Epistemic Virtue

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The basic idea of an epistemic virtue—of a quality or character trait thought to be truth-conducive—seems rather more tractable than its moral counterpart.\(^1\) What reader of such contemporary accounts as James Wallace’s *Virtues and Vices* or Alisdair MacIntyre’s *After Virtue* could say, with equal confidence and brevity, what it is to which the moral virtues are conducive?\(^2\) Lurking just below the surface, however, are some fundamental questions which I shall be addressing in this paper.

First, truth-conduciveness, or ‘reliability’, may be predicated of all sorts of items—ranging from causal processes like ‘a good memory’ to epistemic principles, rules, and strategies. Now, certainly, the epistemic virtues may be initially distinguished from these other truth-conducive items as the latter are not character traits. But are there, operating at a deeper level, reasons to think that the epistemic virtues should play anything like—as I shall be suggesting—a *special role* in epistemological theory?

Second, there is this familiar—but none the less troubling—concern. Let us assume that a Cartesian ‘evil demon’ has, unbeknownst to us, made our world such that truth is best attained by thoroughly exemplifying what, on our best crafted current accounts, qualify as intellectual *vices*. Presumably, we would not therefore conclude that these apparent vices are and have always been virtues. To be sure, if we were actually to find out that such was the case, *henceforth* we would have to alter our opinions about the worth of these qualities, to start encouraging their development, and so forth. But this is hardly to say that, retrospectively, Galileo should now be regarded as epistemically vicious and, say, Schmalileo, his lazy, intellectually uncurious brother, as epistemically virtuous. At least as I want to conceive them here, the epistemic virtues, and proper judgements respecting them, would not be affected by any such sceptical possibilities. So, for this account, truth-conduciveness cannot, as such, be the distinctive mark of the epistemic virtues.\(^3\) But what connection, then, will there be between truth and epistemic virtue?

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\(^1\) Well, perhaps not *all* that tractable: here I pass over the difficult question of whether there might not be other ends towards which these virtues are properly conducive, e.g., the avoidance of error, intellectual economy, or some combination of these with truth. For discussion of this, see Ernest Sosa’s ‘Knowledge and Intellectual Virtue’, *The Monist*, 1985, pp. 226–45.


\(^3\) I reject, then, the sort of teleological conception of epistemic virtues offered by Sosa, op. cit. (I...
Third, and relatedly, if we are to appraise the relative worth, or ‘virtue’ of epistemic agents by the truth-conduciveness of their intellectual dispositions, then how are we to accommodate the approximate equality of epistemic virtue we find in such diverse agents as Aristotle, Ptolemy, Albertus Magnus, Galileo, Newton, and Einstein? From our present vantage point, we recognize these thinkers as differing greatly in the truth of their respective beliefs and systems of belief—as well as in the truth-conduciveness of their leading ideas and methodological postulates. How can such rough equality in virtue be reconciled with this verific diversity?

1 From ‘Responsibility’ to Virtue

I begin with a notion already possessing great currency in the epistemological literature, that of ‘epistemic responsibility’. The view of this currently favoured, or sometimes just assumed, links such responsibility to an agent’s desires. Hilary Kornblith’s statement here is representative:

We are to measure the epistemic responsibility of agents by the extent to which they are regulated by a desire for the truth. From 'Responsibility' to Virtue

So this is quite a subjective notion of epistemic responsibility: one might say that as long as an agent is trying his best to arrive at the truth, it follows on this account that he is epistemically responsible. And this suggests, certainly, a parallel with moral conscientiousness, with the notion of an agent who is trying her best to do what she thinks is right. More importantly, what this suggests is that the current notion of epistemic responsibility is too weak to capture a full-blooded notion of epistemic virtue. For just as a moral fanatic may qualify as conscientious without being, on balance, very virtuous at all (except to his co-fanatics), we can easily imagine an ‘epistemic fanatic’ who is not epistemically very virtuous at all—for example, an extreme dogmatist, absolutely convinced of his possession of the truth, absolutely convinced that his methods of study of some sacred text are every day bringing in powerful new truths. Relevant here too, perhaps, is Dickens’s characterization of Sir Leicester Dedlock in *Bleak House*:

[a man] of strict conscience . . . honourable, obstinate, truthful, high-spirited, intensely prejudiced [and] perfectly unreasonable.

thank John Heil for helping me to see the necessity of doing this, even if he would not agree with the resulting view.) It should also be observed, though, that the question of the proper end of the epistemic virtues (alluded to in n. 1) does not just disappear on my view, but ultimately re-emerges as a question about what ends, besides truth, an epistemically conscientious person ought to seek.

4 'Ever Since Descartes', *The Monist*, 1985, p. 272. See also in this connection Kornblith’s view in his longer paper, ‘Justified Belief and Epistemically Responsible Action’, *Philosophical Review*, 1983, esp. p. 34. In a similar vein Keith Lehrer in *Knowledge*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1974, p. 190, writes that the way for a man to find what he would believe as an ‘impartial and disinterested inquirer after truth’ (what he calls a ‘veracious inquirer’) is to ‘strive for that ideal and see what he believes’.
This is a portrait of a conscientious man—and possibly a responsible one in Kornblith’s sense—but not, overall, a very virtuous one.\footnote{James Wallace cites these lines as illustrating the correlative thesis that moral conscientiousness does not suffice for an overall judgement that one is morally virtuous, op. cit., p. 93. A useful discussion of such conscientious but unvirtuous agents may be found in Lorraine Code’s essay, ‘Father and Son: A Case Study in Epistemic Responsibility’, The Monist, 1983, pp. 268–82.}

\section{The epistemic virtues: a preliminary catalogue}

The prevailing conception of the ‘responsible’ epistemic agent—we have now seen—must be filled out with some traits in addition to conscientiousness if we are to arrive at a satisfactorily robust notion of the virtuous epistemic agent. Yet these additional traits, I want to maintain, are not simply additional virtues, related to conscientiousness in the way that patience and loyalty may be regarded as distinct and independent moral virtues; rather, these others are forms of conscientiousness—\textit{ways of being conscientious}—related to the latter in roughly the way that moral courage is related to moral conscientiousness. Let me now describe what I take to be the two most important classes of such virtues, then resume discussion of the deeper problem of what makes such qualities epistemic virtues.

First, there are what I will call the virtues of \textit{impartiality}. These I take to include such particular qualities as an openness to the ideas of others, the willingness to exchange ideas with and learn from them, the lack of jealousy and personal bias directed at their ideas and the lively sense of one’s own fallibility. The second and complementary class I would term the virtues of \textit{intellectual courage}. These I take to include most prominently the willingness to conceive and examine alternatives to popularly held beliefs, perseverance in the face of opposition from others (until one is convinced one is mistaken), and the Popperian willingness to examine, and even actively seek out, evidence that would refute one’s own hypotheses. These classes I term ‘complementary’ in that they concern opposite, but it seems equally important, sides of the balanced intellectual personality: the latter comprising the ‘inner-directed’ virtues of a person of high intellectual integrity; the former, the ‘other-directed’ virtues which are necessary to sustain an intellectual \textit{community}—the epistemic equivalents, one might say, of Hume’s ‘amiable’ virtues.

I have deliberately characterized these qualities in quite broad terms. But one may be tempted to adopt this sort of narrower characterization. Instead, for example, of calling ‘an openness to others’ ideas’ a virtue, one might be tempted to speak of the relevant virtue here as ‘an openness to others’ ideas in so far as they are likely to be true’. And similarly for the other virtues. Such a change, however, in part for reasons already indicated, introduces too strong a notion of truth-conduciveness into our characterization. (If, unbeknownst to all, the words of some crazed oracle...}
actually turn out to be true, it should not follow that an openness specifically to this person’s ideas is an epistemic virtue.) At the other extreme, notice too that we may be tempted to think of the actual virtue here as something like ‘an openness to others’ ideas in so far as one takes them to be true’. But this of course is also a mistake, as it will imply that the most narrow-minded dogmatists are actually virtuous. These individuals are open to those ideas which they take to be true. We do not want, then, to build excessive objectivity or subjectivity into the epistemic virtues; so I let them stand simply as personality traits, analogous to such moral personality traits as kindness (rather than to ‘kindness to those persons who truly deserve kindness’ or, its subjective counterpart, ‘kindness to those persons who one takes to deserve it’).

What connection do these two classes of broadly defined qualities bear to the ‘overarching’ virtue of epistemic conscientiousness? Consider, first, intellectual courage (understood as a single generic trait). While it is true that those lacking in intellectual courage are characteristically also lacking in epistemic conscientiousness, these traits are distinguishable. Some persons, for instance, may shun possible sources of contrary ideas to their own, not so much fearing that these ideas are true, as fearing that they lack the wherewithal to avoid being misled into thinking them true. Such persons betray a degree of intellectual cowardice, but not necessarily any lack of desire for truth. By contrast, the conscientious dogmatist displays an opposite vice: fundamentally he is over-confident of his intellectual powers, thus, unable or unwilling to suspend his doxastic commitments in order to see whether or not his certitude is truly warranted.

Let me offer, then, the following suggestion. Fundamentally, the epistemic virtues (besides epistemic conscientiousness itself) are forms by which the latter may be regulated. Unregulated by these, bare conscientiousness (as we have seen) may degenerate into some form of intellectual dogmatism, cowardice, or related evil. Bare conscientiousness, that is, by no means guarantees a proper orientation either towards one’s own or others’ beliefs; and this is why the sorts of qualities we have been enumerating seem so necessary to intellectual enquiry (and integral to our notion of a virtuous enquirer).

3 The epistemic virtues: their epistemic status
We began by noting that many things—and not just personal qualities akin to the moral virtues—may be termed truth-conducive. And we have now indicated one way in which a certain class of apparently truth-conducive qualities stand out as forms of epistemic conscientiousness. In

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6 A correlative point. Notice that these allied qualities (included in intellectual courage and impartiality), when they are not exemplified out of an underlying conscientiousness, do not themselves contribute to a judgement that one is epistemically virtuous. Obviously, to listen to others’ ideas not out of a regard for their possible truth, but out of a desire to curry favour with them is no display of epistemic virtue.
this section I want to explore, in a somewhat more fundamental way, how the epistemic status of these qualities may distinguish them as well from other truth-conducive items.

To begin, an important part of our notion of a virtue, and a legacy of Aristotle, is that these are qualities we want so thoroughly engrained as to be habits. We want virtuous acts and the characteristic patterns of motivation underlying them to be exemplified, on appropriate occasions, with much of the ease and regularity of habits; and, more relevantly here, we want the virtues to be 'engrained' in being much more the basis of our actions and evaluation of actions than themselves the objects of continuing critical scrutiny and evaluation. This last point is crucial. We would like our children to be honest; thus, to be disposed to criticize their own and others' dishonesty. But we do not want them now, and only to a limited extent in the future, to be disposed to critically evaluate honesty itself. Nor would we want such critical evaluations of honesty, to the extent that they would be apposite, to emerge from a motivational attitude which is 'neutral' between honesty and mendaciousness. Notice, though, by way of contrast here, that even those of us who regard loyalties to political parties as sometimes a good thing are reluctant to inculcate 'loyalty to the Republicans' (or whomever) as a virtue; for this we want to be a matter for continuing rational investigation and critical scrutiny. (If there are some who would try to engrain 'loyalty to the Revolutionary Party' (or whomever) as virtues, of course all this shows is that some people, unfortunately, do wish political loyalties to be relatively safe from rational scrutiny.)

Consider now the application of this contrast to the epistemic sphere. A commitment to the truth is undeniably an epistemic virtue; a commitment, say, to an entirely behaviourist psychology would not seem to be one (even if we suppose it to be truth-conducive). Why not? The analogy here with the moral virtues and political loyalties is suggestive. We do not want a commitment to behaviourism to have the kind of relative immunity from critical scrutiny that we would accord to a commitment to the truth. Adherence to behaviourism, as much as Republicanism, we think, should be a matter of continuing reflection—and not in any sense a habit.7

Apparently, then, we want the epistemic (as well as the moral) virtues to be deeply entrenched motivationally as well as intellectually—and in this respect distinguishable, in degree if not in kind, from our commitments even to those general empirical and methodological postulates in which

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7 In emphasizing, however, this relative immunity of the virtues from sustained critical examination, certainly one further distinction needs to be made. Both in the moral and the epistemic sphere, the appropriate balancing of one virtue against another—justice against kindness, perseverance in one's own beliefs against openness to those of others—should be, we think, very much the stuff of continuing reflection. This I hardly deny. But critical reflection on whether, say, in a given case, honesty or kindness should be paramount, obviously is not the same as critical reflection on whether honesty of kindness are good qualities. It is the latter, not the former, from which the virtues should be regarded as being relatively immune. (I thank Hilary Kornblith for making me clarify this point.)
we are most confident. But, on a more fundamental level, is there anything we can cite to justify this greater desired entrenchment?

As a first attempt at an answer, we might consider the following. The epistemic virtues, unlike other putatively truth-conducive items, are transparently so. Although a persistent tendency to adhere to the pronouncements of B. F. Skinner might be truth-conducive, that this is so is far from transparent. By contrast, it does seem that qualities of intellectual courage and impartiality have a kind of transparent veracity to them. How could anyone not recognize their truth-conduciveness?

This proposal, however, is not without its difficulties. For one, it seems easy enough to imagine something like a tribe of ‘epistemic savages’, persons of incredibly sloppy epistemic practices (who, thanks to a bountiful natural setting, are not especially penalized for these vices). Now if these habits are thoroughly inculcated in the youth of this tribe, it might be true that, for even the boldest and most heterodox natures among them, the epistemic virtues would be anything but transparent.

I would address the above difficulty as follows. If we consider the various qualities in our enumeration of the epistemic virtues, this much at least seems clear: that if someone were conscientious, he would also want to have these other qualities; that is, he would want to be intellectually courageous and impartial (and to have the particular qualities these embrace). He will want to have the courage to pursue his own enquiries, to learn from others, yet not be unduly bound to their opinions regarding his enquiries—and so forth. Now return to our friends, the ‘epistemic savages’. Certainly the fact that they are epistemically vicious, even to the point of not being able to recognize some or all of the epistemic virtues, by itself creates no special problem for what I want to say. For all I wish to claim is that anyone who is epistemically conscientious will recognize these other qualities as virtues. As they are patently not epistemically conscientious, these individuals pose no problem for my account.

Yet this, no sooner said, gives rise to a new difficulty. If all these virtues will be desired by the epistemically conscientious person, what about our original case of the conscientious but unvirtuous dogmatist? How is this even possible? The answer is this. It is one thing to value an epistemic quality—even to value it and think that one possesses it to a satisfactory degree—but quite another to know whether one is exemplifying it to that degree. Our conscientious dogmatist may of course believe that he is being open to the ideas of other; but in truth he is not being so. Whereas he will value such openness at least to a degree, his very lack of this quality blinds him to the fact that he does not have it.

Another difficulty arises here, however. If the epistemically conscientious person desires these other virtues, it would seem that he must have some knowledge of their truth-conduciveness. I have insisted from the outset, though, that these qualities are not necessarily truth-conducive (that there
may be worlds, which may include ours, in which these qualities are not truth-conducive). Thus, knowledge of the truth-conduciveness of these qualities I cannot construe as the grasp of anything like a necessary truth. But what sort of knowledge, then, is involved here? Although one might know a priori that such artfully described qualities as ‘an openness to others’ ideas in so far as they are likely to be true’ are truth-conducive, this seems about as far as a priori knowledge here would extend. As I have construed them, knowledge of the truth-conduciveness of genuine (not artfully described) epistemic virtues is, and can only be empirical, based on observation of their workings in our own and others’ lives.

There is one final problem, however, in the present connection. Assuming that this knowledge is simply empirical, is not the special status—the special ‘entrenchment’ of the epistemic virtues discussed above—now suddenly threatened? No, and for two reasons. First, an important disparity remains between the very apparent truth-conduciveness of a quality like an openness to others’ ideas and scientific claims whose truth is anything but apparent. As opposed to the latter, the truth-conduciveness of the epistemic virtues is notable for the wide variety and non-technical (or uncontrived) character of the circumstances in which it may be observed. Second, there are important non-cognitive reasons for this entrenchment, which pertain to the difference between inculcating a motivational tendency and imparting a truth—even a truth upon which such a tendency might be based. Teaching you that an openness to others’ ideas is truth-conducive is obviously quite different from making you thus open; knowledge even of all the propositions grounding a motivational tendency is no guarantee that one will have the tendency itself. In part owing to this disparity, such motivational tendencies in many cases are best instilled early in life—some time before a child could be said to know that these qualities are truth-conducive. So this, then, is a second source of the entrenchment of the epistemic virtues. As motivational tendencies, they need this entrenchment in order to be maximally effective.

To summarize, I characterize the epistemic virtues as traits of epistemic character which, if they are not epistemic conscientiousness itself, are desired by the epistemically conscientious person in virtue of their apparent truth-conduciveness under a very wide variety of ordinary, uncontrived circumstances. Partly for this reason, they possess the kind of entrenchment Aristotle describes the moral virtues as having. This entrenchment, however, is grounded empirically in what are purely contingent features of our epistemic situation; in other ‘possible worlds’ the epistemic vices of this world may indeed be virtues.

4 Scepticism and Epistemic Virtues: Two Problems Resolved
The preceding discussion has brought us to the point of solving the sceptical problem posed at the outset. Reduced to its essentials, the
problem was this. Could we develop an account of the epistemic virtues such that the qualities we presently judge to be virtues would remain so, even were we systematically misled with respect to their truth-conduciveness?

We have developed such an account. On the view defended in the last section, the epistemic virtues are distinctively qualities which an epistemically conscientious person would want to have. This, as I have explained, is not the same thing as to say that they are, or must be, truth-conducive. Conceivably, a trait such as openness to others’ ideas might not be so. Conceivably, the world might be such that the contrary quality—a relative imperviousness to others’ ideas—is actually truth-conducive. My claim is, and need only be, that an epistemically conscientious person would not want to have such a trait. That is, even were the world such that (contrary to all appearances) imperviousness to others’ ideas is truth-conducive, no truth-desiring person (given these same appearances) would want to have this epistemic character trait.

‘But if we have no guarantee that these qualities are truth-conducive, why should a truth-desiring person—as you maintain—want them?’ I answer, simply, that a truth-desiring person, in the absence of a guarantee of the way that the world actually is, can do no better than to rely on the way it appears to be. Given our present epistemic situation, these qualities do appear to be truth-conducive. If the truth-seeker can do no better than to rely on appearances, certainly she could do worse—by systematically ignoring them.

We are also in a position now to achieve the third strategic objective identified at the start of the discussion. This was to reconcile our judgements of rough equality in epistemic virtue, holding among a whole series of famous historical enquirers (Aristotle, Ptolemy, et al.), with the fact that these thinkers differ radically from the standpoint of the truth and truth-conduciveness of their respective beliefs, methods, leading hypotheses, etc. The point to be made here is just this. In terms of the qualities which actually comprise the epistemic virtues, if our account is correct, there certainly will be a rough equality holding among these thinkers. Whatever their differences, it is a reasonable assumption that these thinkers do not differ markedly in their epistemic conscientiousness, or in their supporting qualities of intellectual courage and impartiality.

May it be objected that these thinkers are admired for, and judged roughly equal in, other epistemic qualities as well, especially ones pertaining to the power and originality of their intellects? In part, I concede this point—while insisting, however, on the following contrast. Consider poor Schmeinstein, Einstein’s forgotten contemporary. This man was the equal of Einstein, let us suppose, in all the qualities I have counted epistemic virtues, but was his drastic inferior in terms of the respective powers of their intellects. Is Schmeinstein the ‘intellectual equal’ or ‘as great an
enquirer' as Einstein? Obviously not. But is Schmeinstein epistemically as *virtuous* as Einstein? Here I submit only that, in at least one quite intuitive sense of this term, they are equal in this respect. So while I would never claim that equality in the attributes I have claimed to be epistemic virtues is the sole basis of our judgement of the *overall* epistemic worth of enquirers, I can account for what otherwise seems quite anomalous; that persons can be equal in (epistemic) virtue, amidst great disparities in the truth and truth-conduciveness of their beliefs.8

5 From virtue to justification: the problem of truth

Let me now turn to the first, and remaining, question posed at the outset of this paper. Are there reasons to think that the epistemic virtues may play anything like a special role in epistemological theory? What I shall try to do here, building on the discussion of the previous section, is to show how our conception of epistemic virtue could play a distinctive role in a theory of epistemic *justification*, thus guaranteeing, if I am right, the epistemic virtues some special status in epistemology as a whole.

Now, to begin, it seems reasonable to suppose that any account of epistemic justification must somehow link this notion to that of *truth*. For unless such links can be made, we might have to concede that a person interested in truth need not be concerned at all with whether her beliefs are justified—surely an embarrassing concession for epistemology. In forging some link between truth and justification, however, one faces the same sceptical problem with which we have been wrestling in formulating an account of epistemic virtue. Here the point can be put most forcefully, I think, in this way. Take apparently the most knowledgeable, the most committed, the most noble enquirers of our era; and suppose that the (hidden) truth of some radical sceptical hypothesis renders their personal qualities, their leading hypotheses, indeed every salient feature of their intellects distinctly *not* truth-conducive. Would not their beliefs—if anyone's—remain justified?9 But if so, how *can* truth and justification be related?

Here I shall try to argue that a notion of justification which is based upon the preceding discussion of the epistemic virtues offers at least one plausible solution to this problem—is able to provide at least one intuitive link between justification and truth which withstands the encroachments

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8 Thus, in an important sense, the notion of 'epistemic virtue'—if it is to accommodate the considerations advanced in this section—must be seen as independent of the different substantive intellectual systems to which Ptolemy, Aristotle, Einstein (and Schmeinstein) adhere. Such a separation, I might add, would be rejected by orthodox reliabilists (see the discussion of this point in section 8, esp. n. 16).

9 An incisive discussion of the problems this raises for Alvin Goldman's currently very influential reliabilist view of epistemic justification, see Jonathan Kvanvig's 'How to be a Reliabilist', *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 1986, pp. 189–97.
of scepticism. (I shall not try to argue, however—and do not maintain—that any notion of 'epistemic virtue' by itself can generate a complete account of epistemic justification.)

The connection between truth and justification, from the standpoint of my view of epistemic virtue can be briefly stated as follows. Step one: If I am epistemically conscientious (that is, truth-desiring), I will want to have the other epistemic virtues as well. (This, of course, was part of the upshot of our discussion in section 3.) Step two: But what is it to want a set of epistemic virtues if it is not to want to have these qualities regulate the formation (and continued holding) of one's beliefs—that is, to want to have virtuously formed and/or sustained beliefs? Thus, we can say that anyone who seeks after true beliefs will seek to have virtuously formed ones. And thus—step three—we can also say, in so far as the notion of a justified belief is to be understood as a virtuously formed belief, anyone who seeks after true beliefs will, of necessity, be seeking after justified ones.

The point, then, is that this notion of a 'virtuously formed belief', which emerges from our conception of epistemic virtue, is able to link truth and justification—and to do so even if, owing to some sceptical contretemps, in fact justification and truth are objectively unrelated (or even negatively correlated). At the very least, the seeker after truth must be a seeker after epistemic virtue and, to that extent, a seeker after justified belief.

6 The voluntariness objection

At least some of the central terms of epistemology—'justified', for one—are unarguably normative. To that extent, all epistemologies are normative. But some epistemologies, in an important sense, are strongly normative. These seek to understand the epistemic credentials of beliefs in terms of certain evaluative personal attributes of believers—traits which, moreover, bear strong analogies to terms of moral evaluation of persons. Such epistemologies speak, for example, of the epistemological 'responsibilities' or the intellectual 'obligations' of doxastic agents. As I use this term, then, the view of epistemic justification suggested in the previous section would be strongly normative, for it grounds the justifiedness of beliefs, in part, in terms of the personal virtues displayed in their formation and/or retention. And by contrast, currently influential 'reliabilist' views—because they ground justification in what is not a personal evaluative attribute, the

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notion of a reliably functioning system of belief formation—would be normative,\textsuperscript{11} but not strongly so.

Now the following objection may, it seems, be raised against any strongly normative system. Typically, it is stated in these terms.

Belief is not subject, or is only rarely subject, to our direct voluntary control. But terms of normative evaluation apply to persons only on the condition of such control (‘ought implies can’). Hence, any (strongly) normative conception of epistemic appraisal must limit itself to the evaluation of those actions which affect what we believe; and, thus, will fail to provide a satisfactory account of the justification of beliefs themselves.\textsuperscript{12}

Of late, William Alston\textsuperscript{13} has pursued this line of argument most strenuously, maintaining that the involuntariness of belief forces defenders of a normative approach to epistemic justification to adopt a ‘wildly permissive’ criterion such as this one he offers:

$S$ is justified in believing that $p$ if and only if $S$’s belief that $p$ did not, so far as $S$ can tell, stem from $S$'s violations of intellectual obligations. (p. 200)

If we replace here ‘violations of intellectual obligations’ with something like ‘substantial deficiencies in intellectual virtue,’ the tendered view is not markedly unlike my own; so let me try to rebut Alston’s specific argument (before moving on to a more general discussion of the whole voluntariness issue as it bears on epistemic evaluation).

Alston writes of the criterion just quoted:

We rarely have reason to think that one of our beliefs stems from intellectual transgressions. To know about the causal history of our beliefs takes research, and we rarely engage in such research. Hence we have very few beliefs about the causal history of our beliefs. And so practically all beliefs, no matter how shoddy or disreputable, will be justified on this criterion. (p. 200)

This is puzzling. Dan the Dogmatist may very rarely engage in research upon, or think much about, ‘the causal history of his beliefs’; but, assuming that many of these beliefs do issue from intellectual transgressions (or epistemic vices), it may well be true that Dan has ample reason to think that this is so. Again, the fact that he has very few beliefs about how his beliefs can about surely does not exonerate him from normative criticism regarding this genesis—certainly not if the explanation of this block is


\textsuperscript{13} ‘Internalism and Externalism in Epistemology’, \textit{Philosophical Topics}, 1986, pp. 179-221.
some epistemic vice (as opposed to a mere deficiency of intellectual ability) of Dan's. And again, notice, the fact that Senator Windbag is a pompous ass may give him a perfectly good reason for thinking that he is—even though, being one, he is not much given to such thoughts. This, surely, does not render the Senator justified in his belief that he is not an ass. Unlike Alston, I find no wild permissiveness here.

Speaking in broader terms now, I believe that the supposed involuntariness of belief—whatever its import for other strongly normative epistemologies—fails to touch a virtue-based conception. For notice that a very clear indication of the nature and extent of one's virtues and vices (moral or epistemic) may be found in the reasons one has for one's actions/beliefs. Thus, just as moral courage is reflected in the reasons for which a person acts or disdains action, intellectual courage is, for example, reflected in one's foot not forming beliefs for reasons relating to their popularity with others; impartiality, in one's not rejecting beliefs because of one's personal feelings about those who may happen already to hold them. Are not, though, reasons for belief different from reasons for action in not requiring the voluntariness of that for which they are reasons? No, far from being true as a general thesis, this is not even true for the examples at hand. A person utterly lacking in courage may display this precisely by acting involuntarily for reasons of personal safety. Moreover, it is a mistake to suppose, as any kind of general thesis, that the distinctive exercises of a virtue or vice must be voluntary—they need not. In fact, there are qualities (for example, kindness) which require that one have certain kinds of involuntary reactions. In short, then, even were it the case—what I have argued elsewhere is a mistake—that believing for reasons exhibits characteristically less voluntariness than acting for reasons, this is no bar to the evaluation of beliefs in terms of the epistemic virtues.

7 The problem of spontaneous belief formation

Now let us address another troublesome question. If the epistemic virtues and vices are to play anything like a systematic role in the evaluation of actions, it would seem necessary to show that they play some role in the determination of all beliefs—or, at least, all those beliefs which we take to be suitable objects of epistemic appraisal. But is this actually so? Are traits of epistemic character always operative?

Here I turn directly to what seems the most difficult type of case for my account: ordinary 'spontaneous' perceptual beliefs of the sort we are constantly forming. If any beliefs are not subject to mediation by epistemic


character traits, presumably it will be these. So what account can be given of such beliefs?

To begin, let us notice that it is dubious that processes of spontaneous belief formation must always be subject to epistemic appraisal; for in such cases as those of very small children, it seems plausible to maintain, they are not. If we follow this line of thought, such very early perceptual beliefs would be neither justified nor unjustified; justification would only enter in at the point when one is sophisticated enough to weigh and evaluate sensory evidence. For only at this point, the claim would be, can believers be judged according to whether, and how successfully, they have exercised this evaluative capacity. But notice, at this point believers are very much exhibiting and exercising traits of epistemic character. They are being either careful or careless, rushing to judgement or exercising due caution, willfully ignoring or judiciously applying past experience, and so forth. So, relative to this view of perceptual justification, spontaneous perceptual beliefs need pose no very serious problem for our view of epistemic virtue. Where these beliefs are not formed by doxastic agents able to exercise traits of epistemic character, they are not subject to evaluative appraisal; where they are formed by such agents, then even failures to apply reflective checks on spontaneous belief may be judged both instances of bad epistemic character and of defectively formed beliefs.

Of course, some would maintain that very small children—and non-human animals even—can have beliefs which are justified or unjustified according to whether their perceptual system is currently functioning in a ‘reliable’ way. Although I have already alluded to the reasons one might have for rejecting this overall conception of justification (see note 9 and the related discussion in the text), in the present connection let me register my doubt as to whether this view can very plausibly distinguish justified belief and true belief in such perceivers as very small children. Take, for example, a child’s first exposure to an environment in which things do not have the colours they appear to have. Are his initial false beliefs in this environment justified or not? One can give reliabilist arguments on either side. What one is unfortunately barred from doing—at least from the standpoint of reliabilism in its purest (and most instructive) forms—is fully accommodating what seems the most relevant consideration here, namely, that the child has no reason to think that her early beliefs in this environment are false. Once, though, we do give entrance to talk of ‘reasons’, the epistemic virtues rush in as well. For any talk of the child’s being evaluated according to her having reasons based on past experience will be starkly incongruous unless she is sophisticated enough to be meaningfully said to be ‘heeding’ or ‘being heedless of’ these lessons of past experience. And once such predicates are applicable, then we clearly have an operative concern with epistemic virtue.

What I think is true of relatively spontaneous, unreflective perceptual
beliefs is that the range of epistemic qualities likely to be engaged, or displayed, in their formation is quite small. Notably, qualities pertaining to one’s relation to an epistemic community are not likely to be present. Still, my point has been that if someone has what seems the requisite sophistication to be an object of epistemic appraisal, it also seems that he will possess and be exercising (or be judged faulty for failing to exercise) traits of epistemic character. As with moral character, one’s intellectual personality begins to be formed, and to emerge, at quite an early age. And from quite an early age we begin to apply terms of epistemic appraisal to children’s beliefs. The (rough) coincidence of these, of course I would maintain, is no accident.

8 Conclusion

Enough has now been said, I think, to indicate at least the general contours of a normative epistemology formulated in terms of the epistemic virtues. In closing, though, it will be instructive to set our previous discussion in a larger context. In what systematic ways should we expect this conception to deviate from ones extant in the current literature?

First, this would tend to be a more ‘liberal’, more relativistic view than such reliabilist theories of justification as Alvin Goldman’s—and in two important respects. (1) It makes no general demand that one’s belief-producing processes be reliable, but is concerned only with traits of epistemic character. For this reason, as noted above, it is able to capture—in a way in which the reliabilist seemingly cannot—our intuitive notion that thinkers whose ideas differ radically in truth-conduciveness (Ptolemy and Einstein, say) may yet be equal in epistemic virtue.16 (2) It requires only that these epistemic character traits be suitably connected to the desire, not the likelihood, of attaining truth. For this reason, also as noted, it does not fall prey to the sceptical difficulties apparently besetting reliabilist accounts.

Second, though, in certain important respects this is a less liberal and relativistic view than today’s most influential rivals to Goldman-type views: rivals which would be variously describable as ‘internalist’, ‘coherentist’, or ‘non-naturalist’.

To begin with, a virtue-based conception allows that someone can be justified in her beliefs without having anything like satisfactory access, within the scope of her own beliefs, to what is making them unjustified. 16 Hilary Kornblith has remarked that the reliabilist may account for this disparity just by noting that, say, Aristotle and Galileo, may be equally reliable doxastic agents whose intellectual outputs differ in veracity because they have received different inputs. But this seems true only in the sense that had, say, Baby Aristotle been transported to sixteenth-century Italy, he might have grown up to be as reliable a doxastic agent as Galileo. If, though, we treat Aristotle’s leading ideas not as ‘outputs’, but as part of a system for generating outputs, this system cannot be judged as ‘virtuous’ as Galileo’s—which is precisely my point.
It is a hallmark of anti-reliabilist views to demand such access; mine does not. This is a matter of some importance. As noted in my criticisms of Alston, I make no requirement that ‘R is a reason for S to believe that p’ entail anything like ‘S recognizes (or is even disposed to think) that R is a reason to believe that p’. For, as was observed in section 3, it is characteristic of epistemic vices that they blind us to those very considerations which would generate reasons to change our beliefs. If we think of such internalist authors as Lehrer and Bonjour as trying to construe the justification of S’s belief that p entirely in terms of the set of other beliefs which S now has (entirely in terms of what Lehrer calls ‘the circle of belief’), then their approach must be regarded as fundamentally different from my own. To this extent, as my discussion of ‘Senator Windbag’ will have brought out, I am not an internalist. I do not maintain, nor should be virtue-based theory maintain, that the question of whether a given belief is justified must depend entirely on the subject’s own ‘internal resources’ available to him at the time, that is, his own beliefs. We can be justly criticized not only for failing to believe what we should believe, given our other beliefs; but for failing to believe what we should, but do not, have beliefs to support. For, as we saw in the Senator’s case, an intellectual vice may be responsible for our failure to have such supporting beliefs. Here, to use Alston’s term, it would be wildly permissive to excuse all such failures as ‘justified relative to the subject’s own internal resources’. But I make no such excuse for the epistemically vicious.

There are two further respects in which the approach I have been suggesting will be more demanding than ‘internalist’ ones. Lehrer, we have noted, has construed justification (roughly) as coherence with those beliefs which an agent accepts out of a desire to attain truth. This, we have seen, is too limited a requirement: at the very least this relativization should be to those beliefs which are virtuously accepted. Also, though this is a peculiarity of Lehrer’s formulation of internalism, a virtue-based account will insist (contra Lehrer and his well-known case of the ‘Gypsy Lawyer’), that what justifies a belief must stand in some causal (or at least explanatory) relation to it, rather than (as Lehrer would have it) merely a logical or evidentiary relation. The reason for this is straightforward. In the absence of such an explanatory relationship, we cannot very well think of a belief as virtuously held: unless traits of good epistemic character play some role in explaining why I now believe p, then this belief may be something which coheres with what I virtuously believe, but it will not be itself virtuously believed. If I carelessly form a belief that p, a belief

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18 Knowledge, p. 188.
which happens to cohere with what I more virtuously believe, this hardly serves to show that I virtuously believe \( p \).\(^{20}\)

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