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Intellectual Virtue

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While attention to intellectual virtue dates back at least to Aristotle (*see* ARISTOTLE), most philosophers interested in virtue have tended to focus on moral or ethical virtue (*see* VIRTUE; MORAL CHARACTER). During the last decade of the 20th century, this focus began to broaden, as epistemologists began returning to the notion of intellectual virtue in their reflections on the life of the mind. Approximately 25 years later, virtue epistemology, which foregrounds considerations of intellectual virtue, is a leading approach to the theory of knowledge.

What is intellectual virtue? Very generally, intellectual *virtue* (singular) is a state of overall epistemic excellence comprised of the possession of intellectual *virtues* (plural). What, then, are intellectual virtues? There is surprisingly little agreement about this matter in the contemporary literature. If one includes ancient, medieval, and other historical perspectives, the lack of agreement only widens. The conceptions of intellectual virtue endorsed by philosophers like Aristotle, Aquinas, and Hume, for instance, do not map cleanly onto the current theoretical landscape. Accordingly, the primary focus of this entry is intellectual virtue as conceived of within contemporary virtue epistemology. (For more on the historical conceptions, see Reeve 2013, Hoffman 2012, and Vitz 2009.)

We begin with a familiar, if somewhat oversimplified, introduction to theoretical models of intellectual virtue. Next, we add some important subtlety and complexity to this initial picture. In the final section, we examine some connections between intellectual virtue and some important facets of moral competence.

<u>Two Conceptions of Intellectual Virtue</u>

In the present section, we consider two main questions. First, what sorts of qualities are intellectual virtues? Second, what *makes* these qualities intellectual virtues?

One might reasonably expect broad agreement about which sorts of qualities are intellectual virtues. After all, in virtue ethics (*see* VIRTUE ETHICS), there is widespread (albeit not quite unanimous) agreement that moral virtues are *character strengths* of a certain sort (*see* CHARACTER). However, as we turn now to consider, two rather different ways of thinking about intellectual virtue have emerged within virtue epistemology.

Some virtue epistemologists conceive of intellectual virtues on the model of moral virtues (e.g., Montmarquet 1993; Zagzebski 1996; Roberts and Wood 2007; and Baehr 2011). For them, intellectual virtues are excellences of intellectual *character*, such as open-mindedness, intellectual courage, intellectual tenacity, intellectual humility, and intellectual honesty. More precisely, they are the character traits of an excellent or responsible thinker, learner, or inquirer. This view is known as "virtue responsibilism." (It is natural to wonder how exactly responsibilist virtues are related to familiar moral virtues: Are they a species of moral virtue? Can a person be intellectually virtuous in this sense without being morally virtuous? Or vice versa? The present entry is intended to be neutral with respect to the relationship between intellectual and moral virtues. However, the moral significance of intellectual virtues is addressed in the final section. (For more on the relationship between intellectual virtues and moral virtues, see Driver 2003; Baehr 2011: Appendix; Battaly 2005: Ch. 1).

A different group of virtue epistemologists conceives of intellectual virtues on the model of reliable or truth-conducive cognitive *faculties* like (good) memory, vision, hearing, introspection, and reason (e.g., Sosa 1991, 2007; Pritchard 2005; Greco 2010). Reliable cognitive faculties are related to but distinct from strengths of intellectual character. A person can, for instance, have 20/20 vision, acute hearing, and an impeccable memory, while being intellectually lazy, dogmatic, narrow-minded, hasty, or indifferent. Conversely, a person with poor vision or an ailing memory might yet be highly inquisitive, open-minded, and intellectually tenacious. (This is not to suggest a person's cognitive faculties can be *fully* or *maximally* reliable in the absence of responsibilist virtues; nor that the cognitive faculties of a person who possesses responsibilist virtues can be badly defective *across the board*. More on these points below. For more on the distinction between reliabilist and responsibilist intellectual virtues, see Battaly 2015: Chs. 1-3.)

We turn now to the second question: What *makes* the qualities in question virtues? What is their characteristic form of *excellence* or *value*? The reliabilist answer to this question is fairly straightforward. Truth or true belief is a fundamental epistemic value. According to virtue reliabilists, faculties like vision, memory, and introspection are intellectual virtues because of their *causal* connection with truth. That is, they are virtues because, under suitable conditions and with respect to a limited subset of propositions or claims, they are reliable sources of true belief (Sosa 1991: Ch. 16). In a well-lit room, for instance, vision is a reliable source of true belief concerning certain physical features of one's immediate environment. But it is not a source of reliable information in a room filled with optical illusions; nor concerning topics like what one had for breakfast or what type of music is playing in the other room. (A similar point can be made in connection with memory, introspection, and other cognitive faculties.)

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There is considerably less agreement among virtue epistemologists about the virtue-making feature of intellectual *character* traits such as intellectual honesty, perseverance, and open-mindedness. Three views merit consideration.

First, taking a cue from virtue reliabilism, some virtue responsibilists think of epistemic *reliability* as the defining characteristic of intellectual virtues (see, e.g., Driver 2003). For these theorists, qualities like intellectual honesty and perseverance are virtues because, under certain conditions and with respect to certain topics or claims, they reliably assist their possessor in the formation of true beliefs.

A second group of virtue responsibilists points to the characteristic *motivation* of intellectual virtues to explain why they are virtues. Their reasoning is as follows. In general, intellectual character virtues are conceived of as being rooted in a "love of truth" or a desire for epistemic goods like knowledge and understanding. According to these theorists, this psychological stance is valuable or admirable *in its own right*. Jason Baehr (2011), for instance, argues that being a good person or good *qua* person is partly a matter of "loving" or being positively oriented toward epistemic goods (see Adams 2006 for a related account of moral virtue). Accordingly, on this view, qualities like intellectual honesty, perseverance, and open-mindedness are intellectual virtues on the basis of their contribution to their possessor's "personal intellectual worth." (Whether personal *intellectual* worth is a species of or at least partially dependent on personal *moral* worth is an open question. For more on this issue, see Baehr 2011: Chs. 6-7, Appendix.)

A third group of virtue epistemologists appeals to epistemic reliability *and* proper epistemic motivation to explain what makes the traits in question intellectual virtues. Linda Zagzebski (1996), for instance, argues that intellectual virtues have both a "motivational

component" and a "reliability component." On her view, an intellectually virtuous person possesses an intrinsically valuable desire for "cognitive contact with reality" and can be relied upon to make such contact in the form of knowledge, understanding, and related epistemic states (165-84).

These differing conceptions of intellectual virtue have been put to different theoretical uses and possess competing strengths and weaknesses. Most virtue reliabilists have invoked the concept of intellectual virtue in the service of defending a particular account of the nature of knowledge (Sosa 1991; Greco 2010). For a range of reasons, their discussions have tended to revolve around types or cases of relatively "low-grade" knowledge, for example, simple and immediate perceptual, introspective, and memorial knowledge. Virtue reliabilism seems to have a plausible explanation such knowledge. For, knowledge of one's immediate surroundings, say, or of what one had for breakfast, is plausibly viewed as a product of the routine and relatively "brute" operation of one's cognitive faculties (viz., the faculties of vision and memory, respectively) (Battaly 2015: Ch. 5).

While offering a promising account of much "low-grade" or "animal" knowledge, reliabilists have a harder time accounting for "high-grade" or "reflective" knowledge. This includes much philosophical, scientific, historical, moral, and several other highly sought-after varieties of knowledge. The challenge posed by such knowledge stems from the fact that reliably getting to the truth in areas like philosophy and science would seem to require considerably more than well-functioning cognitive faculties (e.g. good eyesight, a good memory, etc.). To be a reliable inquirer in these domains, one also needs to perform certain intellectual *actions* and to manifest certain intellectual *motives*, including the actions and motives characteristic of *responsibilist* character virtues like intellectual carefulness, thoroughness, autonomy, openness,

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and tenacity (Baehr 2011: Ch. 4). There is, then, a *prima facie* tension between the relatively "brute" and mechanistic focus of reliabilist theories and the agential or characterological demands of "high-grade" or "reflective" knowledge. (Below we will return to, and call into question, this initial appearance.)

Where virtue reliabilist theories of knowledge appear vulnerable, virtue responsibilist theories appear equipped for success. Zagzebski (1996: Pt. III), for instance, defines knowledge as true belief arising from "acts of intellectual virtue," which in turn are comprised of actions and motives characteristic of familiar intellectual character virtues. Again, this seems like an accurate description of what knowledge amounts to in several important domains. In areas like science and philosophy, for instance, knowledge is often very difficult to achieve. It comes, when it does, as a result of sustained and intelligent intellectual *effort* and *activity*. Such effort and activity appears to be precisely of the sort characteristic of responsibilist virtues like inquisitiveness, intellectual tenacity, intellectual honesty, and open-mindedness. Accordingly, theories like Zagzebski's appear well suited to explain the epistemic status of more demanding, "high-grade" instances or varieties of knowledge (Battaly 2015: Ch. 5).

At the same time, however, responsibilist theories of knowledge have a harder time accommodating putative cases of "low-grade" or "animal" knowledge. The reason is that in cases of this sort, knowledge arguably is acquired independently of any intellectually virtuous motives or actions. For example, knowledge that one has a splitting headache or that the lights in the room have suddenly shut off emerges automatically or spontaneously. It appears to result from the *natural* or *default* operation of one's basic cognitive equipment (not of any refined or cultivated perceptual capacity) (Baehr 2011: Ch. 3). In this respect, responsibilist theories of knowledge face a challenge where reliabilist theories appear to be on solid ground.

<u>Overlap between "Reliabilist" and "Responsibilist" Virtues</u>

The preceding way of thinking about the terrain in virtue epistemology is familiar and fairly standard within the virtue epistemology literature (see e.g. Battaly 2008; Baehr 2011: Ch. 1). While understandable and satisfactory in many respects, it is an oversimplification and potentially misleading in others. Here we introduce some needed nuance and complexity.

To begin, while reliabilist accounts of intellectual virtue have tended to stress the mechanistic aspects of the relevant cognitive abilities, their focus need not be (and, indeed, in certain respects, has not been) this narrow. This is so in at least three ways.

First, in their lists of intellectual virtues, virtue reliabilists sometimes include intellectual *skills*, such as inductive, deductive, and abductive reasoning (Sosa 1991: Chs. 5, 16). These skills, while perhaps building on or incorporating certain "subpersonal" or mechanistic faculties, also make significant demands on the agency of their possessor. As such, they are irreducible to any individual or complex of mechanistic cognitive faculties (Battaly 2015: Ch. 1, 5; Zagzebski 1996: 106-15).

A second and related point is that reliabilists uniformly include the faculty of *reason* in their lists of intellectual virtues (though the skills just noted involve this faculty, they are not identical to it). While there may be instances of *a priori* knowledge that do not make significant agential demands, reason is not a mechanistic faculty. In fact, as suggested earlier, cultivated and refined reason, reason of the most *reliable* sort, would seem to require the possession of certain intellectual *character* virtues like attentiveness, intellectual autonomy, and intellectual tenacity (Baehr 2016). Therefore, while virtue reliabilists have tended, in their theories of knowledge, to

focus on relatively "easy cases" (e.g., immediate perceptual knowledge), and while this in turn has led to them to emphasize the mechanistic aspects of cognition, their embrace of reason as a reliable cognitive faculty suggests that virtue reliabilism may have the resources to make sense of some (perhaps all) "high-grade" or "reflective" knowledge. It also shows why it is difficult to draw a clear distinction between virtue reliabilism and virtue responsibilism, for it suggests that to fully account for the reliability of reason, virtue reliabilism will need to incorporate elements of virtue responsibilism. (See further down for a recent and notable exception to the reliabilist tendency to focus on subpersonal knowledge and cognitive abilities.)

Third, at the broadest level, the reliabilist's concern is with stable capacities that lead to the acquisition of true beliefs. In many domains, and with respect to many propositions, basic cognitive faculties play this role. However, in other contexts, intellectual character virtues appear to be epistemically more important. One can reliably discover scientific, historical, and philosophical truth only if one's inquiry is careful, rigorous, open, tenacious, and attentive (Baehr 2011: Ch. 4). While the relevant responsibilist virtues are not entirely separable from reliable cognitive faculties, they appear in these contexts to be the primary basis of epistemic reliability. This further suggests that a suitably developed or elaborated version of virtue reliabilism can accommodate "high-grade" knowledge and that such a view will integrate elements (and thereby move in the direction) of virtue responsibilism.

A timely and noteworthy illustration of some of these points is the recent evolution of Ernest Sosa's virtue epistemology. Sosa is one of the founders of contemporary virtue epistemology, and his early work, which grounds an account of "animal knowledge" in the operation of reliable cognitive faculties (e.g., 1991), is a prime example of virtue reliabilism. Recently, however, Sosa has directed his attention to more estimable epistemic goods.

Specifically, he has developed a "performance-based" model of "reflective knowledge," which grounds such knowledge in the exercise of "agential virtues" that closely resemble responsibilist character virtues (see Sosa 2015: Ch. 2; Baehr 2016). Thus Sosa's recent epistemology moves in precisely the direction outlined above.

Does Sosa's recent work represent a "third alternative" to reliabilism and responsibilism? This is a difficult question to answer. It does in the sense that it counts as intellectual virtues both naturally functioning cognitive faculties and something like responsibilist virtues (viz., "agential virtues"). However, one of the points of the preceding discussion, a point recently emphasized by Sosa himself (2015: 35-7), is that virtue reliabilism has all along been committed, at least implicitly, to treating responsibilist virtues (or something like them) as genuine intellectual virtues. Furthermore, on Sosa's recent view, a certain kind of epistemic reliability or competence remains the dominant feature of "reflective knowledge" and therefore of the virtues that contribute to such knowledge. Viewed from this angle, Sosa's recent work remains firmly within the reliabilist camp.

We have thus far identified ways in which a fully worked out version of reliabilism will move in the direction of virtue responsibilism. However, it is also important to note respects in which responsibilism is indebted to reliabilism.

The discussion up to this point might suggest that intellectual character virtues are independent of reliable cognitive faculties. This is true in certain respects. Responsibilist virtues, for instance, sometimes can correct for deficiencies in reliabilist virtues. Knowing that one's memory or vision is weak, one might, so as to avoid cognitive error, be especially *careful* and *cautious* when forming beliefs based on input from these faculties. However, it would be extremely misleading to suggest responsibilist virtues are, on the whole, distinct or separable

from reliabilist virtues. First, if one lacked *any* cognitive faculties at all, or if *all* of one's

faculties were massively defective, it is difficult to see how one could be virtuously open-

minded, intellectually autonomous, careful, honest, or the like. (This does not entail that

responsibilist virtues are *necessarily* reliable. In particular, it leaves open whether traits like

open-mindedness and intellectual carefulness might still be intellectual virtues in a world

controlled by a systematically deceptive Cartesian demon. See Montmarquet 1993 and Baehr

2011: Ch. 6 for discussion.) Second, responsibilist character virtues are manifested in the

operation of cognitive faculties. One thinks autonomously using *reason*, observes attentively

with *vision*, draws on *introspective* powers when honestly scrutinizing one's feelings, and uses

memory to carefully recall the details of a past event. In short, while reliabilist virtues can

operate independently of responsibilist virtues, the operation of responsibilist virtues cannot be

disentangled from that of reliabilist virtues.

We have found that on closer inspection the distinction between virtue reliabilist and virtue

responsibilist accounts of intellectual virtue begins to blur. This is due partly to the fact that a

suitably developed reliabilist account of intellectual virtue (one that does justice to the different

forms that epistemic reliability can take) apparently must incorporate elements of responsibilism.

It is also due to the fact responsibilist virtues are, to a significant degree, parasitic on reliable

cognitive faculties.

<div align="center">The Moral Significance of Intellectual Virtues</div>

  Intellectual virtues are *epistemically* oriented: they aim at distinctively epistemic ends

like truth, knowledge, and understanding. However, they also have considerable moral or ethical

significance. For instance, many (if not all) responsibilist virtues have an *others*-regarding

dimension. This dimension is obvious in the case of traits like open-mindedness and intellectual generosity. But even virtues like intellectual carefulness and thoroughness can be motivated by or have a favorable impact on the well-being of others, as in the case of a teacher designing a lesson to enhance student understanding or a journalist seeking to inform her readership about an important civic matter.

But this does not exhaust the moral or ethical significance of intellectual virtues. To see why, note that epistemic notions pervade the moral landscape. Central to the moral life, and to philosophical reflection on this life, are abilities and activities such as moral *perception*, moral *intuition*, practical *reason*, and practical *wisdom* or *phronesis*. The relevance of reliabilist faculties to at least some of these competences is clear enough. If one's basic perceptual faculties are systematically defective or misleading, then one's ability to perceive the morally relevant features of one's situation will be limited (*see* PERCEPTION, MORAL). Similarly, to the extent that one's rational capacity is diminished, one's ability to grasp the truth of certain moral claims may (on certain rationalist accounts of moral intuition) be compromised (*see* INTUITIONISM, MORAL; INTUITIONS, MORAL; A PRIORI ETHICAL KNOWLEDGE).

Responsibilist character virtues occupy a subtler but no less significant moral role. In the remainder of this section, we will focus on the connection between responsibilist virtues, on the one hand, and moral perception and practical reasoning, on the other.

Virtuous moral agents perceive the world through an appropriately sensitive and focused moral lens (McDowell, 1979). Lawrence Blum (1991), for instance, gives the example of two people, John and Joan, sitting in a crowded subway car. Nearby a woman is standing and holding two heavy shopping bags. While the woman's discomfort is immediately evident to Joan, it fails to register in John's perceptual awareness. This failure underscores a defect in John's moral

psychology and character (702-3). As this example illustrates, moral perception is largely an *empirical* process (*see* A POSTERIORI ETHICAL KNOWLEDGE).

However, it is not primarily a function of good vision or an acute sense of hearing. Rather, as Jennifer Lyn Wright (2007) explains, moral perception requires that our cognitive faculties be *trained* or *cultivated* in a particular way: "[M]ature moral agents do not possess some distinct 'moral sense': their faculties of perception have simply been refined and developed in such a way as to enable them to reliably perceive subtle facts about the moral environment that surrounds them (facts that other moral agents might not perceive)" (11-12). Plausibly, such refinement includes the cultivation of several responsibilist virtues. When it comes to her awareness of the moral features of her situation, the perceptive moral agent is *attentive* to important details, her mind is *open* to the perspectives and experiences of others, and she is *honest* and appropriately *inquisitive* about what she sees. Her perceptual acumen is at least partly a function of her excellent intellectual character.

Next consider practical reasoning. As Alsadair MacIntyre (1999) observes, "[w]e may at any point go astray in our practical reasoning because of intellectual error: perhaps we happen to be insufficiently well-informed about the particulars of our situation; or we have gone beyond the evidence in a way that has misled us; or we have relied too heavily on some unsubstantiated generalization" (96). Accordingly, a competent practical reasoner is *sufficiently* well-informed about the particulars of her situation, *avoids* going beyond her evidence, and does *not* rely too heavily on unsubstantiated generalizations. MacIntrye also explains how such reasoning requires an ability to think for oneself (91), to imagine relevant practical alternatives (94), and a significant degree of self-knowledge (94-5). As MacIntyre himself acknowledges (92, 96), the cultivation of intellectual virtues is central to the meeting of these demands. A competent

practical reasoner is sufficiently well-informed because she is appropriately *curious* or

inquisitive, her intellectual *autonomy* allows her to form her own conclusions, she avoids going

beyond her evidence and relying on unsubstantiated generalizations because she is intellectually

careful and *thorough*, she has an *open* and *creative* moral imagination, and she is *humble* and

honest about her intellectual limitations and mistakes.

The intersection of intellectual virtues and various forms of moral competence should not

be too surprising. (Indeed, while Aristotle's notion of *phronesis* is significantly different from

contemporary conceptions of intellectual virtue, he pointed long ago, in the *Nichomachean*

Ethics and elsewhere, to the dependence of moral virtue on virtues of the intellect.) This is

because the competences in question (arguably) are *truth*-oriented. Moral perception and moral

intuition, at least on several standard ways of understanding these capacities, equip their

possessor to grasp moral facts. Similarly, barring a strongly subjectivist or reductionist account

of practical reasoning or practical wisdom, these capacities enable their possessor to reach the

truth about how she should act, which ends are worth pursuing, and how these ends should be

pursued. As we have noted, intellectual virtues by definition are truth-oriented. As James

Montmarquet (1993) describes responsibilist virtues, they are the character traits "a truth-

desiring person would want to have" (30). This includes the person who desires truth in the

moral realm or truth about how best to live. Therefore, a deep connection between intellectual

virtue and moral excellence is to be expected.

While unsurprising, this overlap between the subject matter of virtue epistemology and

that of moral philosophy, psychology, and epistemology has not been very widely explored

within contemporary philosophy. Our discussion suggests that were virtue epistemologists and

moral philosophers to begin examining this territory in greater detail, their efforts would prove timely and fruitful.

SEE ALSO: A POSTERIORI ETHICAL KNOWLEDGE; A PRIORI ETHICAL KNOWLEDGE; ARISTOTLE; CHARACTER; INTUITIONISM, MORAL; INTUITIONS, MORAL; MORAL CHARACTER; PERCEPTION, MORAL; PRACTICAL REASONING; VIRTUE; VIRTUE ETHICS; WISDOM.

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