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Wisdom comes from experience.[1] But not all experiences are conducive to wisdom. Among the experiences sometimes thought to be conducive to wisdom are adversity and suffering.[2] Suffering, the story goes, has the ability to clarify one's moral vision: it can help one grasp what's most important in life, compel one to restructure one's priorities, develop a greater appreciation for life's simple pleasures, and more. Michael Brady puts the point starkly: "[T]he standard refrain remains true: we won't get to develop or cultivate virtue, in this case the virtue of wisdom, without suffering. Negative experiences might not be sufficient to make us wise. But they are certainly necessary."[3] While suffering can facilitate wisdom, it can also be crippling. Suffering can leave a person angry and cynical; even worse, it can precipitate serious mental or physical illness. As such, suffering also has the potential to diminish a person's capacity for wisdom.[4]

What exactly is wisdom? Under what conditions is it facilitated by suffering? And when does suffering impede the acquisition of wisdom? These are colossal philosophical and empirical questions. While they are the focus of this paper, I can offer only a limited treatment of them here. My aim is to show that *given* particular conceptions of wisdom and humility, we should expect the possession of humility to increase a person's capacity for wisdom in the context of suffering. As such, I'm arguing for an empirical prediction. While I draw on some empirical work at several points along the way, my argument for this prediction is primarily conceptual in

nature. I begin, in the first two sections, by developing an account of wisdom. I then underscore some probable connections between wisdom and suffering. Finally, I explain why the possession of humility makes it more likely that a person will derive wisdom from experiences of suffering. While my aim is to examine the relations between suffering, humility, and wisdom, much of the paper is spent laying out an account of wisdom. This is because, once the conceptual contours of wisdom have been clarified, its connections with suffering and humility will be relatively easy to pinpoint.

A few preliminary points are in order. First, my claim is not that humility *guarantees* the acquisition of wisdom from suffering. Neither, then, do I claim that if a suffering person fails to grow in wisdom, this person must be deficient in humility (much less that a lack of humility must explain why the person's wisdom didn't increase). Second, my argument doesn't trade on any specific theory of suffering; nor on any correlative specification of well-being.[5] While I will say something about why suffering (compared with other sorts of experiences) might bear a special connection to the acquisition of wisdom, these remarks are intended to be compatible with a wide range of views about the nature of suffering. Third, I hasten to add that the accounts of wisdom and humility provided in the first two sections of the paper are not intended as full-blown defenses. The latter would be nearly impossible within the limits of this paper. However, this consideration is offset by three factors: first, I have developed and defended many aspects of these accounts in prior work on these topics[6]; second, while not offering full-blown defenses of my accounts of wisdom and suffering, I do offer several prima facie plausible considerations in support of them; and, third, the conclusion of my argument may be understood *conditionally*, as the claim that *if* we understand wisdom and humility in the indicated ways, then (other things

being equal) we should expect humble persons to be better equipped than their non-humble counterparts to emerge from experiences of suffering having increased in wisdom.

1. Putative Features of Wisdom

To introduce my conception of wisdom, it will be helpful to begin with a brief overview of several putative features of wisdom. These features make regular appearances in our ordinary ways of thinking and talking about wisdom. They also show up regularly in the philosophical and psychological literature on the topic. As I get to below, I think the plausibility of an account of the nature of wisdom depends (at least in part) on how well it is able to accommodate or make sense of these features:

1. *Expertise*. Wisdom is importantly related to expertise. To be wise about X is to be a kind of expert about X. It is, in any case, especially unlikely, if not impossible, to be wise about X while also being incompetent or a complete novice with respect to X.[7]

2. *Understanding*. Wise persons characteristically possess a uniquely insightful and accurate grasp or understanding of what it is they are wise about (e.g. life, relationships, vocation, etc.). A wise person is not confused, muddled, or ignorant.[8]

3. *Experience*. Wisdom is the result of lived experience. This explains why young people are rarely (if ever) considered wise. Rather, wisdom is something that tends to develop over the course of a life.[9]

4. *Advice*. Wise persons are excellent sources of advice. They are uniquely capable of providing good and reliable guidance, especially concerning life's more important and difficult decisions or challenges.[10]

5. *Skill*. Wise persons are also characteristically skilled at navigating the sorts of challenges just noted. They do not bumble their way through life; they are neither clumsy nor incompetent.[11]

6. *Judgment*. Wisdom is importantly related to good judgment. Indeed, the latter is precisely what one needs when faced with confusion or uncertainty about the proper application of familiar practical rules.[12]

7. *Self-Knowledge*. Wise persons know themselves. They are not out of touch with or badly deceived about who they are, what they value, or what they are or aren't capable of. They possess a relatively high degree of self-understanding.[13]

8. *Virtue*. We look up to, receive inspiration from, and often seek to emulate wise persons. Wise persons are admirable; and they are admirable, at least in part, because of who they are *as persons*.[14]

These putative features of wisdom are not unrelated or disconnected from each other. For instance, it is largely because we think of wise persons as having good *judgment* that we go to

them for *advice*; and presumably such judgment is rooted in a kind of deep *understanding* of the domain in question, understanding that typically comes only with lived *experience*. Together with *self-knowledge*, these characteristics go a considerable way toward explaining why we think of wise persons as *skilled*, why we admire them or consider them *virtuous*, and why we associate wisdom with *expertise*.

2. Wisdom: A Sketch

I will treat the foregoing observations concerning the putative features of wisdom as intuitive data that any adequate account of the nature of wisdom ought either to make good sense of or explain away. Like many other kinds of data, these observations are fallible; it may be that there are good conceptual or empirical grounds for rejecting one or more of them. However, barring arguments to this effect, I shall assume that we can assess a theory of wisdom (at least partly) on account of how well it accommodates these judgments. Accordingly, I turn now to sketch the contours of my account of wisdom. I then turn to consider how this account stands relative to the intuitive judgments just noted.

The account begins with the familiar idea that wisdom is a matter of *knowing how to live well*.[15] Or, as Staudinger and Glück put it, wisdom involves "expertise in the fundamental pragmatics of life."[16] While this idea seems reasonable enough, it is anything but precise. My account is aimed at adding some flesh to the idea that to be wise is to know how to live well.

We tend to approach wise persons (or wish we could) precisely when we feel stuck or confused about how to carry on—when, for instance, we feel overwhelmed by the circumstances or choices life has presented us with, find ourselves unable to "see the forest for the trees," or are

otherwise uncertain or confused about how to proceed.[17] We look to wise persons under such conditions, I suggest, because we take them to have a certain privileged *perspective*—a perspective on life in general, on the particular circumstances in which we find ourselves, or both. The wise person *does* see the forest (as well as the trees). She possesses a kind of "meta-perspective" on life or on present circumstances in virtue of which she is well-positioned to provide reliable and insightful guidance concerning how to act. Glück and Bluck defend a similar view, claiming that "[w]ise individuals reflect deeply on experiences, strive to see the 'big picture,' identify larger themes, developmental links over time, and relationships between issues."[18] My initial suggestion is that such a perspective is the key to understanding the defining character of wisdom.

But what exactly does this perspective amount to? I maintain that it has two main components. First, a wise person knows what is of ultimate value or importance.[19] She can reliably distinguish, and presumably with some level of awareness and understanding, between things that are of great significance or value in life and things that are not. This is part of what it means to say that wise persons can "see the forest" (in addition to trees). It also helps explain why wise persons are capable of helping others see their way through practical problems and dilemmas. Such persons can, with authority, say things like: "This is what you really need to be concerned about in the present circumstances" or "Though it doesn't seem like it now, what's got you worried isn't terribly important in the broader scheme of things."[20] As Tiberius and Swartwood comment, a wise person "knows what matters and can make appropriate distinctions and connections between the various things that matter in life."[21] In these respects, the perspective of the wise person is to the perspective of the rest of us like the perspective of a mature and experienced adult is to that of a child.

This way of thinking about wisdom invokes notions of things that "matter in life" or are of "ultimate value or importance." I will not attempt to specify which ends or values are ultimately valuable or important, nor even what it means for one end or value to be better or more important than another. Indeed, I think it is best for these matters to be left open, at least for the time being. For, it may be that what is ultimately good or important is, within limits, more or less relative to the individual or circumstances in question. Nor do I have any interest in saddling my account of wisdom with any ethical or meta-ethical commitments that are not essential to the broader conceptual picture I am after. I will assume, then, that some plausible notion of what is ultimately good or important in human life and activity is sufficiently familiar and determinate for present purposes.[22]

The sort of knowledge just described, while necessary for wisdom, is not sufficient. A person can know what is ultimately good or important in life but to a large extent remain a fool. Specifically, if the person is oblivious to the ways of the world, or to how the world works, then her general normative outlook, as accurate or wise as it might be, will prevent her from living well. Accordingly, the general normative knowledge partly constitutive of wisdom must be accompanied by a second, more specific form of knowledge, namely, knowledge of "how the world works." Tiberius and Swartwood make a similar point:

> In our view, then, the kind of reflection that a wise person engages in is reflection about what matters to whom and why. This reflection is partly normative, but it also requires thinking about the facts – what people are like, how they differ from each other, and how the various circumstances in which people find themselves bear on normative questions.[23] (286)

This does not mean that wise persons must be masters of biology, physics, or even metaphysics.[24] Rather, the suggestion is that they understand how things work or how life operates *in relation to* what is ultimately good or important. More specifically, wise persons understand the workings or operation of the parts or aspects of life that are relevant to pursuing, respecting, maintaining, enjoying, or other ways of acting in relation to what is ultimately good and important.[25] This includes, but is not limited to, various cause-effect and means-end relations: for example, that if you treat people in way A, they are likely to respond in manner B; that situations of sort C tend to play out in ways D; that the most effective way of bringing about end E is by way of means F; and so on.[26]

While necessary for wisdom, neither can this more specific form of knowledge stand alone. A person can understand how the world works, but if she has a deeply flawed view of what is good or important in life, then she may be no closer to wisdom than the fool described above. Machiavelli's prince may be a case in point: he clearly understands the ways of the world (e.g. what people are like, how they tend to react, how situations tend to play out, and so on); however, he arguably possesses a deeply flawed conception of the good.[27] As such, while he may be "clever" in Aristotle's sense, he is far from admirable or virtuous, and therefore less than wise.[28]

I have claimed that a wise person knows what is ultimately good or important in life and understands how life works or how other elements of life stand in relation to what is ultimately good. My suggestion is that such knowledge and understanding comprise a cognitive perspective that is largely constitutive of wisdom. However, more needs to be added to this account. To see why, note that while the second kind of knowledge identified above is more specific than the

first, the perspective sketched thus far remains fairly general. Specifically, a person might know what is ultimately good and important in life, have a good sense of how the world works in relation to what is good and important, but lack the ability to *apply* this overall perspective to particular or unfamiliar situations or dilemmas. This is significant given the putative advice-giving ability of wise persons, for this ability requires being able to apply one's knowledge of what is ultimately good and of how the world works to certain very specific situations or dilemmas. It is also significant in light of the fact that wise persons are excellent deliberators, for deliberation also frequently involves reasoning about very particular situations or practical problems.[29]

This underscores a further dimension of wisdom. It suggests that a wise person also possesses a certain *competence*. Specifically, she is able and willing to apply her knowledge of what is ultimately good and of how the world works to specific contexts or situations, including ones that she has not previously considered or encountered. She is reliably disposed to make sound judgments about how to act or proceed given the particular features of the situation in question. This feature of wisdom is widely recognized in the philosophical and psychological literatures on wisdom. Roger Walsh, for instance, claims that wisdom involves "the ability to recognize responses that are contextually appropriate for the specific situation and people."[30] And Tiberius and Swartwood comment: "Wise people are good at putting their deep understanding to use: they have the ability to apply their deep understanding to their own lives and to the lives of others in order to solve problems."[31]

Wisdom, as sketched thus far, has both an epistemic dimension and a competence dimension. A wise person characteristically (1) knows what is ultimately good or important in life, (2) understands how life works or how other elements of life stand in relation to what is

ultimately good, and (3) is competent at applying this perspective to new or particular contexts or questions.

Because of the central importance it assigns to a reflective perspective on what matters and how life works, we can refer to this as the "perspectival account" of wisdom. A great deal more could be said to unpack and defend this account.[32] We will, indeed, have occasion to add to it below. However, given the limits and specific focus of the paper, I will limit my further defense of the account to an exploration of how it stands relative to the various putative features of wisdom enumerated at the outset of the paper. These again are understanding, experience, expertise, skill, advice, judgment, self-knowledge, and virtue.

First, according to the perspectival account, wisdom is importantly related to *understanding*. It is partly constituted by an understanding of how life works, especially those parts or elements of life relevant to pursuing, maintaining, enjoying, respecting, and otherwise acting on behalf of what is ultimately important or good. Put another way, the wise person understands how things hang together in the practical domain. The perspectival account also stipulates that the wise person knows which ends are ultimately good or important. Such knowledge also can be thought of as a kind of understanding, inasmuch as wise persons are likely to have some sense of *how* or *why* the ends in question have the normative status they do. Finally, recall that the perspectival account is an attempt to make sense of the claim that wisdom involves knowing how to live well. Here too the knowledge at issue can be viewed as a form of understanding. Given their understanding of what is ultimately good or important in life, and how other elements of life are related to this, wise persons grasp, not merely *that* they should conduct themselves in such-and-such ways, but also (at least to some extent) *why* they should do so.[33]

Second, wisdom thus conceived bears a natural connection to lived *experience*. Typically, we learn what matters and how life works by *living*—often via a process of trial and error. For most of us, the kind of cognitive perspective I am claiming is essential to wisdom is a major life achievement—one which, if it comes at all, tends to come later in life. The notion of experience is also relevant to the competence component of wisdom. For, in many cases at least, a wise person's ability to apply her knowledge to a wide range of practical contexts or dilemmas is likely to be due in part to an accumulation of experience, especially experience of a fairly broad or varied sort. Accordingly, if we think of wisdom along the lines sketched above, we should expect a close correlation between wisdom and experience.

Third, if the perspectival account is correct, we should also expect a close correlation between wisdom and *expertise*. Expertise is associated with knowledge and ability. If a person is an expert in a domain D, we can expect her to have a firm personal knowledge or understanding of D, and in particular, a grasp of the first principles proper to D or of how the elements of D hang together. If the perspectival account is on the right track, it makes sense to think of wise persons as experts in the domain of life or of living well. For, again, on this view, the wise person understands what is ultimately good and how life operates, which in turn gives her a kind of special insight into how to live well. Similarly, if a person is an expert in a domain D, we can expect her to have certain D-specific competences. Among these is a competence to handle the practically *difficult* or *challenging* aspects of D. Here again a connection with the perspectival account is apparent, for it describes the wise person as capable of *applying* her perspective on life and living well to specific contexts and problems.

Fourth, the notion of expertise is closely related to that of *skill*, a further quality closely associated with wisdom. Wise persons, we observed, are said to be skilled at the art of living.

They do not bumble their way through life. They tend to know what's coming and to be uniquely capable of handling life's challenges intelligently and competently. This also makes good sense if we are thinking of wisdom along perspectival lines. For, again, a person who has the kind of general knowledge and understanding described above and can competently apply this knowledge in practical contexts is well-equipped for living skillfully. She understands what is ultimately important and how life works, both in general and in specific contexts. And she can apply this understanding to new and particular practical problems and questions. As such, she is unlikely to be perplexed or disoriented by the circumstances or challenges life brings her way.

Fifth, the fact that a wise person has a firm grasp of what is good in life and of how life works, together with the fact that she is skilled at applying this knowledge in practical contexts, also makes good sense of the familiar idea that wise persons are especially good sources of *advice* about how to live or conduct oneself in complicated or difficult circumstances. Indeed, within virtually any practical domain, if one wants to know how to act or proceed in that domain, one often does well to consult an expert, that is, one who has a deep understanding of what is important in the domain and of how the other elements of the domain hang together. The wise person, as I have characterized her, has precisely this sort of understanding within the domain of human life and activity. This makes her an excellent source of advice to others looking for guidance about how to live.

Sixth, we also think of wise persons as having good *judgment*. Again, when faced with competing normative demands, or when the right thing to do or best way to proceed is not something that can simply be inferred from other obvious or well-established principles, wise persons in particular can be counted on to arrive at sound practical judgments. This is also predicted by the perspectival account. For, again, on this account, a wise person is competent at

applying her knowledge to novel or complex circumstances. Indeed, it is not unreasonable to equate this competence with precisely the kind of good judgment standardly associated with wisdom.

Seventh, the competence dimension of wisdom also underscores its connection to *self-knowledge*. Wise persons are competent at applying their general knowledge about life and morality, not merely to how other people should act, but also to their *own* conduct. Doing so requires self-knowledge. How a person should act in a given situation depends on certain specific features of the person herself, including her values and desires, abilities and limitations, and so on. Therefore, to be capable of making the sorts of practical judgments that in turn are essential to living well, wise persons must know what they care about, what they are capable of, how they are likely to respond to particular challenges, and more. They must possess a reasonably high degree of self-knowledge.

Finally, recall that we also think of wise persons as *admirable* or *virtuous*. This makes at least some sense given the perspectival account. According to this account, wise persons have an admirable cognitive perspective and ability to apply the content of this perspective in action-guiding ways. They are, then, admirable or virtuous at least in some sense.

That said, I do not think the perspectival account as developed thus far captures the full extent to which wise persons are virtuous or admirable. First, it does not seem impossible that a person might be wise in the sense sketched above while also being *wicked*. Such a person might know what is ultimately good or important in life, understand how life works, be capable of applying this knowledge to particular situations in a sound manner, but use this combination of knowledge and skills in acts of brazen immorality—e.g. in depriving others of precisely what they most need or in trying to make others as unhappy as possible. Second, someone might

possess the relevant perspective and competence but be profoundly *akratic*, such that he rarely manages to act in ways that he knows are good and right. Neither the wicked nor the akratic person would be admirable or virtuous enough (or in the right way) to be considered wise.[34]

This suggests that the perspectival account needs to be supplemented by a requirement to the effect that a wise person is disposed to *act in accordance with* her wise perspective and judgments—or, more generally, according to which she not only knows how to live well but also is motivated to do so.[35] (Caveat: given that wise persons sometimes offer judgments concerning how others should act, and that these judgments can be very specific to the persons in question, there may be occasions with respect to which a wise person would not "act in accordance with" her own wise judgments.)

The perspectival account can now be stated in full: a wise person: (1) knows what is ultimately good or important in life; (2) understands how other elements or aspects of life work in relation to what is ultimately good or important; (3) is competent at applying this perspective to new or particular contexts or questions; and (4) is disposed to act in accordance with the resulting judgments.[36]

3. Suffering and Wisdom

Suppose this is what wisdom amounts to. How should we understand the relationship between wisdom and suffering? Should we expect suffering, at least in a significant number of cases, to contribute to wisdom? If so, in which cases and why? As noted above, I will not assume any particular theory of suffering, though I will attempt to clarify what it is about suffering that might make it relevant to the acquisition of wisdom.[37] Moreover, while I will argue that suffering

can, under certain conditions, contribute to wisdom, this is consistent with the sobering fact that suffering can also diminish (if not destroy) a person's capacity for wisdom. Thus the discussion is at best a partial account of the potential effects of suffering. Finally, I do not claim, with respect to cases in which suffering does or may contribute to wisdom, that it is the *only* thing capable of doing so. That is, I do not take suffering to be an *exclusive* means to wisdom.[38]

We may begin by attending to potential connections between suffering and the *epistemic* dimension of wisdom. Earlier we noted that this dimension is comprised of at least two types of knowledge: knowledge of what is ultimately good or important in life and knowledge of what the world is like or of how the world works in relation to what is ultimately good. However, recall that the epistemic dimension of wisdom also involves a third type of knowledge: namely, self-knowledge. As noted, self-knowledge is essential to the wise person's ability to apply her knowledge of morality and the world to her *own* situation or context.

There are good reasons to think, with respect to a reasonably wide range of cases, that suffering can contribute to a person's acquisition of all three types of wisdom-relevant knowledge. First, it is not uncommon for people to emerge from experiences of suffering with a new and more accurate perspective on *what matters most in life*.[39] Such persons often look back on their lives and judge that prior to suffering their priorities were out of order—e.g. that they were living for or striving after things of minimal significance. Post-suffering, they often prioritize such things as loving relationships with friends and family, living more openly in relation to others, and appreciating life's simple joys and pleasures. Why might suffering have this effect? One plausible explanation has to do with the way in which suffering can be disorienting, upending our ordinary ways of experiencing the world, ourselves, and other people. As such, it can awaken our moral sensibilities and serve as an invitation to reevaluate our

priorities, rely more heavily on the support of loved ones, and cease taking for granted various goods and blessings.

In keeping with this picture, Tedeschi and Calhoun, in their work on "posttraumatic growth," observe: "A typical change in priorities [following a traumatic experience] is an increase in the importance of what before might have been considered the 'little things,' such as a child's smile and spending time with a toddler, and the recognition of the importance of things formerly taken for granted."[40] They illustrate this point with a poignant reflection from author Hamilton Jordan:

> After my first cancer, even the smallest joys in life took on special meaning—watching a beautiful sunset, a hug from my child, a laugh with Dorothy. That feeling has not diminished with time. After my second and third cancers, the simple joys of life are everywhere and are boundless, as I cherish my family and friends and contemplate the rest of my life, a life I certainly do not take for granted.[41]

Davis and Nolen-Hoeksema make a similar observation. In a study on bereavement, they found that 70-80% of family members reported perceiving some benefit from their experience of loss. Among these benefits were a "gain in perspective" and "deepening relationships." As one of their respondents remarked: "I learned that when you love someone, the relationship is so important. It's enhanced my relationship with other people because I realize that time is so important, and you can waste so much effort on small, insignificant events and feelings."[42]

Suffering can also increase a person's understanding of *what life is like or of how the world works in relation to what is most important*. It can lead to observations such as that life is

fragile or short, that life is sometimes unfair, that it has its ups and downs, that bad things can happen to good people, etc.[43] Along these lines, Davis and Nole-Hoeksema note that according to "social-cognitive models of coping and adjustment," loss and trauma threaten "our most fundamental beliefs or assumptions about how the world works."[44] Similarly, Joseph and Linley argue that adversity can "show us … that the future is uncertain, and that what happens to us can be random. Adverse events show us the limits of the human condition and bring into question our assumptions about ourselves and the world."[45] While experiences and beliefs like these are not sufficient for wisdom, they do seem capable of contributing to it.

Can't these epistemic elements of wisdom be gained by other means, for example, by studying history, reading good literature and biographies, viewing documentaries, and so on? I suspect they can. But that is no objection to my argument, for again my claim is not that suffering is a *necessary* means to wisdom. That said, I do suspect that experiences of suffering can be especially epistemically powerful. Suffering involves *first-person acquaintance* with facts such as that life can be unfair, difficult, unpredictable, and so on. This acquaintance can enhance a person's understanding of "how the world works" in a way that is especially vivid and difficult to forget by comparison with some of the other media noted above.

As the remark above by Joseph and Linley indicates, suffering can also contribute significantly to *self-knowledge*. Most obviously, it can acquaint a person with her fundamental limitations and vulnerabilities. Judgments like the following are a natural and familiar result of suffering: "I'm not invincible," "I need other people," "I lack ultimate control," "my well-being is fragile," etc. Here too it is not difficult to imagine that suffering might play at least a somewhat unique epistemic role. While it is one thing to learn from, say, reading a biography or viewing a documentary that life is short or that human beings need each other, it is quite another

to be vividly and painfully acquainted with the fact that *my* life is short, that *I* am mortal, or that *I* need to depend on others in order to flourish. While other media can inspire such insights, the personal and experiential aspects of suffering make it especially likely to do so.

Along these lines, Calhoun and Tedeschi report that losing a loved one can heighten one's sense of one's mortality and one's need for support from other people.[46] Similarly, Joseph and Linley remark that "growth through adversity" includes "three main facets," one being that "people change their views of themselves in some way," including a "greater acceptance of their vulnerabilities and limitations."[47] Posttraumatic growth researchers have also observed that people can emerge from traumatic experiences, not only with a more acute awareness of their vulnerability, but also with an increased sense of personal agency, for example, with the sense that they can handle whatever challenges life brings their way.[48] Of course, experiences of loss and suffering can also lead to *false* or *irrational* beliefs about oneself, and when they do, they are not a source of wisdom. However, beliefs like the ones just described seem both reasonable and capable of making a person wiser.

4. Humility and Wisdom

Suffering evidently can contribute to the epistemic dimension of wisdom as characterized by the perspectival account. But this benefit is not guaranteed. Again, suffering can also *diminish* a person's capacity for wisdom.[49] Therefore, an important question remains: when or under what conditions is suffering more or less *likely* to yield growth along the epistemic dimension of wisdom?

There is no single or simple answer to this question. Nevertheless, in the remainder of the paper, I argue that persons who encounter suffering with a posture or attitude of *humility* are in a considerably better position to acquire several of the epistemic elements of wisdom just described.[50] I begin by sketching an account of the nature of humility. I then explain why people who negotiate suffering with a posture of humility are more likely to grow in wisdom as a result.[51]

Humility, as I am thinking of it, is a disposition to be properly attentive to and to "own" one's limitations. By "limitations" I mean something very broad, including defects and weaknesses, but also various needs and dependencies. Limitations also admit of various types: we can be limited in moral, physical, metaphysical, intellectual, psychological, and other ways. The notion of "owning" a limitation is quasi-technical. While it is related to admitting, accepting, or taking responsibility for a limitation, its demands may vary from one situation to the next depending on at least a couple of factors. To illustrate, if the limitation is a *significant* and *correctable* defect, then owning this limitation will require, not merely acknowledging that it exists, but also resolving to get rid of it or prevent it from guiding one's activity. On the other hand, if the limitation is a minor defect or defect over which one has little or no control, then owning it may involve little more than honestly acknowledging or accepting that one has it. The same goes where the limitation is not a defect at all but rather a natural human need or vulnerability (e.g. a lack of ultimate control).[52] In short, then, human existence is filled with a wide and diverse range of limitations, and humility is the virtue that helps us remain attentive to and properly responsive to or accepting of our limitations. It is the virtue that helps us negotiate our limitations in an honest, responsible, and accepting way.

Given this conception of humility, it is not too difficult to imagine that persons who encounter suffering with an attitude or posture of humility might be primed for acquiring at least some of the wisdom that suffering makes possible.[53] To make good on this point, I turn now to describe how this posture might facilitate an increase in the three types of knowledge discussed above—knowledge which again constitutes the epistemic dimension of wisdom. (I do not claim that humility is conducive to the development of *all* aspects or elements of wisdom—even all of the aspects that can be derived from suffering. For instance, a willingness to admit one's limitations is unlikely to play a special role in facilitating a greater sense of one's personal *agency* or *resilience*, which again is a widely recognized result of some experiences of suffering.[54])

The first type is knowledge of *what is ultimately good or important*. Recall that much of the knowledge in this category draws attention to our need for others, for example, our inability to flourish in the absence of loving relationships with friends or family. While such a need is hardly a defect, a person bent self-sufficiency or radical autonomy may have a very difficult time accepting it. By contrast, humble persons are disposed to own their limitations; they are aware of and accepting of the fact that they need other people in order to live a healthy and fulfilling life. We also noted above that experiences of suffering can lead one to make critical assessments of how one was living prior to suffering—perhaps even that one has spent a good portion of one's life chasing after the wind. These realizations also can be very difficult to attend to or accept. However, to the extent that one is honest with oneself about and disposed to admit (rather than deny or be defensive about) one's flaws and mistakes, one is more likely to make and be accepting of these important and insightful judgments. Put another way, humility functions to eliminate *obstacles* to the acceptance of truths that are at once integral to wisdom and an affront

to human pride. In these and related ways, humility manifested in the context of suffering can enhance one's sense of what is (and is not) of ultimate importance or value.

The second type of knowledge comprising the epistemic dimension of wisdom pertains to *what life is like or how the world works.* As noted above, the features of life that become salient in the context of suffering include life's brevity and unpredictability, the fact that the past cannot be changed, that bad things can happen to good people, and so on. These aspects of life may be alarming and repugnant to persons who think of themselves as invincible or as the exclusive authors of their own life stories. As such, they are likely to be resistant to processing or accepting them, which in turn will limit their capacity for wisdom. Humble persons, by contrast, will be more likely to face these facts about life and be appropriately accepting of the constraints and limitations they introduce. This in turn stands to increase their share in the epistemic dimension of wisdom.

The third type of wisdom-relevant knowledge that can be facilitated by suffering is *self-knowledge,* in particular, knowledge of such claims as "I'm not invincible," "I need other people," "I lack ultimate control," and "my well-being is fragile." Here too such knowledge will be a very bitter pill for persons resistant to acknowledging or owning their limitations. This is not to say that *humble* persons will enthusiastically embrace all of this discomfiting self-knowledge. They might, for instance, lament their mortality or the fact that their well-being is as fragile as it is. Unlike some prideful persons, however, they will not be in denial about or refuse to accept the relevant facts. Thus humility also puts people in a favorable position to acquire the kind of wisdom-relevant self-knowledge that suffering makes possible.

We've seen that humility manifested in encounters with suffering can increase one's chances of deriving wisdom from suffering. Our focus so far has been on the relationship

between humility and the *epistemic* dimension of wisdom. However, a similar point can also be made in connection with the other dimensions of wisdom.

According to the perspectival account, wisdom is not merely a matter of knowing certain things about morality, life, or oneself. It also involves *applying* this knowledge to particular contexts or situations and *acting* in accordance with the resulting practical judgments. Humble persons, we have seen, are better positioned to acquire some of the wisdom-relevant knowledge that can come from suffering. As such, humble persons are in a better position to make wise judgments that depend on this knowledge and to act accordingly. Persons in the grip of pride, by contrast, might fail to acquire this knowledge. If so, they will be in no position to make wise practical judgments on the basis of it (nor to act in accordance with these judgments).

Further, suppose a non-humble person manages somehow to acquire much of the wisdom-relevant knowledge that suffering can yield. This person might still be ill-equipped to apply this knowledge or to put it into practice. To see why, recall once more that this knowledge pertains largely to human limitations and vulnerabilities. Again, people sometimes emerge from experiences of suffering with the sense that they've been living foolishly or that they need to depend more deeply on or live more openly with others. These are fairly general truths. To be wise, a person must also be competent at using this knowledge to make situation-specific practical judgments and be disposed to act in accordance with these judgments. However, this may prove very difficult for someone deficient in humility. For, the judgments in question may very well include things like: "I need to apologize to my family for how badly I've neglected them" or "I need to admit to my partner or friends how much I need them." Making these judgments—let alone *acting* on them—may demand a significant amount of humility. Therefore,

humility can also contribute to these other aspects of wisdom made possible in the context of suffering.

Taranto offers an apt summary of some of the foregoing connections between suffering, humility, and wisdom:

> Few escape the lessons of human vulnerability. Certainly some choose to deny the reality of such limitations or are broken by them, but some choose to "work around them" or "live within them." The latter individuals, I suggest, have more wisdom than the former, for loss of control and recognition of the limits of control that we have over such losses is a form of control itself.[55]

5. Conclusion

My aim has been to shed some light on the relationship between wisdom and suffering. Specifically, I have sought to better understand when or how suffering might contribute to wisdom. In response to this question, I have argued that persons who negotiate the terrain of suffering with an attitude or posture of humility are more likely to acquire the epistemic elements of wisdom. This has involved providing an account of the nature of wisdom, the nature of humility, and some apparent causal connections between suffering and wisdom. My defense of the relevant causal connections has mainly been conceptual in nature. However, with suitable measures for wisdom and humility, it could profitably be subjected to empirical assessment.[56]

[1] See Ursula M. Staudinger and Judith Glück, "Psychological Wisdom Research: Commonalities and Differences in a Growing Field," *Annual Review of Psychology,* Vol. 62, (2010), pp. 215-241, and Stephen Grimm, "Wisdom," *Australasian Journal of Philosophy,* Vol. 93, No. 1, (2015), pp. 139-154.

[2] See Judith Glück and Susan Bluck, "The MORE Life Experience Model: A Theory of the Development of Wisdom," in Michael Ferrari and Nic Westrate, eds., *Personal Wisdom* (New York: Springer, 2013), pp. 75-98.

[3] See *Suffering and Virtue* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming), Ch. 5. Throughout the paper I'll focus primarily (though not exclusively) on *suffering* rather than *adversity* (which is a wider notion) or *trauma* (which is narrower).

[4] See Richard G. Tedeschi and Lawrence Calhoun, "Posttraumatic Growth: Conceptual Foundations and Empirical Evidence," *Psychological Inquiry,* Vo. 15, No. 1, (2004), pp. 1-18.

[5] For a recent account of the nature of suffering, see Brady, ibid., Ch. 1.

[6] See my "Intellectual Virtues and Truth, Understanding, and Wisdom," *Oxford Handbook of Virtue,* ed. Nancy Snow (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), pp. 800-819; "Sophia," *Virtues and their Vices,* eds. Kevin Timpe and Craig Boyd (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), pp. 303-26; "Two Types of Wisdom," *Acta Analytica,* Vol. 27, (2012), pp. 81-97; and "Intellectual Humility: Owning our Limitations," co-authored with Dennis Whitcomb, Heather Battaly, and Dan Howard-Snyder, *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research,* Vol. XCIV, No. 3, (2017), pp. 509-539.

[7] See Staudinger and Glück, op. cit.

[8] Doesn't Socrates, a wisdom exemplar, often come across as muddled or confused? Perhaps. But the point is that wise persons are neither muddled nor confused about that *on account of*

which they are wise. Socrates is wise partly because he is *aware of and honest about* his confusion or ignorance. For more on the relationship between wisdom and understanding, see Roger Walsh, "What Is Wisdom? Cross-Cultural and Cross-Disciplinary Syntheses," Review of General Psychology, Vol. 19, No. 3, (2015), pp. 278-293, Paul B. Baltes and Ursula M. Staudinger, "Wisdom: A Metaheuristic (Pragmatic) to Orchestrate Mind and Virtue Toward Excellence," *American Psychologist*, Vol. 22, No. 1, (2000), pp. 122-136, Valerie Tiberius and Jason Swartwood, "Wisdom Revisited: A Case Study in Normative Theorizing," *Philosophical Explorations*, Vol. 14, No. 3, (2011), pp. 277-295, and Shane Ryan, "Wisdom: Understanding and the Good Life," *Act Analytica*, Vol. 31, No. 3, (2016), pp. 1-17.

[9] See Nic M. Weststrate and Judith Glück, "Hard-Earned Wisdom: Exploratory Processing of Difficult Life Experience is Positively Associated with Wisdom," *Developmental Psychology* Vol. 53, No. 4, (2017), pp. 800-814, Maria A. Taranto, "Facets of Wisdom: A Theoretical Synthesis," *International Journal of Aging and Human Development*, Vol. 29, No. 1, (1989), pp. 1-21, Staudinger and Glück, op. cit., and Glück and Bluck, op. cit.

[10] See Robert, Nozick. *The Examined Life: Philosophical Meditations* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1989), Valerie Tiberius, "Wisdom and Humility," *Annals of the New York Academy of Science*, Vol. 1384 (2016), pp. 113-116, and Westrate and Glück, op. cit.

[11] See Lisa Bortolotti, "Does Reflection Lead to Wise Choices?" *Philosophical Explorations*, Vol. 14, No. 3, (2011), pp. 297-313, Walsh, op. cit., and Tiberius and Swartwood, op. cit.

[12] See Grimm, op. cit., Walsh, op. cit., and Bortolotti, op. cit.

[13] See Lawrence G. Calhoun and Richard G. Tedeschi, "Positive Aspects of Critical Life Problems: Recollections of Grief," *OMEGA*, Vol. 20, No. 4, (1989-1990), pp. 265-272, Walsh, op. cit., Grimm, op. cit., and Baltes and Staudinger, op. cit.

[14] See Staudinger and Glück, op. cit., and Baltes and Staudinger, op cit.

[15] For defenses or discussions of this claim, see Sharon Ryan, "What Is Wisdom?" *Philosophical Studies*, Vol. 93, No. 2, (1999), pp. 119-139, Dennis Whitcomb, "Wisdom," in Sven Bernecker and Duncan Pritchard, eds., *Routledge Companion to Epistemology* (London: Routledge, 2011), pp. 95-105, Nozick, op. cit., and Grimm, op. cit.

[16] Op. cit., p. 222.

[17] See Tiberius, op. cit.

[18] Op. cit., p. 11.

[19] Throughout the paper I'll use "knows" and its cognates (e.g. "understanding") somewhat loosely. In particular, while I'll defend a close connection between wisdom and understanding, I wish to remain neutral on two issues: first, whether understanding is a species of knowledge; and, second, the extent to which the kind of understanding involved in wisdom is factive. On the former issue, see Stephen Grimm, "Is Understanding a Species of Knowledge?" *British Journal for the Philosophy of Science*, Vol. 57, (2006), pp. 515-535. On the latter issue, see Catherine Elgin, "Is Understanding Factive?" in Adrian Haddock, Alan Millar, and Duncan Pritchard, eds., *Epistemic Value* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 322-330. For more on the relationship between knowledge, understanding, and wisdom, see Shane Ryan, "Wisdom: Understanding and the Good Life," *Acta Analytica*, Vol. 31, No. 3, (2015), pp. 235-251.

[20] See Christopher G. Davis and Susan Nolen-Hoeksema, "Loss and Meaning: How Do People Make Sense of Loss," *The American Behavioral Scientist*, Vol. 44, No. 5, (2001), pp. 726-741, Tiberius, op. cit., Grimm, op. cit., and Tedeschi and Calhoun, op. cit.

[21] Op. cit., p. 282.

[22] See Grimm, op. cit., p. 142 for a similar point.

[23] Op. cit., p. 286.

[24] For an argument to the effect that the scope of wisdom extends to these and related subjects, see Sharon Ryan, "Wisdom, Knowledge, and Rationality," *Acta Analytica*, Vol. 27, (2012), pp. 99-112. My rejection of this claim is consistent with the possibility that there might be another kind of wisdom—viz. *theoretical* wisdom—that precisely involves knowledge of these other, more academic subjects. For more on this issue, see Whitcomb, op. cit., and my "Sophia," op. cit. The focus of the present paper is wisdom *simpliciter* or *moral* wisdom.

[25] See Westrate and Glück, op. cit., Walsh, op. cit., and Taranto, op. cit. Strictly speaking, it may be that not *all* such knowledge contributes to wisdom. For instance, technical medical knowledge can contribute to the good of health, but it's unclear whether such knowledge makes its possessor wiser. Thanks to an anonymous refer for this point.

[26] This explains the connection, noted by Taratano others, between wisdom and "proverbs, adages, fables, and maxims," (op. cit., p. 5). For, the latter often have the sort of structure just noted and are thought to encapsulate wisdom. For more on this point, see Taratano, ibid., and Staudinger and Glück, op. cit.

[27] See Niccolo Machiavelli, *The Prince*, trans. Robert M. Adams (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 1992).

[28] See Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book VI, Ch. 12 and Bk. VII, Ch. 10.

[29] This is also Aristotle's view. See Aristotle, op. cit., 1141b9-10, 1140a25-31, 1141b8-9, and 1140b5-6.

[30] Op. cit., p. 286.

[31] Op. cit. p. 282.

[32] Interested readers can see sources referenced in note 6 above.

[33] This connection with understanding is significant, not merely because it fits with our pretheoretical ways of thinking about wisdom, but also on conceptual grounds. As Shane Ryan argues (op. cit.), to the extent that a person could have *knowledge* of the relevant objects (viz. that which is of ultimate value or significance, the way the world works, and living well) without *understanding* them (e.g. by knowing these things merely on the basis of reliable testimony), such knowledge might fail to make one much wiser.

[34] This is at odds with Whitcomb, op. cit. For a further defense of the point, see my "Two Types of Wisdom," op. tic.

[35] Presumably she will also do so with appropriate *pleasure*. While I suspect, as this suggests, that there is also an *affective* dimension of wisdom, I will not pause here to develop it. For more on the affective or emotional aspects of wisdom, see Glück and Bluck, op. cit, and Staudinger and Glück, op. cit.

[36] This account bears some resemblance to Grimm's in "Wisdom" (op. cit.). According to Grimm, wisdom necessarily involves knowledge of: (1) "what is good or important for well-being," (2) "one's standing, relative to what is good or important for well-being," and (3) "a strategy for obtaining what is good or important for well-being" (140). While I find a great deal to like in Grimm's account, it is different from the account developed here in a few ways. First, the moral knowledge component of my account is broader than Grimm's. Grimm restricts this component to knowledge of well-being, while my account leaves room for the possibility that knowledge of what is just or fair—considerations that might be distinct from or even at odds with well-being—might figure importantly into the epistemic constitution of wisdom. Second, my account requires that wise persons be disposed to *act in accordance* with their wise perspectives, while Grimm's does not. Finally, Grimm's account doesn't explicitly require that

wise persons be knowledgeable about "how the world works." However, on this last point, it may be that such knowledge is implied by Grimm's third condition (i.e. that to possess a reliable strategy for obtaining "what is good or important for well-being" one must have a understanding of the ways of the world). Similarly, while Grimm's account makes self-knowledge a prominent feature of wisdom, on my account it is merely implied (again, to competently *apply* one's moral knowledge to one's own actions and life, one must have a relatively high degree of self-knowledge).

[37] As we will see, experiences of suffering most likely to contribute to the acquisition of wisdom are experiences that invite an honest and vulnerable confrontation with one's limitations. Some experiences of suffering, owing either to their intrinsic character or to certain facts about our psychology, may lack this tendency. For instance, some experiences of suffering may be so overwhelming as to discourage an honest and vulnerable confrontation with one's limitations. More on these points below.

[38] Of course, there may be *individuals* for whom suffering is a necessary means to wisdom. My concern here is with a more general connection.

[39] See Stephen Joseph, "Growth Following Adversity: Positive Psychological Perspectives on Posttraumatic Stress," *Psychological Topics*, Vol. 18, No. 2, (2009), pp. 335-343, and Stephen Joseph and P. Alex Linley, "Positive Adjustment to Threatening Events: An Organismic Valuing Theory of Growth Through Adversity," *Review of General Psychology*, Vol. 9, No. 3, pp. 262-280.

[40] Op. cit., p. 6.

[41] Ibid., p. 1

[42] Op. cit., p. 735.

[43] See Ronnie Janoff-Bulman, "Assumptive Worlds and the Stress of Traumatic Events: Applications of the Schema Construct," *Social Cognition*, Vol. 7, (1989), pp. 113-136.

[44] Op. cit., p. 727.

[45] Op. cit., p. 272.

[46] Op. cit., p. 269.

[47] Op. cit., p. 263.

[48] See Joseph and Linley, op. cit., Calhoun and Tedeschi, op. cit., and Tedeschi and Calhoun, op. cit.

[49] It can do so, for instance, to the extent that it prevents a person from adopting the kind of reflective stance that I am claiming is central to wisdom—e.g. if the suffering is so excruciating that the person is able to focus only on the most immediate and basic of tasks or concerns. Thanks to an anonymous referee for this point.

[50] I say "posture or attitude" of humility (vs. "humility" *simpliciter*) because I'm conceiving of humility as a character virtue and thus as a reasonably stable disposition. A person might be able to adopt a *posture* or *attitude* of humility without possessing the actual virtue of humility. I see no reason to think that this difference would, in any particular case, limit the person's ability to gain wisdom from suffering.

[51] Wisdom can, of course, express itself in humble behavior. This is consistent with the view defended here, which aims to pinpoint a way of being humble that can, in the context of suffering, also *precede* and *facilitate growth in* certain aspects of wisdom. These aspects wisdom, once acquired, are likely to deepen and reinforce a person's humility. For a similar point, see Westrate and Glück, op. cit., pp. 801-811, and Walsh, op. cit., p. 290.

[52] For a corresponding account of *intellectual* humility, see Whitcomb et al, op. cit.

[53] I am hardly the first philosopher to recognize a connection between wisdom and humility. For instance, taking her inspiration from the sagely Socrates, Sharon Ryan (op. cit., 2012) considers (and rejects) the possibility that wisdom might be identical to epistemic humility. The position defended here is different in two respects: first, I do not equate wisdom and humility; second, my concern is not primarily with *epistemic* humility.

[54] See Joseph and Linley, op. cit., Calhoun and Tedeschi, op. cit., and Tedeschi and Calhoun, op. cit.

[55] Op. cit., p. 16.

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