Personal Wisdom in the Balance

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I came to the study of personal wisdom through a confluence of personal experiences. These experiences continue even until the present day.

First, I had developed a theory of intelligence, the theory of successful intelligence (e.g., Sternberg, 1997). The theory was proving to be reasonably successful as theories go, in that research we were doing seemed to support at least the main aspects of the theory (Sternberg, 2005b). According to the theory, the conventional notion of intelligence is incomplete: It involves memory and analytical aspects of intelligence, but not creative and practical ones, so the theory goes. In order to act intelligently, one needs creative skills to generate new ideas, analytical skills to ascertain whether they are good ideas, and practical skills in order to apply the ideas and persuade others of their value. But I was perplexed by what appeared to be an obvious weakness of the theory. What about someone like Josef Stalin or Mao Tse Tung or Robert Mugabe? All have shown themselves ruthlessly creative in generating ideas about how to stay in power, were analytical in making sure their ideas worked regardless of who else might suffer, and were practical in carrying out their policies, resulting in the impoverishment, imprisonment, suffering, and death of millions of people. But they successfully adapted to the environments in which they lived. Indeed, they shaped these environments to be more or less what they wanted them to be, regardless of the costs to others. One possibility is to say that there are people who are smart sociopaths, but another possibility is to say that whereas the idea of successful intelligence was formulated to combat the narrowness of traditional definitions of intelligence, perhaps this concept of successful intelligence also was too narrow.

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Second, in my early years as a faculty member—perhaps 5 years into my career—a graduate student asked me for advice regarding which of two jobs she should take. One job was at a highly prestigious university that valued research greatly and teaching only slightly. The other was from a very fine but less prestigious university that was more balanced in its rewarding of teaching and research. The problem was that the particular passion and perhaps excellence of the graduate student was in her teaching. I foolishly recommended that she take the more prestigious position, telling her that if she did not, she always would wonder what would have happened if she had. Unfortunately, she followed my advice. Predictably, it was a disaster. The university did not value her particular strengths; she did not value the value system of the university; and after several years, she and the university parted ways. She went to a university much more concerned with excellence in teaching and has been highly successful there. But my advice steered her wrong. I realized that however smart my advice may have been, it certainly was not wise.

Third, during the 1980s, there was a series of serious business scandals. Firms like Enron, WorldCom, Global Crossing, and Arthur Andersen, among others, were engulfed in scandals perpetrated by individuals who, by almost any standard, seemed to be conventionally intelligent and, arguably, successfully intelligent. Many of the perpetrators went to first-rate colleges and then on to topflight business schools. One Enron CEO, Jeffrey Skilling, was a graduate of the Harvard Business School. Another Enron CEO, Kenneth Lay, had a doctorate in economics. Their fancy educations seemed to have left a gaping hole.

Of course, such scandals did not end in the 1980s. In 2008, the allegedly brilliant minds of Wall Street—certainly they thought themselves brilliant—created a worldwide financial disaster. Having caused financial ruin and bankruptcy for countless people, many of them went on to look for ways further to profit from others' misery. In other words, how could they take the horrible mess they created for others and extract yet more profit from the misery of other people that they had created? In December of 2009, it was discovered that Goldman Sachs, an investment bank, was selling its clients prepackaged mortgage-based securities while betting its own money against the securities they were recommending to their clients. And this was from the most prestigious firm on Wall Street.

Fourth, in between the 1980s and the 2000s were the 1990s, when more genocides occurred than at any time since the Holocaust. Many of these genocides, such as in Rwanda, were planned not by people in the uneducated masses; rather, they were planned by well-educated leaders directing the uneducated masses. In 2010, many contemporary terrorists are not illiterate rascals but rather highly educated men who are, in a word, evil.

The one thing that the various scoundrels described above have in common is intellectual talent or even brilliance accompanied by stunning lack of wisdom. (There might be those who would call them wise, but I show below that they would not qualify as "wise" by the definition to be used in this chapter.) Our society and many others give short shrift to wisdom. Wisdom is usually left out of accounts and assessments of intellectual skills, or at least, of childhood intellectual skills. But

in an age where lack of wisdom seems to be responsible for wars, economic hardship, and societal stagnation, can a society really afford to leave wisdom out of the equation?

The Concept of Wisdom

Some people would say that wisdom is not relevant to conceiving of, measuring, or teaching children, because wisdom is a characteristic only of the later years of adulthood. Is wisdom truly associated only with older people?

There are different accounts of wisdom and its relation to aging (Sternberg, 2005a). By one account, aging is the key to wisdom—at some age, one somewhat mysteriously becomes wise. By a second account, one is becoming wiser with age, but slowly and incrementally; one is, on this account, building upon the life experiences one has had earlier that have bestowed upon him a steadily increasing supply of wisdom, one that is likely to increase until our last days. By a third account, one is increasingly rapidly losing whatever wisdom one may have gained in our life. And by a fourth account, one has lost whatever wisdom one may have had long ago.

We all have a considerable stake in which of these accounts is correct. As it is, we only can present the evidence, offer our appraisal, and then let the reader, and the young people who depend on us, decide.

There almost certainly is no one trajectory of wisdom with age. In other words, age is not, in and of itself, a variable that is valid for indexing the development of wisdom. Age in itself always has been an "empty" independent variable. Rather, age is a proxy for other things, such as personal growth (Ryff, 1989; Staudinger, & Pasupathi, 2003; Staudinger, 1996), openness to experience (Kramer, 2000), or ability to learn from experience (Sternberg et al., 2000). In the case of wisdom, age has been, in large part, a proxy for experience. But experience does not create wisdom. Rather, one's ability to profit from and utilize one's experience in a reflective and directed way is what determines how wisdom develops. Thus, using age as an independent variable can distract us from understanding the cognitive and other mechanisms involved in the development and decline of wisdom.

What Is Wisdom?

Different approaches have been taken to figuring out what wisdom is, in general, and what personal wisdom is, in particular (Staudinger & Glück, 2011a, 2011b; Sternberg & Jordan, 2005). Consider, in turn, philosophical, implicit-theoretical, and explicit-theoretical approaches to the nature of wisdom.

Philosophical Approaches

Philosophical approaches have been reviewed by Robinson (1990; see also Robinson, 1989, with regard to the Aristotelian approach in particular; Kupperman, 2005; Labouvie-Vief, 1990; Osbeck & Robinson, 2005; for further reviews). Robinson points out that, in the Platonic dialogues, there are three different senses of wisdom: wisdom as (a) *sophia*, which is found in those who seek a contemplative life in search of truth; (b) *phronesis*, which is the kind of practical wisdom shown by statesmen and legislators; and (c) *episteme*, which is found in those who understand things from a scientific point of view.

Implicit-Theoretical Approaches

Implicit-theoretical approaches to wisdom have in common the search for an understanding of people's folk conceptions of what wisdom is. Thus, the goal is not to provide a "psychologically true" account of wisdom, but rather an account that is true with respect to people's beliefs, whether these beliefs are right or wrong.

Holliday and Chandler (1986a, 1986b) used an implicit-theories approach to understanding wisdom. I have taken a related approach.

I reported (Sternberg, 1985, 1990a) a series of studies investigating implicit theories of wisdom. In one study, 200 professors each of art, business, philosophy, and physics were asked to rate the characteristicness of each of the behaviors obtained in a prestudy from the corresponding population with respect to the professors' ideal conception of each of an ideally wise, intelligent, or creative individual in their occupation. Laypersons were also asked to provide these ratings but for a hypothetical ideal individual without regard to occupation. Correlations were computed across the three ratings. In each group except philosophy, the highest correlation was between wisdom and intelligence; in philosophy, the highest correlation was between intelligence and creativity. The correlations between wisdom and intelligence ratings ranged from .42 to .78 with a median of .68. For all groups, the lowest correlation was between wisdom and creativity. Correlations between wisdom and creativity ratings ranged from −.24 to .48 with a median of .27. The only negative correlation (−.24) was for ratings of professors of business.

In a second study, 40 college students were asked to sort three sets of 40 behaviors each into as many or as few piles as they wished. The 40 behaviors in each set were the top-rated wisdom, intelligence, and creativity behaviors from the previous study. The sortings then each were subjected to nonmetric multidimensional scaling. For wisdom, six components emerged: *reasoning ability*, *sagacity*, *learning from ideas and environment*, *judgment*, *expeditious use of information*, and *perspicacity*.

Examples of behaviors showing high loadings under each of these six components were "has the unique ability to look at a problem or situation and solve it," "has good problem-solving ability," and "has a logical mind" for *reasoning ability*; "displays concern for others," "considers advice," and "understands people through dealing with a variety of people" for *sagacity*; "attaches importance to ideas," "is perceptive," and "learns from other people's mistakes" for *learning from ideas and environment*; "acts within own physical and intellectual limitations," "is sensible," and "has good judgment at all times" for *judgment*; "is experienced," "seeks out information, especially details," "has age, maturity, or long experience" for *expeditious use of information*; and "has intuition," "can offer solutions that are on the side of right and truth," "is able to see through things—read between the lines" for *perspicacity*.

In this same study, components for intelligence were *practical problem-solving ability*, *verbal ability*, *intellectual balance and integration*, *goal orientation and attainment*, *contextual intelligence*, and *fluid thought*. Components for creativity were *nonentrenchment*, *integration and intellectuality*, *aesthetic taste and imagination*, *decisional skill and flexibility*, *perspicacity*, *drive for accomplishment and recognition*, *inquisitiveness*, and *intuition*.

In a third study, 50 adults were asked to rate descriptions of hypothetical individuals for intelligence, creativity, and wisdom. Correlations were computed between pairs of ratings of the hypothetical individuals' levels of the three traits. Correlations between the ratings were .94 for wisdom and intelligence, .62 for wisdom and creativity, and .69 for intelligence and creativity, again suggesting that wisdom and intelligence are highly correlated in people's implicit theories.

Explicit-Theoretical Approaches

Explicit theories are constructions of (supposedly) expert theorists and researchers rather than of laypeople. In the study of wisdom, most explicit-theoretical approaches are based on constructs from the psychology of human development (see Staudinger & Glück, 2011a, 2011b).

Some theorists have viewed wisdom in terms of post-formal operational thinking, thereby viewing wisdom as extending beyond the Piagetian stages of intelligence (Piaget, 1972). Wisdom thus might be a stage of thought beyond Piagetian formal operations. For example, some authors have argued that wise individuals are those who can think reflectively or dialectically, in the latter case with the individuals' realizing that truth is not always absolute but rather evolves in an historical context of theses, antitheses, and syntheses (e.g., Basseches, 1984a, 1984b; Kitchener, 1983, 1986; Labouvie-Vief, 1990; Pascual-Leone, 1990; Riegel, 1973). Consider a very brief review of some specific dialectical approaches.

Kitchener and Brenner (1990) suggested that wisdom requires a synthesis of knowledge from opposing points of view. Similarly, Labouvie-Vief (1990) has emphasized the importance of a smooth and balanced dialogue between logical

forms of processing and more subjective forms of processing. Pascual-Leone (1990) has argued for the importance of the dialectical integration of all aspects of a person's affect, cognition, conation (motivation), and life experience. Similarly, Orwoll and Perlmutter (1990) have emphasized the importance to wisdom of an integration of cognition with affect. Kramer (1990) has suggested the importance of the integration of relativistic and dialectical modes of thinking, affect, and reflection. And Birren and Fisher (1990), putting together a number of views of wisdom, have suggested as well the importance of the integration of cognitive, conative, and affective aspects of human abilities.

Other theorists have suggested the importance of knowing the limits of one's own extant knowledge and of then trying to go beyond it. For example, Meacham (1990) has suggested that an important aspect of wisdom is an awareness of one's own fallibility and the knowledge of what one does and does not know. Kitchener and Brenner (1990) have also emphasized the importance of knowing the limitations of one's own knowledge. Arlin (1990) has linked wisdom to problem finding, the first step of which is the recognition that how one currently defines a problem may be inadequate. Arlin views problem finding as a possible stage of post-formal operational thinking. Such a view is not necessarily inconsistent with the view of dialectical thinking as such a post-formal operational stage. Dialectical thinking and problem finding could represent distinct post-formal operational stages, or two manifestations of the same post-formal operational stage.

Although most developmental approaches to wisdom are ontogenetic, Csikszentmihalyi and Rathunde (1990) have taken a phylogenetic or evolutionary approach, arguing that constructs such as wisdom must have been selected for over time, at least in a cultural sense. In other words, wise ideas should survive better over time than unwise ideas in a culture. The theorists define wisdom as having three basic dimensions of meaning: (a) that of a cognitive process, or a particular way of obtaining and processing information; (b) that of a virtue, or socially valued pattern of behavior; and (c) that of a good, or a personally desirable state or condition.

I proposed (Sternberg, 1990b) an explicit theory of wisdom, suggesting that the development of wisdom can be traced to six antecedent components: (a) knowledge, including an understanding of its presuppositions and meaning as well as its limitations; (b) processes, including an understanding of what problems should be solved automatically and what problems should not be so solved; (c) a judicial thinking style, characterized by the desire to judge and evaluate things in an in-depth way; (d) personality, including tolerance of ambiguity and of the role of obstacles in life; (e) motivation, especially the motivation to understand what is known and what it means; and (f) environmental context, involving an appreciation of the contextual factors in the environment that lead to various kinds of thoughts and actions.

Whereas that theory (Sternberg, 1990a) specified a set of *antecedents* of wisdom, the subsequent balance theory (Sternberg, 1998) specifies the *processes* (balancing of interests and of responses to environmental contexts) in relation to the *goal* of wisdom (achievement of a common good). The first theory is incorporated into the

balance theory as specifying antecedent sources of developmental and individual differences, as discussed later.

According to the balance theory, wisdom is the application of intelligence, creativity, and knowledge as mediated by values toward the achievement of a common good through a balance among (a) intrapersonal, (b) interpersonal, and (c) extrapersonal interests, over the (a) short and (b) long terms, in order to achieve a balance among (a) adaptation to existing environments, (b) shaping of existing environments, and (c) selection of new environments (Sternberg, 1998, 2003; Sternberg & Lubart, 2001).

What kinds of considerations might be included under each of the three kinds of interests? Intrapersonal interests might include the desire to enhance one's popularity or prestige, to make more money, to learn more, to increase one's spiritual well-being, to increase one's power, and so forth. Interpersonal interests might be quite similar, except as they apply to other people rather than oneself. Extrapersonal interests might include contributing to the welfare of one's school, helping one's community, contributing to the well-being of one's country, or serving God, and so forth. Different people balance these interests in different ways. At one extreme, a malevolent dictator might emphasize his or her own personal power and wealth; at the other extreme, a saint might emphasize only serving others and God.

What constitutes appropriate balancing of interests, an appropriate response to the environment, and even the common good, all hinge on ethical values. Values, therefore, are an integral part of wise thinking. The question arises as to "whose values"? Although different major religions and other widely accepted systems of values may differ in details, they seem to have in common certain universal values, such as respect for human life, honesty, sincerity, fairness, and enabling people to fulfill their potential. Of course, not every government or society has subscribed to such values. Hitler's Germany and Stalin's Russia blatantly did not, and most societies today only subscribe to them in some degree but not fully.

The Problem of Personal Wisdom

Is Personal Wisdom Any More Than Wisdom?

Consider some individuals who have generally been considered among the wisest of the twentieth century: Martin Luther King, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, Mother Teresa, and Socrates. King was notoriously unfaithful to his spouse. Roosevelt, like King, was unfaithful to his spouse. He also rejected the opportunity to save large numbers of Jews and members of other persecuted groups from certain death by refusing to accept them into the United States. Mother Teresa's diaries revealed herself to be tormented for many of her later years by her lack of faith. And Socrates, considered one of the wisest men of all time, was probably considerably less than a perfect husband or father. Perhaps his scorn of money and material goods

would not have been ideally helpful to the family in maintaining an adequate standard of living. If Xanthippe was as ill-tempered as often is suggested, perhaps it was in part because of the man she was with. And Socrates' uncompromising trial defense and later drinking the hemlock by choice may have helped cement his reputation as standing on principles, but may have been less helpful to the family he was supposed to support.

One can be wise in the abstract, and perhaps wise with others, but unwise with regard to one's own life. Gardner (1983, 2006) has distinguished between interpersonal and intrapersonal intelligences, and perhaps wisdom at an interpersonal level or more general level needs also to be distinguished from personal wisdom, or wisdom at the intrapersonal level.

Personal wisdom seems to require all that wisdom in the abstract requires, but also, something more. What might be this something more? The something more is perhaps an attitude toward life—that one wishes to apply to one's own life the principles that one applies in the abstract—and that one wishes to apply them in an ethical fashion. This attitude is not an easy one to acquire.

First, hormones, baser instincts, or whatever one wants to call them may work against the attitude. Does anyone really believe that Tiger Woods didn't know any better when he became physically involved with multiple women beyond his wife? Certainly President Bill Clinton knew better, or Governor Mark Sanford, who visited his mistress in Argentina while claiming to be hiking the Appalachian Trail. At the extreme, one can live the kind of ascetic life that Mohandas Gandhi eventually claimed to live. But most people try to live normal lives and in the course of doing so fight the unacceptable impulses within themselves, with better or worse results.

Second, who among us is never hypocritical, applying to others standards that we fail to observe ourselves? Someone could be wise in giving excellent advice and yet hypocritical in not following the advice him or herself.

Third, we may have conflicting goals and, lacking external objectivity, fail to apply the same wise standards we would apply to others in seeking a resolution of these goals. No one can view him or herself in a totally objective manner and so our perceptions may be skewed and result in our acting in ways that appear very differently to ourselves than they do to others.

Finally, by dint of the "actor-observer effect," we tend to view others' behavior as reflecting their traits and our own behavior as reflecting how we respond to situations. Perhaps it is no great challenge to behave wisely when situational variables favor us. But when we lose our jobs or our marriages or our children, we may find ourselves tempted to act in ways that more benevolent situations would not bring out.

In sum, we may fail ourselves, even as we serve others wisely. Personal wisdom goes beyond wisdom in general. Hard though it is to be wise with others, it is probably harder to be wise with ourselves. To be personally wise, one needs to deal, minimally, with hormones, hypocrisy, lack of objectivity, and situational challenges. We tend to view ourselves through lenses, often rose-colored, that cloud our thinking about our behavior—so-called myside bias.

Is Personal Wisdom Beneficial?

There is evidence that wisdom does lead to higher degrees of subjective well-being (SWB) in older adults, holding constant other variables (Ardelt, 1997). Similarly, Takahashi and Overton (2005) have suggested that wisdom brings an internal sense of reward by helping people better to appreciate the subjective meaning in their lives. Hui and Yee (1994) found that wisdom and life satisfaction are positively correlated in older adults. Although older adults experienced losses, these losses helped them better appreciate what they had and gave them new insights into their lives and what they meant. This in turn increased their satisfaction with their lives.

A different view is that of Baltes (1997), who proposed that wise people may experience what he refers to as *constructive melancholy*. People who are wise, on this view, see the sadness as well as the joy in the complex events of life.

The view of Baltes and his colleagues is also different from that of traditional thinkers, such as Erikson (1959), who believe that wisdom involves some degree of emotional distance and detachment. The traditional psychoanalytical view of the therapist, for example, emphasizes the importance of keeping one's emotional distance from the patients one advises, lest one get caught up in their problems and thereby become unable to help the patients overcome this problem. In the Berlin view, wisdom inheres not in detachment but in sympathizing and empathizing with fellow human beings in the crises that beset them (Kunzmann & Baltes, 2005). Hence, wisdom may bring with it at least as much sadness as joy. People who do good work and apply their wisdom to it may see that others, in contrast, use their intelligence for less positive ends, which may lead to sadness (Solomon, Marshall, & Gardner, 2005).

Another factor that may work against wisdom leading to happiness is the presence of negative stereotypes about aging (e.g., Levy, Slade, Kunkel, & Kasl, 2002). To the extent that people have negative stereotypes, they may find sadness in thinking about their own age-related status, and hence feel the sadness invoked by these stereotypes joining whatever sadness the wisdom of aging may bring. Actual decreases in physical health may also lead to such sadness (Jordan, 2005).

Finally, wisdom may make one more deeply aware of the misery and hardship that exist in the world. Can a wise person ignore the suffering of others while enjoying life, him- or herself? But if the person is too cognizant of such suffering, is there a danger that the individual will find him or herself unable to enjoy life at all?

In the end, the data seem consistent with a picture of the ability of the individual to continue to develop wisdom until the latter days in which health problems impair thinking. But whether wisdom actually will develop depends not so much on age as upon cognitive variables, personality variables, and life experiences. Most important, the person has to utilize life experience in a way that is consistent with the development of wisdom. There is a joke about how many psychologists it takes to change a light bulb. The answer is it doesn't matter, so long as the light bulb wants to change. Similarly, people must want to develop their wisdom-related skills in order for them actually to develop, and then must adopt the attitudes toward life—

openness to experience, reflectivity upon experience, and willingness to profit from experience—that will enable this development to occur.

A problem is that there is relatively little reinforcement in our society for the development of personal wisdom. It is not, for the most part, taught in schools; it is not tested on achievement tests. On the contrary, what is tested is a set of memory and analytical skills that is quite remote from wisdom. A student who spends the time developing wisdom does so not for reward, but rather, at his or her own peril.

The Ethical Component of Personal Wisdom

Introductory Remarks

When people falter in their personal wisdom, it appears often to be because of ethical lapses in their professional or personal lives. An important part of personal wisdom is having but also acting in accord with positive ethical values. How do such values get enacted—or not? One cannot be personally wise without being ethical.

"I am very proud of myself," I told the 17 students in my seminar, Psychology 60, The Nature of Leadership. I had just returned from a trip, I told them, and felt that the honorarium I was paid for consulting on ethical leadership was less than I deserved. I felt badly that I had decided to accept such a consulting engagement for so little compensation. I then told the class that I was about to fill out the reimbursement forms when I discovered that I could actually get reimbursed twice. The first reimbursement would come from the organization that had invited me, which required me merely to fill out a form listing my expenses. The second reimbursement would come from my university, which required me to submit the receipts from the trip. I explained to the class that I had worked really hard on the trip consulting about ethical leadership, and so I was pleased that by getting reimbursed twice, I could justify to myself the amount of work I had put into the trip.

I waited for the firestorm. Would the class—which had already studied leadership for several months—rise up in a mass protest against what I had done? Or would only a half-dozen brave souls raise their hands and roundly criticize me for what was obviously patently unethical behavior? I waited, and waited, and waited. Nothing happened. I then decided to move on to the main topic of the day, which was ethical leadership! All the time I was speaking about that main topic, I expected some of the students to raise their hands and demand to return to the topic of my supposed double reimbursement. It didn't happen.

Finally, I stopped talking about whatever the topic was, and flat-out asked the class whether any of them thought there was something off the mark with my desiring to obtain double reimbursement. If so, I told them, why had no one challenged me? I figured that, to a person, they would be embarrassed for not having challenged me. Quite a few of them were embarrassed. Others thought I

must have been kidding. Others thought that as I was the professor and a dean to boot, whatever I did I must have had a good reason for. What I did not expect, though—especially after having taught them for several months about ethical leadership—was that some of the students would commend me on my clever idea and argue that, if I could get away with it, I was entitled to receive the money—more power to me!

This experience reminded me of how hard it is to translate theories of ethics, and even case studies, into one's own practice. The students had read about ethics in leadership, heard about ethics in leadership from a variety of real-world leaders, discussed ethics in leadership, and then apparently totally failed to recognize unethical behavior when it stared them in the face. Moreover, these were students who by conventional definitions would be classified as gifted. (Full disclosure: I did *not* really seek double reimbursement!) Why is it so hard to translate theory into practice, even after one has studied ethical leadership for several months?

Latané and Darley (1970) opened up a new field of research on bystander intervention. They showed that, contrary to expectations, bystanders intervene when someone is in trouble only in very limited circumstances. For example, if they think that someone else might intervene, the bystanders tend to stay out of the situation. Latané and Darley even showed that divinity students who were about to lecture on the parable of *The Good Samaritan* were no more likely than other bystanders to help a person in distress who was in need of—a good Samaritan! Drawing upon their model of bystander intervention, I propose here a model of ethical behavior that would seem to apply to a variety of ethical problems (see Sternberg, 2009a, 2009b, 2009c). Without ethical reasoning of the kind deriving from this model, one cannot be wise.

The basic premise of the model is that ethical behavior is far harder to enact than one would expect, simply on the basis of what we learn from our parents, from school, and from our religious training. To intervene, individuals must go through a series of steps, and unless all of the steps are completed, they are not likely to behave in an ethical way, regardless of the amount of training they have received in ethics, and regardless of their levels of gifts in other types of skills.

A Multiphase Model for Ethical Behavior

A proposed model of ethical behavior, taking off from the work of Latané and Darley described above, shows why it is so hard to behave ethically (Sternberg, 2009a, 2009b). Yet personal wisdom requires ethical behavior—not just in the abstract, but also in one's daily life. According to the proposed model, enacting ethical behavior is much harder than it would appear to be because it involves multiple, largely sequential, steps. To behave ethically, the individual has to:

1. *Recognize that there is an event to which to react*
2. *Define the event as having an ethical dimension*

3. *Decide that the ethical dimension is of sufficient significance to merit an ethics-guided response*
4. *Take responsibility for generating an ethical solution to the problem*
5. *Figure out what abstract ethical rule(s) might apply to the problem*
6. *Decide how these abstract ethical rules actually apply to the problem so as to suggest a concrete solution*
7. *Decide upon the ethical solution, meanwhile preparing to counteract contextual forces that might lead one not to act in an ethical manner*
8. *Act ethically*

Seen from this standpoint, it is rather challenging to respond to problems in an ethical manner. Consider the example of the supposed double reimbursement.

Recognize That There Is an Event to Which to React

The students were sitting in a class on leadership, expecting to be educated by an expert on leadership about leadership. In this case, he did not present the problem as one to which he expected them to react. He was simply telling them about something he had done. They had no a priori reason to expect that something an authority figure would require any particular kind of reaction, perhaps, except for taking notes. So for some students, the whole narrative may have been a nonevent.

This, of course, is a problem that extends beyond this mere classroom situation. When people hear their political, educational, or religious leaders talk, they may not believe there is any reason to question what they hear. After all, they are listening to authority figures. In this way, leaders, including cynical and corrupt leaders, may lead their flocks to accept and even commit unethical acts.

Define the Event as Having an Ethical Dimension

Not all students in the class defined the problem as an ethical one. It became clear in the discussion that some students saw the problem as utilitarian: I had worked hard, had been underpaid, and was trying to figure out a way to attain adequate compensation for my hard work. In this definition of the problem, I had come up with a clever way to make the compensation better fit the work he had done.

Cynical leaders may flaunt their unethical behavior—one is reminded today of Robert Mugabe, but there are other world leaders who might equally be relevant here. When Mugabe and his henchmen seized the farms of white farmers, the seizure was presented as one of compensating alleged war heroes for their accomplishments. Why should it be unethical to compensate war heroes?

The Chinese government attempted to manipulate media to downplay the dimensions of an event with a huge ethical component (Atlas, 2008). On May 12, 2008, an earthquake in Sichuan province killed an estimated 10,000 school children. Earthquakes are natural disasters but there was an irregularity in the buildings

that imploded during the earthquake. Schools for children of well-connected party leaders as well as government buildings withstood the earthquake with no problem. In contrast, schools housing poor children crumbled to dust. It turned out that the schools had been built in ways that could only poorly withstand an earthquake. Presumably, the money that was supposed to have supported better construction went to line the pockets of Party functionaries (Atlas, 2008). The government is doing what it can to suppress these basic facts.

Decide That the Ethical Dimension Is Significant

In the case of the professor having sought double reimbursement, some of the students may have felt it was sketchy or dubious but not sufficiently so to make an issue of it. Perhaps they had themselves asked for money twice for the same cause. Or perhaps they had sometimes taken what was not theirs—say, something small like a newspaper or even money they found on the ground—and saw what he was doing as no more serious than what they had done. So they may recognize an ethical dimension but not see it as sufficiently significant to create a fuss.

Politicians seem to specialize in trying to downplay the ethical dimension of their behavior. The shenanigans and subsequent lies of Bill Clinton regarding his behavior are well known. A few years ago, a state senator in Massachusetts was arrested for attempting to grope a woman on the street ("Senator faces list of assault allegations," http://www.boston.com/news/local/massachusetts/articles/2008/06/05/senator_faces_list_of_assault_allegations/, 2008, retrieved June 5, 2008). He apparently had a record of harassing other women over a period of years. What is more amazing than his pleading innocent after being caught red-handed is that, when asked his name, he gave the name of a colleague in the state senate as his name! He thereby sought to duck responsibility for his own unethical behavior.

Take Responsibility for Generating an Ethical Solution to the Problem

The students may have felt that they are, after all, merely students. Is it their responsibility, or even their right, to tell a professor in a course on leadership how to act, especially if the professor is a dean? From their point of view, it was perhaps his responsibility to determine the ethical dimensions of the situation, if any.

Similarly, people may allow leaders to commit wretched acts because they figure it is the leaders' responsibility to determine the ethical dimensions of their actions. Isn't that why they are leaders in the first place? Or people may assume that the leaders, especially if they are religious leaders, are in a uniquely good position to determine what is ethical. If a religious leader encourages someone to become a suicide bomber, that "someone" may feel that being such a bomber must be ethical. Why else would a religious leader suggest it?

Figure Out What Abstract Ethical Rule(s) Might Apply to the Problem

Perhaps some of the students recognized the problem the professor created for them as an ethical one. But what rule applies? Have they ever had to figure out reimbursements? Perhaps not. So it may not be obvious what rule would apply. Or even if they have, might there be some circumstances in which it is ethical to be dually reimbursed? Maybe the university supplements outside reimbursements, as they sometimes do fellowships? Or maybe the university does not care who else pays, so long as they get original receipts. Or maybe what he meant to say was that he had some expenses paid by the university and others by the sponsoring organization, and he had actually misspoken. Especially in new kinds of situations with which one has little familiarity, it may not be clear what constitutes ethical behavior.

Most of us have learned, in one way or another, ethical rules that we are supposed to apply to our lives. For example, we are supposed to be honest. But who among us can say he or she has not lied at some time, perhaps with the excuse that we were protecting someone else's feelings? By doing so, we insulate ourselves from the effects of our behavior. Perhaps, we can argue, the principle that we should not hurt someone else's feelings takes precedence over not lying. Of course, as the lies grow larger, we can continue to use the same excuse. Or politicians may argue that they should provide generous tax cuts to the ultrawealthy, on the theory that the benefits will "trickle down" to the rest of the population. So perhaps one is treating all people well, as we learn to do—just some people are treated better than others with the rationalization that eventually the effects will reach all the others.

Sometimes the rules that apply to a problem may conflict. For example, if you have a good friend who tells you in confidence that he is a drug user, your promise to keep the information confidential conflicts with your responsibility to seek external help for him (assuming, as is likely, that you are unable to help him yourself). In this case, one must decide which responsibility is greater and thus dominates the other.

Decide How These Abstract Ethical Rules Actually Apply to the Problem So As to Suggest a Concrete Solution

Perhaps the students had ethical rules available and even accessible to them, but did not see how to apply them. Suppose they have the rule that one should only expect from others what one deserves. Well, what did he deserve? Maybe, in application, they saw him as deserving more because he said he did. Or suppose they had the rule that one should not expect something for nothing. Well, he did something, so he was only trying to get something back that adequately reflected his work. In the end, they may have had trouble translating abstract principles into concrete behavior.

This kind of translation is, we believe, nontrivial. In our work on practical intelligence, some of which was summarized in Sternberg et al. (2000), we found

that there is, at best, a modest correlation between the more academic and abstract aspects of intelligence and its more practical and concrete aspects. Both aspects, though, predicted behavior in everyday life. People may have skills that shine brightly in a classroom, but that they are unable to translate into real-world consequential behavior. For example, someone may be able to pass a written drivers' test with flying colors but not be able to drive. Or someone may be able to get an A in a French class, but not speak French to passersby in Paris. Or a teacher may get an A in a classroom management course, but be unable to manage a classroom. Translation of abstracted skills into concrete ones is difficult and may leave people knowing a lot of ethical rules that they are nevertheless unable to translate into their everyday lives.

If one follows reports in the media, there are any number of instances in which pastors who are highly trained in religion and ethics act in unethical and unscrupulous ways. They may be able to teach lessons on ethics, but they fail to translate what they teach into their own behavior. One may tend to be quick to blame them, but as psychologists, we know that there are many competent psychologists who are unable to apply what they do in therapy to their own lives. Being a psychologist is no protection against personal strife, any more than being an ethicist is protection against unethical behavior.

Decide upon the Ethical Solution, Meanwhile Possibly Counteracting Contextual Forces That Might Lead One Not to Act in an Ethical Manner

You sit in a classroom and hear your teacher brag about what you perhaps consider to be unethical behavior. You look around you. No one else is saying anything. As far as you can tell, no one else has even been fazed. Perhaps you are simply out of line. In the Latané and Darley (1970) work, the more bystanders there were, the less likely one was to take action to intervene. Why? Because one figured that, if something is really wrong, then someone among all the others witnessing the event will take responsibility. You are better off having a breakdown on a somewhat lonely country road than on a busy highway, because a driver passing by on the country road may feel that he or she is your only hope.

Sometimes, the problem is not that other people seem oblivious to the ethical implications of the situation but that they actively encourage you to behave in ways you define as unethical. In the Rwandan genocides, Hutus were encouraged to hate Tutsis and to kill them, even if they were within their own family (see discussion in Sternberg & Sternberg, 2008). Those who were not willing to participate in the massacres risked becoming victims themselves (Gourevitch, 1998). The same applied in Hitler's Germany. Those who tried to save Jews from concentration camps themselves risked going to such camps (Totten, Parsons, & Charny, 2004).

One may hesitate to act because of possible repercussions. Perhaps students in his class saw the professor as grossly unethical but did not want to risk challenging him openly and thereby potentially lowering their grade. In genocides, opposing the perpetrators may make one a victim. Or one may look foolish acting in an ethical

way when others are taking advantage of a situation in a way to foster their personal good. Even before one acts, one may be hesitant because of the aftermath one anticipates, whether real or merely imagined.

We would like to think that the pressure to behave ethically will lead people to resist internal temptations to act poorly. But often, exactly the opposite is the case. In the Enron case, when Sherron Watkins blew the whistle on unethical behavior, she was punished and made to feel like an "outcast" ("Person of the Week: Enron Whistleblower Sherron Watkins," 2002, http://www.time.com/time/pow/article/0,8599,194927,00.html, retrieved June 5, 2008). In general, whistle-blowers are treated poorly, despite the protections they are supposed to receive.

Act Ethically

In the end, all the thinking in the world will not matter if one does not bridge the gap between thought and action. Ultimately, wisdom inheres in actions, not in preparation for those actions.

Is There an Ethical Ability Underlying Personal Wisdom?

Gardner (1999b) has wrestled with the question of whether there is some kind of existential or even spiritual intelligence that guides people through challenging life dilemmas. Coles (1998) is one of many who have argued for a moral intelligence in children as well as adults. Is there some kind of moral or spiritual intelligence in which some children are inherently superior to others? Kohlberg (1984) believed that there are stages of moral reasoning and that as children grow older, they advance in these stages. Some will advance faster and further than others, creating individual differences in levels of moral development.

The perspective here is perhaps a bit different. People can certainly differ in their moral reasoning and moral development, but we can teach children as well as adults to enhance their ethical reasoning and behavior simply by instructing them regarding the challenges of thinking and acting in an ethical way. It is not enough to teach religion or values or ethics. One needs to teach children about the steps leading to ethical behavior, as described above, so that they can recognize for and in themselves how and why it is that ethical behavior presents such a challenge. They need education and they need inoculation against the forces that are likely to lead them to fail to behave ethically because they do not make it through all 8 of the steps as described above.

From this point of view, ethical reasoning and behavior do not derive from some kind of inherent characteristic but are things we can develop in virtually all children (assuming they are not psychopathic). But such development is difficult because, as we have seen, thinking and acting ethically is more of a challenge than would appear. Merely going to religion or ethics classes will not, in and of itself, produce

ethical behavior. Wise people are always ethical, although ethical people are not always wise, so if we want to develop personal wisdom, we must develop a mature sense of personal ethics.

In speaking of the challenges of leadership, and particularly of leaders who become foolish, we have spoken of the risk of ethical disengagement (Sternberg, 2008).

Ethical disengagement (based on Bandura, 1999) is the dissociation of oneself from ethical values. One may believe that ethical values should apply to the actions of others, but one becomes disengaged from them as they apply to oneself. One may believe that one is above or beyond ethics, or simply not see its relevance to one's own life.

There are other fallacies that lead people to be foolish, where "foolishness" is viewed as the opposite of wisdom (Sternberg, 2002, 2005a, 2005b, 2008). They include

1. *Unrealistic optimism*. The person thinks he or she is so bright, or so powerful, that anything he or she does will turn out all right, regardless of how foolish or unethical it may be.

2. *Egocentrism*. The person comes to believe that his or her leadership or power is for purposes of self-aggrandizement. Tyco CEO Dennis Kozlowski, currently in prison for tax evasion, ran the company as though it was his own personal piggy bank ("Timeline of the Tyco International Scandal," 2005; http://www.usatoday.com/money/industries/manufacturing/2005-06-17-tyco-timeline_x.htm, retrieved June 5, 2008). Ethics took the back seat to Kozlowski's desire to enrich himself and his family.

3. *False omniscience*. Some people come to believe themselves as all-knowing. The surprising thing about the behavior of a Bill Clinton or a George W. Bush, in quite different domains, is not that they made mistakes, but rather, that they kept making the same mistakes over and over again. Clinton correctly viewed himself as very intelligent and perhaps thought that his intelligence and excellent education gave him levels of knowledge that he did not have. George W. Bush appears to have believed that he could trust his gut. He was wrong, over and over again, but was so lacking in intrapersonal intelligence (Gardner, 1983) and self-reflection, that he learned little, if anything, from his mistakes. In contrast, Barack Obama, during his presidential campaign, made mistakes, but each time seemed to learn from them and not repeat them, which is one of many reasons he was elected as president.

4. *False omnipotence*. Napoleon's failed invasion of Russia stands as one of the great historical monuments to false feelings of power. Napoleon believed himself to be extremely powerful. His invasion of Russia was politically pointless and strategically flawed, but he wanted the prize nevertheless. The invasion was the beginning of the end for Napoleon. Like so many other powerful leaders, he overreached, and his feelings of omnipotence led to his doom.

5. *False invulnerability*. Perhaps Eliot Spitzer, as governor of New York State, felt himself not only extremely powerful, but invulnerable. He must have felt pretty close to invulnerable, because as a former prosecutor, he must have known that police agencies had multiple ways of tracking patrons of prostitutes. He

nevertheless engaged in a pattern of repeated reckless behavior ("Spitzer is linked to prostitution ring," 2008; http://www.nytimes.com/2008/03/10/nyregion/10cnd-spitzer.html?_r=1&oref=slogin, retrieved June 5, 2008), which eventually cost him the governorship.

6. *Ethical disengagement*. How did Jimmy Swaggert go wrong? Or Jim Bakker? Or Ted Haggard? Or any of the countless men of the cloth who, when given the chance, acted in their own lives precisely how they told their listeners not to act in their lives. They exhibited ethical disengagement, whereby they came to believe that ethics are important for others, but not for them. They came to believe that they were, somehow, above acting ethically—until society decided they weren't.

If we want to nurture wisdom, we must nurture ethical reasoning and action because they are an essential part of wisdom. In our own theory, WICS (Sternberg, 2003), wisdom is viewed here according to the balance theory of wisdom proposed earlier, according to which an individual is wise to the extent he or she uses successful intelligence, creativity, and knowledge as moderated by positive ethical values, to (a) seek to reach a common good, (b) by balancing intrapersonal (one's own), interpersonal (others'), and extrapersonal (organizational/institutional/spiritual) interests, (c) over the short and long term, to (d) adapt to, shape, and select environments. Wisdom is in large part a decision to use one's intelligence, creativity, and experience for a common good.

Wise individuals do not look out just for their own interests, nor do they ignore these interests. Rather, they skillfully balance interests of varying kinds, including their own, those of others, and those of the communities of which they are a part. They also recognize that they need to align the interests of their group or organization with those of others groups or organizations because no group operates within a vacuum. Wise people realize that what may appear to be a prudent course of action over the short term does not necessarily appear so over the long term. And they realize the importance of doing the ethically right thing, not merely the expedient one.

Leaders who have been less than fully successful often have been so because they have ignored one or another set of interests. For example, in the United States, Richard Nixon and Bill Clinton, in their respective cover-ups, not only failed to fulfill the interests of the country they led, but also failed to fulfill their own interests. Their cover-ups ended up bogging down their administrations in scandals rather than allowing them to make the positive accomplishments they had hoped to make. George Bush became the most unpopular US president since polls started measuring popularity because he appeared to some to care more about the enhancement of his own power than the good of the world or even the country he was elected to lead. Freud was a great leader in the fields of psychiatry and psychology, but his insistence that his followers (disciples) conform quite exactly to his own system of psychoanalysis led him to lose those disciples and the support they might have continued to lend to his efforts. He was an expert in interpersonal interests, but not as applied to his own life. Napoleon lost sight of the extrapersonal interests that would have been best for his own country. His disastrous invasion of Russia, which appears to have been motivated more by hubris than by France's need to have

Russia in its empire, partially destroyed his reputation as a successful military leader and paved the way for his later downfall.

Leaders can be intelligent in various ways and creative in various ways; it does not guarantee they are wise. Indeed, probably relatively few leaders at any level are particularly wise. Yet the few leaders who are notably so—perhaps Nelson Mandela, Martin Luther King, Mohandas Gandhi, Winston Churchill, and Mother Teresa—leave an indelible mark on the people they lead and, potentially, on history. It is important to note that wise leaders are probably usually charismatic, but charismatic leaders are not necessarily wise, as Hitler, Stalin, and many other charismatic leaders have demonstrated over the course of time. In the end, wisdom is the use of intelligence, creativity, and knowledge in a positively ethical way that is directed toward the common good.

People may differ in their ability to behave ethically, but, to our knowledge, there is no evidence of intrinsic differences in "ethical giftedness" or "moral intelligence." The difference in people's behavior appears rather to be in their skill in completing a set of eight steps that, conjointly, produce ethical behavior. Failure of an earlier step is likely to lead to failure to execute the later steps. Teaching children abstract principles of ethical behavior or ethical rules is unlikely, in itself, to produce ethical behavior. Rather, children need to be taught the sequence of processes leading to ethical thinking, and to inoculate themselves against pressures—both external and internal—to behave in unethical ways. If we want to produce ethical giftedness, we have to develop it, not hope it will be a given in some group of intrinsically gifted children.

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