Virtues and Vices of Virtue Epistemology

JOHN GRECO
Fordham University
Rose Hill Campus
Bronx, NY 10458
USA

In recent years, virtue epistemology has won the attention of a wide range of philosophers. A developed form of the position has been expounded forcefully by Ernest Sosa and represents the most plausible version of reliabilism to date. Through the person of Alvin Plantinga, virtue epistemology has taken philosophy of religion by storm, evoking objections and defenses in a wide variety of journals and volumes. Historically, virtue epistemology has its roots in the work of Thomas Reid, and the explosion of Reid scholarship in the last few years is perhaps both a cause and an effect of recent interest in the position.¹

In this paper I want to examine the virtues and vices of virtue epistemology. My conclusion will be that the position is correct, when qualified appropriately. The central claim of virtue epistemology is that, Gettier problems aside, knowledge is true belief which results from a cognitive virtue. In section one I will clarify this claim with some brief remarks about the nature of virtues in general, and cognitive virtues in particular. In section two I will consider two objections to the theory of

knowledge which results. In section three of the paper I will argue that virtue epistemology can be qualified so as to avoid the objections raised in section two. Finally, I will argue that the amendments which solve the objections of section two also allow us to solve a version of the dreaded generality problem.

Specifically, I will argue that not all reliable cognitive virtues give rise to knowledge. Rather, a cognitive virtue gives rise to knowledge only if (i) it is reliable, and (ii) the reliability of the virtue is the result of epistemically responsible doxastic practices. In cases of knowledge, reliability is grounded in responsible belief formation and maintenance. The resulting position has ramifications for the analysis of knowledge, the internalism-externalism debate concerning epistemic justification, and the problem of skepticism.

I What is a Cognitive Virtue?

A virtue, in one important sense, is an ability. An ability, in turn, is a stable disposition to achieve certain results under certain conditions. Further, when we say that a subject S has an ability to achieve certain results, we imply that it is no accident that S achieves those results. S’s disposition to achieve the relevant results is grounded in certain properties of S, such that under the appropriate conditions any subject with those properties would tend to achieve those results.

For example, Don Mattingly has the ability to hit baseballs. This means that Mattingly has a stable disposition to hit baseballs under appropriate conditions, although Mattingly will not hit the baseball every time under those conditions. Further, it is no accident that Mattingly tends to hit baseballs. Mattingly’s tendency to hit baseballs is grounded in certain properties of Mattingly, such that anyone with those properties would also tend to hit baseballs with similar success in similar conditions.

As we have said above, the central idea of virtue epistemology is that, Gettier problems aside, knowledge is true belief which results from one’s cognitive virtues. A cognitive virtue, in the sense intended, is an ability to arrive at truths in a particular field, and to avoid believing falsehoods in that field, under the relevant conditions. Examples of human cognitive virtues are sight, hearing, introspection, memory, deduction and induction. Thus cognitive virtues have also been called ‘cognitive faculties,’ or ‘faculties of the mind.’

A more exact definition of cognitive virtue is as follows.

(V) A mechanism M for generating and/or maintaining beliefs is a cognitive virtue if and only if M is an ability to believe true
propositions and avoid believing false propositions within a field of propositions $F$, when one is in a set of circumstances $C$.

According to the above formulation, what makes a cognitive mechanism a cognitive virtue is that it is reliable in generating true beliefs rather than false beliefs in the relevant field and in the relevant circumstances. It is correct to say, therefore, that virtue epistemology is a kind of reliabilism. Whereas generic reliabilism maintains that justified belief is belief which results from a reliable cognitive process, virtue epistemology puts a restriction on the kind of process which is allowed. Specifically, the cognitive processes which are important for justification and knowledge are those which have their bases in a cognitive virtue.

Let us use the term ‘positive epistemic status’ to designate that property (whatever it may be) which turns true belief into knowledge, Gettier problems aside. Then an important corollary of virtue epistemology is as follows.

(VE) S’s belief that $p$ has positive epistemic status for $S$ if and only if $S$’s believing that $p$ is the result of some cognitive virtue of $S$.

The claim embodied in (VE) has a high degree of initial plausibility. By making the idea of faculty reliability central, virtue epistemology explains nicely why beliefs caused by perception and memory often have positive epistemic status, while beliefs caused by wishful thinking and superstition do not. Second, the theory gives us a basis for answering certain kinds of skepticism. Specifically, we may agree that if we were brains in a vat, or victims of a Cartesian demon, then we would not have knowledge even in those rare cases where our beliefs turned out true. But virtue epistemology explains that what is important for knowledge is that our cognitive faculties are in fact reliable in the conditions we are in. And so we do have knowledge so long as we are in fact not victims of a Cartesian demon, or brains in a vat.

But although virtue epistemology has initial plausibility, it faces at least two substantial objections. I turn to those objections now.

II Objections to Virtue Epistemology

One objection facing virtue epistemology is that (VE) seems too strong. There are cases where S’s cognitive faculties are wholly unreliable with respect to S’s believing that $p$, but where S is nevertheless justified, in some important sense, in believing that $p$. Another objection facing virtue epistemology is that (VE) seems too weak. There are cases where
S’s believing that p results from a reliable cognitive faculty, but where S is epistemically irresponsible in believing that p.

Both of the above objections have been recognized and addressed by virtue epistemologists. Most notably, Sosa and Plantinga have developed detailed epistemologies which include (VE) as a central thesis, and which are designed to avoid the kinds of objections currently under discussion. In the remainder of this section I will consider Sosa’s and Plantinga’s strategies for responding to the above objections, and I will argue that their responses are inadequate. In the next section I will argue that virtue epistemology can be amended so as to avoid these objections. Finally, I will argue that the suggested amendments help us to avoid a version of the generality problem as well. What is required is that we add an internalist element to our criterion for positive epistemic status. Our conclusion will be that knowledge is true belief which results from a cognitive virtue, but not just any cognitive virtue. Those cognitive virtues which are important for knowledge and justification have their bases in epistemically responsible belief formation and maintenance. In other words, in cases of knowledge reliability is grounded in responsibility.

1. The evil demon problem for virtue epistemology.

The first objection faced by virtue epistemology is that (VE) seems too strong. This objection arises if we think that positive epistemic status is closely related to epistemic justification. More specifically, it seems possible that an epistemic agent could be justified in believing that p, even when her intellectual faculties are largely unreliable. Suppose, for example, that Kathy is the victim of a Cartesian deceiver. Despite her best efforts almost none of Kathy’s beliefs about the world around her are true. It is clear that in this case Kathy’s faculties of perception are almost wholly unreliable. But we would not want to say that none of Kathy’s perceptual beliefs are justified. If Kathy believes that there is a tree in her yard, and if she bases this belief on the kind of experience usually caused by trees, then it seems that she is as justified as we would be regarding a similar belief. The problem for virtue epistemology is to account for this intuition. There is something about Kathy’s belief which is epistemically valuable, i.e. valuable in a way which is relevant for having knowledge. Yet it is clear that Kathy’s belief is not the result of a cognitive virtue in the sense defined by (V).

Plantinga’s strategy for addressing the evil demon problem is to admit that Kathy’s belief is justified in some sense, but not in a sense that is sufficient for positive epistemic status. According to Plantinga, the victim of the evil deceiver has epistemically blameless belief, in the sense
that her belief does not violate any of her epistemic obligations. However, Plantinga argues, not violating one's epistemic obligations is not sufficient for having positive epistemic status. The latter property requires that one's belief is grounded in an objectively reliable cognitive virtue. As far as I can see, Plantinga is right about this. In other words, he is right that epistemic blamelessness is not sufficient for positive epistemic status, and that positive epistemic status requires grounding in an objectively reliable cognitive faculty. But I will argue below that not violating one's epistemic obligations is necessary for positive epistemic status, and that Plantinga's theory of epistemic virtue does not account for this. But this discussion should be postponed to Section II: 2, where I discuss the objection that (VE) is too weak.

Sosa's strategy for addressing the evil demon problem is to make justification relative to an environment. Thus Sosa recognizes that there is something valuable about Kathy's belief, even though that belief has its origin in wholly unreliable cognitive faculties. What is valuable about Kathy's belief, Sosa argues, is that it is produced by cognitive faculties which would be reliable in our environment.

On the present proposal, aptness is relative to an environment. Relative to our actual environment A, our automatic experience-belief mechanisms count as virtues that yield much truth and justification and aptness. Of course, relative to the demonic environment D, such mechanisms are not virtuous and yield neither truth nor aptness. It follows that relative to D the demon's victims are not apt, and yet relative to A their beliefs are apt.

The above proposal by Sosa is an interesting one, but some questions arise. First, couldn't we construct the example so that Kathy's cognitive mechanisms are not reliable relative to our environment? Thus suppose that Kathy is a brain in a vat, hooked up to a super computer which causes her to have experiences exactly similar to the experiences that I am having now. If in these circumstances Kathy forms the belief that there is a glass of water on the table in front of her, her belief should be as justified as is my belief that there is a glass of water on the table in front of me. But if Kathy were in my environment her cognitive faculties would not be reliable at all, and in fact would be incapable of connecting her with reality at all. For if Kathy were in my environment, rather than hooked up to a super computer, she would lack the faculties for producing experiences. She would be a helpless brain on a desk. What the

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2 Plantinga, 'Positive Epistemic Status,' 8ff.

3 Sosa, 'Intellectual Virtue in Perspective,' in Knowledge in Perspective, 289
example shows is that Sosa’s account must define environments very specifically, so that one’s environment includes being inside a normal head with normal sensory apparatus. Or alternatively, he must define sets of circumstances very specifically, so as to include being inside a head and having normal sensory apparatus. This might seem odd, but it only shows that Sosa’s notion of an environment or of a set of circumstances must be a technical one.

However, there seems to be another problem for the account. Suppose that Kathy’s powers of reasoning are helped by her vat environment. We may imagine that Kathy’s natural reasoning mechanisms are defective, but that the fluids in the vat serve to correct the defect. Thus inside the vat environment Kathy is a flawless reasoner. But if Kathy were in a normal environment, i.e., inside a normal head with normal sensory apparatus, her reasoning mechanisms would be defective and thus unreliable. Now suppose that Kathy believes that the house in front of her was built before 1900, and that she believes this partly on the basis of her present experience and partly on the basis of her reasoning from this experience. It seems to me that Kathy could be perfectly justified in this belief, even though she is a brain in a vat and the cognitive mechanisms which produce her belief are not reliable. However, the mechanisms which produce Kathy’s belief are not reliable relative to our environment either, since in our environment Kathy would lack the vat fluids which correct her cognitive defects.

Sosa might attempt to solve the problem as follows. We could define environments very specifically, so as to include being in a normal head, etc., and then define sets of circumstances in terms of experiential and doxastic inputs. Cognitive mechanisms would then be dispositions to form certain beliefs in a field, given certain experiential and doxastic inputs. We could then say that what is valuable about Kathy is not that she would have virtues if she were in our environment, but that the cognitive mechanisms she does have in her environment would be virtues in our environment.4

I take it that there are at least two problems with the latest proposal: one for Sosa’s positions in particular; and one for virtue epistemology in general. First, Sosa’s position requires an epistemic perspective on one’s own cognitive virtues in order to have reflective justification, and in order to solve the generality problem.5 But it is implausible that the

4 Here I am indebted to Sosa, who suggested this response in conversation.

5 The notion of an epistemic perspective and its role in Sosa’s account of reflective justification is discussed below.
typical believer has such a perspective when virtues are defined in terms of experiential inputs. I take it that the experience-belief pairs that would describe a reliable mechanism must be very detailed regarding the quality of the experiences involved. But in the typical case there is no such detailed perspective on even our present experiences, much less the range of our possible experiences.

Second, Sosa’s account of what is valuable about Kathy’s belief assumes that Kathy’s cognitive mechanisms would be reliable in our environment. But this assumes that our cognitive mechanisms are reliable in our environment. We think Kathy is reliable because she is like us in relevant respects, and we think we are reliable. But suppose we are victims of an evil deceiver, or that we are brains in a community vat. Then Kathy’s mechanisms are no more reliable in our environment than they are in hers. And thus, according to Sosa’s account, Kathy’s beliefs are not justified relative to our environment. But this seems wrong—there seems to be something valuable about Kathy’s beliefs whether or not she or we are victims of an evil deceiver. There is something epistemically important about the way her and our beliefs are formed, whether or not they are formed via cognitive faculties which are objectively reliable relative to our environment.

I would like to suggest that what is epistemically valuable about Kathy’s beliefs is that they are right from her point of view. From Kathy’s point of view, the way in which she has formed her beliefs, and the way in which she continues to maintain them, is perfectly correct or appropriate. Thus I am suggesting that knowledge has a subjective element. It is not enough that one’s belief be in fact true and in fact caused by a reliable cognitive faculty; the way in which one forms and maintains one’s beliefs must be correct or appropriate from one’s own point of view as well. In section III, I will attempt to spell out in more detail the kind of correctness which I think is involved. However, we can pursue the point on a more general level by considering the second of our two objections to virtue epistemology.

2. The problem of epistemic irresponsibility.

The second objection to be considered is that (VE) is too weak. Specifically, we can imagine cases where S’s cognitive faculties are highly reliable with respect to his belief that p, but where S is epistemically irresponsible in believing that p. Such a case may arise when S has substantial but misleading evidence against his belief that p.

Consider an example from Plantinga, which is supposed to show that process reliabilism is false. S suffers from a brain tumor which, by an ironic twist of fate, causes a reliable cognitive process which results in S
believing that he has a brain tumor. S has no evidence in favor of this belief and in fact has considerable evidence against it. Nevertheless, S continues to believe that he has a brain tumor. Obviously S does not know that he has a brain tumor in this case, even though it is true that he does have one. The example is supposed to show that true belief caused by a reliable cognitive process is not sufficient for knowledge. One explanation for this is that such a process can result in epistemically irresponsible belief. Given that S has no evidence in favor of his belief, and considerable evidence against it, S is epistemically irresponsible in believing that he has a brain tumor. From S’s own point of view, he ought not to have this belief.

Plantinga argues that virtue epistemology avoids the counter-example to process reliabilism, though it does not avoid it by invoking epistemic responsibility as a requirement for knowledge. Rather, virtue epistemology puts a restriction on which reliable cognitive processes can give rise to knowledge. Only processes which are grounded in a properly functioning cognitive faculty are epistemically worthy. In the brain tumor case, of course, S’s cognitive process is not grounded in a properly functioning faculty. In that case the process is a result of cognitive malfunction. But although Plantinga’s position avoids the brain tumor example, it is open to a different kind of counter-example.

Consider the case of Mary, who is in most respects a normal human being. The relevant difference is that Mary’s cognitive faculties produce the belief in her that there is a tiger nearby whenever there is a tiger nearby, and even in cases where Mary does not see, hear or otherwise perceive a nearby tiger. Mary’s brain is designed so as to be sensitive to an electromagnetic field emitted only by tigers, thus causing her to form the relevant belief in the appropriate situation, and without any corresponding experience, sensory or otherwise. We can imagine that this cognitive feature was designed by natural processes of evolution, or that it was literally designed by a beneficent creator, one who realizes that tigers are dangerous to beings like Mary and who therefore wishes to equip her with a reliable warning device. Now suppose that a tiger is walking nearby, and that Mary forms the appropriate belief. Add that Mary has no evidence that there is a tiger in the area, nor any evidence that she has such a faculty. Rather, she has considerable evidence against her belief that there are tigers in the area. Clearly, Mary’s belief that there is a tiger nearby does not have positive epistemic status in this situation, even though the belief is caused by properly functioning faculties in an appropriate environment. Mary does not know that there is a tiger nearby. Again, the explanation for this is that Mary’s belief is epistemically irresponsible. Given the way things look from Mary’s point of view, she ought not to believe that there is a tiger nearby.
Someone wishing to defend Plantinga’s view might respond to the example as follows. Given that Mary has evidence against there being a tiger nearby, it is true that she ought not to believe that there is a tiger nearby. But this only shows that Mary’s cognitive faculties are not working properly, since they are not sensitive to the relevant evidence. If her faculties were working properly, she would believe according to the evidence. The above example, therefore, is not a counter-example to the theory.

I think that there are two adequate responses to this line of reasoning. First, it seems to me that the counter-example does not depend on Mary’s having evidence against her belief that there is a tiger nearby. If we were to revise the case so that Mary has no evidence either way, the revised case would still constitute an effective counter-example to Plantinga’s theory. In the case where Mary finds herself believing that there is a tiger nearby, but in which she has no grounds for her belief whatsoever, it is clear that Mary does not know that there is a tiger nearby.

But if this is not convincing to the defender of Plantinga’s theory, we can consider a third scenario. Imagine that things are as in the first case above — Mary finds herself believing that there is a tiger nearby, despite the fact that she has no evidence in favor of this belief, and despite the fact that she has considerable evidence against it. Now add that Mary’s creator knows that tigers are very very dangerous to beings like Mary. For this reason, He has designed Mary’s cognitive faculties so that her tiger-warning faculty always overrides her evidence-gathering faculties in cases where the faculties conflict. In this case we will have to say that Mary’s belief is the result of properly functioning faculties. But because Mary’s belief is contrary to all the evidence she has, her belief cannot be considered knowledge. From Mary’s point of view, she ought not to have the belief she does. The principle behind the above examples is this. It is possible for a belief to be caused by properly functioning faculties, but for that belief to be entirely irresponsible. Knowledge, however, requires epistemic responsibility. Another way to put the same point is as follows. The examples show that it is not enough for knowledge that S’s cognitive faculties are in fact working properly. A requirement of knowledge is that things be working properly from S’s point of view.

Sosa’s strategy for addressing this kind of example recognizes the importance of S’s point of view by invoking S’s epistemic perspective.

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6 The present example does not violate Plantinga’s condition that the relevant segment of the design plan be aimed at producing true beliefs. For although the design plan is here aimed at Mary’s preservation, that goal is achieved by means of producing true beliefs about tigers.
Sosa makes a distinction between animal knowledge and reflective knowledge. For animal knowledge, it is sufficient that S’s true belief be caused by a reliable faculty. For reflective knowledge, we must add that S has a true grasp of the fact that her belief is grounded in a reliable cognitive faculty. This grasp must in turn result from a faculty of faculties, which gives rise to the required epistemic perspective.

For one is able to boost one’s justification in favor of P if one can see one’s belief of P as in a field F and in circumstances C, such that one has a faculty (a competence or aptitude) to believe correctly in field F when in conditions C... One thereby attributes to oneself some intrinsic state such that when there arises a question in field F and one is in conditions C, that intrinsic state adjusts one’s belief to the facts in that field so that one always or very generally believes correctly.7

According to Sosa, to ‘see’ one’s belief that p as in a field and circumstances and to ‘attribute’ to oneself reliability in that field and those circumstances, is to have true beliefs to that effect, where those true beliefs are themselves products of a cognitive virtue. And now we may see how this position can be applied to the case above. According to Sosa, Mary has animal knowledge but not reflective knowledge. Further, he can say that Mary’s belief is reflectively unjustified, since her belief actually conflicts with her epistemic perspective on her faculties.

But the problem with this proposal is that we seldom have such beliefs about our beliefs and about our cognitive faculties. In the typical case, we have no beliefs at all about the sources of our beliefs, or about our reliability in particular fields and circumstances.

Or at least this is so for occurrent beliefs. Is it plausible that we typically have such beliefs dispositionally? Where we do have such a dispositional perspective, the field and circumstances that perspective specifies are probably the wrong ones. Specifically, to the extent that I attribute to myself certain cognitive faculties, those faculties are specified much too broadly to be of any use. For example, consider my belief that there is a glass of water on the table. In the typical case I have no occurrent beliefs about the source of this belief in a given cognitive virtue. Let me now consider any dispositional beliefs I might have. After considering the issue for a moment, it occurs to me that my belief about the glass is the result of sight. But if you ask me to get very specific about a field of propositions F, or a set of circumstances C, such that I am highly reliable

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7 Sosa, Knowledge in Perspective, 282. Sosa develops this strategy in ‘Intellectual Virtue in Perspective’ and in ‘Reliabilism and Intellectual Virtue,’ both in Knowledge in Perspective.
in that field when in those circumstances, I am at a loss. I simply do not have very specific beliefs in this area, nor is it plausible that such beliefs are available dispositionally if only I think about it a little more. But such a conclusion should not be surprising. For otherwise it would be possible to do cognitive science from one’s armchair. And this gives us another way to put the same objection. If Sosa were correct that believers typically have the perspective he requires, this would entail that cognitive science could be done by introspection.

We may conclude that in the typical case a believer will not have a true grasp of the inventory of cognitive faculties she possesses, nor will she have a perspective on which faculty is responsible for producing the particular belief in question. On the other hand, there does seem to be something importantly right about Sosa’s proposal. I want to argue that Sosa is right to invoke S’s point of view as an important element for having knowledge, but that he invokes S’s point of view in the wrong sense. Below I will develop a different sense in which Mary’s belief is correct or appropriate from her point of view, and I will argue that this is the sense which is relevant for having knowledge.

III An Internalist Version of Virtue Epistemology

We have said that (VE) fails to take into account an important kind of epistemic value. Namely, (VE) fails to recognize the importance of S’s belief being correct or appropriate from S’s point of view. One way in which this lack presents itself is in the evil demon problem. Virtue epistemology fails to recognize an appropriate sense in which S’s beliefs might be epistemically valuable, even if those beliefs result from wholly unreliable cognitive faculties. Another way in which this problem presents itself is in examples which show that (VE) is too weak. There are cases where S’s true belief is the result of a reliable cognitive faculty, but where S lacks knowledge because S’s belief is somehow inappropriate from S’s point of view.

Sosa tries to address the latter problem by invoking the idea of an epistemic perspective. The problem with this proposal is that the relevant perspective is lacking in the typical case. It is implausible that believers typically have a true grasp of their cognitive faculties, or a true grasp of which faculty has produced a particular belief. Below I want to develop a different understanding of what it means for a belief to be correct or appropriate from S’s point of view. I will then argue that virtue epistemology can be amended so as to incorporate this understanding, and I will defend the theory of knowledge which results. Finally, I will argue that the proposed amendment also allows us to deal with the generality problem.
1. Norm internalism.

Norm internalism is the position that justified belief is the result of following correct epistemic norms, or correct rules of belief formation and maintenance. More exactly,

\[(\text{NI}) \quad S \text{ is epistemically justified in believing that } p \text{ if and only if } S's \text{ believing that } p \text{ is in conformance with the epistemic norms which } S \text{ countenances, and the history of } S's \text{ belief has also been in conformance with those norms}.\]

It will be necessary to say more about two of the central notions involved in (NI): the notion of a belief being in conformance with an epistemic norm, and the notion of an epistemic norm being countenanced. I begin with the latter.

We may get an idea of what it is to countenance an epistemic norm if we consider the following example. Suppose that Jane, who is not very good at math, bases her belief in a complicated theorem on a set of axioms which do in fact support the theorem. But suppose that she does so not because she sees the supporting relation, but because she has reasoned invalidly from the axioms to the theorem. Obviously Jane is not justified in her belief that the theorem is correct.

What is required for Jane to be justified in believing the theorem? What is it that justification requires but Jane lacks? A plausible suggestion is that Jane must be sensitive to the inference relation between her theorem and the axioms on which she bases the theorem. Just what this sensitivity amounts to, however, is not easy to state. For although we are often ‘aware’ that some set of evidence supports a conclusion, it is not easy to state what this awareness consists in.

One suggestion is that Jane must believe that her conclusion follows from her evidence. But this is obviously too weak. For Jane could believe that her conclusion follows from her evidence even if she has reasoned fallaciously and has no real insight into how her conclusion follows from her evidence. Alternatively, one might suggest that Jane must believe that the relevant general rule of inference is correct, and that her inference is an instance of the general rule. But this suggestion is too strong. Typically only logicians have beliefs about the deductive rules which govern our reasoning, and it is agreed on all sides that no one has successfully characterized the rules which govern our non-deductive

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8 This position is defended in detail in my ‘Internalism and Epistemically Responsible Belief,’ *Synthese* 85 (1990) 245-77.
reasoning. But if we typically do not have beliefs about the rules which govern correct reasoning, how are we to understand our sensitivity to such rules?

I suggest that although we do not typically have beliefs about such rules, we do countenance such rules in our reasoning. In other words, we follow such rules when we reason conscientiously, although the way in which we follow them does not involve having beliefs about them, either occurrent or dispositional. Thus the way in which we countenance rules of reasoning is analogous to the way we countenance other action-governing norms. The norms which govern good hitting in baseball, for example, are countenanced by good hitters when they are batting conscientiously. But this does not mean that all good hitters are capable of articulating those norms, or otherwise forming true beliefs about them. Not all good hitters make good hitting coaches. In fact, it is possible for a good hitter to form false beliefs about the norms which he countenances when he is actually playing. Thus Little League coaches who were good hitters themselves often tell their players to make a level swing with the bat. But good hitters in fact almost never use a level swing. Batters who hit for average usually swing slightly down on the ball, whereas batters who hit for power usually have a slight upper-cut.9

So although we do not typically have beliefs about the norms which govern our beliefs, we do countenance certain norms and not others. The norms that we countenance are the norms that we follow when we reason conscientiously. And thus it makes perfect sense to say that someone is reasoning in a way that he does not countenance. This is in fact what happens when we form our beliefs hastily, or fall into wishful thinking, or are swayed by our prejudices.

I now turn to the notion of a belief’s being in conformance with a norm. The notion can be made more clear by considering a distinction common in moral philosophy. It is common for moral philosophers to make a distinction between acting in accordance with one’s duty and acting for the sake of one’s duty. In the former case one’s actions happen to coincide with one’s duties. In the latter case one’s actions are performed because one has certain duties. And now a similar distinction can be made with respect to our believings. While some of our beliefs are merely in accordance with the norms of belief formation which we countenance, others of our beliefs are in conformance with those norms in the following

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9 A similar example in tennis was suggested to me by Henry Hultquist. Tennis coaches often tell their players that they should stand sideways to the ball to hit with power. The best tennis players, however, stand square to the ball and generate power by turning their upper body.
ing sense; they arise, at least partly, because we countenance certain norms and not others. The latter beliefs are accepted (at least partly) because we follow certain norms when we are reasoning conscientiously.\(^{10}\)

To illustrate the distinction, we may consider the following case. Suppose that Larry wants to balance his checkbook, and correctly believes on the basis of a lucky guess that his outstanding checks amount to a total of $200.00. Suppose also that Larry knows the amount of each outstanding check but has not bothered to calculate the total. He could perform the calculation just on reflection, but fails to do so. Now in this situation the epistemic norms which Larry countenances would permit the belief that the total of outstanding checks is $200.00, since those norms include the simple rules of addition involved in the required inference. But although Larry’s belief is in accordance with the norms he countenances, it is not in conformance with those norms, for his belief does not utilize those norms in any way. He does not believe that the total is $200.00 because he countenances an inference to that effect. Notice that, as a result of this, we should say that Larry is not justified in believing that his outstanding checks total $200.00.

A final example will serve to show that the history of one’s belief is also important for justification. Suppose that Maria believes that her favorite singer, Dean, is Italian. She believes this because she seems to remember clearly that this is so, and she presently has no reason for doubting her belief. In fact, the belief appears to her to be common knowledge. Assume also, however, that Maria first came to her belief on the basis of testimony from her mother, who believes that all talented singers are Italian. At the time Maria knew that her mother was an unreliable source regarding these matters, and she realized that it was not rational to accept her mother’s testimony. However, she believed anyway. Clearly Maria is not justified in her belief now, even though her belief is presently in conformance with the epistemic norms which she countenances. The reason is that her belief involves epistemic negligence at an earlier time.\(^{11}\)

\(^{10}\) For a similar distinction, see John Pollock, *Contemporary Theories of Knowledge* (Totowa, NJ: Rowman and Littlefield 1986), 168.

\(^{11}\) Of course questions remain. For example, it is plausible that a person’s norms will change and even conflict over time. How does this effect epistemic responsibility? There is also the problem of ‘norm schizophrenia,’ or the problem of conflicting norms at the same time. Finally, it might be thought that the above account leads to an unacceptable kind of epistemic relativism. I address all of these questions in my ‘Internalism and Epistemically Responsible Belief.’ There I conclude that a) respon-
We may now articulate the relevant sense in which knowledge requires that a belief be correct or appropriate from S’s point of view. S’s belief that p is correct from S’s point of view, in the sense required for knowledge, only if S’s believing that p is in conformance with the epistemic norms which S countenances, and only if the history of S’s belief has also been in conformance with those norms.

Notice that the present position is not subject to the objections raised against Sosa’s idea of an epistemic perspective. Thus the position does not require that S have beliefs about which norms she countenances, or about which norms are involved in the formation of a particular belief. All that is necessary is that S does in fact countenance the relevant norms, and that S’s belief is in fact in conformance with those norms. Second, the present position explains what is valuable about the beliefs of the victim of the evil deceiver. In the case of the evil deceiver, Kathy’s beliefs are justified because they are in conformance with the rules of belief formation and maintenance which Kathy countenances. Finally, the account explains why Mary’s beliefs do not amount to knowledge. Even though Mary’s belief results from a reliable tiger-detecting faculty, Mary’s belief is not in accordance with the norms which Mary countenances. Presumably, Mary countenances norms which disallow believing that tigers are present in the absence of any evidence to that effect, or in cases where one has considerable evidence against that belief and no evidence in favor of it.12

2. Norm internalism applied to virtue epistemology.

We may see how the present position can be used to amend virtue epistemology if we make a distinction between a virtue and the basis for that virtue. We have been understanding virtues as abilities, and we have been understanding abilities as stable dispositions to achieve certain results under certain conditions. But then the same virtue might have different bases in different subjects. Thus the ability to absorb oxygen into the blood has a different basis in fish than it does in human beings.

sibility concerns conformance to one’s present norms; b) when present norms conflict responsibility requires that none of S’s norms disallow S’s belief; and c) the only kind of relativism involved is harmless, and should be expected given the analogy to moral responsibility.

12 I am willing to concede that not all beings capable of justification need countenance such norms, but these beings would be very different from ourselves, and my intuitions about them are not strong. I tend to think that when we fill in the story, the present account rules correctly concerning these strange beings.
Similarly, the ability to roll down an inclined plane has a different basis in a pencil than it does in a baseball. Now according to both Sosa and Plantinga, the basis for a cognitive virtue is the inner nature of the cognitive subject. Thus Plantinga makes the basis of a cognitive virtue the cognitive hardware of the believing subject, as designed by a beneficent Designer. Sosa refers to the subject's inner nature explicitly in his latest account. 'One has an intellectual virtue or faculty relative to an environment E if and only if one has an inner nature I in virtue of which one would mostly attain the truth and avoid error in a certain field of propositions F, when in certain conditions C.\textsuperscript{13}

A different proposal would be that the basis for cognitive virtues, at least where knowledge is concerned, must be S's conformance to the epistemic norms which S countenances. On this proposal cognitive virtues relevant to knowledge are grounded in conscientious belief formation and maintenance, rather than in an unchanging inner nature.

Perhaps the following analogy will clarify the present proposal. Pitching machines and Nolan Ryan both have the ability to throw baseballs at high speeds. But the basis of this virtue in the pitching machine is different from the basis of the virtue in Ryan. Moreover, the basis for the virtue in the machine is the machine's inner nature; given the way that the machine is constructed and given the appropriate conditions, the machine throws baseballs at high speeds. The basis of the same virtue in Ryan is of a different sort; Ryan's ability to throw baseballs is based in Ryan's conformance to the norms governing good throwing. A person might have the same inner nature as Ryan and not have the ability to throw baseballs because that person fails to conform to the proper norms. Consider that Ryan himself would not throw baseballs at high speeds if he did not conform to the norms of good throwing.

The analogy should be obvious. I am suggesting that knowers are more like Ryan than like pitching machines. Specifically, I am suggesting that the virtues associated with knowledge have their bases in conformance to relevant norms rather than in a fixed inner nature.\textsuperscript{14} The present proposal nicely explains how the same subject can have different beliefs in the same circumstances at different times. This can happen if the subject reasons conscientiously at one time and carelessly at another. (Just as the same pitcher can be effective at one time and ineffective at another.) The present proposal also explains how the same belief can

\textsuperscript{13} Sosa, 'Intellectual Virtue in Perspective,' 284. See also Sosa's definitions on 286-9.

\textsuperscript{14} Perhaps I should say 'rather than merely in a fixed inner nature,' since it is possible that S's conformance to relevant norms is itself based in a deeper inner nature.
have different epistemic status when formed in the same circumstances at different times. This can happen if S’s belief is in conformance with the norms she countenances at one time, but merely in accordance with those norms at another. Thus take the case of Larry and his checkbook. Under the same circumstances, Larry might guess correctly that his outstanding checks amount to $200.00, or he might base his belief on a correct inference. It is only when Larry forms his belief in conformance with the norms which he countenances that his belief will have positive epistemic status.

Applying norm internalism to virtue epistemology results in the following account of positive epistemic status.

(VEI) S’s belief that p has positive epistemic status for S if and only if
(i) S believes that p;
(ii) S’s believing that p is the result of a reliable cognitive virtue V of S; and
(iii) S’s virtue V has its basis in S’s conforming to epistemic norms which S countenances.

3. (VEI) defended.

According to (VEI), knowledge is true belief which results from a cognitive virtue, where this virtue has its basis in S’s conforming to epistemic norms which S countenances. Thus on the present account, knowledge is virtuous in both a subjective and an objective sense. Knowledge is virtuous in a subjective sense in that knowledge is belief which is correct or appropriate from S’s point of view. And this means that in cases of knowledge S’s belief is in conformance with the rules of belief formation and maintenance which S countenances. Knowledge is virtuous in an objective sense in that belief which is knowledge is the result of a reliable cognitive faculty. Further, the two ways in which knowledge is virtuous are related. In cases of knowledge, a belief is objectively virtuous because it is subjectively virtuous. In other words, in cases of knowledge the basis of S’s objectively reliable cognitive virtue is in S’s conformance to the epistemic norms which S herself countenances; reliability results from responsibility.

We may now see that (VEI) avoids the two objections raised against virtue epistemology as defined by (VE). Because (VEI) recognizes an internalist element in knowledge, (VEI) explains what is valuable about the beliefs of the victim of an evil deceiver. Namely, someone whose cognitive faculties are made wholly unreliable by an evil deceiver might nevertheless reason in conformance with the norms that she counte-
nances. Thus the victim of an evil deceiver might have beliefs which are subjectively responsible, even if they are not objectively reliable. Second, (VEI) avoids the counter-examples which show that (VE) is too weak. Specifically, (VEI) requires epistemic responsibility for positive epistemic status. And this requires that S’s belief be correct or appropriate from S’s point of view, in the sense defined by norm internalism.

Thus (VEI) avoids the two objections raised against (VE). Does (VEI) still have the attractive features which we attributed to virtue epistemology at the beginning of the paper? (VEI) continues to explain nicely why beliefs caused by perception and memory often have positive epistemic status, while beliefs caused by wishful thinking and superstition do not. But it has the added advantage of explaining why not all reliable cognitive faculties give rise to positive epistemic status. Thus it explains why Mary’s tiger-detecting faculties do not. Second, the theory continues to give us a basis for answering certain kinds of skepticism. Thus it continues to explain why we would lack knowledge if we were brains in a vat, or victims of a Cartesian demon, and why we do not lack knowledge so long as this is not the case. (VEI) in fact nuances our answer to skepticism by explaining what is epistemically valuable about the beliefs of victims trapped in the skeptical scenarios.

We may conclude that (VEI) retains all the advantages of (VE), while avoiding problems which (VE) cannot. In the final section of the paper I will argue that (VEI) also helps us to deal with the generality problem, a problem which has plagued reliabilist theories of knowledge.

IV The Generality Problem

As was noted above, virtue epistemology is a version of reliabilism. And as would be expected, a serious objection facing virtue epistemology is a version of the generality problem for reliabilist theories of knowledge. More exactly, for any true proposition p believed by S, we can select a field of propositions F and a set of circumstances C such that S is perfectly reliable in F and C, or such that S is miserably unreliable in F and C. Obviously, virtue epistemology must say more about what fields of propositions and sets of circumstances are relevant for specifying cognitive virtues.

We may understand the generality problem more clearly if we consider the following criterion for positive epistemic status, suggested by our discussion of (VE) above.

(VE') S’s belief that p has positive epistemic status for S if

(1) S believes that p; and
(2) there is a field $F$ and a set of circumstances $C$ such that

(i) $p$ is in field $F$,

(ii) $S$ is in circumstances $C$, and

(iii) for any proposition $q$ in $F$, if $S$ were in $C$ and $S$ believed that $q$, then $S$ would very likely believe correctly with regard to $q$.

As we have noted, a problem arises concerning the selection of an appropriate $F$ and $C$. For given any true belief that $p$, we can always come up with a field $F$ and a set of circumstances $C$, such that $S$ is perfectly reliable in $F$ in $C$. For any true belief that $p$, let $F$ be the field including only the propositions $p$ and not-$p$. Let $C$ include whatever circumstances there are which cause $p$ to be true, together with the circumstances which cause $S$ to believe that $p$. Clearly, $S$ is perfectly reliable with respect to propositions in this field in these circumstances. But we do not want to say that all of $S$'s true beliefs have positive epistemic status for $S$. And of course there is an analogous problem in the other direction of generality. For given any belief that $p$, we can always specify a field of propositions $F$ and a set of circumstances $C$, such that $p$ is in $F$, $S$ is in $C$, and $S$ is not reliable with respect to propositions in $F$ in $C$.15

I want to suggest that (VEI) gives us the resources required to solve the generality problem. Specifically, the fields of propositions and sets of circumstances which are relevant for specifying cognitive virtues are those $Fs$ and $Cs$ which are embodied in the norms which $S$ countenances. When $S$ forms and maintains her beliefs responsibly, she does so by conforming to certain norms which she countenances. These norms specify sets of conditions in their antecedents, under which conditions it is permissible to have certain beliefs, specified in their consequents. When $S$'s belief formation and maintenance is in conformance with these norms, this will form the basis for a cognitive mechanism $M (F,C)$, where $C$ is a set of circumstances which corresponds to the conditions described in the antecedents of the relevant norms, and where $F$ is a field of propositions which corresponds to the beliefs described in the consequents of those norms. Now if the norms which $S$ countenances are also reliable in the environment where $S$ uses them, then the cognitive mechanism $M (F,C)$ which results will also be a cognitive virtue relative

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15 For a discussion of how virtue epistemology might handle the generality problem without introducing norm internalism, see Sosa, 'Intellectual Virtue in Perspective.'
to that environment. Furthermore, it will be the cognitive virtue which is relevant for determining whether S has knowledge in a particular case.

In conclusion, (VEI) solves problems which (VE) does not, while retaining all the advantages of virtue epistemology. In addition, (VEI) provides us with resources for solving the generality problem for reliabilist theories of knowledge. We should therefore amend the basic idea of virtue epistemology, so that the cognitive virtues which are relevant for knowledge have their bases in the epistemic responsibility of the knower. In this way we add an internalist element to the virtue theory of knowledge, recognizing that knowledge must be objectively reliable, but correct or appropriate from S's point of view as well.16

Received: August, 1991
Revised: January, 1992
Revised: August, 1992

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16 In this paper I am hopelessly indebted to the work of Ernest Sosa. I also owe him a special thanks for his written comments and for his patient conversation. Also, I would like to thank Vincent Colapietro, Linda Zagzebski, and Dean Zimmerman for their helpful comments on drafts, and on other material relevant to this paper. Finally, I would like to thank the referees for the Canadian Journal of Philosophy for their comments on earlier versions of this paper.