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Review of Jay Wood, Becoming Intellectually Virtuous

Jason Baehr
Loyola Marymount University, jbaehr@lmu.edu

Epistemology: Becoming Intellectually Virtuous. By W. Jay Wood. Downer's Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998. 216 pages. $12.99.

Epistemologists have recently begun to rediscover something that was taken for granted in their discipline prior to the modern era—viz., that there is more to being good or well-off cognitively than having true beliefs that are "justified," or that are produced by "reliable" or "properly functioning" cognitive faculties. It is now recognized that intellectual virtues like wisdom, understanding, attentiveness, thoroughness, studiousness, intellectual humility, intellectual tenacity, and open- and fair-mindedness also play an important role in what it is to be in an epistemically desirable state. Jay Wood's *Epistemology: Becoming Intellectually Virtuous* is an introduction to epistemology written with precisely this insight in mind. Its aim is to familiarize students with "some of the central concerns of epistemology while also recommending that these concerns be pursued by taking seriously our growth in the intellectual virtues;" it is also intended to show "how considerations of intellectual virtue and vice bear upon and even help resolve longstanding epistemological controversies" (7).

While comprised of eight chapters, the book divides up nicely into three main parts. In the first part, Wood provides an introduction to the major questions of epistemology and to the intellectual virtues. Chapter 1 explores the practical import of some of these questions (e.g., how can we most effectively lay hold of the truth? and, what is it to be cognitively excellent?) and explains how one's approach to answering them will be affected if one takes intellectual virtue seriously. Chapters 2 and 3 examine in more detail the different kinds of intellectual virtue, their internal structure, and the demands they place upon our cognitive lives.

In the second part of the book, Wood deals with some of the major issues that have been of special interest to epistemologists in more recent times. Chapter 4 is a discussion of foundationalism. Here Wood describes the general motivation behind foundationalism, then characterizes and criticizes strong and weak formulations of it. In chapter 5, "Epistemic Justification," he discusses two varieties of internalism, viz., evidentialism and coherentism, and offers criticisms of each. This leads to a discussion in chapter 6 of the currently most popular variety of externalism, viz., reliablism. After setting forth some objections to reliablism, Wood goes on to show how the dispute between internalists and externalists might be resolved within a virtue theory of epistemic justification.

The third part of the book examines the relationship between intellectual virtue and the epistemology of religious belief. In chapter 7 Wood develops an externalist conception of the justification of religious belief, drawing heavily from the resources of Reformed epistemology (and Alvin Plantinga's work in particular). Chapter 8, "The Role of Emotions

and Virtue in Proper Cognitive Functioning," is devoted to an investigation of the epistemic value of the emotional and moral dimensions of our cognitive lives, including how they bear upon the epistemic status of religious belief.

As an introduction to the nature of intellectual virtue and to its epistemological significance, Wood's book is tremendously valuable. His discussion of the intellectual virtues is lucid, insightful, and well-illustrated with several colorful examples taken from literature and other familiar sources. This, coupled with its emphasis on how we might actually grow in intellectual virtue, is likely to make the book more engaging to students than most introductory epistemology texts. Other related highlights include: a division of the intellectual virtues based on how they pertain to the *acquisition, maintenance, communication,* and *application* of our beliefs; an analysis of the structure of the virtues in terms of how they require us to *think, feel,* and *act*; various explorations of how our moral and emotional lives may enhance our cognitive activity (e.g., how they might improve our ability to assess evidence); and a consistent sensitivity to how epistemology and intellectual virtue relate to our religious beliefs and lives.

As an introduction to the major issues of concern to contemporary epistemologists (apart from the issue of intellectual virtue), Wood's book, while still useful, is in certain respects less satisfying. First, as Wood acknowledges, it offers no treatment of issues like *a priori* justification, memory, perception, testimony, skepticism, or Gettier problems (which to some actually may not be disappointing). Second, its treatment of certain important epistemological theories leaves something to be desired. By way of illustration, I note two problems with Wood's discussion of foundationalism. First, Wood holds that it is a fundamental requirement of foundationalism (at least in its stronger varieties) that, as we go about admitting beliefs into our noetic structure, we must *consciously base* each new belief on a suitable foundation. So, for instance, as I form the belief that there is presently a computer monitor before me, I must reason thus: I am having a particular perceptual experience; in the past, when I have had this kind of experience, there has been a computer monitor before me; therefore, there is a computer monitor before me presently (94). But this, as Wood rightly points out, is an unreasonable requirement, for many of our putatively justified beliefs are formed *involuntarily,* and indeed even *unconsciously.* I think there are a few problems with this characterization of foundationalism, but the most salient one is that foundationalism (in either its weak or strong versions) ordinarily involves no such requirement. Foundationalism is fundamentally a view about the structure of epistemic justification, according to which, if a given belief is justified, its justification must arise, ultimately, from one or more immediately justified, or basic, beliefs (cf. William Alston's "Foundationalism" in *A Companion to Epistemology*

[Blackwell, 1992]). There is no further requirement that we go about forming our beliefs in a way that mirrors this structure. The basic problem with Wood's exposition is that it apparently construes the requirements of the foundationalist *epistemic* basing relation in *psychological* terms (i.e., as the claim that we must *consciously base* each of our beliefs, as we form them, on appropriate foundations). However, this is a requirement that most foundationalists themselves will agree creates a glaring and unacceptable conflict with the facts of our doxastic psychology. (An analogous criticism can be made of Wood's discussion of evidentialism in chapter 5.)

A second problem concerns Wood's discussion of weak or moderate foundationalism, which is generally regarded as the most promising kind of foundationalism on offer. Wood limits his discussion here to the views of Thomas Reid, which is likely to leave many moderate foundationalists feeling shortchanged since other considerably different, more sophisticated, and (arguably) more plausible formulations of moderate foundationalism are available (e.g., those of Robert Audi, Paul Moser, and Laurence BonJour). For instance, Wood's focus on Reid results in the suggestion that moderate foundationalism usually embodies a strong externalist spirit. Wood claims that *à la* Reid the moderate foundationalist "makes no claims about … a need to be reflectively aware of which beliefs have the status of basic" (98). He also describes Reid's epistemology (which, again, he thinks *typifies* moderate foundationalism) as a precursor to reliablism (99). The problem is that some of the most influential contemporary formulations of moderate foundationalism (e.g., those of the philosophers mentioned above) are robustly *internalist* and exhibit little to no resemblance to views like reliablism. Wood's exclusive focus on Reid also leads to his equating the moderate foundationalist's view of basic beliefs with Reid's view of "first principles." This gives rise to a characterization of basic beliefs according to which their paradigm instances consist of very broad philosophical principles (e.g., "what is to be, will probably be like what has been in similar circumstances") and are "self-evidently justified, being believed, merely upon being understood" (99). But again, at least certain prominent versions of moderate foundationalism differ considerably with Reid on this score: basic beliefs on these theories are generally not "principles" of any sort but rather are quite ordinary experiential or perceptual beliefs (e.g., my belief that there appears to be a red book on the desk before me); moreover, they are not taken to be characteristically self-evident but instead are thought usually to be justified on the basis of *experience.* So while Wood's discussion of Reid's epistemology is interesting in its own right, it hardly suffices as an accurate portrayal of moderate foundationalism.

The forgoing criticisms aside, Wood's book, if used in conjunction with one that has a wider scope and that lacks the sorts of weaknesses just

described, offers a novel, informative, and stimulating introduction to epistemology from a point of view that is deeply and explicitly sensitive to the theological and ethical elements of Christian theism.

REVIEWED BY JASON BAEHR
UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON