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The Structure of an Intellectual Vice

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VIRTUE EPISTEMOLOGY, VIRTUE ETHICS, AND THE STRUCTURE OF VIRTUE

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Contemporary virtue epistemology examines the cognitive life with an eye to the epistemic excellences or “intellectual virtues” of knowing subjects.¹ It was inspired by virtue ethics, which emphasizes moral virtues and their centrality to acting and living well. While the structural similarities between virtue epistemology and virtue ethics have been widely noted, a certain structural *dissimilarity* has received relatively little attention.

Within virtue epistemology, two rather different approaches have emerged. So-called “virtue responsibilists” emphasize the personal and characterological dimensions of the cognitive life.² They conceive of intellectual virtues on the model of moral virtues. Examples include open-mindedness, intellectual humility, intellectual autonomy, and intellectual courage. “Virtue reliabilists” have tended to focus on the more mechanistic or subpersonal aspects of human cognition, identifying intellectual virtues with reliable or truth-conducive cognitive faculties such as memory, vision, introspection, and reason.³ Unsurprisingly, these very different models of intellectual virtue have given rise to two very different strands of virtue epistemology.⁴

The theoretical landscape in virtue ethics, by contrast, is considerably more uniform. Specifically, there does not appear to be a counterpart in virtue ethics of reliabilist faculty virtues like memory or vision. Rather, virtue ethicists generally agree that moral virtues should be understood as stable dispositions of personal *character*. While this makes for an obvious parallel between virtue ethics and *responsibilist* virtue epistemology, it appears to leave little room for an approach to virtue ethics that is on par with virtue reliabilism. As Heather Battaly and Michael Slote observe:

[T]here there is nothing in virtue ethics that corresponds well with the emphasis within Reliabilist virtue epistemology on the excellence of the functioning of sub-personal and hard-wired human cognitive systems like memory and perception. It is not clear what in virtue ethics could even conceivably correspond to such sub-personal virtue: the emphasis both in ancient and in recently revived virtue ethics has been on acquired/developed human character at the personal level, on what it is to be and become a virtuous *person*. (2015: 258-259)

Thus while there are two quite distinct approaches to virtue epistemology, the structure of virtue ethics remains broadly singular.

In the present chapter, I examine these and related issues in greater detail. I begin by considering whether, initial appearances notwithstanding, there is in fact a virtue ethical counterpart of reliabilist virtue epistemology. This leads to a somewhat narrower consideration, namely, whether there is a counterpart of reliable cognitive faculties within our moral psychology.⁵ The overarching aim of the chapter is twofold: first, to clarify and motivate further reflection on the relationship between virtue epistemology, virtue ethics, and the virtues proper to each approach; and, second, to underscore the deep embeddedness of intellectual virtue along a certain dimension of moral excellence.

Before proceeding, it bears mentioning that in recent years the line between responsibilist and reliabilist approaches to virtue epistemology has begun to blur. Ernest Sosa, the originator of virtue reliabilism, has recently (2015a) given a central role in his account of “reflective knowledge” to traits he calls “agential virtues,” which bear a close resemblance to responsibilist character virtues. As such, Sosa’s epistemology, which ranges over both “animal” and “reflective” knowledge, may provide a way of integrating the concerns of reliabilists and responsibilists. While an interesting prospect, this development does not bear significantly on the direction of the present discussion. One reason for this is that most other virtue epistemologists, on either side of the responsibilist/reliabilist divide, resist the collapse of these distinct epistemic perspectives.⁶ Another reason is that even if Sosa’s more comprehensive epistemology were correct, it would remain an open and interesting question whether there exists a moral analogue of reliabilist faculty virtues.

1. A Consequentialist Analogue?

The claim that virtue ethics does not contain a counterpart of virtue reliabilism can be called into question. Some virtue ethicists think of something like “moral reliability” as the defining feature of a moral virtue. Of particular interest here is a consequentialist view of moral virtues according to which a trait of character is a moral virtue just in case (very roughly) it manifests in actions that tend to result in the greatest amount happiness and the least amount of unhappiness compared with available alternatives (Driver 2001: Ch. 4; Bradley 2005). These views closely mirror the virtue reliabilist’s claim that intellectual virtues are cognitive faculties that systematically result in the production of true beliefs and the avoidance of cognitive errors.

While an analogue of sorts, a consequentialist view of moral virtues is not a close or complete analogue of a reliabilist conception of intellectual virtues. First, the moral qualities in question are limited to dispositions of personal *character*. As such they are structurally similar to responsibilist character virtues and different from reliabilist faculty virtues. This difference offers a plausible explanation of why a broad distinction akin to the one between responsibilism and reliabilism has not arisen within virtue ethics. Rather, the distinction between consequentialist and other, more “internalist” or motivational accounts of moral virtue closely parallels the distinction within virtue responsibilism between consequentialist and non-consequentialist accounts of intellectual character virtues. That is, like virtue ethicists, virtue responsibilists adopt competing views about what gives the character traits in question their status as virtues, with some responsibilists arguing that qualities like intellectual courage and carefulness are intellectual virtues on account of their epistemic consequences or “outputs” (e.g. Driver 2003; Goldman 2001) and others explaining this status (at least partly) in terms of an element of admirable epistemic motivation (e.g. Zagzebski 1996 and Baehr 2011).⁷

Another way to come at this point is to observe that there is an analogue of consequentialist accounts of moral virtue within virtue epistemology, but that this analogue lies squarely within a *responsibilist* (not a reliabilist) framework. Julia Driver’s work is especially instructive on this point. Driver defends an account of moral virtues according to which a trait of character is a moral virtue just in case it “systematically (reliably) produces good consequences” (2000: 126). For Driver, moral virtues include qualities like generosity, benevolence, and honesty. Driver also defends a corresponding account of intellectual virtues according to

which a trait of character is an intellectual virtue just in case it “systematically (reliably) produces true belief” (ibid.). She cites intellectual rigor, curiosity, and open-mindedness as key instances of intellectual virtues thus conceived. Driver’s account of intellectual virtues is the clear counterpart of her consequentialist account of moral virtues. Because its scope is explicitly limited to the *character* traits of a good inquirer, it is best regarded as a contribution to responsibilist (vs. reliabilist) virtue epistemology.

Linda Zagzebski’s virtue theory (1996) illustrates a related point. Zagzebski offers a comprehensive account of moral and intellectual virtues according to which, for something to be a virtue of either sort, it must include an element of intrinsically valuable motivation and be reliable at bringing about the end or ends proper to the virtue in question (136-37). Thus she conceives of intellectual virtues as involving a consequentialist or “reliability” component. Nevertheless, Zagzebski is widely regarded as the pioneer of responsibilist virtue epistemology. This is because, while not neglecting considerations of epistemic reliability, her interest is restricted to excellences of intellectual character.

This brings to light more and less restricted senses of the term “reliabilist.” In a more restricted sense, the term refers to the view known as “reliabilism” or “virtue reliabilism” in epistemology, according to which intellectual virtues are truth-conducive cognitive faculties. It is in this sense of “reliabilist” that we are looking for an analogue of a reliabilist faculty virtues within virtue ethics. In a broader and less restricted sense of the term, “reliabilist” refers (merely and roughly) to the stable or systematic achievement of certain ends or goals. While the narrow sense of “reliability” includes the wider sense, in that virtue reliabilists identify intellectual virtues with cognitive faculties that are reliable in the broader sense, the point is that to be a full or proper analogue of a reliabilist account of intellectual virtues, an account of moral virtues must be “reliabilist” in *both* senses: it must identify moral virtues with qualities that are conducive to achieving good ends and that are faculty-like in nature. Again, we have found that consequentialist accounts of moral virtue are “reliabilist” in the first but not the second sense.

2. A Sentimentalist Analogue?

The suggestion that reliabilist virtue epistemology has a virtue ethical counterpart in consequentialist theories of moral virtue falls short because such theories, while incorporating an emphasis on “reliability” (in the broad sense), conceive of moral virtues as traits of character, which makes them more akin to responsibilist theories of intellectual virtue. Therefore, given the concern to identify a virtue ethical counterpart of virtue reliabilism, we would do well to survey the landscape of our moral psychology for an analogue of reliabilist cognitive faculties.

One distinguishing feature of cognitive faculties is their brute or mechanistic character. They are capable of operating independently of volition or agency.⁸ I do not, for instance, choose to undertake the kind of sensory processing in virtue of which I see the computer screen before me or hear a door closing in a nearby room. Memories as well can come to us unbidden—even against our will. Indeed, a significant portion of our basic sensory, memorial, and related forms of knowledge appears to be an output of certain rudimentary and naturally occurring cognitive processes. Its acquisition does not depend on an exercise of cultivated excellences of personal character such as open-mindedness, intellectual courage, or intellectual tenacity.⁹

We would do well, then, to consider whether there are elements of our moral psychology that function in something like this way, that is, that yield moral goods or achievements in a natural and psychologically rudimentary way. When the question is framed in this way, moral *sentiments* come to mind as a possible analogue of reliabilist faculty virtues. According to one venerable tradition in moral philosophy, with roots in the ethical thought of figures like Adam Smith and David Hume, moral sentiments like sympathy and benevolence naturally prompt us to behave in morally appropriate ways (for a recent overview, see Driver 2013). Accordingly, perhaps moral sentiments are the moral counterpart of our cognitive faculties.

The problem with this proposal is similar to a problem identified in connection with the consequentialist proposal discussed above. In short, there is *already* an epistemic analogue of moral sentiments, and this analogue is not reliabilist faculty virtues. Rather, the analogue is natural *epistemic* sentiments. At the outset of his *Metaphysics*, Aristotle famously observes that “all men by nature desire to know” and that an “indication of this is the delight we take in our senses.” Natural epistemic sentiments also include states like wonder, joy in discovery, receptivity to experience, and aversion to falsehood (Scheffler 1991: Ch. 1). Such sentiments can be a source of knowledge in a way that seems straightforwardly analogous

to the way that natural moral sentiments like benevolence or compassion can be a source of morally right action.

This point underscores a largely unexplored theoretical possibility. In particular, it points in the direction of a sentimentalist approach to virtue epistemology, that is, an approach that treats as intellectual virtues, neither cultivated traits of intellectual character, nor reliabilist cognitive faculties, but rather natural epistemic sentiments like the ones noted above. While not presently a well-developed theoretical alternative, Battaly and Slote have recently sought to motivate a sentimentalist virtue epistemology and sketch some of its contours. As they note, “there is a choice to be made in virtue epistemology between Aristotle and (roughly) Hume that corresponds to the now well-recognized choice within virtue ethics between the same two figures” (2015: 260). The discussion here offers some *prima facie* support for a sentimentalist approach to virtue epistemology.

3. A Rationalist or Perceptual Analogue?

The foregoing point about natural epistemic sentiments suggests that to identify an analogue of reliabilist faculty virtues in the territory of our moral psychology, we should look more closely at how these sentiments (which have a clear moral counterpart) are related to our cognitive faculties. One conspicuous difference between epistemic sentiments and cognitive faculties is that the latter, but not the former, function as *sources of information*. Vision and hearing provide us with information about our immediate physical environment, introspection yields information about our own mental states, and so on. Epistemic sentiments, by contrast, while often leading to the employment of cognitive faculties, are not sources of information in this sense. Given that epistemic sentiments are the analogue of moral sentiments, we might do well to consider whether there exists something like an information-yielding capacity in the moral realm.

Here as well some familiar moral concepts come to mind. One is moral intuition. On one way of understanding this phenomenon, it involves the grasping of moral properties or truths on the basis of something like intuitive reason (Audi 1997; Ross 1930). Moral intuition thus conceived is a source of moral

information in something like the way that vision is a source of information about physical appearances. Is moral intuition, then, a proper moral analogue of reliabilist faculty virtues?

The problem with this suggestion is not that moral intuition, understood in the relevant way, is insufficiently *like* a cognitive faculty. Rather, it is that moral intuition just *is* a cognitive faculty, or rather a mode or function thereof. Reason is a familiar reliabilist virtue. Therefore, if moral intuition exists, and if it is essentially a function of intuitive reason, then moral intuition is not an *analogue* of any cognitive faculty, but rather a function or mode of the faculty of reason. It is reason at work in the moral domain.

A similar point applies to conceptions of moral cognition that are more perceptual and empirical in nature. Consider, for instance, John McDowell's claim that the virtuous moral agent is one who "sees situations in a certain distinctive way" (1979: 347). A similar view is defended by Lawrence Blum, who emphasizes that good moral reasoning must be accompanied by good moral perception: "An agent may reason well in moral situations ... Yet unless she perceives moral situations as moral situations, and unless she perceives their moral character accurately, her moral principles and skill at deliberation will be for naught and may even lead her astray." (1991: 701). On these views, competent moral agents grasp morally relevant facts (e.g. that a person is in need of assistance or has been wronged in some specific way), not or not merely via something like rational intuition, but rather by way of a more familiar and empirically grounded perceptual process.

But neither can a capacity of this sort be divorced from reliabilist faculty virtues. On the view in question, one perceives that a person is in need, or that a situation calls for some kind of moral response, largely if not entirely by virtue of one's eyes and ears, that is, by using the very sensory modalities that virtue reliabilists identify as intellectual virtues. Moral perception, then, is not so much a moral analogue of reliabilist cognitive faculties as it is an application of these faculties that is morally informative or evaluable.¹⁰ As Jennifer Lyn Wright, remarks: "[M]ature moral agents do not possess some distinct 'moral sense': their existing 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)" (2007: 11-12).

These points underscore the fact that a certain kind of epistemic excellence lies at the foundation of a certain kind of moral excellence. If one's capacity for moral intuition or perception is flawed or deficient, this is likely to have a deleterious effect on the moral quality of one's actions, at least insofar as one's morally relevant actions are based on and guided by one's moral intuitions or perceptions. Thus a certain kind of moral achievement (viz. something like deliberate, morally right action) would appear to be dependent or parasitic on a kind of proper epistemic functioning that centrally involves reliabilist faculty virtues.

A corresponding implication is that reliabilist virtue epistemology apparently occupies some non-trivial real estate within moral philosophy.¹¹ This is at least somewhat surprising given that reliabilist treatments of intellectual virtue, especially by comparison with responsibilist treatments, tend not to have much of a moral or ethical flavor. Indeed, one of the distinguishing features of virtue reliabilism—a feature that is viewed by some as a decided theoretical advantage—is its externalist, quasi-naturalistic character, according to which intellectual virtues are nothing more (or less) than cognitive faculties that reliably generate a preponderance of true beliefs. Understood in this way, virtue reliabilism avoids what some consider to be a controversial and problematic appeal to character virtues, especially character virtues which, like open-mindedness and intellectual honesty, have a notable moral valence.¹² However, if we take seriously the idea that moral judgment is grounded in something like moral intuition or perception, and that the latter in turn centrally involve the operation reliabilist faculty virtues, then present formulations of virtue reliabilism need to be broadened to include an account of the operation of reason or sensory perception in the moral domain.¹³

4. The Integration of Faculties Virtues and Character Virtues

Before returning to the question of whether there is a proper moral analogue of reliabilist faculty virtues, the point just made concerning the moral role of cognitive faculties merits further attention.

How plausible is it to think that reason or our perceptual faculties *operating in a (more or less) natural or default mode* (as is characteristic of reliabilist virtues) are capable of doing the kind of epistemic-cum-moral work we have ascribed to them? On the one hand, it does not seem too implausible to think of reason, say, as allowing one to grasp the badness of another person's excruciating pain or the fact that one

should alleviate that pain if one can do so easily and with little risk to oneself. Nor does it seem implausible to think that one's basic perceptual abilities might be sufficient for recognizing certain reasonably obvious moral facts (e.g. that a nearby person is in extreme distress and may need assistance). Such judgments might be on par, in terms of their immediacy and demandingness, with judgments like that the conclusion of *modus ponens* follows from the premises or that a familiar person has just walked into the room.

What seems no less plausible, however, is that many *other* morally significant judgments or perceptions are likely to require an exercise of more refined cognitive capacities. The point I wish to emphasize is that such capacities include *responsibilist* character virtues. To illustrate, suppose that in a state of parental exasperation, I have dealt an unfair consequence to one of my children in response to his poor treatment of one of his siblings. While my child's behavior was clearly wrong and merited some kind of corrective response, my reaction, while not obviously excessive, was at least minimally (and significantly) so. Will intuitive reason operating in a relatively default and unrefined mode be sufficient for grasping my mistake or the fact that I ought to make amends? Similarly, will the possession of keen eyesight be enough to pick up on the slightly forlorn (and morally relevant) look on my child's face? Quite possibly not. If the moral facts or morally relevant details in question are subtle enough, they may escape my immediate grasp or notice. It may be that I will perceive these factors only if I am, say, sufficiently *open-minded* and intellectually *humble* enough to consider that my perspective on the situation might be mistaken, sufficiently *attentive* to notice how my behavior has affected my child, or intellectually *persistent* enough to identify the precise way in which my reaction was unfair. In other words, it may be that I will grasp the relevant facts or features only if I manifest intellectual character virtues like intellectual humility, open-mindedness, attentiveness, and persistence.

One lesson to draw from this is that responsibilist virtues contribute to and partly constitute a kind of cultivated or refined capacity for moral judgment and perception that is characteristic of moral excellence and maturity. That is, being an insightful and perceptive moral agent is at least partly a matter of being intellectually humble, open-minded, attentive, and persistent. It follows that responsibilist character virtues also are foundational to a certain kind of moral excellence and that responsibilist virtue epistemology also occupies a notable position within moral philosophy.¹⁴

A related point concerns the relationship between reliabilist faculty virtues and responsibilist character virtues. The discussion up to this point may give the impression that these two virtue-types are fundamentally distinct from each other. This impression is mistaken. The case just discussed shows that responsibilist character virtues manifest *in the operation of* reliabilist faculty virtues. This includes, but is not limited to, the way in which virtues like intellectual humility and honesty can facilitate refined moral judgments and perceptions. In these and related cases, there is no distinguishing between the operation of the relevant responsibilist virtues (e.g. intellectual humility and honesty) and that of certain reliabilist virtues (e.g. reason and vision).

In certain respects, these observations are nothing new. Indeed, though under slightly different descriptions, they have a long and distinguished history. I will briefly discuss two examples, one ancient and one contemporary.

Consider, first, Aristotle's account of moral virtue in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. While spending the better part of Books 2-6 discussing the nature and structure of familiar moral virtues, Aristotle makes the controversial point in Book 6 that a certain intellectual virtue, *phronesis*, is both necessary and sufficient for the full possession of any moral virtue, saying that "we cannot be fully good without intelligence [*phronesis*], or intelligent without virtue of character" (1144b30-35). I do not have the space to explore how *phronesis* might compare to the kind of moral intuition or perception discussed above.¹⁵ Nor can I take up the interesting question of whether this capacity is better understood in responsibilist or reliabilist terms. Rather, I will limit my remarks to the observation that on Aristotle's view, the possession of a certain intellectual virtue is indispensable to the possession of moral virtue.

Second, in an early contribution to responsibilist virtue epistemology, James Montmarquet (1993) argued that an exercise of responsibilist intellectual virtues is the basis of a certain kind of doxastic responsibility, which in turn is central to moral responsibility (Chs. 1, 3-4). According to Montmarquet, on many occasions, a person's actions can be deemed morally responsible only if the beliefs that give rise to these actions are epistemically responsible, where the latter is a matter of having been formed via doxastic activity that is characteristic of virtues like open-mindedness, intellectual humility, intellectual perseverance, and intellectual courage (23).

For Aristotle and Montmarquet alike, a proper understanding of a crucial dimension of moral excellence requires sustained attention to intellectual virtues of one sort or another. Again, the main argument of this section adds to and supports this perspective.

5. Conclusion

The chapter began with an observation about a structural asymmetry between virtue epistemology and virtue ethics. This led to the search for a moral analogue of reliabilist faculty virtues. Several moral capacities have been considered and found wanting. Does it make sense to continue the search?

To my mind, it does not. We have seen that it is very difficult, if not impossible, to fully disentangle reliabilist (and responsibilist) intellectual virtues from an understanding of our moral psychology. In light of this, it is difficult to imagine what a moral analogue of reliabilist faculty virtues could possibly amount to. Indeed, given the moral embeddedness of reliabilist faculty virtues, the very question of whether there is a moral *analogue* of these faculties now seems unmotivated.

A similar point holds in connection with the related but broader question of whether virtue ethics contains a counterpart of reliabilist virtue epistemology. That there is no such counterpart should no longer be surprising. Again, we have seen that certain concerns proper to reliabilist virtue epistemology are also proper to ethics, virtue ethics included. Specifically, provided that reliable and refined moral judgment or perception are an important component of moral virtue, a comprehensive account of moral virtue will require venturing into the territory of reliabilist (and responsibilist) virtue epistemology.¹⁶ Thus the motivation to identify a virtue ethical *counterpart* of reliabilist virtue epistemology appears questionable as well.¹⁷

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¹ For an overview see Battaly (2008).

² For some representative works, see Zagzebski (1996), Roberts and Wood (2007), and Baehr (2011).

³ For some representative works, see Sosa (2007) and Greco (2010). As will become clear, the inclusion of reason on this list (along with other factors) complicates the idea that virtue reliabilists focus on the subpersonal dimensions of cognition.

⁴ For more on the relationship between these approaches, see Baehr (2011: Ch. 4) and the debate between Sosa and me in Sosa (2015b) and Baehr (2015).

⁵ The first consideration is *theoretical*: it concerns the relationship between different virtue theoretical approaches; the second, narrower consideration is *psychological*: it is concerns the possibility of a moral counterpart of reliabilist cognitive faculties.

⁶ On the reliabilist side, see Greco (2010); on the responsibilist side, see the works cited in note 2 above.

⁷ For a helpful discussion of these and related issues, see Battaly (2015: Chs. 1-3).

⁸ That they are “capable of” of such does not entail that they necessarily operate in this way; more on this below.

⁹ For more on this point, see Baehr (2011: Ch. 3) and Baehr and Zagzebski (2013).

¹⁰ See Dancy (2010: 113). There are, of course, ways of understanding moral cognition according to which it is neither rationalistically nor empirically grounded. For instance, one could treat moral intuition as a kind of “sixth sense” distinct from reason and our usual sensory modalities. However, if this sense were grounded in, say, moral sentiments, or in a combination of moral sentiments, reason, and (standard) sensory perception, then, for reasons already considered, it still would not be a proper analogue of reliabilist faculty virtues. Nor would it be such if it were *sui generis*. For, if the “moral sense” is a (reliable) source of moral information or facts, then in fact it is straightforwardly a reliabilist cognitive faculty, albeit one that is not countenanced by most virtue reliabilists. For it would be a quality that, under certain conditions, and with respect to a certain field of propositions (*viz.*, moral ones), leads reliably to truth and the avoidance of cognitive error.

¹¹ This is not (merely) because the concerns of reliabilist virtue epistemology extend to the domain of moral facts or truths. Rather, because the capacities at issue (e.g. moral intuition or perception) are morally evaluable, the point is that part of what it is to be a good moral agent is to be a good epistemic agent in certain respects, and that virtue epistemology is well-positioned to explain these respects.

¹² See, for example, Alfano (2012). Sosa's most recent formulation (2015a) of virtue epistemology is especially interesting in this regard. On the one hand, he eschews responsibilist virtues (at least insofar as they involve an element of intrinsic epistemic motivation); on the other hand, he gives intellectual character virtues *of a sort* (what he calls "agential virtues") pride of place in his account of reflective knowledge. For more on this, see the debate comprised of Sosa (2015b) and Baehr (2015).

¹³ It is, of course, open to naturalistically-minded virtue reliabilists to *deny* that moral judgment is epistemically reliable or that it is grounded in something like moral intuition or perception, and thereby to avoid this implication.

¹⁴ See Swanton (2013: 129) for a similar point.

¹⁵ But for more on this topic, see (Reeve 2013).

¹⁶ For a very different route to a similar (albeit far from identical) conclusion, see Zagzebski (1996: 334-40).

¹⁷ I am indebted to Heather Battaly, Josh Dolin, Steve Porter, and Dan Speak for helpful conversations on the issues discussed in this chapter.