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# Wisdom: Understanding and the Good Life

Shane Ryan<sup>1</sup> 

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**Abstract** I argue that a necessary condition for being wise is: understanding how to live well. The condition, by requiring understanding rather than a wide variety of justified beliefs or knowledge, as Ryan and Whitcomb respectively require, yields the desirable result that being wise is compatible with having some false beliefs but not just any false beliefs about how to live well—regardless of whether those beliefs are justified or not. In arguing for understanding how to live well as a necessary condition for wisdom, I reject the view, proposed by both Ryan and Whitcomb, that subjects such as chemistry lies within the domain of wisdom. I show that the argued for condition yields the desirable result that being wise is not a common achievement, but that it is not something that can only plausibly be achieved in the modern era.

**Keywords** Wisdom · Epistemology · Understanding · The good life

## 1 Preliminaries

One important contemporary account of wisdom is Sharon Ryan's. Ryan makes an attempt to give a set of necessary and sufficient conditions for wisdom. A central requirement of her account is that the wise agent "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)" (Ryan 2012, 108). I make the case that Ryan's requirement faces significant objections both with regarding its epistemic aspect and the domain it specifies. I do likewise with regard to Whitcomb's similar position. My ultimate goal is to develop a positive view, using Ryan's and Whitcomb's discussions as starting points. Like Ryan, I make an attempt to offer a set of necessary and sufficient conditions for wisdom. A central requirement of my account is that the wise agent understands how to live well.

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An account of wisdom need not be an iff analysis, an account that sets out necessary and jointly sufficient conditions for wisdom. Types of accounts of wisdom may differ with respect to the specificity they attempt to provide. Other things being equal, we should want the type of account that offers us the greatest level of specificity. We should, however, also want accuracy. If no set of necessary and jointly sufficient conditions for wisdom can be provided that accurately demarcates the boundary between instances of wisdom and non-wisdom, then we should give up on providing such an account of wisdom.<sup>1</sup>

In what follows, I will consider a number of simple iff analyses of wisdom which inform the more complex analyses of wisdom that are current in the literature.<sup>2</sup> One such analysis is presented as a possible Socratic analysis of wisdom. According to this analysis, second-order “epistemic accuracy” is fundamental to wisdom. The thought is that what makes the Socrates of the *Apology* wise is that, while other Athenians claim to have knowledge that they do not actually have, Socrates is accurate about what he knows. This reading, according to Dennis Whitcomb (2010), suggests that being wise is knowing “what one does and does not know”. This may be rendered as *S* is wise iff *S* knows which facts she knows and knows what she does not know.<sup>3</sup>

Such an analysis is problematic for several obvious reasons. In one respect it sets the bar too high and in another respect it sets the bar too low. If we were to accept this analysis of wisdom, then it would appear that no one with a sizeable number of beliefs about facts is wise. After all, it seems highly implausible that any person with a sizeable number of beliefs actually is completely accurate about what facts she knows and what she does not know. The bar seems too low because while it is conceptually possible that such a person exists, it is consistent with the requirement that the particular facts that *S* knows that she knows are mundane. Perhaps she knows that she knows what day of the week it is and she knows little else besides such mundane facts. Intuitively this person is not wise. While there seems to be much more to wisdom than the epistemic accuracy of the sort described, it does seem appropriate to associate awareness of epistemic limitations with wisdom.

The analysis that wisdom requires extensive knowledge across a wide range of subjects avoids the objections raised to the Socratic analysis. After all, it is plausible that there are people with such extensive knowledge and that such knowledge is not limited to the mundane. Ryan (2013) formulates the analysis thus: “*S* is wise iff *S* has extensive factual knowledge about science, history, philosophy, literature, music, etc.” (Ryan 2013). Nonetheless, this analysis also faces strong objections. It is consistent

<sup>1</sup> Fileva and Tresan (2013, 235) express doubt as to whether an iff account of wisdom is possible. If one were to give up on providing an iff account, one might provide a generalist account. Such an account would make general rather than exceptionless claims about wisdom. Alternatively, the view that that wisdom can only be determined holistically might be defended. Such a view is akin to Jonathan Dancy’s (2004) particularism in the moral realm.

<sup>2</sup> More analyses than are considered here can be found in Ryan (2013). For an interesting and somewhat unusual contemporary strand in the philosophical wisdom literature that does not figure in Ryan (2013), see Lehrer (1997) and Miščević (2012). In addition, there is also an extensive literature on wisdom in the psychology literature. See Birren and Fisher (1990), who record 23 different definitions of wisdom from that literature.

<sup>3</sup> This reading is also found in Ryan (2007), whom Whitcomb (2010) cites. Ryan, however, cashes out epistemic accuracy in terms of belief, formulating the analysis thus: “*S* is wise iff for all *p*, (*S* believes *S* knows *p* iff *S* knows *p*)”.

with the above requirement that a person has the relevant knowledge but is completely foolish in her behaviour. It is counterintuitive, however, that a wise person could be completely foolish in her behaviour. So while a person with extensive knowledge across a wide range of subjects might be a great addition to a table quiz team, we might not think of such a person as wise. The thought that the wise person is one who is doing well epistemically across a variety of subjects, nevertheless, is one that informs Ryan's account. As we shall see though, this thought informs a necessary rather than a sufficient condition.

An alternative approach to analysing wisdom, and one similar to the analysis that will be defended in this paper, is articulated by Robert Nozick's (1989). Nozick writes that "[w]isdom is what you need to understand in order to live well and cope with the central problems and avoid the dangers in the predicaments human beings find themselves in" (Nozick 1989, 267). In fact, Nozick (1989) later writes that understanding or knowledge is required.<sup>4</sup> Ryan (2013), drawing on these remarks and close by views, offers us the analysis that "S is wise iff S knows how to live well".<sup>5</sup> Such a view, however, faces the dialectical challenge of countering the agreement amongst leading contributors to the literature on wisdom that wisdom requires, or is increased by, knowledge of worthwhile subjects.<sup>6</sup>

## 2 Wisdom: Ryan and Whitcomb's Views

Ryan (2012) defends the deep rationality theory (DRT) of wisdom. According to the DRT analysis of wisdom:

S is wise at time  $t$  iff at time  $t$

- (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 1) and
  - (b) Living rationally (practically, emotionally, and morally) (Ryan 2012, 108).

Whitcomb proposes a "Twofold Consequentialism" view. According to the view, there is a practical kind of wisdom and a theoretical kind of wisdom. Whitcomb (2011, 101) sets out the requirements for each as follows: "To be practically wise is to know how to live well. To be theoretically wise is to have deep understanding."

<sup>4</sup> As we shall see, I argue that it is understanding rather than knowledge that is required.

<sup>5</sup> Ryan (2013) cites John Kekes (1983) and Tiberius (2008) as also endorsing similar views. Whitcomb (2011), also discussing Nozick's view, cites Garrett (1996) as defending a like position.

<sup>6</sup> Ryan (2012), Whitcomb (2011), Baehr (2012) each support such a view. Previously Ryan (1999) omitted such a condition. Michel de Montaigne (2004), a prominent sixteenth century French philosopher not referred to in the contemporary debate, writes extensively on wisdom and rejects such a view.

I focus primarily on examining Ryan's first condition and Whitcomb's requirements and make the case for what I take to be a superior alternative. My focus is appropriate given that Ryan's first condition and Whitcomb's requirements are most informative of the nature of wisdom. Relatedly, these requirements also concern the general area on which the debate in the philosophical literature is most focused. Nonetheless, I also consider Ryan's other conditions that are claimed to be necessary and, in conjunction with Ryan's first condition, jointly sufficient for wisdom. Where I disagree with Ryan with regard to these other conditions, I make the case for relevant alterations.

Although I engage with both Ryan and Whitcomb's accounts, I focus more on Ryan's account. The motivation for my greater focus on Ryan's account is that; firstly, I believe it comes closer to being right; secondly, criticisms I make of her account have a bearing on other prominent accounts in the literature on wisdom; thirdly, the criticisms I make of her account serve to motivate the account which I ultimately defend.

### 3 The Epistemic Standing of the Wise Agent

Ryan's first condition concerns the epistemic standing of an agent in a particular domain. The condition specifies the required epistemic standing and its required domain. Although the two are tied together, I will begin by focusing on the specified epistemic standing. Ryan (2012, 108) claims that the wise agent must have "a wide variety of epistemically justified beliefs" in the relevant domain. In making her case for the necessity of this epistemic standing, rather than requiring a wide variety of knowledge in the relevant domain, Ryan (2012, 107) asks us to imagine the case of a wise and rational "elder". It is conceivable that such a person could base her beliefs in the relevant domain on "extremely credible evidence", form a wide variety of such beliefs, be epistemically blameless with regard to those beliefs, and yet fail to get things right in that domain. To make the case more concrete, we can suppose that such an elder forms beliefs about the Earth's relationship to the sun, but that those beliefs are false. Ryan claims that we should not want to rule out the possibility that such an agent is wise. Ryan offers the example of Ptolemy to bolster the claim that an agent who nonetheless fails to get things right in the relevant domain could plausibly still be wise. Ryan points out that Ptolemy is hardly alone; Hypatia, Socrates, Aristotle, Homer, and Lao Tzu are said to be in the same position. It looks like a condition requiring a wide variety of knowledge in the relevant domain would result in us having to deny paradigm cases of wise persons from any pre-modern period.<sup>7</sup> After all, such figures had a wide variety of false beliefs in the domain specified by Ryan, plausibly much more so than knowledge in that domain. Ryan takes the upshot of this to be that knowledge, which implies true belief in the relevant domain, is not a requirement of

<sup>7</sup> Ryan (2012, 107) writes that "Ptolemy had justified beliefs about a geocentric solar system. I will assume that, given how intelligent he was, he had a lot of epistemically justified beliefs about a wide variety of subjects. He discussed his ideas and experiments with the best scientists of his time. As it turned out, many of Ptolemy's justified beliefs about the solar system were false. Ptolemy did not *know* that the earth is the centre of the solar system" (Ryan's emphasis).

wisdom. Saying otherwise, assuming the domain has been fixed correctly, is what leads to having to rule out such thinkers as being wise.<sup>8</sup>

Ryan claims we should not rule out someone as being wise because of their epistemic bad luck. The epistemic bad luck Ryan seems to have in mind is being in a time or place such that one is surrounded by false beliefs or at least an absence of many true beliefs in the relevant domain. The thought appears to be that Ptolemy, and others like him, did very well epistemically in relation to the relevant domain given their surroundings. That they failed to get some or even many things right in the relevant domain should not rule them out as wise. Ryan (2012, 107), defending the thought that epistemic bad luck in the relevant domain should not rule someone out as being wise, offers a further example:

Another way of developing this same point is to imagine a person with highly justified beliefs about a wide variety of subjects, but who is unaware that she is trapped in the Matrix or some other skeptical scenario. Such a person could be wise even if she is sorely lacking knowledge.

Fileva and Tresan (2013, 231–232), in their reply to Ryan, make the case that having epistemically justified beliefs but not knowledge with regard to some matters in the relevant domain, as is set out by Ryan, does seem to make a significant difference as to whether a person is wise. In making their case, they counter Ryan's argument with a case of their own. They ask the reader to imagine a candidate who satisfies Ryan's conditions for wisdom coming to have a justified belief that she should volunteer her children for organ harvesting to save the lives of others.<sup>9</sup> It seems natural to think that this would be a terrible mistake, and assuming for the sake of argument that it is, then thinking that such a person should be counted as wise even if the candidate has a justified belief is not plausible. Perhaps one might deny that such a belief could enjoy epistemic justification. If so, then one appears committed to saying that one could not form (or maintain) such a belief such that that belief is justified.<sup>10</sup> For example, we would have to deny that we could have a justified belief in this matter on the basis of an excellent case made, say on consequentialist grounds, by an outstanding philosopher. Perhaps this is so, but it is quite a strong claim. It is worth noting that Ryan takes her (2012, 110) position to be "compelling" whether one accepts evidentialism or reliabilism, or another leading account of epistemic justification.

Even if we accept that such a belief could not be justified, Ryan's account is still in trouble. On Ryan's account, see condition (2), a wise person may have some unjustified false beliefs. The counterexample, therefore, could just as well involve such a belief.<sup>11</sup> Perhaps Ryan might respond by saying that having a wide variety of justified beliefs

<sup>8</sup> In fact, such a knowledge condition is not obviously inconsistent with an agent having lots of false beliefs in the same domain. Depending on how "wide variety" is spelt out, however, we either get the result that such a knowledge condition would rule out thinkers such as Ptolemy as being counted as wise or, on a weaker reading, allow these thinkers such as Ptolemy to be counted as wise but also allow many others to be so counted who we do not think of as being wise. Such a condition will either be too strong or too weak.

<sup>9</sup> I have made some slight stylistic changes here to how they present their case.

<sup>10</sup> We are at risk of getting bogged-down in needless complications here, let us just say that "could not" here covers nearby possible worlds and not far away possible worlds.

<sup>11</sup> This is a point that Fileva and Tresan (2013) missed.

and very few unjustified beliefs in the domain she claims is relevant for wisdom means that her account provides the result that the person in the harvest one's children's organs case is not wise. The thought might be that if one were really to have a great deal of justified beliefs and very few unjustified beliefs in the relevant domain, then one would not have the harvest one's children's organs belief. It seems obviously possible, however, that one could have a great deal of justified beliefs and very few unjustified beliefs in a domain and that one of those unjustified beliefs could constitute a very big mistake. Regardless, the option of taking a very strong reading of the epistemic requirement is not open dialectically to Ryan given what she takes to be the domain of wisdom and historical examples of wise people.

### 3.1 The Domain of Wisdom

What are we to say about Socrates, Aristotle, Hypatia, and so on, who had numerous false beliefs in the domain that has been specified? How are we to differentiate them from the agent in the harvest one's children's organs case? After all, it is the plausible wisdom of such historical figures that served as the motivation for saying epistemically justified beliefs in the relevant domain is the requirement, rather than, say, knowledge.<sup>12</sup> This brings us to the relevant domain:

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)* (Ryan 2012, 108). (Emphasis added).

If we think the domain relevant to the wise person's epistemic standing includes "a wide variety of valuable academic subjects", then it looks like we have an exclusive choice between either saying that figures such as Aristotle were wise or that it is a requirement of the wise person that their beliefs be true in the relevant domain. Given that denying either disjunct is problematic, it is appropriate to give consideration to the antecedent which sets up the disjunction. Why think that the domain relevant to the wise person's epistemic standing includes "a wide variety of valuable academic subjects"?

Ryan (2012, 103) points out that it is common in the literature to claim that the domain of wisdom includes how we should live. She further claims that an account that places beliefs, whatever their epistemic status, as to how we should live alone in that domain would be unsatisfying. As we have seen, she holds that justified beliefs in "basic academic subjects such as philosophy, science, literature, history, etc., are essential for wisdom". Her claim is motivated by the thought that someone who has not received a "well-rounded education", though he may do well epistemically when it comes to living well, will not be sufficiently "informed" to count as wise. If having the relevant epistemic standing with regard to living well were sufficient, then lots of people would turn out to be wise. Ryan (2012, 104) writes that she agrees with Whitcomb (2011) that any adequate theory of wisdom should not yield the result "that it's quite common to achieve wisdom".

<sup>12</sup> Perhaps one might dispute whether the named agents were in fact wise. This would miss the point. Surely there were some agents prior to the scientific revolution who were wise.

Maybe we do think that a large proportion of the population has a wide variety of justified beliefs about how to live well.<sup>13</sup> If we agree with Ryan and Whitcomb, that an account that yields the result that wisdom is a common achievement is problematic, then it might be right that more lies in the relevant domain than how to live rationally or that the relevant epistemic standing that Ryan has argued for is too weak/permissive. Of course, both disjuncts might be true, but if so then we once again encounter the problem that figures like Aristotle will turn out not to be wise according to such a position. If we reject the first disjunct as it currently stands, indicating what it indicates—that basic academic subjects are also in the relevant domain, and increase the relevant epistemic requirement, then we look much better placed to get the result that wisdom is not a common achievement and that people such as Aristotle and Socrates, paradigmatic cases, do come out as being wise. An obvious candidate that would strengthen the epistemic requirement, and previously advocated by Ryan (2012) and others in the literature, is knowledge.

Now the revised condition will run as follows:

Person *S* is wise at time *t* iff at time *t*

(1)\* *S* has a wide variety of knowledge on how to live rationally (epistemic, moral, and practical)...

The critic of (1)\* may simply reply that (1)\* by itself does not rule out *S* having false beliefs in the relevant domain. *S* having a wide variety of knowledge does not imply that *S* has no false beliefs.<sup>14</sup> Given that this is so, we still get the result from (1)\* that a person can be wise and believe that their children's organs should be harvested. (1)\*, therefore, is also problematic.

Consider the following alternative:

Person *S* is wise at time *t* iff at time *t*

(1)\*\* *S* knows how to live rationally (epistemic, moral, and practical)...

Should we now be happy with the epistemic standing? I do not believe so. Knowledge is still too strong in one respect and too weak in another to be the appropriate epistemic standing. While it seems right to think that getting it wrong in some cases, for example the harvest one's children's organs case, rules you out as being wise, it seems that having justified but false beliefs in other cases is unproblematic.<sup>15</sup> For example, perhaps one thinks that one should, given a certain level of maturity and mental health, experiment with particular hallucinogens when in fact one should not, or vice-versa. This seems like the kind of thing one could get wrong and still be counted as wise.<sup>16</sup>

Whitcomb (2011) endorses a very similar headline view, at least with regard to one of the kinds of wisdom which he identifies. What knows amounts to is, however, spelt out rather differently, and Whitcomb does not talk of living rationally but of living well. According to Whitcomb (2011, 101):

“[i]f one knows how to live well, then, one thereby knows both (a) of at least some of the sets of ends the fulfilling of which is sufficient for living well, that the

<sup>13</sup> I am not convinced that this true, but I would not pursue the point here.

<sup>14</sup> Note that Ryan's second condition is not sufficiently strong to help us here.

<sup>15</sup> This is something that Fileva and Tresan (2013) also point out.

<sup>16</sup> It also seems a plausible case in which the opinion of people we think of as wise could be divided. We can imagine a wise mystic saying one thing and a wise ascetic saying another.



fulfilling of those sets of ends is sufficient for living well, and (b) of at least some of the means sufficient for bringing about those sets of ends, that those means are sufficient for bringing about those sets of ends.”

This view is well placed to meet the “too strong” charge levelled at (1)\*\*. After all, it is just what is sufficient, both with regard to ends and the means to those ends, for living well that one is required to know. (1)\*\* and Whitcomb’s view, however, falter on the “too weak” charge.

Very recently Grimm (2015) has defended the view that wisdom requires knowing how to live well. He holds, like Whitcomb, that we should think of wisdom along a continuum such that someone can do better or worse with regard to wisdom. Again, like Whitcomb, for Grimm “knows how to live well” involves knowing propositions that bear on living well. As with Whitcomb’s view, his position falters on the “too weak” charge.

Simply knowing how to live rationally or well opens the door for problematic cases. Receiving testimony from a wise person about how to live rationally can, if that testimony is believed, lead to testimonial knowledge. An agent gaining much testimonial knowledge about how to live rationally is plausibly not sufficient epistemically to result in that agent being wise. It is not enough that the wise person knows how to live rationally, it might be possible that a comprehensive book could tell her that. The wise person must, rather, understand how to live rationally, or well. This would rule out the person with mere testimonial knowledge of how to live rationally, or well, from counting as wise.

Relatedly, understanding is intuitively a higher epistemic standing than knowledge, or, in other words, epistemically better than knowledge. The person who has understanding in a domain is plausibly doing better than someone who merely has knowledge in that domain, or even someone who merely knows that domain well. A good chemist does not just know lots about chemistry, or even just know chemistry well, she understands chemistry. In understanding chemistry, she sees how things hang together and has an epistemically strong basis for forming new and interesting beliefs in the domain of chemistry. The wise person, surely, also has understanding, the higher epistemic standing, in her domain.

Another advantage of requiring that the wise person understand how to live rationally is that this move helps us, in virtue of the dynamic nature of understanding, with our first problem, the knowledge requirement being too strong. If we say that the wise person must understand how to live rationally, and we assume that understanding of some subject matter permits some false beliefs in the domain of that subject matter, then we get the result that someone can be wise in the required domain without that requiring that she have only true beliefs in that domain. That understanding of a subject matter is compatible with having some false beliefs about that subject matter is a view advanced by Kvanvig (2003), Elgin (2009), and Riggs (2009).

We can now also deal with the harvesting one’s children’s organs case. Plausibly, in such a case, if one believes that one should harvest one’s children’s organs, one has gone so far wrong that one demonstratively lacks understanding of how to live

rationally.<sup>17</sup> This result generalises for cases like the harvesting one's children's organs case; that is, cases in which the protagonist seems, and let us assume is, obviously not wise. This seems exactly the right thing to say about such a case. If someone knew what "propositional logic" meant but believed that propositional logic had nothing to do with logical operators then we would be right in saying that this person does not understand propositional logic. Similarly, if a person knows what "astronomy" means but thinks that the earth is motionless; then this person does not understand astronomy. While there may be difficult boundary cases, whatever the domain, this does not undermine the point that understanding in a domain can be inconsistent with certain false beliefs in that domain. Furthermore, the domain of how to live rationally is such a domain.<sup>18</sup>

The new formulation is as follows:

Person *S* is wise at time *t* iff at time *t*

(1)\*\**S* understands how to live rationally (epistemic, moral, and practical)...

Now what should we say about the domain? Given that we have said that understanding is the relevant epistemic standing, can we substitute basic academic subjects back into the relevant domain? Not if we want to continue to say that paradigm cases of wise people are in fact cases of wise people. Ptolemy was fundamentally wrong about the Earth's place in the solar system, as was Aristotle. More generally, if we think that valuable academic subjects include sciences such as physics, chemistry, biology, and surely we do, then it is implausible that any pre-scientific revolution thinker could be a candidate for wisdom.<sup>19</sup>

Should we be concerned if "a wide variety of valuable academic subjects" drops out of the domain of wisdom in our condition? Its inclusion does reduce the number of those who can be said to be wise, but raising the epistemic requirement from a wide variety of justified beliefs to understanding also has this effect. Besides, wanting a condition to yield the result that wisdom is uncommon is by itself a poor motivation for the formulation of a particular a condition.

Even if we accept that we want the result from our condition that wisdom is uncommon, Ryan's formulation goes too far. Intuitive cases of wise people are conceivable in which these people's particular epistemic successes, a wide variety of justified beliefs, with regard to a wide variety of valuable academic subjects is either incidental or non-existent. In contrast, our conception of the wise person seems precisely centred on understanding how to live well. When an image of the wise person comes to mind, we see, amongst other things, someone who gives guidance

<sup>17</sup> It might sometimes be difficult to determine whether someone lacks understanding or not, nonetheless I take it that there is a fact of the matter as to whether an agent lacks understanding. I do not, therefore, take that difficulty to present a problem for my view. Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for pressing me on this point.

<sup>18</sup> While it might be desirable in one respect to provide a full theory of understanding here, my concern with doing so is that it would divert us away from the aim of this paper and is unnecessary if what I have said about understanding is already plausible, which I believe it is.

<sup>19</sup> Alternatives are still possible. Someone could attempt to defend a position close to Ryan's by arguing either for a condition with a mixed epistemic requirement, that is, one for example that requires understanding of how to live rationally and justified beliefs in the domain of valuable academic subjects. Similarly, one might seek to make minimal alterations to the domain, and in acknowledgement of what has been previously argued exclude the sciences from the domain in which the wise person is required to have understanding. Either move though would be less theoretically elegant than the alternative I have argued for and would lack appropriate motivation. I say more about why the first move lacks motivation later.

as to how to live well. The image is not tied to a particular time or location. It is not tied to even the presence of beliefs about physics, literature, chemistry, and so on. We can imagine the wise person in Ancient Greece, in an Indian village one thousand years ago or living today, cut off from the modern world and its concerns, or not. At the basis of the view outlined above is the belief that it is conceivable that there have been wise individuals who have lacked formal education and have been from epistemic communities that had no study of chemistry, physics and various other academic subjects.

Whitcomb (2011, 99) presents a case, adapted for our purposes, which supports a view somewhat similar to that of Ryan's. He asks us to consider two people that are doing equally well epistemically with regard to how to live well. One of these people, *A*, in addition to doing well epistemically with regard to how to live, is doing much better epistemically than the other person, *B*, in the domain of academic subjects.<sup>20</sup> In fact, we can even suppose that *A* is doing as well as possible epistemically in the domain of academic subjects, while *B* has few or no justified beliefs in the domain of academic subjects.<sup>21</sup> The view that Whitcomb ultimately supports, though he does not mention it here, is that such an agent would have "deep understanding" of the subject matter. Whitcomb asks whether *A* is wiser than *B*, adding that he thinks that *A* is indeed wiser than *B*.

I do not share the intuition. Of course, *A* is doing better than *B* epistemically, but if he, say, knows or understands extra things about physics or chemistry, I do not feel any pull to say that he is wiser. Perhaps knowing particular things about certain aspects of history or psychology could help *A* to do better than *B* epistemically with regard to how to live well, but we have just said that they are doing equally well epistemically in that regard. So while it seems possible that doing well epistemically in the domain of certain aspects of some academic subjects might be of some instrumental value for doing well in the domain of how to live well, it does not follow that academic subjects should make it into our condition that sets out the domain of wisdom.<sup>22</sup>

I think that the best thing to say about a person with understanding in the domain of an academic subject or subjects is that she is exhibiting an epistemic characteristic of wisdom, understanding, outside of the domain of wisdom and in the domain of something that is also intellectually demanding and valuable. This way of seeing such cases allows us to make sense of the pull some may feel to say that geniuses in various academic fields are wise, while leaving us the resources to explain why they may in fact not be wise.

So far I haven't challenged Ryan's idea that the domain of wisdom includes how to live rationally (practically, emotionally, and morally), although Whitcomb's alternative

<sup>20</sup> Whitcomb describes person *A* as doing much better epistemically with regard to theoretical wisdom, though theoretical wisdom is taken to involve subjects such as chemistry (Whitcomb 2011, 102).

<sup>21</sup> Note, however, that "B has few or no justified beliefs in the domain of academic subjects" should be understood in such a way so as to be consistent my condition (2)\*. I argue for condition (2)\* later.

<sup>22</sup> Grimm (2015, 151) suggests, somewhat differently, that there are positions on the good life according to which what has been called theoretical wisdom is, as a class, a requirement of the good life, and that this is a way that such theoretical knowledge could turn out to be a requirement for living well. Note that Grimm's position is that the fully wise person lives well, whereas my position is that this need not be the case. The discussion in "Additional Conditions: the Commitment Condition" makes clear the motivation for not requiring that the wise person succeed at living well.

discussion of living well has been noted. Ryan (2012, 103) sees living rationally (practically, emotionally, and morally) as what is required for living well. Here, however, for our purposes at least, Ryan is making an unnecessary substantive claim.<sup>23</sup> Our concern is to provide the relevant conditions for wisdom, rather than, if possible, getting into what living well entails.<sup>24</sup> Obviously, if we want to understand wisdom further, then we'll likely want to understand what living well amounts to, but this can come later. In any case, articulating a widely agreed upon analysis of wisdom with the content of living well still to be thrashed out would be a step forward.

So far I've written in support of the view that in the domain of wisdom is living well and I've rejected the view that academic subjects are also in that domain. A question still to be considered, however, is whether there is anything further in the domain of wisdom other than living well. When we think of the wise, we not only associate them with having understanding as to how to live well, we also associate them with being disposed to respond well to certain important questions that don't in any obvious way have a bearing on how to live well. The kind of important questions I have in mind are questions such as why is there something rather than nothing?; what is the basic stuff of the universe?; if there is a God, then why does he allow the innocent to suffer?; why should one be moral? Some questions of this sort might be asked in empirical academic disciplines, some are not; what is common to them, however, is that they pertain to basic philosophical issues. Thinking that having good responses to such questions falls within the domain of wisdom fits with the idea that philosophy as a subject is itself somehow concerned with wisdom, as the etymology of "philosophy" suggests.

Is it correct to think that good responses to such questions have no bearing on how to live well? If we think that understanding how to live well requires good responses to such questions, then there is no need to include them separately in the domain of wisdom. But why think that? It is hard to imagine that a good response to the question of why is there something rather than nothing will bear on how one should live, though that is not to deny that the content of a particular answer, say one that makes reference to a personal God, might be relevant to how one should live. Still the point remains that it seems plausible that there are good responses to some such questions that do not bear on how one should live.

An alternative explanation for the association, and the one that seems most plausible, is that the wise person is committed to living well, see condition (3) or (3)\*, and part of living well is engaging in deep reflection on oneself and the world one inhabits. If this is right, then it may just be the case that the wise, being committed to living well, engage with such questions and, because of the intellectual virtues that enable them to be wise in the first place, tend to have good responses to such questions and tend not to have bad responses to such questions. Certainly, it seems that not having understanding of how to live

<sup>23</sup> There are a number of well known competing theories of the good life that would be relevant if one wished to develop an account of living well. Such theories are typically divided up as desire-fulfilment theory, hedonism, objective list theory.

<sup>24</sup> I take it, however, that saying *S* understands how to live well implies that *S*'s understanding is not merely something theoretical; *S* is able to bring that understanding to bear in day-to-day situations.

well excludes one from being counted as wise, whereas not having good responses to the sort of questions mentioned does not exclude one from being wise. My answer here, however, is anticipating my examination of the further conditions that Ryan argues are requirements for wisdom.

Given what has been argued so far, my proposed full revision of Ryan's first condition, and contrary to Whitcomb's account, is as follows:

Person *S* is wise at time *t* iff at time *t*

(1)\*\*\*\* *S* understands how to live well...<sup>25</sup>

#### 4 Additional Conditions: the Epistemic Humility Condition

Ryan's (2012, 108) proposed second condition, which I will now consider, runs as follows:

Person *S* is wise at time *t* iff at time *t*...

(2) *S* has very few unjustified beliefs and is sensitive to his or her limitations...

The motivation for the condition stems from the previously discussed view of wisdom in Plato's *Apology*, the view that Socrates is wise because he is aware of his ignorance (Ryan 2012). As previously argued, awareness of one's ignorance alone is not sufficient for wisdom. It does, however, seem a requirement of the wise person that he not have a lot of unjustified beliefs or be afflicted by intellectual hubris or excessive intellectual modesty.

In one sense the condition seems exactly right. By stating that the agent should be aware of his limitations, rather than simply stating that he should be epistemically humble, we can get the right result in the case of a God-like agent who pre-theoretically we would think of as wise but who does not have reason to be humble given his approximation to intellectual perfection. It is a mark in favour of the condition; therefore, that it merely requires that if an agent is to be in the running for being counted as wise, then he must be sensitive to his intellectual limitations.

A worry is that (2), as articulated above, does not rule out the possibility of *S* being intellectually vicious in a certain respect. It is compatible with (2) that *S* could suspend belief as to *p* when believing *p* is in fact what is epistemically appropriate. Because of the way Ryan's condition is formulated, an agent could suspend belief far more than it is appropriate for her to do so and still be counted as wise. After all, in such cases she could still have very few unjustified beliefs and so satisfy the requirement as Ryan has articulated it. An alternative to the "very few unjustified beliefs" formulation that avoids this

<sup>25</sup> One might worry that this condition, despite the absence of academic subjects from the domain, still rules out Aristotle, and perhaps some of the other candidates Ryan mentions, from being counted as wise. The worry that Aristotle is ruled out as being wise by the condition depends on whether some of his beliefs, such as his belief in the institution of slavery, are incompatible with understanding how to live well. If they are, then, on this account, we will have to concede that Aristotle is not wise. My concern in putting forward this account is not that we get the result that each of the historical figures that Ryan names as paradigmatically wise turn out to be wise. It is that some agents living in a time prior to the scientific revolution turn out to be wise. The condition still allows for the possibility that some agents from thousands of years ago and from communities lacking formal education today might be wise. Indeed, it seems intuitive that there is a timeless aspect to wisdom. This condition gives us that result.

problem is to say that in very few cases or no cases does the wise agent not believe as it is epistemically appropriate for her to do so.<sup>26, 27</sup>

If we say this, then do we also need to add that such an agent is sensitive to her epistemic limitations?<sup>28</sup> In fact, requiring that the agent be sensitive to her epistemic limitations appears to be made redundant by requiring that the wise agent in very few cases or no cases not believe as it is epistemically inappropriate for her to believe. She just is manifesting such sensitivity if in very few cases or no cases she does not believe as it is epistemically appropriate for her to do so.<sup>29</sup>

Our condition (2)\* is as follows:

Person *S* is wise at time *t* iff at time *t*...

(2)\* in very few or no cases does *S* not believe as it is epistemically appropriate for her to do so...

#### 4.1 Additional Conditions: the Commitment Condition

Ryan's (2012, 108) non-epistemic condition is as follows:

Person *S* is wise at time *t* iff at time *t*...

(3) *S* is deeply committed to both:

- (a) Acquiring wider, deeper, and more rational beliefs about reality (subjects listed in condition 1).
- (b) Living rationally (practically, emotionally, and morally).

The argued for superiority of (1)\*\*\*\* over (1) means that a related change to what we say *S* is committed to is appropriate. (3) makes reference to subjects listed in condition (1), but (1) has been rejected in favour of (1)\*\*\*\* and those subjects are not listed in (1)\*\*\*\*. The point raised in relation to (2) regarding the possibility of a wise God-like being gives us a further reason to change (3). It would seem odd to require of a God-like being that she be committed to acquiring wider and deeper understanding about how to live well if she already understands all there is to understand about living well.

The following formulation accounts for these points:

Person *S* is wise at time *t* iff at time *t*...

<sup>26</sup> Believing as is "epistemically appropriate" here means believing as it is appropriate for one to believe given the epistemically relevant particulars of one's situation, such as the evidence available to one.

<sup>27</sup> Requiring that an agent believes as is epistemically appropriate echoes Hume's (1999, 170) claim that the wise man "proportions his belief to the evidence" without committing one to evidentialism. Grimm (2015, 146, fn. 12) also sees Ryan's position as similar to Hume's own position, albeit not on this point but in her rational beliefs requirement.

<sup>28</sup> Ryan (2012, 109) has epistemic limitations in mind when she refers to "limitations", but not just epistemic limitations. She does not go into any detail, however, as to what non-epistemic limitations might be. The result is that it is not clear what those non-epistemic limitations might be and why being sensitive to them is a requirement of the wise person.

<sup>29</sup> Sensitivity here is a fuzzy notion. Perhaps occasionally she will betray ignorance of her epistemic limitations. Anything more demanding than this will likely rule out the possibility of even some human agents being wise agents.

(3)\* *S* is deeply committed to both:

- (a) Acquiring wider and deeper understanding about how to live well, if it is possible to acquire such understanding;
- (b) Living well.

The condition put more abstractly is that the wise person is committed to acting in a certain way. A motivation for the condition is that we do not want to say that someone who meets the first condition for wisdom, who understands how to live well, but who is not committed to live accordingly or is committed to live in a way that is fundamentally in conflict with living well, should be counted as wise. Suppose there were a person who understood how to live well, but she herself chose to spend her life counting blades of grass instead of living well.<sup>30</sup> The thought is that such a person should not be counted as wise.

A motivation for the condition requiring commitment rather than success is that we can imagine a wise person who is not living well even though she understands how to live well. A person, say, who is imprisoned or tortured, plausibly is not living well. It is intuitive; however, that such a person could remain wise even though she is not living well.<sup>31</sup>

## 5 A Worry

A worry that one might have with the account provided is that it leaves open the possibility of an agent having epistemically inappropriate beliefs about basic empirical matters, such as the Earth's shape or place in the solar system, in cases in which we think the agent has no good excuse for going wrong about such matters.<sup>32</sup> Aristotle and Ptolemy did well with regard to astronomy given their starting point. Knowing their starting point, we do not blame them for being fundamentally wrong about the Earth's place in the solar system. Perhaps we can grant that they had justified beliefs and beliefs that were epistemically appropriate, given their situation. Matters seem different if we consider the case of an agent from a community that is scientifically well-informed, who goes on to form the belief, say, that the Earth is flat, or that it is the Earth that is the centre of the solar system. The first condition I argue for does not obviously rule out such an agent as wise, given that the domain identified is how to live well. The second condition does not necessarily rule out such a possibility either, given that it precisely allows for the wise agent to have a few beliefs that are not epistemically appropriate. What should we say about the worry?

While the first condition does not obviously rule out this possibility, in so far as what living well amounts to goes unspecified, the condition has the potential to do so. It is difficult to see, however, why understanding how to live well would imply not getting

<sup>30</sup> This is based on a case described by Parfit (1984, 499–500).

<sup>31</sup> For criticism and a more detailed defence of adopting a condition of this type see Whitcomb (2011) and Ryan (2012), respectively. Grimm's (2015, 140) position does not seem to be informed by this aspect of the dialectic. He writes that the fully wise person would not only know what is necessary for well-being but would have attained what is necessary for well-being.)

<sup>32</sup> Credit for this point goes to an anonymous reviewer for this journal.

wrong the sort of basic facts mentioned above in cases in which one has no excuse to get those facts wrong.

Earlier I discussed how we associate the wise person being disposed to have good responses to certain questions that are not obviously related to how to live well. The way this issue was handled also seems relevant to the worry raised in this section. Condition (3)\* requires that the wise person is committed to living well. If part of living well is engaging in deep reflection on oneself and the world one inhabits, then we can expect that the intellectual virtues that enable an agent to be wise will enable that agent to believe appropriately when it comes to the sort of basic facts that concern us here. Recall also that condition (2)\* requires that in very few or no cases does the wise agent not believe as it is epistemically appropriate for them to believe. That such an agent will believe epistemically appropriately seems all the more likely given that we are concerned with the agent who is from a community that is already doing well in such matters. The onerous nature of the condition rules out the possibility that an agent could be wise and have many epistemically inappropriate beliefs. These considerations taken together make it very unlikely that there is a wise person who believes, say, that the world is flat. In fact, such a belief is a very good indicator that someone is not wise.

Nevertheless, it is still conceptually possible that there could be such an agent on the account provided. Let us say there is an agent who meets the requirements laid out and yet has the epistemically inappropriate beliefs mentioned above. I think we should still grant that such a person be counted as wise. Certainly, we would not expect her to have such inappropriate beliefs given condition (3)\* and she could be doing better with respect to condition (2)\*. Nonetheless, given how well she is doing with regard to what is central to wisdom, she understands how to live well, it seems appropriate to count her as wise. If we are to grant that it is possible for human agents to be wise, then we should accept the conceptual possibility that though it would be uncharacteristic of a wise person to have the sort of inappropriate belief we have been considering, a few such inappropriate beliefs do not rule someone out as wise.

## 6 Conclusion

In this paper, I argued for a particular analysis of wisdom. The case was made for this analysis by building on Ryan's analysis of wisdom and motivating an alternative analysis by way of criticism of both Ryan and Whitcomb's accounts. Particular attention was paid to Ryan's first condition. I argued that this condition is both too strong and too weak. I argued that Ryan's condition is too weak in that it yields the result that harvesting one's children's organs is compatible with wisdom. I argued that it is too strong in that it commits us to denying that there are wise agents who do not have a wide variety of justified beliefs across numerous valuable academic subjects. I made the case that Whitcomb's alternative account of wisdom is also problematic. I rejected his epistemic requirement for living well as too weak and his motivation for holding that deep understanding of a subject such as chemistry contributes to someone being wise. In doing the latter, I offered a diagnosis of the pull one might feel in response to Whitcomb's case, while rejecting the moral that Whitcomb draws from that case. Finally, I also made the case for adjustments to the two other conditions that Ryan sets out.



The analysis I argued for runs as follows:

$S$  is wise at time  $t$  iff at time  $t$ ...

- (1)\*\*\*\*  $S$  understands how to live well;
- (2)\* in very few cases or no cases does  $S$  not believe as it is epistemically appropriate for her to do so;
- (3)\*  $S$  is deeply committed to both:
  - (a) Acquiring a wider and deeper understanding about how to live well, if it is possible to acquire such understanding;
  - (b) Living well.<sup>33</sup>

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