

Three Models of Practical Wisdom

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Abstract

There are two leading models of practical wisdom in the contemporary analytic philosophy literature, the Standard Model and the Socratic Model. Recently, a neglected third option is starting to get some attention. On the Eliminativist Model, there is no virtue of practical wisdom at all. There are a variety of distinct sets of capacities which carry out the various functions associated with practical wisdom. But there is no trait that they jointly constitute. The goal of this paper is to set out what separates the three models, and what I take some of the main costs to be with the Standard and Socratic Models. While the Eliminativist Model might not be the clearly superior choice of the three models, it deserves to be taken far more seriously in future discussions of practical wisdom.

Keywords: Character; Character Traits; Practical Wisdom; Traits; Virtue.

There are two leading models of practical wisdom in the contemporary analytic philosophy literature. One, the Standard Model, harkens back to Aristotle and is supported by neo-Aristotelians such as Daniel Russell, Nancy Snow, and Kristján Kristjánsson.¹ The other, the Socratic Model, is a Platonic alternative that has been advocated by Mario De Caro, Maria Silvia Vaccarezza, Massimo Marraffa, and Ariele Niccoli.²

Recently, a neglected third option is starting to get some attention. On the Eliminativist Model, there is no virtue of practical wisdom at all. There are a variety of distinct sets of capacities which carry out the various functions associated with practical wisdom. But there is no trait that they jointly constitute. Practical wisdom, as understood by both the Standard Model and the Socratic Model, does not exist.

The Eliminativist Model was developed independently by Sophie Grace Chappell in an earlier paper, and more recently in my own work and in the

¹ See Russell 2009, Kristjánsson 2014, Darnell et al. 2019, and Snow et al. 2021.

² See De Caro et al. 2018 and De Caro et al. 2021.

work of the psychologist Dan Lapsley.³ The goal of this paper is to set out, as clearly as I can, what separates the three models, and what I take some of the main costs to be with the Standard and Socratic Models. To be fair, I will also raise some concerns about the Eliminativist Model as well. To anticipate, the overall conclusion will be that, while the Eliminativist Model might not be the clearly superior choice of the three, it deserves to be taken far more seriously in future discussions of practical wisdom.

Section one outlines a variety of functions that have been ascribed to practical wisdom by various contemporary authors. This sets the stage in section two for presenting the Standard Model and raising some concerns about it. Section three does the same with the Socratic Model. The final section of the paper then turns to Eliminativism.

One final preliminary is that the focus in this paper is on practical wisdom as treated in the contemporary literature. It is not on reconstructing historical views put forth by Plato, Aristotle, or Aquinas, a project which would require far more space than is available here to carry out well.

1. The Multiplicity of Functions Associated with Practical Wisdom

In recent work, practical wisdom is invoked to do certain things and to play certain functional roles. Furthermore, it is invoked primarily in the context of its bearing on our moral character, and in particular on the possession of moral virtues like honesty and compassion. This much so far is agreed upon by advocates of all three models.

What are these functions ascribed to practical wisdom? Unfortunately, there is no agreed upon list. In fact, each contemporary writer tends to have a different list of functions from the next. In previous work, I distinguished between the following:⁴

The Handling Conflicts Function: When two or more moral virtues lead in opposing directions, practical wisdom will decide how best to resolve the conflict.⁵

The Instrumental Function: Practical wisdom decides the best means to pursue in achieving the ends of the moral virtues.⁶

³ Chappell 2006, forthcoming, Miller 2021, and Lapsley 2021.

⁴ See Miller 2021.

⁵ Zagzebski 1996: 221–224, Hursthouse 2000: 48, Russell 2009: 25–26, 31, Roberts and Wood 2007: 312, Kristjánsson 2014: 155, 162, Darnell et al. 2019: 119–120, Kristjánsson et al. 2021: 8, and Snow et al. 2021: 71–72, 81. In the text the function is described in terms of conflicting virtues, but it can be extended to including conflicting values, principles, and other normative considerations.

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The End-Setting Function: Practical wisdom fixes or at least plays an important role in fixing the ends of the moral virtues.⁷

The End-Specification Function: Practical wisdom adopts the general end of a virtue and specifies it more precisely for the particular situations that the virtuous person encounters.⁸

The Justification Function: Practical wisdom provides good reasons to justify the choice of ends adopted by the virtues.⁹

The Knowing Reasons Function: Practical wisdom ensures that a virtuous person is aware of the objective normative reasons which bear on a given action.

The Motivating Reasons Function: Practical wisdom ensures that a virtuous person's motivating reasons correspond, in content and in motivating strength, to the objective normative reasons which bear on a given action.¹⁰

The Perception Function: Practical wisdom ensures that the virtuous person perceives the morally relevant features and considerations pertaining to a given situation.¹¹

In documenting these functions at the time, I missed some additional ones that have also been appealed to in the literature:

The Mean Function: Practical wisdom ensures that each moral virtue hits its own mean characteristic of that virtue.¹²

The Emotion Regulation Function: Practical wisdom “ensures that we have appropriate emotional responses, that is, that our emotion fits the

⁶ Hursthouse 2000: 55–56, 58–62. Russell 2009: x, Chappell 2006: 156, Roberts and Wood 2007: 306, Kristjánsson 2014: 155, 162, Darnell et al. 2019: 113, Snow et al. 2021: 71, 87, and Lapsley 2021: 142.

⁷ Russell 2009: 7–10, 34, Roberts and Wood 2007: 306, Kristjánsson 2014: 155, Stichter 2018: chapter four, De Caro et al. 2018: 295, 2021: 31, Vaccarezza 2018: 253–257, Darnell et al. 2019: 113, and Snow et al. 2021: 71. For extensive discussion of whether Aristotle ascribed this function to practical wisdom, see Moss 2011.

⁸ Russell 2009: x, 7–11, 21–22, 25, 361, Roberts and Wood 2007: 306, Vaccarezza 2018: 253–255, De Caro et al. 2018: 295, Van Zyl 2019: 79, Snow et al. 2021: 87, and Lapsley 2021: 142.

⁹ Russell 2009: x and Kristjánsson 2014: 155.

¹⁰ For the Knowing Reasons and Motivating Reasons functions, see in particular Sosa 2009: 281–282. See also Russell 2009: x–xi, 16, 29, 361, Kamtekar 2004: 482, Stichter 2018: 127, Darnell et al. 2019: 113–114, 118–120, 122, and Van Zyl 2019: 80–81.

¹¹ Hursthouse 2000: 57, Roberts and Wood 2007: 306, Russell 2009: 21, Vaccarezza 2018: 251, 253–255, Snow et al. 2021: 77, 80, 86, Kristjánsson et al. 2021: 8, and Lapsley 2021: 142, 144, 149–152.

¹² Chappell 2006: 143–147, Vaccarezza 2018: 251, Darnell et al. 2019: 114, and Lapsley 2021: 142, 145–149.

situation at hand, in two respects: first, by regulating our emotions such that we get our emotion right – we feel compassion instead of cruel glee; and second, that our compassion is neither too intensely nor too weakly felt.”¹³

Here I will not pause to explain what each function is meant to involve. It is sufficient for my purposes to note that (i) there are a number of functions listed above (10 in fact), and (ii) they are not equivalent to each other. Nor is this list of 10 meant to be exhaustive.¹⁴ Indeed, Sophie Grace Chappell goes so far as to distinguish 15 different functions.¹⁵

When it comes to particular philosophers today writing about practical wisdom, no one attributes just *one* function to practical wisdom. At the very least they ascribe several functions, and as we will see when we get to the Socratic Model, some even ascribe to it all the functions.

To take one illustration, here is the list found in the work of Catherine Darnell, Liz Gulliford, Kristján Kristjánsson and Panos Paris, advocates of the Standard Model:¹⁶

Perception Function: It “enables an agent to perceive what the salient features of a given situation are from an ethical perspective...”.¹⁷

Handling Conflicts Function: “this component of phronesis involves integrating different components of a good life, especially in dilemmatic situations where different ethically salient considerations or virtues appear to be in conflict.”¹⁸

The Motivating Reasons/Emotion Regulation Function: It “requires, and contributes to, the agent’s emotions being in line with her construal of a given situation, moral judgement, and decision, thereby also offering motivation for the appropriate response.”¹⁹

¹³ Snow et al. 2021: 73. See also Ibid., 82, Darnell et al. 2019: 119–120, and Kristjánsson et al. 2021: 9.

¹⁴ For instance, Mario De Caro and his colleagues appeal to “openness to new domains and situations”, which includes the “intention to improve oneself” (2018: 295, 2021: 31). Nancy Snow and her colleagues require “reflection on one’s life as a whole” (2021: 73; see also 83–84, 89–90 and Stichter 2018: chapter four). Jason Swartwood holds that practical wisdom “is the knowledge or understanding required to make reliably excellent decisions about what one ought to do all-things-considered” (2020).

¹⁵ Chappell forthcoming.

¹⁶ Darnell et al. 2019. See also Kristjánsson et al. 2021 and Kristjánsson and Fowers forthcoming.

¹⁷ Darnell et al. 2019: 118.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid., 119–120.

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Plus they add a new function not listed above:

The Blueprint Function: “Phronetic persons possess a general conception of the good life (eudaimonia) and adjust their moral identity to that blueprint, thus furnishing it with motivational force.”²⁰

To take another, rather different example from the contemporary literature, here are some of the functions invoked by Rosalind Hursthouse:

Handling Conflicts Function: “It is generally recognized that practical wisdom comes into play in the correct resolving of difficult dilemmas...”²¹

Instrumental Function: “...find the really effective means to her proposed goal, whatever that may be...is essential to practical wisdom.”²²

Perception Function: “They have a perceptual capacity, ‘perceptiveness’ or ‘sensitivity’, to see or hear that, despite a smiling front, others are hurt, embarrassed, uncertain...”²³

She also appeals to a rarely mentioned function of good comprehension, understood as the ability “to judge, rightly or well, what others say about matters within the scope of practical wisdom.”²⁴ In addition, “the *phronimos* must have enough understanding of people, born of experience, to know what sorts of things would make things worse for them...”²⁵ Still other functions include “an understanding of what the individual virtues require” and the ability to “reflect on our life as a whole.”²⁶

Elsewhere I have documented how Daniel Russell invokes the End-Setting, End-Specification, Instrumental, Justification, Knowing Reasons, and Handling Conflicts functions. Robert Roberts and Jay Wood in their work instead appeal to End-Setting, End-Specification, Instrumental, Perception, and Handling Conflicts.²⁷

What does all this have to do with assessing the three models of practical wisdom? The functions themselves are not what differentiate the three

²⁰ Ibid., 119.

²¹ Hursthouse 2000: 48.

²² Ibid., 55–56. See also 58–62.

²³ Ibid., 57.

²⁴ Ibid., 51.

²⁵ Ibid., 62–63. See also Snow et al. 2021: 77, 82 and Kristjánsson et al. 2021: 249.

²⁶ Hursthouse 2000: 64.

²⁷ See Miller 2021: 56–58.

models. What differentiate them are two things: first, whether they accept that practical wisdom is a trait of character, and second, provided it is a trait, whether it is distinct from the individual moral virtues. Let's unpack what these differences amount to, starting with the Standard Model.

2. The Standard Model and its Challenges

I take the Standard Model to be committed to four claims.²⁸ The first is this:

- (1) Practical wisdom is a character trait.²⁹

A character trait in turn is a psychological disposition which can have downstream effects on a person's behavior, but which is not to be identified with that behavior. Rather it gives rise to thoughts and/or feelings relevant to that trait, which in turn can bring about behavior. This claim that practical wisdom is a character trait will be shared with the Socratic Model, and will be rejected by the Eliminativist Model.

Here are the second and third claims made by the Standard Model:

- (2) Practical wisdom is a virtue, and furthermore it is an intellectual virtue.³⁰
- (3) Practical wisdom is necessary for the possession of the moral virtues.³¹

Clearly practical wisdom is not meant to be a vice or a mixed trait;³² rather it is an excellence of character. Given (3), it would be hard to accept that practical wisdom is itself a *moral* virtue, since then it would also be necessary for its own possession. Rather it is a different kind of virtue, an intellectual or epistemic virtue, which contributes to the possession of all the moral virtues.

Finally, we get:

²⁸ I developed this account of the Standard Model in Miller 2021.

²⁹ Russell 2009: 13, Roberts and Wood 2007: 305, Kristjánsson 2014: 155, Darnell et al. 2019: 112, and Van Zyl 2019: 78.

³⁰ Roberts and Wood 2007: 305, Kristjánsson 2014: 155, Darnell et al. 2019: 112, and Van Zyl 2019: 78.

³¹ Kristjánsson 2014: 155, Darnell et al. 2019: 112, 115–116, and Van Zyl 2019: 77, 82–84.

³² For mixed traits, see Miller 2013, 2014.

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- (4) Practical wisdom is not sufficient for the possession of the moral virtues.³³

Hence practical wisdom is needed for moral virtue, but it is not all that is needed for possessing the moral virtues. This claim is what will divide the Standard and Socratic Models, where the latter holds that practical wisdom is both necessary *and sufficient* for moral virtue.

Here is a concise way to state the Standard View:

The Standard Model: Practical wisdom is a character trait which is distinct psychologically from the moral virtues, but which is necessary for them to count as virtues.³⁴

As already mentioned, Daniel Russell, Nancy Snow, and Kristján Kristjánsson hold the Standard View, as does Matt Stichter, Jennifer Cole Wright, Michael T. Warren, Catherine Darnell, Liz Gulliford, and Panos Paris. Aristotle is the historical touchpoint for the view.³⁵

Such is the basic outline of the Standard Model. As we move to assessing the model, here is a concern that advocates of the model will want to avoid:

The Subsumption Concern: If a number of functions are ascribed to practical wisdom, then it had better not turn out that there is nothing to having a moral virtue besides just having practical wisdom.³⁶

In other words, if so many functions are ascribed to practical wisdom that each individual moral virtue has nothing to contribute of its own, then it looks like practical wisdom is doing all the work and is sufficient for possessing the moral virtues, thereby leading to the rejection of (4) and the acceptance of the rival Socratic Model.³⁷

³³ Russell 2009: x, Kristjánsson 2014: 155, 162 and Darnell et al. 2019: 112.

³⁴ See Miller 2021: 53. For helpful framing of the Standard Model, albeit with the aim of rejecting it, see De Caro et al. 2018.

³⁵ See Russell 2009, Kristjánsson 2014, Stichter 2018, Darnell et al. 2019, and Snow et al. 2021. As Kristjánsson writes, following Aristotle, “Every moral virtue thus requires both a moral component concerned with the proper passions, desires and pleasures, and an intellectual component consisting of the sort of knowledge and intellectual guidance that only *phronesis* can provide” (2014: 155).

³⁶ See also Chappell 2006: 137 and Miller 2021: 58.

³⁷ Chappell independently saw this problem as well, and nicely states it as follows: “that single disposition would then threaten to ‘crowd out’ the other virtues: it would apply whenever they apply and, in fact, do all their work, leaving them with nothing to do” (2006: 137).

The advocate of the Standard Model can avoid this concern by ascribing only some, but not all, of the 10 (or more) functions that have been connected to practical wisdom. And that is indeed what we find happening in the literature. For instance, the End-Setting Function might be ascribed to each particular moral virtue, and not to practical wisdom itself. To take a specific example, we saw how Darnell and her colleagues have reserved only four specific functions for practical wisdom in their model, thereby presumably reserving other ones for the particular moral virtues.

This move successfully avoids the Subsumption Concern, provided that there are still significant functions for individual moral virtues to carry out.³⁸ But it leads naturally to another concern:

The Arbitrariness Concern: If only some of the 10 (or more) candidate functions are ascribed to practical wisdom, then there is a worry that there is no plausible justification for ascribing these particular functions to practical wisdom and the remaining functions to the individual moral virtues. Any such choice can appear to be arbitrary.³⁹

To illustrate, let's return to the specific proposals that were offered in the previous section:

Catherine Darnell and Colleagues: 4 functions ascribed to practical wisdom.

Rosalind Hursthouse: 7 functions ascribed to practical wisdom.

Daniel Russell: 6 functions ascribed to practical wisdom.

Robert Roberts and Jay Wood: 5 functions ascribed to practical wisdom.

What is the basis for selecting 7 functions versus 6 functions or 5 or 4? Furthermore, what would justify selecting exactly these particular functions, however many there are, and not another bunch of functions instead?

To illustrate the concern another way, take the End-Specification Function, whereby a general end is adapted to the specific details of a given situation. It seems like this function could be played by a general intellectual virtue like practical wisdom. Or it could be played by each one of the moral virtues. The worry is that it is not clear what the basis would be to justify choosing one or the other.

³⁸ This is a non-trivial qualification. For an example of trying to avoid the Subsumption Concern, but in a way that doesn't leave us with real moral virtues, see Chappell 2006: 137.

³⁹ For related remarks, see also Miller 2021: 58 and Chappell forthcoming: 1.

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Similarly take the Perception Function, whereby the person picks up on morally relevant features of her situation. Again, this could be carried out by a general virtue. Or each moral virtue could be responsible for this function. For instance, the virtue of compassion could enable the person to pick up on peoples' needs, whereas the virtue of honesty could enable the person to notice considerations bearing on truth and deception. Advocates of the Standard Model seem to be divided among themselves as to where to assign this function, since the Perception Function shows up on some of their lists of functions of practical wisdom and not others. But rarely do we find them providing a *justification* for their choice one way or the other.

Rather what typically happens is that the functions are just announced in a stipulative way to apply or not to apply to practical wisdom. Or they are listed on the basis of whether Aristotle himself appealed to them or not. But that's hardly an adequate philosophical basis. Hence there seems to be some merit to the Arbitrariness Concern.

To be fair, one notable exception is the Handling Conflicts Function. Since the job there is to adjudicate conflicts between two or more moral virtues, it is not a function that would be ascribed to a moral virtue itself, but rather to something that is capable of playing a more supervisory role. Hence it is not arbitrary to link Handling Functions with practical wisdom. Note, though, that a similar rationale does not apply in the case of the other 9 functions listed in the previous section.

This last point leads to a final concern that will be raised here for the Standard Model.⁴⁰ Suppose we take the Handling Conflicts Function, and tack 5 other functions onto practical wisdom as well. Then it is natural to have the following worry:

The Unity Concern. If there are multiple functions ascribed to practical wisdom including Handling Conflicts, then it is difficult to accept that they would all be carried out by a single character trait, especially given how diverse the functions tend to be.⁴¹

⁴⁰ There are other concerns which could be raised besides these three. See, for instance, Chappell 2006, who raises a unity concern and a triviality concern, both of which do not appear in this paper. De Caro et al. 2018 raise 5 additional concerns. See also Lapsly 2021 and Chappell forthcoming for still further concerns. For responses to a few of the concerns raised in the literature, see Kristjánsson and Fowers forthcoming.

⁴¹ See also Miller 2021: 59. Chappell 2006 raises a "unity problem" for the Standard Model, but it is a different problem than the one considered in the text. Chappell's problem has to do with what unifies the field or scope of practical wisdom. In Chappell forthcoming, however, there is a similar unity concern to the one raised above.

Just consider the Handling Conflicts Function, the Perception Function, and the Instrumental Function. These are extremely different psychological tasks. Reliably discerning morally relevant features of a situation is not at all the same as determining the best means to our ends. A person could be good at carrying out one of them and poor at doing the other. Nor does either of them seem to have any close relationship to handling conflicts between different virtues. To ascribe these three functions to the very same character traits, then, can have the appearance of artificially throwing something together for which there is no reason to expect that they would naturally go together in one trait.

Matters might be different if the functions in question were all highly domain specific. For instance, if they all had to do with matters of suffering or pleasure or money, then it might make more sense to say that they all partially constitute one character trait. But that won't work in the case of practical wisdom, which after all is supposed to be completely domain-general.

Similarly, saying that these functions are all necessary for the possession of a moral virtue, is not enough to make the case that they in turn are constituents of one character trait. After all, as we will see the Eliminativist Model can say that these functions are necessary too, while maintaining that each function is carried out by its own set of capacities that do *not* in turn constitute a trait of practical wisdom.

Before we get to the Eliminativist Model, though, let's first consider the other leading model in the literature today, the Socratic Model.

3. The Socratic Model and its Challenges

The Socratic Model shares with the Standard Model a core commitment to practical wisdom being its own character trait, and also with practical wisdom being necessary for the possession of any moral virtues. But the Socratic Model takes one big further step that advocates of the Standard Model are not prepared to make. It claims that practical wisdom is also *sufficient* for possession of the moral virtues, and indeed is just *identical to* all of them. The model can be put succinctly as follows:⁴²

The Socratic Model: Practical wisdom is not distinct psychologically from the moral virtues; rather “when one is virtuous, what one really possesses is the single virtue of practical wisdom.”⁴³

⁴² Here I follow Miller 2021: 64.

⁴³ De Caro et al. 2018: 294. More recently De Caro and colleagues spell the model out this way:

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Consider a fully virtuous person. Metaphysically speaking, her psychology would not contain distinct dispositions of honesty, compassion, courage, and all the rest. Rather it would contain one and only one character trait, practical wisdom. Honesty, compassion, and courage would just be domain-specific manifestations of that one trait. So when it comes to matters of truth telling, for instance, the person would exhibit honest behavior which stems from her trait of practical wisdom applied to this specific context.

The Socratic Model avoids some of the concerns raised in the previous section. For instance, Subsumption is no issue, since there is no need on the Socratic Model to keep practical wisdom distinct from the moral virtues and try to reserve some specific tasks for each of them to carry out. Rather the model *just is* that practical wisdom subsumes the moral virtues entirely.

The Arbitrariness Concern goes away as well. There is no need to justify why some functions are assigned to practical wisdom and some are not. Rather, whatever functions need to be exercised by a person with excellent moral character will be carried out by practical wisdom. If that is all 10 functions from the list in section one, then so be it.

On the other hand, the Unity Concern gets magnified significantly with the Socratic Model.⁴⁴ As we saw in the last section, even with just the Handling Conflicts Function, the Perception Function, and the Instrumental Function, they seem to have little in common, and positing a trait that encompasses them seems artificial. Now we are supposed to add to them 7 (or more) other functions as well, and what we get is a monstrously large and disjointed trait that is constituted by an incredibly diverse range of capacities.

So here too we have a Unity Concern. Why think there is one trait constituted by all these capacities? And what unifies them all into this one trait? It is hard to see how an account addressing these questions would go.

4. The Eliminativist Model and its Challenges

The Eliminativist Model accepts that there are important functions that need to be carried out in the psychology of a virtuous person, such as the Handling Conflicts, Perception, and Instrumental Functions. It just denies that those

Virtue molecularism. The only trait a virtuous moral agent really possesses is practical wisdom (phronesis) as ethical expertise – a trait that is manifested at various degrees in different domains and whose description can be given in terms of clusters of traditional virtues, though its ultimate nature is unitary (De Caro et al. 2021: 31, emphasis theirs).

For development of this model, see De Caro et al. 2018 and De Caro et al. 2021. For a sympathetic mention of a similar view, see Russell 2009: 26 fn. 44.

⁴⁴ For additional concerns for the Socratic Model, see Kristjánsson and Fowers forthcoming: footnote 10.

functions are carried out by one trait of practical wisdom. In doing so, it challenges the very first commitment of both the Standard and Socratic Models:

(1) Practical wisdom is a character trait.

In its place, the Eliminativist accepts the following:⁴⁵

Practical Wisdom Eliminativism: We should reject the appeal to one intellectual virtue, practical wisdom, which is supposed to carry out some or all of the functions associated with practical wisdom. Instead for each function, we can appeal to a distinct trait that corresponds to that function.⁴⁶

To unpack this, note that the Eliminativist accepts that there can be the following:

A set of capacities for carrying out the Handling Conflicts Function,
A set of capacities for carrying out the Instrumental Function,
A set of capacities for carrying out the End-Specification Function,
A set of capacities for carrying out the End-Setting Function,
A set of capacities for carrying out the Justification Function,
A set of capacities for carrying out the Knowing Reasons Function,
A set of capacities for carrying out the Motivating Reasons Function,
A set of capacities for carrying out the Perception Function,
A set of capacities for carrying out the Mean Function,
and a set of capacities for carrying out the Emotion Regulation Function.

What she denies is that there is, in addition to these sets of capacities, a character trait of practical wisdom which exists as well.⁴⁷

Now the Eliminativist might not want to posit *all* of these sets of general capacities for carrying out the different functions. Why not? Because like the advocate of the Standard Model, she might want to hold that some of them

⁴⁵ The remainder of this paragraph follows Miller 2021: 65–66.

⁴⁶ For versions of Eliminativism, see Chappell 2006, forthcoming, Miller 2021, and Lapsley 2021.

⁴⁷ As Lapsley describes the model from a psychological perspective, “the value-added yield of phronesis is slight by comparison; and there would be little interest in treating phronesis itself as a psychological construct or in exchanging the language of social-cognitive theory for that of phronesis...” (2021: 151).

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are to be carried out by the individual moral virtues themselves. For instance, Handling Conflicts might be carried out by a set of capacities distinct from the individual moral virtues, but the Perception Function might be carried out by the virtue of honesty and by the virtue of compassion and so on. Note then that adopting this version of the Eliminativist approach leads to the Arbitrariness Concern again, since something would need to be said to justify assigning or not assigning functions to the individual moral virtues. This is worth noting in order to be transparent about the fact that Eliminativist views face challenges too, and that none of the three approaches to practical wisdom considered in this paper is without significant problems.

Alternatively, a different Eliminativist might, like the advocate of the Socratic Model, accept that there are all 10 sets of general capacities for carrying out the various functions, and deny that in addition there is either a trait of practical wisdom or any particular moral virtues. Rather morally relevant behavior is just a manifestation of these different capacities giving rise to that behavior in different domains.

Hence there can be versions of the Eliminativist view which are more closely aligned with the Standard Model and versions more closely aligned with the Socratic Model. But in opposition to both models, the Eliminativist has to maintain that there is no character trait of practical wisdom above and beyond whatever sets of general capacities are carrying out the functions.

It is worth spending a moment clarifying what this denial amounts to. A weak interpretation would just have it be the rejection of a certain non-reductive picture of the metaphysics of the trait of practical wisdom. On that picture, the trait of practical wisdom is *constituted by but not identical to* the sets of capacities which carry out various functions associated with practical wisdom. As such, the trait would be expected to do real causal and explanatory work above and beyond that done by its constitutive capacities.

In contrast to this non-reductive picture, one could hold a reductive account of the trait of practical wisdom whereby it exists but is simply *identical to* the capacities which carry out various functions associated with practical wisdom. Hence there would not be a metaphysically distinct trait which does causal and explanatory work of its own.

When comparing these two pictures, there are good reasons for favoring the reductive approach. One is that it is more parsimonious, avoiding having to posit a distinct metaphysically real trait. More importantly, perhaps, it also avoids problems associated with causal overdetermination. For on the non-reductive picture, *both* the trait and the relevant underlying capacities would be causally operative in impacting the possession of moral virtues and ultimately in giving rise to virtuous behavior. As in the well-known case of

non-reductive physicalist positions in the philosophy of mind, causal overdetermination is not typically taken to be a desirable feature of a view about parts of the mind.⁴⁸

But I do not want to explore this debate between reductive versus non-reductive accounts of the trait of practical wisdom any further. The point of distinguishing these two accounts is to use them to further illustrate what the Eliminativist is committed to denying. And the answer is that the view denies *both* the reductive and non-reductive accounts. There is no trait of practical wisdom, *period*. It is not just that practical wisdom does not exist as a distinct causal trait from its constitutive capacities. It is that it does not exist, even reductively as being identical to those very capacities.⁴⁹

This is a metaphysical claim about the (non-)existence of a trait. It is compatible with our applying the terms ‘practical wisdom’ to the collection of general capacities including those responsible for the Handling Conflicts Function. After all, assuming we think that several functions need to be operative for the possession of the moral virtues, it would be pragmatically useful to have a label to employ as a convenient shorthand for all the relevant capacities. This is a matter of convenience, though, and not metaphysics.⁵⁰

So the Eliminativist is proposing a bold alternative to the Standard and Socratic Models after all. They both accept that practical wisdom is its own character trait. The Eliminativist denies this.

To advance the debate forward between Eliminativism and its two main rivals, it would be helpful to turn to the more general topic of what is necessary and sufficient for a character trait to exist in the first place, regardless of whether it has anything to do with practical wisdom. With those conditions clarified, we could return to the case of practical wisdom and see if they are indeed met or not. Such a project, though, will have to wait for another occasion.⁵¹

⁴⁸ For more about causal overdetermination and character traits, see Miller 2014: chapter one.

⁴⁹ Why favor an Eliminativist approach when one can accept this reductionist alternative instead? The answer is, precisely for the reasons that were outlined in the sections on the Standard and Socratic Models. A reductionist Standard Model would still face the Subsumption, Arbitrariness, and Unity Concerns. A reductionist Socratic Model would still face the Unity Concern. Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for suggesting that I clarify this.

⁵⁰ For a similar approach, see Chappell 2006: “‘practical wisdom’ is a name for a shapeless disunity of different dispositions and their interactions” (138).

⁵¹ In a forthcoming paper, Kristjánsson and Fowers adopt a different strategy in an effort to argue for the distinct existence of practical wisdom and its having “incremental explanatory and predictive value with regard to moral decision-making, beyond the value gleaned by simply adding together the power of the individual components” (forthcoming: 4). In particular, they try to shift the burden of proof to the Eliminativist using an analogy with decathlons. A decathlon is something that is above and beyond the 10 individual sports that constitute it. For instance, there

5. Conclusion

There are no knockdown objections raised in this paper against any of the three models of practical wisdom.⁵² But hopefully enough has been said to cause some unease with the two leading approaches – the Standard Model and the Socratic Model – to the point where a third alternative, the Eliminativist Model, will receive increasing attention.⁵³

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is a special training regime for decathlons that does not involve just training for each sport as one normally would individually. Instead, “what is needed is a coach that can oversee the overall training regime and ensure that the best balance between the different sports is achieved” (10). Similarly, by analogy the individual moral virtues would be like the 10 sports, and practical wisdom would be overseeing these virtues, balancing them in the right ways.

This is an intriguing analogy, and I agree that it puts some pressure on the Eliminativist view. But here is a worry. To really address the Unity Concern, there would need to be a number of very different functions ascribed to a decathlon, while it is still the case that decathlons are causally and explanatorily distinct from their individual sports. In the case of practical wisdom, on the version of the Standard Model that Kristjánsson and Fowers favor, the functions are 4: Perception, Handling Conflicts, Motivating Reasons/Emotion Regulation, and Blueprint. These are extremely different jobs that are being assigned to the very same character trait. They can clearly function just fine on their own. Furthermore, they are supposed to be carried out by a trait of practical wisdom that is distinct from the individual moral virtues. But what are the analogous, extremely divergent functions of a decathlon that are supposed to be carried out by a decathlon, which is distinct from the 10 individual sports? I needed some more help clarifying this. Also, I wonder whether the best analogy is really to decathlons themselves, or instead to the trait of being excellent at decathlons. In any event, this argument by analogy clearly deserves further development and discussion.

⁵² And these are not the only models available. In Miller 2021, I also spell out a Fragmentation Model, but since no one in the practical wisdom literature has endorsed this model, I have set it aside here.

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