Introduction: Too Much Wisdom

WHAT SHOULD I DO, how should I live, and whom should I become? Many of us ask such questions, and, modern life being what it is, we don't have to go far to find answers. Wisdom is now so cheap and abundant that it floods over us from calendar pages, tea bags, bottle caps, and mass e-mail messages forwarded by well-meaning friends. We are in a way like residents of Jorge Luis Borges's *Library of Babel*—an infinite library whose books contain every possible string of letters and, therefore, somewhere an explanation of why the library exists and how to use it. But Borges's librarians suspect that they will never find that book amid the miles of nonsense.

Our prospects are better. Few of our potential sources of wisdom are nonsense, and many are entirely true. Yet, because our library is also effectively infinite—no one person can ever read more than a tiny fraction—we face the paradox of abundance: Quantity undermines the quality of our engagement. With such a vast and wonderful library spread out before us, we often skim books or read just the reviews. We might already have encountered the Greatest Idea, the insight that would have transformed us had we savored it, taken it to heart, and worked it into our lives.

This is a book about ten Great Ideas. Each chapter is an attempt to savor one idea that has been discovered by several of the world's civilizations—to question it in light of what we now know from scientific research, and to extract from it the lessons that still apply to our modern lives.

I am a social psychologist. I do experiments to try to figure out one corner of human social life, and my corner is morality and the moral emotions. I am also a teacher. I teach a large introductory psychology class at the University of Virginia in which I try to explain the entire field of psychology in twenty-four lectures. I have to present a thousand research findings on everything from the structure of the retina to the workings of love, and then hope that my students will understand and remember it all. As I struggled with this challenge in my first year of teaching, I realized that several ideas kept recurring across lectures, and that often these ideas had been stated eloquently by past thinkers. To summarize the idea that our emotions, our reactions to events, and some mental illnesses are caused by the mental filters through which we look at the world, I could not say it any more concisely than Shakespeare: "There is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so."[1] I began to use such quotations to help my students remember the big ideas in psychology, and I began to wonder just how many such ideas there were.

To find out, I read dozens of works of ancient wisdom, mostly from the world's three great zones of classical thought: India (for example, the Upanishads, the Bhagavad Gita, the sayings of the Buddha), China (the Analects of Confucius, the Tao te Ching, the writings of Meng Tzu and other philosophers), and the cultures of the Mediterranean (the Old and New Testaments, the Greek and Roman philosophers, the Koran). I also read a variety of other works of philosophy and literature from the last five hundred years. Every time I found a psychological claim—a statement about human nature or the workings of the mind or heart—I wrote it down. Whenever I found an idea expressed in several places and times I considered it a possible Great Idea. But rather than mechanically listing the top ten all-time most widespread psychological ideas of humankind, I decided that coherence was more important than frequency. I wanted to write about a set of ideas that would fit together, build upon each other, and tell a story about how human beings can find happiness and meaning in life.

Helping people find happiness and meaning is precisely the goal of the new field of positive psychology,[2] a field in which I have been active,[3] so this book is in a way about the origins of positive psychology in ancient wisdom and the applications of positive psychology today. Most of the research

I will cover was done by scientists who would not consider themselves positive psychologists. Nonetheless, I have drawn on ten ancient ideas and a great variety of modern research findings to tell the best story I can about the causes of human flourishing, and the obstacles to well being that we place in our own paths.

The story begins with an account of how the human mind works. Not a full account, of course, just two ancient truths that must be understood before you can take advantage of modern psychology to improve your life. The first truth is the foundational idea of this book: The mind is divided into parts that sometimes conflict. Like a rider on the back of an elephant, the conscious, reasoning part of the mind has only limited control of what the elephant does. Nowadays, we know the causes of these divisions, and a few ways to help the rider and the elephant work better as a team. The second idea is Shakespeare's, about how "thinking makes it so." (Or, as Buddha[4] said, "Our life is the creation of our mind.") But we can improve this ancient idea today by explaining why most people's minds have a bias toward seeing threats and engaging in useless worry. We can also do something to change this bias by using three techniques that increase happiness, one ancient and two very new.

The second step in the story is to give an account of our social lives—again, not a complete account, just two truths, widely known but not sufficiently appreciated. One is the Golden Rule. Reciprocity is the most important tool for getting along with people, and I'll show you how you can use it to solve problems in your own life and avoid being exploited by those who use reciprocity against you. However, reciprocity is more than just a tool. It is also a clue about who we humans are and what we need, a clue that will be important for understanding the end of the larger story. The second truth in this part of the story is that we are all, by nature, hypocrites, and this is why it is so hard for us to follow the Golden Rule faithfully. Recent psychological research has uncovered the mental mechanisms that make us so good at seeing the slightest speck in our neighbor's eye, and so bad at seeing the log in our own. If you know what your mind is up to, and why you so easily see the world through a distorting lens of good and evil, you can take steps to reduce your self-righteousness. You can thereby reduce the frequency of conflicts with others who are equally convinced of their righteousness.

At this point in the story, we'll be ready to ask: Where does happiness come from? There are several different "happiness hypotheses." One is that happiness comes from getting what you want, but we all know (and research confirms) that such happiness is short-lived. A more promising hypothesis is that happiness comes from within and cannot be obtained by making the world conform to your desires. This idea was widespread in the ancient world: Buddha in India and the Stoic philosophers in ancient Greece and Rome all counseled people to break their emotional attachments to people and events, which are always unpredictable and uncontrollable, and to cultivate instead an attitude of acceptance. This ancient idea deserves respect, and it is certainly true that changing your mind is usually a more effective response to frustration than is changing the world. However, I will present evidence that this second version of the happiness hypothesis is wrong. Recent research shows that there are some things worth striving for; there are external conditions of life that can make you lastingly happier. One of these conditions is relatedness—the bonds we form, and need to form, with others. I'll present research showing where love comes from, why passionate love always cools, and what kind of love is "true" love. I'll suggest that the happiness hypothesis offered by Buddha and the Stoics should be amended: Happiness comes from within, and happiness comes from without. We need the guidance of both ancient wisdom and modern science to get the balance right.

The next step in this story about flourishing is to look at the conditions of human growth and development. We've all heard that what doesn't kill us makes us stronger, but that is a dangerous oversimplification. Many of the things that don't kill you can damage you for life. Recent research on "posttraumatic growth" reveals when and why people grow from adversity, and what you can do to prepare yourself for trauma, or to cope with it after the fact. We have also all heard repeated urgings to cultivate virtue in ourselves, because virtue is its own reward, but that, too, is an oversimplification. I'll show how concepts of virtue and morality have changed and narrowed over the centuries, and how ancient ideas about virtue and moral development may hold promise for our own age. I'll also show how positive psychology is beginning to deliver on that promise by offering you a way to "diagnose" and develop your own strengths and virtues.

The conclusion of the story is the question of meaning: Why do some people find meaning, purpose, and fulfillment in life, but others do not? I begin with the culturally widespread idea that there is a vertical, spiritual dimension of human existence. Whether it is called nobility, virtue, or divinity, and whether or not God exists, people simply *do* perceive sacredness, holiness, or some ineffable goodness in others, and in nature. I'll present my own research on the moral emotions of disgust, elevation, and awe to explain how this vertical dimension works, and why the dimension is so important for understanding religious fundamentalism, the political culture war, and the human quest for meaning. I'll also consider what people mean when they ask, "What is the meaning of life?" And I'll give an answer to the question—an answer that draws on ancient ideas about having a purpose but that uses very recent research to go beyond these ancient ideas, or any ideas you are likely to have encountered. In doing so, I'll revise the happiness hypothesis one last time. I could state that final version here in a few words, but I could not explain it in this brief introduction without cheapening it. Words of wisdom, the meaning of life, perhaps even the answer sought by Borges's librarians—all of these may wash over us every day, but they can do little for us unless we savor them, engage with them, question them, improve them, and connect them to our lives. That is my goal in this book.