'How-to' Wisdom: The application of an abstract, timeless meta-virtue

A Book Review of: A TIME FOR WISDOM by Paul T. McLaughlin and Mark McMinn (2022)

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Many people have an "*I know it when I see it*" subjective parameter to define wisdom. In a pluralistic society, wisdom may seem especially arbitrary. However, if wisdom is in the eye of the beholder, it could not be studied and, more troubling, there would be no guidance for personal growth. This book provides a structure to advance the practice of wisdom. This book is not a self-help book, but it provides many strategies, exercises, and prayers to cultivate wisdom. It is not a philosophy book, but it cites many classical scholars and pulls from various theoretical models. It is written for the thoughtful novice and is meant to be practical.

There is a humble fragrance to the book. The authors say "This is a book about wisdom, yet we claim no special personal privilege of this virtue" (p. 235), and they model an unassuming, teachable tone. They claim, with evidence, that wisdom is a virtue that can be fostered. This assumption is widely accepted within virtue science, perceiving virtues as habitual traits that are developed (Fowers, et al, 2021; Snow et al., 2020).

Perhaps the most human touch of the book is the centrality of pain and suffering and the unapologetic integration of human spirituality. The introduction states, "Does one need to be old

to be wise? Not necessarily. (…) Does wisdom require suffering? Probably" (p. 6). The authors posit that pain, not age, is the likely key ingredient to wisdom. The model they propose weaves adversity throughout the book. As long as wisdom is mostly attributed to age, it remains difficult to teach or model, and research has supported the weight of individual and situational variables over broad age differences (Sternberg, 2005).

McLaughlin and McMinn critique some current empirical approaches to wisdom that divorce it from religion and spirituality. The authors claim that "in the attempt to create a secular field of wisdom, they [previous scholars] stripped wisdom from its natural environment and overlooked the importance of the transcendent" (McLaughin & McMinn, 2022, p. 8). While the book is written predominantly from the Christian perspective, it is carefully embedded in a broad framework of spirituality and provides sources from a swath of religious and cultural affiliations. The introduction provides self-disclosure of both authors' religious backgrounds. These are not authors who are hiding behind ambiguous value-statements. Their humble self-disclosure aligns with Fower's (2022) "bullet-bitting" approach. Fowers claims that attempting to eliminate values from science just leads to smuggling moral commitments in, and impedes critical evaluation. Full disclosure of moral and spiritual perspectives is a good direction for scientific writing, especially in the field of virtue science. Personal values are inevitably a part of the scholarly process and outcome.

This book presents wisdom as a meta-virtue, as if it were the executive function between multiple competing values. For example, if both mercy and justice are core virtue commitments in one's life, these values may encounter situations where they appear to conflict. It is *wisdom* that facilitates the process of judgment, resource allocation, and shrewd decision making, comparable to how we think of executive function with cognitive tasks. To hone this skill, the

book presents a KDTT model to wisdom: Knowledge, Detachment, Tranquility, and Transcendence. The book is ordered around these four ascending constructs with three chapters each.

Knowledge

Information is necessary for wisdom, but most people are drowning in a constant flow of data without the space or habits to digest knowledge into wisdom. The authors claim that the sheer enormity of daily global knowledge generation threatens human's ability to retain the bigger picture. However, they hold onto the importance of knowledge as a central component of wisdom (McLaughlin & McMinn, 2022). Many current psychological and philosophical theories align with the importance of the knowledge/cognition piece within virtue and character models. Flowers' (2021) STRIVE-4 model presents knowledge as a key component, citing that *ignorance* cannot be a source of virtue. Cognition is also one of the four subsystems in Nucci's (2018) character system model.

While the impotence of knowledge/cognition may seem obvious, it contrasts with the *tabula rasa* notion of purity and child-like wisdom models. The high cognitive baseline necessary is especially relevant to point out in an age of growing anti-intellectualism (Merkley & Loewen, 2021; Peters, 2019). Investing in cognitive advancement plays a critical role in the pursuit of *eudaimonia,* the good and virtuous life. It is central to hold onto the role of critical thinking and a strong knowledge base, as a vital (though insufficient) path to the virtue of wisdom.

Detachment

As a novice myself to the study of wisdom, the *detachment* piece was the least intuitive process to read about. I had been accustomed to a negative connotation to detachment, such as

'unhinged' from reality, or emotionally stunted. But the authors defined detachment as a distancing cognitive strategy that allows people to lower defense mechanisms, allows for gray areas, and engagement in metacognitive strategies, commonly used in therapeutic settings or spiritual traditions. In chapter 6, the authors presented a useful metaphor of wise detachment: the coach-player model. This process requires constantly switching between observing from the sidelines to see what is working or not (coaching), but also getting in the game and fully engaging (playing). The authors build this case through the science on the interplay of emotion regulation and social cognitive processing (Glück, 2020) and the importance of self-reflection for wisdom (Westrate, 2019).

Detachment, defined herein, is not emotional withdrawal, but an acceptance of emotions and circumstances. Paradoxically, it is in the acceptance of pain that one can actually detach, no longer trying to outrun it. The authors cited Vietnamese monk Thich Nhat Hanh in the claim that suffering is only holy when we embrace it and look deeply into it, or else it is the ocean in which we drown (Hanh, 2015). Thus, suffering and reflective detachment practices can serve the path to refine personal values and pursue a life of wisdom and meaning.

Tranquility

The third process in the KDTT model is tranquility. Thankfully, the authors provide a definition for tranquility that can coexist with external chaos. Their definition is neither passive, nor apathetic. To elucidate that point, the authors provide examples of inner peace during difficult conversations and life transitions. This section presents a necessary critique of the shallow examples present of "self-care" culture in our public dialogue. Contrary to what click-bait headlines (or HR emails) suggest, self-care is not escapist strategies filled with bubble baths, comfort foods, gaming, or binge-scrolling activities. McLaughlin and McMinn juxtapose the

inner hedonist desires and differentiate it from real rest which promotes tranquility and serves as an antidote to the dragon of narcissism (p. 142, 161). The Judeo-Christian practice of Sabbath, a spiritual non-doing can be a path to internalizing tranquility and detaching from the culture permeated by distractions and busyness.

It is predominantly in this section that the authors weave in the importance of emotion regulation. This is consistent with many theoretical models of moral and character development that juxtapose both mind and emotion. Daniel Lapsley has written about the importance of phronetic (practical wisdom) calibration between emotions and reason as a guide to moral behavior (Lapsley, 2019). This interplay is present in Larry Nucci's (2018) character system, enhancing the importance of social-emotional capacities in character development.

Transcendence

According to the authors, transcendence brings the role of knowledge, detachment and tranquility together and pushes people to see the whole, not the sum of the parts. Wisdom is not just the ability to make in-the-moment shrewd choices. But, the ability to lead a purposeful life with awe, humility, and guiding principled values. The transcendent piece is likely the main differentiator between an amoral study of wisdom, and this unapologetic integration of spirituality.

The practice of transcendence calls people beyond the superficial markers of ego. Perhaps transcendence is more probable with age, yet teachable among youth. Many people in late adulthood notice the futility of professional success markers that loom large over aspiring youth. But transcendent practices, often embedded in spiritual traditions, provide relief from a metric-driven society. It is the distinction between hedonia (pursuit of pleasure) and *eudaimonia*

(pursuit of virtue and meaning). The surest way to happiness is when it is pursued indirectly, through virtue and meaning. When it is the end goal (hedonia), happiness is elusive.

While it is never appropriate to downplay someone else's pain, adversity becomes much more bearable when paired with purpose and support. The authors' focus on pain and transcendence is a relevant reminder to never underestimate the capacity-building features of social interactions and a sense of meaning.

At each section, these four (KDTT) processes build on each other, and the authors provide rationale and examples to support the constructive process. The cognitive component (knowledge) provides a path for detachment and critical thinking which allows for inner-tranquility and adequate internal calibration and steadiness. These processes are encompassed by a broad framework that permits individuals to see beyond their inner bubbles towards the final process: transcendence.

Critique and Future Directions

Each chapter has strategies and examples which makes this work on wisdom ideal as a trade book. The examples are especially applicable to the current North American context, such as political polarization, masking debates in the Covid-19 pandemic, and the hot housing market. The current nature of the examples help ground the book in what is going on in many of its readers' lives in 2022, yet it may be at the expense of the book feeling timeless in ten years. That said, the title is "A Time for Wisdom" and in that sense, it meaningfully advocates for why it is a concept that is applicable to right here/right now. Although McLaughin and McMinn carefully maintain a positive psychology approach throughout the book, I cannot help but think that, in a world of fools, the practices in this book would curb much of our current idiocracy. But they were wise enough not to phrase it like that.

The authors do cite studies from cultures outside the WEIRD contexts, and even go into explanatory detail on the differences between vertical/horizontal collectivism/individualism and the implications that may have on wisdom development. These scientific studies are still scarce and issues of measurement and cross-cultural operational definitions must be carefully sorted and re-sorted in the coming years. There were many times in the book where I wondered what the operational definition of wisdom was for any specific study and how it was measured (e.g. self-reported, other-nominated, etc.) But that is often the nature of trade books and the purpose of a detailed reference section. Much of the empirical science of wisdom is still under construction. Wisdom is certainly context-dependent and culturally-varying to some degree, but that is no reason against its empirical study. For decades, psychological science strayed from the study of virtues, only to the detriment of the discipline's utility. This imperfect science must continue.

The scientific study of wisdom from an empirical psychological perspective is still young and positive psychology in general has been plagued by an absence of strong guiding theories (Kristjánsson, 2010; Snow, 2019). To address this, contemporary psychologists and philosophers have found renewed collaborations and worked together on theoretical models and measurements in virtue science (Kristjánsson et al., 2021; Lapsley, 2019; Snow et al., 2020). However, the study of virtues is still plagued by the 'gappiness' problem (Lapsley, 2019), the gap between knowledge and action, and the gap between theory and application. This book attempts to bridge that gap and provide a personal application of what is already known.

The book is not an exhaustive exposition of theories of wisdom. In many ways this is best. There are many of the theoretical divides within contemporary theories and virtue scientists can also succumb to the same bickering and foolish divisiveness common to humans. McLaughlin and McMinn did notably try to construct connections across theoretical definitions

through an appendix comparison table. This book however, does have notable absences in the study and mention of wisdom such as the renewed enthusiasm for the study of phronesis (practical wisdom, Kristjánsson, et al., 2021; Lapsley, 2019), or the 6P framework (purpose, persons, processes, products, press, problems; Sternberg & Karami, 2021). However, as a book aimed for practice, it fulfills its purpose.

In the future of the empirical study of wisdom, I hope that the relational dimension of wisdom is further developed. There were many relational examples in the book, especially in therapeutic contexts. However, I wonder how much, in reality, wisdom is relationally-based and co-scaffolded, instead of self-driven. Reflecting personally, if I have gained any wisdom, it has been taught/modeled. Without caregivers and mentors who cared and knew me deeply, I would have likely resorted to lower-level hedonic goals. The guide-figure is likely a necessary one for all four processes, from knowledge to transcendence. This relational dimension may seem implied, but it should be more developed in future models.

The importance of relationships makes me further wonder about the role of formal education in the development of wisdom. The relational dimension is the one most difficult to replicate in a virtual setting, which may mean wisdom development is especially vulnerable in the pandemic and post-pandemic education shifts. Perhaps that is another potent example for why now is a time for wisdom.

Conclusion

There is still much empirical data to be collected on wisdom development, particularly in further delineating operational definitions, studying cross-cultural trends, lifespan development, and the relational dimension. Wisdom may be the 'meta-virtue' of virtue science, as metacognition is to cognitive science. In that case, hopefully the study of wisdom will boom and

flourish in the coming decades of virtue science. Empirical work on wisdom in psychology and philosophy is still undergoing much theoretical work, but it is past time to apply what we already know. This book is a wonderful starting point, especially for those seeking a more applicable definition and path towards a more knowledgeable, detached, tranquil, and transcendent *eudaimonia*.

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