

## Virtue Epistemology

Forthcoming in the *Encyclopedia of Philosophy and the Social Sciences* (Sage)

John Turri and Ernest Sosa

[john.turri@gmail.com](mailto:john.turri@gmail.com)

[ernest.sosa@gmail.com](mailto:ernest.sosa@gmail.com)

Virtue epistemology is a distinctive approach to understanding the evaluative and metaphysical dimensions of cognition. Although the field is marked by considerable diversity and disagreement, there is broad agreement on at least two fundamental principles. On the one hand, virtue epistemologists agree that cognition is *normative*. Cognitive science has much to teach us about how we perceive, remember, reason, inquire, and so on, but unfortunately there is no easy path from these extremely valuable empirical insights to conclusions about how we *ought* to cognize, or what counts as *good* cognition. This is not to say that empirical facts about cognition are irrelevant to the normative questions, but only that important questions remain once all the science is in. On the other hand, virtue epistemologists agree that the ultimate source of epistemic normativity, and hence the central focus of epistemological inquiry, are cognitive agents and communities, along with the fundamental powers,

traits and habits that constitute their intellect. This contrasts with the mainstream approach in later twentieth-century analytic philosophy, which focuses on individual beliefs and inferences, instead of individuals and their cognitive character. Traits that promote good cognition or intellectual flourishing are called, following a tradition extending back to Aristotle, *intellectual* or *cognitive* or *epistemic virtues*, whence the name “virtue epistemology.”

Virtue epistemologists try to answer longstanding philosophical questions about cognition by focusing on how an agent’s intellectual powers, habits, and abilities (‘dispositions’ for short) enter into the conduct of inquiry and formation of belief. A crucial resource here is the notion of an outcome *manifesting* a disposition, which is an especially intimate relationship between the outcome and disposition. For example, one important philosophical question about cognition is, “When is a belief based on perceptual experience?” A virtue epistemologist might answer, “When the perceptual experience causes the subject to form the belief, and the fact that it does so manifests the subject’s disposition to trust his senses.” Another question – perhaps the most important question in this area – is, “What is knowledge?” A virtue epistemologist would answer, “Knowledge is true belief manifesting epistemic virtue.” Another

important question is, “Why is knowledge more valuable than true belief?” A popular answer among virtue epistemologists is, “Because you do not necessarily deserve credit for believing the truth, as might happen if you luckily guessed the correct answer to a question; by contrast, you know something only if you deserve credit for arriving at the truth, through the exercise of your epistemic virtues, which makes knowledge better than mere true belief.”

What counts as an epistemic virtue? A standard answer is that one central and important class of virtues includes the subject’s truth-conducively reliable doxastic dispositions. That is, they are dispositions that make the subject good at detecting and endorsing the truth, so that she usually gets it right when she exercises those dispositions. A further set of important and, from a philosophical perspective, poorly understood dispositions concern the metacognitive task of suspending judgment on a question. It is not obvious that the quality of these dispositions can be measured simply in terms of how reliably they produce true beliefs, since suspending judgment occurs only if one *refrains* from forming a belief. So when ought one to suspend judgment? Most, if not all, of our cognitive dispositions have innate, biological and social bases, so the abstract account of epistemic virtue put forward by the virtue epistemologist must

be properly supplemented through insights from the biological, cognitive and social sciences.

The nature and scope of epistemic virtues is an area of potentially fertile interdisciplinary work among philosophers and scientists. For example, some virtue epistemologists, often called “virtue responsibilists,” accept a more demanding conception of epistemic virtue than the minimal reliabilist conception of virtue mentioned above. Responsibilists define epistemic virtues as praiseworthy and refined character traits with a distinctive motivational profile, such as conscientiousness and open-mindedness, which underwrite robust, broad-based dispositions to inquire well across a wide range of circumstances. These epistemic traits share the same profile as the ethical traits featured in the Aristotelian tradition of virtue ethics, such as generosity, justice and compassion. But a rich body of work in social psychology has led many psychologists and philosophers alike to question the existence of such traits. For instance, in one set of experiments involving seminarians at Princeton Seminary, the strongest predictor of whether a seminarian would stop to help a stricken person was how much time the seminarian thought he had to arrive at lecture on time, not how compassionate he was. In another set of experiments, whether the subject offered help to a distressed passerby was strongly

influenced by whether the subject had recently found a dime in a payphone, not how compassionate she was. These and other equally surprising results are often taken to suggest that we dramatically overemphasize the prevalence of individual traits in determining behavior, and correspondingly underemphasize the impact of situational factors. If this is correct, then it does not bode well for the responsibilist conception of epistemic virtue. Does the hypothesis that we have refined epistemic virtues fare any better than the hypothesis that we have refined ethical virtues? This is an issue ripe for further experimental work, which would have important philosophical consequences.

The cultivation of epistemic virtues is another of area fruitful overlap between virtue epistemology and the social sciences. Just as there is no doubt that a human's biological endowment heavily influences her cognitive character, there is equally little doubt that her socialization has a similar effect. For example, consider how much humans rely on testimony. Competently consuming testimony involves a battery of skills and presuppositions. There is strong evidence that a speaker's social status, gender, and ethnicity affects how their testimony is regarded. Unless we are disposed to be appropriately sensitive to features relevant to the quality of testimony, and appropriately insensitive to irrelevant features,

we run the risk of incompetently or unfairly consuming testimony. Social scientific research is essential to help us understand our habits and predispositions, both vicious and virtuous, in this regard.

### **Further Readings**

- Baehr, J. (2011). *The inquiring mind: on intellectual virtues and virtue epistemology*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Doris J. (2002). *Lack of character: personality and moral behavior*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Fricker, M. (2007). *Epistemic injustice: power and the ethics of knowing*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Greco, J. (2010). *Achieving knowledge: A virtue-theoretic account of epistemic normativity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Greco, J. & Turri, J. (Eds). (2012). *Virtue epistemology: contemporary readings*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Pritchard, D. (Forthcoming). Anti-luck virtue epistemology. *Journal of philosophy*.
- Sosa, E. (2007). *Apt belief and reflective knowledge, volume 1: a virtue epistemology*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Sosa, E. (2011). *Knowing full well*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Turri, J. (2011). Manifest failure: the gettier problem solved.”

*Philosophers' Imprint* 11, 1–11.

Zagzebski, L. (1996). *Virtues of the mind*. Cambridge: Cambridge

University Press

Zagzebski, L. (2009). *On epistemology*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.