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Were you ever in a situation where you did something stupid that not only hurt you, but also hurt others, and you (1) realized you should never do it again, (2) promised yourself or others you never would do it again, and then (3) actually never did it again? If so, you were showing some wisdom, as our title implies, in your (1) thoughts, (2) words, and (3) deeds. But if you only got part of the way, say through the “words” part, at least you showed some wisdom – perhaps only in your thoughts and words, if not quite in your deeds!

This book reviews and analyzes what psychologists have learned about wisdom. Our hope is that it may help readers to move one step further on their own path toward wise deeds – maybe from thoughts to words, or from words to actual deeds.

1.1 Defining Wisdom

There are many different definitions of wisdom¹ and one could write a whole book on the different definitions. In Chapter 3, we will review in some detail how various psychologists have defined wisdom. Until then, we focus on a definition of wisdom, proposed by one of us, that explains how wisdom manifests itself in people’s judgments and decisions about difficult problems. What kinds of problems require wisdom? You probably didn’t need wisdom if you sought to find your car this morning or if you wanted to decide on a breakfast cereal. We typically need wisdom when questions get difficult, and that is often the case when a problem involves diverging interests.

Wise people are not merely smart people. They are smart people who seek to leverage their strengths to achieve a common good. In particular, we will define wisdom here as the application of one’s world knowledge and skills toward (1) attaining a common good; by (2) balancing one’s own, others’, and larger interests; over the (3) long-term as well as the short-term, through (4) the use of positive ethical

Box 1.1 Paul's Problem with His Mother

Paul is forty-two years old and a father of three. He works as a teacher and loves his job. Recently, his seventy-eight-year-old mother has been having serious health problems. She has been living on her own for a long time, but now she is very scared. She thinks she might have a heart attack and die all alone. She has asked Paul to let her come live with him. Paul's wife is willing to go along if he wants to do that, but he is sure that it would be very difficult for her and the family. He has been looking into possibilities for assisted living but his mother refuses to even consider that option. What would be the wisest solution to Paul's problem?

values, in order to (5) adapt to, shape, or select environments.² According to this definition, wise people are smart, but they are not just smart, and they are not necessarily the people with the highest IQs. Rather, wise people look beyond their own self-interests. They are concerned not only with how their thoughts and actions benefit themselves and others like them (friends, family, associates), but also with striving, through their thoughts and actions, for a common good that reaches out to all.

Consider, for example, Paul's problem as described in Box 1.1.

In terms of our definition, Paul would want to achieve a common good. This would mean balancing the interests of his mother with those of his wife, himself, his children, and perhaps an extended family, if relevant. Other people might be affected as well.

As Paul is a teacher, his income is probably not very high. Unless his wife's income is quite high, or unless he has other resources (e.g., an inheritance), assisted living might be a very expensive option; moreover, his mother adamantly refuses to consider it. Paul's mother continuing to live alone is an option, but Paul is afraid that, if she gets sicker, it might end badly.

Paul could buy his mother a pendant with a button to press in case of an emergency, but if the mother were to have a heart attack, she might never get to press the button. The pendant might be a temporary solution until something more long-term is worked out.

Living with Paul and his family would be difficult, but Paul cannot be sure of just how difficult it would be. Living with a sibling might be

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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

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

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-

disposal solution worth the long-term consequences? Certainly, few residents of Oklahoma would say so, unless their livelihood depended on the affiliated industries.

The long-term matters so much because what works well in the short-term often does not work so well in the long-term. Some things are good in the short-term as well as the long-term – toilets, for example! Musical instruments have served societies over the centuries and even the millennia. Who would want to be without toilets or musical instruments, or sinks or electronic communications, if they were given the option? Some inventions that are terrible in the short term – thalidomide, for example, which caused birth defects – have had better uses in the long run, such as, for thalidomide, treating Hansen’s disease (leprosy) and certain types of cancer.

The bottom line is that wisdom requires us, to the extent possible, to think about the long-term as well as the short-term. This is often hard to do because the future is always uncertain. For example, if we increase our use of nuclear energy, we may be able to get rid of energy sources that contribute to climate change, such as coal. But if another Chernobyl (or worse) happens, any proponents of nuclear technologies will be retrospectively declared as tremendously unwise. Even if they now compare statistical estimates of the likely number of deaths due to such a nuclear-plant accident to the number of deaths due to climate change, this will not make them look any wiser in the eyes of those affected by the accident. How one can best weigh and balance short-term and long-term consequences of decisions is a difficult question. But societies depending on quarterly reports and a 24-hour news cycle often simply look at the short-term and largely ignore the long-term.

In the time of pandemic now being experienced throughout the world, the facts may seem simple. Virtually all scientists agree that opening up businesses prematurely results in more waves of illness and death. At the same time, keeping businesses closed for extended periods of time leads to many people losing their jobs. In a country like the United States, which has a weak social-security system, losing one’s job often means losing one’s health insurance and possibly losing all of one’s savings and even one’s home. Therefore, wise governments need to carefully weigh the different short-term and long-term risks

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against one another – apart from the fact that wise governments probably should have more of a government-based safety net that prevents people from losing everything through no fault of their own.

Paul, in Box 1.1, needs to find a wise solution for his family problem. Paul needs to think not only about his mother's current situation but also about what may happen in a few years. At some point, the health of Paul's mother is likely to deteriorate. At the same time, his children are growing up and they will take up less of his time. Perhaps his mortgage will have been paid off at some point, which would make things a bit easier. But then, in uncertain economic times, it may be good to save money for one's own old age. And so on. A wise decision balances short-term gains with long-term losses, and vice versa.

1.1.4 *Positive Ethical Values*

One cannot be wise in the absence of positive ethical values. We all have ethical lapses; well, Jesus perhaps did not, but the rest of us do not end up being part of a trinity comprising God, at least according to the Christian conception. In most religious traditions, even the greatest leaders had ethical lapses, such as Moses or King David in the Jewish tradition.

Positive ethical values are sometimes viewed as culturally specific, but at the most general level, almost any culture would share values such as compassion for the unfortunate, fairness, honesty, integrity, sincerity, and so on. These values certainly cross many different religious traditions. In general, ethical norms refer to norms an individual establishes for him- or herself, whereas moral norms refer to norms that apply to a group of people.

Not all ethical values are positive. Ethical values reflect an individual's sense of what is right and what is wrong. Some individuals have distorted or even warped senses of what is right and wrong, for example, terrorists who believe they are acting ethically in harming others or people who believe that only people like themselves are worthy of being treated with respect. Positive ethical values help to achieve a good not only for oneself or one's own group, but for other individuals and groups as well. Positive ethical values are not the same

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