

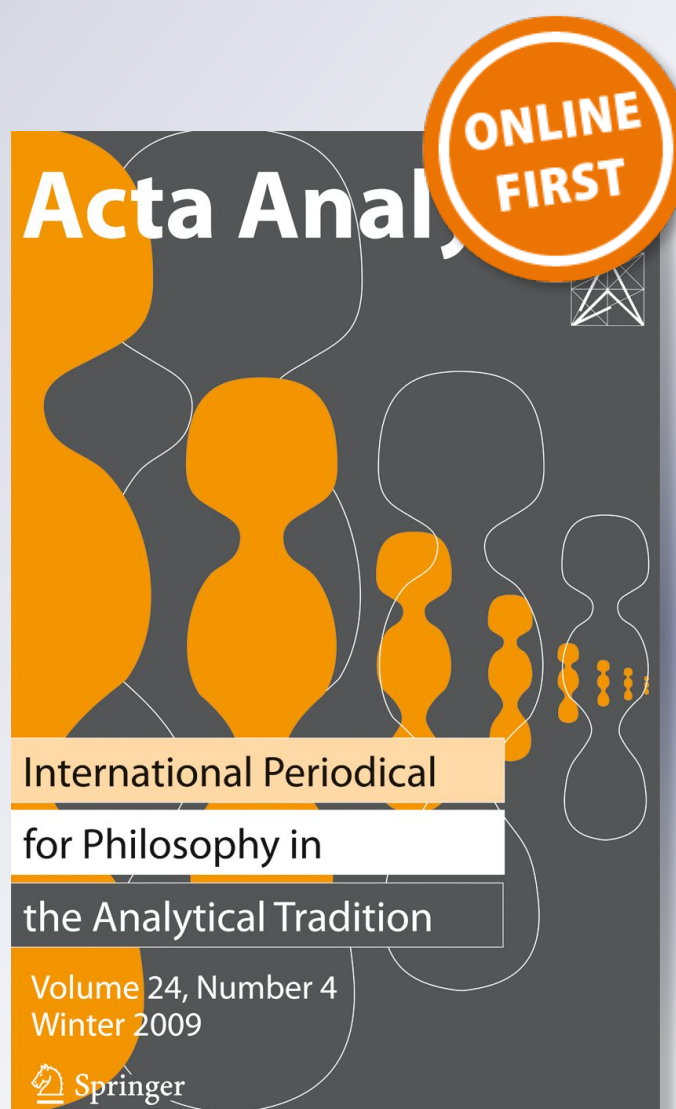
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Wisdom Beyond Rationality: A Reply to Ryan

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Abstract We discuss Sharon Ryan's Deep Rationality Theory of wisdom, defended recently in her "Wisdom, Knowledge and Rationality." We argue that (a) Ryan's use of the term "rationality" needs further elaboration; (b) there is a problem with requiring that the wise person possesses justified beliefs but not necessarily knowledge; (c) the conditions of DRT are not all necessary; (d) the conditions are not sufficient. At the end of our discussion, we suggest that there may be a problem with the very assumption that an informative, non-circular set of necessary and sufficient conditions of wisdom can be given.

Keywords Wisdom · Rationality · Judgment · Value conflicts · Virtue

What is wisdom? Sharon Ryan recently, on the pages of this journal, proposed an account on which wisdom is a commitment to rationality, more specifically, it is a deep commitment to the acquisition of rationally justified beliefs in a variety of domains, and the exercise of practical rationality of various sorts.¹ We salute Ryan's return to the important and often neglected topic of wisdom, but we have doubts regarding the actual proposal.

Ryan dubs her account "The Deep Rationality Theory" (DRT). DRT is meant as a comprehensive theory that incorporates all that is good about alternative proposals, yet avoids the problems that plague those other theories. The dismissed alternatives

¹Sharon Ryan, "Wisdom, Knowledge and Rationality," *Acta Analytica* 27 (2012): 99–112.

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include: wisdom as epistemic humility,² wisdom as a kind of knowledge, either theoretical or practical,³ wisdom as the ability to apply knowledge⁴ and, finally, Ryan's own earlier "hybrid" view.⁵ According to Ryan, each of the first four theories misses something important present in the other three. For instance, the epistemically humble person may not be knowledgeable enough to count as wise. The theoretically wise may lack practical acumen. The practically knowledgeable may lack the ability to properly apply her knowledge. Ryan's earlier "hybrid view" requires all of these: theoretical knowledge, practical knowledge, and ability to apply one's knowledge. But while the hybrid view may avoid the problems with the theories whose strengths it aims to incorporate, there is an objection to the hybrid view as well: it fails to take into account a key virtue which every wise person, on Ryan's considered view, possesses. The virtue of placing value on learning: "Wise people are continually pursuing a deeper and wider understanding of various aspects of reality and how to live better."⁶ DRT is meant as an attempt to overcome this latter limitation. In DRT, the commitment to pursuing ever deeper understanding of various aspects of reality is made paramount.

Ryan spells out DRT as follows. A person S is wise if and only if:

- (1) S has a wide variety of epistemically justified beliefs on a wide variety of valuable academic subjects and on how to live rationally (epistemically, morally, and practically).
- (2) S has very few unjustified beliefs and is sensitive to his or her limitations.
- (3) S is deeply committed to both:
 - (a) Acquiring wider, deeper, and more rational beliefs about reality (subjects listed in condition)
 - (b) Living rationally (practically, emotionally, and morally).

We wish to argue that the conditions listed by Ryan are neither necessary nor sufficient. But we begin with a more general worry.

Rationality is an abstract and contested notion, and people can have different things in mind when they speak of rationality. Despite its centrality in her view, Ryan does not tell us much about what she means by it. What she does tell us is that rationality has different types. It can be epistemic, practical, moral, or emotional. She

² A view typically associated with Socrates and the idea that the wise man knows he is ignorant.

³ By "theoretical knowledge," here Ryan means knowledge of general truths and scientific laws. She attributes this view to Ned Markosian, defended in discussion. See Ryan, "Wisdom,"¹⁰² and *ibid.*, footnote 4. The idea of wisdom as "practical knowledge" is attributed to Aristotle, Nozick, Kekes, and psychologists Baltes and Smith. See Robert Nozick, "What is Wisdom and Why do Philosophers Love it So." In Robert Nozick, *The Examined Life* (New York: Touchstone Press, 2001), 267–278; John Kekes, "Wisdom," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 20 (1983): 277–286; and Paul Baltes and Jacui Smith, "Toward a Psychology of Wisdom and its Ontogenesis." In Robert Sternberg, *Wisdom: Its Nature, Origins and Development* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1992), 87–120, all referenced at Ryan, "Wisdom,"¹⁰².

⁴ The suggestion that wisdom involves the ability to apply one's knowledge is developed in, for instance, Nick Maxwell, *From Knowledge to Wisdom* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1984) and Richard Garrett, "Three Definitions of Wisdom." In Keith Lehrer et al. *Knowledge, Teaching and Wisdom* (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1996), 221–232, both referenced at Ryan, "Wisdom,"¹⁰³.

⁵ In a 2007 *Stanford Encyclopedia* entry, accessed June 15, 2012, <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/wisdom/>.

⁶ Ryan, "Wisdom,"¹⁰⁷. Ryan attributes this objection to Matthew Robinson, a philosophy student in her 2010 Theory of Knowledge class at West Virginia University. See Ryan, *ibid.*, footnote 9.

doesn't say whether she takes these to exhaust the types of rationality, but they are the sorts of rationality to which wise people must be deeply committed and about which they must have justified beliefs. However, we need something more than a gesture at the plurality of the notion. What does each of these different kinds of rationality amount to? Arguably, one of the four—epistemic rationality—is clear enough: we more or less know what it means to be rational in the epistemic sense. Not so for the other three, however.

Take, for instance, “moral rationality.” What does it mean to be “morally rational”? Ryan says only that a morally rational person “has good reasons supporting his or her beliefs about what is morally right and wrong, and about what one morally ought and ought not do in a wide variety of circumstances,” and is “deeply committed to ... treating others morally.”⁷ It is not clear why the term “moral rationality” has been chosen over “morality” here, except perhaps that the former helps give at least nominal unity to the theory by linking together all its different conditions (they all have something or other to do with “rationality”). Worse still, to the extent that “moral rationality” *can* be seen as deviating in important ways from “morality,” it does so for the worse. For while the moral person may be said to be someone who treats others well, the morally rational person, on Ryan's view, is merely someone who possesses justified beliefs about how he ought to treat others. He does not necessarily possess knowledge. So it's quite compatible with the theory that the morally rational person doesn't actually treat others well: she may only justifiably *believe* she does.

Ryan prefers justified belief over knowledge here, because she wants to allow for the possibility that a wise person may have “bad epistemic luck.” For instance, imagine a wise person in the real world and her Matrix counterpart. One intuition tells us that the Matrix counterpart is no less wise than the wise person in the real world: bad luck should not exclude her from the rank of the wise. It is this intuition that Ryan wants to do justice to when she suggests that the wise person need not possess knowledge, only justified beliefs.

We agree that sometimes, bad luck would not disqualify a person from being wise. This is particularly likely to be so when it leads to justified but false beliefs about academic subjects like physics or geography, and it may well be the case in Matrix scenarios. But Ryan throws out the baby with the bath water by giving up on knowledge entirely and adopting the vocabulary of rationally justified belief, instead. Sometimes, a justified belief that fails to count as knowledge *may* disqualify a person from being wise. We suspect this is particularly likely in the case of moral beliefs. Some versions of consequentialism endorse harvesting the organs of unwilling innocents, even if it means their death, so long as more lives are saved. Indeed, on some of these versions, we should sacrifice our own children in this way, so long as the overall welfare effects would be greater than if we didn't. Even if we suppose for the sake of argument that such views are mistaken, one might justifiably come to believe one. Imagine Smith reads a seemingly decisive argument that relies on an extremely subtle and hard-to-notice fallacy of equivocation; perhaps, moreover, those he has good inductive reason to regard as morally knowledgeable all turn out to be consequentialists of this sort. If so, then on Ryan's view, if Smith is wise he'll be

⁷ Ryan, “Wisdom,” 108.

ready to offer up his children in that way, despite it being in fact morally wrong. That doesn't sound like a good candidate for a wise action.

Now, one may say that if a justified belief failing to qualify as knowledge excludes a person from the rank of the wise, then someone may, through no fault of her own, fail to be wise: the failure will be due to bad luck, at least in part. But the conclusion to draw from here is not that wisdom does not require knowledge; rather, it is that wisdom may sometimes, at least in part, depend on luck. While a part of us may militate against this supposition, the idea should not come to us as a big surprise. We have always known that luck has a role to play in wisdom in general. For instance, we have always known that wisdom depends on intelligence, and the possession of intelligence is partly due to luck.

Similar considerations apply to "emotional" and "practical" rationality. The latter two, much like "moral rationality" are very sketchily defined, and fleshing out the definitions in more detail is likely to lead to problems. But leave the worry about what the different kinds of rationality amount to, whether, for instance, "morally rational" is in any way preferable to "moral" and whether the vocabulary of justified beliefs is preferable to that of knowledge. Even if we set these aside, other problems with DRT arise.

First, the three conditions of DRT as spelled out by Ryan are not jointly necessary. For instance, Condition 1, which requires that the wise possess a wide variety of beliefs on a wide variety of subjects ranging from art to geography, is too restrictive: by our lights, no one but erudite polymaths would meet this requirement. This is an unwelcome consequence: surely, the wise can be focused on a particular area of study or of action. Thus, social reformer Mohandas Gandhi who inspired millions to effect social change without ever shedding a drop of blood, Roman historian Tacitus whose *Annals* have much to teach us, not only about history but about human nature and culture even today, 2,000 years after being written, or psychiatrist Leslie Farber whom ordinary people and other therapists alike would turn to for guidance, are rightly regarded as wise. But none of these people would qualify as wise on Ryan's theory, since none appears to have had the requisite variety of beliefs on the requisite variety of topics. This can't be right. While a wise historian or psychotherapist can be expected to have a basic understanding of the science of their time, there is no reason why such a person cannot count as wise unless he has a "wide variety" of beliefs on academic subjects from art to geography. Neither is it necessary that they possess a *commitment* to the acquisition of such beliefs. It seems to us that there can be wise people in all walks of life and engaged in any number of pursuits, and for some of them the wise course may be precisely to eschew certain types of learning. Should an undercover police officer, or a naval commander in war, or a single parent facing unexpectedly hard economic circumstances, set aside time for these pursuits? Have they thereby forsaken wisdom?

But perhaps, there are resources in Ryan's account to respond to this objection. The theory, after all, requires that a person be rational in a number of *different* senses, not only epistemically, but also practically, emotionally, and morally. Maybe, a practically rational psychotherapist, seeing as he may that he has no time for reading books about impressionism or mountain ranges in Asia, decides to sacrifice breadth for depth and focus on his own area of study without running the risk of exclusion from the rank of the wise. It can be argued that such a decision is entirely compatible with

DRT. After all, there is no reason to rule out the possibility for *conflicts* between different kinds of rationality.

In fairness, Ryan acknowledges that such conflicts are possible. But here we run into another problem. She tells us little about how they may be resolved and whether the ability to resolve such conflicts is a matter of rationality or something else. This means that the conditions in Ryan's theory are not sufficient. It is not enough to say that the wise person is rational in a number of different senses. What if he is, but the different rational demands *compete* with each other? For instance, a colonel might find himself in a situation in which morally he thinks he ought to disobey an order to send his troops up a certain hill, but he may also be quite certain that disobedience will result in career stagnation or even personal disaster (the brig, disgrace and ostracism for his family). This seems to be a situation in which wisdom would be helpful to have, but Ryan's theory does not tell us how and why that would be. The colonel justifiably believes that obeying the order is practically rational and, so, if he's wise, he is committed to obeying it. He also justifiably believes that obeying the order is immoral and, so, if he is wise, he is committed to disobeying it. If he has those beliefs and commitments, he has met all the conditions of Ryan's theory. Yet, wisdom seems to provide something *further*. The wise person can be expected to have the ability to resolve conflicts among conflicting values. But Ryan gives us no clue about what the additional element may be.

Ryan anticipates this objection, but her reply is unsatisfactory. She says that, "being deeply committed to being rational will involve making hard decisions. For example, being morally rational might require patience working through a problem, while being practically rational, in the exact same situation, might involve dealing swiftly with the problem. Being epistemically rational might not always be practically rational. This theory does not rank the various kinds of rationality. That is another virtue of the theory. In such a situation, all the theory would require is that the wise person have justified beliefs about what is more important to focus on ... and that she be committed to doing what's best."⁸

We don't think that this reply is of much help. Are "important" and "best" here to be understood in terms of rationality at all? If so, rationality of what type? And why not just speak of *that* type of rationality as the basis of wisdom instead of speaking of four different types plus an additional one? If, on the other hand, the additional element is not a kind of rationality at all, then what becomes of the idea that wisdom is at root about rationality? Wisdom is nowhere so clearly present as in the ability to resolve conflicts. So if that ability itself cannot be construed in terms of rationality and rational commitments, then the theory of wisdom as rationality goes by the board. Finally, if the additional element is itself wisdom or a close normative cousin thereof, then the account is circular. We get no substantive theory of wisdom, only a vague gloss on the nature of wisdom (having justified beliefs about and commitments to what's important and best) plus some sketchy remarks about what that amounts to. For instance, on one possible and natural interpretation of "best" and "most important," what the conjunction of seeing what's "most important" and "doing what's best" amounts to is something like "what's all-things-considered best simpliciter (not morally best or best of any other type, just best)." If Ryan means to suggest

⁸ Ryan, "Wisdom," 111.

something along those lines then, assuming that the idea of all-things-considered best simpliciter is clear enough, of course we would have to agree that the wise person appreciates what's best simpliciter. In fact, we would supplement this claim with an observation. Wisdom has a special place among the virtues: other virtues typically allow of misuse or of undesirable surpluses. Thus, an intellectually gifted person may use her intelligence to commit fraud, and a witty person may use her wit to ridicule others. One may be kind to a fault, courageous to the point of foolhardiness, too patient, or too generous. But one cannot, it seems, be too wise or put one's wisdom to bad use. When it comes to wisdom, good use is part of the very notion of wisdom. This is likely because the wise person can determine and do what is best all things considered simpliciter. But pointing that out really doesn't make for much of a theory, and Ryan tells us even less than we just did.

So far we've argued that (a) Ryan's use of the term "rationality" needs further elaboration; (b) there is a problem with requiring that the wise person possess justified beliefs but not necessarily knowledge; (c) the conditions of DRT are not all necessary; (d) the conditions are not sufficient.

We now want to raise two more worries. First, wisdom is better thought of as a capacity to judge rather than a set of beliefs. (Here, one may be reminded of senex, the Jungian archetype of wisdom—a compassionate elder of keen judgment.) And second, it may involve the possession of character traits irreducible to rational commitments (that's another way in which the conditions provided by Ryan are insufficient). Both points can be illustrated by considering again the case of a value conflict. The wise person is not so much someone who has justified *beliefs* about what is more important than what—no one can possibly have justified beliefs about how to weigh all the different options life will throw at her—but someone who is able to weigh values properly, make a judgment, and take action when the situation requires it. And he is someone who can take the pain of a sacrifice. To be able to make a sacrifice is not a rational capacity, though it has a rational component. It is, rather, a strength of character. Consider a story about psychiatrist Leslie Farber whom we mentioned in the beginning as an example of a wise person. In this story, Farber resolves a value conflict, and the resolution requires both judgment and sacrifice. We want to know whether Farber's judgment is reducible to the possession of justified beliefs and the sorts of rational commitments that provide the basis for Ryan's construal of wisdom.

For several years, Farber was hosting a discussion group that included several academics, a few therapists, a leading film critic, and a Jesuit priest. The purpose of the group was to do some real intellectual work and engage in what Farber calls "real talk," meaning talk free from the formalities of academe. One day, an esteemed professor was giving a talk on obligation and the good, but the talk was "leading no where near an invocation of a conceivably human dilemma."⁹ Farber listened politely for 20 minutes or so, then significantly cleared his throat a couple of times, waved his hand to catch the speaker's attention, and when none of these things worked, he interrupted the speaker mid-sentence and said, "But what, really, do you think about the good, Professor? You've told us what one or two others have said

⁹ Robert Boyer, Introduction to *The Ways of the Will* by Leslie Farber (New York: Basic Books, 2000), xiii–xxv, xiv.

about it, though you've not ventured to speculate at all about what they might actually have meant... And I must tell you, and I can't bring myself at all to apologize for this, that I don't think you've actually asked yourself what these terms you are using actually mean – what they mean to *you*.”¹⁰

Here, Farber faces conflicting demands: on the one hand, politeness requires that he go on listening. On the other, his commitment to the value of “real talk” demands that he do something. The conflict is made even more acute by the fact that he is a host of the event, and that he is, in general, “an affable host” and “a solicitous interlocutor.”¹¹ But Boyer, a psychiatrist who knew Farber and was present at the meeting, writes, “charity was not for him a primary obligation by comparison with candor, and though forbearance surely seemed to him appropriate with persons who could not defend themselves, interrogation (and, if necessary, disputation) was clearly more apt to release, to bring out—so Dr. Farber believed—what was best in persons committed to the life of the mind.”¹²

Farber resolves the conflict wisely. What helps him? The first thing to note is that his judgment cannot be plausibly reduced to a justified belief about what to do. In general, it is unreasonable to expect a wise person to have justified beliefs about what exactly to do in such situations. For how long should one listen before one takes action? How many times should one significantly clear one's throat or wave one's hand at the speaker before interrupting? While the wise person is able to sacrifice a value, he will often pay some tribute to that value—in this case, by waiting for 20 minutes before interrupting the speaker and by trying to get the speaker stop in non-verbal ways. The wise person makes a judgment about such things on the spot. Wisdom is no more a set of justified beliefs about how to act than musical ability is a set of justified beliefs about what sounds to make and in what order. Second, and more importantly, resolving the conflict in this case and in many others requires bravery and related virtues. A wise person has the where-withal to go against social conventions or make sacrifices of other kinds if the occasion demands it. Wisdom is, thus, both unprincipled and hard.

This brings us to a final point. We have argued that the conditions provided by Ryan's DRT are neither jointly necessary nor jointly sufficient for wisdom. In raising our objections, we followed Ryan in supposing that an account of wisdom must give us necessary and sufficient conditions of wisdom. It is possible to question that assumption, however. Perhaps, there is a problem with the very endeavor to account for wisdom as a set of “iff” conditions. It may be that wisdom cannot be captured in a definition for reasons similar to those Plato had in claiming that virtue cannot be taught. If that's the case, it does not follow that we should not try to give an account of wisdom, but it does follow that the account need not take the form Ryan's account has. Einstein once said that things should be made as simple as possible but not simpler. This sounds to us like a wise piece of advice and one applicable to the present case. We would echo that advice in suggesting that one should aim to make one's conception of wisdom as precise as possible but not more precise. And if this is seen as an acknowledgement of our limitations, we grant that it is. But then, we agree with Ryan in that a dose of epistemic humility is a key ingredient in wisdom.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, xv.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, xvi.

¹² *Ibid.*