

PAUL O'GRADY

GRIMM WISDOM

1. INTRODUCTION

Wisdom has not been widely discussed within analytical philosophy, particularly analytical epistemology. While it was a major focus for ancient and medieval philosophers, it was marginal for most of the twentieth century. Why this is so is an interesting question, but not one I shall discuss here. However, it has not been completely ignored and a number of suggestive and interesting analyses have been offered in the last few decades. The rise of virtue epistemology has given an extra impetus to explorations of wisdom especially within so-called responsibilist virtue epistemology, which explicitly connects epistemological and ethical accounts of virtue. One feature of wisdom that many agree on is that it connects knowledge and goodness in some sense or other, or that wisdom cannot be used for evil ends (unlike knowledge). In this paper I engage with a specific account of the nature of wisdom, that of Stephen Grimm, identify certain problems with his account and clarify avenues for further exploration of the concept.

2. GRIMM'S THEORY

Stephen Grimm's account of wisdom is minimal, plausible and fits with many pre-theoretical intuitions about wisdom. It also offers an interesting perspective on why interest in wisdom waxes and wanes in the history of philosophy.¹ Two key commitments of his account are that 1) knowledge is required for wisdom rather than merely rationality, warrant or justification

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¹ GRIMM 2015.

and 2) the traditional distinction between theoretical and practical wisdom does not hold.

He distinguishes between full wisdom (which it is likely no human possesses) and incipient wisdom, i.e. being on the path to full wisdom. This latter is the target of his enquiry. And he further distinguishes between a fully articulated theory which involves substantive commitments to detailed accounts of notions such as 'well-being' and partially articulated theories, which give a more schematic account. He specifies his goal, therefore, as a partially articulated account of incipient wisdom.

His account has three necessary conditions:

- (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.

Knowledge of what is good for well-being involves having life experiences which allows one to encounter different possibilities and to weigh and evaluate the relative worth of these for well-being. Knowledge of one's standing means that one can situate oneself in respect of what is needed for well-being—it is not a disinterested or purely speculative knowledge, but involves some evaluation of the self. Finally having some means of achieving these possibilities is also necessary, for if one had no idea of how to achieve these ends, one wouldn't be reckoned wise.

3. TWO OBJECTIONS

Grimm discusses two potential objections to his account. The first, deriving from Sharon Ryan's work, is that knowledge is too strong a condition.² It is possible to be wise in the absence of truth. For example, Ptolemy, despite his false astronomical beliefs, could still be reckoned wise. Or Confucius, placed in the Matrix, would still be a paradigm of wisdom, despite the pervasiveness of his false beliefs about his surroundings. Grimm denies this. Ptolemy's astronomical beliefs are not relevant to whether he lives well. Confucius may still have many wisdom-relevant beliefs, even in the Matrix, about friendship, fairness, respect for others, which explains the intuition that he still is wise. However, Grimm maintains that Confucius-in-the-

² RYAN 2012; 2013.

Matrix is also deluded about having real friends or people to be fair to, so he fails condition (2)—he does not have a real grasp of where he stands in relation to things needed for well-being—so he is not wise. Hence wisdom requires knowledge.

The second objection is that there is no single overarching notion of wisdom, but wisdom is domain specific. One may be wise about living well, about physics, about chemistry etc, but there is no wisdom in general. Against this Grimm argues that there is a focal meaning for wisdom—which is about living well—and that other forms of wisdom are analogical extensions of this, feeding into the focal meaning. To defend this he cites empirical evidence which shows that people are loth to attribute ‘wisdom’ to highly respected scientists or mathematicians, but rather use terms like ‘intelligence’ to describe them. It seems a mistake to say that someone is wise in respect of maths or logic, whereas we might say they are clever, quick or intelligent. Therefore wisdom has a core meaning, which has to do with living well.

4. REINFORCING THESE OBJECTIONS

There is a tension between the two key commitments of Grimm’s theory. The requirement of a knowledge component and the rejection of a split between practical and theoretical wisdom generates a significant problem. While the three conditions he articulates are plausibly presented as necessary elements of an account of wisdom, Sharon Ryan’s concerns about the presence of the knowledge component persist. The lack of distinction between theoretical and practical wisdom, on the other hand, seems more defensible and so the focus of this discussion will be the former commitment.

As noted, Grimm draws on some empirical work about the respective use of the terms ‘intelligent’ and ‘wise’. In a survey of North American students, figures such a Confucius, Jesus, Buddha were reckoned ‘wise’, whereas scientists and politicians such as Einstein, Clinton, Gates and Hawking were reckoned ‘intelligent’. Let us therefore take two such archetypal figures—Jesus and Buddha—as paradigmatically wise people. A theory of wisdom must have as a result that such figures end up being wise by its lights. But on Grimm’s account only one or the other can be wise, since they have conflicting belief systems and hence only one of them could have knowledge.

In dealing with this kind of objection we have seen that he discusses two ways in which figures with false beliefs could perhaps be wise. Firstly

Ptolemy has false astronomical beliefs. They have been shown to be empirically false. However, Ptolemy may nevertheless have adequate practical beliefs which suffice to allow him live well and hence achieve well-being. So in such a case irrelevant false empirical beliefs do not defeat the possibility of being wise. Secondly Confucius has false metaphysical beliefs (being in the Matrix). He is deceived as to the actual nature of the external world—and so he has not a genuine grasp of his real status vis-à-vis living well.

One might note in passing that it is an interesting historical fact that philosophers with an interest in wisdom have tended to have little truck with the kind of hyperbolic doubt associated with external-world skepticism (while they might engage with Academic skeptics offering skepticism as a path to *eudaimonia*). That is, they do not think that the problem of skepticism should shape the methodology of epistemology and deny that dealing with skeptical thought-experiments is a useful tool in theorizing about knowledge. So it may well be the case that one might discount such a skeptical challenge.

Nevertheless, despite putting general skeptical worries aside, it seems that Jesus and Buddha have conflicting metaphysical commitments. On a mainstream interpretation of Christianity, Jesus holds that there is a stable entity called the self, there is a different and distinct reality called God and that well-being lies in achieving an appropriate connection between these two, which transcends the cessation of corporeal existence. So wisdom, for Jesus, involves knowledge of these truths, an assessment of where one is in relation to them, and following a path which leads one to achieve them. The Buddha rejects all of these. There is no self, there is no God and union of self and God is not the way to achieve well-being. On the contrary loss, of ego, realizing the unity of all things in compassion and following the noble eightfold path is the path to well-being. So Buddha and Jesus have significantly opposed accounts. And if one requires that to be wise one must have *knowledge* of these conditions, then at most one of them can only be wise, they cannot both be. Spelling it out—the reason for this is that they have significantly different metaphysical commitments, which inform their understanding of the nature of well-being, their own standing relative to well-being and the appropriate strategy for achieving well-being. So on Grimm's account only a subset of the archetypal wise figures (e.g. Jesus, Confucius, Buddha) could be actually wise.

5. WAYS OUT?

Grimm's is an attractive theory. So how might one avoid this outcome? Dropping the knowledge claim is an obvious route and replacing it with some lesser epistemic condition. Yet there is something attractive about connecting wisdom to knowledge—as Grimm puts it, the intuition that the wise person is concerned with knowing what the world is like at a fundamental level, or living a life in harmony with nature or the universe. One straightforward way to keep this condition is to endorse exclusivism and argue that one view is the correct account of wisdom—but in so doing one rejects the intuition that Jesus and Buddha are both wise, an intuition I take it which Grimm wants to hold, not least because he is advancing a partially articulated account, explicitly desiring to be compatible with different fleshed-out accounts of well-being.

Another strategy is to observe the distinction between knowledge claims being veridical and whether one is actually succeeding in making a knowledge claim. As Morawetz puts it:

It is important to distinguish the correct view that I cannot know (or have known) anything that is false from the absurd view that I cannot claim to know, or give grounds for, anything that is false.³

If Christianity is true (or Buddhism), then Jesus has knowledge (or Buddha). But we cannot be sure that they are and can only make a fallible contingent commitment to their claims. So we can treat Jesus and Buddha as being potentially wise, we are not in a position to make the definitive call. Yet we know there is an element of uncertainty and potential falsehood involved—that one of them is really going to turn out to be unwise—so again this undermines the intuition that they both are wise.

There are various strategies for accommodating apparently conflicting claims like this. Rather than being in direct conflict, as they seem to be, it might be that something 'shifty' is going on.⁴ A first suggestion is that the meanings of the opposed claims don't really conflict. A second is that the truth predicates required for knowledge are relativized or in some way differ from each other. A third is that the referents of opposed claims are actually different, and so the claims are compatible.

³ MORAWETZ 1978, 86.

⁴ LEWIS 1996.

Addressing the first suggestion, if one argues that the face-value conflicting claims actually do not really compete because they can be lexically interpreted so that they do not compete, then one is some form of revisionist about meaning. Jesus's talk about the Kingdom of Heaven and Buddha's discourse about Nirvana might be re-interpreted such that they can co-exist. Hence they could both make compatible knowledge claims and hence both be wise. A standard problem with such revisionism is that it doesn't fit with standard believers' own interpretation of their beliefs. A sophisticated reconstruction of 'heaven' and 'nirvana' such that they amount to the same, seems at odds with the beliefs of regular Christians or Buddhists. Another version of this is to be a noncognitivist, as certain sayings of Wittgenstein seem to point.

Was Augustine in error then when he called upon God on every page of the *Confessions*?

But-one might say—if he was not in error, surely the Buddhist holy man was—or anyone else—whose religion gives expression to completely different views. But none of them was in error, except when he set forth a theory.⁵

Theories are not being articulated here, hence there is no conflict. Religious statements are forms of expression and so are not truth-apt. But this can't help Grimm since it removes truth from his account and hence also the possibility of knowledge.

The second strategy is to put the shiftiness in the truth predicate. To say that "God exists" is "True-for Jesus" and to say "There is no self" is "True-for Buddha". These are compatible with the first claim being "False for Buddha" and the second being "False for Jesus". However, this means that there is no common discourse across these key claims and that there is therefore no disagreement possible. But this seems false to the experience of those who convert from one view to the other, those who reject the claims of one worldview and endorse the other (see for example Anthony Kenny's account of moving from Christianity to agnosticism or Paul Williams' account of moving from Mahayana Buddhism to Roman Catholicism⁶).

The third approach is to argue that what is being spoken about differs, not by virtue of a revisionist account of lexical meaning, or by having differing truth predicates but rather that the meaning of such claims is partially constituted by a form of life. Concepts such as 'God', 'soul', 'self' and 'well-

⁵ WITTGENSTEIN 1993, 119.

⁶ KENNY 1986; WILLIAMS 2002.

being' gain their meaning in part from the role they play in the practices, values and activities of those who use them. A standard objection to this is it endorses a kind of fideism which closes down the possibility of rational disagreement and brings with it a kind of incommensurability regarded as problematical. One way of explicating this claim is to endorse something like Hick's religious pluralism, arguing that Jesus and Buddha offer different but complementary accounts of an underlying reality.⁷ Their religious traditions offer historically and culturally different filters on the fundamentally unknowable reality at the basis of reality. The plethora of objections to Hick's position are well known, but let's just take one basic one here. There are certain predicates which, if pluralism is correct, can be applied to any religious tradition—Yandell calls these "Happy Predicates".⁸ One such might be 'causation'. The Real causes the diversity of religious traditions which seek to articulate it. Jesus seems to articulate a view (or at least presuppose a view) where God is the cause of everything else. However, Buddhism denies such a causal link and indeed such a distinction. There is no ultimate real and hence no dualistic bifurcation between the Real and its manifestations. Hick's picture of the unknowable "Real" and its cultural manifestations requires one to make a determination as to whether the Real has causal powers in relation to its cultural manifestations or not—which means it cannot be neutral between Christianity and Buddhism. So there cannot be 'happy predicates' which fit different wisdom traditions.

A different way (to Hick) to argue that what is being spoken of by Jesus and Buddha doesn't strictly conflict is to argue that the concept 'God' or 'Buddha', while it is world-invoking, is also partially constituted by the attitudes, practices and values of those who use it. In this respect it differs from concepts which are more fully constituted by the world—like 'gold', 'dogs' or natural-kind words, which are susceptible to empirical investigation. Such empirically grounded concepts are not essentially contested nor do they require judgement, reflection or indeed philosophical analysis (as distinct from chemical or zoological analysis). In contrast, for such non-empirical concepts the very meaning of the word is partially constituted by the conditions of the user. How?

While I have agreed with Grimm, above, that there is a connection between theoretical and practical wisdom, I have also argued that truth-claims advanced in theoretical contexts inform and impact on practical claims about

⁷ HICK 1989.

⁸ YANDELL 1999.

modes and goals of well-being. This blocks one possible response to the situation – distinguishing between substantial wisdom and instrumental wisdom. On this view one might argue that while Jesus and Buddha have substantive differences about the core meaning of wellbeing, they can nevertheless agree on means to get there (e.g. fasting, loss of self-centredness etc). Because of the connection I wish to defend between theoretical and practical concerns, I do not think this dichotomy of substantial/instrumental wisdom works. Fasting as understood by a Christian, embedded in views about the mortification of the flesh is different to fasting understood by a Buddhist embedded in views about sharpening concentration. Using terminology from Aquinas, one might say that while while they agree in material object (i.e. involve the same behavioural practice), they differ in formal object (the specific reasons for which they are undertaken).⁹

Theoretical wisdom therefore infects practical wisdom, views about heaven, nirvana, soul and nothingness impact on strategies for well-being. However, Linda Zagzebski has argued for the more radical claim that practical wisdom impacts on theoretical wisdom.¹⁰ She shows that virtues such as interest, attention, patience, courage, fair-mindedness etc. have a big impact on our theorizing. And as Grimm has argued, our theorizing should impact on our well-being. So there may be a virtuous circle between practical and theoretical concerns precisely in this area which involves wisdom. The very meaning of “God” is partially constituted by the sets of practices, emotions, values, attitudes one deploys about the use of the term. By saying ‘partially constituted’ I want to avoid a kind of simple Feuerbachian projectivism. The discourse is truth-apt and there is more involved than projecting human emotions, values, attitudes onto non-human reality. Yet, the contours and descriptions of this reality is essentially shaped by human interests. Hence different cultures and historical periods, possessing different practices, attitudes, values, etc will construe it differently. I also want to avoid any claims about incommensurability, i.e. that an outsider could not come to understand such concepts. I have suggested reasons why incommensurability is a troublesome outcome such a position elsewhere.¹¹ The claim here is that the conceptual content of the theoretical terms deployed in a worldview are partially

⁹ I owe consideration of this objection to an anonymous referee. Aquinas deploys this distinction to allow one separate, for example, fasting conducted for religious reasons from fasting conducted for health reasons. The same behavior has a different rationale. See for example ST I-II, q. 110 a. 3.

¹⁰ ZAGZEBSKI 1996.

¹¹ O'GRADY 2002, 156–170.

constituted by the practices of that worldview, the partial ensuring lack of incommensurability. We engage with the same reality.

Christians will differ from Buddhists in the content of these claims, but both will understand themselves as being directed to the goal of enhancing well-being. The conditions of justification of these claims will arise from a rich and complex cultural milieu. What counts as wisdom will vary across these milieu (in both theoretical understanding and practical prescriptions), but the justification will arise within a specific milieu. Unlike empirical research, which allows for clear conditions to make judgements about physical reality across culture and history, the kind of reflection required for wisdom has to embed itself in a complex cluster of interrelated claims about knowledge, reality, well-being etc. What counts as wisdom for a Christian or a Buddhist includes both theoretical and practical elements, which make truth-apt claims about reality and hence can count as involving knowledge. Yet the conditions for justification of these knowledge claims are embedded in complex cultural environments which do not allow for definitive resolutions in the manner of empirical disputes. Dispute is certainly possible, but no non-question-begging resolution is possible.

Thus, to put together the requirements that wisdom involves knowledge and also that practical and theoretical wisdom are connected, requires one to acknowledge that the content of wisdom claims are partially constituted by complex cultural environments and that the epistemic status of such claims has to be evaluated relative to these contexts. Is this relativism? Well, argument is still possible, error is still possible (although hard to establish) and one can make relative judgements about whether divergent paths really do support well-being. Perhaps the term ‘non-indexical contextualism’ is preferable to ‘relativism’ — non-indexical because it is not a simple lexical difference, but the context which fixes the referent involves the complex cluster of practices, attitudes, values and emotions associated with a form of life.¹² As Williamson puts it “contextualism is relativism tamed”.¹³ In this way, Jesus, Confucius and Buddha can still end up being wise, within the parameters of Grimm’s theory.

¹² MACFARLANE 2009.

¹³ WILLIAMSON 2005.

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MADROŚĆ WEDŁUG GRIMMA

Streszczenie

Dotychczas problematyka mądrości nie była szerzej rozważana na gruncie epistemologii analitycznej. W ostatnim czasie interesujące ujęcie tematu zaproponował Stephen Grimm, który dowodzi, że mądrość oparta jest na wiedzy oraz że tradycyjny podział na wiedzę teoretyczną i praktyczną jest nie do utrzymania. Dostrzegam pewną niespójność w tychże aspektach jego pracy. Z jednej strony chciałby utrzymywać, że tradycyjne wzorce mądrości (takie jak Jezus, Budda, Konfucjusz) mogą wciąż być określane mianem „mądrych” z punktu widzenia jego teorii. Lecz z drugiej strony, proponowany przezeń warunek bycia mądrym zdaje się zakładać, że tylko część tych, którzy głoszą sprzeczne ze sobą poglądy, istotnie jest mądra. Rozważam szereg możliwych rozwiązań tego problemu oraz popieram podejście kontekstualistyczne, które dopuszcza warunek wiedzy oraz pozwala tradycyjne wzorce mądrości określać mianem „mądrych”.

Przełożył Marcin Garbowski

GRIMM WISDOM

Summary

Wisdom has not been widely discussed in analytical epistemology. An interesting recent analysis comes from Stephen Grimm who argues that wisdom requires knowledge and that the traditional dichotomy between theoretical and practical wisdom doesn't hold. I note a tension between these aspects of his work. He wishes to maintain that traditional exemplars of wisdom (such as

Jesus, Buddha, Confucius) may still be termed ‘wise’ by his theory. But his knowledge condition seems to require that only a subset of those who hold conflicting views are really wise. I consider a number of possible responses to this and endorse a non-indexical contextualist approach which will allow the knowledge condition and also allow the traditional exemplars to be termed ‘wise’.

Słowa kluczowe: mądrość; epistemologia analityczna; Stephen Grimm.

Key words: wisdom; analytical epistemology; Stephen Grimm.

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