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Two Types of Wisdom

Jason Baehr
Loyola Marymount University, jbaehr@lmu.edu

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Jason Baehr
Loyola Marymount University

In a paper titled "Dare to Be Wise," Richard Taylor remarks:

> Students of philosophy learn very early—usually the first day of their first course—that philosophy is the love of wisdom. This is often soon forgotten, however, and there are even men who earn their livelihood at philosophy who have not simply forgotten it, but who seem positively to scorn the idea. A philosopher who … dedicates himself to wisdom is likely to be thought of as one who has missed his calling, who belongs in a pulpit, perhaps, or in some barren retreat for sages, but hardly in the halls of academia. (1968: 615)

It is difficult to deny that Taylor is onto something here. Aside from some of the secondary literature in ancient philosophy on *phronesis*, wisdom receives exceedingly little attention among philosophers today.[1]

Whatever the explanation of this neglect might be, I think it is largely unwarranted, and indeed that now is an especially appropriate time for epistemologists and ethicists to give more focused attention to wisdom. One reason for this is the resurgence of interest in virtue-theoretical approaches to both ethics and epistemology.[2] The practical and the theoretical varieties of wisdom have long been considered virtues—and indeed virtues with an exalted status in their respective domains. It stands to reason that virtue epistemologists and virtue ethicists might benefit from thinking in a more direct and sustained way about wisdom.[3] A second reason is the recent advent of so-called "epistemic value theory," which is aimed at explaining the value of knowledge and related epistemic states, properties, relations, and the like.[4] Here again, whatever its other qualities may be, wisdom is widely regarded as a major—perhaps the supreme—epistemic good, and thus is likely to be of interest to the theorists in question.

My aim here is to counteract the philosophical neglect of wisdom by way of some instructive ground-clearing. Specifically, my aim is to articulate a careful and plausible distinction between the main types or varieties of wisdom. Traditionally, a distinction has been drawn between practical wisdom and theoretical wisdom or between *phronesis* and *sophia*. I shall attempt to shed some light on this distinction. We shall see, first, that while some kind of distinction between practical and theoretical wisdom is reasonably familiar and intuitive, closer inspection reveals that it is surprisingly elusive; and, second, that getting a handle on the distinction will put us in a considerably better position to begin thinking in a more focused and

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[1] Some recent and welcome exceptions include Conway (2000), Ryan (1996), (1999), (2007), Lehrer et al (1996), and Whitcomb (2010a) and (2010b). For some possible explanations of the philosophical drift away from wisdom, see Conway (2000) and Smith (1998).

[2] In the former domain, Hursthouse (1999), Hurka (2001), Foot (2003), and Adams (2006) are representative. In the latter, Zagzebski (2006), Roberts and Wood (2007), Sosa (2007), Greco (2010), and Baehr (2011) are representative.

[3] Zagzebski (1996) touches briefly on wisdom at various points in her treatise on virtue epistemology (see esp. pp. 216-21).

[4] See Riggs (2008) and Whitcomb (2012) on this turn in epistemology.

in-depth way about the positive character of wisdom proper and about practical and theoretical wisdom in particular.[5]

1. A Methodological Issue

My project faces a certain methodological challenge that must be dealt with up front. "Practical wisdom" and especially "theoretical wisdom" are to a significant extent terms of art.[6] This raises the question of what exactly I am hoping to clarify when I say that I hope to clarify the distinction or relation between theoretical and practical wisdom. Therefore, before getting to the main project of the paper, I must do more to try to "fix the referent" of my discussion. I shall do so, first, by drawing attention to an intuitive and pre-theoretical distinction between practical and theoretical wisdom; and second, by stipulating some further general features of practical and theoretical wisdom as I shall be thinking of them.

In a recent paper on wisdom, Dennis Whitcomb (2010a) argues that the "best practical view of wisdom" is that "wisdom is a kind of practical knowledge or belief: knowledge of how to live well, or perhaps some sort of moral or prudential propositional knowledge or belief." He goes on to claim that this is not, however, a complete account of wisdom proper:

> [P]ick what you think is the best sort of knowledge to have, except the know-how or knowledge-that featured in the best practical theory. This sort of knowledge may be fundamental metaphysical or epistemological knowledge; or it may be some more scientific knowledge; or it may be any other sort of knowledge. Whatever it is, call it 'the best non-practical knowledge.' Now, consider two people, A and B, with equal amounts of knowledge featured in the best practical view. Suppose that A has much more of the best non-practical knowledge than does B. Suppose, even, that A has all of the best non-practical knowledge, and that B has very little or not of it. Is A wiser than B? (99)

Whitcomb's answer, which I think is right, is that A is indeed wiser than B. This suggests that wisdom admits of both practical and theoretical dimensions or varieties.[7] It also provides at least a very general idea of what they might involve. My aim, again, is to try to get a better handle on these varieties, and especially on their relation to each other.

To further fix the subject matter of our discussion, I shall make the following assumptions about the states or qualities in question (assumptions which, I take it, fit well with the brief intuitive characterization above and that are plausible in their own right). Of theoretical wisdom, I shall assume: (1) that it is a high-grade or especially worthy or desirable epistemic good or excellence[8]; (2) that it has something to do with the notion of explanatory understanding; and (3) that it is at least in the general vicinity of what Aristotle described as *sophia*. (1) is uncontroversial. Whatever else might be said of theoretical wisdom, it is clearly a highly estimable epistemic state or quality. (2) is also very plausible. For insofar as wisdom has an intrinsically epistemic or theoretical dimension, it seems reasonable to think that it amounts to or

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[5] I engage in some of this more focused work in a pair of recent papers: "Sophia" (forthcoming) and "Wisdom in Perspective" (draft).

[6] In this way they differ, apparently, from "wisdom" simpliciter.

[7] Ryan (2007) suggests a similar distinction within commonsense thinking about wisdom. Aristotle likewise makes the point that more or less commonsense thinking allows that a person might, say, have a kind of theoretical wisdom while not being practically wise (*NE* VI.7).

[8] Riggs (2003) makes a similar claim.

involves some kind of deep understanding, an understanding that puts its possessor in a position to explain various aspects of the subject matter proper to it. (3) requires a bit more explanation. I propose to use Aristotle's view of *sophia* as a general constraint or guide to thinking about theoretical wisdom, first, because his discussion of *sophia* is perhaps the best-known treatment of what is referred to in English as "theoretical wisdom," and second, because I am convinced that it is an attempt to get at a recognizable and significant epistemic good that is naturally and plausibly referred to as "theoretical wisdom." My position is not that Aristotle's account of *sophia* is authoritative in the sense that no plausible account of *sophia* or theoretical wisdom can depart from it. On the contrary, I will shortly be rejecting certain aspects of Aristotle's account. Rather, my suggestion is that, other things being equal, it is a virtue of an account of theoretical wisdom if it exhibits a general faithfulness to Aristotle's account of *sophia*, that is, if is reasonable to say of the account in question that it captures an epistemic good or excellence that is at least in the vicinity of Aristotle's notion of *sophia*.

Of practical wisdom, I shall assume the following: (1) that practical wisdom is a high-grade moral good or excellence; (2) that it involves something like a cognitively grounded ability to live well; and (3) that it is at least in the neighborhood of what Aristotle and similarly minded Greek philosophers seem to have had in mind by "phronesis." Given the discussion in the previous paragraph, (1) and (3) should seem plausible enough. Practical wisdom is surely a very important moral good or excellence. And it would seem a mark of a plausible account of practical wisdom that it exhibit at least a rough similarity to Aristotle's and other Greek philosophers' accounts of *phronesis*. (2) is also fairly uncontroversial. Again, at a pretheoretical level, we think of a wise person as one who knows how to live well, and especially, how to live well in the face of practically challenging or uncertain circumstances.[9] It is also plausible, I shall assume, to think of this ability as being grounded in a kind of special moral understanding or knowledge which allows the wise person to deliberate well among the various ends and courses of action that lay before her.[10]

2. Theoretical vs. Practical Wisdom: Some Initial Proposals

With a better idea of what theoretical and practical wisdom generally amount to, I turn now to the main task of the paper: namely, that of trying to understand the relation between theoretical and practical wisdom. My strategy will mainly be to consider various ways in which we might attempt to mark a reasonably sharp distinction between these two types of wisdom.

Taking a cue from Aristotle, we might initially be tempted by the following view:

(1) Theoretical wisdom concerns *necessary* features of reality, while practical wisdom concerns matters that are *contingent* or that are susceptible to human action or influence.

This conception is suggested, first, by Aristotle's view that *sophia* or theoretical wisdom is comprised of *nous* and *episteme*, where the former involves an intuitive or rational apprehension of necessary first principles and the latter knowledge that is derived from these principles.[11] The

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[9] Nozick (1989) underscores this aspect of wisdom.

[10] I do not claim that the knowledge in question must be especially sophisticated or articulate. Indeed it may largely be implicit. Therefore, I remain unwed to any strongly "intellectualist" way of understanding practical wisdom.

[11] The key texts in Aristotle are his *Nicomachean Ethics* VI.7 and *Metaphysics* A.1-2. See Smith (1998) and Taylor (1990) for helpful discussions of Aristotle's view.

suggestion, then, is that theoretical wisdom strictly concerns necessary properties, relations, states of affairs, and the like. The above conception is also supported by Aristotle's view that practical wisdom involves deliberating about and choosing well among various ends and possible courses of action, for this is precisely the sphere of human influence.[12]

Despite whatever initial plausibility it might have, this account is problematic with respect to both theoretical and practical wisdom. First, it seems entirely reasonable to think that a person could have theoretical wisdom in connection with or in virtue of a grasp of something like theoretical physics, a domain which presumably is governed by laws that could have been other than what they are. Nor will it do to think of theoretical wisdom as essentially concerned with logically *or* nomologically necessary truths, since it seems equally reasonable to think that someone could be theoretically wise, at least some extent, on account of a grasp of the "first principles" proper to a domain like economics or political science.[13] Accordingly, imagine a person A, who has complete metaphysical knowledge, but nothing more. Suppose that another person B has the same knowledge but also a deep and accurate understanding of the best theories in economics and political science—an understanding that allows her, among other things, to explain and predict a wide range of economic and political events, processes, trends, and the like. Surely person B would be more theoretically wise than person A.[14]

What about the claim that *practical* wisdom concerns contingent matters or matters that are susceptible to human influence? Here again I think the account may be too restrictive. For on a standard and very plausible way of thinking about practical wisdom, it involves (or at least *can* involve) an application of *general* (perhaps even necessary) moral principles or considerations to particular contexts or situations.[15] If so, we cannot distinguish theoretical wisdom from practical wisdom on the grounds, say, that the former concerns general features of reality while the latter concerns particular features.[16] I conclude that a sharp or helpful distinction cannot be drawn between theoretical and practical wisdom on the basis of the modal status of what these states are about.

A related way of marking the distinction, also suggested by Aristotle, is as follows:

(2) Theoretical wisdom is an *a priori* affair, while the sort of knowledge relevant to practical wisdom is *a posteriori*.

This proposal is suggested by Aristotle's view of the role of *nous* in theoretical wisdom, which again is a matter of grasping necessary first principles on the basis of something like intuitive

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[12] See *NE* VI.5.

[13] Aristotle disagrees (see *NE* VI.7); however, his reason seems to be that these disciplines are not the "best" or "highest" sciences. I do not dispute this much. What I dispute is that *sophia* or "theoretical wisdom" is limited strictly to knowledge of the (very) highest science or principles. More on this below.

[14] That said, it does seem essential to theoretical wisdom that it be concerned with certain reasonably *general* or *universal* features of reality. One cannot, after all, be theoretically wise on account of one's grasp of even a very wide range of first-order truths or particular facts or states of affairs. In this way the objection is consistent with our commitment to maintaining a "general faithfulness" to Aristotle's account of *sophia*.

[15] See Thomas Hibbs's treatment of Aquinas's view of practical wisdom (2001: 98f) for more on this suggestion.

[16] I appeal to the general/particular distinction rather than the necessary/contingent distinction here because we have already seen that the former cannot ground a distinction between theoretical and practical wisdom. Also, while it may be that theoretical wisdom *tends* to have a more general focus or to be about matters of necessity and practical wisdom *tends* to focus on particulars or contingent matters, the resulting distinction between the two types of wisdom is superficial. And we do not yet have reason to think that this is the best or deepest distinction that can be drawn.

reason.[17] But it too is problematic—and for reasons similar to the first proposal. First, if we are right to think that one can have theoretical wisdom in connection with largely empirical disciplines, then we are wrong to think of theoretical wisdom as an exclusively *a priori* affair. Likewise, if we are correct to think of practical wisdom as involving the application of general (possibly necessary) moral principles to particular contexts or circumstances, then, if we do not dismiss the notion of *a priori* knowledge out of hand, it may also be a mistake to think of the sort of knowledge involved with this type of wisdom as strictly *a posteriori*.[18]

A different way of marking the distinction is suggested by Anthony Kenny's distinction between theoretical and practical *reasoning*, which he draws in connection with Aristotle's view of the relation between *sophia* and *phronesis*. Kenny says: "Practical reasoning is reasoning which reasons out the good, as theoretical reasoning is reasoning which reasons out the truth. The conclusion of a piece of theoretical reasoning is a truth to be believed; the conclusion of a piece of practical reasoning is a good to be brought about" (1992:1). Similarly, we might claim:

> (3) Theoretical wisdom involves reasoning about or in a way that is aimed at *truth*, while practical wisdom involves reasoning about or in a way that is aimed at the *good*.

There are, I think, a number of problems with this proposal; however, I shall limit my attention to just one of them.[19] While not uncommon in philosophical literature, and while not without some initial plausibility, this proposal relies on what is ultimately a problematic distinction between "the good" and "truth." Presumably "the good" refers to something like that which is essential for living well or for having a good life. The problem, however, is that truth—or true belief—is itself an important good. Indeed, it is *part of* "the good" as ordinarily conceived. For part of what it is to live well as a human being is, for instance, to exercise one's mind and to acquire some kind of education, no small part of which involves acquiring true beliefs.[20] Therefore, at a minimum, we cannot successfully distinguish practical wisdom from theoretical wisdom on the grounds that former involves reasoning about or in a way that is aimed at "the good" while the latter does not.

A related way of approaching the distinction is in terms of a prior distinction between the epistemic and the moral. Here one might opt for the following view:

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[17] See *NE* VI.3, 6-7. Aristotle makes a similar claim about in VI.3 about *episteme*, since *episteme* concerns truths that can be logically deduced from necessary first principles. In more recent literature, Kekes (1983) argues that theoretical wisdom or *sophia* is necessarily of *a priori* truths.

[18] Here as well there is something to the Aristotelian picture. Surely theoretical wisdom tends to involve a greater *a priori* component than practical wisdom (and practical wisdom a greater *a posteriori* component). This indeed is something that any developed theory of theoretical or practical wisdom ought to account for. But, again, this hardly makes for a very deep or interesting distinction between the two types of wisdom.

[19] Though I will not develop the points here, by the end of this section it should be clear enough that the present proposal is also susceptible to at least two of the further proposals considered below (viz. one to the effect that the practically wise person is concerned with epistemic goods like truth; and another to the effect that the theoretically wise person can, as such, be concerned with "the good" understood even in a relatively narrow and strictly moral sense).

[20] Indeed, on one reading of Aristotle, this is the whole of living well, at least so far as *theoria* or contemplation is the ultimate good. One might respond to this objection by adopting a narrower definition of "the good" that excludes true belief. However, I know of no such conception that is non-arbitrary and broadly plausible. This includes an identification of the good with the moral—see (4) below.

(4) Theoretical wisdom is concerned with *epistemic* norms and values (e.g. truth, justification, etc.), while practical wisdom is concerned with *moral* norms and values (right action, moral duty, etc.).

Even if true, this would not, by itself, provide a complete or deeply illuminating account of the relation between theoretical and practical wisdom. But it too is problematic, even as a starting point. First, recall that practical wisdom is often conceived of as involving a kind of situation-specific means-end reasoning, particularly where the end or ends in question are good or worthy ones. The problem is that *epistemic* activities and reasoning often have the same general structure. Being a successful inquirer, for instance, requires identifying the most choiceworthy epistemic goods and most effective or reliable ways of bringing these about. The basic competence or skill required in this context would not appear to be significantly different from that involved in (more straightforwardly) moral contexts. Indeed, a broadly or fully practically wise person would appear perfectly well-suited to handle precisely this kind of challenge. My suggestion is that the domain of practical wisdom extends into various aspects or dimensions of the cognitive life—that practical wisdom is sometimes deployed in deliberation about and the pursuit of distinctively epistemic goods or values. If this is right, then we cannot distinguish between theoretical and practical wisdom on the grounds that the former pertains to epistemic norms and values, while the latter pertains to moral norms and values.[21]

A related problem concerns the fact that the *phronimos* or person of practical wisdom is often described as one who is especially well-equipped to adjudicate competition or conflict between values. There is little reason to think that this applies only to values of a single variety or within a single domain. On the contrary, provided that there are different types of value, and that conflicts can arise between these types (e.g. conflicts between epistemic and moral value or between moral and aesthetic value), practical wisdom seems to be precisely what is needed in order to settle or resolve such conflicts. In this respect as well it is a mistake to think of the purview of practical wisdom as limited to moral norms and values.

While we cannot derive a satisfactory account of the distinction between theoretical and practical wisdom from the distinction between the epistemic and the moral, the latter might be thought to point in the direction of a more promising proposal:

(5) Theoretical wisdom is concerned with *believing* well or correctly, while practical wisdom is concerned with *deliberating* and *acting* well or correctly.

This account is an improvement on the previous one given that in its epistemic dimensions, practical wisdom is a matter of deliberating and acting in certain ways—e.g. of researching or inquiring in ways that are likely to help one reach the truth.

Nevertheless, significant problems remain. First, there is a sense in which theoretical wisdom is concerned with correct deliberation and action. For it is reasonable to think of theoretical wisdom as involving a grasp of what we might think of as "epistemically significant" subject matters, that is, of subject matters that are, say, worth knowing about for their own sake—not merely for the sake of achieving some other kind of value (e.g. moral or aesthetic

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[21] A further problem, which I will not develop here, concerns the very distinction between the moral and the epistemic. There are reasons for thinking that this is, in fact, a very difficult distinction to draw; and that any successful attempt will not permit a very deep distinction between theoretical and practical wisdom. See the Appendix of my (2011) for more on this issue.

value).[22] This seems obviously correct if we are committed to thinking of theoretical wisdom as a high-grade epistemic good, since a mastery of ostensibly trivial knowledge, even where this involves a deep explanatory grasp of the relevant content, hardly amounts to a very estimable cognitive state.[23] But presumably "moral reality"—e.g. the nature and structure of rational deliberation and morally right action—is among those subject matters that are epistemically significant or worth knowing about for their own sake.[24] If this is correct, then there is at least a sense in which theoretical wisdom is "concerned" with excellence in deliberation and action.

Second, *believing* well or correctly is hardly ancillary to the concerns of the *practically* wise individual. For the possession of justified or true beliefs is critical to the enterprise of deliberating and acting well. Any practically wise person will, of course, be concerned with the quality—and hence the *truth-value*—of the information or beliefs that she is deliberating with and acting on. It is, then, a mistake to characterize the practically wise person as concerned with deliberating and acting well rather than with believing well.

Here, then, is a closely related proposal that gets around both of the objections just considered:

> (6) Theoretical wisdom is concerned with believing well or correctly *as such*, while practical wisdom is concerned with deliberating and acting well or correctly *as such*.

This proposal gets around the first of the two objections just considered because, while theoretical wisdom can concern or be about deliberating and acting well, deliberating and acting well are not themselves the aim or concern of the theoretically wise person. The theoretically wise person, by contrast with the practically wise person, is not concerned with acting or deliberating well *as such*. The proposal also gets around the second objection. For, while a person concerned with deliberating and acting well will also be concerned with believing well, she will not, at least qua deliberator or agent, be concerned with believing well *as such*. Again, her concern will be with believing well insofar as having (say) true or justified beliefs stands to improve the quality of her deliberation or action.

But this still does not provide a clean distinction between theoretical and practical wisdom. To see why, note that the proposal can be read as saying that practical wisdom is concerned with certain *intrinsic* features of actions rather than (say) any ends at which these actions might be aimed or states of affairs they might bring about.[25] This is, at any rate, one way of interpreting the claim that practical wisdom is aimed at acting well *as such*. But this cannot be correct. For it is a near truism that the practically wise person is at least sometimes concerned with achieving certain *ends* or bringing about certain *states of affairs*. Accordingly, we must think of "acting well as such" as including something like "acting for the sake of certain ends or states of affairs."

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[22] Moreover, as I will get to below, if we were to think of theoretical wisdom as a kind of skill or competence that "involves" the relevant kind of cognitive grasp in the sense that it *aims* at this grasp, then we would have yet a further reason for thinking that theoretical wisdom is concerned with deliberating and acting well, and thus for rejecting (5).

[23] See Baehr (2012) for more on this point.

[24] This is entirely consistent, of course, with the possibility that the knowledge in question is also *instrumentally* valuable in various ways. Nor need it be viewed as favoring any particular metaphysical account of morality or other metaethical view. That is, it is neutral about what the relevant "nature and structure" amount to.

[25] This is suggested, for instance, by Aristotle's claim in *NE* VI.5 that the end of practical wisdom is "acting well itself."

Once we do this, however, the line between theoretical and practical wisdom begins to blur. For, recall that epistemic goods are among the ends that a practically wise person might be concerned with—and, presumably, be concerned with *as such*. One such good, of course, is "believing well or correctly." It follows that practical wisdom can also be concerned with believing well or correctly as such. Once more the idea is that the practically wise person sometimes aims at "acting well" in the sense of "acting for the sake of" accurate or otherwise choiceworthy beliefs.[26]

2.1. Two Conceptions of Theoretical Wisdom

Where does this leave us? We have found that a number of prima facie plausible ways of trying to distinguish between theoretical and practical wisdom, while perhaps identifying features that one variety of wisdom tends to have and the other tends to lack, nevertheless fail to identify a very deep or principled difference between the two. But need this be a problem? Indeed, why not think of theoretical and practical wisdom as conceptually intertwined such that marking a very clear or definite distinction between them is impossible? To answer these questions, it will be helpful to distinguish between two importantly different conceptions of theoretical wisdom with respect to which the discussion thus far has mostly been neutral.

On the one hand, it is very natural and plausible to think of theoretical wisdom as a kind of ideal cognitive *end* or *goal*—as a more or less settled cognitive *state* that is to be desired, pursued, and enjoyed. More specifically, it is natural to think of theoretical wisdom as something like *deep explanatory understanding of epistemically significant subject matters*, where the latter again are subject matters worth knowing about for their own sake.[27] This characterization fits well with much of Aristotle's discussion of *sophia*. And it obviously does justice to our initial observation that theoretical wisdom involves explanatory understanding. Finally, it preserves the idea that theoretical wisdom is itself an especially worthy epistemic end. Let us, then, refer to this as the "epistemic state conception" of theoretical wisdom.

On the other hand, it might seem reasonable to think of theoretical wisdom as a kind of personal intellectual *ability* or *competence* that is *aimed* at the sort of cognitive end just described. Here theoretical wisdom would amount to a cognitive ability that enables its possessor, say, to reliably identify choiceworthy epistemic ends or subject matters and to quickly and efficiently arrive at a deep explanatory understanding of them. We can refer to this as the "competence conception" of theoretical wisdom. On this view as well, theoretical wisdom involves explanatory understanding, at least in the sense that it aims at and is reliably productive of it. Interestingly, this view also bears some resemblance to Aristotle's view of *sophia*, since Aristotle sometimes appears to go back and forth between thinking of *sophia* as an epistemic state or good, on the one hand, and thinking of it as an epistemic competence or power, on the other.[28] Finally, the competence conception has the virtue of identifying theoretical wisdom with what seems clearly to be a worthy epistemic excellence.

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[26] Moreover, if some beliefs just are actions, this would make for a further sense in which a practically wise person might be concerned with believing well or correctly as such. See Zagzebski (2001) for a defense of the idea that beliefs can be actions.

[27] See my (forthcoming) for a development of this view of theoretical wisdom or *sophia*. The account bears certain interesting similarities with Aristotle's, including the appeal to "epistemically significant subject matters," which would appear to be roughly similar to Aristotle's notion of "honorable knowledge" (*NE* VI.7).

[28] The competence conception, for instance, is at least suggested by the very idea of *sophia* understood as an *intellectual virtue*, since "virtue" suggests some kind of personal quality or power (rather than a settled epistemic

With these two conceptions of theoretical wisdom before us, let us turn to consider what each one suggests about the precise relation between theoretical wisdom and practical wisdom. On the competence conception, theoretical wisdom turns out to be a *component* or *mode* of practical wisdom. To see why, recall the claim—in (6) above—that practical wisdom concerns or aims at "acting well" or "acting well as such," where this can include acting for the sake of a choiceworthy end, including a choiceworthy *epistemic* end. Deep explanatory understanding of epistemically significant subject matters is an epistemic good *par excellence*. Therefore, practical wisdom sometimes aims at acting for the sake of such understanding. Now recall the claim—also in (6)—that theoretical wisdom is concerned with or aims at believing well as such. If we accept the competence conception, we shall want to modify this slightly by saying that theoretical wisdom is aimed, in particular, at understanding of the relevant sort. Moreover, because such understanding often is difficult to come by, because it often requires sustained, thoughtful, and deliberate pursuit, we must understand the claim that theoretical wisdom is "aimed at deep understanding" to include the possibility that it—like practical wisdom—sometimes aims at *acting* for the sake of deep explanatory understanding. In sum, the activity proper to and expressive of practical wisdom sometimes coincides with the activity that is proper to and expressive of theoretical wisdom conceived of as a cognitive competence. That is, we can think of theoretical wisdom as constituting one dimension or application of practical wisdom.

Is this problematic? Should we expect a deeper or sharper distinction between theoretical and practical wisdom? I see no reason to think that we should provided that we are thinking of theoretical wisdom as kind of cognitive competence (a view which again has at least some initial plausibility). For, it does not seem at all problematic or counterintuitive to think that when a theoretically wise person skillfully deliberates about and pursues an epistemic goal, he is also exercising (an aspect or dimension of) practical wisdom. Likewise, if we imagine an ostensibly practically wise agent deliberating about how best to go about trying to achieve a deep explanatory grasp of some important subject matter, it does not seem problematic to think of this person as *also* exhibiting theoretical wisdom of a sort. There is, then, no problem with blurring the line between practical wisdom and theoretical wisdom understood as a cognitive competence.

Now let us turn to the "epistemic state conception" of theoretical wisdom, according to which, again, theoretical wisdom is something like a state of deep explanatory understanding about epistemically significant subject matters (rather than a competence that aims at and is useful for achieving such understanding). If we adopt this conception of theoretical wisdom, what follows with respect to the distinction between theoretical wisdom and practical wisdom?

One implication is that theoretical wisdom turns out to be independent of practical wisdom in a way that it is not on the competence conception. To see why, recall once more the

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state or kind of knowledge). Likewise for Aristotle's claim that *sophia* is a "part of the soul" (*NE* VI.1, 3) and the "divine element" (X.7-8) in human nature. Again, these descriptions suggest a view of *sophia* according to which it is a kind of capacity or power that allows its possessor to lay hold of a certain type of knowledge or understanding— not the knowledge or understanding itself. Some translators and interpreters of Aristotle suggest the same: for instance, Kenny's (1979) translation of *sophia* as "learning" and various identifications of sophia with something like a *pursuit* of truth or a quality central to that pursuit. As Conway (2000: 17) points out, if *sophia* is a kind of knowledge or explanatory understanding, then the pursuit of it, or the qualities useful in the pursuit of it, must be distinct from the thing itself. Nevertheless, at other points, Aristotle seems clearly to favor the epistemic state conception of *sophia*, for instance, when he describes *episteme,* a core ingredient of *sophia,* as a state in which "a person *believes* in a certain way and *understands* the first principles" (VI.3; my italics). Here *sophia* (or a core aspect of it) seems clearly to be a settled cognitive state—a state of grasping or understanding a certain cognitive content.

idea that theoretical wisdom aims at "believing well as such." We saw above that this claim fits well with the competence conception of theoretical wisdom, and that, since practical wisdom also sometimes aims at "believing well as such," practical wisdom and theoretical wisdom conceived of as a competence sometimes coincide. But note that if we conceive of theoretical wisdom as an epistemic *state* or *good*, the idea that practical wisdom "aims at believing well as such" makes little sense. For theoretical wisdom understood in this way does not *aim* at anything; indeed it is itself a kind of excellent or worthy doxastic state. Accordingly, on the epistemic state conception, theoretical and practical wisdom are conceptually distinct in a way that they are not distinct on the competence conception.

Nevertheless, there remains a close connection between practical wisdom and theoretical wisdom thus conceived. First, while theoretical wisdom understood as an epistemic good is distinct from practical wisdom, it nevertheless falls within the "jurisdiction" or purview of practical wisdom. For, again, it is entirely reasonable to think of deep explanatory understanding of epistemically significant subject matters as among the ends about which a person of practical wisdom might deliberate and make efforts to bring about. A second and less obvious connection is that the practically wise person's understanding of moral and other normative subject matters apparently will involve an *element* of the theoretically wise person's grasp of the same. We noted earlier that theoretical wisdom, if conceived of as a high-grade epistemic good, ranges over the subject matter of morality—that, for instance, the nature and structure of rational deliberation or morally right action is an "epistemically significant" subject matter. We also noted that practical wisdom involves drawing on and reasoning with certain general moral or other normative considerations. My point, then, is that the content of the practically wise person's moral understanding presumably will draw upon and incorporate elements of the theoretically wise person's moral understanding. Specifically, the practically wise person will be adept at *applying* knowledge of the latter sort to her immediate situation. This does not entail that the practically wise person's grasp of the relevant content must be the same as that of the theoretically wise person—that, for instance, it must be especially sophisticated, explicit, or reflective. The idea is rather that the practically wise person will draw upon and apply a kind of moral knowledge or understanding of which the theoretically wise person presumably will have a much richer, deeper, and more explicit grasp.

We have found that theoretical wisdom is concerned with "believing well" and specifically with something like deep theoretical understanding. And we have found that practical wisdom is concerned with deliberating and acting well. We have also seen, however, that how exactly we understand the relation between theoretical and practical wisdom depends in part on a choice between two different but both prima facie plausible characterizations of theoretical wisdom. Conceived of as a "competence" for arriving at deep theoretical understanding, theoretical wisdom is a "mode" of practical reasoning. Conceived of as an epistemic good or "state," it falls within the purview of practical wisdom. I will not attempt to adjudicate these accounts of theoretical wisdom. In fact, I think that attempting to do so is likely to be a mistake. For, as we noted at the outset of the paper, "theoretical wisdom" is largely a technical term. It is not at all clear that this term picks out a single determinate and univocal state or excellence. This opens up the possibility that there is, in fact, more than one legitimate and plausible way of thinking about theoretical wisdom. Thus I suggest that we treat both state conception and the competence conception of theoretical wisdom as prima facie reasonable and worthy of further consideration by philosophers.

2.2 Two Conceptions of Practical Wisdom

　　I turn now to address a potential ambiguity in the notion of *practical* wisdom. On one way of conceiving of practical wisdom that is consistent with much of the discussion thus far, the practically wise person is one who knows how to deliberate and act well: this person is good at balancing competing values and applying moral principles to challenging and novel situations. Let us refer to this as the "know-how" conception of practical wisdom.

　　The know-how conception can be contrasted with a different conception according to which the practically wise person knows how to live well in the relevant sense but is also *able and willing to conduct himself accordingly*. Here the practically wise person is one who not only has the relevant practical knowledge, but is prepared or motivated to act in accordance with this knowledge. On this view, practical wisdom amounts to something like a personal trait or virtue. Thus I shall refer to this as the "trait conception" of practical wisdom.[29]

　　Here I think it is worth trying to adjudicate the conceptions in question. This is partly because the notion of practical wisdom, unlike that of theoretical wisdom, is closely related to much of our ordinary thinking about wisdom proper. That is, when we think about wisdom in a more or less commonsense or pretheoretical way, we typically are thinking of a practically oriented state that is at least roughly similar to what philosophers have had in mind by practical wisdom.[30] The result is that the notion of practical wisdom is considerably less technical and stipulative than that of theoretical wisdom. Accordingly, in the remainder of the paper, I shall say a few things in support of the trait conception of practical wisdom and against the know-how conception. I shall then turn to consider what, if any, implications this has for understanding the relation between practical wisdom and theoretical wisdom.

　　Note, first, that the know-how conception does not square very well with our initial general characterization of practical wisdom, which we observed had a significant amount of prima facie plausibility and thus could serve as a kind of constraint on a more detailed account of practical wisdom. For instance, it is not at all clear that practical wisdom, understood as mere know how, is a "high-grade moral good or excellence." Simply knowing how to act in certain specific contexts or in the face of practical challenges—without any ability and/or inclination to act accordingly—hardly seems to represent a very impressive or estimable moral state.[31] Indeed, as we shall see momentarily, such knowledge can be exploited in the service of profoundly wicked ends. Nor, for obvious reasons, does practical wisdom thus conceived involve a "cognitively grounded ability to live well." According to the know-how conception, while a

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[29] For various reasons, the know-how and trait conceptions of practical wisdom are not straightforward analogs of the state and competence conceptions of theoretical wisdom noted above. For instance the "know how" in question is very different from the relevant "state," insofar as the former is (largely) knowledge of how to proceed in pursuit of a certain end, while the latter is (largely) a matter of grasping various general and fixed features of reality. Similarly, the "trait" at issue is quite different from the relevant "competence," since the competence in question need not (at least insofar as I have described it thus far) involve the volitional or motivational element essential to the trait. See my paper "Wisdom In Perspective" and Baehr (forthcoming) for more on some of these possibilities.

[30] This is not true of *all* commonsense thinking about wisdom proper. For, as we saw above, such thinking appears to recognize some kind of distinction between practical and theoretical wisdom or between certain practical and purely theoretical elements of wisdom.

[31] Nor, in fact, is it clear that it even represents an estimable *epistemic* state, given its highly particular and practical focus. Also, while the knowledge in question might prove morally valuable for *others* (e.g. for those who are counseled on the basis of it), this does not make it morally valuable considered in its own right. The problem, of course, is that practical wisdom or *phronesis* presumably *is* valuable considered in its own right. Aristotle makes a similar point regarding both practical and theoretical wisdom, claiming that each is choiceworthy *in itself* (*NE* VI.7).

practically wise person might have such an ability, this is not a requirement; and where it is possessed, it is no part of what *makes* the person in question practically wise. Finally, the view in question represents a radical departure from Aristotle's account of *phronesis*. Again, as we shall explore in somewhat more detail momentarily, a person could possess practical wisdom in the present sense while being entirely akratic or wicked. This is, of course, a very far cry from anything that Aristotle was prepared to treat as *phronesis*.[32]

Is there anything to be said in support of the "know-how" conception? Dennis Whitcomb (2010a) has recently defended this conception against something like the trait conception. He offers two cases in support of his view. The first is that of a "wicked sage," namely, Mephistopheles, who "knows what advice will bring Faust to live a bad life" and advises him accordingly. Whitcomb surmises that because Mephistopheles knows what it is to live a bad life, he "also knows what advice will bring Faust to live a *good* life" and thus "knows how to live well." Whitcomb concedes that this character is "sinister, fiendish, and wicked," adding: "But whatever he is, he is not a fool. He is, it seems, wise but evil" (98).

I confess that I do not share Whitcomb's intuition about this case. But instead of simply registering a clash of intuitions, I shall attempt to articulate some positive reasons for denying that Mephistopheles and similar characters are truly wise. First, note that Mephistopheles willingly and systematically dispenses advice and behaves in ways that he knows full well are bad or wrong. Thus he systematically acts against his own better judgment. This fact alone would appear to make him a *fool* of sorts and thus not wise (and indeed a fool or unwise in a straightforwardly *practical* sense). Second, this estimate of Mephistopheles is especially apt insofar as living well in the relevant sense is good *for* the agent or is required, say, for having a good *life*. If it is, then Mephistopheles and similar characters systematically act contrary even to their own self-interest and thereby prevent themselves from having good lives (for again, *ex hypothesi* they are not living well). In this respect, "wicked sages" like Mephistopheles would appear to be practically foolish not wise.

The foregoing seem to me to be good reasons for denying that a wicked sage can be wise in any relevant sense and thus for accepting a motivational requirement on practical wisdom. However, I also want to offer a kind of error theory that might help explain away any appearance to the contrary, that is, any appearance to the effect that the wicked sage *is* genuinely wise.[33] According to the trait conception of practical wisdom, a wise person knows how to live well and is able and willing to act accordingly. A wicked sage has the knowledge in question, may or may not possess the relevant ability, but lacks precisely the relevant volitional disposition. But the sage also has knowledge of a different sort: namely, knowledge of how to live *wickedly*—of how to bring harm and destruction to others. Moreover, relative to *this* knowledge, he *does* possess the relevant ability and willingness: he is able and motivated to act in accordance with his knowledge of wicked living.

What this indicates is that a wicked sage like Mephistopheles has a semblance of practical wisdom understood as personal trait or virtue—and in two respects. First, he has the knowledge involved with such wisdom (knowledge of how to live well). Second, he has something *like* the relevant ability and motivation. The problem is that he has the latter two qualities in relation to the wrong body of knowledge (knowledge of how to live harmfully or

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[32] See e.g. *NE* VI.12-13 and VII.10.

[33] Aristotle offers a similar error theory concerning the clever person, whom he says possesses an ingredient of and is sometimes (mistakenly) thought actually to possess practical wisdom. See *NE* VII.10.

wickedly). My suggestion is that this (mere) approximation of wisdom suffices to explain any appearance to the effect that the wicked sage is genuinely wise.[34]

A second and related case discussed by Whitcomb is that of a "depressed sage." This is a person who "knows how to live well" but is "beset by a fit of deep depression due to a medication he had to take to cure an otherwise terminal illness." While profoundly depressed and unable to live well, this person retains his knowledge of what living well amounts to. Whitcomb remarks: "It seems unfair to this person to say that his medication destroys his wisdom. Isn't his depression bad enough on its own? Can't his doctor rightly avoid mentioning wisdom loss when discussing the medicine's risks?" (97).

In my estimation, the depressed sage has both a lesser and a greater claim to practical wisdom than the wicked sage, but neither of which is actually sufficient for practical wisdom. To his credit, the depressed sage is not acting wickedly. Thus, to the extent that we are inclined to associate practical wisdom with virtuous action or living well (or at least with being *able* and *willing* to live well), we are likely to adopt a more favorable view of the depressed sage. Moreover, the depressed sage, unlike the wise sage, would not appear to be a *fool* in any relevant sense. This is because he clearly is not responsible (or at least to *blame*) for his lack of motivation or failure to act in accordance with his knowledge of what it is to live well.[35]

Notice, however, that if knowledge of living well truly is sufficient for practical wisdom, then it should not matter how this person's lack of motivation came about. Indeed, we should be inclined to think the same of him—relative to his claim to wisdom—even if he were responsible for his own lack of motivation: even if, for instance, he took the relevant drug, knowing that it would completely dissipate any interest in or ability to live in ways that he knows to be good and right, for strictly experimental or recreational purposes. In this case, however, I take it that we would readily and plausibly think of the person in question as foolish and not wise. This, then, is a further indication that the know how in question is not sufficient for practical wisdom.

Finally, the depressed sage, while not systematically acting *against* his knowledge of how to live well, does systematically fail to live in accordance with this knowledge. And while, depending on the reason for this failure, this may not make him a fool, it would by itself seem to be a sufficient reason for thinking that he lacks practical wisdom. Likewise, to the extent that living well is good for the agent or necessary for having or living a good life, then the depressed sage, like the wicked sage, systematically neglects his own well-being and is cut off from the possibility of a good life. Again, this hardly seems consistent with any kind of genuine practical wisdom, particularly where such wisdom is thought to be an especially worthy or excellent state.[36]

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[34] I have no objection to the idea that practical (and theoretical) wisdom comes in *degrees* and thus, to the extent, say, that Mephistopheles has the knowledge required by the trait conception, he has a degree of practical wisdom. According to the know-how conception, however, such knowledge is necessary *and sufficient* for practical wisdom in its entirety, that is, practical wisdom just is a matter of the relevant practical knowledge. And it is this claim that I am arguing against.

[35] In fact it might be argued that he *is* acting in accordance with such knowledge given that his only alternative is to succumb to a terminal disease. There is, in any case, a sense in which "living well" *for someone in his predicament* requires taking the disabling drug. To the extent that this is right, the case fails to provide even a prima facie reason for thinking that practical wisdom need not involve an ability to live well.

[36] As this suggests, the doctor in Whitcomb's initial description of the case could and indeed should mention "an inability to live a good life" as one of the drug's side effects. Looked at from this angle, it does not seem unreasonable that the doctor might also (with considerable regret, of course) mention the loss or at least a significant impairment of the patient's wisdom as a side effect. This also underscores a possible reply to Whitcomb's observation that if he "ran across such a person, I'd take his advice to heart, wish him a return to health, and leave

The foregoing suggests that the depressed sage, while not practically wise, is closer to being so or is less unwise than the wicked sage. But in one respect this is not true. Recall that the wicked sage is competent at a kind of means-end reasoning and is able and willing to exercise this competence. The problem is that he has adopted wicked ends.[37] We observed above that the ability and motivation in question establish a (limited) likeness with a truly wise person. The depressed sage, by contrast, lacks any such motivation and presumably lacks the corresponding ability as well. In this respect, he actually bears less of a resemblance to the genuinely practically wise person by comparison with the wicked sage.

What, if anything, does the distinction between the know-how conception and the trait conception of practical wisdom imply regarding the relation between practical wisdom and theoretical wisdom? This question could be explored in some depth. Specifically, for each of the two conceptions of practical wisdom, we could examine how practical wisdom thus conceived is related to theoretical wisdom understood as an epistemic state and as a cognitive competence. However, I will not undertake this task here.[38] This is mainly because, unlike the dual concepts of theoretical wisdom distinguished above, the concepts of practical wisdom at issue are structurally similar: the trait conception simply adds something like an ability condition and a motivation condition to the central condition of the know-how conception. The result is that distinguishing between types of practical wisdom in the relevant way does not, by comparison with our distinction between types of theoretical wisdom, have quite the theoretically significant or interesting implications for our understanding of the relation between practical and theoretical wisdom.

3. Conclusion

I noted at the outset of the paper that I was interested in approaching the distinction between practical and theoretical wisdom in a way that might accomplish some conceptual ground-clearing, which in turn might set the stage for some future philosophical work on wisdom. To this end, we began by examining a range of prima facie plausible ways of trying to mark a distinction between theoretical and practical wisdom. We found all but one of these ways wanting. This in turn led to a distinction between different conceptions of both theoretical and practical wisdom. The discussion has not yielded anything like a definitive or univocal account of the relation between practical and theoretical wisdom, and even less so a definitive or even

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the continuing search for sages to his less grateful advisees" (97). If the advisees are merely seeking wise *counsel* or wise *advice*, then I agree that they need look no further than the depressed sage. But if they are, say, looking for paradigms of wisdom or for wise persons, then a continuation of their search seems to me quite warranted. And it is the latter that we are concerned with here.

[37] In this respect, he is akin to the "merely clever" person described by Aristotle. See *NE* VI.12 and VII.10.

[38] I briefly mention a few things that would merit consideration if we were to undertake this task: (1) the knowledge component of theoretical wisdom conceived of as a cognitive competence would partly constitute the knowledge component of practical wisdom conceived of as a kind of know how; however, (2) the demands of theoretical wisdom conceived of as a competence (which presumably involves an *ability* to do that which the competence is a competence *for*) would exceed the corresponding demands of practical wisdom conceived of as know how; (3) finally, the further requirements involved with thinking of practical wisdom as a trait (vs. as mere know how) might exceed those of theoretical wisdom conceived of as a competence, since having the competence might not require having the *motivation* or *willingness* to use it (while having the relevant trait does require such willingness). In this respect, it might turn out that theoretical wisdom conceived of as a competence does not fully coincide with or isn't quite a "mode" of practical wisdom conceived of as a trait.

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very precise account of their internal nature or structure.[39] My hope, however, is that it has shed considerable and worthwhile light on how philosophers interested in wisdom might—as well as various ways in which they ought *not*—go about thinking of the relation between these important varieties of wisdom and about the states or qualities themselves.

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[39] For an attempt to get at some of the finer-grained psychological elements of wisdom, see Sternberg (1998).

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