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Collective Wisdom and Civilization: Revitalizing Ancient Wisdom Traditions

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Introduction

Our question is: can collective wisdom save civilization? On one rendition this question is rather straightforward and can be empirically answered. For if ‘collective wisdom’ is understood as the collective knowledge of a society or culture and ‘civilization’ is associated with a certain level of social or technological advancement, then our question concerns whether collective knowledge can help create or maintain certain kinds of social structures or technologies, certain levels of urbanization or kinds of civil infrastructural technology.

Characterized this way, the answer to our question is an obvious, and perhaps trivial, “yes.” But both ‘collective wisdom’ and ‘civilization’ have alternative definitions, which render our question less trivial and more important, though more difficult to answer.

‘Collective wisdom’ may not refer merely to the collective knowledge of a particular society or culture, but can refer instead to wisdom understood as a collective interpretation of human experience, of what kind of intellect, knowledge, experience, and judgment is required to live a good and successful human life as such.

‘Civilization,’ although often associated solely with certain levels of social and technological advancement, can also refer to the moral status and level of development of an action or individual as when we refer to specific actions or persons as “civilized” or “uncivilized” in a distinctly normative moral sense.¹ To be ‘civilized’ in an individual moral sense is what Aristotle called to be *eleutherios*, to have the individual disposition to be concerned with virtue (*arētē*) in both thought and action as the result of proper education and habituation.²

With these alternative definitions, our question becomes: Can collective interpretations of human experience, interpretations of the thoughts and skills required to live a good and successful human life as such, create or maintain individual dispositions to be concerned with virtue?

¹ Of course, the social and technological senses of ‘civilization’ also lend themselves to normative uses, which served as a basis for some peoples and nations to deem less developed ones as inferior and able to be mistreated (or forcefully reformed).

² See Terrance Irwin’s translation of Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1999, p.331 (cf. 1179b5-10).

This essay is an attempt to answer our question thus formulated. I argue that, in one sense, yes, collective wisdom *can* save civilization. But in a more important sense, collective wisdom should be understood as a *form* of civilization, as the result and expression of a moral civilizing-process that comes about through the creation and transmission of collective interpretations of human experience and the concomitant skills to be developed.

Collective wisdom traditions function in this manner by providing an interpretation of what it means to be human and what thoughts, skills, and actions are required to live a successful human life at the most general level of analysis. Collective wisdom can have a civilizing effect on individuals, and indirectly on societies, by providing a type of orienting theoretical and practical framework for understanding the proper relationship between the self, others, and the world. Such traditions in effect provide a “blueprint” for the successful human life as such, by providing guidance on thought and action, on what is appropriate to think, feel, desire, and do in theoretical and practical contexts.

A wise individual will be a 'civilized' individual in this moral sense, an individual who is properly habituated and educated so as to now reflectively endorse and desire thinking and acting in morally civilized ways.

However, this understanding of collective wisdom and civilization is in many ways today controversial and met with justified critiques and skeptical criticisms. To defend this way of approaching and answering our question against these critiques, I turn first to ancient wisdom traditions from civilizations in ancient India, China, and Greece as paradigms for understanding exactly how collective wisdom can achieve the end of civilizing humanity. Based on this analysis, I sketch the outlines of a revitalized wisdom tradition able to civilize individuals today. But any such tradition must be updated to reflect the advancement of modern natural science and to meet the demands of living in our diverse, pluralistic, and globalized world.

Ancient Wisdom Traditions

The term ‘ancient wisdom tradition’ requires explicit definition. By ‘ancient wisdom traditions’ I mean what we would call today the ethical-philosophical-religious traditions that developed across various ancient cultures during the so-called "axial age,"³ approximately 800 BCE to 200 BCE.

³ This is a term popularized by the philosopher Karl Jaspers in the early 20th century to reflect the radical changes in thought that occurred in several places around the globe in this period.

This age of “turning” saw the rise of new forms of thought, new ways of thinking about society, religion, ethics, and what it means to be human. This entailed reflection on the implicit aspects of human experience, claims and assumptions about the nature of reality, as well as a critique of social values and habits deemed inimical to harmony, order, or virtue.

To be more specific, by ancient wisdom traditions I will be referring to the wisdom traditions that developed from the dominant strands of thought within ancient India, China, and Greece. It is within these ancient civilizations that distinctive wisdom traditions developed for the first time in recorded human history, often in contrast to previous cultural, religious, and mytho-poetic traditions. For this reason, it is to these traditions we can look to understand general features or requirements of wisdom traditions before turning to our contemporary situation and need for updated or revitalized ancient wisdom.

This emphasis on India, China, and Greece is not to conceal or deny the influence of Egyptian and Near Eastern influences on ancient wisdom, nor is it the claim that such traditions did not exist at all in pre-Columbian America, Africa, or Austronesia. Generally we should acknowledge that much of “western” civilization originated from non-western sources,⁴ but the traditions of ancient India, China, and Greece have had a type of cohesiveness and influence that other traditions have not.

What are some features of the wisdom traditions of ancient India, China, and Greece?

Generally, each of these traditions focused on ‘wisdom’ in some form, whether understood as contemplative insight into the true nature of reality, or theoretical knowledge about the eternal law or order of the cosmos, or practical knowledge about what constitutes the good human life.

Importantly, this type of wisdom was understood as a certain kind of insight or knowledge or way of life accessible to normal human beings without the aid of revelation or mystical insight derived from super-human sources or super-natural faculties, respectively.⁵ The

⁴ The particularities of *western* thought specifically tend to dissolve when it is recognized that Greek culture, the foundation of “western culture,” is really a product and amalgamation of Egyptian and Indus-Valley civilizational influences. This fact, however, is often met with suspicion and skepticism, especially when reactionaries defend the purity of the western tradition (see Mary Lefkowitz’s 1997 *Not out of Africa*).

However, if one can get past these presumptions, then it becomes clear that “western” and “eastern” civilization and philosophy have numerous overlaps in both form and content. Indian forms of idealism come very close to certain Parmenidian, Platonic, and Neo-Platonic forms; see P.S. Sastri’s 1976 *Indian Idealism* and R. Harris’s 1981 *Neo-Platonism and Indian Philosophy*, for examples. More generally, the trend of emphasizing the continuity across traditions can be seen in the emerging field of “world philosophy;” see Robert C. Solomon’s and Kaathleen M. Higgins’s 2003 *From Africa to Zen: An Invitation to World Philosophy* for an important example.

⁵ The difference between a wisdom tradition and a mystical or religious tradition was not clear-cut in the ancient world, at least not to the extent that philosophy is distinguished from religion today. This is no mistake, for wisdom, mystical, and religious traditions make metaphysical claims about the ultimate nature of reality.

attempt to provide an articulation of the intelligibility of human behavior is found generally in myths, cultural narratives, and moral parables as well as specifically in the works of individual thinkers considered wise or sage-like; individuals such as Confucius, Aristotle, and the Buddha stand out in this regard.⁶

The specific conception of wisdom differs across traditions. For example, following Pythagoras and the Pre-Socratics,⁷ wisdom for the Athenian school, Socrates, Plato,⁸ Aristotle and their followers, was importantly related to a specific type of scientific knowledge (*epistēmē*) and practical wisdom (*phronēsis*) that results from the proper usage of reason (*logos*) and understanding (*nous*)⁹ concerned with the nature of reality (*Kosmos*).¹⁰

In Confucianism, Taoism, and the *Yin-Yang* tradition in China, wisdom is not as closely tied to the proper rule of reason or usage of our distinctive cognitive capacities in the Greek sense, Chinese thinkers will even speak of a mind-heart complex that the Greeks would likely reject. The focus instead in the Chinese traditions is on properly orienting oneself according to the nature of reality and responding appropriately to the demands of social existence.

The difference, however, lies in the *method* of each and the ways in which such claims are realized and put forth. Wisdom traditions, I contend, place an emphasis on human capacities and faculties, whatever these may be, as distinct from divine revelation or the operation of super-natural faculties. What we call super-natural may have been part of what, say Plato, would have called the natural state of the human soul, for example, *not* something that requires an intervention or change in the natural order.

⁶ *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1094a-1095b; Lee Dian Rainey, 2010, p.23-30. The importance of eastern thinkers is often overlooked or diminished in western thought insofar as these eastern thinkers are considered somehow “not philosophers” or external to philosophy proper (i.e. philosophy in some “western” sense). However, such dismissal of ancient and non-western sources of wisdom often comes at the expense of meaningful interaction and engagement.

⁷ The Ionian search for a fundamental principle of nature can be interpreted as a type of proto-science or early form of science, insofar as they attempted to explain the natural world without resorting to mythic explanation or super-natural vagaries. Perhaps Anaximander is an outlier in this regard, in that his reference to the “indefinite” (*apeiron*) as the archē provides little by way of actual explanation.

⁸ This can be seen from throughout both the “earliest” Socratic dialogues such as the *Euthyphro*, *Apology*, and *Crito*, to the middle Platonic dialogues including *Gorgias* and *Republic*, and onward to the later dialogues, *Timaeus*, *Statesman*, and *Laws*. Aristotle devotes significant time and space to a consideration of these issues throughout the works attributed to him, perhaps most clearly in the *Nicomachean Ethics* and *Politics*.

⁹ Reference to the divine mind or *Nous* plays an important role in both Plato’s *Timaeus* and of course in Book XII of Aristotle’s *Metaphysics*, as the prime unmoved mover and final cause of the *Kosmos* (*Timaeus*, 29a, 34b-c, 42c; *Metaphysics*, bk. 12, 1074b-1076a).

¹⁰ Greek and Roman philosophers up to and including Pythagoras, Plato, Aristotle, Epicurus, and the Stoics made metaphysical naturalism and its ethical consequences the centerpiece of their philosophical considerations. See Sarah Broadie’s 2010 essay, “The Ancient Greeks” in the *Oxford Handbook of Causation*, for a detailed analysis of this line of thought. As noted in the above, the idea that the natural world constitutes a *Kosmos* or a law-governed whole may be considered a hallmark of much of ancient Greek philosophy. Although there were alternative perspectives put forth by deterministic thinkers such as Democritus and Empedocles, both thinkers who denied teleology in the form of final causation, these mechanistic and probabilistic natural philosophies nevertheless made some appeal to law-like function (*nomos*) or rule-governed regularity of nature (see Aristotle’s *Physics* 186a-187b; Long and Sedley, 1987, p.266; Inwood, 2009, p.203).

In the *Yin-Yang* tradition, wisdom entails living according to the interdependence of reality, despite the appearance of disparate opposed binaries (e.g., active/passive, male/female, good/evil, etc.).¹¹ The wise Taoist sage is one who lives a life in harmony (*he*) or resonance (*gan ying*) with the nature of the Tao or “way” of Nature or Heaven (*Tian*).¹² The Confucian sage (*junzi*) obtains humaneness (*ren*) and thereby wisdom by properly cultivating virtue, responding appropriately to the demands of specific social relationships, performing important rituals, and respecting just laws (*li*).¹³

In the Vedic and Brahmanic traditions, wisdom refers to a type of insight into or contemplation of truths concerning the relationship between the ego, the true self (*Ātman*), and the nature of reality as such (*Brahman*), which in turn has important practical relevance for what amounts to correct action (*karma*) and proper ritualization according to the eternal law (*Santana dharma*).¹⁴

These are but a few examples from these traditions; see similar strands can be found in the Stoic,¹⁵ Sramana,¹⁶ Mohist,¹⁷ or Neo-Confucian¹⁸ traditions as well.

We must be careful here because much of what I am focusing on are the dominant themes and strands in these traditions, which is not to imply that these traditions were by any means

¹¹ *Yin* and *Yang* are the opposing yet complimenting principles of reality, which manifest in various dualities that must coexist for reality to be constituted (light-dark, heaven-earth, hot-cool, active-passive, man-woman); this is in some ways similar to the Empedoclean conception of ‘Love and ‘Strife’ as archai.

¹² The concept of the ‘*Tao*’ most likely began as an ethical consideration based upon accepted principles of *Yin-Yang* before turning more fully into a metaphysical principle, the eternal *Tao* (see Lao Tzu’s *Tao Te Ching*, specifically ch. 1.1-2.3; 8.1-10.3; 18.1-20.2; 23.1-24).

¹³ The teachings attributed to Confucius are filled with references to implicit, ordered patterns in human activities, for example, with the Five Confucian Relationships. Specifically, this theme reoccurs throughout the *Analects* (*Confucian Analects*, bk. 1, ch. 1-2; 6-7; 9-11; 13-14; bk. 2, ch. 1-3; see also bk. 3 and 4).

¹⁴ The Vedas represent the foundational texts in the tradition of classical Indian philosophy. These take the form of *rishis* or sacred hymns that outline the proper ordering of the world, up to and including human behavior, social arrangement, and religious ceremony (*Rigveda*, hymn 1, hymn 4-11.). The *Rigveda* is the most important of the Vedas besides the later Vedanta or Upanishads.

¹⁵ Due to the fragmentary nature of Stoic philosophy, this section is derived in large part from the Long and Sedley’s 1987 collection, *The Hellenistic Philosophers*, which collects primary and secondary texts from various Greek and Roman Stoic philosophers and their critics. Specifically, see p.266-280; p.313-344; and p.359-423.

¹⁶ Sramana tradition gave rise to the yoga, Jainism, Buddhism, and some schools of Hinduism.

¹⁷ Mozi was a Taoist before developing his own framework for understanding ethical commitments; at first glance his views align closely with utilitarian principles (Collinson, 2000, p.226-232).

¹⁸ In many ways the Neo-Confucian thinkers, influenced by Taoism and later Chan Buddhism, played the role of Plato to the Socrates of Confucius. By this I mean that the Neo-Confucian thinkers, beginning with Zhou Dun-yi, developed a metaphysic that aligns with the ethical principles outlined by their master, who did not himself write any texts and focused mainly on ethical concerns rather than metaphysical considerations; see Siu-chi Huang’s 1999 *Essentials of Neo-Confucianism*, especially the historical and philosophical contexts chapter and chapter two.

monolithic, and like every tradition, each has its own associated set of subsequent detractors, skeptics, and offshoot traditions.¹⁹

Nevertheless, and despite important differences and disagreements within and across traditions in the specifics, ancient wisdom traditions, both dominant and reactionary, were generally concerned with addressing or removing to various degrees: suffering, unhappiness, or illusion; and conversely, concerned with attempting to create in or lead the individual or collective to: pleasure, happiness, or insight.

The specifics in each case do differ owing to the particularities of the culture and language in which these traditions arose, but there are nevertheless common themes and elements not completely determined by the particularities of a culture, language, or time period.

That such interpretations of human experience and human nature can become a tradition at all, let alone traditions capable of spanning hundreds of years and multiple cultures and peoples, is significant and cannot be easily denied by the most ardent defenders of relativism or constructivism.

But in the interest of space and to maintain focus on our question at hand, I will examine only two related themes found in these ancient wisdom traditions, one theoretical and one practical, though necessarily related: 1) the relationship between ethics and metaphysics, and 2) the moral development of the self and human nature.

The Relationship between Ethics and Metaphysics

The most important aspect of these ancient wisdom traditions for addressing our question is the belief that there is an essential relationship between ethics and metaphysics and that understanding and living out this relationship is a necessary condition for being wise. The idea is that what one ought to think, feel, desire, and do is necessarily a function of the way reality is, specifically the nature of human beings and how human beings “fit” within the context of the world, usually considered as an ordered totality (Nature, *Tao*, *Kosmos*, Brahman).

¹⁹ For even the Skeptics and Sophists held that their conclusions were correct about the nature of things by emphasizing agnostic indeterminacy and the supposed gulf between *nomos* and *phusis*, or human-made law and nature, respectively. Even atomists like the Epicureans, thinkers who rejected the rationalism of the Athenian School and Stoicism, believed that an adequate understanding of the world had ethical consequences, namely happiness as the lack of the fear of death and the judgment of the gods. Even the anti-rationalist dimensions of Taoism and Chan Buddhism in China rejected Confucianism because they held that it was all too human when compared to the truth of non-human reality. And even the non-orthodox strands in Indian philosophy, Carvaka, Jainism, and Buddhism, claimed to various degrees to describe the true nature of reality, often in direct contrast to certain elements in the Vedic tradition.

Relatedly, the nature of reality is understood through necessary reference to human beings and human nature, and this is one main reason why these traditions often rely on organic metaphors and anthropomorphic language to describe reality.

In these traditions wisdom requires a type of metaphysical or theoretical understanding of both what *is* the case and what *ought* to be the case, which cannot be separated without incoherency. The wise individual is able to live a successful human life because she understands what it means to be a human and what is required to live harmoniously with the nature of reality, of which human beings are but one part. This in turn requires understanding human experience and human nature as manifestations of the nature of reality, capable of reflectively identifying with and harmoniously ordering one's life according to the recurrent patterns found in nature. Achieving this ideal entails what the Stoics called "living according to nature" (*kata phusin*),²⁰ what the Taoists called *Wu-Wei* or the 'way of naturalness' or harmony through non-action,²¹ and what the Vedic-Brahmanic adherents call *moksa* or liberatory self-knowledge of the identity between the true Self (*Ātman*) and the fundamental principle of reality, Brahman.²²

However, understanding and living out the relationship between ethics and metaphysics is not automatic because false beliefs and hallow desires can prevent human beings from recognizing and adequately responding to it. It becomes difficult or impossible to acknowledge that metaphysical knowledge is ethically important because it is required to help us ignorance or misunderstanding about what is truly real, or what is desirable and valuable for beings like us.

Conversely, it may be impossible to acknowledge that ethical knowledge and action are metaphysically important because human beings are understood in these traditions as partly responsible for the proper function of reality insofar as human beings play a certain role in its operation.

It may even be held that metaphysics and ethics are not related at all, that metaphysics can be done without reference to human beings and value, or that ethics can be independent from

²⁰ In Stoic philosophy, living '*kata phusin*' or 'according to nature,' was the metaphysical and ethical end or *telos* of human nature; according to Seneca, "For man is a rational animal. Man's ideal state is realized when he has fulfilled the purpose for which he was born. And what is it that reason demands of him? Something very easy - that he live in accordance with his own nature" (Seneca, 1969, p.88-89). The relevant meanings of the ancient Greek word *phusis* range from 1) nature as an active process of becoming (e.g. the growth of a seed into a tree), to 2) the specific characteristics of the thing in question (e.g. the nature of a dog), to 3) a normative term that refers to characteristics an individual *ought* to have owing to its nature in the second sense; and finally, to 4) the ordered whole of all that is (*Kosmos*) as determined by law (*nomos*) and structure (*logos*). I owe this breakdown of the meanings of *phusis* relevant for the Stoics to Adolf Bonhöffer by way of William O. Stephens; see, Bonhöffer, 1894, p.13-14, and Stephens, 1994, p.276.

²¹ *Tao Te Ching*, ch. 2.

²² *Katha Upanishad* p.1, ch.2, verse 24; *Mandukya Upanishad*, verse 2. *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* p.1, ch.4, verse 10.

the way reality is on some more fundamental level underneath social and cultural constructions.

In these traditions the way to address these potential incoherencies is through a focus on human nature as the manifestation of the relationship between ethics and metaphysics.

The concept of human nature (*atman*,²³ *hsing*, *phusis*) is fundamental in these traditions because human nature is considered the intersection between ethics and metaphysics and a site for the interpretation of both. Claims about human nature, such as the claim that a human being is a rational animal or a social animal or a divine animal, are theoretical claims that have direct practical consequences, concerning, for example, the proper trajectory or end goal of human development and the objective conditions under which human beings can or ought to survive, live, and flourish. That being said, these traditions do not deny, though perhaps they are often victim to, the ambiguity and danger associated with identifying human nature and making epistemological claims about our access to the metaphysical nature of reality.

This ambiguity and potential danger was raised as far back as the ancient Greek Sophistic claim that much of what we attribute to be fundamental aspects of (human) nature (*phusis*) is socially or culturally constructed (*nomos*). But the relation of this ambiguity to wisdom comes in the form of an enlightenment or transcendence that results from correctly identifying human nature as a microcosm that mirrors the macrocosm of the totality of reality.

This is perhaps most clearly seen in Plato's allegory of the Cave, which tells of the dangers of illusion and the attempt to enlighten others, but similar ideas can be seen in the *Yin-Yang* and Taoist warnings against relying on dualisms created by human language and the Hindu understanding of *Maya*, the phenomenal veil of illusion that underlies naïve realism. In these traditions the danger lies in erroneously identifying some aspect of human nature as essential when it is merely contingent, say the assumption that Homeric conceptions of virtue are simply necessary and natural. The associated danger is the distortion or concealment of the relationship between ethics and metaphysics, which in an extreme form entails the denial that we have *any* access to human nature and reality as it really is beyond mere phenomenal appearances and the social constructs.

The Moral Development of the Self and Human Nature

The first theme concerned the necessary conditions for wisdom in terms of theoretical beliefs about the relationship between ethics and metaphysics. The second theme concerns the necessary conditions for wisdom in terms of practical belief, desire, and action.

²³ I am using the lower-case 'A' to distinguish between the *atman* composed of five 'sheaths' or *kosas* (physical [*annamaya kosa*], breath [*pranamaya kosa*], mind [*manomaya kosa*], intellect [*vijnanamaya kosa*], and bliss [*anandamaya kosa*]) and the *Ātman* that is the innermost core and true nature of the Self.

These two themes, of course, are directly related to and augment each other, for, to borrow phraseology from Kant, theoretical belief without practical action would be empty and practical action without theoretical belief would be blind. But given the relationship between ethics and metaphysics, how can the relationship between ethics and metaphysics be cultivated and actually lived out in terms of practical belief, desire, and action?

The answer to this question is found in the belief in these traditions that the self and human nature do not begin as fully developed or complete, both developmentally and morally, but can and must be developed over time toward certain ends or goals of fulfillment.

The idea is that human beings developmentally and morally begin from an initial, inchoate state, in many ways less than human in a normative sense of the term. From an initial state of egocentrism, the individual develops morally -- given the appropriate kinds of habituation and education, resulting in a concern for virtue or justice or humaneness. Living out the relationship between ethics and metaphysics is a process of reaching the most complete state of human moral development, which entails an understanding of the natural moral laws of reality, or the relationship between self, other, and the world.

This is to become ‘civilized,’ to be free from hollow, defective, and irrational desires and instead willing to act in distinctly moral ways. But this requires the individual to identify with the higher parts of the self over and above the lower parts and proclivities that we have toward what is unhealthy, base, and disordered.

In the initial inchoate state, of both individual ontogenesis and moral development, the human being is driven by lower and more basic aspects of our nature. Clear examples of this characterization of moral development is found in the Platonic-Aristotelian conception of the tripartite conception of the soul, the five sheaths of *kosas* of the self in the Hindu tradition,²⁴ and Mencius’s four beginnings or “germinations” (*tuan*), natural predispositions that each individual human being has toward virtue, which can in turn be cultivated and grown into an internalized disposition toward virtuous thought and action.²⁵ In either case, moral development or the lack thereof concerns the cultivation of and identification with the higher parts of the true self, the self that is most fully human, beyond all particular attributes and contingent identity characteristics.

The moral development of normal human individuals can and must be directed or else it may never mature or may develop in a twisted manner. This is achieved through the correct kinds of external stimuli, from moral habituation, socialization, and role modeling toward the end of cultivating an internal disposition toward virtue, and ultimately wisdom. This development enables an individual to associate with ever larger categories, beginning from a concern with the ego, to family members, community, city- or nation-state, and eventually Nature or the totality of reality itself.

²⁴ See previous footnote, 23.

²⁵ Graham, 2002, p.20.

Moral development does not require the total denial of the lower parts of the soul and the selfish or vicious predispositions that we also have, but a channeling of our amoral needs, drives, and desires in virtuous ways that respond to the moral reality of other persons and moral agents. That being said, this process is also subject to errors and distortions, and the individual can become morally twisted and may have distorted desires toward ends that are unhealthy, immoral, or otherwise unnatural.

An individual can in this way become “stuck” in terms of moral development, either because she is unable to progress beyond some initial stage or has come to desire vicious ends for their own sake. Due to this possibility some interpret human nature as being inherently evil or prone to conflict rather than harmony (*Xunzi*), but these ancient wisdom traditions generally hold that human nature must be developed and is not innately or automatically good *or* evil, perhaps good insofar as the nature of each thing is proper to itself. Nevertheless, human nature can be perfected but it is not itself perfect or imperfect as such and without reference to the development of the self.

Wisdom in terms of practical belief and action requires the proper kind of intellect, knowledge, experience, and judgment. This is a honed sense of what to do and refrain from doing in practical contexts, a capacity for judgment Plato and Aristotle called practical wisdom or *phronēsis*.

A wise individual is able to act in the appropriate ways in the appropriate contexts relative to the standards of the community and ultimately to the standards of human nature and the nature of reality. The characterization of wisdom that results from these two related themes is one that requires both an orienting theoretical framework and a practical skillset that disposes an individual to think, feel, desire, and act in certain ways.

A wisdom tradition provides this framework and practical skill set, which can have the effect of morally civilizing individuals in both thought and action. The wise individual is one who knows what to think and do because he knows how cognition, affection, conation and action are related to and sourced in human nature, which itself is an outgrowth of cosmic nature. The wise individual is the human being who has reached her fullest potential *qua* human nature, a fully realized state of *eleutherios*, of the freedom to be able to live a successful human life and harmonize with the nature of reality.

Revitalizing Ancient Wisdom

Returning to our question, in this section I argue that these elements in ancient wisdom shed light on why collective wisdom can save civilization by being an instantiation of it. I argue that we need to revitalize or continue these wisdom traditions by updating them to meet the demands of the contemporary world and reconcile them with modern scientific knowledge. This will be a general sketch of what a contemporary wisdom tradition would entail and not an exhaustive account that will answer all potential worries and objections.

But first, it will be helpful to focus on what is false, implausible, and even dangerous about these ancient wisdom traditions. Even if there are plausible aspects of these traditions, these traditions and thinkers also have shortcomings of their own.

Perhaps the greatest mistake found in many of these traditions is an overemphasis on the past, the prioritization of conserving social order at all costs, and an associated suspicion of change.²⁶ This tendency lends itself to a type of naturalistic fallacy, or assumption that simply because things *are* some particular way that they *ought* to be this way, perhaps because reality is governed by Fate or Destiny. For example, this trend can be seen historically from biology-based gender essentialism, to the philosophical and religious defense of 'slave nature' and certain kinds of racism, to the *ad hoc* metaphysical justification of the caste system in India, to the reactionary nature of certain aspects of Confucianism, and the list goes on.

Ancient wisdom traditions at times merely provide metaphysical and ethical justifications of supposedly natural, necessary, or rational aspects of society that actually resulted from contingent historical events, contingent ways of structuring society, and empirically false beliefs about the world. The second major shortcoming that can render these traditions implausible *prima facie* is their tendency to anthropomorphize²⁷ reality and the natural world to a degree that is difficult, if not impossible, to reconcile with a modern scientific understanding. Given that much of what the ancients knew about the natural world was false or distorted or based on certain cultural assumptions, it is easy and today commonplace to consider these traditions superstitious, primitive, or otherwise backwards, perhaps even “uncivilized” in terms of social, technology, and moral development.²⁸

These two shortcomings must be recognized as serious, but part of addressing them requires the acknowledgment that they are not isolated to these traditions alone. In terms of the first shortcoming, many of us today often fall into the trap of assuming that the ways in which *we* think, live, and structure society are somehow how they ought to be, e.g., perhaps democracy or capitalism or egalitarianism is the most rational or natural or necessary political, economic, and moral system, respectively.

²⁶ Part of this is due to the cyclical conception of temporality found in these traditions, which stands in stark contrast to a linear Abrahamic and later modern scientific conception of time. Nonetheless, in effect the focus on fixity indirectly and at times directly supported a type of reactionary conservatism on the political level, and at least in the Greek and later Christian traditions, the metaphysical priority of Being over becoming on the metaphysical level.

²⁷ By anthropomorphism here I mean the types of animism, vitalism, and projectionism that pervade many ancient, traditional, and indigenous cultures.

²⁸ Religious, mystical, and spiritual traditions, which hitherto provided this orientation are increasingly losing influence and plausibility, both in the public sphere and intellectually in the minds of many people around the world. There are, of course, good reasons why these traditional sources of meaning are met with such reactions. It seems clear that we should at the very least no longer consider these sources authoritative *simply* because they are traditions and we should be wary of any non-scientific claims or essentialism. But there are also good reasons why these traditions came into existence and were accepted in the first place because they are successful to at least some degree.

Ancient wisdom traditions are no more or less subject to this cognitive bias than any other tradition. The difference is that we have the perspective of history to see exactly how they were clearly mistaken in many respects, though we lack the same perspective on ourselves. That being said, because we now do know much more about the natural world than the ancients, we should carefully reject those beliefs and values that were based on mistaken or partial evidence.

To correct for this shortcoming, we can distill the general and recurring elements in each tradition and jettison the idiosyncratic elements that likely resulted from contingent aspects of these ancient cultures. In terms of the second shortcoming, the tendency to anthropomorphize reality still exists, and perhaps this tendency is necessary to some extent, because it is easier to explain what is more distant in terms of what is closer in our experience, even in physics.²⁹

However, this second shortcoming manifests itself differently today in the form of the apparent contradiction between our scientific knowledge of the natural world and our practical existence as moral beings. Many of us practically act as if morality and value are real and objective,³⁰ while also acknowledging theoretically that scientific knowledge shows that there is nothing intrinsically valuable or moral or human at the "absolute" level of reality. What we lack is a justifiable, coherent framework for reconciling our practical lives and our theoretical belief, and without such a framework, we will continue to live out a contradiction.

A revitalized wisdom tradition based on ancient antecedents can correct for these shortcomings and reconcile these seemingly disparate domains, but only by updating these traditions in relation to our contemporary world and recent advancements in natural science, especially evolutionary biology. Based on our current scientific knowledge of the world, we now have good reason and evidence to believe that at some more basic level the universe is constituted by energy in various forms that cannot be accurately anthropomorphized without projection and distortion of the phenomena. However, we also now have good reason and evidence to believe that the same principles that constitute the nature of reality are also found in and constitutive of our evolved human nature.

For this reason, studying human nature and our evolution can allow us to understand what the ancients already knew about the relationship between ethics and metaphysics, even if

²⁹ Physical events and experiments, even when derived from the use of computers and particle accelerators, still require human interpretation, and necessarily, some amount of anthropomorphization. This is so because we must relate whatever we may discover in the arena of physics to our everyday experience of the world by using imagery, metaphor, and human linguistic constructs. An example of this is the names given to certain quarks, such as "charm" and "strange," which are distinctly human ways of sorting out physical phenomena.

³⁰ 'Objective' here means mind-independent. Value realism or moral realism is the claim that there are value facts or moral facts and the existence of these facts is metaphysically, epistemologically, and logically independent of our evidence for them. This is a characterization of realism put forth by David Brink; see Brink, 1989, p.5-7.

the specific formulation of the conclusions that we arrive at today will differ greatly in some respects. That is, we now know that the world is not *human*. Instead, the human is *world*, for human nature and experience are manifestations of the world, rather than something above or below it. We need not anthropomorphize the universe, but understand how we ourselves are cosmomorphized.

In this sense Bernard Williams is correct when he noted that, when viewed *sub specie eternitatis*, or from an “absolute” view, there is nothing distinctly human or valuable or moral to be found in the extra-human or mind-independent reality.³¹ But the fact that value is not at the end of the day found on the “absolute” level of energy does not render it any less real, at least not any less real than phenomena like life and consciousness, which are certainly real in some important sense, though also not present at the “absolute” level of reality.

One insight gained by analyzing these ancient wisdom traditions for our contemporary situation is recognition that the relationship between ethics, metaphysics, and human nature does not cease to exist when it is no longer recognized.

There are those who can and do act as if there is no such relationship, as if the rational mind, the will, the soul, or individuality cannot be understood through reference to human nature.³² Still others pretend that the coherency of our experience can be maintained by either denying the objective reality of morality and value entirely,³³ because they are seen as human constructs, or by denying the objective truth of modern natural science, because it is somehow dehumanizing or imperialistic.

But all of these options lead to incoherency in both belief and action. In the first case we must deny the large part of our experience that is filled with value and normativity because these are seen as mere illusions³⁴ or emotive responses,³⁵ mental expressions,³⁶ or relative social beliefs³⁷ when compared to a world constituted by lifeless particles and uncaring fields of energy. In the second case we must deny the objectivity and reality of modern natural science, motivated in part by a reaction against what Schiller called the disenchantment (*Entzauberung*) of the world and any feelings of belongingness in the world.

³¹ Williams, 1985, p.139.

³² Thinkers in these camps range from Phenomenologists like Heidegger, Existentialists like Sartre, who denies that the for-itself (*pour-soi*) is causally determined by external factors, to Kantians, non-naturalists, and social constructivists, who all to various degrees deny that reference to a transcendently real or mind-independent reality and human nature is required to understand human experience and wisdom.

³³ There are numerous metaethical positions that provide skeptical, nihilistic, or anti-realistic accounts of moral behavior, evaluation, and judgment. Specifically, in the emotivist camp, thinkers like A.J. Ayer, Rudolph Carnap, Charles Stevenson, expressivists like Simon Blackburn and Allan Gibbard, as well as error theorists such as J.L. Mackie, Richard Joyce, and other anti-realists like Sharon Street.

³⁴ Mackie, 1977, 38; see Joyce, 2001.

³⁵ Ayer, 1936; Stevenson, 1957.

³⁶ Blackburn, 1993; Gibbard, 2003.

³⁷ Harman, 1977.

What a wisdom tradition today would need to answer is a question raised by Hans-Georg Gadamer: “how [is] our natural view of the world - the experience of the world that we have as we simply live out our lives - related to the unassailable and anonymous authority that confronts us in the pronouncements of science?”³⁸

These ancient wisdom traditions attempted to articulate recurrent patterns in both the natural world and human experience toward the end of being able to understand how to achieve certain goals and create certain kinds of human beings, the goal of wisdom and the creation of wise individuals. A wisdom tradition as such cannot *make* individuals wise, but it can provide the conceptual and practical framework that, if applied correctly, can foster the cultivation of such individuals, if only fallibly. These traditions in effect provide a type of “blueprint” for how to think and live successfully and given the recurrent pitfalls that arise in the course of a human life.

Modern natural science and evolutionary biology provide the current best methods for isolating and discovering recurrent patterns in the natural world that give rise to complex forms of life, up to and including our own experience, and importantly, our very need for wisdom traditions.³⁹ What we mean metaphysically by Nature is surely different than the externally, rationally, or teleologically ordered reality of the ancients, but there is nevertheless enough order or regularity in the universe to permit the evolution of complex forms of life according to certain patterns or law-like relations and forms of causation.

Biological evolution provides the current best explanatory account of how it is possible that physical and chemical regularities or patterns in the natural world can give rise to life, self-sustaining biological systems directed toward certain goals or features in the environment necessary for survival and reproduction. Although evolution as such is not externally directed toward pre-given ends, the minimal necessary conditions for sustaining life and the constraints placed on the organism by the environment lead through natural selection to the development of relatively determinate adaptive organismal natures. For instance, a fern has a type of adaptive trajectory or normal course of development, survival, and reproduction relative to its evolutionary lineage and directed toward certain features of the (physio-chemical) environment. Increasingly complex forms of life have similar trajectories oriented toward certain features of the (internal) environment for minimally conscious creatures and the (social) environment for social animals, from wolves to human beings.⁴⁰

This evolutionary development of adaptive natures can be plausibly understood as a type of natural teleology, though reducible to complex forms of efficient causation and not a *sui generis* teleological principle as the ones found in ancient Indian, Chinese, and Greek

³⁸ Gadamer, 1976, p.3.

³⁹ There are those of course who believe that evolution demonstrates that value and morality are not real in any mind-independent or objective manner (as the value and moral realists claim). However, a full defense against this charge is outside the scope of this essay; see Ruse, 1998; Street, 2006; and Joyce, 2007.

⁴⁰ Philippa Foot and Rosalind Hursthouse provide detailed accounts of how this naturalistic approach can be used to evaluate human virtues in a Neo-Aristotelian vein. See Foot, 2001 and Hursthouse, 1999.

traditions.⁴¹ Taking this seriously requires acknowledging that there is a normal trajectory or course of development individually and morally for human beings toward certain ends or goal-states; this is not fundamentally different than other organisms.

This is the naturalistic relationship between ethics and metaphysics. There are thus certain thoughts, feelings, desires, and behaviors that are fitting or natural for us, in part because these certain ways of thinking, valuing, and acting allowed our ancestors to live, survive, and reproduce by fulfilling conditions of life and meeting the demands of the environment.

Flourishing is also made possible as a positivity that supervenes on the maximal state of development, though flourishing itself was likely not naturally selected, because happiness, excellence, and even wisdom are not directly fitness conferring. However, because our cognitive capacities have developed to the extent that we are not driven purely by innate instinct or learned behavior, we may fail to reach these goals if we have not been habituated or educated correctly relative to this normal course, and importantly, when we lack a theoretical and practical framework for connecting our needs and desires to their proper natural ends in the physical and social environments.

Naturalistically interpreted, wisdom traditions operate by providing these kinds of adaptive frameworks, to connect up our needs and desires with their fulfillment in a natural, healthy, and successful way.⁴²

This naturalistic proposal is currently suspect either because it is seen as a type of scientific reductionism or because it runs contrary to a large part of modern forms of philosophical subjectivism⁴³ and Neo-Platonic and Christian assumptions about supposedly non-natural or supernatural elements of human nature. But there is also a general, Enlightenment-inspired, now mainly post-modern, mistrust of any appeal to nature as the basis for understanding human nature and experience, especially given the aforementioned naturalistic fallacy. This suspicion of naturalism and naturalizing projects is justified to a certain degree, but the problem is not with naturalism as such, but with historical misuses of the method and concept.

Even if human nature and ethics should be understood naturalistically, this does not entail that simply because some act is natural it is therefore ethical; this would indeed be fallacious,

⁴¹ This entails a type of teleological or goal-directed causation comes operant. Teleological causation here is a complex form of efficient causation which is not reflective as in humans but results when and because certain actions have been successful relative to the objective conditions for the existence of life to the extent that the goal of biological process guides means for obtaining that end. My account here is indebted to Harry Binswanger's work, *The Biological Basis of Teleological Concepts*.

⁴² My naturalistic interpretation of wisdom comes close to Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's own in his essay "Toward an Evolution Hermeneutics: The Case of Wisdom," but I do not make the claim that wisdom was selected naturally in the course of evolution, in part because being wise by itself does not directly enhance fitness. See Csikszentmihalyi, 1995.

⁴³ Beginning with Descartes, modern thinkers who began with philosophical starting point of the subject rejected non-skeptical versions of naturalism (e.g., Hume, Berkeley, Kant).

just as the claim that simply because we have always thought and acted this way therefore we ought to continue to think and act this way. Neither does this mean that rational reflection and human choice are eliminated, for nothing about nature or reality can *force* us to act in certain ways rather than others and what type of world we want to live in and create requires choice on our part, a choice though that is circumscribed by objective facts about the natural world and human nature, however.

With caution, we can say at the very least that human nature evolved in such a way as to be disposed toward sociality, which means that human beings normally survive, reproduce, and flourish by interacting with and relying on other humans on a regular basis.⁴⁴ However, human beings also normally have individual needs and desires that are non- or anti-social in various ways, which must be channeled and met in healthy ways that are cooperative or pro-social.⁴⁵ Naturalistically interpreted, morality can be understood as an adaptation for channeling these needs and desires toward cooperative social functioning, whereby individuals are induced to meet their individual needs and desires in light of the reality, needs, and desires of other members of a particular social grouping, say a family, kin group, community, or nation state, etc.

This normally occurs when individual needs and desires become embedded in the needs and desires of other members of the group in specific social relationships (e.g., familial relationships or friendship) or through extended cultural categories (e.g., ethnicity, religion, nationality, etc.). This means that moral development requires cognitive, affective, and conative capacities, as well as the appropriate type of upbringing and habituation, and like all biological processes, this development is subject to disruption, distortion, and even failure.

Nevertheless, human morality and moral development is constituted and constrained by real, objective, or mind-independent facts about human nature, our evolutionary lineage, and the necessary conditions required for social functioning.

Understood in this way, morality is something that human beings do in the same way that flight is something that many birds do, something appropriate for their bird-form of life, and a fully developed human individual will be much like a fully developed tree in bloom that has reached its full potential. This can in turn be understood as a form of ethical naturalism, a combination of philosophical naturalism and moral realism, though again different in

⁴⁴ This is in contrast to animals that are non-social and only occasionally interact for the sake of reproduction or a one off hunt.

⁴⁵ For example, the regulation of alimentation ensures that a suitable amount of food is allocated to each member to meet their respective needs, and the regulation of reproduction, coupling, and birth entails a framework for controlling the transmission of genetic material. Now surely much of this process is largely implicit and much of it is also the response to instinctual or stereotyped behavioral predispositions sourced in our primatial and mammalian lineage. But they can and do raise the level of conscious awareness and (critical) rational reflection.

many respects from the naturalism and moral realism found in the ancient wisdom traditions of India, China, and Greece.⁴⁶

Even though there are general or universal characteristics of human nature, the social and environmental context in which human beings live can greatly alter the specific form human development and experience take. Context can be so influential that it can even lead to the concealment of these patterns in reality and human nature, if and when we are unable or unwilling to identify with the natural world or choose instead to define ourselves according to social constructs or technological artifacts. This seems to be the case, as when we understand ourselves through the categories of our particular time and place or understand the human mind like a human-made object such as a computer.

To see the effect of social and environmental context on the expression of human nature, we must understand how our contemporary social and environmental context differs from the initial evolutionary context in which our ancestors lived for the majority of our anatomically modern evolutionary lineage.

Anthropological data suggests that for over 200,000 years, anatomically modern human beings lived in small, mobile groups, eventually forming into small hunter-gatherer tribes.⁴⁷ In this context, each member of the social group would likely share similar background beliefs, values, interests, and even genetic material with each other. Each member would normally have a reason and interest in cooperating with other members of the group, even if implicit, because individual needs and desires would have been embedded within the needs and interests of others in the social group.

Compare this context to our contemporary one. Take, for example, New York City, a city of over eight million inhabitants, a social context wherein individuals often have vastly different beliefs, values, interests, and genetic backgrounds. In this contemporary setting it is psychologically impossible to know each member of the social group, and consequently, possible that an individual may feel no emotional, moral, or even human attachment to those outside of the scope of direct relationship or the cultural categories which are strongly identified with (e.g., ethnicity/religion/class).⁴⁸ Moreover, an individual may have a rational self-interest *not* to cooperate with the needs and interests of others outside of our own group and special relationships. Still worse, an individual may even have a reason to act immorally

⁴⁶ There are of course numerous ethical naturalist contemporary thinkers such as Richard Boyd, Nicholas Sturgeon, Peter Railton, David Brink, David Copp, among others. However, these thinkers tend to stop short of relating this contemporary form of ethical naturalism to its antecedents in the ancient wisdom traditions, which in turn leads to an unjustifiable focus on consequential states of affairs and objectifiable psychological states such as desires. What is lost is a focus on the agent-centered dimension of our moral experience, as understood in the background of our evolutionary lineage.

⁴⁷ Krebs, 2011, 164-165.

⁴⁸ This is not to deny that hunter-gatherer societies treated out-groups in a similar manner. Instead, we now live in a singular society that still has multiple tribes and associations, which cause social ills and can cause social unrest. But hunter-gatherer societies were more insulated than ours today, and for this reason, there was an onus placed on the mistrust of outsiders and a justified suspicion toward potential external threats.

(i.e. non-cooperatively), if individual short-term needs and desires can be met at the expense of others whom one does not know and is not related to in any overriding moral sense.⁴⁹

This is but one example that demonstrates that the context⁵⁰ in which human beings live and understand themselves can change rapidly owing to technological and social development, which is development that is not necessarily connected with moral development and at times in conflict with it.

Social and technological development lead to a type of “gap” that exists due to the disparity between the more adaptive context in which our ancestors evolved and our contemporary context, which in many ways is maladaptive or leads to maladaptive development and behavior.⁵¹

This gap can manifest itself in a number of ways, from a normative gap that opens up between our rational self-interest and our interest in cooperation, to an empathy gap that results when various subgroups must live in close proximity, and an authority gap that requires increased levels of internalized authority in a context with increasingly less direct authority control and intervention in private life.

All of these gaps result from the sheer size and complexity of social settings and can lead to maladaptive, immoral, and unsuccessful thought and action unless filled. Even capacities that were adaptive in the initial context may become maladaptive in another; for example, the human ability to identify with a particular group or culture provides a basis for social integrity and cooperation in one context, and in another, is the indirect source of ethnocentrism, xenophobia, and racism. This is similar to the way in which we evolved with the adaptive craving for sugar, salt, and fat and now are in an environment with an abundance of these things with the result that we have maladaptive behaviors and an obesity epidemic.⁵²

⁴⁹ An individual may nevertheless have a vested long-term interest and reason to cooperate, even with those with whom there is no relatedness, but human beings also have a psychological tendency to prioritize the short-term over the long-term, even if this is in some sense irrational, or at the very least, imprudent.

⁵⁰ We should expect, for example, a society that lives in a desert environment to place a priority on specific values and define specific actions as immoral; for example, the theft of water in a harsh environment must be treated with a harsher punishment or prohibition than in an environment with abundant water. A population in an arctic environment will also vary accordingly. But because of certain objective constants (physical, chemical, and biological regularities) certain values will remain constant and be true, for all intents and purposes, in all socially possible environmental contexts.

⁵¹ This truth can be understood on the physiological level as well. Human beings evolved in an environmental context wherein highly caloric forms of sugar, salt, and fat were rare. Today and through technology, such food is widely available and this context stimulates and evolved predisposition we have leading to the obesity epidemic now increasingly spreading the globe, in both industrialized and developing nations.

⁵² Factors such as genetics, poverty, and urbanization also contribute to this epidemic. My remarks refer to the evolved motivational system that induces us to desire sugar, salt, fat in the first place that, when combined with a particular environment, can lead to maladaptive, unhealthy, and deadly results.

These gaps can and must be bridged even though they can never be completely closed because they result from the structural differences in the size and complexity of a society.

However, these gaps can be filled or bridged through orienting frameworks, skill sets, and education that can enable individual to cope with the challenges of living a successful human life given the particularities of our contemporary context. But these gaps are not new and have existed since the development of agriculture, which enabled human beings to live in highly populated, fixed location cities. These gaps existed in the social setting of these ancient wisdom traditions and part of their implicit function was to compensate for and mitigate their danger to social order, harmony, and civilization in every sense of the word.

Ethnicity, religion, and nationality are well-known categories that function by organizing individuals under a common category and group identity, but unfortunately they can lead to conflict rather than cooperation when there is no common ground or shared life between competing categories; a cursory glance at human history or the world today demonstrates this.

We are in many ways currently still using categories and ways of thinking and acting that worked and made sense in one context, but are now unintelligible, obsolete, and even damaging. Indeed, many of the moral problems we face today are due to the fact that often people are stuck using categories that are maladaptive in our context or identify themselves by contingent characteristics or socially constructed concepts that emphasize the differences between us rather than a common ground beyond all religion, ethnicity, and nationality.

Still worse, we are also heir to a mishmash of outdated and often mutually exclusive moral frameworks that cannot change and adapt to meet the demands of the contemporary world.

But what this aspect of human nature shows is that the physical and social environmental context can change the way in which human beings think and live in relation to each other. That is, human nature is only relatively determinate and not static or fixed, and this means that changing the environment in which we live can develop our capacities in different ways to meet the differing demands of our contemporary society in adaptive ways (i.e. pro-social ways). This requires a category that spans the gulf of difference, one beyond creed, color, or flag that emphasizes a shared or common form of life, despite superficial appearances to the contrary.

Collective wisdom amounts to reflection on the category of human being as such, through the specific concept of human nature, which in effect is reflection on the shared common ground of human experience. Collective wisdom is a process of becoming explicitly aware of and articulating the cognitive, affective, and conative patterns that we initially follow only implicitly and without reflection.

This enables an individual to understand what something like a need or desire or belief is as such, what function it has, and thus which needs, desires, and beliefs should be identified

with as appropriate, fitting, or natural for creatures like us and which are not (given the context in which we find ourselves).

In effect, the wise and civilized individual is one who is able to mentally and practically fill the gaps by mentally and practically *simulating* the conditions of our initial evolutionary context (i.e. by thinking and acting *as if* we are all brothers and sisters, one big tribe, or really all the same). This simulation is ultimately limited by our psychological and emotional capacities, as well as our justified commitments to our close friends and family, but it can allow us to compensate for the difference between our contemporary context and our initial evolutionary one.

We can to an extent correct for the fact that we are now like the same species of fish taken from multiple independent rivers and placed in the same aquarium, one filled with artificial behaviors, plants, and rocks taken to be natural state, and haunted by leftover habits and prejudices from our respective rivers that no longer work given the demands of a diverse, pluralistic, and globalized aquatic life.

A collective wisdom tradition today would be concerned with what type of self-understanding and skill set are required to live a successful human life as such and given the particularities of the context in which we find ourselves.

This calls for reference to and a prioritization of human nature, the *only* category that cannot be rendered completely obsolete, the only one beyond the particularities of religion, ethnicity, and nationality. Such an emphasis on human nature, however, differs from a type of universal humanism, as an emphasis on and respect for humanity *as such*, for a 'human' or 'humanity' as such and without condition does not actually exist, as there is no such thing as a bare particular.

But it is possible that we can each come to think of ourselves *first* as human animals, natural beings with a specific human nature, *before* thinking of ourselves as Asian or White, Jewish or Muslim, and American or Chinese, etc. A wisdom tradition in effect enables us to change our environmental context, and indirectly the expression of human nature, by changing the available categories and concepts through which we think and live.

And it is by having a common form of life and common way of understanding ourselves that we can be able and *willing* to cooperate with each other, despite surface-level differences and distinctions.

Putting this into practice and living out the relationship between ethics and metaphysics of course requires concomitant institutional⁵³ and pedagogical mechanisms for transmitting

⁵³ Jonathan Turner provides an important analysis ways in which social institutions serve the end of social order. For my purposes, any successful wisdom tradition must be able to influence, inform, or create social institutions to exemplify and reproduce the tenets of the tradition; see Turner, 1997.

and reproducing the self-understanding and skill set required for this way of life in subsequent generations. But ideally this would take the form of compensating and correcting for the ways in which historical baggage and our contemporary context disposes us to maladaptive and uncooperative thoughts and actions.

The goal is a society that best approximates or simulates the conditions of adaptive contexts, in form rather than content, which would be a situation wherein individuals have a rational self-interest in cooperating with other members of the social group, and perhaps more importantly, actually feel moral sentiments and have moral desires toward others in the appropriate contexts and despite empathetic barriers.

What we would need to create is a social and environmental context that is as adaptive as possible given the physical and psychological limits of human nature, that is, one that cultivates the higher or more cooperative capacities and dispositions that we have and that channels the more basic, non- and anti-social capacities and dispositions that we all normally have in healthy ways. But this is exactly what the ancient wisdom traditions were attempting to do, though differing in the specifics, owing to the differences in environmental and cultural context. This in effect creates a new type of culture, one that applies to each human, which is not reducible to a particular religion, ethnicity, or nationality.

What we need to acknowledge, and what the ancient wisdom traditions recognized, is that we *cannot* fundamentally change what we are, perhaps I should say "yet," but we *can* be honest about our situation, and design belief systems, conceptual frameworks, educational modules, and traditions that work *with* rather than *against* our human nature. Part of this requires acknowledging rather than denying human nature, for human nature is not intrinsically evil or fallen or in any way unnatural as such but only in certain contexts and if we let social settings degrade to that point morally.

Now there can be no guarantee that civilization as a type of moral complexity may not be decreased or destroyed, that social and technological development may not actually lead to more complex and pervasive forms of immorality. Nothing about the nature of reality or human nature can force us to be wise or civilized. This requires choice, but civilization in the moral sense is a very fragile and precious thing that is worth saving and collective wisdom is our best chance to create, maintain, and develop it.

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