

Critical Notices

Intellectual Virtues: An Essay in Regulative Epistemology. ROBERT C. ROBERTS AND W. JAY WOOD. Oxford: Clarendon Press. Pp. vii, 329.

This is an ambitious book, in two ways. First, it advocates a drastic transformation of contemporary epistemology's scope and method. Second, it exemplifies a new way of doing epistemology, plumbing the depths of epistemic psychology by subtly characterizing the nature of, and interrelations among, a host of intellectual traits. Part I critiques standard "analytic" epistemology and expounds the authors' alternative vision of epistemology's scope and method. Part II consists of admirably nuanced and intriguing discussions of several intellectual virtues (and many corresponding vices), most notably: love of knowledge, firmness, courage, caution, humility, autonomy, generosity, and practical wisdom.

Analytic epistemology, according to our authors, is generally in a sorry state. Too narrowly focused, equipped with a flawed methodology, and having grown increasingly "irrelevant to broader philosophical and human concerns" (6), it requires transformation to become "the serious and important discipline that it can and ought to be" (34).

Analytic epistemologists restrict their focus to propositional knowledge. Our authors seem to agree, following Plantinga, that propositional knowledge is warranted true belief. But whereas warranted true belief is an intellectual good worth having, we also prize understanding and acquaintance, which, our authors argue, differ from propositional knowledge (42–55). Understanding is "an ability to recognize things," and differs from propositional knowledge "in not being necessarily propositional" (47). Acquaintance is "experiencing for oneself," and has epistemic value beyond its potential for grounding propositional knowledge (51). Indeed, propositional knowledge is a mere "abstraction from knowledge," where by 'knowledge' our authors mean a "richly intertwined bundle of understanding, acquaintance, and propositional knowledge" (153).

Even restricting attention to propositional knowledge, our authors argue, we should abandon analytic epistemology's misguided aims and methodology. Analytic epistemology's primary aim is to produce an accurate "e-definition": a formula stating the individually necessary and jointly sufficient conditions for propositional knowledge (and often also justification, warrant, and rationality). They deny this can be done, because *knowledge* is a family-resemblance concept, characterized by "a *fund* of properties some of which will be necessary, and enough of which will be sufficient, in any given case" (56).

Our authors also reject the analytic methodology of "regimenting" concepts "in a monistic, reductive, hierarchical, or derivational style." Anything less, analytic philosophers think, is "weak" and "impure" theorizing (23). Monistic reduction occurs when we derive "all the concepts in a given field from some single, key concept" (23). A proper hierarchical structure requires that if you explain B in terms of A, then you do not explain A in terms of B (25). Our authors eschew this approach, its characteristic "neatness compulsion" and the "confusing and pedantic analyses" it spawns, opting instead for "multi-directional" explanations of key epistemological concepts and a "messy, non-hierarchical logic" that better reflects "the concepts that govern" human life (26).

“Regulative epistemology,” which our authors practice, aims to enhance intellectual culture by promoting and inculcating virtuous dispositions. Our authors intend to influence their individual readers directly by enlightening and inspiring them, and the culture more generally by affecting educational leaders’ curricular development and teachers’ pedagogical practices (29–30). They intend to achieve this by clarifying our concepts and portraying the virtuous attainment of intellectual goods, which “can actually help people live that life” (27–28). The bulk of this work occurs in the book’s second part, of which our authors boldly claim, “The descriptions we offer of . . . love of knowledge and the virtues of epistemic humility, caution, courage, tenacity, openness, charity, and generosity *are* the chief regulators, insofar as philosophers can provide such” (28). They mine fiction and literature (e.g., Dickens, Tolstoy, Austen, the Christian Bible) and intellectual biography (e.g., Goodall, Galileo) to present us with illuminating and edifying examples of intellectual virtue and vice. The book’s second part may be the most sustained and nuanced treatment of epistemic psychology in the literature. It constitutes an admirable contribution.

Our authors define a human virtue as an acquired trait, which enables success in characteristic and important human activities. Virtues are acquired through training and education. Some virtues are perfective: they “complete” our native faculties. Some virtues are remedial: they “correct” our natural weaknesses. Virtues are intimately related to the will; distinctive motivation attends to the operation of most virtues. Cultural context affects the development of virtue. Generosity, for instance,

belongs, stylistically, to Christianity, and it does so because of the centrality of the Christian virtue of love. The centrality of love is a consequence of God’s generous love as revealed and embodied in Jesus Christ. (304)

Christianity also fosters

an intrinsic interest in important truths about history, nature, and human beings. Nature, including human beings, is God’s creation and reflects his intelligence and beauty; and he is the Lord of history. It is a natural extension of the worship of God to have reverence for and interest in the things he has made and rules. (304)

The virtue of love of knowledge packages a desire for knowledge, along with the sense of the relative importance of truths, and thus which truths merit pursuit (Chapter 6, *passim*). The social side of the love of knowledge includes a willingness and ability to convey relevant truths to others (165). Intellectual firmness disposes us to “grip currently possessed particular intellectual goods” just tightly enough, so that we are intellectually neither too rigid nor flaccid (206). Intellectual courage and caution are the virtues that dispose us to respond appropriately to perceived threats in our intellectual lives, courage disposing us to not be unduly intimidated, caution disposing us to not take inappropriate risks in achieving intellectual goods (219). Intellectual humility disposes us to be only minimally concerned with our reputation, especially when it would interfere with the acquisition of intellectual goods (250). Intellectual

autonomy disposes us to be appropriately dependent on others' intellectual guidance and achievements (261). Intellectual generosity disposes us to happily "[give] the intellectual goods freely to others, for their own sake" (293). Finally, practical wisdom consists in the ability to balance all relevant considerations, harmonize the demands of the various specialized intellectual virtues, and appropriately resolve any apparent conflicts, such as, for example, when autonomy and generosity appear to require incompatible responses to a situation (311).

I will close with some critical remarks. First, I was disappointed by the authors' unfortunate caricature of "analytic" philosophy. Analytic epistemologists—in which group the authors place most twentieth-century "English-speaking" epistemologists—are not monolithic in their aims and method. Some eschew e-definitions in favor of the explication of concepts.¹ Others deny that concepts are the proper object of philosophical study.² And although elegantly explaining all concepts in a domain by reference to a single fundamental notion is an admirable ideal—in science and mathematics, no less than philosophy—analytic philosophers do not insist on "regimenting" concepts as our authors claim. Some important clusters of related concepts can only be inter-defined.³ Foundationalists recognize the value of coherence as an independent source of justification, at least among beliefs with some prior quantity of foundational justification.⁴ And it is commonplace by now to recognize multiple fundamental epistemic values.⁵ Due to this caricature, the book unfortunately might be neglected by an audience that would otherwise appreciate our authors' insightful, positive contributions.

Second, I doubt that our authors' strategy of investigating knowledge, understood as an integrated amalgam of propositional knowledge, understanding and acquaintance, is helpful. We clearly have different concepts of these three things, so why would we not seek to understand each on its own terms? Of course, we ought to not lose sight of any important connections among them, but the same can be said for the connections between any of the intellectual goods and, say, moral responsibility or right action.

Third, Gilbert Harman and John Doris have argued that results from empirical psychology suggest that we simply do not have the sort of refined

¹ See, e.g., Edward Craig, *Knowledge and the State of Nature: An Essay in Conceptual Synthesis* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 8.

² Hilary Kornblith, *Knowledge and Its Place in Nature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

³ See e.g. H. P. Grice and P. F. Strawson, "In Defense of a Dogma," *Philosophical Review*, 65: 2 (April 1956), 141–158 (esp. pp. 148–9), and Alvin Plantinga, *The Nature of Necessity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).

⁴ See C. I. Lewis, *An Analysis of Knowledge and Valuation* (LaSalle, Illinois: Open Court, 1946), 334–352; Roderick Chisholm, *Theory of Knowledge*, 3rd ed. (Prentice Hall: Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, 1989), chapter 9; Susan Haack, *Evidence and Inquiry* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993).

⁵ Linda Zagzebski, "From Reliabilism to Virtue Epistemology," in *Knowledge, Belief, and Character* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000), ed. Guy Axtell; Michael DePaul, *Balance and Refinement: Beyond Coherence Methods of Moral Inquiry* (New York: Routledge), chapter 2; Michael DePaul, "Value Monism in Epistemology," in *Knowledge, Truth, and Duty* (Oxford: Oxford University Press: 2001), ed. Matthias Steup.

character traits, which feature so prominently in our authors' discussion.⁶ Yet our authors do not engage this challenge to their approach. Although not compulsory, a response to this challenge would have been welcome.

Fourth, we are given no evidence for thinking that practicing regulative epistemology is apt to "provide guidance" or affect intellectual cultural change. Might not practicing analytic epistemology (even as caricatured) fare better in that respect? Might we not be better off just reading good literature to educate ourselves in the life of the mind?

Fifth, our authors waffle on whether virtue has a success component. When discussing generosity, they claim, "if human efforts to do one another good through free giving *generally* failed to benefit people, then the disposition to make such effort would not count as a virtue" (287). Yet when discussing humility, they assert that even if humility did not generally bring intellectual goods, and even if arrogance was *more* effective than humility in this regard, "we ... would not give up our claim that humility is an intellectual virtue" (251). Instead, they say humility "is an intellectual virtue because it is exemplified in the context of intellectual practices." But arrogance and stupidity are often exemplified in our intellectual practices. They also tell us, "Virtues are traits of the person who is functioning as persons are supposed to function" (252). But even properly functioning people can have vices.

Sixth, our authors present an interesting argument against analytic virtue epistemology ('AVE'), i.e., virtue epistemology in the service of e-defining propositional knowledge (10–19; also see 108–111). Distinguish between *trait-based* and *faculty-based* virtue epistemology. Trait-based theory analyzes knowledge in terms of refined character traits, such as open-mindedness and honesty; faculty-based theory analyzes knowledge in terms of powers and abilities, such as eyesight, memory, and reasoning. Distinguish between "low-end" propositional knowledge, such the knowledge that results from merely observing that the lights just went out, and "high-end" propositional knowledge, such as the knowledge that DNA carries the genetic information of Earthling life or knowledge of one's moral weaknesses. Our authors argue that (1) virtuous faculties do not suffice for high-end knowledge, (2) virtuous traits are not necessary for low-end knowledge, and (3) no combination of virtuous faculties and traits is both necessary and sufficient for all cases of propositional knowledge. Therefore, AVE cannot successfully e-define propositional knowledge.

Their defense of 1 is underwhelming, relying on the thought that "it is implausible" that virtuous faculties suffice "to make great scientific discoveries or gain a deep understanding of your own moral nature" (10–11). But the requirements of scientific discovery or understanding outstrip those of propositional knowledge, and competent consumption of testimony will suffice for knowledge of science and one's personal strengths and weaknesses.

Their defense of 3 seems to depend on the idea that we can construct Gettier-style counterexamples to any virtue-theoretic definition.⁷ They feature the example of Sam, a scientist who discovers that a victim was murdered with poison X. With perseverance and ingenuity, Sam detects X, but his experiment

⁶ See John Doris, *Lack of Character: Personality and Moral Behavior* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

⁷ I thank Robert C. Roberts for helpful email correspondence on this point.

suffers from the following odd feature: the final ingredient he adds to the experiment is inert due to a lab assistant's mislabeling, but luckily overnight a janitor inadvertently spills the needed substance into the beaker. Our authors intuit that Sam has a true belief produced by intellectual virtue, but which is not knowledge. Can AVE handle this verdict? They review and critique some responses, but they do not consider the following response.⁸ We recognize a general distinction between (i) the occurrence of some condition C *manifesting* a power or disposition D, and (ii) C happening *merely because* of D. Glass is fragile. Recognizing this, when faced with a glass falling off the table, I reach out and catch it. The glass *remained intact* because it was fragile, although obviously its remaining intact does not manifest its fragility. In Sam's case, and others like it, the subject has a true belief because of his intellectual virtue, but the true belief fails to manifest his intellectual virtue. Virtue epistemologists should contend that knowledge requires the latter, not merely the former. Gettier cases result only when we have the former, not the latter. Problem solved. Another possible response: Sam's belief that the victim was murdered with poison X is partly based on his *false* belief that the experiment went as planned, and that explains why it is not knowledge.⁹

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⁸ Compare Ernest Sosa, *A Virtue Epistemology* v. 1 (Oxford: Oxford University Press), esp. pp. 42–3, and John Turr., "Manifest Failure: The Gettier Problem Solved," *Philosopher's Imprint* 11.8 (April 2001).

⁹ But see Fritz Warfield, "Knowledge From Falsehood," *Philosophical Perspectives*, 19, *Epistemology*, 2005.