CHAPTER 2

The Moral Purpose of Wisdom

Daniel Lapsley

Abstract

What it means to flourish and to live well the life that is good for one to live is typically addressed in psychology by formidable research programs on the Big Three constructs of purpose, wisdom, and moral identity. Yet each construct fails to address, and so is unable to resist, what Kekes (1995) calls the permanent adversities of contingency, conflict, and evil. These adversities are inescapable features of human agency that will compromise good lives in pursuit of purpose, wisdom, and character unless the resources of moral wisdom are cultivated. This chapter first discusses why contingency, conflict, and evil are permanent adversities and how they constitute impediments to flourishing. The second part gives an account of moral wisdom and the means at its disposal for controlling permanent adversities. It will be seen that the work of moral wisdom is strongly metacognitive, involving both knowledge (declarative, procedural, and conditional) and regulation (planning, selection, control, monitoring, and evaluation) processes. The remaining sections will take up the implication of moral wisdom for the Big Three constructs of purpose, wisdom, and moral identity, and the theoretical modifications required of them to account for good lives lived well.

In the second movement of *Little Gidding*, T. S. Eliot (1943) writes of three gifts reserved for age "To set a crown upon your lifetime's effort." The first is the "cold friction of expiring sense . . . As body and soul begin to fall asunder." The second is the "conscious impotence of rage at human folly." The third gift frames the tenor of this chapter:

> . . . the rending pain of re-enactment/Of all that you have done, and been; the shame/Of motives late revealed, and the awareness/Of things ill done and done to others' harm/Which once you took for the exercise of virtue/ Then fools' approval stings, and honour stains. (p. 54)

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This remarkable passage invites troubling developmental questions. How could a lifetime's effort be so mistaken about the exercise of virtue? To recall only in late life the harm visited upon others with motives now revealed to be shameful is a review of a life that has gone wrong. In late-realized moments of clarity, one discovers that one has lived a life of moral opacity – that one's character is not what one has supposed – so that now the approbation of others is felt like a reproach, and accrued honors and gestures of respect are just stinging reminders of one's hypocrisy and moral failure.

How should we understand lives like this? The lessons of positive psychology and happiness studies run entirely in the opposite direction to show how the crown of a lifetime's effort can be personal fulfillment and well-being rather than "the pain of reenactment of all you have done and been." One might say, for example, on the basis of this literature, that the sentiments of *Little Gidding* can only be the result of living without a sense of purpose. Or perhaps it is a failure of wisdom, as variously conceived by developmental and personality science. Erikson's lifespan developmental theory can be invoked to argue that the ego despair of *Little Gidding* reflects the confusion of values that results necessarily when the identity work of adolescence fails to secure the proper ideological commitments that might otherwise sustain ego integrity across the life course. Moreover, identity work itself might have deep implications for what one takes to be the "exercise of virtue." After all, Erikson argued that ethical capacity is the "true criterion of identity" (1968, p. 39), but also that "identity and fidelity are necessary for ethical strength" (1964, p. 126). In this respect, contemporary moral identity theory is perhaps more on point insofar as identity commitments, on this view, are premised on moral considerations, or alternatively, morality is deemed essential, important, and central to self-understanding (e.g., Blasi, 1984; Lapsley, 2016).

Hence the moral alienation of *Little Gidding* either elides the concerns of purpose, wisdom, and moral identity, or else is something that could have been avoided if only these constructs were in better evidence. The Big Three constructs of purpose, wisdom, and moral identity are associated, of course, with formidable empirical research programs. There are several handbooks, for example, that address the complexities of wisdom (Brown, 2000; Sternberg, 1980; Sternberg & Glück, 2019; Sternberg & Jordan, 2005), along with new attempts to integrate its diverse theoretical features (Jeste et al., 2020; Grossman et al., 2020; Kristjánsson et al., 2021; Sternberg & Karami, 2021). This volume and other recent studies (Hill et al., 2013; Hill et al., 2023; Kashdan et al., 2022; Lewis, 2020) attest to

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the importance of a "sense of purpose" for positive development across the life course. Moral identity, long considered one of the strongest predictors of moral behavior (Hertz & Krettenauer, 2016; Lapsley, 2016) and emotional well-being (Goering et al., 2024), continues to attract new ways to conceptualize the contours of its theoretical boundaries (Krettenauer, 2021; Krettenauer & Stichter, 2023; Sonnentag et al., 2023).

What's more there are attempts to conjoin the Big Three in ways to suggest that the work of these constructs is mutually implicative. For example, identity and purpose are said to be closely allied constructs (Bronk, 2011; Burrow & Hill, 2016; Hill & Burrow, 2012), and so is purpose and character (Malin et al., 2017). Similarly, certain conceptions of wisdom carve out important roles for the purpose (Sternberg & Karami, 2021), moral reasoning (Pasupathi & Staudinger, 2001), morality and ethics (Sternberg & Glück, 2021), morally grounded metacognition (Grossman et al., 2020), moral aspirations (Kristjánsson et al., 2021), or else wisdom is a form of tacit and explicit knowledge put at the service of the common good (Sternberg, 2001). It may indeed be the case that the Big Three constructs collectively constitute what it means to flourish or to live well the life that is good for one to live.

But I want to suggest that the Big Three constructs, for all their theoretical elegance and explanatory power, and impressive empirical track record, are unable to account for the predicament of *Little Gidding*, at least not without amendment. All three constructs fail to address, and so are unable to resist, what philosopher John Kekes (1995) terms the "permanent adversities" of contingency, conflict, and evil. Moreover, these adversities are not infrequent calamities that befall unfortunate lives but are instead an inescapably common feature of creatures like us. As Kekes (1995, p. 79) put it, the permanent adversities "are *in us* as well as outside of us. It is human agency itself that is permeated by contingency, conflict and evil, so no effort of ours could succeed in getting rid of them." Of course, we are also not without resources for coping with permanent adversities and for living a life that is good for one to live in spite of them. To do so, however, requires the cultivation of moral wisdom (as Kekes argues), and I would simply repeat that each of the Big Three constructs – purpose, wisdom, and moral identity – fails to describe moral wisdom and is defeasible without it.[1]

[1] The purpose literature typically understands *eudaimonia* or what it means to flourish by reference to various psychological dimensions of well-being (e.g., Kashdan et al., 2023; Ryff & Singer, 2008). Has well-being served the purpose of literature well? Is well-being constitutive of *eudaimonia?*

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Hence it is necessary to explore the nature and work of moral wisdom in the context of permanent adversities, and here my debt to Kekes (1995) will become obvious. This chapter will unfold in the following way: First, I discuss the permanent adversities of contingency, conflict, and evil and how they constitute impediments to character formation and good lives. The second part of the chapter will give an account of moral wisdom and the means at its disposal for controlling permanent adversities. The remaining sections of the chapter will take up the implication of moral wisdom for the Big Three constructs of purpose, wisdom, and moral identity, and the theoretical modifications required of them to account not only for good lives lived well but also for the lives rendered poignant by the despairs of *Little Gidding*.

Permanent Adversities

"I see this too under the sun," writes Ecclesiastes (9: 11–12),[2] "the race does not go to the swift, nor the battle to the strong; there is no bread for the wise, wealth for the intelligent, nor favour for the learned; all are subject to time and mischance." Chance ignores merit is the traditional interpretation of this famous passage. The ambitions that drive our life forward, the purposes we set out for ourselves, including our desire to live a good life, are frustrated by the contingency of external circumstances. "I have seen so much," says Ecclesiastes (7: 15–16): "the virtuous man perishing for all his virtue, for all his godlessness the godless living on."

For most of us, our ambitions are typically many, our values plural. We live in pursuit of multiple purposes that each make a claim on our self-understanding, the projects we identify with, our way of being in the world. Yet ambitions, values, purposes, and identities invariably conflict. Choosing one course of action or one set of commitments premised on one set of values leaves other highly sought-after values unrealized. All conceptions of a good life face the permanent adversity of incompatible and incommensurable values, purposes, and identities, which are not resolved simply in the act of choosing.

Moreover, our choices and motives for choosing are a potent cocktail of virtue and vice stirred by self-deception. Our capacity for evil is veiled by

Perhaps, but not necessarily. The life that is good for one to live is fundamentally a moral project that is scaffolded by character-relevant considerations of purpose, wisdom, and moral identity – the Big Three – and these constructs are beleaguered by permanent adversities. Although I don't gainsay the importance of psychological well-being as an important feature of adaptive mental health, it will not count for flourishing in the absence of moral wisdom.

[2] All quotations are from the *The Jerusalem Bible* (1966). New York: Doubleday.

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egocentrism and too willing tendencies to disengage from the moral consequences of our agency through self-protective stratagems that shield us from facing the truth of our behavior (Krettenauer, 2021). As Iris Murdoch (2001, p. 51) famously put it, "In the moral life the enemy is the fat relentless ego." She writes:

> By opening our eyes we do not necessarily see what confronts us. We are anxiety-ridden animals. Our minds are continually active, fabricating an anxious, usually self-preoccupied, often falsifying veil which partially conceals the world. Our states of consciousness differ in quality, our fantasies and reveries are not trivial and unimportant, they are profoundly connected with our ability to choose and act. (p. 88)

Contingency, conflict, and evil, then, are adversities that cannot be evaded if we are to make sense of purpose, wisdom, and moral identity. Learning how to live a good life animated by the Big Three in the face of these adversities is the task of moral wisdom. Learning more about the nature of the permanent adversities is the first step.

Contingency

The extant literature of the Big Three suggests that living a good life will require a sense of purpose to drive our life forward, wisdom of various kinds to navigate the pragmatics of daily life or advance the common good, and moral identity to bridge the gap between knowing the right thing to do and then doing it. If these are virtues of a good life lived well, they are insufficient for procuring it. As Kekes (1995, p. 52) put it, "We learn that life is contingent, goodness may lead to suffering, moral growth need not be rewarded, and people come to undeserved harm." This was the complaint of Ecclesiastes noted earlier. Of course, the fact that virtue is unavailing to secure flourishing and happiness is no reason to forego effort to strive for the excellence of character on which a good life depends.

Yet experience teaches that good motives, decency, firm resolve, and virtues are at the mercy of exigencies that are indifferent to these things. To enjoy the benefits of our own efforts toward self-improvement will require external goods over which we have no control. Aristotle stresses the point in the *Nichomachean Ethics* (1101A 14–16): an adequate supply of external goods is required of the happy person "who expresses complete virtue in his activities," and such external goods are not simply required from time to time "but for a complete life."

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Relevant external goods include an "evolved nest" (Narvaez & Bradshaw, 2023) or facilitating environment (Winnicott, 1965) of early childcare, additional relationships of a certain kind (e.g., parenting quality, close relations with competent adults, mentors, and connection to prosocial peers) and community resources (e.g., good schools, prosocial institutions, and neighborhood quality) that drive both optimal development (Narvaez, 2014) and the "ordinary magic" of resilience (Masten, 2015). One could add food security, access to proper educational opportunities, meaningful work, and freedom from discrimination, racial hostility, and other forms of oppression. Kekes (1995) mentions prestige, respect, friendship, good health, and possessing a certain status. Having these things makes lives better than not having them, but their possession is a matter of contingent moral luck (Hart, 2005; Nagel, 1979; Williams, 1981). It is even a matter of contingency whether we inhabit the sociocultural spaces that allow virtues to be manifested in the first place or provide occasions for their cultivation. As Kekes (1995, p. 52) puts it, "Living a reasonable and decent life is of no match against the contingency of nature." The fact that we have no control over the supply of these external goods is what makes contingency a permanent adversity, and it is the task of moral wisdom to help us cope with it.

Conflict

It is commonplace to observe that settling upon a conception of a good life is a developmental challenge that endures across the life course. Developmental science offers constructs to make sense of it: identity, generativity, and purpose, among others.[3] It is a developmental challenge because the self-same person typically embraces many identities and purposes are legion. The developmental moment of clarity, in this view, is when one *decides*, identifies with something, and finds a purpose. Matriculating college seniors face this moment of truth when they contemplate the world beyond graduation. And they will also face the prospect noted earlier: that their conception of a good life will be riven with values all worth pursuing yet conflict nonetheless. Some choices are inextricably

[3] Generativity is the central psychosocial challenge of mid-life that bids one to take active steps to mentor, raise, and guide the younger generation on their own transition to responsible adults, and it goes beyond mere parenting. McAdams (2015) argues that generativity is also a moral project – we have to step up to bend the contexts of development (family, school, work, community, and civic life) in directions that favor positive youth development. Failure to live a generative mid-life invites both personal and societal stagnation.

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incompatible. One cannot crave privacy and a public life without tension. Simultaneous desire for agency and communion, autonomy and attachment, and independence and connection is fraught with tension. A romantic attachment may not survive divergent career and postgraduate opportunities. As Kekes (1995, p. 58) writes:

> A risk-taking adventurous life excludes the peace of mind which derives from cherishing what one has. Breadth and depth, freedom and equality, solitude and public-spiritedness, good judgment and passionate involvement, love of comfort and love of achievement, ambition and humility, justice and mercy – all exist in a state of tension, and the more we have of one, the less we have of the other.

Moreover, simply making a choice in the fateful moment of decision-making presumed by purpose and identity theory does not settle the matter, nor is the inevitable choice a straightforward compromise among rival values. It does not settle the matter because a sense of loss will haunt any choice; and compromise is not possible because conflicting choices are not only incompatible but incommensurable. There is no neutral standpoint or common measure by which to compare conflicting values. This is troubling because "the values about whose ranking there are reasonable disagreements may also be values that we want to realize but cannot because they totally or proportionately exclude each other. It is thus the coincidence of the incommensurability and incompatibility of conflicting values that creates a permanent adversity for our moral life" (Kekes, 1995, p. 62).

Evil

There is another kind of conflict that might fall under the heading of "Evil," the third permanent adversity. This is a conflict between two courses of action where each option is morally problematic, but we must choose for all that. The issue of incompatibility and incommensurability arises here as well. Should a staff member continue to work for a tyrannical president, for example, or resign and leave tyranny unchecked with one less impediment to its abuses? The attempt to live according to a conception of a good life will too often present us with conflicting values on both sides of the moral line of scrimmage.

Yet this is not entirely what Kekes (1995) had in mind for the third permanent adversity. Conflicting values and choices will certainly obscure the regulative ideals we wish could guide our conception of a good life, and we often face hard moral choices that leave us unavoidably compromised,

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but the consequences of these choices, for example, our sense of loss and the affront to our moral compass, is readily experienced by anyone with a modicum of self-knowledge. Rather, what Kekes (1995) has in mind is the wickedness that pervades our choices and life projects, though it is cloaked as good intentions. The narrator of *Little Gidding* came to know something about this.

Our character is not unalloyed, virtuous, or vicious. The person of full virtue, the *phronimos* touted by neo-Aristotelian virtue theory, is philosophical fiction, not a person of this world, not a creature like us (see Athanassoulis, 2021, for a related discussion). We are instead, all of us, a complex mélange of motives and inclinations, of virtues and vices, and we should not retreat from acknowledging that "our fat relentless ego" makes it hard to tell the difference. Nor should we retreat from acknowledging that evil inclinations are commonplace. Certainly, Aristotle thought that wickedness was common, and so did Ecclesiastes. In his *Rhetoric*, Aristotle writes "And since the general run of men are worse rather than better – slaves to their own interest and cowards in times of danger – as a rule it is a cause of fear to be in the power [at the mercy] of another man" (1382, cited in Cooper, 1932, p. 108). Similarly, Ecclesiastes (9:3) laments: "This is the evil that inheres in all that is done under the sun: that the hearts of men should be full of malice."

Of course, most individuals do not own up to hearts of malice. Instead, we are "agents of evil, and of the good, and we act one way or another, depending on our imperfect knowledge, mixed motives, unclear aims, and on the pressures exerted on us by the historical, political, culture, and other forces to which we are subject" (Kekes, 1995, p. 68). Yet it is important for us to believe that the self is fundamentally moral (DeFrietas et al., 2017; Lapsley et al., 2022; Stichter, 2022; Strohminger et al., 2017). The moral self, which we are convinced represents our essentialist true self, is protected from moral stain by a protective belt of moral disengagement strategies: our tendency to sanitize our motives with obfuscating euphemisms, for example, or our tendency to dehumanize victims, negate harmfulness, make downward comparisons, and displace responsibility (Bandura, 2016, 1999). Even when caught with the goods the typical response is that this terrible thing I did is out of character, does not reflect the real me, it's not who I really am deep down. And in fairness, most individuals who do evil do not pursue it as a conscious deliberate policy. Rather, as Kekes (1995, p. 68) put it, "They certainly do evil, but disguise its nature from themselves."

Perhaps this was the case in *Little Gidding*. Its disturbing account of late-achieved recognition of things done to others harm, and for motives

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now deemed shameful rather than done for motives born of virtue, shows vividly how the permanent adversity of evil prevents our general understanding of evil from attaching to our own behavior in moments of action. As Kekes (1995, p. 68) writes:

> Their own cruelty is seen by them as justice, selfishness as claiming their due, hatred as just condemnation, envy as commitment to equality, or fanaticism as being principled. They know that cruelty, selfishness, hatred, envy, and fanaticism are evil, but they do not know that their own actions exemplify these evils. And they do not know it because they foster or allow something in themselves that precludes them from seeing the true nature of their conduct.

If the adversities of contingency, conflict, and evil are permanent features of human life, then this fact qualifies how we are to think about purpose, wisdom, and moral identity. These venerable constructs would seem to hold out misplaced optimism for the possibilities of human flourishing unless the baleful influence of these permanent obstacles to living a good life is duly considered. The account of moral wisdom by Kekes (1995) shows one way to counteract (without defeating) the permanent adversities.

Moral Wisdom

On Kekes's (1995) view, moral wisdom is properly considered a second-order virtue that disposes to the right judgment on matters of fundamental importance. First-order virtues are "legislative" aspects of our character that guide our natural human tendencies with respect to a conception of a good life. Second-order virtues, in contrast, direct the development of "judicial" aspects of our character that subjects our conception of a good life to critical examination with the aim of *developing a character* that is worthy of it. Hence wise actions implicate the agent's character, a point that psychological accounts of wisdom take few pains to mention.

The distinction between the legislative and judicial aspects of character is an improvement on Frankfurt's (1988) distinction between *wantons* and *persons*. On Frankfurt's account a *person* has the capacity to reflect upon desires and motives and to form judgments with respect to them. A person cares about the sort of desires, characteristics, and motives one has, and wants effectively to instantiate these in one's life (as "second-order desires"). In contrast, a wanton does not care about the desirability of one's desires. A wanton pursues whatever inclinations are the strongest, but does not care which inclination it is.

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Yet wantons like this are as fictitious as *phronimos* exemplars. A legislative character that is action-guiding in pursuit of substantive desires that accord with some conception of a good life is within reach of all normally developing individuals. Hence, there are no real wantons of concern to moral psychology; and although Frankfurt's *person* would be in minimal possession of a legislative character, it is not clear that such persons would be in possession of the judicial character that subjects substantive considerations to further appraisal.

Second-Order Self-Identity

Frankfurt's (1988) account of second-order desires, and the distinction between wantons and persons, influenced both Charles Taylor (1989) and Augusto Blasi (1984, 2005) in their accounts of self and identity processes in the moral domain. "Being a self," Taylor (1989, p. 112) writes, "is inseparable from existing in a space of moral issues." For Taylor (1989) identity is a product of strong evaluation. Strong evaluators make ethical assessments of first-order desires, and these discriminations are made against a "horizon of significance" that frames and constitutes who we are as persons. "To know who I am is a species of knowing where I stand (Taylor, 1989, p. 27). He continues: "My identity is defined by the commitments and identifications which provide the frame or horizon within which I can try to determine from case to case what is good or valuable, or what ought to be done or what I endorse or oppose" (p. 27).

Similarly, Blasi (1984) argues that moral identity is the result of a self that is constructed on the basis of moral commitments. The moral person is one for whom morality is central, essential, and important to self-understanding. Moral commitments cut deeply to the core of what and who they are as persons, and this identification with morality yields a self-consistent motive to follow through in action on what the moral law requires in the situations that confronts us. In a later writing, Blasi (2005) folded this self-model of moral identity into a general theory of character that distinguishes lower and higher order traits. Lower order traits are the specific dispositions that often show up in tables of favored virtues. These lists "frequently differ from each other, are invariably long, and can be easily extended, and are largely unsystematic" (Blasi, 2005, p. 70). In contrast, higher order traits have greater generality and applicability across situations.

One cluster of higher order traits are skills of willpower that underwrite self-regulation in problem-solving. These include breaking down

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problems, goal-setting, focusing attention, avoiding distractions, resisting temptation, and staying on task. This willpower cluster is broadly metacognitive in nature. The second cluster of higher order traits organize internal self-consistency and the sense of integrity (e.g., being a person of one's word, self-accountable, transparent to the self, resistant to self-deception). In Blasi's (2005) view, integrity is felt as *responsibility* when we constrain the self with intentional acts of self-control; and as *identity* when we imbue the construction of self-meaning with moral desires. When constructed in this way living out one's moral commitments does not feel like a choice but is felt instead as a matter of self-necessity. This suggests that self-control and integrity are morally neutral but take on significance for moral character when they are attached to moral desires. Our self-control and integrity are moralized by our desire to keep faith with morality.

One attractive feature of Taylor's strong evaluation and Blasi's integrity is the centrality of self-identity in the formation of moral agents. This feature foreshadows a point I will make later with respect to purpose and wisdom. A second attractive feature is the evident *second-order* nature of strong evaluation and integrity, a feature that is shared with moral wisdom (and other approaches to virtue). Blasi's account of self-consistency and integrity traits, particularly the latter's emphasis on self-transparency and resistance to self-deception, would seem crucial for undermining the all too human tendency to cloak shameful motives with the veneer of virtue; although self-control described by higher order cluster of self-consistency traits will also find its place as a metacognitive cluster within moral wisdom.

That said, there are possible lines of criticism. Flanagan (1990) argues that Taylor's strong evaluation overestimates the degree of articulateness and reflection required for personhood and identity. Similarly, one could imagine making identity commitments to traditional morality that do not necessitate burdensome reflection. One might, for example, passively accept enduring, conventional patterns to provide guidance for one's conception of a good life. Kekes (1995) terms this conventional passivity "fortuitous character," as opposed to "deliberative character" where one subjects one's choices to active reflective judgment. In both the case of weak evaluation and fortuitous character the *second-order* feature of virtue reflection does not seem strictly necessary or is happenstance. One can see the justice of Flanagan's criticism if one were talking about legislative (vs. judicial) character and substantive (vs. regulative) desires in living out a conception of a good life that aligns with fortuitous (vs. deliberative) moral commitments.

Yet moral wisdom will be required to adjudicate conflicting substantive and regulative desires and to transform fortuitous character into a

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deliberative character. Kekes (1995) would add that the second-order features of Frankfurt and Taylor (and I would add Blasi) do not countenance the permanent adversities, and hence moral wisdom is also required to better control the adversities that permanently frustrate our aspirations toward living well the life that is good for one to live, which is to say, a life with purpose, wisdom, and moral commitment. On this point, the possible ways of amending the purpose, wisdom, and moral identity constructs are already in view. Moral identity commitments of a fortuitous character, purposes that reflect substantive desires, and wisdom that is legislative, are not up to the task of curbing permanent adversities. Such a life is more likely to lead to the consternation of *Little Gidding* unless turned by moral wisdom in the direction of the deliberative character, regulative desires, and judicial oversight of the sort of person deemed necessary to live worthy conceptions of a good life.

Metacognitive Features of Moral Wisdom

Moral wisdom is a second-order virtue that involves the knowledge, evaluation, and judgment required for living in accord with a conception of a good life (Kekes, 1995). The knowledge component is of the permanent adversities, of the sources of good and evil in our lives and how it affects our character. Evaluation and judgment are recruited to exercise control over our desires – to suppress the shameful and sinister while promoting the praiseworthy and virtuous. We are cognizant of how contingency, conflict, and evil distort our character and cause us to fall short of the moral line to gain, but we try nonetheless to come closer to first downs on the pitch of our moral ambitions. We do this by increasing our control over our capacities, opportunities, and situational affordances through knowledge, evaluation, and judgment.

The three components of moral wisdom, then, knowledge, evaluation, and judgment, are deployed to solve the problem of controlling permanent adversities that stand in the way of living a good life. What Kekes (1995) is describing (without saying so) is that the second-order aspect of moral wisdom is metacognitive in nature. Indeed, it is now increasingly common to invoke metacognition to describe *phronesis*, wisdom, and virtue (Bajovic & Rizzo, 2021; Green, 2019; Grossman et al., 2020; Kristjánsson et al., 2021; Lapsley & Chaloner, 2020; Lepock, 2014; Narvaez, 2014; Stichter, 2024).[4]

[4] *Phronesis* is traditionally understood as "practical wisdom or "practical intelligence." It does the heavy lifting in neo-Aristotelian inspired ethical theory and conceptions of wisdom, where it is understood

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The second-order features of desires (Frankfurt), strong evaluation (Taylor), and moral identity consistency (Blasi) also have a metacognitive ring to it. So does Aristotle's account of virtue: "to feel them at the right times, with reference to the right objects, towards the right people, with the right motive, and in the right ways, is what is both intermediate and best, and that is characteristic of virtue" (Aristotle, 1106b). Indeed, Lepock (2014, p. 46) argued that "... the 'high-level' virtues are easily seen as capacities for controlling or regulating inquiry and belief formation" and "we can use empirical studies of metacognition to inform our understanding of what is necessary for virtue."

Yet empirical studies of metacognitive virtue, *phronesis*, and wisdom have not yet emerged. It has not even surfaced as a theoretical possibility in the purpose literature. This is because the extant invocation of metacognition in accounts of these constructs has been largely metaphoric, suggestive, and imprecise and not anchored to well-attested theoretical and empirical treatment of metacognition in the literature of developmental and educational psychology where it does the heavy lifting. But Kekes's (1995) account of the knowledge, evaluation, and judgment components of moral wisdom deployed for the purpose of exercising control over the character and for transforming it in the face of permanent adversities does, indeed, align with standard accounts of metacognition (Schraw & Moshman, 1995), as I hope to show.

The standard psychological account identifies two components of metacognition: (1) metacognitive knowledge and (2) metacognitive regulation. Metacognitive knowledge is declarative (knowing *that*), procedural (knowing *how*), and conditional (knowing *when*). Metacognitive regulation includes *planning*, *selection*, *monitoring*, *controlling*, and *evaluating*. These twin components of metacognition (knowledge and regulation) are the very terms of reference for moral wisdom, as can be seen in Table 2.1.

Knowledge of Moral Wisdom

The declarative metacognitive component of moral wisdom is *knowing that* permanent adversities confront our attempt to live a good life. It is knowledge of good and evil. Further, it is to align primary and secondary

as a special kind of intellectual meta-virtue that has several functions: it guides social perception, summons and adjudicates the application of other virtues, and provides a blueprint for action and living a virtuous life. See Darnell et al. (2019), Kristjánsson, K. and Fowers, B. (2023), and Russell (2009) for authoritative accounts of *phronesis*. For doubts about *phronesis* see Lapsley (2019, 2021) and Miller (2021). For a rejoinder, see DeCaro, Navarini, and Vaccarezza (2024).

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Table 2.1 *Metacognition of moral wisdom*

Moral wisdom knowledge		Moral wisdom regulation	
Declarative	Knowing that contingency, conflict, and evil are permanent adversities	Planning	Deciding what forward-looking steps to take to strengthen or weaken enduring patterns in our deliberative character
Procedural	Knowing how to align primary and secondary values to a conception of a good life	Selection	Selecting appropriate situations that afford cultivation of virtues while "avoiding the near occasions of sin"[1]
Conditional	Knowing when to connect particular situations to judgments of good and evil	Control	Using three modes of reflection (moral imagination, self-knowledge, moral depth) to increase our control over internal obstacles in the way of our judgment
		Monitoring	Tracking agent's behavioral motivations with self-reflective transparency
		Evaluation	Regulative (second-order) evaluation of substantive desires in light of agents' character and desirability of conception(s) of a good life

[1] Act of Contrition (prayer)

values with a conception of a good life. Primary values are those invariant considerations that attach to human beings as such (e.g., bodily needs, protection from elements, goods of intimacy, and reliable social order). Secondary values are those that attach to variable conceptions of good lives. These conceptions follow from traditions that typically provide more options than can be reasonably pursued in one life. Think of emerging adults' exploration of identity options "in breadth" (Luyckx et al., 2005), for example, or the life course challenge involved in discerning a sense of purpose (Bronk, 2014) as sustained reflections on the variety of goods motivated by secondary values (and recruiting conflict as permanent adversity as a result).

As Kekes (1995, p. 23) puts it, "Primary values are discovered by attending to uniform human needs; while secondary values are formed by

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the reciprocal adjustment between our moral tradition and individuality. The tradition presents a plurality of secondary values, and part of the process of finding secondary values is to grow in our appreciation of these traditional possibilities." This alignment of values to a conception of good lives constitutes the procedural *knowing how* of moral wisdom. Finally, the conditional aspect of metacognitive moral wisdom closely reflects Aristotle's account of virtue, or practical wisdom (*phronesis*) that attaches to virtue, cited earlier: to recruit moral knowledge at the right times in the proper situations, with the right motive, in the right way.

Regulation of Moral Wisdom

Moral wisdom is also metacognitive in terms of regulative processes. Planning, selection, and evaluation were alluded to earlier. One must strategically plan the steps to move a fortuitous character to a deliberative one; select the contexts where virtue can be exercised and strengthened; and evaluate the desirability of our substantive desires in light of our character and conception of a good life. But whether planning, selection, and evaluation are effective will depend upon our ability to block the internal obstacles presented by permanent adversities from sacking our moral ambitions. The blocking scheme requires three modes of reflection to improve our judgment, what Kekes (1995) calls *moral imagination*, *self-knowledge*, and *moral depth*. Here I am grouping moral imagination and moral depth under the heading of metacognitive control processes and self-knowledge under the heading of metacognitive monitoring to better illustrate the fundamental metacognitive nature of moral wisdom regulation.

Metacognitive Control Processes. Moral imagination is required in order to transform complex situations into something simpler and actionable without glossing over moral complexities (Kekes, 1995). We might enlarge our vision, for example, by considering the lives of exemplars and the possibilities they faced while drawing implications for our own predicament. We might draw lessons from literature, history, and biography. Great poetry can open our eyes to wider vistas of insight and uncommon depths of feeling. It is sometimes said that what we see in the moral landscape depends on who we are, that is, depends on our character; yet what we see can also change our character if we look beyond the friendly confines of our own tradition, beyond the conventionalities that canalize our judgment. We grow in breadth by playing in a larger field of possibilities, and, from that standpoint, are put in a better position to critically appraise our own moral tradition.

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Kekes (1995) argues, however, that living like this is not a realistic option for most of us. We cannot engage in deliberative, effortful System 2 cognitive architecture for very long. At some point, we have to settle in, make peace with conventional possibilities, and get on with our lives. But here lurks a danger. "Step by innocuous step," Kekes (1995, p. 110) writes, "we are thus led down the path to narrow-mindedness." It is far easier to turn away from possibilities that could make our lives better than to maintain constant watch. Kekes continues

> This understandable propensity toward laziness of spirit and willingness to stay with the familiar is one source of the misjudgments we tend to make of our possibilities: we exclude many of those we could make our own, and the exclusion is motivated by our desire for comfort and by our aversion to expanding our horizons.

Our fat relentless ego is plagued by two additional sources of misjudgment: fantasy and self-deception. Fantasy is fueled by disproportionately strong emotion that bids us to pursue unsuitable possibilities or to preclude the search for better ones. Self-deception emerges in our attempt to reconcile the conflict between our substantive and regulative desires, as when we deceive ourselves into believing that our reasons for pursuing the former are motivated by the latter when they are not.

Hence moral imagination is required to prevent narrow-mindedness, fantasy, and self-deception from leading us to misapprehend possibilities and distort our judgment. Moral imagination is also required, by extension, for identity work and for discerning purposes, and for the same reason. Identity exploration in breadth, as understood in the Belgian four-dimensions model of identity development (e.g., Luyckx et al., 2005), and discernment of purpose, as variously understood in the purpose literature, can be plagued similarly by narrow-mindedness, fantasy, and self-deception. The explorations of identity can shift away too readily from what is fundamental to living a good life, which is how our identifications are also reflections of character. All identity work, on this view, to the extent that it is premised on living a good life, is moral identity work, although commitments proper to fortuitous character is a common temptation that will require moral wisdom to counter.

Moral self-regulation also requires moral depth, as well as moral imagination. Moral depth, in Kekes (1995) view, is an attitudinal response to a sense of hopelessness that might arise when we realize that our moral ambition to live a good life is not under our control, that our efforts are compromised by contingency, conflict, and evil. Moral depth is revealed

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when our reflections acknowledge that honorable lives are jeopardized by permanent adversities and when we recognize that it is illusory to think that decency, purpose, wisdom, and moral identity are sufficient to surmount them.

But moral depth turns against inappropriate responses to this realization, including responses such as disengagement, denial, romanticism, and resignation (Kekes, 1995). An attitude of disengagement from the life endangered by adversities will actually weaken our will to confront them. Denying the relevance of permanent adversities to living a good life will not make them go away, nor will romanticizing invulnerability to them. Resignation must also be resisted because it induces real doubts about whether wholehearted engagement in life is worth the effort. "We shall lack enthusiasm, dedication, seriousness of spirit, and our lives, then, become permeated by a languid insipidity in which nothing really matters" (Kekes, 1995, p. 179). We are resigned to being spectators to our own lives "but our heart will not be in it" (p. 179).

An attitude befitting moral depth bids us not to "collude in causing what we fear" (p. 179), not to disengage, deny, romanticize, or resign, but rather to put forth our best effort even if the moral line to gain seems well-defended or beyond reach. Moral depth helps us maintain our balance by recognizing the source of what is dispiriting about the human condition, which is the completely unrealistic expectation that living with decency is sufficient to secure our ambition to live a good life. It might be disquieting to realize that our aspirations often fail, and herein lies the temptation to hopelessness; but greater moral depth cautions against drawing the wrong conclusion, which is that any effort to control the conditions of our life is unavailing.

Here, then, is one kind of purpose in life worth pursuing but unaddressed in the purpose literature: develop moral depth to challenge the *ennui* of resignation, disengagement, and denial. Put differently, the purpose of moral wisdom is to cultivate attitudes of moral depth in pursuit of a good life worth living.

Metacognitive Monitoring. Self-knowledge is the metacognitive monitoring feature of moral wisdom. It is a mode of reflection that aims to transform fortuitous character into deliberative character, a transformation made necessary because of the inability of fortuitous character to resolve any but plainly simple situations requiring the application of an obvious moral principle. Hence the aim of self-knowledge is the transformation of our character (Kekes, 1995). Its metacognitive monitoring feature is directed toward understanding the malign influence of

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permanent adversities on our character and the steps we must take to fortify our character to oppose or mitigate them.

In important ways, self-knowledge, as a metacognitive feature of moral wisdom, functions much the way Blasi (2005) describes identity-as-integrity with its self-transparency and resistance to self-deception. It monitors the facts about ourselves so that we are able to construct an accurate self-portrait. This fact-finding looks backward in our biographical past to inspect and evaluate the enduring pattern of our character that strengthens or weakens our resolve to live a good life but with an eye to a forward-looking commitment to keep our eye on the prize. Self-knowledge, then, involves description, evaluation, and motivation (Kekes, 1995). And there is a Blasian element here, too, that self-knowledge carries with it a constitutive motivation element to act on our self-understanding in accord with a consistency principle that is built into his conception of moral identity.

Kekes (1995) argues that self-knowledge combats moral drift and alienation. He writes "The more we come to know ourselves, the more our character changes from fortuitous to deliberate because the result of self-knowledge is to transform the patterns formed of desires, capacities, opportunities, values, and actions, which constitute our character, from what they happened to have been to what we decide they ought to be" (p. 131). Hence the moral purpose of wisdom is the transformation of our character. And what we often discover in the process is that we have spent our lives "in a confusion of what we say and do with who we really are" (Auden, 2022, p. 259). What we discover strikes us as an unpleasant surprise. We become more deeply aware of intentions, motives, and actions that now seem the product of incoherence in our character (Kekes, 1995). This sudden illumination of self-knowledge is perhaps the very thing that strikes the narrator of *Little Gidding*, it is the very thing that drives the ego despair described by Erikson in his final epigenetic stage, and though observers like us might lament that such self-knowledge comes so late it is also a sure sign that lives are redeemable with the metacognitive monitoring that comes with moral wisdom. This is the real gift that one hopes is reserved for all of us and not only for the aged.

The Big Three Revisited

Moral wisdom is the capacity to make judgments in moments of action about how to live well the life that is good for one to live. It is a second-order virtue constituted by metacognitive knowledge and metacognitive

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regulation processes that equips one with a fighting chance to control the influence of permanent adversities that distract us from living a good life. Confronting contingency, conflict, and evil will require the transformation of our character so that we are better able to evaluate and reconcile substantive and regulative desires. It will require self-reflective transparency to move us from fortuitous to deliberative character. It will require three modes of reflection – moral imagination, self-knowledge, and moral depth – to increase our control over internal obstacles that block the way to living a good life.

Kekes's (1995) account of moral wisdom has implications for how we think about the Big Three constructs of purpose, wisdom, and moral identity. I noted earlier that these important constructs lack the resources to confront the permanent adversities of human life. In each case moral wisdom is required to forestall the ego despair of senescence and the unpleasant surprise of *Little Gidding*. Moral wisdom is required to support generative lives across the entire lifespan. In this section, I make several observations about the contribution of moral wisdom to extant conceptualizations of the Big Three.

Purpose

The purpose of moral wisdom is to acquire self-knowledge to transform our character. On this view, the "sense of purpose" has a fundamentally moral point: to overcome internal obstacles to living out the moral conceptions of our life so that the enduring patterns of our character come into better alignment with the sort of person we claim ourselves to be. This is quite different from the way the sense of purpose is often described in the literature, for example, as a broad overarching framework or centralized aim that drives goal-setting in daily life (e.g., Kashdan et al., 2022; Lewis, 2020). Putting it this way leaves blank and ghostly the character of the agent whose purpose it is. In contrast, the sense of purpose worth having (on the view defended here) is the commitment to cultivate moral wisdom because without it we are ill-equipped to navigate the multiple and conflicting overarching frameworks and centralized aims at our disposal and without moral wisdom these frameworks, aims, and moral aspirations founder on the shoals of permanent adversities. Parenthetically, this is an argument for locating the purpose construct more squarely in the domain of moral psychology.

Of course, the purpose literature is not entirely bereft of moral considerations. There is evidence, for example, that prosocial purpose orientations are particularly conducive to well-being (Bronk et al., 2009; Hill et al.,

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2010). Purpose has been likened to a virtue to the extent it is dispositional, second-order, fostered by explicit tuition and habituation, and guided by *phronesis* (Han, 2015). Damon and colleagues build moral commitments that reach beyond the self into their conceptualization of purpose (Damon et al., 2003). On this account, self-transcendence is a purpose worth having insofar as it is manifested by a commitment to other-regarding moral projects. It is more rarely noted that for all the emphasis on transcendence, this model also insists that commitments "beyond the self" must *also* be meaningful *to the self*.

One attraction of the self-transcendence perspective is that purpose commitments are decidedly anchored within a psychology of selfhood and identity. This is worth noting because the character of agents – their identity, and self-understanding – is not always prominent in other accounts of purpose, as noted earlier. What is prominent instead is that a "sense of purpose," no matter its thematic content, and certainly absent considerations of the moral self, is somehow implausibly the driver of well-being, flourishing, good health, good incomes, and unrelenting happiness and positivity *no matter what* (see also Burrow et al., 2021). And although the components of purpose surely involve traits, habits, and states, as the PATHS model indicates (Hill et al., 2023), these things also attach unmistakably to selves with character and the whole range of morally charged self-relevant emotions that comes with it. Indeed, self-understanding, at the highest level of developmental complexity, is suffused with ethical considerations (Damon & Hart, 1982; Lapsley, 2005) which in turn lays the foundation for purpose development beyond adolescence (Damon, 2000).

Yet moral wisdom is still required. Self-transcendence models of purpose emphasize a prosocial "beyond the self" orientation, but making this work requires moral wisdom to overcome internal obstacles to living out these moral commitments. The self who adopts a purpose that is both meaningful and transcendent must also be free from fantasy, self-deception and the subtle machinations of the fat relentless ego. One must be clear about substantive and regulative desires and the requirements of deliberative character. In short, the metacognitive features of moral wisdom, its knowledge and regulative processes described earlier, are indispensable for controlling the permanent adversities that invariably compromise self-transcendent intentions, and for transforming our character in ways that animate our desire to be worthy of them. Put differently, the sense of purpose requires a moral-character psychology to better describe the self whose purpose it is.

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This line of argument underscores the point noted previously that the purpose construct is profitably located within moral psychology but a further clarification is in order. It was argued, for example, that the sense of purpose requires a moral-character psychology to better describe the sort of self whose purpose it is. The "beyond-the-self" conception of purpose is usefully thought to ground the purpose construct on a moral foundation, but not entirely, I would argue. After all, beyond-the-self purposes, while surely of some other-regarding moral significance, must also be meaningful to the self whose purpose it is. Put another way, self-transcendent purpose does not work without moral wisdom.

Of course, we all pursue purposes of many kinds, but the sense of purpose driving them is at different levels. The distinction between legislative and judicial virtues and between fortuitous and deliberative character can be pressed to inform the moral status of the different kinds of purpose. Recall that first-order virtues are legislative aspects of our character that are action-guiding with respect to our conception of a good life. Judicial aspects of our character subject such legislative purposes to critical examination with the aim of *developing our character*. Relatedly, one can approach the purposes of one's life in a passive way, accepting conventional patterns as befits a fortuitous character, or else in a deliberative way that brings critical reflective judgment to bear on one's purposes. The sense of purpose that aligns more closely with judicial, deliberative aspirations *for our character* lands in the moral domain. Whether the "beyond-the-self" perspective always lands in this domain would seem to hinge on whether such projects are undertaken with reflective, second-order deliberative concerns with character or not. It bears repeating: self-transcendent purpose without moral wisdom will fall short of the moral line to gain.

Wisdom

One theme of this chapter is that the sense of purpose that has figured so prominently in the positive psychology literature is defeasible without moral wisdom. Moral wisdom is the suite of metacognitive skills that allows one to cope with permanent adversities that invariably challenge our good intentions to live well. But, of course, a concept like moral wisdom will have inevitable implications for the way wisdom is conceptualized in many fields of psychology. Another theme of this chapter is that these conceptions are defeasible in the face of permanent adversities.

The wisdom and purpose literature share broad similarities. Both have attracted soaring research interest. Both are described in terms of multiple

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complex models and meta-perspectives illustrated by charts of impressive complexity. Moral themes are evident in both works of literature (e.g., Huynh et al., 2017), and so is self-transcendence (e.g., Aldwin et al., 2019; Kim et al., 2023; Nusbaum, 2019). Recently, Sternberg and Karami (2021) argued that at a certain high level of abstraction, the many models of wisdom are not really inconsistent but are "merely (a) looking at different aspects of wisdom, or (b) highlighting different elements of the same aspects of wisdom" (p. 134). To that end, they articulated a "6P Framework" to unify divergent perspectives. The six components are Purpose of wisdom, wisdom-related environmental Press, Problems requiring wisdom, characteristics of wise Persons, Processes of wisdom, and Products of wisdom: Purpose, Press, Problems, Persons, Processes, and Products.

I am confident that a place can be found for the present account of moral wisdom in the 6P Framework, the generality of which would exclude few constructs. Elements of moral wisdom are recognizable within Purpose and Process, for example, although the Persons component does not appear to be a good candidate, which is surprising. The 6P Framework considers Person characteristics secondary, "because people achieve the purposes of wisdom through a wide variety of means" (Sternberg & Karami, 2021, p. 143), and there is no one correct list of Person characteristics to achieve its ends. "In this sense," they write, "wisdom is idiosyncratic in the way it is achieved, but always has the normative end of achieving a common good" (p. 143).

But moral wisdom is still required, and it attaches to persons. The object of moral wisdom is the transformation of character, a decidedly person variable, so that the ends of wisdom can be realized in the face of permanent adversities. Moreover, the ends of moral wisdom, its purpose, and ethical focus, are internalist in the sense that it implicates qualities of the agent. The metacognition of moral wisdom, its knowledge and regulation processes, is directed to self-transformation so that the patterns of our character are better controlled with self-reflective transparency. In contrast, the ethical focus of 6P is externalist in the sense that it is directed at transforming the social order to realize a normative conception of the common good. Yet it is difficult to see how these admirable and desirable normative ends can be achieved without qualities of agents suffused with characteristics of moral wisdom that are at the ready to control the untoward influence of contingency, conflict, and evil that stand in the way of realizing them.

The Common Wisdom Model (CWM) is another attempt to clarify conceptual confusions and forge consensus among wisdom researchers

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(Grossman et al., 2020). The consensus view of some wisdom researchers draws attention to two of its defining characteristics: moral aspirations and what is called perspectival metacognition (PMC). PMC does the heavy lifting in the CWM; indeed, PMC makes it possible to pursue and enact moral aspirations. PMC is described as a suite of intellectual virtues (my way of putting it). It includes, for example, epistemic humility, open-mindedness to diverse perspectives, and owning the limitations of one's own perspectives. This suite of virtues works against self-deception, it is argued and helps us process social dilemmas and coordinate long-term planning.

The CWM has some affinity with moral wisdom to the extent that it embraces "morally grounded excellence in social-cognitive processes" (Grossman et al., 2020, p. 103). Indeed, social cognitive approaches to moral personality (Lapsley & Narvaez, 2004) and its development (Lapsley & Hill, 2009) are certainly of interest. In addition, the prominent role of metacognition is also a feature of both CWM and moral wisdom, as is the concern to pierce self-deception and illusion. There are also significant differences. The two approaches differ on how to understand metacognition. In the present moral wisdom model metacognition is understood in terms of knowledge and regulation processes, which is standard in the educational, developmental, and learning sciences (e.g., Schraw & Moshman, 1995). In contrast, the CWM treats metacognition as a collection of intellectual virtues (again, my term). On this point, PMC seems more at home in virtue epistemology than in eudaimonic virtue theory. Finally, the CWM has little to say about how to connect wisdom to the agency and character of the moral self, or how PMC controls permanent adversities in pursuit of moral aspirations.

Another prominent approach to wisdom is the neo-Aristotelian *phronesis* (APM) model (Darnell et al., 2019; Kristjánsson et al., 2021; Kristjánsson & Fowers, 2023). It is critical of the CWM in several ways. For example, it argues that the CWM leaves little room for emotions, its account of moral aspirations is "thin and bloodless," and PMC is "inert, unmotivated, and unmotivating" (Kristjánsson et al., 2021, p. 250). Moreover, according to APM, the functions of PMC are better understood in terms of Aristotelian practical wisdom (*phronesis*). For his part, Grossman (2017) dismisses neo-Aristotelian practical wisdom as an essentialist portrayal of wisdom.

The APM model of practical wisdom is influential, widely promoted, and vigorously defended (Kristjánsson & Fowers, 2023; also see De Caro et al., 2024). The model endows *phronesis* with several responsibilities. It has a constitutive-perceptual function in that it extracts ethically relevant

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features from situations. *Phronesis* also integrates the application of virtues, weighing and adjusting their priority, particularly when situations are complex and several are summoned. In addition, *phronesis* articulates a life blueprint that gives shape to moral identity by giving it something to aim for. *Phronesis* also infuses reason with emotions. These four functions of *phronesis* certainly cover quite a lot of ground, perhaps too much ground (Miller, 2021; Stichter, 2024). As a deliberative excellence, it allows its bearer to see clearly, interpret situations, discern key features, and generate salient reasons. It involves emotion regulation and it issues context-sensitive decisions. As a meta-virtue, it adjudicates conflict among virtues and calibrates their application.

Is it capacious enough to subsume moral wisdom? One can imagine a neo-Aristotelian response to the effect that Kekes's model of moral wisdom is *nothing but phronesis*-in-action. Although Kekes (1995) argues against the conflation of moral and practical wisdom, there is clear thematic affinity in some areas that should not be dismissed; and certainly, there is no objection to using practical wisdom as a term to describe situational problem-solving and solution-focused judgment and decision-making. That said, I have raised several doubts about the APM model elsewhere (Lapsley, 2021, 2019) and here I will just make two points.

First, the APM gives *phronesi*s a workload that is coterminous with the entire personality, and its four components are better understood in terms of other personality theories and the constructs they generate. Second, the APM locates *phronesis* atop a hierarchy over which it oversees the working of its four components, including handing off to moral identity a blueprint for it to follow. Yet, on Dunne's (1993) account, *phronesis* strongly implicates the moral self-as-agent and is not something that exists apart from it. In his view phronesis must respect the "nondisposability of the agent's self – so that the self appears not within the field that can be surveyed by *phronesis* but rather in the very activity of *phronesis* itself" (Dunne, 1993, p. 269). Similarly, Sherman (1989) argues that "the agent is not led blindly by certain ends, but controls them to the extent to which he controls his own character."

And here is where moral wisdom is required. Permanent adversities make it difficult to control our own character, and if *phronesis* is a non-disposable feature of the agent's self if the self is "implicated in the very activity of *phronesis* itself," then *phronesis* is no more immune to permanent adversities that are our selfhood and character, and just as much in need of moral wisdom. Indeed, the trouble with human life is that we are faced with multiple blueprints, not a single phronetic one, and identity choices are similarly plural, and while things might seem blazingly clear to

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phronimos, for most of us, moral wisdom is required to work through contingency, conflict, and evil.

Moral Identity

As noted earlier, moral identity is a strong predictor and moderator of behavior across the vast terrain of empirical psychology (Hardy & Carlo, 2011; Lapsley, 2016) and, of course, it also shows up in the neo-Aristotelian *phronesis* model. I have suggested here that models of purpose and wisdom should account for it. In an important study, Krettenauer (2021) argues that moral identity has a dark side. To protect our self-image as a moral person we might be tempted to use moral disengagement strategies, for example, or become too comfortable with moral hypocrisy and moral licensing.

There might be something to this, but the problem might not be with moral identity per se, but with the type of moral identity and its ability to cope with evil and wickedness as permanent adversity. Moral identity commitments can be the unreflective product of fortuitous character. We might become attached to utterly conventional understandings of good and evil which are entirely serviceable if the situations we face do not challenge them. Kekes (1995) calls this "unreflective innocence," and an unreflective form of moral self-identity can certainly be developed in this space. For example, Blasian moral identity could be formed in a way that does not recognize our vulnerability to permanent adversities or, if aware, could harbor the illusion that we can maintain our integrity even if we are defeated by them. As Kekes (1995) points out, permanent adversities are formidable not simply because we are their potential victims but also because we are their potential agents. Herein might lie the dark side of moral identity, that it is unreflective, fortuitous, conventional, and innocent. A reflective form of moral identity would be fortified with the metacognitive knowledge and control processes of moral wisdom, which puts us in a stronger position to cope with the dark sides of contingency, conflict, and evil.

Conclusion

I have argued that living well the life that is good for one to live will require purpose, wisdom, and moral self-identity, as their formidable literature attest, but that these constructs are defeasible without moral wisdom. Kekes's (1995) account of moral wisdom was influential in making this case. I tried to show that the various features of moral wisdom align with standard accounts of metacognition, yielding a more precise way to use the

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language of metacognition with respect to virtue and wisdom. I concluded with a review of each of the Big Three – purpose, wisdom, and moral identity – to show where moral wisdom might be required in the conceptualization of these constructs.

Of course, there is much that is also unsaid, and perhaps unknown. How does research proceed under the heading of moral wisdom? What does it look like? What developmental trajectories are possible? What does moral education look like that brings moral wisdom within reach? Kekes (1995) has some ideas about education for moral wisdom, but my hunch is that future research and educational agenda should target the metacognitive aspects of moral wisdom. Metacognition is the target of instruction in the educational and learning sciences, and looking there for workable insights is a fair strategic bet.

Moreover, new theoretical approaches to moral identity also trade on metacognitive themes whose relevance to moral wisdom and purpose has yet to be explored (Krettenauer & Stichter, 2023; Stichter, 2024). Krettenauer and Stichter (2023) would insist, for example, that a reflective form of moral identity must also include self-regulative goals that are sufficiently abstract, internally motivated (as per the requirements of self-determination theory), and promotion focused rather than prevention focused. The appeal to theories of self-determination, self-regulation, and goal motivation is fertile soil for moral wisdom but also for new ways to understand how purpose works across the life course.

I began the chapter with an excerpt from T. S. Eliot's *Little Gidding*, which served as an organizational hook throughout the chapter. In the final movement of *Little Gidding*, Eliot writes "... to make an end is to make a beginning. The end is where we start from." It seems fitting to end the chapter on making a beginning in light of the work on moral wisdom now in front of us if the account of it here holds any attraction. And moving forward, given the complexities of the work ahead of us, we will surely come to appreciate a stricture from the second movement of *East Coker,* the second of Eliot's *Four Quartets:* "The only wisdom we can hope to acquire/Is the wisdom of humility: humility is endless."

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