is huge: It is the difference between a gifted IQ and an average one, and between an average IQ and one at the borderline of labeling someone "intellectually challenged." Average IQs remain 100 because test publishers periodically re-standardize tests to make the average 100.

Next, the not so good news! The steep rise in IQ has bought us, as a society, much less than anyone had any right to hope for. People are better able to understand complex communications devices and other new technologies than

Note: Portions of the text and tables were drawn or adapted from Sternberg (2018).

they would have been at the beginning of the twentieth century. But in terms of our behavior as a society, are you impressed with what 30 points has brought us? The 2016 US presidential election was probably about as puerile as any in our history, and the result has been a national government that kindly could be called dysfunctional. Moreover, higher IQs have not brought with them solutions to any of the world's or the country's major problems – rising income disparities, widespread poverty, climate change, pollution, violence, and deaths by opioid poisoning, among others.

Many of the standardized tests used in schools are basically IQ proxies. They are not the same as IQ tests, but scores on them are moderately to highly correlated with IQ (Frey & Detterman, 2004; Koenig, Frey, & Detterman, 2008). Our society, in placing so much emphasis on scores on standardized tests, is making a serious and possibly irreversible mistake (Sternberg, 1985a, 1985b, 1988). We are creating an educational race that rewards people who score highly on skills that will help their own life chances to a small to moderate extent (Sternberg, 1984; Sternberg & Hedlund, 2002). But the race does little to choose winners who will create a positive, meaningful, and enduring difference to our future (Sternberg, 2010a, 2016). We have initiated a race to meet Death in Samarra. The skills that our educational system emphasizes matter at least somewhat for success in school and life, but other things matter as much or more (Sternberg, 2016). Schools, and society in general, should develop virtues such as good character, active citizenship, compassion, and ethical leadership, as well as other important skills, including common sense, creativity, and wisdom – the use of one's knowledge and skills to achieve a common good, by comprehending other people's points of view and also by balancing in an ethical way one's own interests with the interests of other people and the larger interests of society, as well as the entire world (Sternberg, 2016, 2017a).

The problem is that intelligence is insufficient for creating a better world. Moreover, it has a dark side (Sternberg, 1988, 2017b). The nature of dark side is simple: Intelligence can be deployed toward good ends (as was done, say, by Nelson Mandela and Martin Luther King), but it also can be deployed toward bad ends (as was done by Adolf Hitler and Joseph Stalin). Intelligence is a measure of adaptive skills (Sternberg, 2014). But those skills are often used to benefit oneself, not society, the environment, or the world. People can adapt, but often at the expense of other people. The growing economic inequality in much of the world shows how some people are learning to adapt just fine, and are just as fine with leaving others way behind. Therefore, intelligence is important to the world, but at the same time, it provides no guarantee of an improved world. Intelligence was behind the development of nuclear weapons, poison gases, and the fossil fuels that are partially behind human-created climate change: Intelligence can help to make the world a better place, but intelligence also can devastate and even destroy the world as we know it. In the event of a nuclear holocaust, there still will be those who can adapt. Unfortunately, they will be cockroaches and other insects and other species more resistant to radiation than humans are.

Creativity is not Enough Either

Creativity can help to make the world a better place (Sternberg & Lubart, 1995). The computer on which this chapter is being written, the book or other medium on which you are reading this chapter, and many if not most of the conveniences of modern life are possible only because of creativity, or the creation of new ideas and products that are both novel and somehow useful (Sternberg & Kaufman, 2018). But creativity also has a dark side (Cropley, Cropley, Kaufman, & Runco, 2010; Sternberg, 2010b). People can direct creativity toward good goals (e.g., formulation of medicines to cure diseases, production of beautiful works of art, writing of poetry) or toward bad goals (e.g., building nuclear bombs, designing terrorist attacks). Certainly, the world, for its survival, requires more than creativity, just as it requires more than intelligence.

We Need Wisdom

Wisdom is the entity that many authors in this volume, including myself, believe can create a better world. There are many definitions of wisdom in the volume, but almost all of them point to wisdom as a key to creating a better world. In my own definition (Sternberg, 2001, 2004), wisdom involves using both one's intelligence and one's creativity, as well as one's knowledge base, for a common good. Thus wisdom, by its nature, cannot be used toward the achievement of dark ends. One achieves a common good by balancing one's own interests with the interests of other people and with larger interests (including the interests of one's family, one's community, one's nation, and even the world), over the short term as well as the long term, through the use of positive ethical values.

Kinds of Wisdom

Wisdom can be seen as being of different kinds, depending on two dimensions: domain generality and depth (see Table 1.1).

Table 1.1 *Kinds of wisdom*

Domain generality	Depth of wisdom	
	Deep	Shallow
Domain-general	**GD**	**GS**
	Deeply insightful advice across domains of inquiry	Modestly insightful advice across domains of inquiry
Domain-specific	**SD**	**SS**
	Deeply insightful advice in a single domain of inquiry	Modestly insightful advice in a single domain of inquiry

Domain-general deep wisdom (**GD**) is the kind of wisdom we often think of when we think about wisdom. GD is used by people who reflect deeply and comprehensively on complex problems across a broad variety of problems and then generate wise solutions.

Domain-general shallow wisdom (**GS**) is the kind of wisdom we may think of when we watch a Hollywood movie in which a person, usually an elderly person, gives wise advice, especially to a younger person. The person is wise enough for a movie or a TV show, but the level of advice is at the level of the old TV show "Father Knows Best." The individual exhibits wisdom, perhaps across several domains, but for simple everyday problems that perhaps younger people (and some older ones) just have not yet learned how to solve.

Domain-specific deep wisdom (**SD**) applies to deep thinking about complex problems, but within a relatively narrow domain. For example, an individual may be wise in giving advice about one's profession, but useless in giving advice about one's personal life, or vice versa. Some of us may have had wise mentors during our schooling or career. They gave us sound professional advice, but at the same time seriously compromised their personal lives, and in some cases, the personal lives of others as well (see Chapter 9).

Domain-specific shallow wisdom (**SS**) is superficial wisdom that applies simply in a single domain. An example would be to defer to your supervisor regarding a financial decision that you view as nonoptimal but acceptable and about which your boss obviously has strong feelings.

Non-Wisdom

Much more prevalent in the world than the appearance of wisdom is the appearance of non-wisdom, which is the lack of wisdom (see Table 1.2).

Quasi-wisdom is near-wisdom or reflection, and perhaps that follows from incomplete or flawed reflection or insight. An individual may offer advice that on the surface seems wise, but that misses or distorts the meaning of significant factors that should have been considered.

The *veneer of wisdom* occurs when someone is believed to be wise, but merely gives the appearance of wisdom. It is "gold-plated" wisdom. The individual

Table 1.2 *Kinds of non-wisdom*

Kinds of non-wisdom	Manifestation
Quasi-wisdom	Near-wisdom – incomplete reflection or insight
Veneer of wisdom	False appearance of wisdom, often because of a position of power or authority
Pseudo-wisdom	False appearance of wisdom that is motivated by self-interest
Dark pseudo-wisdom	False appearance of wisdom that is motivated by evil intentions

indeed may be intelligent or creative, or even superficially an expert, but be unable or unwilling to use the intellectual or creative skills toward a common good (wisely).

Pseudo-wisdom is the purposeful attempt by someone to appear to be wise by someone who is unwise. An example would be a government official who uses his governmental position for his own personal gain or for the gain of family and friends, while trying to portray his service as seeking a common good.

Dark pseudo-wisdom is similar to pseudo-wisdom, except that dark pseudo-wisdom involves the appearance of wisdom that is actually in the service of evil ends, such as harming children or recruiting suicide bombers. Hypocritical religious leaders may take advantage of their position in the religious hierarchy to cause harm to others rather than to help them.

Foolishness

On the one hand, non-wisdom is the lack or nullity of wisdom; but the opposite of wisdom is not non-wisdom but rather foolishness (see Table 1.3). If lack of wisdom is like a "zero," foolishness is like a "negative number." People can be highly intelligent, or even creative, and yet foolish. Indeed, high intelligence can be a risk factor for foolishness, precisely because people who are highly intelligent may believe they are immune to foolishness. Foolishness is exhibited through a series of six cognitive fallacies. First, the *unrealistic optimism fallacy* occurs when people think they are so smart and effective that they can do whatever they want. Second, the *egocentrism fallacy* occurs when people start to think that they are the only ones that matter, not the people who rely on them. Third, the *omniscience fallacy* occurs when people think that they know everything and lose sight of the limitations of their own knowledge. Fourth, the *omnipotence fallacy* occurs when people think they are all-powerful and can do whatever they want, whenever they want. Fifth, the *invulnerability fallacy* occurs when people think they can get away with anything, because they are too clever to get caught; and they figure that even if they are caught they can get away with what they have done because of who they imagine themselves to be. And finally,

Table 1.3 *Kinds of foolishness*

Fallacy	Manifestation
Unrealistic optimism	"If it's my idea, then it must be good"
Egocentrism	"It's all about me and no one else"
False omniscience	"I know everything I want or need to know"
False omnipotence	"I am all-powerful"
False invulnerability	"No one can strike back at me"
Ethical disengagement	"Ethics are important, but only for other people"

sixth, the *ethical disengagement* fallacy occurs when people think that ethics are important – but only for others and not for themselves. They see themselves as above ethical concerns.

Conclusion

The world is facing huge, pressing, and even frightening problems – terrorism, climate change, increasing income disparities, drug abuse, and feelings among many of hopelessness, especially, in some cases, after people see the leaders that their fellow citizens choose or tolerate. Wisdom provides the potential for solutions to problems that cannot be solved through any other means. Wisdom requires both creativity and intelligence, because it often requires people to come up with novel solutions and then to analyze whether the solutions are indeed good ones. But the world today is beset by non-wisdom and foolishness at a time it can ill afford either. Our schools need to teach for wisdom (Sternberg & Grigorenko, 2004; Sternberg, Reznitzkaya, & Jarvin, 2007) and develop wise and ethical leaders, not just smart ones. Many of our societies in the world today have created for their members a race – but a race to Samarra. Wisdom can help societies find a better race for the world to run. Hopefully, this handbook will help take a small step toward bringing to the world the wisdom and understanding of wisdom that the world so desperately needs.

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2 Philosophical Foundations of Wisdom

Jason Swartwood and Valerie Tiberius

Introduction: Wisdom and Moral Philosophy

Wisdom is something we all have reason to care about. Indeed, many ancient and contemporary moral philosophers, whose goal has been to seek well-reasoned answers to questions about how we ought to live, have concluded that wisdom is a central component of a well-lived life. This has led them to explore questions like: Are there different kinds of wisdom? What kind of a state is wisdom? Is wisdom a kind of knowledge or understanding, or is it a skill or a complex set of dispositions? How does wisdom relate to other virtues (excellent traits)? What kind(s) of reasoning, if any, do wise people engage in to decide what to do? What role do emotions and knowledge play in wisdom? Can people actually develop wisdom? If so, how? Contemporary moral philosophers, sometimes building on or responding to the ancients, continue to examine answers to these questions. In this chapter, we will provide an overview of some of the most prominent answers and the arguments for them, focusing especially on contemporary work that bears on the interdisciplinary study of wisdom.

The questions just mentioned are about the *nature* of wisdom. Recent interest in wisdom from psychologists raises new questions about the appropriate *methods* for studying wisdom.[1] Philosophy and empirical science are sometimes treated as adversaries. Often this is because their proper domains of inquiry are contested. In some cases, methods and objects of inquiry that were once viewed as part of philosophy are now considered solely the purview of science. For instance, ancient Greek philosophers, such as Thales, Epicurus, and Aristotle, rejected mythological explanations of the world in favor of rationally defensible naturalistic explanations (Irwin, 1989: 20). These attempts at "natural philosophy" were precursors to, and have been replaced by, contemporary empirical sciences like biology and physics. This raises a question about wisdom: is it the proper object of empirical psychology or philosophy, or a combination of the two? Contemporary moral philosophers have lately grappled

1 See, for instance, Ardelt (2003, 2004), Baltes & Staudinger (2000), Baltes et al. (1995), Bassett (2011), Bluck & Glück (2005), and Sternberg (2004).

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with questions about whether and how empirical research is relevant to moral philosophy,[2] and we will describe how this work bears on this (philosophical) question about methodologies for studying wisdom. Although there is no consensus among philosophers about the proper method for studying wisdom, we will explain why many moral philosophers believe that a plausible account of wisdom requires combining the methods of both philosophy and empirical psychology.

We will begin in the next section with some preliminary clarifications that help us better understand the type of wisdom that will be our focus: *practical wisdom*. This is a reliable understanding of how we ought to conduct ourselves, and we distinguish this from two other types of wisdom: wisdom as epistemic humility and theoretical wisdom. Then, in the following section, we will discuss the methodological question about wisdom and argue that because wisdom is an *ideal* (something we *ought* to strive for rather than merely a description of how things actually are), empirical science alone cannot give a plausible account of it.[3] This will allow us to evaluate various methods used by psychologists and philosophers for studying wisdom and to suggest that a plausible method must combine empirical research and philosophical reasoning. We will then survey some prominent ancient and contemporary answers to questions about the nature and development of wisdom and we will conclude with some reflections on the prospects for interdisciplinary study of wisdom.

Preliminary Clarifications: Three Types of Wisdom

Practical wisdom, which is an understanding of how one ought to live and conduct oneself, is the kind of wisdom that will be our focus. To provide a basic starting definition of this type of wisdom, it will help to distinguish it from other types of wisdom that have been of interest to philosophers.

The Epistemic Humility View of Wisdom

Socrates, who is often seen as the founder of Western moral philosophy, had a view of wisdom that, though tied to idiosyncratic aspects of his life, merits some attention. His life, which we can glimpse through the dialogues of his student Plato, was largely taken up with philosophical discussions about how we ought to live. Instead of engaging in the activities expected of free men in Athens (politics, for example), Socrates engaged in philosophizing: He found people who claimed to be wise and subjected their views to rational scrutiny to see if they had the wisdom he sought.

2 For some representative works, see Berker (2009), Doris (2002), Greene (2002, 2003), Harman (1999), Haybron (2008), Tiberius (2013), and Tiberius (2008).
3 Philosophers would call "wisdom" a *normative concept*, because it evaluates or prescribes a way of being. Since "normative" has a different meaning in the social sciences, we will avoid the word here.