2021 International Wisdom Summit Survey

Analytical results

In August-September 2021, we asked scholars in psychology, moral philosophy, education, and cognitive science to fill out a 10-min survey, with an aim to identify points of convergence and disagreement with respect to the relationship between wisdom, morality, and culture. By identifying points of convergence as well as identifying core themes where scholars disagree, we aimed to facilitate a conversation on these topics, sharpen definitions and enable productive discussion between these evolving fields.

We note that the results reported in this report do not present a systematic review, nor do they claim to comprehensively cover opinions of all scholars interested in the intersection of morality, culture, and wisdom. With an on-going pandemic and given the timing of the survey (beginning of new academic term), a comprehensive representation would have been a close to an impossible order. An additional selection bias is likely due to choosing to conduct the survey in English language only. These are important critiques to keep in mind when reflecting on these results. These critiques notwithstanding, the sample size, along geographic, career-stage, and field-related breadths in the survey make it one of the most comprehensive attempts to capture opinions of scholars of wisdom, morality, and culture to date.

Igor Grossmann, PhD

On behalf of the organizing committee of the 2021 International Wisdom Summit
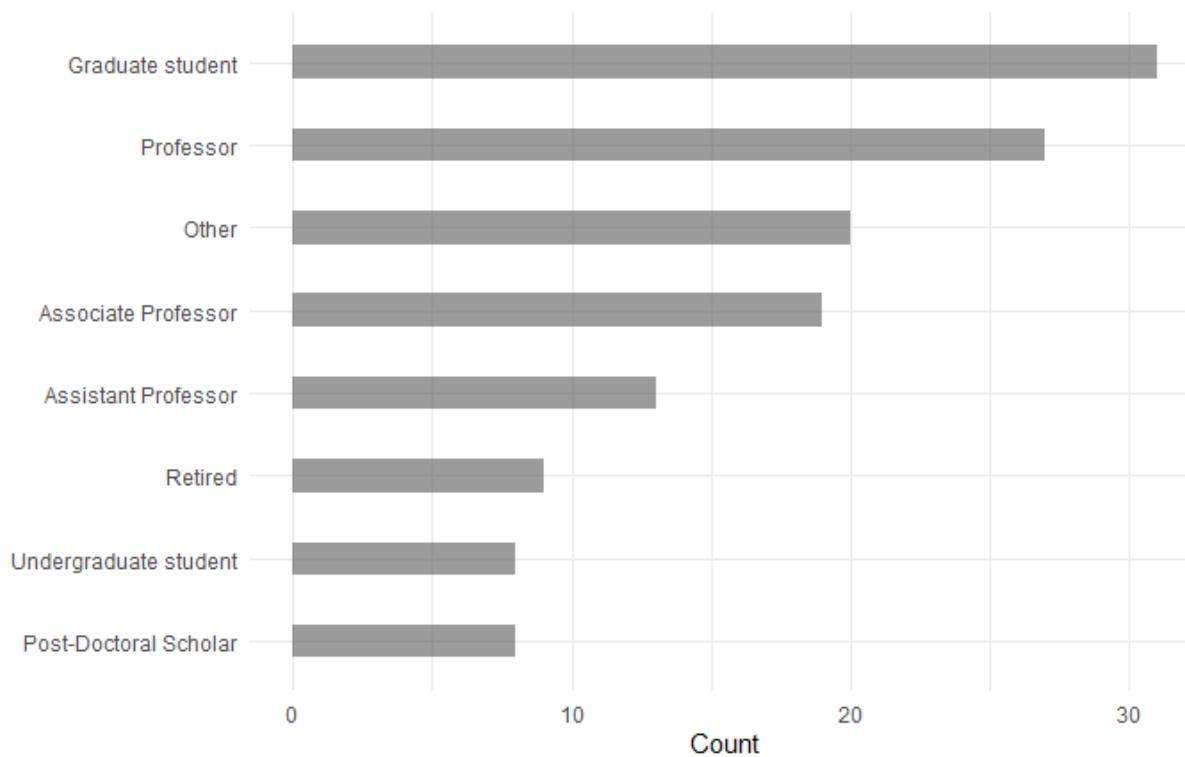
Contents

Sample Characteristics

Country

We asked respondents which country they were currently residing in.

Academic level

We asked respondents to indicate their current academic positions.

A nice distribution by rank, with 62 professors (includes full professor, associate professor, and assistant professor) vs. 73 junior researchers (postdoctoral/doctoral, and college students).

Fields

Among fields of studies, most scholars indicated that they focused on social (41%) and moral psychology (30%), followed by personality science (25%), developmental psychology (23%), education (21%), cognitive science (19%), and cognitive psychology (17%). Some scholars further indicated focus on clinical (10%), evolutionary (8%), and quantitative psychology (6%).

Numerous scholars explicitly indicated that wisdom is their field of expertise (32%), as well as moral philosophy (21%, if looking separately – 16% explicitly stated virtues/virtue ethics).

Wisdom and morality (n = 135)

Forced choice responses. Researchers were asked if morality is sufficient, a precursor to, necessary, relevant for wisdom and vice versa. If they did not agree with claims that morality and wisdom are related, or necessary/a precursor to, or sufficient for each other, they could advance to the next screen (scored as "unrelated" for the sake of simplicity).

Figure 1. Percentage of respondents endorsing a particular view of the relationship between morality and wisdom, ranked from most to least frequent within each set of questions.
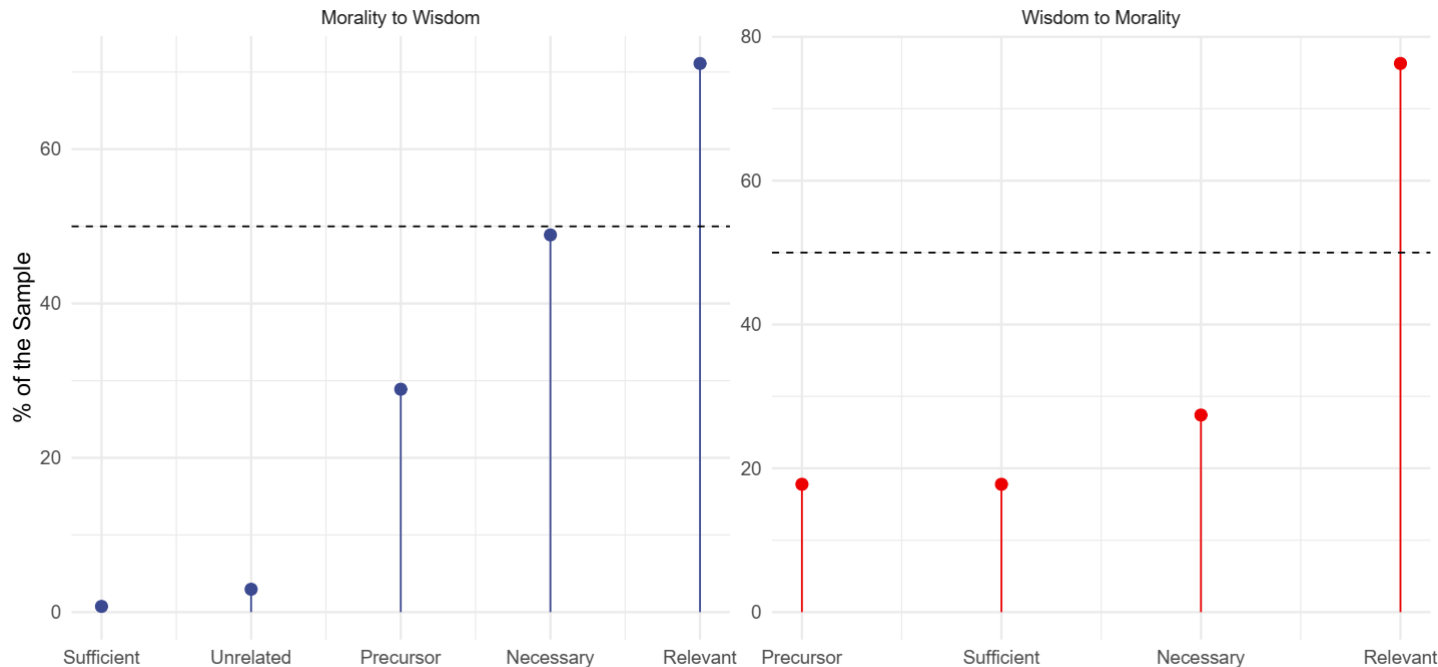

Fig. 1 shows that almost half the sample (and more than half of the professors,), indicated that morality is necessary for wisdom but not vice versa. Approximately 25% viewed morality as a precursor to wisdom.

Generalized mixed model (GLMM) estimates and analyses
Figure 2. Estimates from GLMM, with responses nested in participants.


```
Category = Necessary:
 contrast                                  estimate     SE  df z.ratio p.value
 Morality to Wisdom - Wisdom to Morality    0.2273 0.0591 Inf   3.847  0.0001

Category = Precursor:
 contrast                                  estimate     SE  df z.ratio p.value
 Morality to Wisdom - Wisdom to Morality    0.1121 0.0503 Inf   2.228  0.0259
Category = Relevant:
 contrast                                  estimate     SE  df z.ratio p.value
 Morality to Wisdom - Wisdom to Morality   -0.0528 0.0531 Inf  -0.994  0.3204
Category = Sufficient:
 contrast                                  estimate     SE  df z.ratio p.value
 Morality to Wisdom - Wisdom to Morality   -0.1580 0.0332 Inf  -4.761  <.0001
```

Fig. 3 results show that participants are more likely to endorse the statement that
one may be moral without being wise rather than being wise without being moral.
Further, morality is very infrequently viewed as sufficient for wisdom, whereas for
1/6 of the sample wisdom is viewed as sufficient for morality. One interpretation of
this pattern may suggest a view of a wise decision maker who acts morally by virtue of
making the best decision for the common good, but is driven by self-interested
motives. Even though such self-interested motives may lead to amoral decisions in a
short term, it may be in one's self-interest to act cooperatively in a long-term (to
avoid costly punishment).

By prior research on wisdom

Views of the relationship between wisdom and morality of respondents who reported performing research on wisdom.

```
                                Chisq Df Pr(>Chisq)
(Intercept)                    0.0310  1     0.8602
Group.F                        1.2958  1     0.2550
Category                      36.9433  4   1.85e-07 ***
prior_research                 0.0013  1     0.9712
Group.F:Category               1.1194  3     0.7724
Group.F:prior_research         1.8101  1     0.1785
Category:prior_research        1.2966  4     0.8620
Group.F:Category:prior_research 1.3213  3     0.7241
```

By prior research on morality

Views of the relationship between wisdom and morality of respondents who reported performing research on morality.

```
Response: Proportion
                                Chisq Df Pr(>Chisq)
(Intercept)                    0.0310  1     0.8602
Group.F                        1.2958  1     0.2550
Category                      36.9433  4   1.85e-07 ***
prior_research                 0.0013  1     0.9712
Group.F:Category               1.1194  3     0.7724
Group.F:prior_research         1.8101  1     0.1785
Category:prior_research        1.2966  4     0.8620
Group.F:Category:prior_research 1.3213  3     0.7241
```

By prior research on culture

Views of the relationship between wisdom and morality of respondents who reported performing research on culture.

```
Response: Proportion
                                    Chisq Df Pr(>Chisq)
(Intercept)                        0.0538  1    0.81654
Group.F                            5.4251  1    0.01985 *
Category                          51.1698  4   2.057e-10 ***
research_culturalpsy               0.4200  1    0.51692
Group.F:Category                   6.1299  3    0.10546
Group.F:research_culturalpsy       0.9313  1    0.33454
Category:research_culturalpsy      0.8854  4    0.92665
Group.F:Category:research_culturalpsy 0.6759 3  0.87885
```

By academic rank

Figure 3. Percentage of respondents endorsing a particular view of the relationship between morality and wisdom, separately for professors and non-professors.
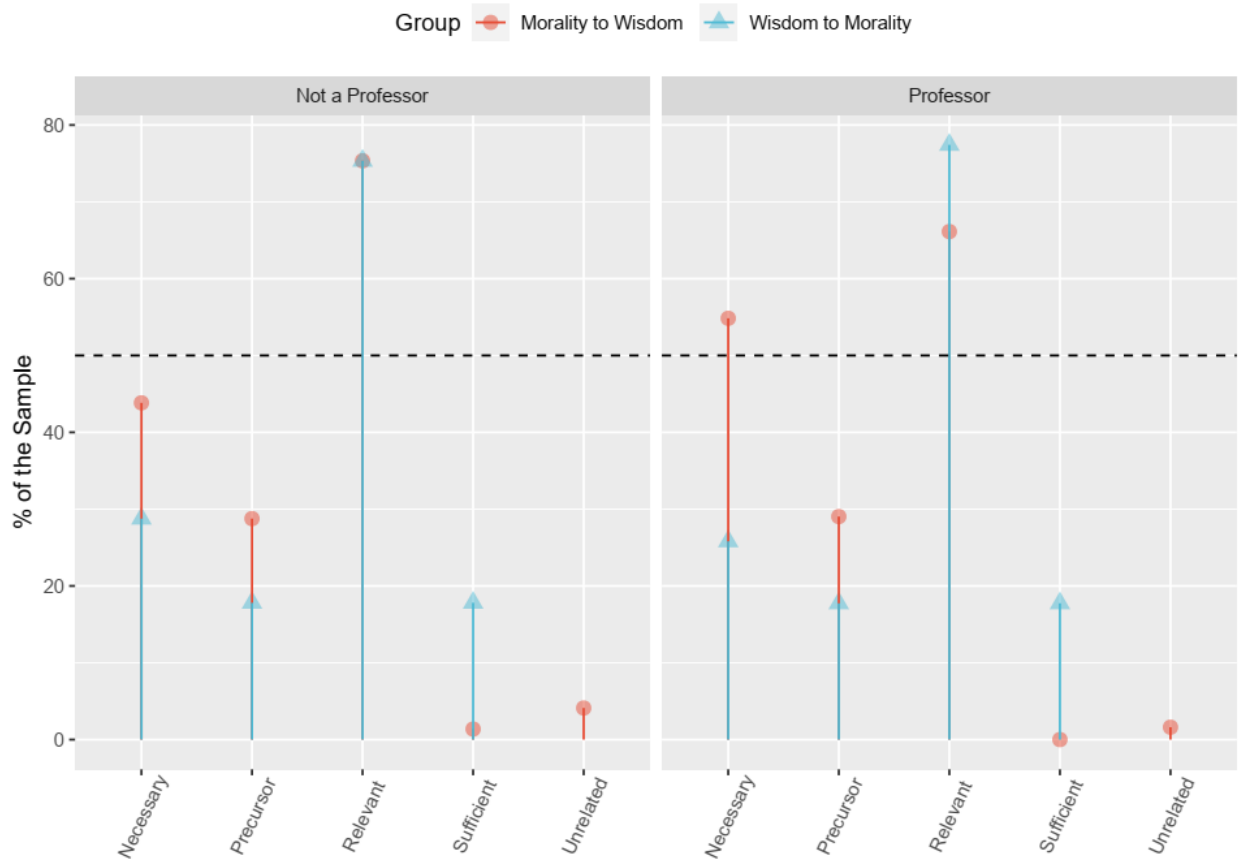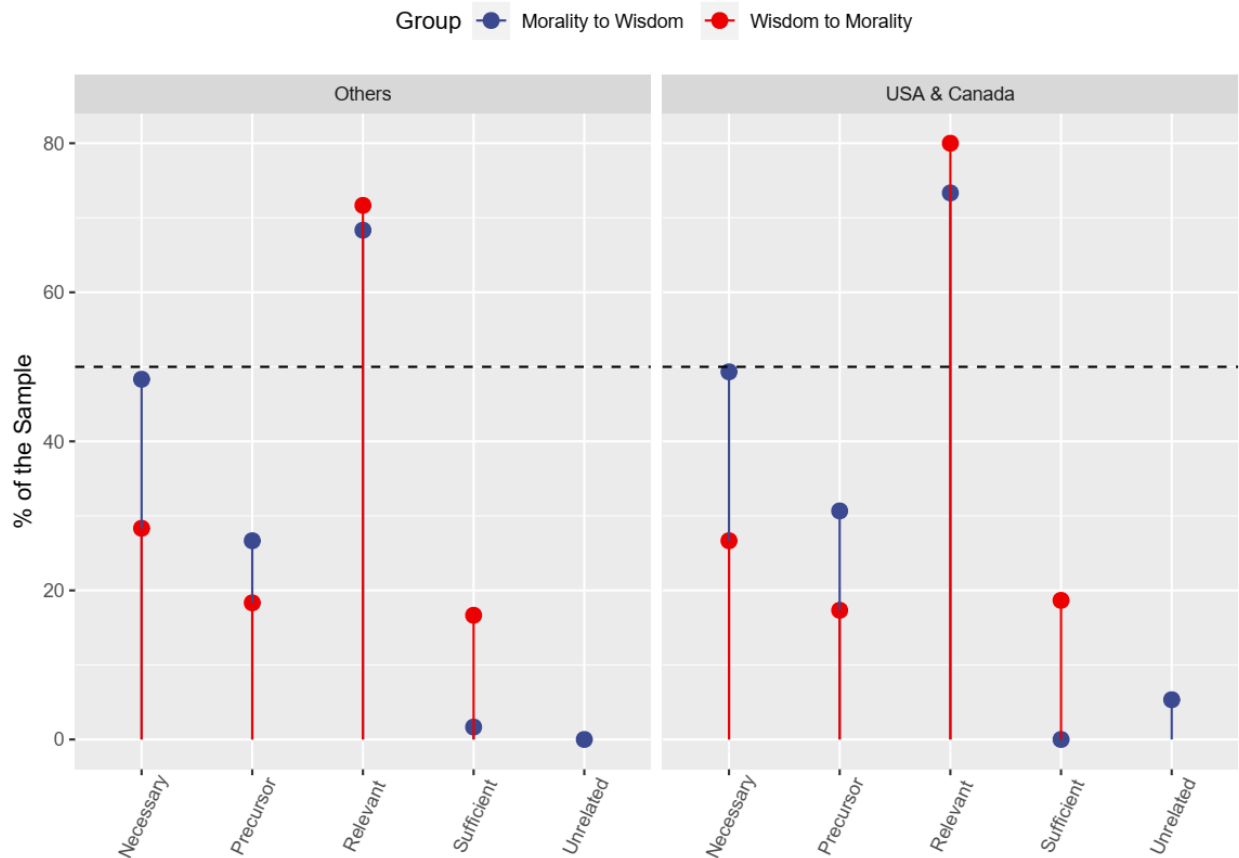

No significant effect of position (based on results of the generalized linear mixed models), suggesting that group assignment by category did not significantly differ between professors and non-professors.

	Chisq	Df	Pr(>Chisq)	
(Intercept)	1.1231	1	0.28926	
Group.F	3.7714	1	0.05214	.
Category	74.3790	4	2.696e-15	***
Position	1.6625	1	0.19726	
Group.F:Category	11.2357	3	0.01052	*
Group.F:Position	**1.4068**	**1**	**0.23558**	
Category:Position	**3.9442**	**4**	**0.41361**	
Group.F:Category:Position	**2.4938**	**3**	**0.47641**	

By country

Figure 4. Percentage of respondents endorsing a particular view of the relationship between morality and wisdom, separately for academics from the US and Canada, and overseas.


No significant effect of country (based on results of the generalized linear mixed models), suggesting that group assignment by category did not significantly differ between scholars from the US/Canada and oversees.

```
                               Chisq Df Pr(>Chisq)
(Intercept)                    0.0791  1    0.77851
Group.F                        5.4148  1    0.01997 *
Category                      36.4904  4  2.294e-07 ***
CountryCode                    0.0199  1    0.88785
Group.F:Category              10.3103  3    0.01610 *
Group.F:CountryCode            0.0840  1    0.77201
Category:CountryCode           0.1790  4    0.99623
Group.F:Category:CountryCode   0.4303  3    0.93392
```

By area of research

Figure 5. Estimates from separate GLMMs, with responses nested in participants, for participants indicating doing research in respective fields. Note: categories are not exclusive, hence confidence bands are partially biased.
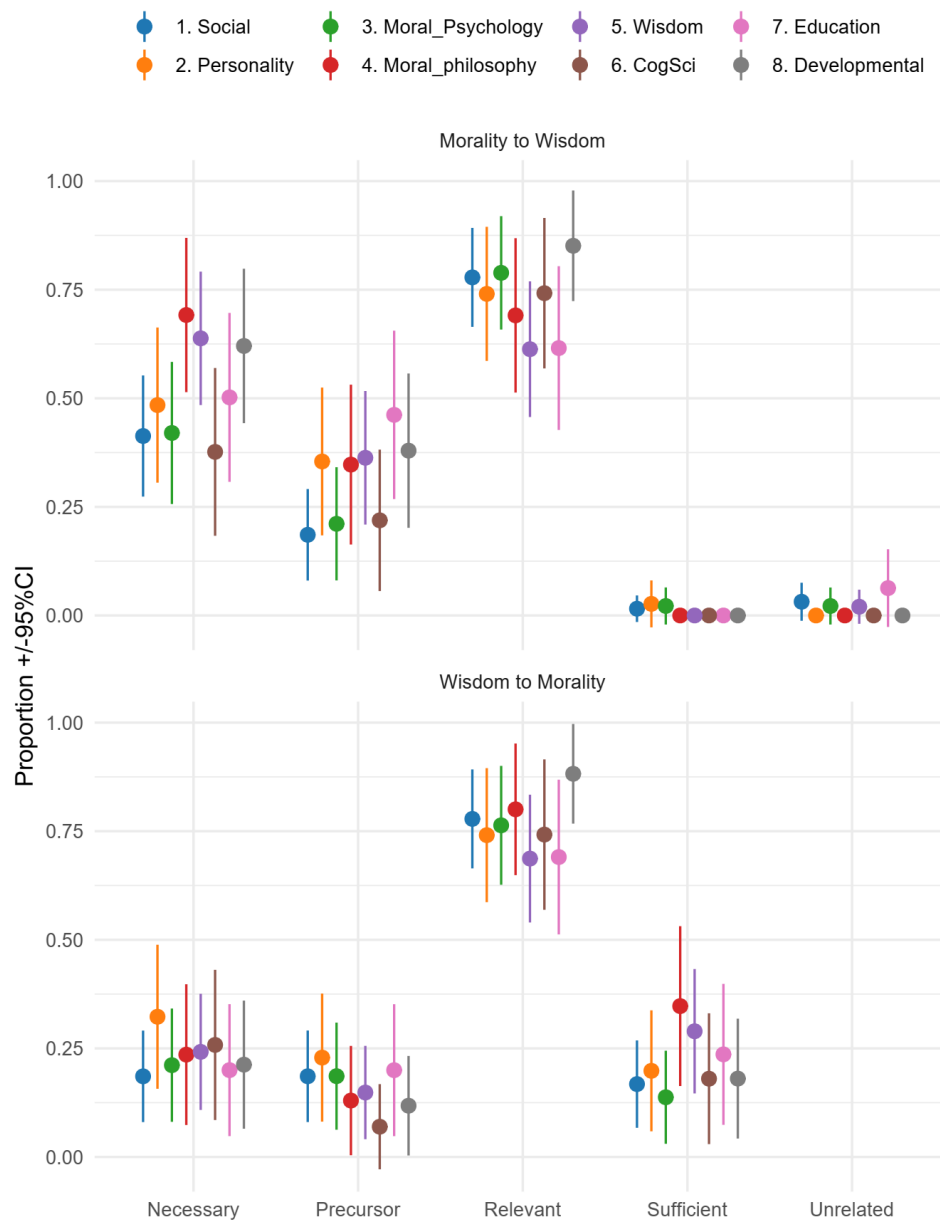
Some evidence of "skin in the game?" Scholars are more likely to agree that morality is necessary for wisdom than vice versa. Compared to moral psychologists, social, personality, and cognitive science scholars, most moral philosophers and wisdom scholars think that morality is necessary for wisdom." But also, we see that a small group of moral philosophers and wisdom scholars are more likely to think wisdom is sufficient for morality compared to other groups.

Open-ended responses (subset: n = 77)

Researchers were asked to provide additional open-ended reflection on the relationship of wisdom and morality.

Dimensions

- (FRMW) Functional relationship: morals=> wisdom. Morals is in service of wisdom. Morals are the driver that leads to wisdom as the outcome.
- (FRWM) Functional relationship: wisdom=> morality. Wisdom is in service of morality. Wisdom is the driver that leads to outcome (Morality).
- (FRJF) Functional relationship where both morality and wisdom serve a joint function: they can be independent from each other, but they both contribute towards a specific life goal (e.g., common good).
- (TRMW) Taxonomic relationship: morality is part of wisdom.
- (TRWM) Taxonomic relationship: wisdom is part of morality.
- (TRHOC) Taxonomic relationship: wisdom and morality are branches of a higher order category (e.g., breaststroke and butterfly are both swimming styles). This code applies even if the person initially says that there is no (functional) relationship between wisdom and morality.
- (PR) Probabilistic relationship: X can guide / often guides Y (with X and Y being either morality or wisdom). In other words: if you have X, you will have higher chance of having Y because X can guide/often guides Y. But it's not a given. For example, if the person states that X fosters or motivates Y, there may be a higher chance that Y will occur, even though it is not an absolute certainty.
- (DR) Deterministic relationship: X requires/ought to promote Y (with X and Y being either morality or wisdom) or X is sufficient for Y and when X is present, Y will (always) follow.
- (FM) (1) Fixed/ Universal versus (2) malleable/ context-dependent relationship/association (0 = not applicable). This also applies to individual features. If both morality and wisdom are viewed as universal/fixed, their relationship by default will also be fixed (i.e., coded as 1). If one of the two features is context-dependent, it will be by definition a malleable/context-dependent relationship as well (i.e., coded as 2). If participants refer to malleability/evolution of relationship of morality and wisdom, it would be a 2. If participants state that morality and wisdom are unrelated, it will be coded as 0. Check forced-choice responses to see if participants mention them not to be related (in which case participants will not select any forced choice response son the prior question).
- PROCESS-MECH Theme: Wisdom as a process allowing moral action/outcome (even if not always). In other words, wisdom is a tool or a mechanism that allows us to achieve moral outcome/action. It is not about a lifelong journey of life experiences leading to later-life development of moral character.
- PROCESS-LIFE Theme: Wisdom as a life-long/experiential process (of accumulating life experiences), which consequently contribute to cultivation of moral character (e.g., compassion, humility). It is not about situation-specific decisions concerning moral action.
- CONSTRUCT Theme: Constructivism – morals as a set of culturally-bounded rules/norms and wisdom as discerning how/when to apply them and/or to implement these rules/norms.

Figure 6. Percentage of participants spontaneously mentioning a particular theme in their open-ended, additional elaboration on a possible relationship between morality and wisdom.
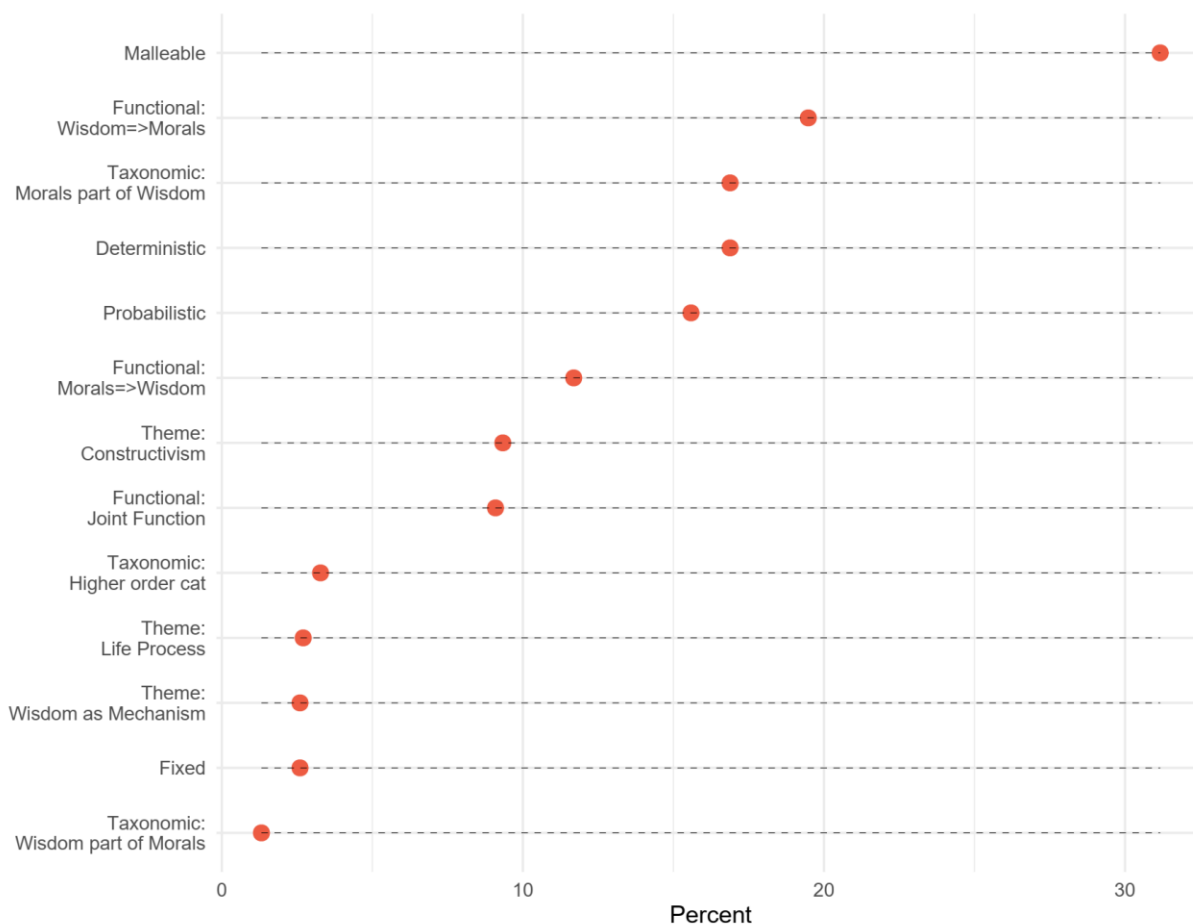

Scholars most frequently mention the themes of malleable and context-dependent relationship of morality and wisdom. Further, scholars are somewhat more likely to view wisdom to be in the service of morality, rather than vice versa (though explicit mentions of wisdom as a mechanism was rare and even most frequent category describing a functional "wisdom leads to morality" relationship is mentioned < 20% of the time). Further, almost the same number of people characterized the relationship taxonomically, with morality being part of wisdom. People were similarly split in their probabilistic or deterministic view of the relationship.

Developmental

We can examine the relevant themes of developmental scholars' open-ended reflection on the relationship between morality and wisdom.
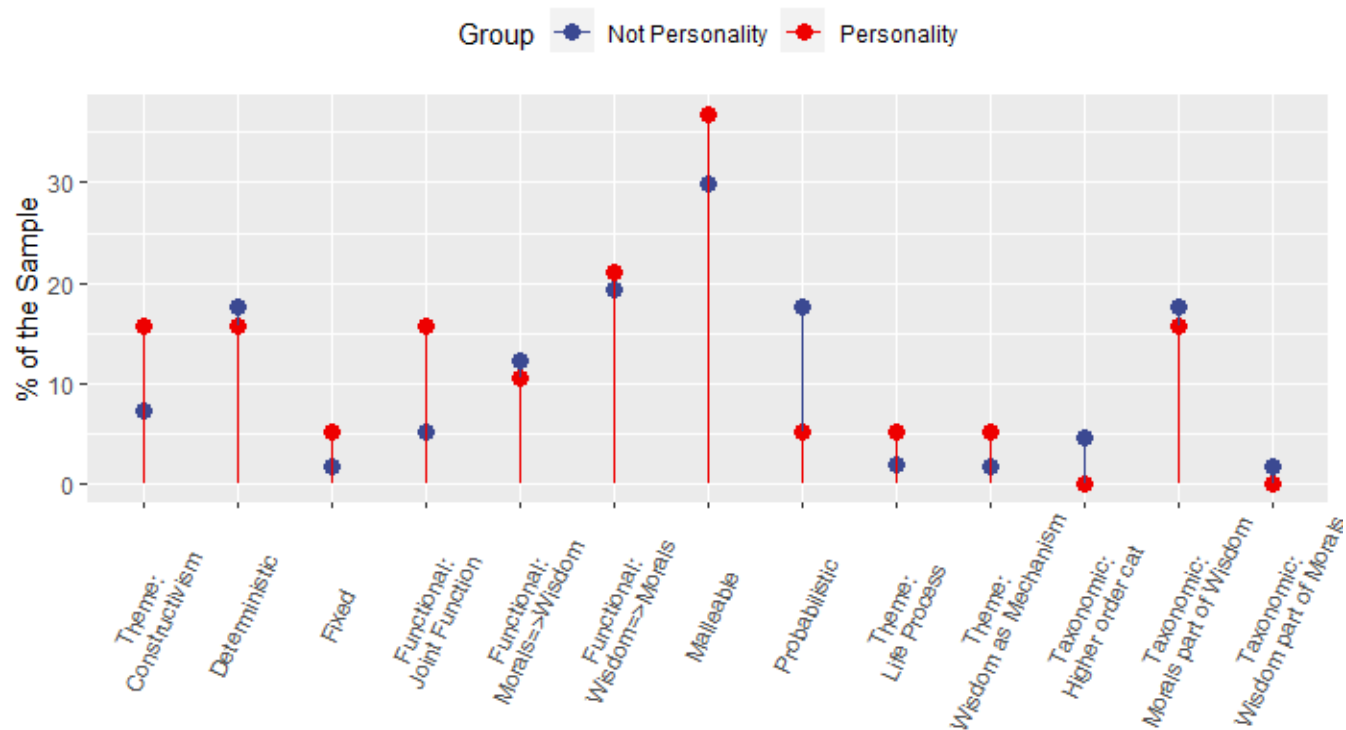
Figure 7. Percentage of participants spontaneously mentioning a particular theme in their open-ended, additional elaboration on a possible relationship between morality and wisdom, separately for participants studying developmental psychology versus. not developmental psychology.
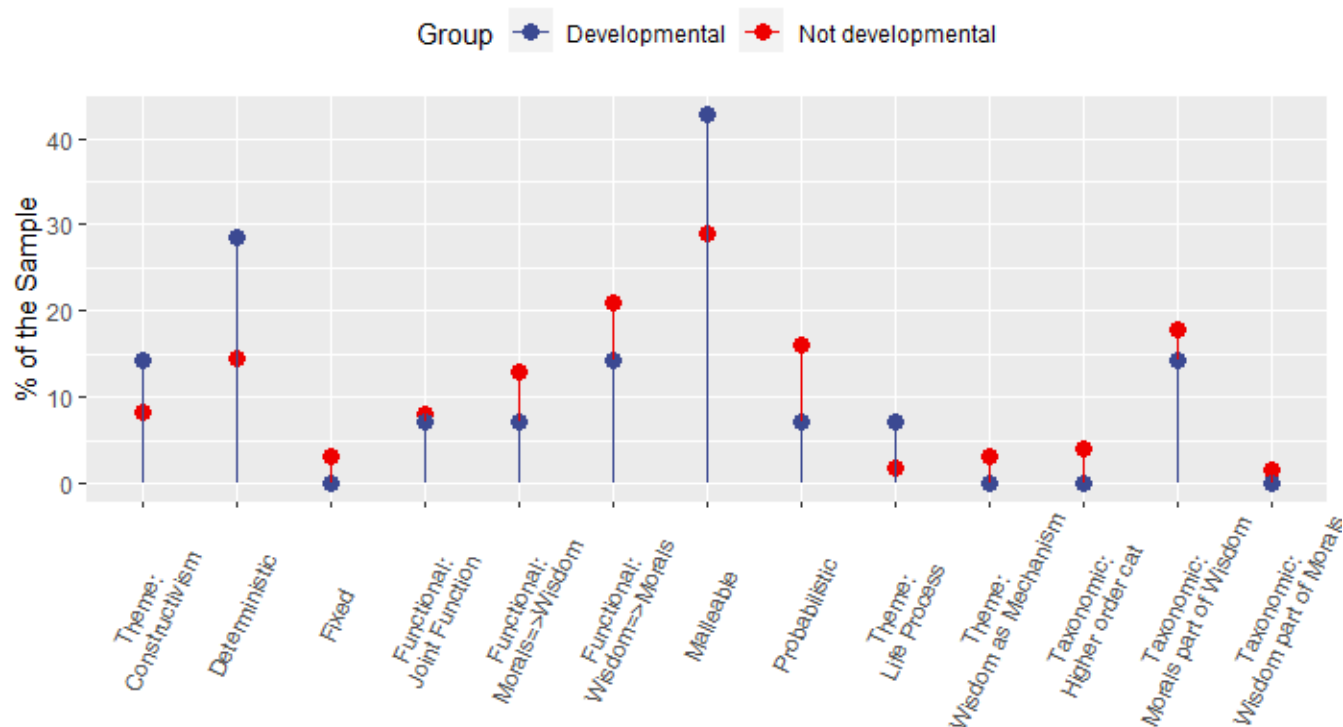
Social

We can examine the relevant themes of social psychology scholars' open-ended reflection on the relationship between morality and wisdom.

Figure 8. Percentage of participants spontaneously mentioning a particular theme in their open-ended, additional elaboration on a possible relationship between morality and wisdom, separately for participants studying social psychology versus not social psychology.
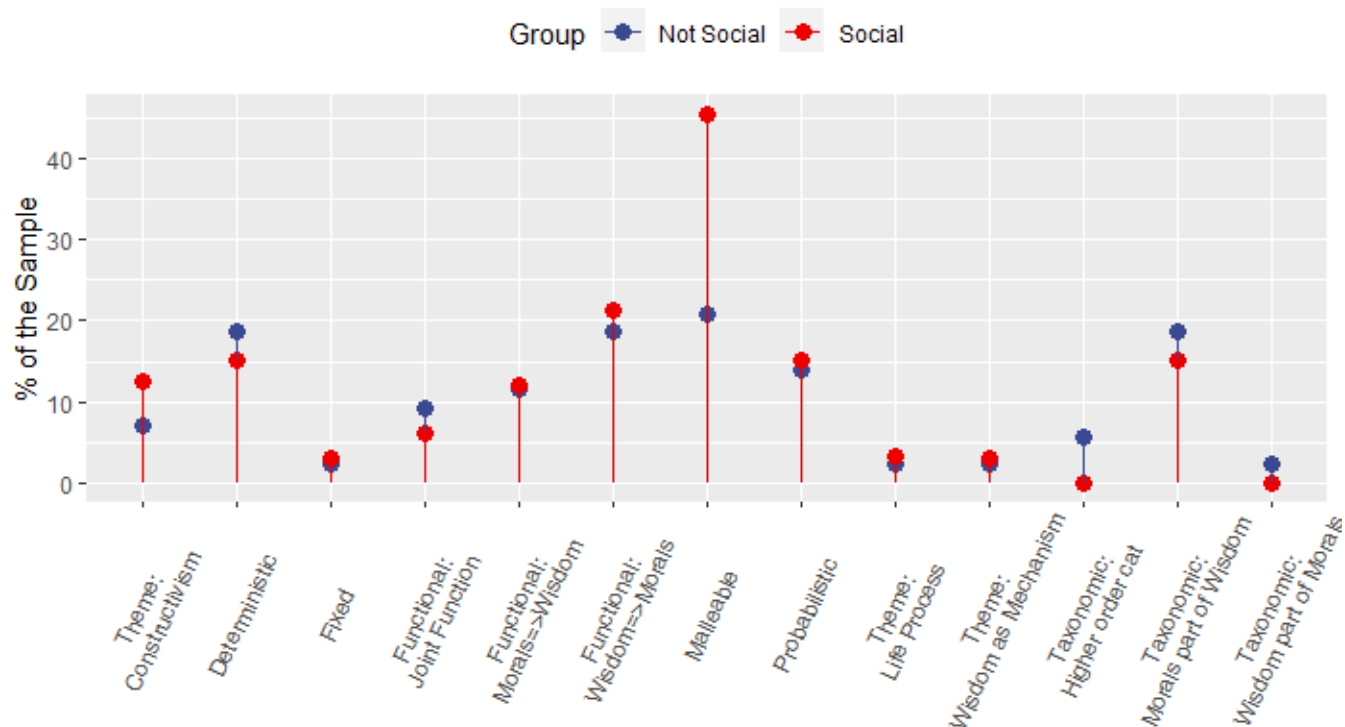
Personality

We can examine the relevant themes of personality psychology scholars' open-ended reflection on the relationship between morality and wisdom.

Figure 9. Percentage of participants spontaneously mentioning a particular theme in their open-ended, additional elaboration on a possible relationship between morality and wisdom, separately for participants studying personality psychology vs. not personality psychology.

Arguments supporting the view that morality is necessary for wisdom

We can examine open-ended responses among participants who indicated that morality is necessary, or unnecessary for wisdom.

Figure 10. Percentage of participants spontaneously mentioning a particular theme in their open-ended, additional elaboration on a possible relationship between morality and wisdom, separately for participants who viewed morality as necessary for wisdom (1) or not (0).
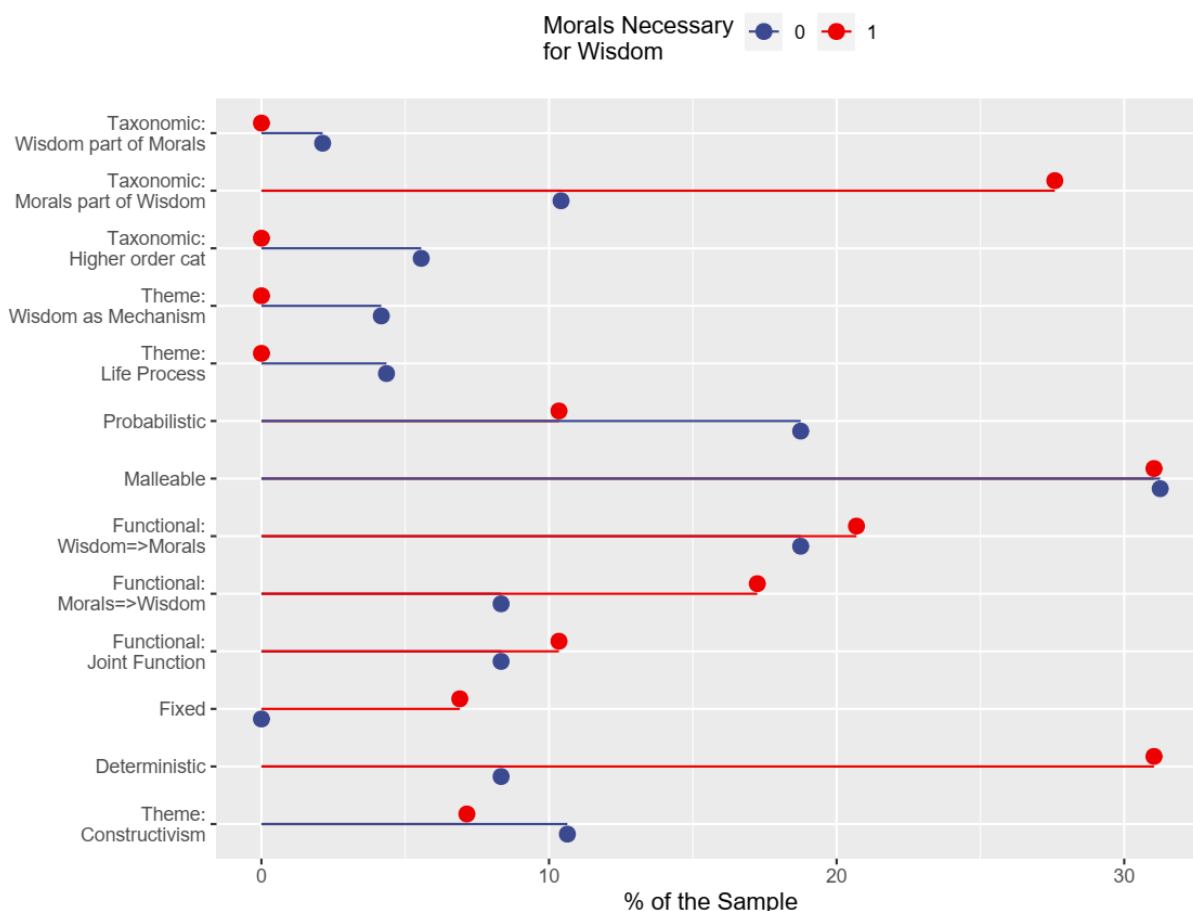

One big difference concerns endorsement of probabilistic versus deterministic claims. Folks who view morality as necessary for wisdom are more likely to be *deterministic* rather than *probabilistic*, whereas the reversal is true for those who don't see morality as necessary for wisdom. Furthermore, folks who view morality as necessary for wisdom are more likely to consider the relationship in terms of a taxonomy, whereas people who don't endorse the claim that morality is necessary for wisdom are more likely to view the relationship in functional terms (wisdom leading to morality).

Arguments of people who view wisdom as necessary for morality
What about the reversal?

Figure 11. Percentage of participants spontaneously mentioning a particular theme in their open-ended, additional elaboration on a possible relationship between morality and wisdom, separately for participants who viewed wisdom as necessary for morality (1) or not (0).
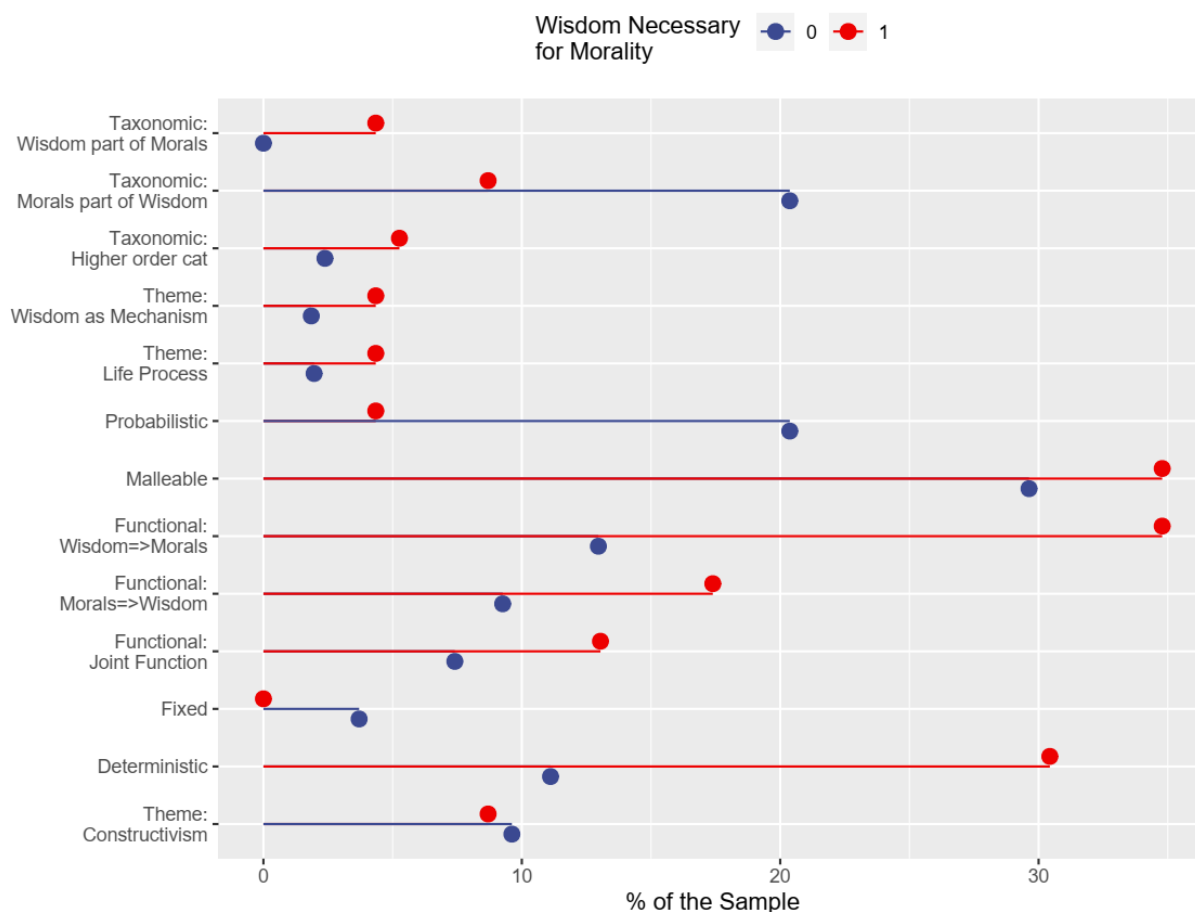

Again, there seems to be a greater focus on deterministic vs. probabilistic relationship if one views wisdom as necessary for morality. It appears that if one makes a strong claim (necessary), one is more likely to use strong (deterministic) language in a subsequent open-ended elaboration on the relationship between morality and wisdom. Further, we see relatively greater likelihood of mentioning a functional relationship (wisdom➔morality), and lower likelihood of endorsing a taxonomic relationship (morals being part of wisdom).

Arguments supporting the view that morality is relevant for wisdom

Let's look more broadly, towards people who believe that morality is generally relevant for wisdom (vs. not).

Figure 12. Percentage of participants spontaneously mentioning a particular theme in their open-ended, additional elaboration on a possible relationship between morality and wisdom, separately for participants who viewed morality as relevant for wisdom (1) or not (0).
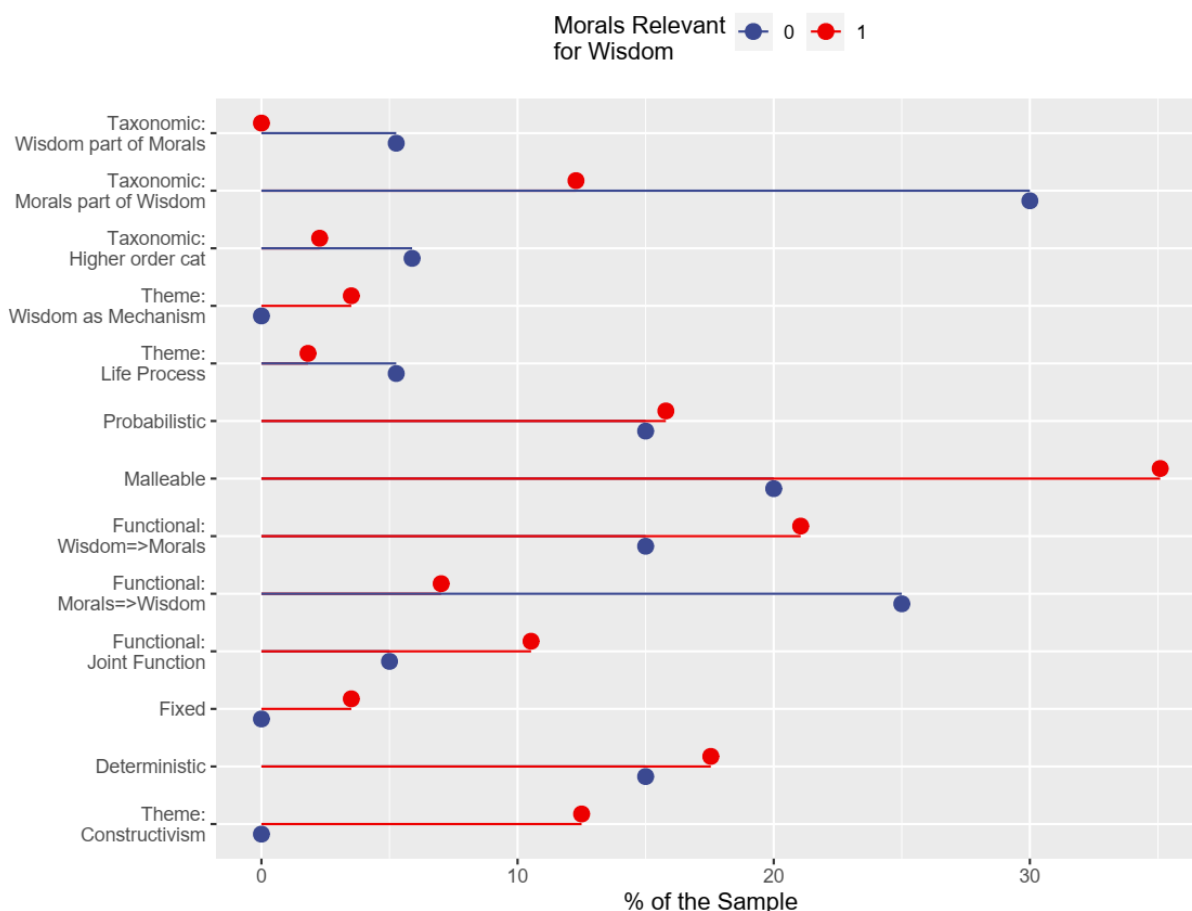
Folks who viewed morality as relevant to wisdom were less likely to think about the relationship in taxonomic terms and more likely to think about it in functional terms (specifically: wisdom leading to morality rather than other way around).
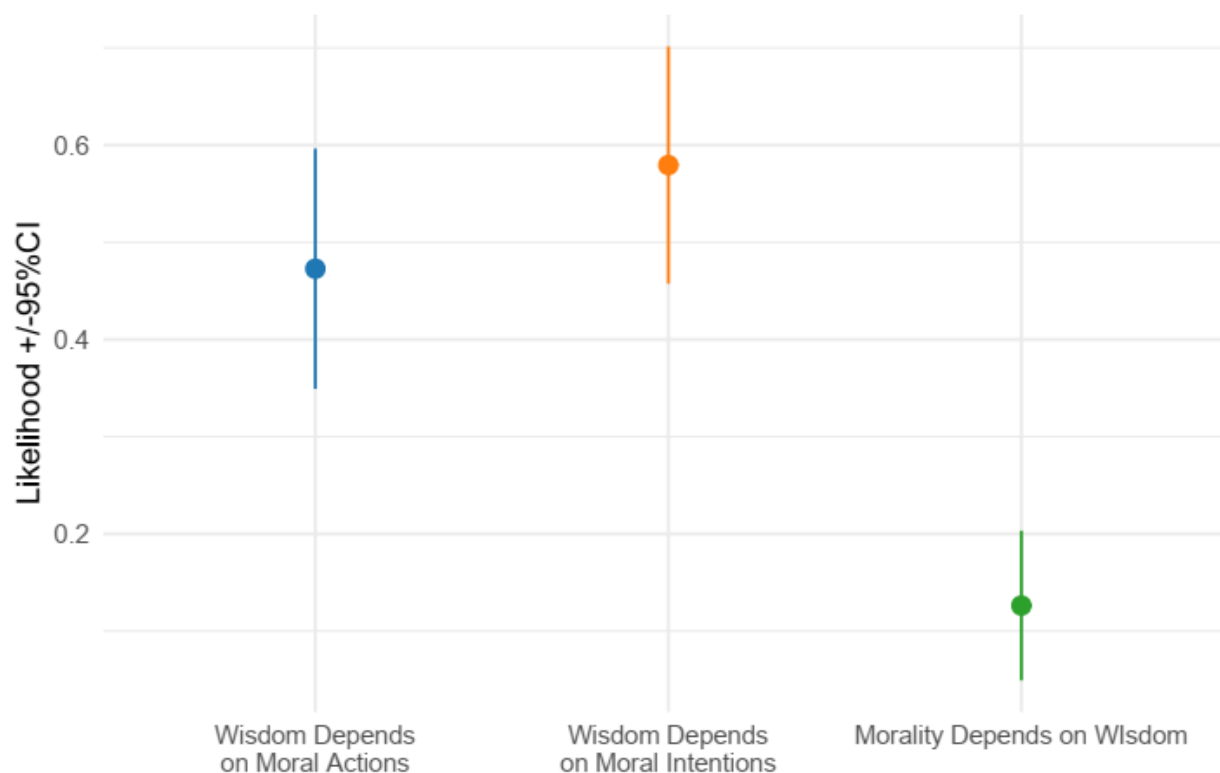
Wisdom, moral intentions and moral actions (n = 92)

To what extent do psychological characteristics of wisdom depend on either moral intentions or actions? By intentions we mean desires and beliefs that behavior will lead to moral outcomes. By actions we mean behaviors undertaken to effect/achieve/obtain outcomes.

We coded responses on three dimensions:

- Intention: wisdom depends on moral intentions
- Action: wisdom depends on moral action
- MDW: morality depends on wisdom (reverse path)

Figure 13. Participants' open-ended responses concerning the role of moral intentions and actions for wisdom. Estimates from GLMM, with responses nested in participants.

More than half of the sample indicates that wisdom depends on moral intentions, with a somewhat smaller percentage (< 50%) indicating that wisdom depends on actions. Notably, a substantial group of people also spontaneously mentioned that morality depends on wisdom rather than vice versa! This observation is noteworthy, as we did not ask about this direction. This pattern mirrors the forced choice responses above, clarifying that there is more agreement about the dependency of wisdom on moral intentions rather than actions.

What characteristics do academics select as central to their working definition of wisdom?

Forced choice responses (n = 107)

Researchers were invited to select from a list of psychological characteristics previously identified as frequently mentioned in relation to wisdom (Grossmann et al., 2010). They were also asked to sort them in terms of different degree of psychological universality (Norenzayan & Heine, 2005). We can therefore look at characteristics selected in general, for different degrees of universality (accessibility, existential, functional, non-universal), as well as weighted scores (based on position in each group).

First, we looked at the overall most frequently selected categories researchers viewed as relevant to their empirical model/view of wisdom.

Figure 14. Psychological characteristics attributed to wisdom, ranked from most to least frequently selected.
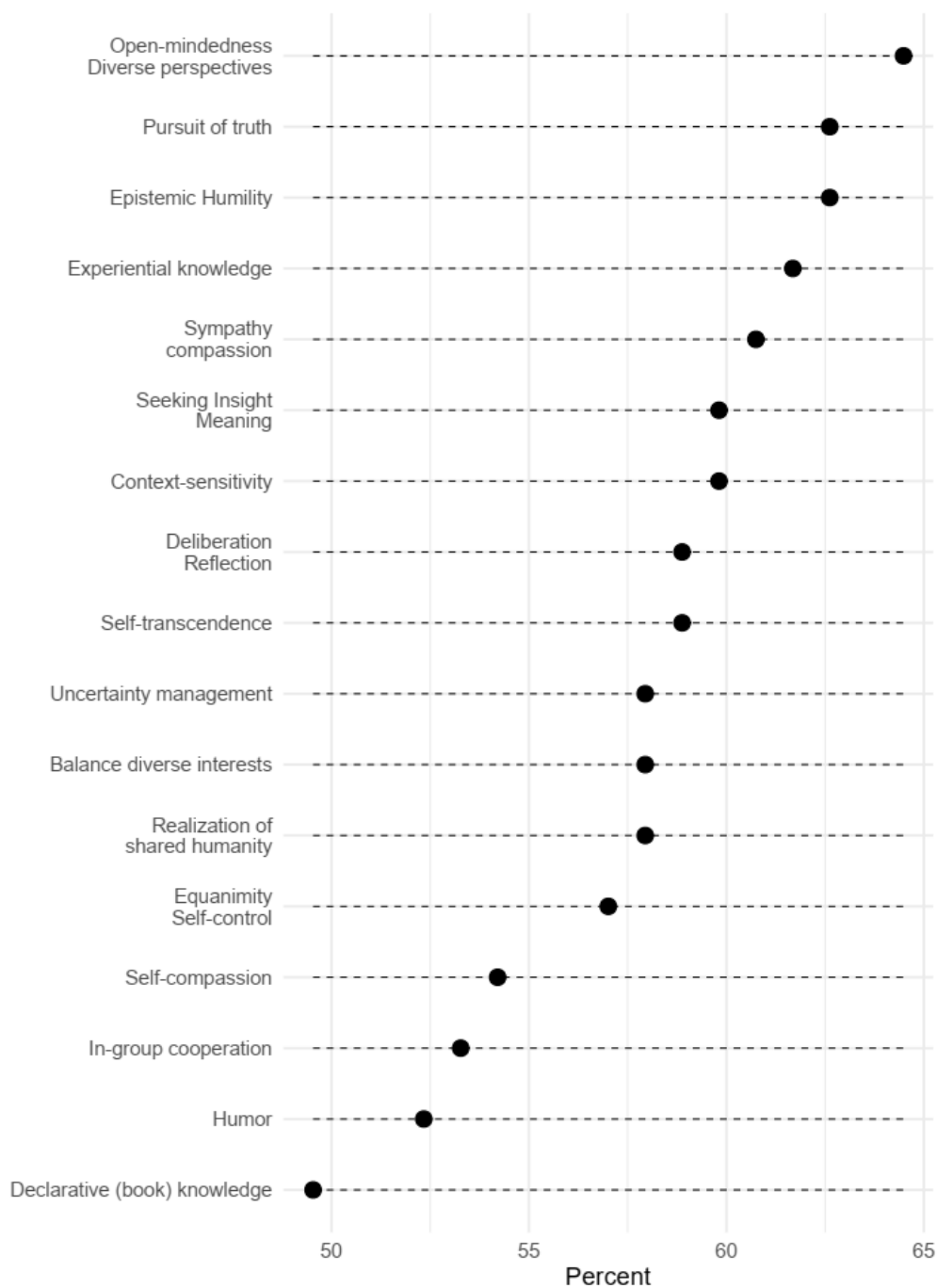

In total, the the characteristics of wisdom academics most frequently selected were open-mindedness/consideration of diverse perspectives, pursuit of truth and epistemic humility, followed by experiential knowledge, sympathy/compassion, seeing insight and meaning, as well as context-sensitivity. Features selected least often were declarative knowledge and humor.

Wisdom and culture (n = 107)

Participants were provided with an explanation of different degrees of cultural universality:

- **Non-universals** are psychological processes that do not exist in all cultures (e.g., abacus reasoning).

- **Existential universals** are psychological processes that exist in all cultures, although the process is not necessarily used to solve the same problem, nor is it equally accessible across cultures. (e.g., rite of passage rituals – they exist in most cultures but can look very different).

- **Functional universals** are psychological processes that exist in all cultures, are used to solve the same problem across cultures, yet are more accessible to people from some cultures than others (e.g., punishment of unfairness across cultures).

- **Accessibility universals** are psychological processes that exist in all cultures, are used to solve the same problem across cultures, and are accessible to the same degree across cultures - i.e., the likelihood of a person using this psychological process is similar across culture (e.g., intuitive physics – even infants are surprised if objects just disappear).
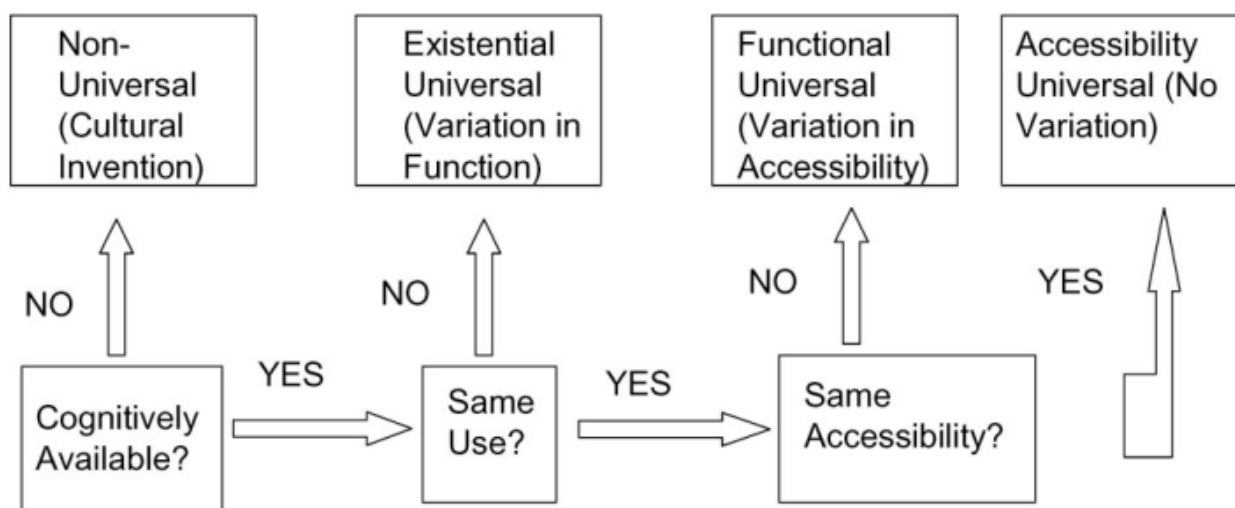
Norenzayan & Heine (2005, *Psychological Bulletin*)

We examined to what extent participants viewed each psychological characteristics they attributed to wisdom as non-universal, existential universal, functional universal, or accessibility universal. Figure 15 indicates how often each characteristic was sorted in each (non)-universality bin. Figure 16 adjusts the scores by *rank* (the order in which participants selected and placed each psychological characteristic), whereby weighting responses by their selected position. Here, top positions would have *lower rank.*

Figure 15. Psychological characteristics attributed to wisdom characterized along four degrees of universality, ranked from most to least frequently selected in each group.
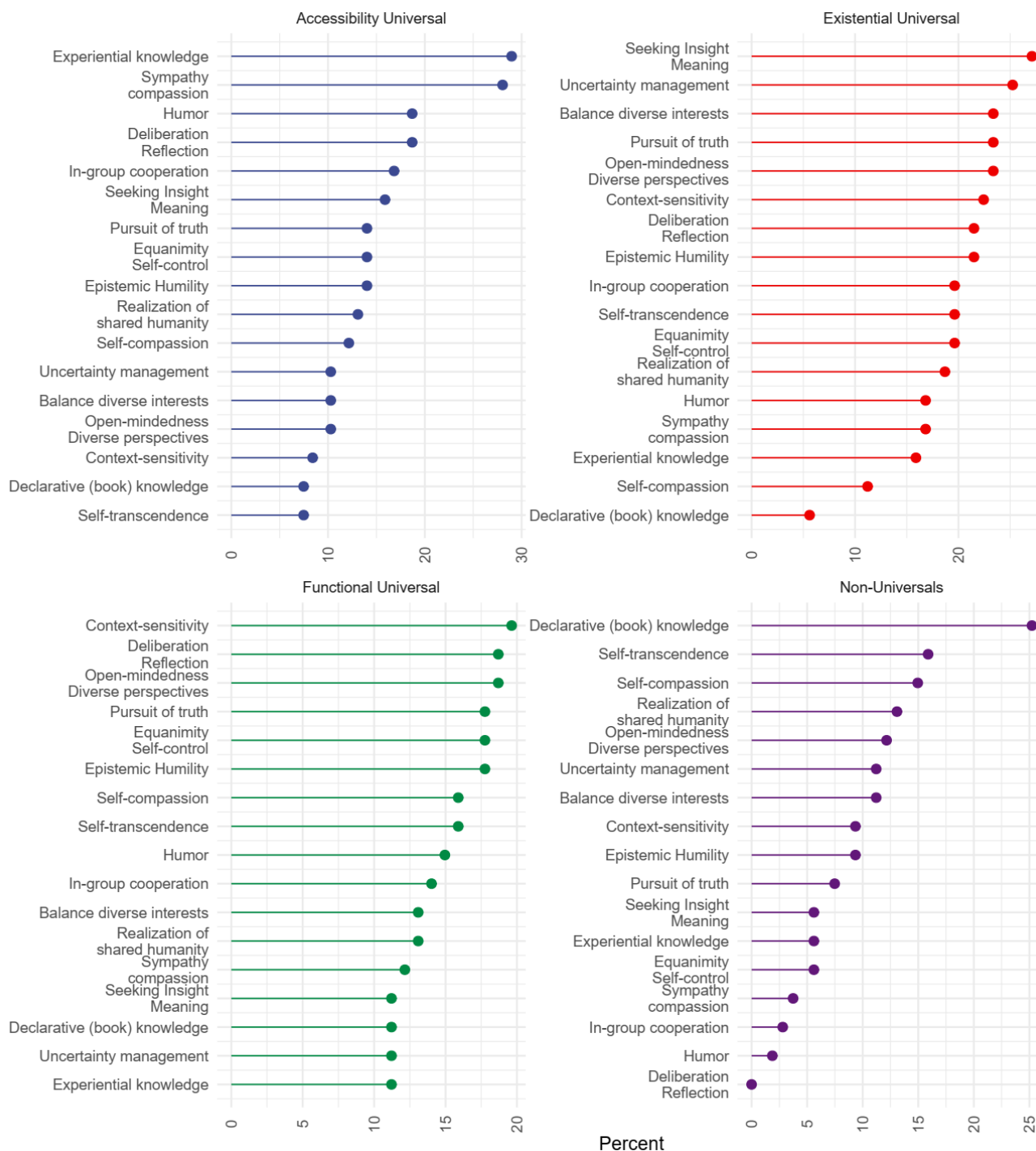
Declarative knowledge was chiefly selected as a non-universal. In contrast, seeking insight and meaning, and uncertainty management, followed by balance of diverse interests were most frequently selected existential universals. Open-mindedness/consideration of diverse perspectives and context-sensitivity, along with pursuit of truth were most frequently chosen functional universals, whereas experiential knowledge and sympathy/compassion were considered to be accessibility universals.

# Selected rank within each bin of psychological universality

Figure 16. Ranked psychological characteristics researchers attributed to wisdom, characterized along four degrees of universality, ranked from top to bottom position. **Lower score = higher rank** within each group.

Average Rank (1-18)
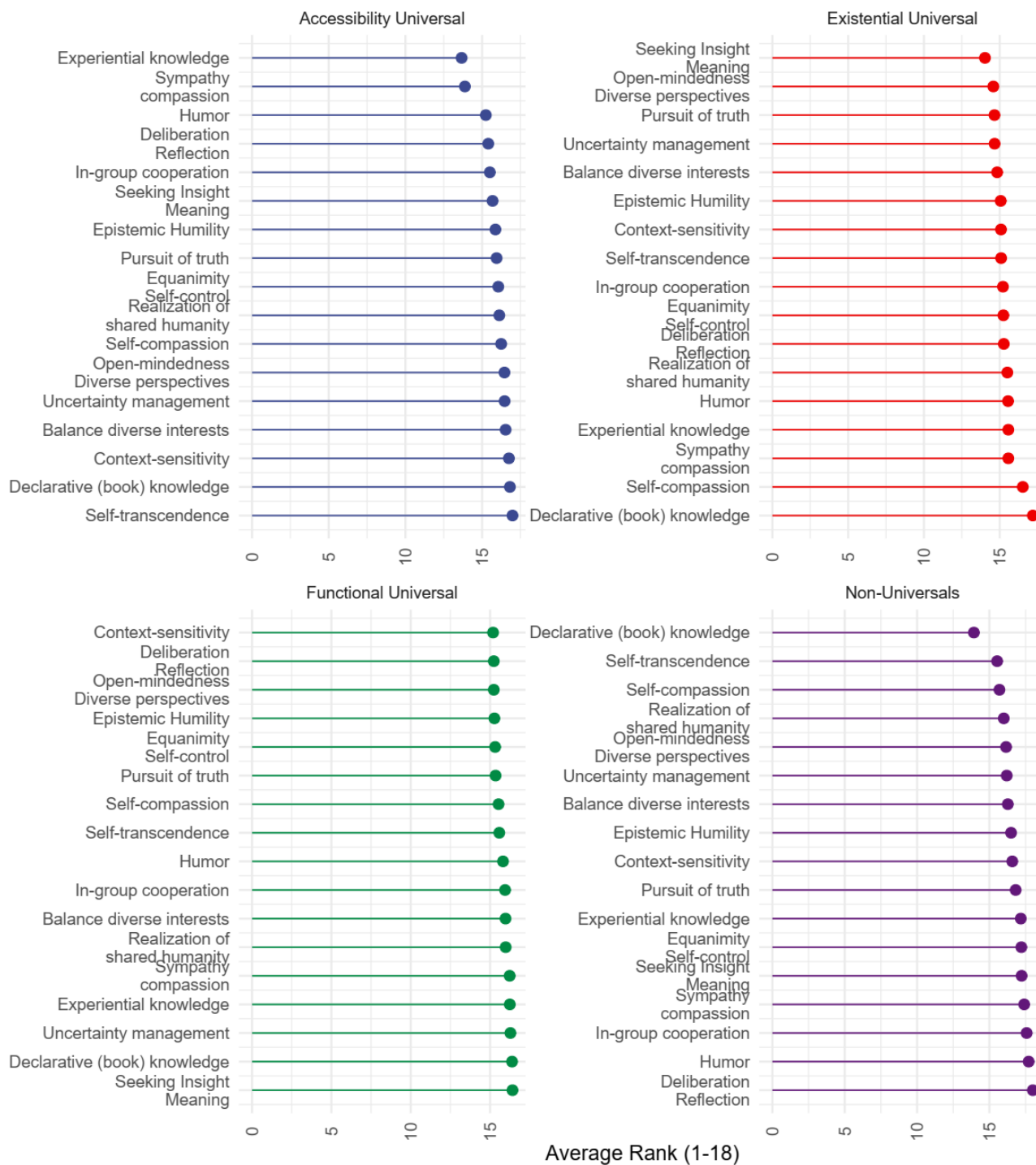
Open-ended responses (subset: n = 98)

- Absolute relativism – definition of what is wisdom as culture-dependent, can only be understood through the eyes/experiences of the insider(emic).
- Universalism - same set of mental processes, just the expression/manifestation varies (e.g., due to different emphasis in socialization), outsider viewpoint on the relationship of culture and wisdom. Culture is a moderator of expression (etic).
- Morally bounded relativism: Wisdom has both universal and culture-specific components. In particular, moral features of wisdom are culture-bound. Responses were only given a 1 *if* they include instances of relativism with respect to morality **BUT ALSO** mentions of other (non-moral) features of wisdom being universal.
- Wisdom as a cultural competence.

Figure 17. Percentage of times participants mentioned a particular theme in their open-ended reflections on the role of culture for wisdom, ranked from most to least frequently mentioned.
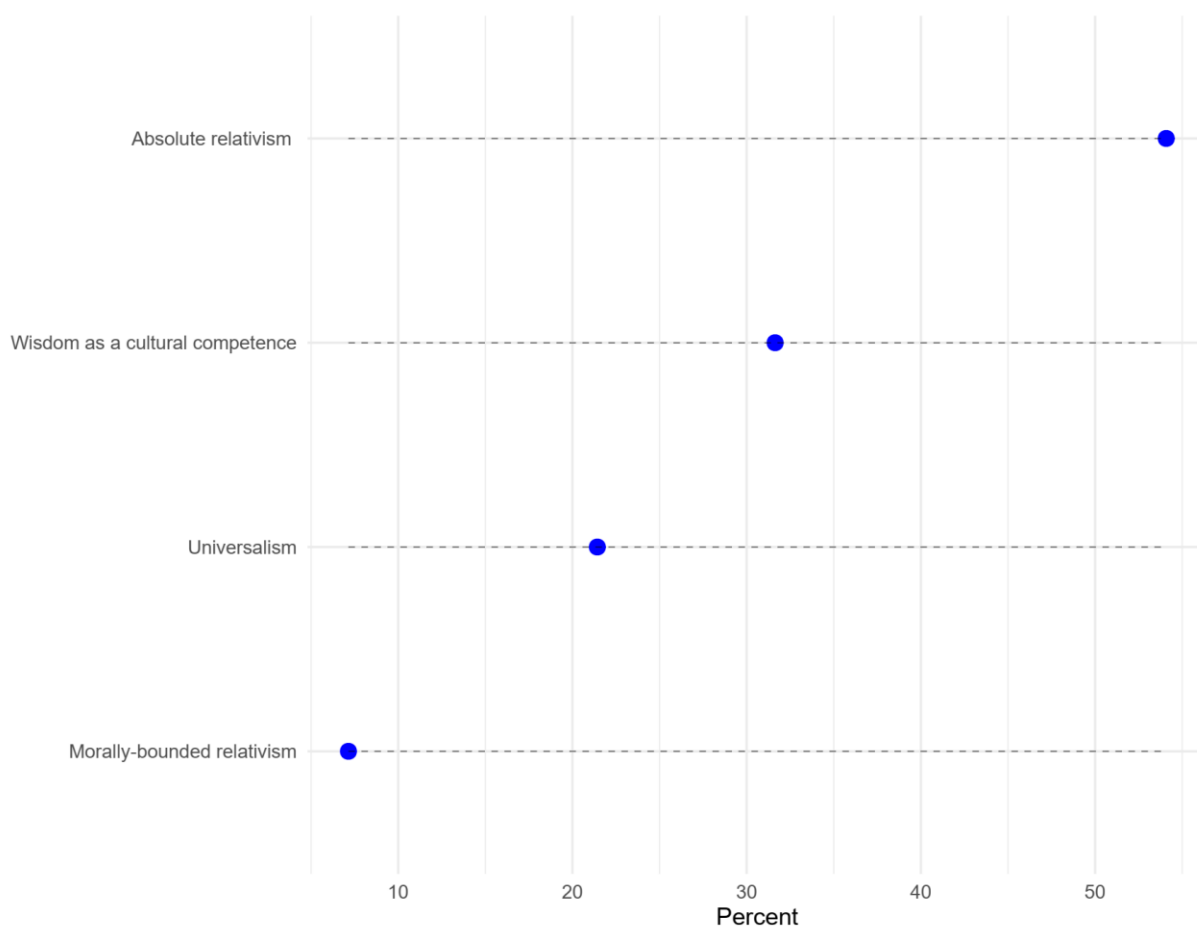

Most scholars see wisdom in culture-relativist terms. At least one third of the sample views wisdom as a form of cultural competence.

Common wisdom model

Familiar with the model (*n* = 43 out of 152; 28%).

Figure 18. Percentage of times participants mentioned a particular theme in their open-ended points of agreement and disagreement with the Common Wisdom Model (Grossmann et al., 2020), ranked from most to least frequently mentioned.
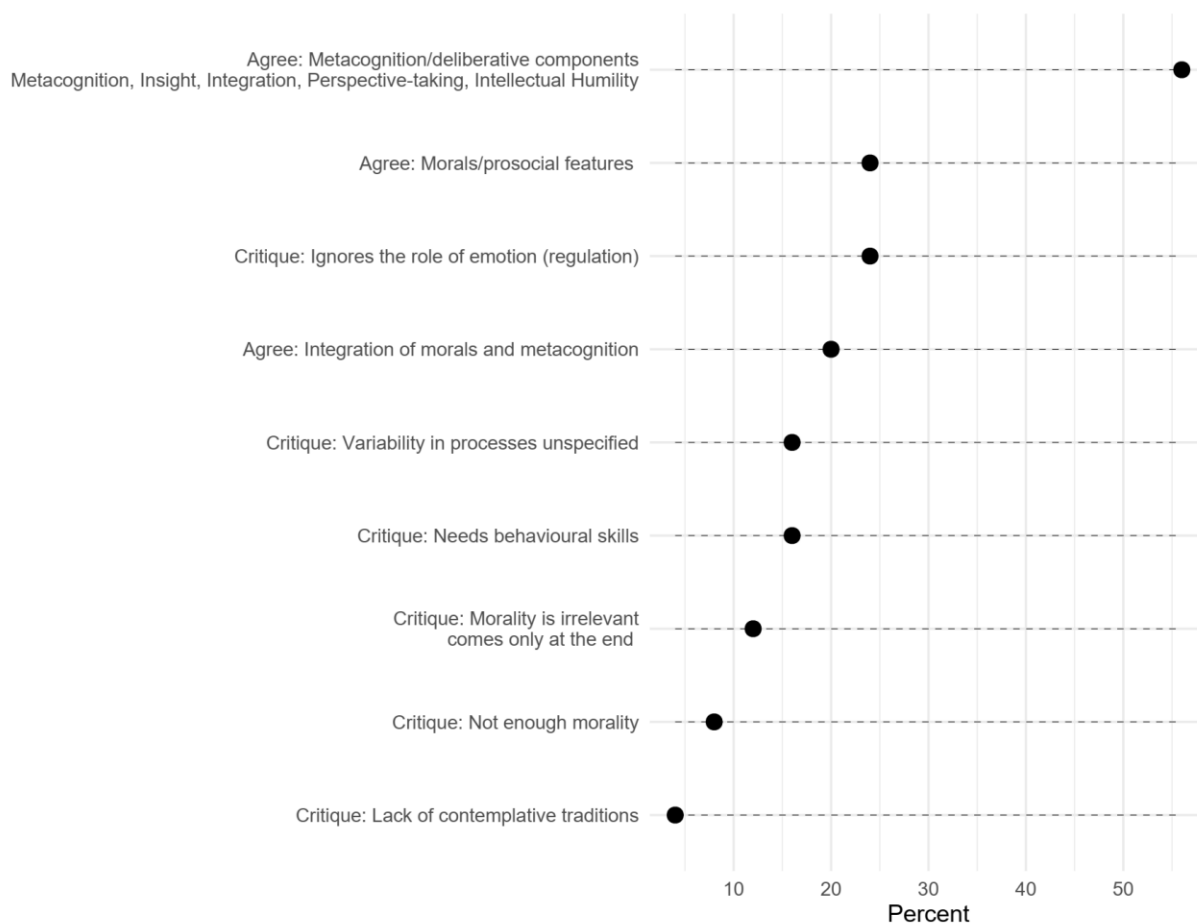
Participants who reported being familiar with the Common Wisdom Model representing established points of consensus in the field (Grossmann et al., 2020, Psychological Inquiry) were most likely to mention agreeing with the emphasis on meta-cognitive components. Less consistent was endorsement of the relevant of moral features in the model, with some participants indicating that morality was not sufficiently elaborated upon, and others indicating that morality itself is irrelevant for wisdom. Additional point of disagreement concerned role of emotions and emotion-regulation, and a call for greater specificity of processes and behavioral features.