A Deeper Defense of the Deep Rationality Theory of Wisdom: A Reply to Fileva and Tresan

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1 Introduction

In their paper, “Wisdom Beyond Rationality: A Reply to Ryan,” Iskra Fileva and Jon Tresan (2013) pose serious challenges to my Deep Rationality Theory of Wisdom (Ryan 2012). They ask for a more illuminating characterization of the notion of rationality at work in my theory, and they argue that regardless of how I clarify what I mean by ‘rationality,’ it is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for wisdom. Obviously, if they are correct, the Deep Rationality Theory of Wisdom is seriously flawed.

Fileva and Tresan’s challenges are important, and they have shown that the concept of rationality that I used in defending the Deep Rationality Theory of Wisdom in 2012 was unclear. I appreciate the careful attention they gave my theory, and their work has helped me to better articulate my theory of wisdom. In this paper, I will clarify the way in which rationality is central to wisdom. After clarifying a sense of rationality, I will show that their objection that rationality is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for wisdom is not convincing. Rationality, I will argue, is at the heart of wisdom.

2 The Deep Rationality Theory of Wisdom

Before presenting and responding to their criticisms, I will state and briefly explain my 2012 version of the Deep Rationality Theory of Wisdom. The theory, as stated in my “Wisdom, Knowledge and Rationality” Acta Analytica paper, is:

(DRT): A person S is wise iff (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, and (3) S is deeply committed to both (a) acquiring wider, deeper, and more rational beliefs about reality and (b) living rationally (practically, emotionally, and morally).

The Deep Rationality Theory (DRT) requires a lot for wisdom. An extremely brilliant specialist on one subject, who is uninformed about most other major areas of inquiry, will not count as wise on this theory. A person who has many epistemically justified beliefs about most academic subjects will fall short of wisdom if he or she does not have justified beliefs about what is morally right and wrong, what is socially appropriate in a given situation, or about how to be successful in life. A person who has an enormous stockpile of justified beliefs about academic subjects, practical matters, emotional matters, and morality, and yet fails to put those beliefs into practice, will fall short of wisdom on my view. In addition to all that a person must be justified in believing in order to be wise, the theory insists upon a kind of epistemic humility. In addition to having a lot of justified beliefs, a wise person will not have many unjustified beliefs and will not be epistemically arrogant. She will appreciate that as a human being, she is fallible. She will seek out, and evaluate carefully, new evidence. Because of this adherence to his or her vast pool of evidence, a wise person is a trustworthy source of information and has good judgment. A wise person values having epistemically rational beliefs and living a life that respects and reflects what she is justified in believing. Despite Fileva and Tresan’s critique, I still believe that this is what it is to be wise. That is, although I acknowledge that the wording in my theory needs serious refinement, the claims central to the theory are correct.

3 Rationality

In some sense, DRT sets the bar lower than some other theories of wisdom. DRT focuses on rationality (justified beliefs) rather than knowledge. There are two main reasons for dropping a knowledge requirement. The first reason is that a wise person could be the victim of mass deception. A person unknowingly trapped inside a realistic skeptical illusion could be wise. Moreover, and perhaps more importantly, a person who lived thousands of years ago, using the best evidence, tools, and technology of the time should not be excluded from the list of the wise just because her beliefs are later, on the basis of new evidence, shown to have been false. The fact that an extremely careful and rational inquirer could fail to arrive at the truth, and therefore lack knowledge, is not a barrier to wisdom. Thus, requiring truth and knowledge for wisdom is too demanding.

Fileva and Tresan argue that my original statement of DRT was unclear. Conditions (1) and (3) make use of three separate types of rationality (epistemic, practical, and moral), and they point out that I did a poor job of clearly articulating what I meant by each sense of rationality. While they admit that the concept of epistemic rationality is fairly straightforward, they claim that the concepts of moral, practical, and emotional rationality are poorly defined. I agree. I am convinced that I can better articulate my theory of wisdom without making use various conceptions of rationality. Instead, I am
going to focus on one, purely epistemic, sense of rationality. Epistemic rationality should be understood in terms of epistemic justification. I endorse an evidentialist theory of epistemic justification. More specifically, I endorse both:

(R) Doxastic attitude D (belief, disbelief, suspension of judgment) is the epistemically rational attitude to take toward p at t iff S’s doxastic attitude toward p is epistemically justified for S at t.

and

(E) Doxastic attitude D toward p is epistemically justified for S at t iff D is supported by the evidence S has at t (Feldman and Conee’s 1985).

In naming and discussing my theory, I am focusing on rationality rather than justification for aesthetic reasons. The word ‘rationality’ sounds and reads better. In discussions outside of philosophy, where wisdom is also of great importance and interest, the term “justification” is awkward and more easily open to misinterpretation. Thus, the first condition of DRT is just meant to provide a list of areas in which a wise person must have a deep understanding, by having justified beliefs supported by their evidence. Those areas include subjects that form the centerpiece of a liberal arts education as well as morality, practical affairs, and matters of the heart. I am not requiring one to be an expert in physics, philosophy, math, or engineering, for example. But I am requiring that one have a basic understanding of the fundamentals. That includes having a basic understanding of such subjects; all of which include understanding how to ask good questions, read carefully, and think creatively and analytically. The Deep Rationality Theory is not committed to the view that one’s learning take place in a classroom setting. Thus, the term “academic” is not to be interpreted strictly. What I have in mind is what one needs to understand in order to qualify as a well-educated person.

Since thinking through Fileva and Tresan’s critique, I see that nothing in what I am advocating requires making use of different types of rationality. Moreover, I agree with them that making use of different senses of rationality is confusing and unhelpful. All that I need for condition (1) of my theory is a list of topics, ranging from those included in a liberal arts education to those that focus on how to deal with the thorny moral, practical, and emotional aspects of life. Condition (3) is meant to require that the wise person be committed to learning more in those areas and to living a life that reflects what she understands. Condition (2) remains the same.

The Deep Rationality Theory is more simply stated as

(DRT)*: A person S is wise iff (1) S has a wide variety of epistemically justified beliefs on a wide variety of subjects that are central to a good liberal arts education, as well as morality, practical matters, and matters of the heart, (2) S has very few unjustified beliefs and S is sensitive to his or her limitations, and (3) S is deeply committed to learning more about the topics noted in (1) and living a life that reflects what S is justified in believing.

Even with these modifications to DRT, Fileva and Tresan will still have reservations about my theory of wisdom. Consider condition (3). They worry, as did I, about cases in which, for example, we have good moral reasons to do A but good practical reasons
to do ~A. What would a wise person do and how would DRT help? Suppose I am having dinner with my friend who is suddenly choking on a piece of bread. If I perform the Heimlich maneuver, which seems like a reasonable response, I risk cracking a rib. I also stand to violate boundaries between my friend and me. There will be some embarrassment for both of us. If I am wise, using all of my relevant evidence, I note the harms and benefits of each alternative and figure out quickly (virtually automatically in this easy case) what to do. This example was an easy case, and it would not take much thought to figure out what to do. Saving my friend’s life is more important than being embarrassed, cracking a rib, etc. In more difficult cases, one might have to draw on one’s understanding about medicine, history, morality, human emotions, and so on. The Deep Rationality Theory says a wise person bases his or her beliefs and actions on the evidence. The Deep Rationality Theory also says that a wise person has a lot of evidence to draw from and is committed to ever enhancing his or her body of evidence.

Consider the following, more difficult, case posed by a referee of this paper:

“[I]Imagine that Sue and Ted have just gotten married. They know that half of all marriages fail. They can start their life together with the belief that their marriage has a 50% chance of failing. Or they can allow their optimism to prevail against the evidence and tell themselves that their marriage is sure to succeed and that “their case is different,” despite the fact they have no evidence to believe that their case is different. Intuitively, going along with the evidence would be more “epistemically rational,” but going along with the optimistic outlook would be wiser. This is so because again intuitively, starting one’s married life with the belief one is likely to divorce one’s partner in a few years is just not a good idea, practically.1

DRT has no trouble with this case. However, the case provides an opportunity to explain further the strength and plausibility of DRT. In this case, DRT advises Ted and Sue to believe what their evidence supports and to live in a way that reflects what they understand from their evidence. In this case, as described by the referee, DRT implies that Sue and Ted should believe that half of all marriages fail since that is what their evidence supports. They should not believe, for no good reason, that their marriage is sure to succeed (or sure to fail) because that is not what their evidence supports. The optimistic outlook, that their marriage is sure to succeed, is not wise. But the story does not have to end on this depressing note for Sue and Ted. DRT does leave room for some rational optimism. Sue and Ted, upon noting the statistics, might wisely decide to commit to giving their marriage the kind of attention and love that can help put them in the successful group. In fact, if they want their marriage to succeed, they ought to acknowledge that marriage is a tricky business, and such relationships need a lot of nurturing and care. I disagree with the claim that Sue and Ted are better off, practically speaking, ignoring the facts and cheerfully believing their marriage is sure to succeed. Acknowledging the facts about the difficulty of marriage, and committing to making the sacrifices and investments, is additional evidence that does bear on the likelihood of the success of their marriage. Once they put all of this together and act accordingly, they do have reason to be fairly optimistic (but not sure).

1 Anonymous referee, Acta Analytica.
Moreover, it is important to note that DRT, of course, does not advise them to dwell upon the marriage statistics. Given that they probably also have evidence that shows that such focus contributes to failure, they should not do it. Again, it is the evidence that guides them not their naïve fantasies or unsubstantiated fears.

A second interesting case proposed by the same philosopher who refereed this paper goes as follows:

Imagine “…an aging film director attends an awards ceremony in the hope he will finally receive a prestigious award. However, it is his son, not him, who receives the award. An emotionally intelligent (and more broadly wise) person in this situation will control his disappointment and share in the joy of his son. An emotionally immature person, by contrast, may find it difficult to congratulate his son and may, instead, make a disparaging remark about the son’s award-winning film. But it is difficult to see how the difference between the two cases could be construed as a difference in the degree of epistemic rationality between the two agents. The father lacking in emotional intelligence may not have any unjustified beliefs relevant to the issue at hand. He may, for instance, believe with very good justification that: this is his last chance to get the award while the son is just starting, that were it not for his help, the son would have never become a director, that the son will now receive more accolades than he ever had. He could even have the fully justified belief that his own film is better than that of his son. The difference between the two agents may come down to something quite different from epistemic justification.”

This is another interesting case. Again, however, DRT says the right thing. The kind of emotional intelligence, or maturity, that is lacking in the unwise version of the father traces back to condition (1) of DRT. Although he might not have any unjustified beliefs getting in the way (i.e., “This is a good way to respond to disappointment or treat my son.”), he apparently lacks pertinent justified beliefs about how to respond to loss and treat the ones you love. He does not understand that the way to be a graceful human being and a decent father is to swallow your pride in such cases and get behind your son. The award has been decided, and there is nothing that can be done about it. He ought to accept that fact, move on from his loss, and spend his energy supporting his son. If he does not understand that much, surely he is missing many important beliefs that are required by condition (1) of DRT. Or, if he does have the right beliefs, but fails to put them into practice, he is failing on condition (3).

Even if I have adequately handled the cases of the newlyweds and the filmmaker, Fileva and Tresan will not be satisfied. In the tough cases, where epistemic values, moral values, and practical values compete, Fileva and Tresan say,

“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.”

2 Fileva and Tresan, p. 233.
My answer to their question is that it is a matter of rationality. It is a matter of tapping into a vast stockpile of evidence gained from reading, observation, thoughtful discourse, personal experience, thinking about hypothetical examples in philosophy, literature, and film, hanging around with other wise people, etc., that help a wise person resolve such conflicts. Fileva and Tresan anticipate that my view will depend upon rationality to deal with conflicts. However, because of the various types of rationality I used in “Wisdom, Knowledge and Rationality,” they see problems.

“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.”

My answer to their provocative and insightful questions is that what helps us make decisions is epistemic rationality. We make wise decisions by believing and acting in accord with our evidence on a wide array of subjects, including practical, moral, and emotional issues. To make tough decisions, consult and weigh carefully all of your evidence. Thus, wisdom is still to be understood in terms of rationality.

Fileva and Tresan pose problems for my view regardless of how well I can answer their worries about what I mean by “rational.” They think that in giving up on truth and knowledge in condition (1), and relying exclusively on justified belief, amounts to “throwing out the baby with the bath water.” They are especially concerned when it comes to morality. I have, according to them, set the bar too low. Having justified beliefs about morality is not enough on their view. One must actually have true beliefs about morality if one is to count as wise. In one example, they make reference to a person who might wind up being justified in believing a version of consequentialism that endorses harvesting the organs of one’s own healthy children as long as more lives are saved. Here is their alleged counterexample:

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

Neither formulation of DRT has such an implication. For starters, it is not at all clear that a wise person in such circumstances would be epistemically justified in accepting this version of consequentialism. Since, in this example, her reasoning relies on a fallacy, the argument is faulty, and she is not justified even if she mistakenly thinks she

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3 Fileva and Tresan, p. 233.
4 Fileva and Tresan, p. 232.
is justified. A bad argument does not justify a conclusion. My view about epistemic justification is that one’s evidence must actually support one’s belief, and as described, this is not such a case. Moreover, if she is wise on my view, she has a basic understanding of philosophy and many other academic subjects and she would know that this consequentialist view is highly controversial and is rejected by philosophers who are equally morally “knowledgeable.” That is an important defeater. Another important defeater to the theory is that it implies that offering up one’s children is morally obligatory. A wise person would be reluctant to accept the theory, on moral grounds, no matter what other experts are saying about the theory. Moreover, even if I grant that Smith is justified in believing that offering up his children is morally right, Smith is not thereby forced to give up his children. There are practical and emotional considerations with values to consider. Smith needs to tap into all of that evidence. If, after thinking about all these values, his evidence really supports giving up his children, then, that is what he will do if he is wise. However, I find it extremely difficult to imagine how a well-informed person (as required in condition (1) of DRT), in circumstances anything like the real world, could have evidence supporting such a belief. Thus, this example does not convince me that having justified beliefs, rather than knowledge, is too weak for wisdom.

4 Alleged Problems for the Necessity of the Conditions of DRT

Fileva and Tresan argue that the conditions in DRT, even if their worries about rationality could be addressed, are not necessary for wisdom. They claim,

“…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.”

DRT requires that a wise person have a wide variety of epistemically justified beliefs on a wide variety of valuable subjects, practical matters, moral matters, and emotional matters. That does not exclude experts in a particular field of study from being wise. One can be an expert on one subject while also having a wide variety of justified beliefs in several other areas. DRT only rules out “experts” with little understanding of anything beyond a narrow field of expertise. The experts Fileva and Tresan mention are not at all narrowly focused on a small topic. In fact, I would argue, what makes the work of Tacitus, or any other historian, of great and enduring importance, is that it provides an understanding of cultural, social, economic, intellectual, philosophical, artistic, and scientific ideas. A truly great psychiatrist must understand a lot about

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5 Fileva and Tresan, p. 232.
science, culture, philosophy, human emotions, etc. to do his or her work well, not to mention the intellectual demands of getting accepted into a good medical school. What made Gandhi so effective was his vast understanding of humanity, psychology, law, culture, history, politics, and religion. Moreover, although DRT acknowledges that wisdom grows with an increase in understanding of various fields, DRT does not require that a wise person be an expert in every field.

Fileva and Tresan protest the necessity of the third condition of DRT. They do not think a wise person must be deeply committed to acquiring wider, deeper, and more rational beliefs. In defense of their view, they ask, “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?”

All such people, if they are wise, will be committed to acquiring wider, deeper, and more rational beliefs about reality. Such commitments can be realized in many ways, totally compatible with their circumstances. I am not arguing that wise people ditch their jobs, kids, and other obligations and interests and enroll in multiple PhD programs or spend all day at the library. And, as Fileva and Tresan point out, I acknowledge that our various intellectual, emotional, social, practical, and moral interests can be in conflict. A wise person rationally navigates through such conflicts by consulting their vast array of evidence.

5 Alleged Problems for the Sufficiency of the Conditions of DRT

According to Fileva and Tresan, the conditions of DRT are not sufficient for wisdom. Wisdom is a virtue that cannot be boiled down to mere rationality. Wisdom, according to Fileva and Tresan, is “better thought of as a capacity to judge rather than a set of beliefs.” I agree with Fileva and Tresan that wisdom is, in part, a capacity to judge. I also agree that wisdom is not a mere set of justified beliefs. Of course, I think it is much more than a capacity to judge. And, that capacity to judge is, I argue, based on a rational understanding of reality. A rational understanding of reality is based on good evidence. To make judgments based on anything else, even if those judgments somehow turn out well, is not a mark of wisdom. The method of arriving at the truth is crucial for determining whether a person is wise or merely fortunate.

They argue that:

“The wise person is not so much someone who has justified beliefs about what is more important that 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 take a sacrifice is not a rational capacity, though it has a rational component. It is, rather, a strength of character.”

6 Fileva and Tresan, p. 232.
7 Fileva and Tresan, p. 234.
In describing a wise person’s ability to judge, they claim,

“The first thing to note is that his judgment cannot be plausibly reduced to a justified belief about what to do. … The wise person makes a judgment about such things on the spot. Wisdom is no more a set of justified beliefs about what to do than a musical ability is a set of justified beliefs about what sounds to make in what order.”

I agree with much of what Fileva and Tresan claim here. However, the wise person’s ability to make good judgments on the spot, and his or her strength of character, must be grounded in what he or she understands about reality and his or her commitment to living a life that models what he or she understands about the world and various competing values. What does this ability to weigh values properly depend upon? Being rational, well informed, and learning from one’s experience. So, I agree that wise people have strength of character and can make tough decisions that others cannot make. But, they figure things out, and strengthen their characters, by the practice of being rational and learning about reality. With time and practice, such decisions can appear to be quick and easy for the wise. Yet, like great musicians, this ability depends on deep understanding and often years of practice and hard work.

In the end, I agree with several of Fileva and Tresan’s main insights about wisdom, yet I think their best insights support thinking of the virtue of wisdom as an intellectual virtue rooted in epistemic rationality.

References

Feldman and Conee’s basic idea in “evidentialism,” (1985). Philosophical Studies, 48(1)

8 Fileva and Tresan, p. 235.
9 I am especially grateful to an anonymous referee from Acta Analytica for excellent comments on an earlier draft of this paper.