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WISDOM IN THEOLOGY

*Blessed is the man who finds wisdom,
the man who gains understanding,
for she is more profitable than silver
and yields better returns than gold.
She is more precious than rubies;
nothing you desire can compare with her.*
-Proverbs 3:13-15

The love of wisdom is found not just in philosophy, but in virtually all of the great religious faiths. In the quote from the Hebrew Bible above we are told that wisdom is more precious than rubies, and in his letter to the Christian community in Colossae St. Paul says that he prays ceaselessly that they might be filled with knowledge of God's will "in all spiritual wisdom and understanding" (Col. 1:9).¹

At the same time, the great faiths often show significant suspicion towards the idea of wisdom, especially in the Judeo-Christian tradition. As Jeremiah warns the Israelites,

Do not let the wise boast in their wisdom...
but let those who boast boast in this,
that they understand and know me, that I am the Lord;
I act with steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth,
for in these things I delight, says the Lord. (Jer. 9:23-24)

And St. Paul similarly writes to the Corinthians:

Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, God decided, through the foolishness of our proclamation, to save those who believe. (1 Cor. 1:19-20)

¹ For more on the significance of wisdom in Eastern religions, see Brannigan (2000), and in Islam see Ferrari *et al.* (2011). Some recent work by Christian theologians on wisdom includes Deane-Drummond (2000) and Ford (2007); on wisdom in the Hebrew Bible, see Crenshaw (2010).

Rather than being more precious than rubies, in these passages the desire for wisdom seems almost like a betrayal of God. It is cast as a pagan, perhaps peculiarly Greek, aspiration that somehow blinds people to what is really important—either acting with steadfast love and justice (Jeremiah) or proclaiming Christ crucified (St. Paul).

In addition to this ambiguous attitude towards wisdom, some of the central Judeo-Christian claims regarding wisdom are far from clear. For example, how can we square the traditional idea that God alone is wise (Romans 16:27) with the idea that fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom (Job 28.28; Proverbs 1.7; 9.10)? If it is true that fearing God helps to *make* one wise, then how is this compatible with God's (apparently) unique claim to wisdom?

The relationship between wisdom and moral goodness has also been contested, and in particular the question of whether it is possible to be wise and evil at the same time.² According to some recent philosophers, the Devil himself (as described by Christian tradition) should be counted as wise, and our theory of wisdom should accommodate this fact.³ Others have claimed that to be wise you at least need to be morally good, with some (such as Aquinas) claiming that true wisdom needs to be infused by God, and is inseparable from love.⁴ These questions help to bring out the fact that wisdom is often thought to have a moral character that other epistemic goods lack. While it is certainly possible to have knowledge and yet fail to be good, and arguably to have understanding yet fail to be good, it is less obvious that one can be wise and fail to be good. We therefore need to explore why wisdom is often thought to differ from other epistemic goods in this way, and how exactly the relationship between wisdom and moral goodness should be conceived.

I. Some distinctions

To better understand wisdom's distinctive character, it will first help to distinguish between domain-specific forms of wisdom and wisdom conceived in a more general or holistic way. In a domain-specific sense, to say that someone is wise mechanic or a wise detective or a wise political consultant is presumably to say that the person understands these various domains at a deep level and sees patterns or connections that other people fail to appreciate. A wise mechanic therefore has a deep understanding of how your car works and a wise political consultant of what motivates the electorate.

It is no contradiction, however, to say that while someone might be a wise political consultant she is not wise in general, or that while someone might be a

² This question is interestingly raised in Pinsent (2012a).

³ See, e.g., Whitcomb (2011).

⁴ For the claim that moral goodness is required for wisdom, see Zagzebski (1996). For Aquinas on these issues, see Pinsent (2012a; 2012b).

wise mechanic he is not *really* wise, or wise deep down. A wise mechanic, after all, might be an indifferent father and otherwise irresponsible—the sort of person you would turn to for advice about your car but whom you would not turn to for advice about life in general.

But what might it mean to be wise in this more general sense, or really wise, or wise deep down? Along with other philosophers such as Robert Nozick (1989) and Joel Kupperman (2005), I have argued that a person who is wise in this more general sense is someone who knows how to live well.⁵ So understand, wisdom is a form of knowledge. Reflection on the concept also suggests that knowing how to live well is a complex state that can be broken down into the following distinct parts, all of which, it seems, are individually necessary for wisdom:

1. Knowledge of what is good or important for well-being
2. Knowledge of one's standing relative to what is good or important for well-being
3. Knowledge of a strategy for obtaining what is good or important for well-being

Later on we can ask whether these three conditions are not just individually necessary but also jointly sufficient—in particular, we can ask whether there is some sort of “lived out” or existential condition on wisdom, over and above these cognitive or epistemic states. I will return to that question in Section 3, but first I will try to say a little in favor of these different conditions.

The basic idea in favor of the first condition is that a wise person knows what is valuable or important for well-being and in particular knows what is *more* or *less* important for well-being. In Kupperman's words, the person has “knowledge of what has high, low, or negative value” (Kupperman 2005: 250), both in general level and especially in particular situations. For example: suppose two sisters have nursed grudges against one for years, both thinking it is more important to maintain their pride than to relent and apologize. The dispute thus simmers on and there is little peace in the family. Suppose eventually sister A comes to think that clinging to her pride is not worth it, and that the well-being of the family is more important. She has a change of heart, and comes to think her old priorities were misguided. Sister B, however, continues to dig in her heels.

If you think that sister A's new attitude is wiser and sister B's foolish, then I take it this is because you think that A now has a more accurate judgment about what is “really important” in life. Put another way, the moral seems to be that if we think someone has *misplaced* priorities—valuing pride over peace, or work

⁵ I defend this idea more extensively in Grimm (*forthcoming*).

over relationships, and so on—then this lack of appreciation for what really matters seems to take them out of the running for wisdom. So it appears that having accurate judgments about what is valuable or important for well-being is a necessary condition on wisdom, in accord with point #1.

It does not seem sufficient for wisdom, however. Suppose I accurately believe that having good friendships is important to well-being, but I mistakenly think that I have a number of good friends, unaware that my selfish behavior has been eroding these relationships for years. Then far from being wise I would begin to seem like a paradigm instance of a fool. What this suggests is that the wise person not only needs to know what is good or important for well-being, but also where she stands relative to what is good or important. In other words, she needs a certain amount of self-awareness or self-understanding, the sort of self-awareness reflected in the Delphic admonition to “know thyself.” One might know what is good, but unless one knows how far away one is from what is good one cannot effectively try to seek it out.

This brings us to our third condition. For the wise person is someone who not only knows what is good or important for well-being and where she stands relative to what is good or important, but she also seems to know effective strategies for achieving what is good or important. An alleged sage who knew that, say, tranquility was crucial to well-being *and* knew that he was very far from tranquility but nevertheless did not have any clue about how to achieve it would not strike us as very wise, I take it.

To count as wise, a person therefore needs to possess some techniques or strategies for bringing about good ends. That is not to say, however, that these strategies are always very specific. For example, it is said in the Talmud that the wise man is “he who learns from all people” (*Tractate Avot* 4.1). Interpreted as a strategy, we can take this to mean the wise person is open to learning from others how to bring about good ends. This would, as it were, be a meta-strategy for learning effective first-order strategies for bringing about good ends. The third condition on wisdom also allows us to acknowledge one of the ways in which wisdom comes in degrees. For one mark of growing wisdom is the ability to deal with a widening range of unexpected challenges and hardships, the more extreme of which will call for more creative approaches.

In the next section I will note some of the ways in which this theory is open-ended and thus needs to be filled out. But before moving on it is worth pointing out figures renowned for their wisdom would fare on such an account. Would Socrates, e.g., still qualify as wise? At first glance it would seem so, for even though he did not take himself to be wise as the gods were wise, he at least took himself to be wise in virtue of knowing (a) that one of the most important things in life was to achieve knowledge of the true nature of things like goodness, justice, and beauty; (b) that neither he nor his fellow Athenians actually possessed

this knowledge; and (c) that an effective way to try to achieve this knowledge was through dialectic or debate.

The account would also not count as wise people who fail to appreciate “what is really important” or “what really matters” in life—and again, this looks like an intuitively desirable result. As a basic framework, it therefore seems like a promising place to start.

II. Clarifications

The account is indeterminate in at least two different ways, however: first, because it is silent about exactly whose well-being is at issue (or perhaps better, *what sort* of well-being is at issue); second, because it fails to specify what actually *is* important for the requisite sort of well-being. Although I have appealed to a few different examples of “important” things so far—things such as a good friendships or a peaceful family—I have not offered a theory about what exactly is important for well-being, or about what is more or less important, or about what is most important.

I take this indeterminacy to be a virtue of the theory for three reasons. First, it allows us to talk and theorize about wisdom without ourselves being wise (a relief!). Put another way, what the view is claiming is simply that our judgments about wisdom track our judgments about whether we think someone knows what is good or important for well-being. It is therefore a thesis about the shape of our concepts *wise* and *wisdom*, about what guides our judgments about what falls into the extension and what does not, rather than a fully articulated view about, as it were, the metaphysics of wisdom. Just as reliabilist theories in epistemology hold that reliability is necessary for knowledge but leave it up to others to determine which cognitive processes actually *are* reliable, so too my claim is simply that knowledge of things like “what is good or important for well being” is necessary for wisdom. For our purposes here, we can therefore leave as open the question of what actually *is* good or important for well-being, and to spell out effective strategies for achieving those goods.

A second asset of the theory is that it allows us to make sense of historical disputes about the nature of wisdom, both among philosophers and between philosophers and (non-philosophical) advocates of different religious traditions. If I am right, the correct way to interpret someone like St. Paul’s disapproval of “the wisdom of the wise” is not to suppose that St. Paul had no time for wisdom, or that he thought it was a purely pagan category of no interest to Christians, but rather than those alleged to be wise by the pagans were not really wise at all because they failed to appreciate what was truly important for living well. I will return to this idea in Section 4.

A third virtue of the theory is that it helps us to understand the scriptural claim that “God alone is wise” (Romans 16:27). On the view here, the way it

makes sense to say that God alone is wise is if one conceives of the relevant sort of well-being on a very grand scale, indeed the grandest scale possible, so that it is the well-being of the universe at issue.

But there are other sorts of well-being a person might have in mind: e.g.

- one's own well-being
- the well-being of one's group
- the well-being of the human community
- the well-being of the human community, now and into the future
- and so on...

And now we can ask: is our concept of wisdom so flexible or open-ended that any of these ways of filling out the relevant sort of well-being might count as legitimate? It does not seem so. For instance, the notion of a “self-centered” wise person—that is, a wise person concerned only with his or her own well-being, to the neglect of the whole—seems like an oxymoron. The wise person therefore appears to be naturally concerned with the good or well-being of his or her larger community. And not just the present community, it seems, because someone who was prepared to mortgage the well-being of future generations in order narrowly to benefit his or her own would likewise not strike us as wise, it seems.⁶

Since the wise person appears naturally concerned with the good of the whole, and since the “logic of wisdom,” as it were, seems to push the relevant circles of concern towards larger and larger groups, it is therefore no surprise that God alone would count as wise on some renderings, for only God could possibly bring about the well-being of the universe as a whole. Our concept of wisdom nevertheless seems flexible enough to count certain human beings as wise so long as they are likewise concerned with the good, on the widest scale available to them. When we say that human beings are wise, we must therefore have more tractable scales of well-being in mind.

III. “Lived-out” wisdom

The claim so far is that the wise person needs to satisfy the three conditions noted above. One natural concern about this view is that it threatens

⁶ A point nicely illustrated in the following quote from Jane Goodall, the renowned naturalist and conservationist: “It is awfully sad that with our clever brains, capable of taking us to the moon and developing all these sophisticated ways of communicating around the planet, that we seem to have lost wisdom; and that’s the wisdom of indigenous people who would make a major decision based on how that decision would affect people seven generations ahead. We’re making decisions now based on the bottom line. How will this affect me now? Me and my family, now? How will this huge decision affect the next shareholders’ meeting three months ahead? How will this decision I make today affect my election campaign? Something like that. So although we think we’re caring about our children and grandchildren, we’re actually stealing their future.” (Quoted in Zuckerman 2008: 83)

to make wisdom overly epistemic or overly cognitive. Surely the wise person does not simply know how to live well but actually *does* live well. So it would appear that, in addition to the three conditions mentioned above, we need to add something else—something along the lines of an application condition, in the sense that the wise person not only knows what is important for well being and has effective strategies for achieving this but actually applies them to her life.

Although I think that something along the lines of an application condition is in fact needed for wisdom, it has been recently challenged by Dennis Whitcomb on the basis of two different examples. Consider first his case involving Mephistopheles (or the Devil):

Consider Mephistopheles, that devil to whom Faust foolishly sells his soul. Mephistopheles knows what advice will bring Faust to lead a bad life, and that is precisely the advice that he gives him. But then, it stands to reason that Mephistopheles also knows what advice will bring Faust to lead a *good* life. So, it stands to reason that Mephistopheles knows how to live well. Despite this knowledge, the life Mephistopheles lives is bad, and so is the life he brings Faust to live. Mephistopheles is sinister, fiendish, and wicked. But whatever he is, he is not a fool. He is, it seems, wise but evil. (Whitcomb 2011: 97-98)

To begin with, we can note that Whitcomb's argument for thinking that Mephistopheles is wise seems misguided. Surely one can be able to offer advice for how to do something badly (play poker, raise children, write philosophy papers) without being able to offer advice on how to do it well. That said, we can agree with Whitcomb that there is genuine pressure to think of the Devil as wise—or, at least, we can agree that many people would “intuitively” count the Devil as wise. How, then, should we make sense of this example?

One option would be to side with Jason Baehr (*ms.*) and say the reason why many might be tempted to think of the Devil as wise is because he is in fact extraordinarily clever or cunning, and there is a natural but mistaken inclination to equate cleverness with wisdom. While I think there is something to Baehr's point, I also think we can speak more directly to the apparent wisdom of the Devil by making a distinction between someone who is “really” wise and somehow who is, as it were, “wise in the ways of men.”

To be wise in the ways of men is to be expert in human psychology: e.g., it is to have a thorough understanding of human desires and fears and foibles and vanities. Someone who is wise in the ways of men is therefore an expert manipulator: he knows what makes human beings tick and is able to exploit this for his own gain. He is therefore like other shrewd but morally misguided figures such as Machievelli or (to use a fictional example) Tywin Lannister from *Game of*

Thrones—all people who are wise in the ways of men but (it seems) mistaken about what is really important, and hence not really or genuinely wise.

On this way of looking at things, the Devil would not count as wise not because he fails to “live out” his knowledge of what is best or most important for well-being but because (we can suppose) he has false beliefs about what is best or most important for well-being: he mistakenly thinks it better to rule in Hell than to serve in Heaven, for example. He therefore fails (at least!) the first condition on wisdom described above.

Whitcomb’s second example appeals to the case of the “depressed sage,” as follows:

Consider a wise person who knows how to live well and values and desires the good life. Suppose that at some point in this person’s life, he is beset by a fit of deep depression due to a medication he had to take to cure an otherwise terminal illness. 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?

Our unfortunate medicine-taker could still retain all of his knowledge, including all of his knowledge of how to live well. People might still go to him for good advice; and with poking and prodding, they might even get it. He might even be a stereotypical wise sage, sitting on a mountain and extolling deep aphorisms. Should his visitors feel slighted because he is deeply depressed? Should they think that they have not found a wise man after all, despite the man’s knowledge and good advice? (Whitcomb 2011: 97)

As Whitcomb reports, he certainly wouldn’t think that. Instead if he ran across such a person, he’d “take his advice to heart, wish him a return to health, and leave the continuing search for sages to his less grateful advisees” (Whitcomb 2011: 97). In short, if Whitcomb is right someone might be wise and yet fail to live well because of a condition such as deep depression.

In evaluating this case it helps to recall that the wise person seems naturally concerned not just with her own well-being but also with the well-being of her community. She knows not just what it takes for her to live well or flourish but also what it takes for that community or group to live well or flourish. But in the case as described by Whitcomb it is far from clear that his sage does not in fact apply or live out his knowledge. After all, Whitcomb’s sage dispenses advice, advice that presumably helps others to live well, and helps the community to flourish. If his sage knew that he could contribute to the well-being of others by dispensing advice and yet failed to do it, then I think our inclination to regard

him as wise would diminish still further. What's more, and as Sharon Ryan points out, the depressed wise person would presumably attempt to get help for her depression—in this way too applying her strategies for living well (Ryan 2012: 105). To the extent that she made no effort to live out her knowledge of the good at all, along with Ryan I think to that extent we would fail to regard her as wise.

It is therefore not clear that Whitcomb has produced a case where knowledge alone—regardless of conduct—is enough to count someone as wise. In addition to knowing how to live well, in the sense of having the three elements of knowledge described above, it therefore looks like the person needs to be able to *apply* this knowledge in some way.⁷ Alternatively, it looks like we need to require that the person “take up” the knowledge in the right way and live it out.

Perhaps the most obvious way to acknowledge the importance of the lived dimension of wisdom is simply to tack it on to the epistemic or cognitive dimension. So we might say (roughly) that the wise person is someone who knows how to live well *and* whose actions are guided by that knowledge. Or perhaps we could add, by way of elaboration, that the wise person not only knows what is most important for well-being but loves what is most important, to account for the apparent fact that in the wise person the cognitive and affective dimension are integrated or lined-up in the right way.⁸

While that is one way to go, in the remainder of this section it is worth considering another approach, one that essentially denies that *akrasia* with respect to wisdom is possible. This would be the view that when one *really* knows what is good or important for well-being and how to achieve those goods, one necessarily acts accordingly. Apparent cases of *akrasia* are therefore also only apparent cases of knowledge—not real or genuine cases of knowledge.

We can try to clarify this view by appealing to one of the central passages from Kierkegaard's *Sickness Unto Death*.⁹

To understand and to understand: are these then two different things?
Certainly.... [A] person stands there and says the right thing—and so has understood it—and then when he acts he does the wrong thing—and so

⁷ According to John Kekes, “Wisdom ought also to show in the man who has it” (Kekes 1983: 281); and according to Robert Nozick “Wisdom is not just knowing fundamental truths, if these are unconnected with the guidance of life or with a perspective on its meaning” (Nozick 1989: 269). Sharon Ryan likewise claims, “Wildly reckless people are, even if they are very knowledgeable about life, not wise” (Ryan 2012: sec. 3).

⁸ As Linda Zagzebski claims, “Wisdom not only unifies the knowledge of the wise person but unifies her desires and values as well. There is nothing incoherent or even surprising about a wise person who is immoral, but it is at least surprising, perhaps incoherent, to say that a wise person is immoral” (Zagzebski 1996: 23).

⁹ Thanks to Angela Sager for emphasizing the interest of this passage from Kierkegaard.

shows that he has not understood it.... Ah! When one sees someone protesting complete understanding of how Christ went about in the form of a lowly servant, poor, despised, mocked, and as the Scriptures say ‘spitted upon’—when I see that same person taking so many pains to seek refuge in the place where in worldliness it is good to be, setting himself up as securely as possible, when I see him so anxiously awaiting—as if his life depended on it—every unfavorable breath of wind from right or left, so blissful, so utterly blissful, so jubilant, yes, to round it off, so jubilant that he even emotionally thanks God for it—for being honored and respected by everyone, everywhere; then I have often said to myself, ‘Socrates, Socrates, how could it be possible for this person to have understood what he claims to have understood?’ (Kierkegaard 1849 [2010]: 304-305)

Although Kierkegaard¹⁰ speaks here of understanding, we can reasonably substitute the term *knowledge* (and its variants: *know*, *known*, etc.) throughout this passage without much loss.¹¹ The idea would then be that there are two states the word “know” might pick out: on the one hand, the state of being disposed to assent to a true proposition, to sincerely affirm it as true on reflection, and so on, but (crucially) where the disposition to otherwise act on the belief is lacking.¹² On the other hand, “know” might pick out a state where these dispositions to assent are combined with a disposition to act in accord with one’s assent. Call the first state *weak knowledge* and the second state *strong knowledge*. If Kierkegaard is right, and supposing the truth of the proposition, one might therefore “accept” that it is best to imitate Jesus whenever possible—and hence weakly know it—even while one might fail to strongly know this because the (apparent) belief fails to make a difference in one’s actions. If one knew in a strong sense that it was best to imitate Jesus whenever possible—if one *really* knew it, as it were—then one’s actions would necessarily be informed by this knowledge.

One way to try to salvage our original tripartite account of wisdom would then be to claim that the sort of knowledge needed for wisdom is strong knowledge—knowledge that goes beyond a mere disposition to assent and that necessarily informs one’s actions. While this approach is appealing, my own inclination is to deny that the weak sense of “knows” picks out a state that deserves to be called knowledge at all: on this view, one does not know even “weakly” know the propositions that one is alleged to know because belief is a necessary ingredient in knowledge,¹³ and one does not even believe these propositions.

¹⁰ I put aside issues of pseudonymity for this paper.

¹¹ Equally, we could have substituted the term “understanding” throughout our original account of wisdom without much loss: thus the wise person would understand how to live well, understand what is good or important for well-being, and so on.

¹² If one wanted to beef-up the knowledge credentials of this state, one could add

¹³ Interestingly, Schwitzgebel (2012) himself resists this step.

To illustrate the point briefly, consider the case of the racist college professor described in Schwitzgebel (2010):

Many Caucasians in academia profess that all races are of equal intelligence. Juliet, let's suppose, is one such person, a Caucasian-American philosophy professor.... She is prepared to argue coherently, sincerely, and vehemently for equality of intelligence and has argued the point repeatedly in the past... And yet Juliet is systematically racist in most of her spontaneous reactions, her unguarded behavior, and her judgments about particular cases. When she gazes out on class the first day of each term, she can't help but think that some students look brighter than others—and to her, the black students never look bright... When Juliet is on the hiring committee for a new office manager, it won't seem to her that the black applicants are the most intellectually capable, even if they are; or if she does become convinced of the intelligence of a black applicant, it will have taken more evidence than if the applicant had been white. When she converses with a custodian or cashier, she expects less wit if the person is black. And so on. (Schwitzgebel 2010: 532)

According to Schwitzgebel, what cases along these lines help to show is that there is a difference between being disposed to judge that certain propositions are true and actually believing them—and that while Juliet is disposed to judge that all races are equal she doesn't actually believe this because all of her actions belie this judgment. As he nicely observes, "If the aim of attributing belief is to say something about how we steer through the world, then judgment cannot be sufficient for belief" (Schwitzgebel 2010: 548).

Schwitzgebel, then, would not want to attribute belief to Juliet, only judgment—that is, only a disposition to assent to the truth of some claim, without the tendency to have that assent guide her actions. And similarly he would presumably say with the case of Kierkegaard's church-going self-aggrandizer, that this person too simply judges or assents to the fact that it is best to act like Jesus, but does not really believe that it is best. What he *really* believes is that it is best to gain worldly respect, or to promote his own welfare wherever possible.

Returning again to our analysis of wisdom, the idea would be that someone who merely claims (judges, assents) that something is best or most important but fails to act accordingly does not really know it, because knowledge requires belief, and she does not in fact believe it. On this view it would therefore be impossible to know that something is best or most important thing to do without having this knowledge guide one's actions. Hence a separate application condition would be unnecessary or redundant.

The point to emphasize, in any case, is that wisdom seems to require an integration of thought, desire, and action, so that the person who claims that

something is best or important but then fails to live in accord with that judgment does not seem wise. I have briefly suggested that the state of knowledge can do this integrating work, but if one thinks otherwise then it will be necessary to stipulate that wisdom requires knowledge *plus* action. I will not try to resolve that issue here, but simply flag that where one stands on this issue will determine whether the tripartite account above requires supplementation.

IV. Wisdom of the cross

I will close by asking about the nature of wisdom in Christianity, and in particular in the writings of St. Paul. Perhaps the central text is from his letter to the Corinthians, quoted in part earlier:

For Christ did not send me to baptize but to proclaim the gospel, and not with eloquent wisdom, so that the cross of Christ might not be emptied of its power.

For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written, 'I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart.' Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, God decided, through the foolishness of our proclamation, to save those who believe. For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength....

[God] is the source of your life in Jesus Christ, who became for us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification and redemption, in order that, as it is written, 'Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.' (1 Cor: 17-31)

This passage is very rich, needless to say. What does it teach us about Christian views on wisdom?

First, consider Paul's remarks about "human wisdom," or the wisdom of the world. If our earlier analysis of wisdom was on target, all claims to wisdom are implicitly claims to know what is good or important for well-being. The Greeks of course—the paradigm of human wisdom for St. Paul—disagreed among themselves about what constituted well-being, but they seemed to agree that virtue was centrally involved in living well, and that what it took to be virtuous could be determined by philosophical debate or reflection. For Aristotle at least, it was also clear that the person who was living well was prominent in the city, and recognized as great by those around him.

According to Paul, Jesus’s life turned these Greek notions on their head. To live well was to live in accord with God’s will, and living in accord with God’s will could require great, indeed crushing, sacrifice. Thus it was Jesus on the cross “who became for us wisdom from God”—i.e., the new picture of what it means to live well or to flourish. But of course the idea that someone nailed to the cross could be living well or doing well is crazy—foolishness—in the eyes of the world. There is thus no philosophical argument that can be made for this way of living, no way to persuade people with “plausible words of wisdom” (1 Cor 2:4). The fact that Jesus on the cross is a picture of the best sort of life could only be demonstrated by God’s power, and especially by the Christian belief that God raised Jesus from the dead.

This Christian vision also seems to have consequences for the way in which wisdom—real, genuine wisdom, on the Christian view—is acquired. For according to the world, one acquires wisdom through experience—by living through different possibilities and gaining a better sense of how these different possibilities contribute to well-being. But if St. Paul is right, no amount of ordinary human experience could make it plausible that suffering, or poverty, or being despised by the world, is a good thing. It therefore seems to require what Aquinas calls a special “gift” of the Holy Spirit to acquire this sort of wisdom, or to recognize that the best sort of life is a life where worldly consolations might be sorely lacking.¹⁴ Considered as a type of knowledge, true wisdom would therefore plausibly be knowledge acquired in an extraordinary way.

V. Conclusion

Before concluding, I should say a word about how the remarks about wisdom here bear on the traditional distinction between practical and theoretical wisdom. For it might be thought that this entire discussion has been too one-sided and partial—the focus has been so exclusively on the practical side of wisdom, or on knowing how to live well, that the theoretical side of wisdom has been unduly neglected.

There are ways, however, even on the “practical” account of wisdom sketched here, on which theoretical knowledge can have an important role to play. For one thing, it might be thought that part of what is involved in living well is exercising one’s highest capacities, and in particular one’s capacity for acquiring scientific or metaphysical knowledge. In that case the wise person would be especially concerned with acquiring the sort of deep understanding of what the world is like that is often categorized as “theoretical” wisdom.¹⁵ For another,

¹⁴ For more on Aquinas and the gift of wisdom, see Pinsent (2012b).

¹⁵ For more on this idea of deep understanding see Aquino (2012). On my view having a deep insight into how various fields fit together or “grasping relevant connections” (Aquino 2012: 85) is

there are many views on which living well requires being in harmony with nature, or with the universe, or with God's will. But in that case living well will apparently be abetted by knowing what nature is really like, or what God is really like: in other words, living well will be abetted by just the sort of deep physical or metaphysical knowledge that has traditionally been categorized as theoretical wisdom.

If the account offered here is correct, however, this sort of knowledge merits the title "wisdom" only because it is importantly related to the goal of living well. And living well, according to the Christian vision in particular, might require something quite different than what common sense would suggest.

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more characteristic of understanding than wisdom. The key to wisdom, I think, is the axiological dimension, where one appreciates which things are better or more important than others.

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