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Must Knowledge Be Virtuously Motivated?

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Reply to Zagzebski

Zagzebski's treatment of our question is characteristically rich, innovative, and insightful. As in previous work, she resists certain standard assumptions and categories and in doing so moves the conversation forward in interesting ways.

Zagzebski and I apparently agree that knowledge does not require intellectually virtuous motives in the strong sense that a belief counts as knowledge only if, in forming or maintaining it, the believer in question manifests intellectually virtuous motives.¹

I

Nevertheless, Zagzebski is committed to some kind of conceptual connection between knowledge and virtuous motivation. She argues that knowledge is "the epistemically conscientious attainment of truth" and that epistemic conscientiousness is "the desire for truth brought to reflective awareness, accompanied by using one's faculties as well as one can to satisfy that desire" (p. XXX). According to Zagzebski, epistemic conscientiousness stands to intellectually virtuous motivation in the following way: *under certain circumstances*, an epistemically conscientious person will, of necessity, manifest certain intellectually virtuous motives (e.g. when having such motives would contribute to the person's attempt to reach the truth). Her view, then, is as follows: knowledge requires an epistemically conscientious attainment of a true belief; epistemic conscientiousness sometimes requires an exercise of virtuous motives; therefore, knowledge sometimes requires an exercise of virtuous motives.

This proposed connection between knowledge and intellectually virtuous motivation is limited in scope (it does not apply to every instance of knowledge); it is also indirect (it is mediated by the concept of epistemic conscientiousness). Can it withstand scrutiny? It can only if the suggested connection between knowledge and epistemic conscientiousness is as Zagzebski describes it. If knowledge does not require epistemically conscientious cognitive activity, then we will have lost our reason for thinking that knowledge sometimes requires virtuous motivation.

Some of the more challenging cases in this regard are what Zagzebski refers to as cases of "easy knowledge."² These are cases in which a putative knower "forms a true belief on the basis of simple perception or memory or testimony, and does so automatically, with no reflection" (p. XXX). I discussed several such cases in my initial essay. Zagzebski maintains that they can indeed be thought of as involving an "epistemically conscientious attainment of truth" (p. XXX). Her reasoning is that they involve a kind of cognitive

“monitoring,” such that the believer in question is alert, at a non-reflective or subconscious level, to cues that might “call into question either her basic self-trust, her trust in others, or her trust in her environment” (p. XXX). Were such cues to appear, this person would respond by manifesting the relevant intellectually virtuous motives and norms; but in the absence of such cues, her cognitive activity will be subtle and relatively unremarkable. This is sufficient, Zagzebski maintains, for reaching the truth in an epistemically conscientious way.

I agree with Zagzebski that at least some cases of easy knowledge fit this description, that is, that what might, from the outside or even from an internal conscious perspective, seem like passive or non-volitional cognitive activity in fact involves a kind of subconscious cognitive monitoring that can reasonably be thought of as manifesting epistemic conscientiousness. However, I think there are many other cases of knowledge with respect to such an assessment is implausible.

The sort of cases I have in mind involve a kind of easy knowledge that might be dubbed “overwhelming knowledge.” This is knowledge that bears down on or overwhelms the knower. Recall, for instance, the case of a scientist confronting counter-evidence to one of his cherished theories. At the first appearance of a conflict between the data and his theory, the scientist lapses into “denial mode,” doing his best to resist the implications of the data (e.g. by thinking about other things or by hastily constructing alternative but manifestly implausible explanations of it). Nonetheless, the force of data is so strong that, despite vicious motives tempting him to draw an alternative conclusion, he is compelled to accept the data at face value and thus to repudiate his theory.

As suggested in my initial essay, it seems entirely possible that in cases like this a person might reach the truth without engaging in any kind of epistemically conscientious cognitive monitoring. Indeed, to the extent that the person’s agency is active, whether at a reflective or non-reflective level, it might be entirely *unconscientious*. While the person does acquiesce to the evidence, this could very well be attributable to the overwhelming force of the evidence together with the natural, brute, or default functioning of the person’s basic cognitive faculties. It need not—and on the surface seems positively not to—be due to any reflective or unreflective use or employment of these faculties on the part of the agent.³

A similar point holds with respect to other cases discussed or alluded to in my initial essay: for example, knowledge of a loud noise, a sudden change in lighting, a shooting pain, or the like. Here as well it seems implausible to think that any epistemically conscientious monitoring is occurring. This is not because there are any epistemically vicious motives in the psychological vicinity; it is rather because the formation of the relevant beliefs is so quick, automatic, and mechanistic that there is apparently little room for such monitoring.

More importantly, even if the knowers in question were engaging in epistemically conscientious monitoring, this would not be the *reason* they form the beliefs they do or the reason these beliefs are true. Again, the reason would instead appear to be the overwhelming character of the objects of belief together with the default functioning of the agents' cognitive equipment. It is implausible, then, to think of these cases as involving an "epistemically conscientious attainment of truth." And yet it seems utterly clear that the beliefs in question amount to knowledge (surely I know I'm in pain when my consciousness is overwhelmed by the throbbing sensation).

How problematic are these apparent counterexamples? Might this be a situation in which it would be worth abandoning certain first-order epistemic judgments in the interest of embracing a theory with other advantages? This is difficult to answer in a decisive way, but I briefly note two reasons for thinking not: first, the cases in question are neither fluky nor artificial; and, second, their epistemic status appears unambiguous (again, it would seem absurd to suggest that I do not know that I have a splitting headache, that a loud noise has just occurred, and so on).

II

Before turning to open the door to a certain version of the claim that knowledge requires intellectually virtuous motives, I want to draw attention to a certain feature of Zagzebski's account of knowledge. I begin with two observations: (1) On her account, the core concept (beyond truth) is that of epistemic conscientiousness; the concept of virtuous motives is secondary and derivative; (2) Because the concept of epistemic conscientiousness is intended to capture the primary value of knowledge over and above the value of true belief, this concept bears a substantial *normative* burden: epistemic conscientiousness, as Zagzebski understands it, must be a significant epistemic *good*. My suggestion is that there is tension between (1) and (2), and specifically, that for epistemic conscientiousness to count as a significant epistemic good, the concept of virtuous motives or intellectual virtues must be given a more prominent—indeed in some sense a primary—position.

Recall that epistemic conscientiousness, on Zagzebski's view, involves an *awareness* of our natural goal of truth as well as an *attempt* to reach that goal. But epistemic conscientiousness thus described might not be an especially epistemically good thing. I might be aware of the truth-goal and make an attempt to reach it, but my attempt might be half-hearted, sloppy, careless, narrow-minded, or the like. It might, in other words, be intellectually *vicious*. Indeed, Zagzebski herself at times indicates, reasonably enough, that

an epistemically conscientious attempt to reach the truth will be “careful and directed” and that it will involve using one’s faculties “as well as one can” (pp. XXX). What this suggests is that in order for a person’s reflective attempt to reach the truth to have epistemic significance or worth—for it to have the kind of value proper to knowledge—it must be marked by intellectually virtuous motives or actions, for example, by the motives and actions characteristic of traits like intellectual carefulness, fairness, honesty, openness, and so on. This suggests that Zagzebski’s notion of epistemic conscientiousness involves an implicit appeal to intellectual virtues or virtuous motives—that for the relevant kind of second-order perspective or cognitive self-regulation to make an epistemic contribution, it must involve such motives or actions. If this is right, then we cannot, as Zagzebski seems interested in doing, define epistemic conscientiousness independently of the concept of virtuous motivation.⁴ Indeed, it would appear that an account of knowledge centered on the notion of epistemic conscientiousness must, in a certain important sense, be virtue-centric.

III

In my initial remarks I left open the possibility that intellectually virtuous motives might be necessary for a certain kind of “high-grade” knowledge, but that a defense of this claim faces a particular challenge: namely, that in order to avoid being purely stipulative or artificial, the kind of knowledge in question must have a sufficient and determinate presence in our pretheoretical thinking about the cognitive life (again, were this not the case, it would be unclear what the account in question is supposed to be an account of). I also expressed some doubt about the possibility of meeting this challenge.

Zagzebski’s rich and insightful discussion of our natural epistemic state, of the way that we reflect on and try to enhance or improve this state, and, most importantly, of the kind of *success* that is possible in this realm seems to me to do a nice job of identifying, in a reasonably pretheoretical or prephilosophical way, a significant and determinate cognitive good. Moreover, I am unaware of any good reason for denying the title of “knowledge” to such a good (provided, of course, that we allow for other types or varieties of knowledge as well). It may be possible, then, to think of the general contours of Zagzebski’s account as picking out a certain high-grade variety of knowledge. Finally, if the point made in the previous section is correct, this account, when properly formulated, will be virtue-centric. In this respect, it may turn out that a certain high-grade variety of knowledge must be virtuously motivated.⁵

¹ See pp. XXX [[section 3, paragraphs 4 and 5, but especially her reply]]. This represents an interesting (and in my view sensible) departure from Zagzebski 1996.

² This is an apt label; however, it is worth noting that this understanding of “easy knowledge” is different from the one at the center of the “problem of easy knowledge” as dealt with in Cohen (2002) and elsewhere.

³ There is a variation on this type of case in which the person acquiesces to the evidence out of a kind of underlying epistemic conscientiousness at odds with his more immediate and epistemically dubious doxastic inclination. However, as I am thinking of such cases, the person in question does not have mixed motives in this sense (nor, I take it, is such a supposition required for it to be plausible that the person acquires knowledge).

⁴ That Zagzebski is interested in doing this is evident in her apparent interest in defining intellectual virtues as traits that an epistemically conscientious person would pursue (pp. XXX). The threat of circularity here should be obvious.

⁵ Thanks to John Turri and Linda Zagzebski for helpful conversation and feedback on earlier drafts of this material.