2014

SOPHIA: Theoretical Wisdom and Contemporary Epistemology

Jason Baehr
Loyola Marymount University, jbaehr@lmu.edu

SOPHIA: Theoretical Wisdom and Contemporary Epistemology

Jason Baehr

Loyola Marymount University

The term "sophia" was used by ancient Greek philosophers to pick out a rather diverse range of states, some of which are morally or practically oriented and others of which have a robust epistemic dimension.[1] My interest is with *sophia* understood as an *intellectual virtue* and thus in the latter more theoretical or epistemic way.

What exactly is *sophia* conceived of as an intellectual virtue? The answer to this question is far from obvious. Accordingly, one principal aim of the chapter is to shed light on the basic character of *sophia* understood in the relevant way. I attempt to do so by delineating three closely related but distinct ways of thinking about *sophia*, each of which has at least some prima facie plausibility. I then go on to consider how these conceptions might figure relative to various issues and debates in contemporary epistemology. My hope is that, in addition to shedding light on how we might think about the positive character *sophia*, the discussion will also pave the way for further epistemological reflection on this and related epistemic concepts.

The attempt to understand how the ancient Greek concept of *sophia* might figure within the landscape of contemporary Anglo-American epistemology may seem like a peculiar or even misguided endeavor. But there are, in fact, at least three good reasons for undertaking such a project. First, contemporary philosophers have had exceedingly little to say about *sophia* or wisdom in general. This is puzzling—perhaps even an embarrassment—given the venerable view that philosophy is the *philo* or love of *sophia* or

wisdom. It is, in any case, worth considering whether this neglect of wisdom is warranted. And given that our concern is with *sophia* understood as an *intellectual* virtue, one natural way of doing so is to consider how the concept of *sophia* might figure with respect to contemporary epistemological categories and debates. [2] Second, epistemologists in recent years have grown increasingly interested in the higher normative reaches of cognition and in the very notion of epistemic value.[3] *Sophia*, of course, was regarded by many ancient Greek philosophers as an exalted epistemic good. There is, then, at least some reason to think that epistemologists today might do well to reconsider the concept. A third and related reason is the increasing popularity of "virtue epistemology," which is a recent collection of approaches to epistemology that give the concept of intellectual virtue a central and fundamental role.[4] Here again, given that we are thinking of *sophia* as an intellectual virtue, it stands to reason that at least one sizeable subset of epistemologists might find it of interest.

My discussion will initially be guided by Aristotle's discussion of *sophia* in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. This is the most developed and well-known treatment of *sophia* conceived of as an intellectual virtue.[5] Yet the chapter is not an exercise in ancient philosophy. I am not primarily interested in understanding how exactly Aristotle or other ancient Greek philosophers thought about *sophia*. Rather, my primary interest lies with conceptions of *sophia* that are likely to be of interest to epistemologists today.[6] Therefore, while I begin with Aristotle's conception, I eventually depart from it in various ways.

1. Aristotle on *Sophia*

In Book VI of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle marks a distinction between moral virtues or virtues of character, on the one hand, and intellectual virtues, on the other. The latter include *techne* ("skill"), *phronesis* ("practical wisdom"), *nous* ("intellect"), *episteme* ("scientific knowledge"), and *sophia* ("wisdom").[7] On Aristotle's view, *sophia* is a combination of *nous* and *episteme*. *Nous* involves a rational or intuitive grasp of necessary first principles. *Episteme* involves a grasp of truths that can be derived from these principles. Thus *sophia* involves a grasp of certain fundamental metaphysical truths and of various truths that follow from them.[8]

A great deal more could be said, of course, to develop and clarify Aristotle's account of *sophia*. However, even this cursory characterization, as with aspects of Aristotle's own discussion of the topic, suggests a certain ambiguity. On the one hand, it seems that for Aristotle *sophia* is a more or less settled cognitive *good* or *state*—that it is a matter of knowing, for instance, certain facts about the ultimate structure of the universe.[9] On the other hand, certain aspects of his discussion suggest *sophia* might be identified, not with the good or state in question, but rather with a cognitive *ability* or *faculty* that makes this knowledge possible, that is, with that cognitive capacity *in virtue of which* a person can know or understand the content in question.

To appreciate the difference between these two ways of thinking about *sophia*, consider the difference between vision and visual knowledge. Vision itself is a kind of cognitive apparatus or mechanism. When functioning properly and in the right environment, it yields visual knowledge (e.g. knowledge that one's surroundings have a certain qualitative appearance). But the faculty of vision clearly is not the same thing, either in general or in any particular case, as the knowledge it yields.

This is not merely because vision tends to operate in a strictly brute or mechanistic way, thereby making a distinction between something like "process" and "product" especially apt. For vision can be trained or tutored; its operation can involve or implicate a person's *agency*. And when it does a clear distinction between vision and visual knowledge remains. Consider, for instance, the sort of knowledge that might be available to an experienced and observant birder or to a microbiologist peering carefully at a clump of cells through a high-powered microscope. These people might *see* things that the rest of us do not and thus gain visual knowledge that the rest of us lack. Yet this in no way obscures the distinction between vision and visual knowledge. The knowledge in question is still acquired by virtue of the relevant faculty or ability. The difference between this case and a case of brute visual knowledge is simply that in the present scenario the faculty of vision has been conditioned in a certain way; its operation involves a kind of effort or concentration on the part of the knower.[10]

There are prima facie good reasons for thinking that Aristotle views *sophia* as an epistemic good or state. First, the fact that he thinks of *sophia* as partly constituted by *episteme* and that he thinks of *episteme* as a kind of deductive "scientific" knowledge that obtains when "a person believes in a certain way and understands the first principles" (*NE*, 1139b40-41) suggests that he is thinking of *sophia* as a cognitive state or type of knowledge rather than as the cognitive power by virtue of which such knowledge is grasped or acquired. Second, he says that to possesses *sophia* a person must "know what follows from the first principles of a science, but also have a true understanding of those first principles" (*ibid.*, 1141a21-22) and that sophia "is scientific knowledge, combined with intellect, of what is by nature most honourable" (*ibid.*, 1141b3-4). These remarks also seem

clearly to support thinking of *sophia* as a type of knowledge. Third, in the *Metaphysics*, he says plainly that *sophia* is "knowledge about certain principles and causes" (982a1-2, trans. Ross). Finally, this reading of Aristotle is also endorsed by several of his commentators. C.C.W. Taylor, for instance, says that for Aristotle, "To possess *sophia* is to possess a body of knowledge, every item of which is either known demonstratively or known undemonstratively" (1990:120).

Nevertheless, there remain aspects of Aristotle's treatment of *sophia* which suggest that *sophia* is rather a cognitive *faculty* or *power* on account of which a person is able to lay hold of the kind of knowledge just noted. First, this is one natural way of understanding Aristotle's claim that intellectual virtues (including *sophia*) are "states" and "excellences" of certain sub-parts of the rational part of the soul" (*NE*, 1139a1-20). If the soul is endowed with certain powers or capacities and intellectual virtues are, as it were, modifications or perfections of these capacities, then it is reasonable to identify intellectual virtues with (modified or perfected) powers or capacities of the soul rather than with the knowledge which these powers are capable of generating. This view is also at least consistent with, if not favored by, Aristotle's claim that intellectual virtues are "ways of arriving at truth by affirmation or denial." (*ibid.*, 1139b19-20). Second, Aristotle sometimes describes *nous* as a cognitive "endowment" that can be had "by nature." This seems to favor thinking of *nous* as a cognitive ability—a view which also seems implicit in standard translations of "nous" as "intellect" or "intuitive reason."[11] Third, Aristotle's view is sometimes explicated by commentators in ways that favor thinking of *sophia* as a cognitive power or faculty. Richard Kraut, for instance, describes *sophia* as an *ability* to "grasp the first principles of certain theoretical disciplines" (*nous*) and to "derive conclusions from those principles in an

appropriate way" (*episteme*) (1989:15). Similarly, Anthony Kenny describes *theoria* or contemplation as involving an "exercise" of *sophia* (1992: 18, 86).

This ambiguity between what we might refer to as the "epistemic state" and "cognitive faculty conceptions" of *sophia*, while not widely recognized, is occasionally gestured at in the secondary literature. David Conway, for instance, notes that some of Aristotle's commentators have described *sophia* as bearing principally on the *pursuit* of truth for its own sake, as it might if *sophia* were fundamentally a cognitive faculty or power. Favoring the epistemic state conception, Conway remarks:

> [I]n so far as the *pursuit* of something implies that implies that the object being pursued has not yet been grasped by its pursuer, anyone engaged in pursuing wisdom must be presumed to lack it. Hence, the pursuit of truth, even that pursued for its own sake, cannot be what wisdom consists in. In fact, Aristotle equates the intellectual virtue of theoretical wisdom [*sophia*] with the *possession* of knowledge of certain truths that had been pursued for its own sake. (2000:17; his emphasis)

My own view is that, as an interpretation of Aristotle, the latter way of thinking about *sophia* is ultimately correct. However, I do not wish to dismiss the cognitive faculty conception, that is, the view that *sophia* is an appropriately cultivated "faculty of the soul" or cognitive power in virtue of which one comes to possess the epistemic good or state in question. Both conceptions are in the vicinity of Aristotle's and other ancient Greek philosophers' ways of thinking about *sophia*. The latter conception also fits at least as well, if not better, with the idea that *sophia* is an *intellectual virtue*, for it is commonplace to think

of intellectual virtues as personal abilities or dispositions rather than as the objects or ends at which these abilities aim.[12] Finally, as we will see below, both conceptions are capable of making a unique contribution to issues and debates in contemporary epistemology.

Before turning to elaborate on the epistemic state and cognitive faculty conceptions of *sophia*, I want to introduce a third conception. While Aristotle's view is sometimes described in ways suggestive of this conception, it would not appear to be one that he had or even might have had in mind (for reasons that will eventually become clear, his discussion appears to rule it out). I introduce it, however, because I think that, as with the two conceptions already discussed, it identifies an excellence that can reasonably be thought of as an intellectual virtue and that fits reasonably well with how the ancients conceived of *sophia*.

According to the epistemic state conception, *sophia* is an epistemic end or goal. It is something to be desired or aimed at. According to the cognitive faculty conception, *sophia* is a cognitive ability or capacity that in some sense aims at or is directed toward the end in question—it is the faculty on account of which a person is able to grasp or comprehend the relevant content. However, it is not difficult to imagine a further way in which an ability or some other aspect of a person's psychology might aim at and be helpful for achieving the epistemic end in question. Specifically, we might imagine a kind of *personal orientation* or *character trait* that is directed at and helps its possessor lay hold of this end. Such a trait presumably would be rooted in something like a firm and abiding *desire* for deep and significant theoretical knowledge and would involve a corresponding disposition to *pursue* such knowledge in active and intelligent ways.[13] Let us refer to this as the "intellectual trait conception" of *sophia*.[14] On this conception, to possess *sophia* is to be a "lover" of a certain

high-grade epistemic good and to be disposed to pursue this good in an intelligent or rational manner on the basis of the underlying desire or orientation.

Because it portrays *sophia* as an intellectual character trait, this conception apparently is not what Aristotle had in mind in his own discussion of *sophia*. For, again, he draws a clear distinction between intellectual virtues, on the one hand, and virtues of character, on the other. Nevertheless, as alluded to above, Aristotle's view of *sophia* sometimes gets described in ways that are at least suggestive of the intellectual trait conception. Again, some have argued that, for Aristotle, *sophia* fundamentally involves a "pursuit of truth for its own sake" (Conway 2000:16). It is not unreasonable to think of this pursuit as originating in a characterological disposition to inquire in a certain way. Similarly, Kenny's translation of "sophia" as "learning" suggests that there is a robustly active or volitional dimension to *sophia*, which also fits well with the idea that *sophia* is an intellectual character virtue. Finally, this conception comports well with Aristotle's own emphasis (1138b20-1141b25) on the relevance of *sophia* to theoretical inquiry, since, again, on this view *sophia* just is a disposition to inquire in certain ways and with a certain motivation.

2. Three Conceptions of *Sophia*

We have identified three conceptions of *sophia*. Each one picks out an intellectual excellence that can plausibly be considered both a type or variety of *sophia* as well as an intellectual virtue of one sort or another. Thus, for our purposes at least, each conception has considerable initial plausibility. In the present section, I develop these conceptions in

more detail. In the section that follows, I examine their potential relevance to contemporary epistemological categories and debates.

2.1. The Epistemic State Conception

According to the "epistemic state conception," *sophia* is a premium epistemic good: it is a kind of firm and settled knowledge that is to be aimed at and sought after by rational and properly motivated inquirers. But what is the knowledge or understanding in question *of* or *about*? Taking a cue from Aristotle (*NE* 1139b15-1141b25), we might say that *sophia* is restricted to knowledge of "first principles" (*nous*) and claims that can be derived from these principles (*episteme*).

But would this be the *right* way to think about the content of *sophia* understood as an epistemic state? I am going to argue that, while the on the right track, this view of the cognitive content of *sophia* is too narrow. My argument hinges on the plausible assumption that we can think of *sophia* as equivalent to something like *theoretical wisdom*. What I will attempt to show is that according to a rather commonsense or intuitive way of thinking about wisdom proper, it has an inherently epistemic or theoretical dimension—a dimension that is reasonably viewed as theoretical wisdom and the content of which is not nearly as restricted as that of Aristotelian *sophia*. Therefore, if we are right to equate *sophia* with theoretical wisdom, we will have grounds for adopting a broader conception of *sophia*.

In a recent paper on wisdom, Dennis Whitcomb (2010a) argues that the "best practical view of wisdom" is that "wisdom is a kind of practical knowledge or belief: knowledge of how to live well, or perhaps some sort of moral or prudential propositional

knowledge or belief." He goes on to claim, however, that this is not a complete account of wisdom proper:

> [P]ick what you think is the best sort of knowledge to have, except the know-how or knowledge-that featured in the best practical theory. This sort of knowledge may be fundamental metaphysical or epistemological knowledge; or it may be some more scientific knowledge; or it may be any other sort of knowledge. Whatever it is, call it 'the best non-practical knowledge.' Now, consider two people, A and B, with equal amounts of knowledge featured in the best practical view. Suppose that A has much more of the best non-practical knowledge than does B. Suppose, even, that A has all of the best non-practical knowledge, and that B has very little or not of it. Is a wiser than B? (99)

Whitcomb's answer, which I think is clearly right, is that A is indeed wiser than B. This suggests that wisdom admits of both practical and theoretical dimensions or varieties.[15] It also provides at least a very general idea of what these varieties might involve.

For our purposes, the critical point here is that the "best non-practical knowledge" to which Whitcomb refers need not be or even involve the rather robust metaphysical knowledge central to the Aristotelian conception of *sophia*. Consider, for instance, a person S who has a deep understanding of global economics: S has a firm grasp of the fundamental economic institutions and forces across the globe, of how they stand in relation to each other and to other relevant (e.g. political and social) institutions and forces. S also

understands the history of global economic trends and is capable of making intelligent and plausible predictions in this domain.

In keeping with Whitcomb's argument, I take it that S can be said to possess a degree of theoretical wisdom that would not be had by a person whose noetic structure is identical to S's minus the economic knowledge or understanding in question. But knowledge of global economics is *not* of the sort that Aristotle characterizes as being essential to *sophia* or theoretical wisdom. S might even be a skeptic about the kind of fundamental metaphysical knowledge that Aristotle thinks of as central to *sophia* (*NE*, 1141a10-1141b25; *Metaphysics* 981b25-983a20). And this would not, I take it, prevent S from being theoretically wise at least to some extent.[16] Accordingly, if we are right to think of *sophia* and theoretical wisdom in a more or less interchangeable way, then we have a good reason for adopting a broader characterization of the content of *sophia* than the one suggested by Aristotle.

I turn now to propose a broader and somewhat more specific account of *sophia* understood as an epistemic state. This account fits reasonably well with the Aristotelian account just noted but it has the advantage of being able to accommodate the sorts of considerations just raised. In short, I propose that we think of *sophia* as *deep explanatory understanding of epistemically significant subject matters*. Call this the "explanatory understanding" account of *sophia*. A great deal could be said to unpack this account, of course, and I do some of this unpacking below; for now, however, I want to briefly comment on a few of its central features.

First, *sophia* thus conceived is a form of *understanding* and thus is an epistemic state or goal rather than a faculty or ability required for achieving this goal. Second, the

understanding in question is both *deep* and *explanatory*. It is "deep" in the sense (roughly)

that its possessor will have a grasp of the fundamental concepts and principles relative to

the subject matter in question. It is "explanatory" in the sense that this person will also be

in a position to see or articulate why things within the relevant domain are the way they

are (more on both of these features below). Third, according to the present definition,

sophia pertains to "epistemically significant" subject matters. While much more could and

ultimately should be said about this notion, the rough contrast here is with merely

"practical" or "instrumental" significance. Thus to say that a subject matter is epistemically

significant is to say that it is worth knowing about, not merely for any resulting practical or

other non-epistemic payoff or result, but also for its own sake.[17] The motivation for this

restriction is not difficult to appreciate: if *sophia* is indeed a supreme cognitive good, then

any plausible conception of *sophia* must exclude from its proper content knowledge or

understanding of epistemically insignificant or trivial subject matters, for such knowledge

presumably does not comprise a highly desirable epistemic state.[18]

This account of *sophia* fits well with the Aristotelian account considered above given

that the salient epistemic good realized by the combination of *nous* and *episteme* is indeed a

deep and explanatory understanding of an epistemically significant subject matter (viz.

something like the fundamental nature or structure of reality). It also has the advantage of

not being susceptible to the objection raised against the Aristotelian account. This is

because our intuitive notion of theoretical wisdom presumably is a notion of something

very much like a deep and explanatory understanding of epistemically significant subject

matters. A cursory or superficial grasp of a subject, for instance, presumably would not be

adequate for wisdom of any sort; and a deep and explanatory understanding of an

epistemically insignificant or trivial subject matter would fail to instantiate the kind of value that is characteristic of theoretical wisdom understood as a significant epistemic good.

While the explanatory understanding account of *sophia* provides at least a general idea of how we might think about *sophia* understood as an epistemic state, it would be helpful if more could be said about the content or structure of the understanding in question, that is, about what exactly is involved with having a "deep explanatory understanding" of a particular issue or subject matter. I turn now to elaborate on the explanatory understanding conception in a way that will help clarify this matter.

Elsewhere I have defended a view of theoretical wisdom according to which, to possess such wisdom with respect to a given domain D is to know or understand (1) what is fundamental in D, (2) how the fundamental elements of D stand in relation to each other, and (3) how they stand in relation to other, non-fundamental elements of D.[19] This account can easily and plausibly be adapted as an account of *sophia*.

Thus we might elaborate on the explanatory understanding model of *sophia* by saying that to possess *sophia* or "deep explanatory understanding," is to grasp, relative to a given "epistemically significant" domain D, (1) that which is fundamental to D, (2) how the fundamental elements of D stand in relation to each other, and (3) how they stand in relation to the non-fundamental elements of D. Accordingly, a person who possesses *sophia* relative to the domain of global economics, say, will have a grasp of the structures and forces that are fundamental in this domain, of how these structures and forces are related to each other, and of how they are related to or bear upon the other, non-fundamental elements in this area.

As this brief description suggests, it is important to leave open what exactly might count as "fundamental" or "basic" within a particular domain and how exactly the elements of a domain might be "related" to each other. For the possession of *sophia* apparently is consistent with these variables being filled out in a variety of ways. A person might have *sophia* relative to a given domain on account of knowing what is, say, *metaphysically*, *conceptually*, *causally*, or *normatively* fundamental in that domain. Or she might possess sophia on account of knowing how other elements of the domain are *causally*, *logically*, *intentionally*, or otherwise related to the more fundamental elements.

This elaborated version of the explanatory understanding model of *sophia* also fits reasonably well with the basic Aristotelian picture discussed above. We can think of Aristotle's concern as lying with the domain of *reality-as-a-whole* or *ultimate reality*. His basic view appears to be that a person with *sophia* will have a grasp of what is fundamental in this domain and of how these fundamental elements are related to other elements of reality. This is suggested by his view that *sophia* is a combination of *nous* and *episteme*. For *nous* presumably involves something akin to a grasp of the fundamental structures of reality and *episteme* a grasp of how other aspects of reality are related to or depend upon these more basic elements. The elaborated model also fits well with the other more intuitive considerations countenanced earlier in the chapter, for instance, with the intuitive theoretical dimension of wisdom proper. For it is very plausible to think of the "best non-practical knowledge" that constitutes theoretical wisdom as exhibiting something very much like the structure described by the elaborated model. Thus if we are right to equate *sophia* and theoretical wisdom, then the explanatory understanding model also enjoys considerable intuitive support.

A great deal more could be said, of course, to flesh out and defend this conception of *sophia*. I take it that what has been said, however, is informative and plausible enough to justify a consideration of how *sophia* understood as an epistemic state might be of interest to epistemologists. This again is a task I shall get to later in the chapter.

2.2. The Cognitive Faculty Conception

I turn now to say more about *sophia* conceived, not as a cognitive end or good, but rather as the faculty or ability by virtue of which one *lays hold* of this good. More specifically, the concern here is with the cognitive faculty on account of which a person is able to grasp the fundamental elements of a given domain, how these elements are related to each other, and how they are related to the less basic or fundamental elements of the domain. The basic character of this excellence is less complex and more transparent than that of its target. Thus the treatment required of it here is considerably less extensive.

It seems fairly obvious that the cognitive faculty in question is something like *theoretical reason*—or, perhaps more accurately, the various "modes" or subfaculties of theoretical reason like intuitive, deductive, inductive, or explanatory reason.[20] For it is on account of these subfaculties or capacities that a person is able to grasp the various truths and relations in question. A person might, for instance, grasp a certain metaphysical principle on account of intuitive reason, an entailment relation on account of deductive reason, a probability relation on account of inductive reason, or a certain causal connection on account of explanatory reason. It is plausible, then, to think of theoretical reason in its

various modes or capacities as the cognitive faculty or ability that "aims" at and makes possible the kind of explanatory understanding identified in the previous section.

This is not quite an accurate characterization, however, for it suggests that the possession of theoretical reason *guarantees* the possession of *sophia* understood in the relevant way. But surely this is not the case. *Sophia*, whatever its other features, is not an extremely widespread cognitive achievement or blessing. Not everyone who possesses theoretical reason is genuinely able to lay hold of the kind of deep explanatory understanding that we are presently envisioning as the target or intentional object of *sophia*.

To resolve this issue, we need to distinguish between theoretical reason in its basic or untutored form and theoretical reason that has been conditioned or trained or shaped in such a way that it is indeed capable of "deep explanatory understanding of epistemically significant subject matters." Such understanding is a significant cognitive achievement. And it is an achievement made possible by a kind of cognitive excellence that not all persons possess. That is, while most of us have "theoretical reason" in some form or have the capacity for a certain degree or certain kinds of deductive, inductive, explanatory, and other kinds of reasoning, not all of us are cognitively equipped to lay hold of the epistemic good in question. The latter would appear to require substantive training, education, and intellectual practice.[21]

Considerably more could be said about the cultivation or preparation required to convert untutored theoretical reason into *sophia* understood in the relevant way. But I take it that the development or training in question is sufficiently intuitive and that the present

conception of *sophia* is straightforward and plausible enough for us to proceed to the third and final conception of *sophia*.

2.3. The Intellectual Trait Conception

On the conception just considered, *sophia* is a cognitive faculty or ability that is aimed at and allows its possessor to lay hold of "deep explanatory understanding of epistemically significant subject matters." We noted earlier, however, that *sophia* can also be conceived of as a *personal orientation* or *trait* that aims at and in some respect makes possible the acquisition of the epistemic good in question. On this conception, to possess *sophia* is to possess a positive volitional or desiderative orientation toward—a kind of "love" of—the relevant understanding, together with a disposition to act on behalf of or to pursue such understanding. It is, we might say, a disposition to *inquire* in a certain way. In the present section, I attempt to say a bit more about *sophia* understood in these general terms.[22]

I suggest that we think of *sophia* here as exhibiting more or less the same general structure as many other intellectual character virtues. In other work (2011; forthcomingb), I have argued that intellectual virtues like fair-mindedness, open-mindedness, intellectual courage, and intellectual honesty have the following core elements. First, each one is rooted in something like a "love of knowledge." Second, each involves a certain characteristic *activity* that distinguishes it from other intellectual character virtues (e.g. open-mindedness involves a kind of cognitive "stretching" or "transcending" beyond ordinary ways of thinking that separates it from related intellectual virtues like intellectual courage). Third,

to possess a given intellectual virtue, one must be disposed to engage in the activity characteristic of that virtue both *well* or *intelligently* and *out of* the relevant love of knowledge, where the latter involves possessing a certain *belief* about the relation between the activity in question and the goal of knowledge (e.g. a belief to the effect that this activity is knowledge-conducive). Thus, to be open-minded, for instance, is to be disposed to "transcend" certain standard or default ways of thinking out of a desire for knowledge, together with the conviction that engaging in such thinking is knowledge-conducive.

This basic model can be adapted to offer an account of *sophia* understood as an intellectual character virtue. In short, the view would be that *sophia* is a disposition to act or inquire in *sophia*-relevant ways out of a desire for "deep explanatory understanding of epistemically significant subject matters" and a belief that acting or inquiring in these ways is likely to promote the goal in question. But what exactly are *sophia*-relevant ways of acting or inquiring?

To answer this question, we must observe, first, that by contrast with many other intellectual character virtues, there would not appear to be any very specific or singular activity that distinguishes the trait we are concerned with from other intellectual virtues. This is indicative, I submit, of the trait's status as a kind of meta- or master-intellectual virtue. That is, I suggest that we think of *sophia* as involving an understanding of how best to *pursue* deep explanatory understanding or how best to negotiate the terrain and demands of *inquiry* aimed at such understanding. Understood in this way, *sophia* involves a second-order or higher level perspective on the process of inquiry: a grasp, for instance, of which inquiry-relevant techniques or practices are appropriate to the situation at hand, how far these techniques or practices ought to be taken, which first-order intellectual

virtues should be exercised and when, and so on. It also involves a disposition to *act or inquire in accordance* with this perspective. As such, the activity characteristic of *sophia* conceived of as an intellectual character trait cuts across the various activity-types that individuate first-order intellectual virtues.

Sophia thus conceived bears a notable resemblance to *phronesis* or practical wisdom, which is often described as the meta- or master-virtue needed for negotiating the *practical* demands of human life. I think this comparison is entirely apt. In fact, while *phronesis* is typically associated with practical rather than theoretical activity, or with matters (broadly) *moral* rather than epistemic, I see no reason to think that this must be the case. That is, I see no reason to think that the purview of practical reason might not extend to the *active* dimension of the cognitive life. Accordingly, I think we can view *sophia* or theoretical wisdom as a *mode* of *phronesis* or practical wisdom, or as practical wisdom *applied to* the domain of inquiry.[23]

Carving up the territory in this way requires rejecting Aristotle's way of distinguishing between *phronesis* and *sophia*. However, we have already considered grounds for thinking that Aristotle's conception of *sophia* is too narrow. And, in any case, there are independent reasons for thinking that the intellectual trait conception of *sophia* is viable. Again, it remains in the vicinity of ancient Greek conceptions of *sophia*, it fits well with certain intuitively plausible ways of thinking about theoretical wisdom, and, as we turn now to consider, it has significant potential bearing on discussions in contemporary epistemology.

3. Implications

We have delineated three different conceptions of *sophia*. On each one, *sophia* amounts to an important cognitive excellence or virtue. In this final section, I consider how *sophia*, understood in these various ways, might be of interest or use to contemporary epistemologists. My aim, again, is to help pave the way for renewed reflection on *sophia* and related epistemic concepts.

3.1. Value-Driven Epistemology

As indicated at the outset of the chapter, epistemologists in recent years have grown increasingly interested in the upper reaches of epistemic normativity. Much of this interest in epistemic normativity has been direct in the sense that it has involved offering accounts of the basic nature or structure of cognitive goods or excellences like *intellectual virtues*, *understanding*, and *wisdom*.[24] Given the premium epistemic quality of *sophia* together with its close and obvious affinity with the states or qualities just noted, each of the three conceptions of *sophia* is likely to garner the interest of one or more of the epistemologists in question. These epistemologists are likely to have an interest in many of the questions dealt with above as well as several questions that we did not pause to address: e.g. questions about the kind of understanding that is or is aimed at by *sophia*, the kind of enhancement of raw theoretical reason that is required for *sophia* conceived of as a cognitive faculty, and how exactly *sophia* conceived of as an intellectual character virtue stands with respect to other intellectual virtues. There is, then, plenty of philosophical

work for these philosophers to do in connection with the concept of *sophia*, work that is likely to be of a piece with their present reflection and work on related epistemic concepts.

3.2. Epistemic Significance

Partly owing to this normative turn in epistemology, there is also a growing literature on the problem of "epistemic significance." Epistemologists have long identified truth or true belief as the primary epistemic good. However, they have also been quick to qualify this assertion by adding that the primary epistemic good is not really true belief *simpliciter* but rather true belief about epistemically "important" or "significant" subject matters.[25] While it is not difficult to identify examples of true beliefs that fit into each of these categories, it is not at all clear how to draw a principled distinction between them. And indeed exceedingly little has been said in the way of a general account or theory of epistemic significance.[26]

The cognitive faculty and intellectual trait conceptions of *sophia* may be useful to epistemologists attempting to address this problem. For instance, it might be argued that epistemically significant subject matters or topics are those at which *sophia* (understood either as a cognitive faculty or as a character trait) is aimed. Such a move would require revising aspects of the cognitive faculty and intellectual character trait conceptions of *sophia* developed above, since these accounts defined *sophia* partly in terms of the notion of epistemic significance (in which case the suggested strategy would run the risk of vicious circularity). But it is not at all clear that this would be a decisive objection.

There are also other, more general reasons for thinking that epistemologists interested in the problem of epistemic significance would also be interested in the notion of *sophia* understood in each of the three ways outlined above. For each of these conceptions gives a prominent role to the notion of epistemic significance: on the cognitive faculty and intellectual trait conceptions, the goal or intentional object of *sophia* is characterized partly in terms of deep explanatory understanding of epistemically significant subject matters; and on the cognitive state conception, sophia is identical with such understanding. Because of the apparently intimate conceptual connection between *sophia* and epistemic significance, I suspect that many epistemologists interested in the latter are also likely to have a natural interest in better understanding the former.

3.3. Understanding

As noted above, the epistemological literature in recent years has seen a marked increase in attention to the concept of understanding. These discussions have revolved around questions like: What is the exact character of understanding? Is understanding a species of knowledge? Is it factive? Can it be Gettiered? What is its distinctive value?[27] Epistemologists interested in such questions are also very likely to take an interest in the concept of *sophia* understood as an epistemic state—both because *sophia* thus conceived is a premium variety of understanding and because reflection on it is likely to lead to the same sorts of questions just noted.

3.4. Value Problem

Broadly construed, the value problem in epistemology is the problem of trying to identify what, if any, distinctive or unique value is instantiated by knowledge by comparison with other epistemic states (e.g. mere true belief). In recent years, some have argued that knowledge is *not* distinctively valuable, but that *understanding* is—that understanding is the unique or superior value in the epistemic neighborhood.[28]

There is something prima facie plausible about this claim. And yet it is not difficult to see some potential problems with it. For, understanding can be superficial or thin. Alternatively, one can possess a rather sophisticated understanding of entirely trivial or insignificant subject matters. In either of these cases understanding appears to bear relatively little (if any) real epistemic worth. Thus the claim that understanding is distinctively and importantly epistemically valuable seems right only if by understanding we have in mind a fairly rich and sophisticated cognitive state and only if this state is directed at an epistemically significant topic or subject matter. In other words, it appears that the sought after epistemic good may be something very close to *sophia* as characterized by the epistemic state conception. In this way as well, then, the concept of *sophia* may be of interest or use to contemporary epistemologists.

3.5. Faculty-Based Virtue Epistemology

"Reliabilist" or faculty-based virtue epistemologists attempt to explain knowledge as (roughly) true belief formed via reliable or properly functioning cognitive faculties or virtues. The virtues most commonly discussed by these authors include memory,

introspection, vision, and the like. One apparent problem with these views is that they do not seem very well-suited to explain the status of much high-grade or "premium" knowledge.[29] This is because they tend to characterize the faculties in question and their "outputs" in relatively brute and mechanistic terms. Ernest Sosa, for instance, has described intellectual virtues as "input-output devices" and as "belief-generating mechanisms." And he has referred to knowledge that is the product of such "mechanisms" as "animal" and "servomechanic" knowledge.[30] The problem, of course, is that much of the knowledge that human beings care about most does not fit this description at all. Such knowledge is often difficult to come by, making significant demands on the *agency* of those who would acquire it. It is no mere "product" or "output" of any brute or mechanistic cognitive process.

Both the cognitive faculty conception and the intellectual trait conception of *sophia* may be of use to virtue reliabilists on this score. By adding *sophia* conceived of in either these ways to their "repertoire" of intellectual virtues (alongside memory, introspection, vision, and the like), they will be in much better position to account for the epistemic status of the beliefs at issue. For, the operation of *sophia* understood in these ways is not strictly or even primarily brute or mechanistic. On the cognitive faculty conception, *sophia* involves considerable training and formation. And on the intellectual trait conception, it involves acting or inquiring in certain intelligent and well-motivated ways. It is, then, far more plausible to think of *sophia* as a source of higher grade knowledge than it is the sorts of faculties typically invoked by virtue reliabilists.

An appeal to the cognitive faculty and intellectual trait conceptions of *sophia* may be of use to virtue reliabilists in other ways as well. Some of the most prominent defenders of virtue reliabilism (e.g. Sosa and John Greco) have also defended two related claims, which I

will refer to as the "credit thesis" and the "achievement thesis." According to the credit thesis, knowledge is "creditable" to the knowing subject. Virtue reliabilists tend to embrace this claim because on their view a person acquires knowledge only if she forms a true belief on account of her cognitive virtues, which in turn is thought to make the person creditable for the belief in question.[31] According to the achievement thesis, knowledge is a cognitive achievement.[32] Here as well the idea is that if knowledge requires reaching the truth on account of one's cognitive virtues, then it is reasonable to think of knowledge as an achievement on the part of the knowing subject.

A similar objection can be raised against the virtue reliabilist's endorsement of these theses provided that the virtue reliabilist is thinking of cognitive virtues in the relevant brute or mechanistic way. For reaching the truth on account of the brute or routine operation of one's basic cognitive faculties hardly seems very "creditable," let alone creditable to the knowing agent herself. This is especially true to the extent that virtue reliabilists are thinking of "credit" in normatively significant or robust terms, which in fact most if not all of them are. Similarly, forming a true belief on account of the brute or routine operation of one's cognitive faculties would not appear to be much of a cognitive *achievement*, particularly, again, if the operative notion of achievement is thought to carry significant normative weight.

This suggests an additional reason for virtue reliabilists to add *sophia* understood as either a cognitive faculty or an intellectual character trait to their repertoire of intellectual virtues. For the idea that an item of knowledge is creditable to the knowing agent or that it represents a significant cognitive achievement would be more plausible if the belief in question had been arrived via an exercise of *sophia* understood in either of these ways. This

again is owing to its "cultivated" or agential character. In this way as well, then, virtue reliabilists might get considerable mileage out of the concept of *sophia*.

3.6. Character-Based Virtue Epistemology

As the name suggests, "responsibilist" or character-based virtue epistemology conceives of intellectual virtues as intellectual character traits like fair-mindedness, open-mindedness, intellectual honesty, and intellectual courage. While some epistemologists working in this area (e.g. Zagzebski 1996) have appealed to the concept of intellectual virtue in the context of offering a philosophical definition of knowledge, others (Roberts and Wood 2007; Baehr 2011) have taken an interest in intellectual virtues considered in their own right. These authors have attempted to shed light on things like the exact nature and psychological structure of the traits in question.

One important question that arises in this context concerns the intentional object or goal of intellectual virtues. What does a person with these traits ultimately aim at? What motivates this person? In addressing this question, character-based virtue epistemologists often make only relatively quick and passing comments to the effect that intellectual virtues aim at truth, knowledge, understanding, or the like.[33] Without further specification or qualification, however, this claim is suspect, for as suggested above, aiming at or being motivated by the acquisition of *trivial* truths or knowledge presumably would not be intellectual virtuous. A much more plausible claim is that a person with the relevant traits, at least if possessed in their "fullness," is motivated by something very much like a "deep and explanatory understanding of epistemically significant subject matters." Accordingly,

the epistemic state conception of *sophia* might be helpful to virtue epistemologists trying to specify the ultimate aim or goal of intellectual character virtues.

Virtue epistemologists of this stripe might also benefit from the intellectual trait conception of *sophia*. As indicated above, it is not uncommon for these authors to maintain that part of what is involved with possessing an intellectual virtue is a disposition to engage in a certain sort of activity specific to the virtue in question and to do so well or excellently, that is, in the right way, at the right time, in the right amount, and so on. Not very much gets said, however, about what exactly counts as engaging in the activity "well," "excellently," "at the right time," and so on. Furthermore, it is sometimes acknowledged that the demands of different intellectual virtues (e.g. intellectual courage and intellectual caution) are susceptible to conflict. Here as well, while the potential conflict is duly noted, very little tends to get said about how an intellectually virtuous person is likely to resolve it.[34]

An appeal to the intellectual trait conception of *sophia* might be of some assistance to virtue epistemologists relative to both of these issues. For, according to this conception, *sophia* is precisely a meta- or master-virtue that enables its possessor to negotiate some of the second-order demands of inquiry. A person with this virtue will have a good sense, relative to a given individual virtue, of how, when, to what extent, and so forth, the virtue should be exercised or manifested. She will also have a sense of how to adjudicate conflicts between the demands of two or more intellectual virtues. At a minimum, the notion of *sophia* understood as a kind of theoretical wisdom analogous to *phronesis* or practical wisdom could plausibly serve as a placeholder for a solution to these problems, bringing

the issues into sharper focus and stimulating further inquiry into the character of *sophia* itself.

4. Conclusion

We have explored the contours and potential epistemological significance of three unique conceptions of *sophia*. It should now be clear that, while an ancient Greek notion *par excellence*, the relevance of *sophia* is hardly limited to ancient theories of knowledge and epistemic well-being. On the contrary, the present state of Anglo-American epistemology—and thus, in at least one dimension, the very discipline of philosophy—is poised for a return to this important notion.[35]

References

Alston, William. 2005. *Beyond Justification* (Ithica, NY: Cornell University Press).

Baehr, Jason. *The Inquiring Mind: On Intellectual Virtues and Virtue Epistemology* (Oxford:
Oxford University Press).

-----. 2012a. "Credit Theories and the Value of Knowledge," *The Philosophical Quarterly* 62:
1-22.

-----. Forthcominga, "Two Types of Wisdom," *Acta Analytica*.

-----. Forthcomingb, "The Cognitive Demands of Intellectual Virtue," *Knowledge, Virtue, and
Action*, eds. David Schweikard and Tim Henning (London: Routledge).

-----. Manuscript. "Wisdom in Perspective," unpublished.

Baril, Anne. "A Eudaimonist Approach to the Problem of Significance," *Acta Analytica* 25:
215-41.

Benson, Hugh. 2000. *Socratic Wisdom* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).

Conway, David. 2000. *The Rediscovery of Wisdom* (London: Palgrave Macmillan).

Greco, John. 2003. "Knowledge as Credit for True Belief," *Intellectual Virtue: Perspectives
from Ethics and Epistemology*, eds. Michael DePaul and Linda Zagzebski (Oxford:
Oxford University Press): 111-34.

-----. 2010. *Achieving Knowledge* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).

Grimm, Stephen. 2006. "Is Understanding a Species of Knowledge," *British Journal for the
Philosophy of Science* 57: 515-35.

-----. 2010. "Understanding," *The Routledge Companion to Epistemology* (London: Routledge): 84-94.

-----. 2011. "What is Interesting?" *Episteme & Logos* 2: 515-42.

Kenny, Anthony. 1996. *Aristotle on the Perfect Life* (Oxford: Clarendon Press).

Kvanvig, Jonathan. 2003. *The Value of Knowledge and the Pursuit of Understanding* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).

Roberts, Robert and Jay Wood. 2007. *Intellectual Virtues: An Essay in Regulative Epistemology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).

Ryan, Sharon. 2007. "Wisdom," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*: http//plato.standford.edu/entries/wisdom.

Sosa, Ernest. 1993. *Knowledge in Perspective* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).

-----. 2007. *A Virtue Epistemology* (Oxford: Clarendon Press).

Taylor, C. C. W. 1990. "Aristotle's Epistemology," *Epistemology*, ed. Stephen Everson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press): 116-42.

Whitcomb, Dennis. 2010a. "Wisdom," *Routledge Companion to Epistemology*, eds. Sven Bernecker and Duncan Pritchard (London: Routledge): 95-105.

-----. 2010b. "Wisdom: An Annotated Bibliography," *Oxford Bibliographies Online*: http//:oxfordbibliographiesonline.com.

Woodruff, Paul. 1990. "Plato's Early Theory of Knowledge," *Epistemology*, ed. Stephen Everson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press): 60-84.

Zagzebski, Linda. 1996. *Virtues of the Mind* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).

---

[1] For the former kind of treatment, see Plato's *Republic*, as well as Paul Woodruff's treatment of Plato's view (1990). The classic treatment of *sophia* conceived of in robustly epistemic terms is Aristotle's in Book VI of the *Nicomachean Ethics*.

[2] On the neglect of wisdom within professional philosophy, see Conway (2000: 16f) and Taylor (1968).

[3] See, for instance, Haddock, Millar, and Pritchard (2009) and Riggs (2008).

[4] See, for instance, Zagzebski (1996), Sosa (2007), Battaly (2008), Greco (2010), and Baehr (2011).

[5] Aristotle also touches at some length on *sophia* or related concepts in *Posterior Analytics* 99b-100b and *Metaphysics* 981b-982b; however, these discussions do not (at least explicitly) treat *sophia* as an intellectual virtue.

[6] This is not to deny the important philosophical merit of trying to get clear on Aristotle's own view. Nor is it to suggest that Aristotle's conception of *sophia* taken in its entirety would not be of any interest to contemporary epistemologists. Rather, as I argue below, my view is that a gently modified version of his account is likely to have the greatest traction within the theory of knowledge today.

[7] Translations of Aristotle, unless otherwise noted, are from Crisp (2000).

[8] For an illuminating explication and discussion of Aristotle's epistemology, Taylor (1990).

[9] Here and elsewhere it should be kept in mind that Aristotle should not be interpreted as holding that *sophia* is, say, the *active grasping of or reflecting on* the relevant content by virtue of the relevant faculty, since that would eliminate his distinction between *sophia* and *theoria* or "contemplation."

[10] Depending on the case, the effort in question may be entirely in the past, since the operation of the person's enhanced visual faculty may, in the present, be entirely spontaneous or a matter of second nature.

[11] See, for instance, Crisp (2000) and Ross (1998).

[12] See, for instance, Zagzebski (1996) and Sosa (2007).

[13] For models of intellectual virtue that suggest such a picture, see Zagzebski (1996) and Baehr (2011).

[14] In (Baehr, forthcoming), I distinguish between a state conception of *sophia* and a "competence" conception, where the latter is ambiguous with respect to the cognitive faculty and intellectual trait conceptions just delineated. (It may also be ambiguous with respect to a further conception briefly identified in note 22 below.)

[15] Ryan (2007) suggests a similar distinction within commonsense thinking about wisdom. Aristotle likewise makes the point that more or less commonsense thinking allows that a person might, say, have a kind of theoretical wisdom while not being practically wise (*NE* 1141b).

[16] This is not to deny, of course, that S would be *more* theoretically wise if he also had the relevant metaphysical knowledge.

[17] Aristotle alludes to a similar distinction at *NE* 1141a15f. I say more about this distinction below.

[18] For a defense of the view that knowledge of some subject matters is intrinsically epistemically worthless, see Baehr (2012).

[19] See my "Wisdom in Perspective" (manuscript).

[20] See Sosa (1993) for more on these distinctions.

[21] This does not make the faculty in question identical to *sophia* conceived of as an intellectual character trait, since the latter involves, among other things, a motivational component that is not required by the former.