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Virtue Epistemology

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Baehr, Jason, "Virtue Epistemology" (2013). *Philosophy Faculty Works*. 27.

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This is a penultimate draft. Please consult the Catholic Encyclopedia of Philosophy for the final version.

VIRTUE EPISTEMOLOGY

Virtue epistemology is a collection of recent approaches to the philosophical study of knowledge that give a primary role to the concept of an intellectual virtue. Intellectual virtues are the qualities or capacities of a good thinker or knower. Accordingly, an important feature of virtue epistemology is its immediate focus on the knowing subject or agent.

Virtue epistemology is prefigured in the work of several historical thinkers, including Aristotle and St. Thomas Aquinas, both of whom give intellectual virtues a critical role in their accounts of human cognition. However, these earlier thinkers conceive of intellectual virtues in a way that differs significantly from contemporary conceptions. The central difference concerns which capacities or qualities are identified as intellectual virtues. Aristotle, for instance, thinks of intellectual virtues as “states of the soul ... in which the soul arrives at truth by way of affirmation and denial” (*NE* 1139b 15-16, trans. Crisp). Aquinas likewise describes intellectual virtues as habits that “perfect the speculative intellect for the consideration of the truth” (*Summa theologiae* I-II, q. 57, a. 2, trans. Fathers of the Dominican English Province). Both authors identify intellect (*nous*), scientific knowledge (*episteme*), wisdom (*sophia*), skill (*techne*), and practical wisdom (*phronesis*) as the chief intellectual virtues. By contrast, current defenders of virtue epistemology think of intellectual virtues either as reliable or truth-conducive cognitive faculties like vision, hearing, memory, and introspection or as good intellectual character traits like attentiveness, open-mindedness, and intellectual courage. It is far from clear how, if at all, the Aristotelian and Thomistic list of intellectual virtues is to be harmonized with either of these other lists. For this reason, virtue epistemology is best viewed an extension of earlier theories only in a rather broad sense.

The two contemporary conceptions of intellectual virtue just noted form the basis of two main varieties of virtue epistemology. In the remainder of the entry, these varieties are outlined, and *prima facie* promising and problematic features of each are identified.

Reliabilist or Faculty-Based Virtue Epistemology

Ernest Sosa was the first to invoke the concept of an intellectual virtue in contemporary epistemology. In “The Raft and the Pyramid” (1980), he sketched a virtue-based account of knowledge as a way of resolving the conflict between “foundationalists” and “coherentists” about the structure of epistemic justification. In other early work (1985), Sosa described intellectual virtues as qualities “bound to help maximize one’s surplus of truth over error” (p. 224). As chief instances, he cited memory, perception, introspection, and intuitive reason (pp. 224-225). Given the identification of intellectual virtues with a certain set of cognitive faculties, and given the claim that these faculties count as intellectual virtues because of their epistemic reliability, the general approach endorsed by Sosa has come to be known as “virtue-reliabilism” (Axtell 1997; Code 1987) or

“faculty-based virtue epistemology” (Baehr 2008). Subsequently, Sosa has gone on to develop an increasingly sophisticated and nuanced reliabilist virtue epistemology (see his 2010). Several other prominent epistemologists have followed suit, including John Greco (2010) and Alvin Goldman (1992: Ch. 9).

Reliabilist virtue epistemology has been marked by a traditional theoretical orientation, with its proponents focusing on issues and problems related to the nature, structure, and limits of knowledge. Virtue reliabilists have been keen to argue, for instance, that they are uniquely capable of offering a satisfactory general account of knowledge, rebutting skepticism, resolving debates about the structure of epistemic justification, and more.

More recently, virtue reliabilists have claimed as a chief advantage of their approach an ability to overcome the “value problem” in epistemology, which requires making theoretical sense of the pre-theoretical judgment that knowledge is of greater value than mere true belief. Their reasoning is (roughly) as follows: (1) the chief difference between knowledge and mere true belief is that knowledge involves securing a true belief out of an exercise of (or in a way that is creditable to, explainable in terms of, or that manifests) the knower’s intellectual virtues; (2) there is greater value in securing a worthy end like true belief out of an exercise of one’s virtues than there is in securing it by some other means (e.g. by accident); (3) therefore, knowledge is of greater value than mere true belief. Arguments of this general sort have been mounted by several virtue reliabilists (see Riggs, 2002, Sosa 2003, and Greco 2003).

One challenge facing faculty-based approaches to virtue epistemology is that of accounting for so-called “high-grade” knowledge. Virtue reliabilists hold that a true belief is knowledge only if its truth is explainable in terms of (or is creditable to or manifests) certain qualities of the knower, in particular, in terms of the knower’s cognitive faculties. This is a *prima facie* plausible requirement on at least some knowledge. I know that the sun is shining, for instance, only if this belief is true and its truth is explainable in terms of the reliable functioning of my visual faculty (rather than, say, in terms of an illusion or some elaborate hoax). But consider what is required for reaching the truth about other, less mundane subject matters: for example, about events in ancient history, subatomic particles, or the nature of moral or religious reality. Forming true beliefs in these areas can be extremely difficult and demanding. Indeed, in at least some cases of this sort, the truth of a known belief will be creditable, not to the knower’s sharp vision, good hearing, or impeccable memory, but rather to her persistent curiosity, open-mindedness, intellectual rigor, intellectual honesty, intellectual courage, or the like. These qualities—not the knower’s cognitive faculties—will explain why the person has formed a true belief.

Virtue reliabilists could accommodate high-grade knowledge of this sort by expanding their repertoire of intellectual virtues so as to include, not just cognitive faculties, but also knowledge-oriented character traits of the kind just noted (Baehr 2011: Ch. 4). This possibility, which has yet to be widely embraced by virtue reliabilists, points in the direction of the second main variety of virtue epistemology.

Responsibilist or Character-Based Virtue Epistemology

A second group of virtue epistemologists thinks of intellectual virtues on the model of moral virtues, that is, as good intellectual character traits like attentiveness, inquisitiveness, open-mindedness, fair-mindedness, intellectual carefulness, intellectual thoroughness, intellectual tenacity, intellectual honesty, and intellectual rigor. This approach was pioneered largely by Catholic philosopher Linda Zagzebski in her landmark 1996 book *Virtues of the Mind*. On Zagzebski's view, intellectual virtues are distinguishable from moral virtues only on account of having an intrinsic epistemic aim: an intellectually virtuous person, she argues, desires epistemic goods like knowledge and understanding at least partly for their own sake (pp. 166-67). In other work (2004), Zagzebski develops a theological foundation for her virtue theory, arguing that a trait's status as a virtue depends ultimately on the character traits or motives of God. Given the idea that intellectual virtues are the character traits of a responsible thinker or inquirer, this second variety of virtue epistemology is known as "responsibilist" or "character-based" virtue epistemology (Code 1987; Axtell 1997; Baehr 2008).

Character-based virtue epistemologies are a diverse lot. Some, like Zagzebski's, retain a largely traditional theoretical orientation: they aim to address or solve problems related to the nature, scope, and limits of knowledge. Others, however, treat reflection on intellectual character virtues as a way of expanding or replacing more traditional approaches to epistemology (see e.g. Roberts and Wood 2007 and Kvanvig 1992).

The latter approach illustrates a chief advantage of character-based virtue epistemology. One gets the impression from the literature in traditional epistemology that the goal of human cognition is little more than the acquisition of true beliefs about the external world via the normal functioning of a knower's basic cognitive faculties. However, if concepts like curiosity, open-mindedness, and intellectual rigor are taken as a theoretical starting point, a very different and more compelling view of the epistemic good emerges. Not only does such an approach give appropriate attention to the personal qualities of knowing subjects, it also makes room for a richer set of cognitive goals, including understanding, insight, and wisdom, for an intellectually virtuous person aims at precisely such ends (rather than, say, at mere true belief or elementary knowledge).

Despite its promising trailblazing quality, the relevance of character-based virtue epistemology to traditional problems and issues is less apparent. The focus of traditional epistemology is generally limited to questions about the essential or required features of knowledge (e.g. about what exactly these features are, which beliefs have them, what their sources are, and so on). If something like an exercise of intellectual character virtues is a required feature of knowledge, this bodes well for a traditionally oriented character-based virtue epistemology. The problem, however, is that an exercise of intellectual character virtues seems not to be a required feature of knowledge. Some knowledge (e.g. knowledge of one's most salient mental states or of the most obvious features of one's physical surroundings) appears to be achievable independent of an exercise of any intellectual character virtues. Such knowledge is rather a kind of automatic or default product of the routine functioning of the knower's cognitive faculties. But if something

like an exercise of intellectual character virtues is not a conceptual requirement on knowledge, it becomes unclear how or why an appeal to such traits will be of use to epistemologists interested in addressing traditional problems and issues (see Baehr: Ch. 3). One challenge for virtue responsibilists, then, is to make good on the claim that their approach really does have theoretical purchase within traditional epistemology.

Conclusion

As this overview suggests, there are two main approaches to virtue epistemology, each of which is well-suited to explain a particular dimension of human cognition: virtue reliabilists have an easy time accounting for simple sensory knowledge but not for more elevated or demanding cognitive states; virtue responsibilists have a ready account of the latter, but not of low-grade knowledge. It has also been suggested, however, that the line between these two approaches might be less sharp than it initially appears: in particular, that faculty-based virtue epistemologists would do well to expand their repertoire of knowledge-generating capacities to include the intellectual character traits of interest to virtue responsibilists.

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