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Character Virtues, Epistemic Agency, and Reflective Knowledge

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Ernest Sosa was the first philosopher to deploy the concept of intellectual virtue in the service of contemporary epistemology.¹ His contributions to what has since become a leading approach to epistemology are second to none in volume, quality, and impact. For these and other reasons, it is an honor to have Sosa carefully address some of my own work in virtue epistemology and to engage with him on several matters central to the field.

Per the debate format, I will take aim at what I take to be a couple of the central claims of Sosa's chapter. However, my criticisms are intended to be constructive and illuminating. Rather than try to uncover any deep flaws in Sosa's brand of virtue epistemology, my aim is to push him further along what appears to be his present trajectory, that is, toward an even wider embrace of intellectual character virtues like open-mindedness, attentiveness, intellectual carefulness, intellectual thoroughness, and intellectual courage. I argue that Sosa should conceive of intellectual character virtues, not merely as "auxiliary virtues" or as what I shall refer to here as "epistemic enablers," but also as constitutive elements of knowledge or as "epistemic contributors."

I begin by addressing some interpretive issues concerning the chapter of mine to which Sosa is responding. Next I argue that while intellectual character virtues sometimes function in the merely auxiliary way Sosa describes, they also regularly manifest in knowledge-constitutive epistemic performances. After also considering the relationship between intellectual character virtues and epistemic agency, I conclude, contra Sosa, that intellectual character virtues like open-

mindedness, attentiveness, and intellectual carefulness are a part of the “charmed inner circle” for traditional epistemology.² I close with a discussion of whether a concern with the dimensions of intellectual character that do not partly constitute knowledge is best understood as proper to epistemology, ethics, or both.

A quick note about terminology. Throughout the paper, I will refer to the traits in question simply as “character virtues” (dropping “intellectual” for simplicity). Also, I will use the term “intellectual virtue” in a quasi-technical way to refer to whatever personal qualities or abilities contribute to knowledge understood within a virtue reliabilist framework.

1. Interpretive Issues

Sosa argues that contrary to what I suggest in my book, something like character virtues have always been a part of the reliabilist repertoire of intellectual virtues: “responsibilist competences ... have been present in virtue reliabilism from its inception” (XX). This claim strikes me as partly right and partly wrong. In some sense, the idea that character virtues have always been present in reliabilism is precisely what I was attempting to defend in my book (2011). A “central claim” of the relevant chapter is that “character virtues satisfy virtue reliabilists’ formal requirements for an intellectual virtue” (47-48). In other words, by reliabilists’ own lights, character virtues are intellectual virtues. A trickier question concerns the extent to which this point has been recognized or accepted by reliabilists. In his chapter, Sosa makes clear that he has always thought of epistemic reliability as involving a volitional and characterological dimension. And he cites some passages from his earlier work that suggest as much. Sosa is correct that I interpreted him as failing to fully recognize or accept that character virtues satisfy the conditions for an intellectual

virtue. While this interpretation was at least somewhat tentative (I argued merely that “there is reason to think” that Sosa does not regard character virtues as intellectual virtues and that he “apparently believes” as much), and while I did offer several reasons in support of this interpretation (including its endorsement by fellow reliabilist John Greco), I now see that it was both mistaken and hasty. I am grateful to Sosa for this correction.

It would also be a mistake, however, to conclude that reliabilists in general have been or are committed to including character virtues in their repertoire of intellectual virtues. In the chapter Sosa criticizes, I also look closely at the views of Greco and Alvin Goldman (49-50). Unlike Sosa, these authors are more explicit about their exclusion of character virtues. Goldman, for instance, says:

In the moral sphere ordinary language is rich in virtues terminology. By contrast there are few common labels for intellectual virtues, and those that do exist—“perceptiveness,” “thoroughness,” “insightfulness,” and so forth—are of limited value in the present context. I propose to identify the relevant intellectual virtues ... with the belief-forming capacities, faculties, or processes that would be accepted as answers to the question “How does *X* know?” In answer to this form of question, it is common to reply, “He saw it,” “He heard it,” “He remembers it,” “He infers it from such-and-such evidence,” and so forth. Thus, basing belief on seeing, hearing, memory, and (good) inference are in the collection of what the folk regard as intellectual virtues. (1992: 162)

I conclude that while Sosa has always thought of certain instances or types of knowledge as requiring something like an exercise of character virtues, the same cannot be said of virtue reliabilists or of virtue reliabilism in general.

2. Character Virtues: Epistemic Contributors or Mere Enablers?

The foregoing, largely irenic picture is not entirely accurate. When Sosa says that “responsibilist competences ... have been present in virtue reliabilism from its inception,” he apparently is not talking about familiar responsibilist traits like open-mindedness and intellectual courage. Rather, he seems to be referring to a different set of agential or character-based abilities that fall somewhere between “non-agential faculty virtues” and responsibilist character virtues (see especially the discussion on pp. XX). This is strongly suggested by Sosa’s description of responsibilist character virtues as “auxiliary virtues” that put a person “in a position to know” but do not constitute knowledge and therefore are not intellectual virtues in the strict sense (XX).

To state Sosa’s position more simply, it will be helpful to have at our disposal a distinction between “epistemic enablers” and “epistemic contributors.” Epistemic enablers are qualities that, in Sosa’s words, put one “*in a position to know*, in a position where one can now exercise one’s knowledge-constitutive competences” (XX) and epistemic contributors are qualities of the latter sort—qualities *in virtue of which* one knows. Accordingly, Sosa appears to be committed to the following claims:

- (1) Character virtues function merely as epistemic enablers.

(2) There is, however, a related but distinct set of characterological or agential virtues—call them “reliabilist agential virtues”—that are epistemic contributors.

(3) Thus reliabilist agential virtues but not character virtues belong in the reliabilist repertoire of intellectual virtues.

This interpretation of Sosa’s position is borne out by several passages in his chapter, including the following:

... we can best understand the responsibilist, character-based intellectual virtues highlighted by responsibilists as *auxiliary* to the virtues that are a special case of reliable-competence intellectual virtue. (XX)

... open-mindedness, intellectual courage, persistence ... are not in the charmed inner circle for traditional epistemology. They are only “auxiliary” intellectual virtues, by contrast with the “constitutive” intellectual virtues of central interest to virtue reliabilism. (XX)

While these and related passages seem clearly to support (1) – (3), there is some textual evidence for thinking that in fact Sosa wants to leave the door open to the possibility that character virtues can be epistemic contributors. Specifically, at one point he says of persistence and resourcefulness (two clear examples of character virtues) that the “the exercise of *such* intellectual virtues need not and normally will not constitute knowledge, not even when that exercise does indirectly lead us to the truth” (XX). “Need” and “normally” suggest the possibility that at least in certain cases character virtues do function as epistemic contributors.

How, then, should we understand Sosa's position here? I think the total evidence of his chapter favors the stronger interpretation according to which character virtues are not epistemic contributors.³ Again, this impression is difficult to escape given his straightforward claim that character virtues "are not in the charmed inner circle for traditional epistemology." And it seems especially clear in his remark that character virtues "are *only* 'auxiliary' intellectual virtues, by *contrast* with the 'constitutive' intellectual virtues of central interest to virtue reliabilism" (emphasis added). I will, at any rate, assume this stronger interpretation in the remainder of the paper. However, even if this interpretation is mistaken, there remains plenty of notable distance between Sosa's view and my own. At most, Sosa appears open to the possibility that character virtues are epistemic contributors only in rare or non-standard cases. Against this claim, I turn now to argue that it is not in fact rare or unusual for an exercise of character virtues to partly constitute an item of knowledge.

We may begin by considering Sosa's case for the claim that character virtues do not function as epistemic contributors. His discussion suggests two main arguments for this claim. The first is that character virtues—at least as understood by some responsibilists—are too normatively demanding (XX). Sosa correctly notes that for both Zagzebski and me, to possess a character virtue, one must be disposed to engage in a certain kind of intellectual activity characteristic of this virtue out of something like a "love" of truth or other epistemic goods. Now, as Zagzebski and I think of it, the "love" in question need not be understood in strongly desiderative terms (hence the scare quotes). I claim, for instance, that "the positive orientation central to personal intellectual worth is not necessarily desiderative in nature ... it can also take a purely volitional form" (109). In other words, one's personal intellectual worth can be enhanced on account of a volitional commitment to reaching the truth even if this commitment is not rooted

in a strong desiderative or affective attachment to truth. A more accurate way of understanding what Zagzebski and I are getting at here is in terms of the notion of *intrinsic epistemic motivation*. We maintain that virtue-manifesting intellectual activity must be motivated at least partly by an intrinsic concern with epistemic goods like truth and knowledge—a concern or desire for these goods *as such* or *considered in their own right*, not merely for the sake of some additional (potentially non-epistemic) good that might result from their acquisition.⁴

Thus the motivational requirement on intellectual virtue that Zagzebski and I subscribe to may not be quite as “high minded” or demanding as Sosa suggests. This clarification notwithstanding, Sosa rehearses a convincing case for the claim that even a weaker motivational requirement of the sort just sketched is problematic vis-à-vis an attempt to give a virtue-based account of knowledge (XX). The problem is that a great deal of knowledge evidently can be acquired in the absence of virtuous epistemic motivation. My knowledge, at the onset of a sudden and unexpected power outage, that the room has suddenly gone dark need not manifest any intrinsic concern with getting to the truth. Such knowledge might come to me entirely unbidden. In fact, if it is sufficiently important to some other purpose of mine that the room remains lit (e.g. if I am struggling to meet an imminent writing deadline), I might even will that the proposition in question be false, while nevertheless still knowing it to be true.

While Sosa is correct that we should not think of intrinsic epistemic motivation as a requirement for knowledge, this does not warrant a dismissal—even from a reliabilist standpoint—of traits like open-mindedness, intellectual carefulness, intellectual thoroughness, intellectual honesty, or intellectual rigor. As Sosa’s own discussion suggests, a person can have a settled disposition to think and reason in ways that are open, careful, thorough, honest, and rigorous, while having little or no intrinsic concern with any epistemic goods:

Hedge fund managers, waste disposal engineers, dentists, and their receptionists, can all attain much knowledge in the course of an ordinary workday despite the fact that they seek the truths relevant to their work only for their instrumental value. That is why they want them, not because they *love* truth. That seems indeed to be true of service professionals generally, including medical doctors and lawyers. It is not love of truth that routinely drives them in their professional activities, by contrast with desire for professional standing, wanting to help someone, or trying to make a living. (XX)

While Sosa does not put the point quite this way, if the people he describes are habitually and intelligently attentive to important details, careful and thorough in their research, if they are regularly open to expert advice, listen fairly to alternative standpoints, and persist in their attempts to acquire knowledge, then surely it will make sense to think of them as having the *traits* of attentiveness, intellectual carefulness and thoroughness, open-mindedness, fair-mindedness, and intellectual persistence. Further, given the plausible assumption that these traits are epistemically reliable, it will also make sense to think of them as *virtues* in some legitimate and familiar sense.⁵

As this suggests, it is at least open to Sosa to treat *broadly motivated* attentiveness, intellectual carefulness, and so on as epistemic contributors, where such motivation includes either intrinsic epistemic motivation or the sort of instrumental motivation just described. Again, he could treat these traits as such because of their contribution to their possessor's epistemic reliability. In fact, a similar view has already been defended by Julia Driver, who claims that a trait like attentiveness or intellectual carefulness is an intellectual virtue "iff it systematically (reliably)

produces true belief" (2000: 126). While, in my own work, I have defended an account of intellectual virtue whereby intrinsic epistemic motivation is a necessary feature of an intellectual virtue, I have also taken pains to endorse pluralism about kinds or concepts of intellectual virtue that leaves room for a conception of precisely this sort:

I think a single trait of character can be intellectually excellent and thus an 'intellectual virtue' in more than one way ... a character trait's being epistemically reliable or truth-conducive is both necessary and sufficient for its counting as an intellectual virtue according to a certain viable 'externalist' model of intellectual virtue. (2011: 105)

Finally, for reasons noted above, I maintain that this is the right conception to adopt where the objective is to offer a philosophical account of knowledge anchored in the concept of intellectual virtue.

To summarize: given Sosa's theoretical aims, he is right to deny a motivational requirement on intellectual virtue; however, this does not warrant banishing character virtues from the "charmed inner circle" in traditional epistemology. For, again, a person can possess the trait of open-mindedness, intellectual carefulness, or intellectual courage without being motivated by a concern with epistemic goods as such. Further, these traits can be viewed as epistemic contributors on non-motivational grounds. Indeed, reliabilists in particular are in a good position to view them as such, for the traits in question contribute importantly to epistemic reliability.

While the latter move is open to Sosa, he seems unlikely to make it. For he also gives a second reason for thinking that character virtues are not epistemic contributors (XX). A central thesis of Sosa's chapter is that while character virtues can put us *in a position* to know, they are

not the sort of cognitive competence *in virtue of which* we acquire knowledge—they are not knowledge-constitutive. Referring to character virtues, he comments:

When the correctness of a belief is due to competence in a way that *constitutes* knowledge, it is not enough that the competence reliably puts one *in a position to know*, in a position where one can now exercise one's knowledge-constitutive competences, those whose exercise *does* constitute knowledge. (XX)

In what sense do character virtues put us in a position to know? Sosa explains:

The long hours, the intense concentration, the single-minded avoidance of distractions, may put the inquirer in a situation, or enable her to attain a frame of mind, or certain skills, through all of which she can have and exercise the competences more directly relevant to the attainment of knowledge. She might acquire important data through a perilous voyage to distant lands, or through observations of the night sky, none of which she could have done without persistent dedication over many years with enormous care. (XX)

Again, for Sosa, while cognitive activity of the sort just described can facilitate knowledge, it is not constitutive of knowledge. He illustrates this point with the following example:

Suppose a mysterious closed box lies before us, and we wonder what it contains. How can we find out? We might of course just open the lid. In pursuit of this objective we will then exercise certain competences, perhaps even character traits (if the box is locked, or the lid

stuck), such as persistence and resourcefulness. And perhaps these qualities (in certain contexts, and in certain combinations) do lead us reliably to the truth. Nevertheless, the exercise of *such* intellectual virtues need not and normally will not *constitute* knowledge, not even when that exercise does indirectly lead us to the truth. (XX)

What does constitute knowledge in such a case? The fairly obvious answer is visual perception. While character virtues may put one in a position to know by helping one figure out how to open the box, one knows what is in the box on account of *seeing* it.

A slightly different way of putting this point is that while intellectual virtues are manifested in the process of inquiry, which often leads to or terminates in the formation of a belief, they do not manifest in belief-formation itself.⁶ Understood in this way, I concur with much of what Sosa has to say. I agree, for instance, that character virtues do bear frequently and centrally on the process of inquiry and therefore often leave their possessor in a good position to acquire knowledge. I also agree that character virtues do not (typically) manifest in the automatic or agency-independent formation of beliefs.⁷ However, Sosa himself makes a good case for thinking that belief formation is not always passive or automatic—as in cases of what he calls “intentional, judgmental belief” (XX). The question, then, is whether character virtues can manifest in knowledge-constitutive cognitive performances of this sort. Sosa seems to think not. I disagree.

I maintain that character virtues regularly manifest in cognitive acts like judging, perceiving, noticing, and grasping and that such acts often enough are knowledge-constitutive in Sosa’s sense. Consider, for instance, a case in which a person notices an important visual clue or detail on account of his focused attention or attentive observation. As I am conceiving of the case, it is not as if the person exercises attentiveness and then, only subsequently, sees the relevant

detail. Rather, attentiveness is manifested in the act of visual perception itself. It is *in* or *through* focused or attentive looking that the detail is perceived. To come at this from another angle, consider how we might answer the following question: on account of which cognitive competence does the person acquire knowledge? One answer might be: good vision. But this is an underdescription. For it could be that most people with perfectly good vision would fail to see the relevant detail. A better answer would be something like: *attentive* and *careful* visual perception. This puts the spotlight back on character virtues. It suggests that the person acquires knowledge on account of his intellectual attentiveness and carefulness, that is, on an account of a manifestation of these traits in the operation of his visual faculty.

Alternatively, consider a case in which, through an act of *honest* introspection, a person becomes aware of the fact that she doubts a certain claim that she has long taken herself to firmly believe. Again, it would be misguided to say that this person manifests intellectual honesty and then, in a separate cognitive act, becomes aware of the relevant fact. Instead, it is thorough or in virtue of her introspective honesty that she grasps her doubt. Her intellectual honesty manifests in an act of introspection. Or, consider a similar case in which a person is presented with counterevidence that defeats the justification of one of her beliefs. The defeating relation is subtle enough that it could easily be missed, even by people whose cognitive faculties are operating normally. The person in question, however, is habitually thorough and open-minded. In an exercise of these traits, she grasps and accepts the fact that belief is unjustified. Again, by all appearances, her knowledge of this fact is partly constituted by her thorough and open-minded use of reason.

These examples underscore a critical point: namely, that the exercise or manifestation of character virtues cannot be divorced from the operation of perceptual or other cognitive faculties

like introspection and reason. It may be tempting to think that the operation of character virtues somehow precedes and thus is distinct from the operation of cognitive faculties. However, this is a mistaken view. Intellectual character virtues manifest in the operation or exercise of cognitive faculties. They harness and regulate these faculties in rational and reliable ways. Indeed, what would it be for a person to exercise open-mindedness, attentiveness, or intellectual carefulness *without* making use of one or more cognitive faculties? Could we even begin to describe the operation of a character virtue without reference to the operation of a cognitive faculty?

The emergent picture is one according to which character virtues are both epistemic enablers and epistemic contributors. In some situations, character virtues may—in precisely in the way Sosa describes—put one in a position to acquire knowledge without partially constituting that knowledge. In other situations, however, they may be manifested in cognitive performances—in judging, perceiving, noticing, grasping, etc.—that do contribute to knowledge.

3. Character Virtues and Epistemic Agency

One way to put the conclusion just reached is that the class of character virtues intersects with the class of reliabilist agential virtues. Alternatively: character virtues sometimes function as reliabilist agential virtues. Now I want to look more closely at this relationship. How exactly do character virtues stand relative to the agential virtues described by Sosa?

To answer this question, we will need to get further clarity on what exactly the latter virtues amount to. This is not an easy task. Sosa makes the following claims about reliabilist agential virtues: (a) they aim at truth (XX); (b) agents are responsible for their exercise and irresponsible for neglecting their exercise (XX); (c) they involve “intentional, volitional agency”;

and (d) they are manifested in the “conscious, reflective scrutiny” (XX) and “conscious, agential, judgmental endorsement” (XX) of first-order beliefs. While this characterization is suggestive, Sosa does not provide any specific examples or concrete cases of agential virtues. This raises the question of how, more precisely, we might think of them. That is, how might we understand the volitional, truth-oriented competences in virtue of which a person with reflective knowledge responsibly scrutinizes or endorses her first-order judgments?

We can begin by noting how such scrutiny or endorsement might go *wrong*, for example, how it might be *irresponsible*. As Sosa suggests elsewhere (2011), one might engage in second-order reflection on a first order judgment in ways that are *biased* (16). Similarly, such reflection can be *hasty, shallow, superficial, provincial, cowardly*, or the like.⁸ Indeed, it is difficult to imagine other sorts of ways in which such reflection might go wrong that are at once volitional and a matter of personal responsibility. In any case, given this understanding of what it is for reflective scrutiny and endorsement to run afoul, a certain conception of *responsible* doxastic reflection immediately presents itself. Specifically, responsible scrutiny and endorsement of a first-order belief is scrutiny and endorsement that is *honest, fair, careful, thorough, open, courageous*, and so on. Put in agential terms, the claim is that responsible doxastic reflection requires an exercise of character virtues like intellectual honesty, fair-mindedness, intellectual carefulness, intellectual thoroughness, open-mindedness, and intellectual courage.

A more controversial question is whether the class of reliabilist agential virtues is *reducible* to the class of character virtues. I am not sufficiently confident about how Sosa is conceiving of reliabilist agential virtues to defend an affirmative reply to this question. Thus I leave open the possibility that some reliabilist agential virtues are not character virtues. However, the point remains that it is difficult to say much about the way in which the kind of “conscious, agential,

judgmental endorsement” in question might be good or responsible without invoking the language of character virtues. For this reason the difference between character virtues and reliabilist agential virtues is at best unclear

This leads to a further point. Consider how moral virtues are sometimes thought to stand relative to practical reason or moral agency. Aristotle, for instance, thinks of moral or ethical virtue as (largely) constituted by a disposition to choose in accordance with a mean—to choose the right actions, at the right time, in the right amount, toward the right person, and so on.⁹ For Aristotle, *individual* moral virtues capture what this looks like from one situation to another: in some contexts, excellence in moral agency looks like giving a certain amount of one’s financial resources to a particular cause and in a particular way (generosity), while in other contexts it might look like facing down one’s fears confidently and in the service of a worthy end (courage), while in others still it might look like resisting or regulating one’s bodily appetites (temperance). One way to put Aristotle’s view is that moral virtues constitute the excellences of practical reason or moral agency.

What might a similar view amount to in epistemology? As Sosa makes clear, some knowledge can be acquired independently of epistemic agency. In other cases—and especially in cases of reflective knowledge, which Sosa describes as “at the center of the epistemological tradition from the Pyrrhonians to Descartes and beyond” (XX)—knowledge makes significant agential demands. As we have seen, this does not mean merely that agency must be *operative* in the formation of the relevant belief, even operative in a strong and central way. Rather, agency must be involved in ways that are *good or excellent*. We have seen further that the excellence in question is naturally describable in virtues terminology. This suggests the following general picture: just as moral virtues are the excellences of moral agency, intellectual character virtues are

the excellences of epistemic agency. On this view, the concept of intellectual character virtue picks out what it is for epistemic agency to function well—or in a responsible, truth-oriented way—from one situation to another. Again, in some contexts, this might amount to exercising caution in the drawing of a conclusion, in others it might look like honestly and courageously confronting a piece of counterevidence, and in others still like carefully and thoroughly probing the evidential basis of a belief. I mention this view as a possibility that merits further consideration. Though I lack the space to explore the view in detail here, to the extent that it is plausible, the distinction between character virtues and reliabilist agential virtues looks fragile indeed.

This has further implications for our understanding of the relationship between character virtues and knowledge. Sosa argues that reliabilist agential virtues are crucial to the possession of knowledge, particularly reflective knowledge. If this is right, and if the difference between reliabilist agential virtues and character virtues is slim (or non-existent), then character virtues also turn out to be critically important to knowledge—not merely in an indirect or instrumental fashion, but constitutively.

4. Epistemology, Ethics, or Both?

I close with a brief reflection on the boundaries of epistemology and on where a concern with character virtues falls with respect to these boundaries. If we are right to think that character virtues figure centrally into the conditions for reflective knowledge, then it is beyond question that a certain kind of philosophical reflection on these traits is proper to epistemology. But imagine that our concern is with the way in which character virtues bear on the cognitive life more generally, for example, with how they are related to “cognitive flourishing” or a good intellectual

life.¹⁰ At a couple of different points in his chapter (XX), Sosa alludes to the view that a concern with the aspects or dimensions of virtuous intellectual character that are *not* knowledge-constitutive, while philosophically legitimate, is proper to *ethics* rather than epistemology. Sosa does not explicitly endorse this claim; nor do I think this is his considered position on the matter.¹¹ However, it would not be very surprising if no small number of epistemologists were to be tempted by this perspective. This is especially true given that the dimensions in question are personal and normatively robust. Once a concern with these dimensions is divorced from a concern with the nature of knowledge, it might seem that any remaining philosophical work in the vicinity would fall to moral philosophers, not epistemologists.

Where, then, does broader philosophical reflection on intellectual character—reflection on character virtues and their role in the cognitive life, considered apart from their status as epistemic contributors—figure relative to the boundaries of epistemology? In the remainder of this chapter, I argue that such reflection lies at the intersection of epistemology and ethics. It is properly epistemological; however, on a sufficiently broad conception of the field, it also falls within the purview of ethics.¹²

First, despite the fact that intellectual character virtues, especially when conceived of as involving an element of intrinsic epistemic motivation, bear on the personal worth of their possessor in a manner analogous to moral virtues, it is important not to lose sight of the fact that they nevertheless *aim* at and are *reliably productive* of distinctively *epistemic* goods like truth, knowledge, and understanding. Indeed, this is one familiar way of trying to demarcate intellectual character virtues from moral virtues.¹³ A related point, also widely acknowledged, is that intellectual character virtues have a unique and central bearing on the process of *inquiry*, which of course is also epistemically oriented.¹⁴ These aspects of character virtues are significant, for

epistemologists have long been focused on the personal capacities, cognitive faculties, and epistemic practices that aim at and reliably lead to true belief. Nor has their concern with these things has been limited to whether or how they figure into the necessary and sufficient conditions for knowledge.¹⁵ Accordingly, why not think of philosophical reflection on the intentional and causal relations between character virtues and epistemic goods as proper to epistemology?

A reply might be that any kind of philosophical reflection on personal character is proper to ethics. On a sufficiently broad conception of ethics, this may be correct; however, this hardly shows that such reflection is proper *merely* to ethics. Indeed, it seems arbitrary in the extreme to treat the *non-volitional* or *non-characterological* aspects of human psychology that are aimed at and productive of epistemic goods as falling within the purview epistemology, while treating the volitional and characterological aspects that are similarly aimed and productive as proper only to ethics. A much more plausible position is that reflection on both sets of qualities or capacities is proper to epistemology, even if reflection on the volitional and characterological qualities is also proper to ethics, broadly conceived.

Second, it is significant that epistemic ends can conflict with what we typically think of as moral ends.¹⁶ Consequently the personal qualities aimed at and productive of these ends can conflict as well. Imagine, for instance, a scientist enthralled with his quest for empirical knowledge. He sees explanatory understanding of a certain dimension of scientific reality as an estimable human good, one that is worth pursuing and acquiring at least partly for its own sake. This orientation in turn compels him to inquire in ways that are careful, thorough, tenacious, honest, open, and so on. However, the scientist is so deeply and personally invested in his quest for understanding that he severely neglects his various duties to his spouse, children, friends, and neighbors. At first glance, the scientist would appear to be intellectually virtuous but not morally

virtuous. Given this tension between intellectual character virtues and paradigmatic moral virtues, the instinct to classify broad philosophical reflection on the former as proper to ethics but not epistemology seems misplaced.

There are, of course, relatively broad conceptions of morality according to which the type of conflict in question is not really between epistemic ends and moral ends but rather between moral ends of two different types or varieties (viz. epistemic and moral in some more familiar or paradigmatic sense). Take, for example, the view that the moral domain is coextensive with the domain of human flourishing. Presumably the scientist, on account of his virtuous orientation toward and pursuit of epistemic goods, is flourishing in certain respects. (Compare him with a person who is similarly neglectful of his most important relationships but who, unlike the scientist, is also intellectually indifferent, lazy, hasty, biased, narrow-minded, etc. Surely the latter person is flourishing to a lesser extent than the scientist.) This reopens the possibility that a concern with the relevant dimensions of intellectual character is proper only to ethics, broadly construed. However, unless one has a good principled reason for excluding all characterological considerations from epistemology, this response is liable to fall flat. Again, a more plausible conclusion is that the concern in question is proper to both epistemology and ethics, broadly construed.

I conclude that philosophical reflection on the role of character virtues in the cognitive life is proper to epistemology even when such reflection is abstracted from any concern with whether or how character virtues constitute knowledge. But it need not be proper only to epistemology. On a sufficiently broad conception of ethics, such reflection falls within the purview of this field as well. It represents a point of intersection between epistemology and ethics. This underscores the possibility of innovative philosophical work that brings together the best thinking and theoretical

resources from epistemology with the best work in areas like virtue ethics, moral psychology, and action theory. The potential result is a deeper philosophical understanding of the personal or characterological dimensions of the life of the mind.

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¹ See his 1980 paper “The Raft and the Pyramid: Coherence versus Foundations in the Theory of Knowledge.”

² At least for traditional epistemology as approached from a reliabilist perspective. For the purposes of this paper, I will, with Sosa, be taking this perspective for granted.

³ Of course, reliabilist agential virtues may be “character virtues” of a sort; but I am here using “character virtues” to refer to those traits of intellectual character of interest to virtue responsibilists—traits like open-mindedness, intellectual courage, intellectual honesty, and so on.

⁴ Such motivation is important to their status as traits that contribute to personal worth. See my (2011: Ch. 6). For a similar view, see Zagzebski (1996: XX).

⁵ It is worth bearing in mind that to be reliable, such dispositions presumably will need to be grounded in an *immediate* or *instrumental* concern with truth or accuracy and that this concern will need to be reasonably *stable* and *broad*. While these conditions are plausibly met by the service professionals noted above, it is doubtful that they are met in Sosa’s assassin case discussed on p. XX. The underlying disposition guiding the assassin’s cognitive activity is evidently quite narrow and unstable.

⁶ Sosa says: “In my view, a competence can constitute knowledge only if it is a disposition to believe correctly, one that can then be manifest in the correctness of a belief” (XX).

⁷ I say “typically” to allow for the fact that they can be manifested in, for instance, passive “noticings” or similar cognitive events that are the result of virtuous cognitive habits developed over time.

⁸ See Sosa’s discussion on pp. 7, 12, and 21.

⁹ For Aristotle, virtues have an affective dimension as well; however, this is less immediately relevant to moral agency, which is my primary concern here.

¹⁰ This bearing might be logical, causal, intentional, or otherwise; and the states in question might include epistemic goods other than knowledge, for example, understanding, insight, or wisdom.

¹¹ The latter impression is based on personal conversations with Sosa.

¹² It might be wondered why we should care about this question in the first place. I briefly note two reasons. First, it is not difficult to imagine that the instinct to punt the relevant kind of reflection on character virtues to ethics might be due in part to a kind of dismissiveness (“I’m interested in the analysis of knowledge, which is a central epistemological project; insofar as character virtues aren’t relevant to this project, I’m not interested in them, and they’re not important to epistemology”). Such dismissiveness is worth calling out and resisting on principle. Second, given that character virtues aim at epistemic goods, are reliably productive of such goods, and have an important cognitive and epistemic component (Baehr 2013), it would be unfortunate if epistemologists, who are experts on such things, were to leave such reflection entirely to their colleagues in ethics. In other words, epistemologists have theoretical resources and expertise that would substantially benefit the philosophical work that gets done in this area.

¹³ See Chapter 6 of my (2011) for more on the aim of character virtues and Chapter 4 for a discussion of their reliability. See the appendix of that work, Zagzebski (1996: XX), and Driver (2000) for discussions of the distinction between intellectual virtues and moral virtues.

¹⁴ See Hookway (2003) for more on the role of character virtues in the context of inquiry and for a supporting account of the scope of epistemology.

¹⁵ From an historical standpoint, one thinks of work by philosophers like Locke and Descartes that is widely regarded as a contribution to the theory of knowledge but the scope of which is much broader than that of recent epistemology. More recently, William Alston (2005) has vigorously defended a broad conception of epistemology. He comments: “[W]hat can be said on the subject of what does and does not count as epistemology? I think the best we can do is the following. What we call ‘epistemology’ consists of some selection from the problems, issues, and subject matters dealt with by philosophers that have to do with what we might call the cognitive side of human life: the operation and condition of our cognitive faculties—perception, reasoning, belief formation; the products thereof—beliefs, arguments, theories, explanations, knowledge; and the evaluation of all that. So a very broad conception of epistemology would be *philosophical reflection on the cognitive aspects of human life*” (2-3). Interestingly, Alston goes on (3-4) to

identify reflection on intellectual character virtues considered apart the analysis of knowledge or justification as a prime example of philosophical work that falls within these boundaries and that merits closer attention among epistemologists.

¹⁶ "Typically think of" is significant because, as I get to below, on a broad enough conception of the moral, epistemic ends may be moral ends of a particular sort.