Toward A ‘Responsibilist’ Epistemology

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1. Introduction

The foundationalist pyramid has no ultimate foundations, and the coherentist raft must inevitably find itself adrift. Faced with this impasse, epistemologists might well see a potentially fruitful new approach in some version of the ‘reliabilism’ proposed in a recent paper\(^1\) as a better route to establishing conditions of justification for knowledge claims. This would be an account of knowledge and justification in terms of, and based upon, intellectual virtues. Such an epistemology would roughly parallel an ethics based upon moral virtues: it would be analogous to such an ethics, but not derivative from it.

We have only a preliminary account of the nature of this new approach; one hopes for its amplification in the near future. In the meantime I shall explore some of its implications in the context of my own attempts to develop a theory of epistemic responsibility as a potential new focal point for theory of knowledge. I shall give an account of what an epistemology thus focussed might consider, and of how it would differ from more traditional approaches.

2. Elaboration of An Epistemology of Intellectual Virtue

Two closely related lines of thought in Sosa’s paper are particularly significant for my purposes. First, he repeatedly indicates that discussions of knowledge and/or belief are discussions of someone’s knowledge and/or belief. Hence, the knower, as well as the known, is accorded epistemic responsibility for his knowledge, with a corresponding duty to be reasonable in virtue of being a knower.


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temological significance. Secondly, at various points where both coherentism and foundationalism seem to break down, analogies are drawn with ethical thinking. This points toward the concluding claim that viewing epistemology as analogous to ethics provides a useful alternative both to coherentism and to foundationalism. Let us consider these points in turn.

In his discussion of foundationalist and of coherentist approaches to knowledge, Sosa maintains, for example, that what is at stake for each theory is the question of how beliefs must be related in a given mind (p. 4); that what the epistemologist has to consider is the condition or structure or content of a body of knowledge in someone’s possession (p. 5); that when we speak of knowledge or belief we are in fact speaking of the knowledge or belief of a particular subject at a given time: of what S believes at t (p. 5); that coherentism is a view about the relations among the beliefs of the subject (p. 18). It is not, I think, Sosa’s intention to suggest that either the foundationalist or the coherentist explicitly asserts the epistemological significance of the knowing subject. Rather, he seems to intend to make explicit the hitherto implicit importance of the knower, or would-be knower, and of what we might call his/her epistemic “location,” in a time, a place, in epistemologically relevant circumstances. (This, to my mind, makes plausible the suggestion that emphasis upon the known to the exclusion of the knower can produce only a partial account of the nature and conditions of knowledge. The persistence of such emphasis throughout the history of epistemology may, in part, explain the impression that a complex process has been excessively simplified in views of knowledge where the knower remains only an implicit part of the cognitive situation: a fleshless abstraction.)

To accord importance to the epistemological circumstances of the subject is, of course, not without difficulties. Central among these is the appearance that one is advocating an outright subjectivist epistemology. To take this to be the case, however, would be too hasty. The sug-

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1 This is, presumably, part of the motivation behind Karl Popper’s efforts to dispense with the knowing subject, for example, in “Epistemology Without a Knowing Subject” in Karl Popper, *Objective Knowledge* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1972). In his concern to challenge the individualistic thrust of traditional epistemology, as he sees it, Popper proposes what he takes to be complete objectivity as a more desirable alternative. But the ‘individuals’ of the tradition he claims to reject are not persons in any significant sense. I, too, want to reject the solipsistic tradition (whose selves are not really selves), and to propose commonality of cognitive endeavour, with the responsibilities that involves, in its stead. It is fundamental to my view, as will become clear in this discussion, that communities of knowers are comprised of persons who make knowledge claims. The product will only be as good as what their combined efforts produce.
gestion that the knowing subject is epistemologically important is by no means tantamount to the claim that an account of the nature of his/her cognitive circumstances can bear the full weight of epistemological explanation or justification. When I ask, “But who told you that Nixon was really a good president?” it is by no means to indicate that if X told you, it is bound to be true, if Y told you, it is bound to be false. It is, rather, to assert that the integrity of your source is a crucial component in my decision whether to accept what you say, or to consider it seriously. My estimation of your reliability in relaying testimony is equally important.

The matter is complex. I do not mean to say that, if X told you, and if X is reliable, then it must be true, using X’s reliability as an alternative foundation for acceptance, open to all of the pitfalls of foundationalism that Sosa tabulates. I mean to say that central among the considerations that will count in my acceptance of a knowledge claim is my evidence as to whether the person at its source is in a position to know.\(^3\) This will depend, in part, upon his/her intellectual integrity, much in the same way as, in moral matters, my trusting a person hinges, to a great extent, upon his/her moral integrity. These varieties of integrity are, at least in most important senses, objectively describable, even if not exhaustively, ultimately, or foundationally. Thus the importance accorded to the person as knower is accorded insofar as conditions (no doubt an open-ended set) can be spelled out for the reasonableness, in certain specific sets of circumstances, of respecting his/her claims to know.

Analogies with ethics amplify and clarify these points. According to Sosa’s account, foundationalist epistemology is unable to avoid falling into regress; hence, in the final analysis it remains unfounded. Further, he shows that coherentism depends for its contact with reality upon what amounts to a foundationalist claim. If the system is not simply to be free-floating, at some point it must attach to events or circumstances in the world. This inevitably gives rise to the question as to how its claim to offer a correct account of these circumstances is substantiated, or founded. Attempts to answer this are open to precisely the same pitfalls of regress as is the foundationalist position.

These problems are attributed, at least in part, to a pervasive epistemological endorsement of the “Intellectualist Model of Justification” (p. 8), where justification of a knowledge claim is always to be sought in a proposition more fundamental, in some sense, than the claim itself. Rather than seeking propositions to ground other propositions, and hence sliding unavoidably into regress, it seems preferable to suggest that,

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\(^3\) Sosa has a useful discussion of what counts as being in a position to know, in “How Do You Know?”, *American Philosophical Quarterly*, Vol. 11, No. 2 (1974).

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on an analogy with ethics, we look at *practices* in which a belief shows itself justified. It is in virtue of the consequences it causes to come into being that, for the consequentialist, an action is judged right or wrong. The rightness or wrongness of the consequences derives from an ultimate moral principle — as ultimate, presumably, as a principle *can* be — about what kinds of consequences are good for human beings and what kinds are bad. Within the context of the system of justification, the ‘ultimacy’ of the principle blocks descent into regress. (The point is not, I think, to urge consequentialism as the best of all possible moral theories. It is to remind us of how moral reasoning works, within a consequentialist framework, in order to propose an analogous possibility for epistemological reasoning.)

The consequences of an action can never show that action to be absolutely justified. But they can, for the consequentialist, demonstrate its justification for a particular agent in certain circumstances. Analogously, the practical consequences of holding certain beliefs have considerable bearing upon the reasonableness, for S at t, of holding this belief. This, of course, must be elaborated with caution. It is by no means a matter of urging a facile form of epistemic opportunism, according to which it is all right for me to believe what I will, as long as the outcome will be advantageous in some way. (Hence I could have believed Nixon to be a good president, just when his integrity was under scrutiny, if so doing would have been profitable in some way.) Rather, the suggestion is that there is something to be learned, epistemologically, from the way ethical judgments, on the consequentialist theory, are grounded. To cite a very simple example, a belief that fire cannot burn me will have serious practical consequences if I act upon it. In view of these consequences, it is clear not only that it is unjustifiable for me to hold the belief, but also that the belief is false. The example is more clear-cut than most ethical or epistemological examples will be, by dint of its degree of conclusiveness. But I think it makes the point that it is because of what happens in the *world*, and not because of propositional entailments, that beliefs are grounded. Whether or not beliefs or knowledge claims are, or can be, valid for all times, whether even such taken-for-granted beliefs as the one I have just cited are corrigible or fallible, is a separate question.

Pursuing the analogy with ethics, the question arises as to whether a belief must, in fact (as foundationalists insist), be infallible in order to play a foundational role. Here a crucial move is to make *justification* the focal point of epistemology (where what is justified can be recognized to be well warranted, with no discernible reasons against it, but not necessarily true), declaring the futility of a search for final or absolute truth. In ethics
it may never be possible to determine that an action is absolutely right in the sense that it is the best of all possible actions in these circumstances. Yet there are many points in human experience at which actions can reasonably be declared justified. Analogously, there are justified beliefs that may not be true in any absolute sense, much less infallible or incorrigible. The belief that the earth is flat is a case in point: a reasonable, though clearly not infallible, belief in its time, upon which a subsidiary set of beliefs was founded; less reasonable now, though, arguably, not wholly irresponsible.

Shifting the focus toward the intellectual ‘character’ of the knower, Sosa suggests that what might be required to resolve the foundationalist/coherentist impasse is an epistemological theory of qualities or characters, which can allow the “supervenience of epistemic justification on such nonepistemic facts as the totality of the subject’s beliefs, his cognitive and experiential history, and as many other nonepistemic facts as seem relevant” (p. 18). This would be a theory analogous to deontological ethics. It would base judgment in facts about the knowledge claimant’s character, and would thus allow justification to have sources that neither foundationalism nor coherentism can, ex hypothesis, allow.

One further step that precedes the move to ‘reliabilism’ must be mentioned. Sosa draws attention to the plausibility of assuming that “beings with observational mechanisms radically unlike ours” (p. 20) are capable, also, of having knowledge of their environment. Foundationalism, with its insistence upon a basis in sensory experience formulable in propositions of natural language, must restrict the label ‘knowledge’ to products of human cognitive endeavour. This results in an unwarranted assumption of uniqueness for human cognition. While I am not particularly concerned to be able to allow that extraterrestrial beings (Sosa’s example) might have knowledge, I have no reason to assume that they cannot, if they exist. More interestingly, though, to take Sosa’s point is to be able to accommodate within a theory of knowledge the fact that other sentient beings with which we are familiar clearly have considerable knowledge of their environment.4

In summary, then, our knowledge cannot be founded, and a coherent body of knowledge still requires a quasi-foundational link with reality. Propositional orthodoxy is misguided; and the implicit foundationalist assumptions that our (human) mode of knowing must have an infallible


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basis, and is unique in meriting the designation ‘knowledge’, are mis-
taken. An adequate theory of knowledge requires a fundamental principle
akin to a generalized version of the utility principle in its capacity to apply
across a multitude of situations and would-be knowers. Substantively,
though, the principle will incline more toward deontological emphasis:
perhaps, indeed, it is more accurately construed as an amalgam of the best
of these two approaches, consequentialist and deontologist, with some-
what greater weight accorded to the latter. It must be a principle that is
not tied (i.e., that does not tie knowledge and justification \textit{per se}) to a cer-
tain kind of sensory being with certain kinds of historical and spatial cir-
cumstances.

For a theory of knowledge reshaped in consideration of these points,
the centre of epistemic focus will become the intellectual analogue of the
stable virtues and dispositions. Just as a person’s actions can, to a sig-
ificant extent, be judged with reference to his/her moral reliability, so
too, cognitive activity and its products can be judged with reference to the
epistemic reliability of the would-be knower. This will involve a recogni-
tion, among other things, of the extent to which knowledge-seeking sit-
uations, and situations where claims to knowledge are assessed, invoke
questions about whom one is prepared to trust, and why. For an ethical
position of this variety, primary justification attaches to moral virtues, to
stable dispositions to act in certain ways. Secondary justification accrues
to particular acts because of their sources in virtue; though, as I shall
explain, this is not a simple, automatic, and direct connection.

For an epistemology modeled on this paradigm, the onus will be upon
the justification of a particular belief- or knowledge-claim of \textit{S} at \textit{t}, rather
than upon justification in general or in the abstract. It will accord evalua-
tive significance to \textit{S}’s intellectual disposition, which is discernibly of a
certain sort, insofar as it embraces certain intellectual virtues. This will, of
necessity, involve an appeal to social criteria of virtuous cognitive con-
duct. That is to say, it is not just a matter of assessing individual conduct
\textit{per se}, but of assessing it as a manifestation of justifiable social practices
of and approaches to enquiry. It is crucial that the individual be
recognized as a social being, as part of a community, with all of the obliga-
tions this entails, as much in intellectual as in moral activity. For such an
epistemology, I shall claim, epistemic responsibility is a central virtue
from which all others radiate. This is analogous to the way in which, for
the hedonist, happiness is the central good, for Kant, good will is the only
good in itself from which all others derive.
3. Epistemological Precedents

The case I want to argue is by no means a purely semantic one. Certainly there is nothing new or surprising in the assertion that there is considerable communality of vocabulary in the language of morals and the language of epistemology. We speak alike of actions that are ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ to do, that ‘ought’ to be done, of beliefs that are ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ (on the basis of the available evidence) to hold, and propositions that ‘ought’ to be believed. It is ‘permissible’ to conduct oneself in certain ways if the circumstances are appropriate, ‘permissible’ to draw certain conclusions if the facts are appropriate. We attribute moral and intellectual integrity to people, declare them rational in action and in enquiry, and condemn them as morally or intellectually careless.

Long familiarity with this close affinity between ethical and epistemic modes of discourse, which is amply evident in the literature, may make it seem that Sosa’s proposal is by no means so novel as I am suggesting. For this reason it is instructive briefly to consider some examples from writings where this semantic overlap is evident, to see whether it in fact indicates an underlying substantive affinity between the two fields of enquiry. What I shall present is only, of course, a small representative sampling, to which may more examples could be added.

Consider *The Problem of Knowledge*.5 Here Ayer discusses knowing as “having the right to be sure” (p. 31 ff.). He writes of “being entitled” to talk of something’s being true (p. 22), and of someone’s “right to reproach me” if my epistemic credentials “do not meet certain standards” (p. 17). It seems quite clear for Ayer that such affinities with ethics as the account may seem to imply are, in fact, purely semantic. There is no suggestion that epistemology be construed as a pursuit analogous to ethics or that the models of reasoning are similar. The rights and entitlements in question are wholly dependent upon standard empiricist criteria for making justified knowledge claims. There is no indication that theorists of knowledge might benefit from restructuring their pursuits so as to capitalize upon a substantive affinity with moral theory.

With Chisholm the matter is somewhat different, and instructively so. He notes that epistemic reasoning and discourse are very much like ethical reasoning and discourse, that many characteristics that philosophers “have thought peculiar to ethical statements also hold of epistemic statements.”6 And, connecting both ethical and epistemic statements with

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statements of feeling and emotion, he asserts that neither species of statement can be either true or false (p. 106). This adumbrates a central strand in Chisholm’s later philosophical position, according to which there are no first person propositions: there are only attributions of properties (e.g., being-appeared-to-thusly) to oneself.7 The connection with ethics here suggests that the same will be true in moral discourse.

In a recent paper,8 Chisholm, more or less in passing, draws attention to the way in which “presuppositions of the theory of evidence are analogous, in fundamental respects, to the presuppositions of ethics” (p. 546). And he concludes the paper with the claim that, although understanding the concept ‘justify’ in its ethical sense does not, in his view, help with the distinction between “knowledge and true belief that is not knowledge,” he means to “leave open the possibility that the epistemic sense of justification can be explicated in purely ethical terms” (p. 563).

These points are only partially relevant to my position. They are relevant in that they are more than merely points about semantics, particularly in the latter work. Although Chisholm does not pursue it, the indication that not only the discourse but also the presuppositions and the reasoning involved in ethics and epistemology are markedly similar suggests that unearthing the explanatory possibilities inherent in the similarities might yield increased understanding both in ethics and in epistemology. It is not clear whether Chisholm sees the similarity to be merely methodological, or also substantive. I think it is reasonable to read him as allowing for either, or both.

But Chisholm does not seem to think these similarities to be very important; or at least his position is ambivalent. For my view, by contrast, understanding the concept ‘justify’ in its ethical sense may indeed help with the distinction between “knowledge and true belief that is not knowledge.” At least it may provide some new insight into just what is and what is not important about the distinction. It may, indeed, turn out to be philosophically useless. A development of the consequentialist approach characterized above could quite conceivably show that it makes no significant difference whether one’s true beliefs are or are not knowledge, so long as there are good reasons for considering them true, and none against. Philosophers are inclined to withhold the designation ‘knowledge’ in those situations where, although a belief is in fact true, coincidentally, we cannot, according to our epistemic principles, call it


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'knowledge' because, unbeknown to the believer, it is not justified. But a reconstruction of the argument on consequentialist lines could show that the difference, though factually interesting, is philosophically unimportant. Following a similar line of argument, on a deontological model, a knowledge claim might well acquire increased credibility for S at t in view of its source in (epistemically) virtuous proceedings. Again, the distinction between knowledge and true belief that is not knowledge would acquire a diminished importance. (On such a line of reasoning, what can actually count as knowledge in a definitive sense will be very little indeed: most so-called knowledge is really well-warranted belief. But this is not a bad state of affairs, either in ethics or in epistemology. It is both realistic and challenging.)

Chisholm’s concluding suggestion9 that it remain open as to whether the epistemic sense of justification can be explicited in purely ethical terms, however, concedes too much, where the last suggestion did not allow enough. He illustrates what this might entail with the example of one’s having the right to believe whatever one wants, provided no one else is thereby affected. This is to collapse epistemic justification into ethical justification in a way that is not particularly illuminating. It is, of course, true that there is a wide variety of instances where I may believe what I like, or, more stringently, what works for me, as long as it does not harm, or adversely influence, someone else. This is almost purely a moral point. To my mind, the more interesting question is whether I can structure my epistemology in such a way that it is wrong epistemically for me to hold certain beliefs because my epistemic principles will not allow it. Chisholm’s concession to moral discourse does not address this issue.

I hope it will be clear from the above that I do not see this refocussing of epistemic emphasis to be a proposal that epistemological enquiry be considered to be simply a study in the ethics of belief. One sometimes has the impression that Chisholm resists developing an analogy between ethics and epistemology because he does not want epistemological questions to be construed simply as an additional species of ethical questions. This is especially evident in his paper, “Lewis’ Ethics of Belief,”10 where he reads Lewis’ statements about beliefs that are justified or unjustified, right or wrong, as ethical statements expressing fundamental principles of Lewis’ theory of knowledge (p. 232).

9 Ibid., p. 563.
It seems to me quite a different, and importantly different, matter to assert, as Chisholm does elsewhere in the Lewis paper (cf. pp. 225-26), that we defend our believing and concluding in ways very similar to those in which we defend our moral actions, and to assert that our epistemic principles are moral principles. Again, the difference is not merely semantic. It is perfectly reasonable to argue, as Firth, for example, does convincingly and conclusively, that epistemic concepts are not reducible to ethical concepts. It is quite another matter to propose, as I am doing, that we structure our epistemological reasoning on an analogy with our moral reasoning. This is not a matter, then, of insisting that we separate moral from epistemic uses of such terms as ‘right’, ‘wrong’, ‘good’, ‘bad’, ‘justified’, and ‘unjustified’. It is a matter of understanding the similarities and differences in the reasoning processes that warrant the application of these terms.

Chisholm takes it to be Lewis’ position that judging the quality or character of a belief is the ethical aspect of epistemology; that, for Lewis, no specific epistemic sense need be read into ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ designations of beliefs. Particularly in his paper, “The Rational Imperatives,” I think that Lewis is writing not so much about the ethics of belief per se as about the illuminating aspects of the analogy that can be drawn between moral and epistemological reasoning.

In this paper Lewis contrasts a manner of moral criticism that holds the doer responsible “only for the moral worth of his intentions and not for their cognitive validity as predictions” (p. 163) with modes of criticism where the doer is held responsible for the cognitive validity of his moral intentions. This suggests that he sees the two as separate, perhaps complementary, matters. In this context, he refers to a “sense in which cognitive rightness is itself a moral concern,” adding “in the broad sense of moral” (loc. cit.). This is the sense I would prefer to call analogical, to indicate that the reasoning, too, is analogous to, but not even broadly identical with, moral reasoning; neither subsumes the other. At the end of the paper, when he comes to consider whether it is ever right to believe without cognitive justification, Lewis is asking questions that belong properly to the ethics of belief context. Up to this point he is investigating questions of objective rightness, cogency in reasoning, and cognitive validity as

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11 See Roderick Firth, “Are Epistemic Concepts Reducible to Ethical Concepts?”, in Values and Morals, ed. A. I. Goldman and J. Kim (Dordrecht: D. Reidel, 1978). I am not persuaded that ‘reducible’ is the appropriate word here, since its use implies that, if the answer were to be in the affirmative, epistemic terms would be diminished in import or status. Thus there is something question-begging about it.

questions that do not obviously constitute merely a species of ethical question. This is what I am proposing: that we acknowledge and learn from the similarities between the two modes of enquiry, without conflating them.

In my reading of Sosa and in the position I shall proceed to develop, there are strong affinities with Peirce’s theory of enquiry: the rejection of foundationalism and the critical view taken of the Intellectualist Model of Justi
cification, the exhortation to concentrate upon practices, the emphasis upon the importance of consequences, and the implicit ‘fallibilist’ sympathies. The significance that will be accorded the intellectual character of the knowing subject is greater in my view than it is for Peirce, though it is, arguably, implicit in his position. Unlike Peirce, I neither see the scientific method as the paradigmatic method of enquiry, nor believe that all enquiry will ultimately approach the truth, the same one and only truth. But I concede the validity of this as an ideal. Peirce remarks that “logical self-control is a perfect mirror of ethical self-control”¹³ (though I see them to be analogous). And his observation that “the purport of any concept is its conceived bearing upon our conduct”¹⁴ catches a central thread of my position.

4. Responsibilism
The question, then is just what the move toward putting epistemic respon
dibility in a central place in theory of knowledge will entail. Of his ‘reliabilist’ proposal, Sosa writes:

In epistemology, there is reason to think that the most useful and illuminating notion of intellectual virtue will prove broader than our tradition would suggest and must give due weight not only to the subject and his intrinsic nature but also to his environment and to his epistemic community. (p. 23)

An elaboration of such a notion of intellectual virtue, with a consideration of how the subject’s nature, environment, and epistemic community need to be accorded epistemological significance, will provide a preliminary answer to the above question.

I call mine a ‘responsibilist’ position in contradistinction to Sosa’s pro
dosed ‘reliabilism’, at least where it is human knowledge that is under dis
cussion. This is because the concept ‘responsibility’ can allow emphasis upon the active nature of the knower/believer that the concept ‘reliability’ cannot. In my view, a knower/believer has an important degree of choice

with regard to modes of cognitive structuring and is accountable for these choices. A ‘reliable’ knower could simply be an accurate, but relatively passive, recorder of experience. We would speak of a ‘reliable’ computer, but not of a ‘responsible’ one. A person can be judged responsible or irresponsible only if s/he is clearly to be regarded as an agent (in this case a cognitive agent) in the circumstances in question. It is because of its active, creative nature that human knowledge-seeking endeavour requires evaluation in terms of responsibility.

(i) Intellectual virtues: In the Nichomachean Ethics, Aristotle designates wisdom, intelligence, and prudence as the primary intellectual virtues (Bk. 1, chap. 13). This is not an exhaustive catalogue of possible intellectual virtues; nevertheless, I think it is useful to go back to Aristotle when giving an account of virtues, for his work on the subject has not been superseded. For my purposes, it is not as important to specify which virtues are to be included in the list as it is to consider the role of virtues in cognitive life. In the course of this consideration, certain other candidates for inclusion in the list will be put forward, and I shall examine the appropriateness of Aristotle’s three for the present context. But the degree of completeness of the list is not a matter of central concern.

The virtue of a human being is his/her particular excellence qua human being. Aristotle characterizes virtue as “such a . . . state as makes a man good and able to perform his proper function well” (Bk. 2, chap. 4). What this “proper function” is will, in his view, be clear from a knowledge of human essence. I do not think there is an essential ‘humaness’. Nevertheless, I think cognitive activity is central to human life in such a way that any judgment of human character must take careful account of the quality of this activity. By ‘cognitive activity’ I mean perceiving, remembering, reasoning, knowing, believing, speaking, imagining, day dreaming: all of those activities that have their source in experience of the world, and of the self in the world; in awareness and self-awareness. It is central to being human in that it is almost always occurring, perhaps even in sleep, probably at least in dreams. Furthermore, it is at the basis of everything we do, from habitual actions such as picking up a pen to sign one’s name, to responding to other persons, to reasoning.


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philosophically, to performing those actions of which moral judgments are made. It is not, however, the proper, essential function of the human being in the sense either that it is a unique function that human beings do not share with other sentient life; or in the sense that the human being is only properly human when engaged in cognitive endeavour.

In insisting thus upon the centrality of cognitive activity, I do not mean to imply that one might be deemed intellectually virtuous by dint of never making a mistake when signing one’s name. To be intellectually virtuous is not just to have a good score in terms of cognitive endeavours that come out right. It is much more a matter of orientation toward the world, and toward one’s knowledge-seeking self, and other such selves as part of the world. Virtues, both moral and intellectual, have much more to do with the manner of relation to the world than with the ‘content’ of particular actions or knowledge claims.

Wisdom, for Aristotle, is the “means or instrument of apprehending first principles” (Bk. 6, chap. 6) and knowing “the truth about these principles” (Bk. 6, chap. 7). It is, for him, the supreme intellectual virtue, when construed as general wisdom, as opposed to particular excellence (e.g., for the performance of a specific art). It is one of the most important intellectual virtues for my position, too, though certain modifications need to be made in the Aristotelian account if it is to suit the context of the present discussion.

In the Aristotelian sense, wisdom is most properly attributed to a person in recognition of excellence in the speculative part of the soul: its domain is the contemplation of eternal scientific truth, first principles, inferences drawn from them. It has nothing to do with discovery. In taking wisdom to be an intellectual virtue of central importance, I reject both the doctrine of the division of the soul that gives rise to it in Aristotle, and the view of science as a discipline whose objects are unchanging and eternal. Wisdom, in my reinterpretation, has something to do with knowing how best to go about substantiating beliefs and knowledge claims, where ‘best’ does not mean ‘cleverly’ or ‘skillfully’ so much as ‘with intellectual honesty and due care’. It entails having a good idea of the extent to which such efforts need to be made before it is reasonable to claim knowledge or to hold beliefs. More importantly, to make the distinction from cleverness still plainer, wisdom involves knowing what cognitive ends are worth pursuing, and understanding the need to see particular cognitive endeavours in context in order to achieve a just estimation of their significance. On this account, the province of wisdom is by no means restricted to the purely speculative activities of the human being. It can reasonably be predicated of the ratiocinative, the experimental, the cre-

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ative and constructive intellectual activities; indeed, of the whole range of cognitive activity, though at certain everyday, commonsense levels it probably is not very appropriate to use so lofty a term. (At the other end of the scale, allowing wisdom to subsume intuitive reason, as Aristotle does, could have important effects for the latter. Despite the bad philosophical press, which claims of intuitive reason so often evoke, it is much more likely that we will look upon them favourably and grant them credence when they are made by someone we have reason to consider wise.)

In many ways I take ‘wisdom’ and ‘epistemic responsibility’ to be concepts so closely related as to be almost interchangeable. Clearly, the wise person will be epistemically responsible in most cases where the term is applicable, and the epistemically responsible person will strive for wisdom. Nevertheless, I prefer to see epistemic responsibility as the primary virtue, for the following reasons: first, for all that I reject the division of the soul that gives rise to ‘wisdom’ as central for Aristotle, I think the term inevitably, in its long tradition, carries a contemplative connotation that denies or minimizes the active nature of human cognitive life. Secondly, however one may stipulate its meaning, ‘wisdom’ retains a good deal of the static quality that it has for Aristotle: it is difficult to conceive of the wise man becoming unwise (so long as he is in possession of his faculties). Thirdly, wisdom seems to be, as Aristotle suggests, a quality appropriate to a certain age; epistemic responsibility is not. We would be unlikely to speak of a wise sixteen-year-old; we might well speak of an epistemically responsible one. Thus I prefer to see wisdom as the ultimate, possibly unattainable, goal toward which the epistemically responsible strive.

Intelligence is an intellectual virtue for Aristotle. It is appropriately regarded as one in my view as well, at least to the extent that it does not mean either genetically determined intellectual capacity or, as it does for Aristotle, the “merely critical” (Bk. 6, chap. 2) making of distinctions. Construed as the virtue operant in attempts to look at situations clearly, carefully, so as not to be unduly swayed by affectivity, intelligence belongs among the intellectual virtues. I emphasize ‘unduly’ because I do not think we are ever unmoved, unaffected by what impinges upon us cognitively, however slightly, nor that we should strive to be wholly unmoved. Aristotle’s doctrine of the mean (Bk. 2, chap. 5) is apposite here.

It is apposite, too, where the virtue of prudence is concerned. Prudence belongs to my list of intellectual virtues, though in a somewhat different construal from that entailed by Aristotle’s divisions of the soul, with the separation of theoretical from practical wisdom. On Aristotle’s view, prudence would at most be called for in assessing the ends that knowledge can, responsibly, be made to serve. In my view, intellectual prudence is
closely allied with wisdom and has considerable bearing upon judgments of epistemic responsibility. What I mean is that there is a sense in which prudence, in contrast with recklessness, is called for in epistemic as much as in ethical contexts. It has to do with judging which lines of enquiry it is prudent or imprudent to pursue, having a sense of one’s limitations, being able to see the impossible difficulties certain lines of enquiry might bring about: difficulties that once raised, must be settled, but that could be ignored without damage to the enquiry as such. Accurate judgment of one’s own competence is primarily at stake here. This is the intellectual virtue that, pursued to excess, becomes intellectual timidity.

I have claimed above that intellectual virtue is a matter, too, of orientation toward one’s knowledge-seeking self. What I mean by this is that, for the intellectually virtuous, self-knowledge is as important as, and indeed complementary to, knowledge of the world. In her discussion of virtue and the good life in *The Sovereignty of Good,* it with which I am in general sympathy, Iris Murdoch makes rather little of self-knowledge as a goal of the virtuous (cf. pp. 67-68). In this I disagree with her. I think it is just because self tends to obtrude so insistently in all human activity, all attempts to be ‘objective’, that self-knowledge is essential. It is important to know whether the concept of self that is obtrusive is in fact valid; and important to know oneself if one is to achieve a just estimation of the degree to which one does know, believe justifiably, deceive oneself, or fail in epistemic responsibility. I am not convinced, as Murdoch seems to be, that self will tend to obtrude more, and hence unduly, as a result of endeavours to achieve self-knowledge. While I take her point that what passes for self-knowledge is often mere delusion, I do not think this has to be so. Here, too, there are degrees of epistemic responsibility, even though, because of the impossibility of separating knower and known, the difficulties of assessment are great. Nonetheless, despite the apparent circularity in such an undertaking, one must strive to know oneself if one is responsibly to assess the degree of one’s own responsibility, both epistemic and moral. One cannot improve upon it if one does not know it. Reflexivity is both a fact of human capacity and (potentially, at least) a value.¹⁸

¹⁷ Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1970). In this work, Murdoch maintains that love is a central concept in morality. This may seem to be a point about moral virtue alone, which has nothing to do with the intellectual life. But I think this is by no means the case, nor does it seem to be for Murdoch. Love, construed as “unsentimental, detached, unselfish, objective attention . . . [the] intellectual ability to perceive what is true, which is automatically at the same time a suppression of self” (p. 66), is as consonant with a theory of intellectual virtue as it is with a theory of moral virtue.

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(ii) The virtuous character: How, then, are we to delineate more precisely the nature of the intellectually virtuous character? I have maintained that intellectual virtue is, primarily, a matter of orientation toward the world, and toward oneself as knowledge-seeker in the world. 19 Pursuing this notion a little further, I think intellectual goodness is best understood as a form of realism, where the term ‘realism’ itself is used with normative force, as Murdoch, too, uses it. 20 The intellectually virtuous person, thus understood, is one who finds value in knowing and understanding how things really are. S/he resists the temptation to live with partial explanations where fuller ones are attainable, the temptation to live in fantasy or in a world of dream or illusion, considering it better to know, despite the tempting comfort and complacency that a life of fantasy or illusion (or well-tinged with fantasy or illusion) can offer.

On a fairly straightforward level, for example, it is easier to believe that a favourite theory is true, and to suppress nagging doubts, than to pursue the doubts and risk having to modify the theory. It may be easier to believe that one cannot master a certain subject matter (i.e., to persuade oneself that it is too difficult) than it is to acknowledge the degree of accessibility of the subject relative to an accurate assessment of one’s capacities, and to tackle it. The intellectually virtuous will incline toward the latter course in either case, all else being equal.

For the intellectually virtuous, knowledge is good in itself, not just instrumentally; though, as with all such seemingly categorical claims about virtue, this is somewhat more complex than it appears. We hesitate to attribute intellectual virtue to the voracious collector of facts, Sartre’s self-taught man, for example, or the information gatherer of ‘encyclopaedic’ mind. The hesitation seems to arise from an implicit belief

18 In the Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society Supplementary Volume LV (1981), K. V. Wilkes, responding to C. Hookaway’s “Conscious Belief and Deliberation,” writes that “... faults that permit us to hold ... unjustified beliefs are ... negligence, idleness, wishful thinking, cowardice, conformity, self-deception ... carelessness ... Since it takes honesty, humility and hard work to apply the Socratic method and since we are free to be lazy or diligent in the matter, the activity in question is one to which notions like that of responsibility apply” (p. 100). Clearly, if one is to be responsible in this activity, one must know one’s potential faults and strengths, and be able to recognize when one is engaging responsibly in the activity, and when one is not.

19 See John McDowell, “Virtue and Reason,” in The Monist 62 (1979). McDowell, writing of moral virtue, observes: “A kind person has a reliable sensitivity to a certain kind of requirement which situations impose on behavior” (p. 331). Sensitivity is here construed as a sort of perceptual capacity. It is something of this nature that is at the basis of the kind of orientation I am discussing, for intellectual as well as for moral virtue.

20 See op. cit. p. 64 ff. in particular, though this use of the term is implicit throughout the book.

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that it is possible, theoretically at least, to know everything, yet understand nothing. The evaluative capacities of the virtuous character will be well cultivated: there will be evident mindfulness of the need to understand the significance of the endeavour and to proceed accordingly.

Underlying all that I have said so far about virtue is the assumption that virtues are beneficial qualities of a human being. It is, however, not clear whom they benefit. The question is too large to answer adequately here, but I think the answer, historically at least, would likely be somewhat different for moral and for intellectual virtue. The former, probably, on balance, benefits others more than it benefits its possessor: at least the possessor who does not count upon rewards in heaven. Moral virtues are difficult to achieve and to maintain, and one might well have a happier, quite probably an easier, life without them. In terms of self-respect, though — and its importance must not be underestimated — one is likely to be better off virtuous than vicious. From a social point of view, the virtuous (though not excessively virtuous) are more likely to perform morally good actions. In this respect, society clearly benefits.

The intellectual virtues, at least as traditionally construed, are primarily beneficial to the possessor. Often it seems not to matter to anyone else at all how epistemically responsible one is, whether one lives with hearsay information or with the products of genuine efforts to know, whether one suspends belief until it seems the only reasonable course, whether one cares about what one knows. I think the historical reasons for this misconception, as I understand it to be, are readily discernible. They are part of the long epistemological tradition that construes the knowledge-seeking enterprise as essentially solipsistic, urging that only what has been discovered by the enquirer’s independent efforts is worthy of being called knowledge. This tradition ignores the extent to which, as human beings, we are cognitively interdependent. One of the effects of broadening the notion of intellectual virtue and of making it of interest to epistemologists should be to make its public value approach its private value more closely.

(iii) The subject’s nature, environment, epistemic community: It is important in giving an account of virtue, either moral or intellectual, to acknowledge that this is an account of an ideal, perhaps never fully realizable; yet at the same time to keep its requirements nearly enough within the reach of the ordinary human being that there can be many virtuous persons, if perhaps none perfectly virtuous. I have claimed that the virtuous human being strives toward a condition that will enable him/her to perform his/her proper function well. I do not mean to imply that this

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31 Jim MacAdam brought this point to my attention.
‘proper function’ is to be conceived as a kind of blueprint that every human being who would be virtuous must strive to ‘fit’. The possible forms of human excellence are infinitely many; the possible forms of epistemic excellence perhaps fewer, but nonetheless manifold.

It is clear that there are factors in a person’s nature, and in the environment and epistemic community where his/her cognitive endeavours take place, which have crucial bearing upon the forms intellectual virtue can take. It would be unreasonable to hold a colour-blind person epistemically irresponsible for not learning to discern the difference between red and green, or a dyslexic person for not learning how to read a set of directions. In view of these deficient capacities certain practical restrictions may need to be imposed upon the person’s activities with regard to driving motor vehicles or dealing with toxic substances. But this is a different matter from declaring the person epistemically irresponsible. S/he, too, is capable of intellectual virtue, though there are aspects of experience where s/he could not claim to be reliable. Again, it is not so much the specific content as the general orientation that counts.

Analogous considerations arise from the nature of the environment and of the epistemic community. It would be as ludicrous to condemn as irresponsible the Soviet scientist who had not read all relevant Western scientific treatises on his/her subject (i.e., those banned in the Soviet Union) as it would to condemn the ancient Athenian for putting forward theories about heavenly bodies that were not based upon telescopic observation. Constraints of this sort are rarely absolute: an exceedingly diligent scientist might succeed in obtaining the unavailable work, just as an exceptional scientist, finally, was the first to use the telescope. But criteria of responsibility cannot be so harsh as to require breaking too far out of the boundaries drawn around cognitive activity by the environment and the condition of knowledge in the epistemic community, elastic though these boundaries may be.

The epistemic community does impose requirements of epistemic responsibility, however. Knowledge-claimants whose claims merit respect will have taken pains to become familiar with those aspects of currently available information that pertain to the claims they wish to make. Pronouncements about biology, nuclear physics, politics, or economics by one who has not troubled to become familiar with the ‘state of the art’ are epistemically irresponsible. Considerations relating to the nature of the environment and the epistemic community are by no means always excusing conditions, on the basis of which ignorance can be tolerated. Just as often they impose conditions and requirements sine qua non for the acceptance or the attribution of epistemic responsibility.
Clearly, too, certain roles and sets of circumstances impose criteria of intellectual achievement over and above those that are expected of persons simply as persons. The teacher, physician, or scientist, for example, in his/her professional capacity, has special epistemic responsibilities. One would be reluctant, though, to consider a teacher (or physician or scientist) intellectually virtuous who was epistemically responsible, or seemed to be, from a professional point of view alone, but dogmatic, careless, and unscrupulous in private life. Expectations of integrity are central to the attribution of intellectual virtue. And here, again, the doctrine of the mean is relevant. Too little value accorded to integrity clearly makes the attribution of virtue inappropriate; too rigid an insistence upon integrity may verge toward dogmatism.  

5. Some Conclusions

The problem, now, is to bring together the foregoing discussion of intellectual virtues and Sosa's account of the foundationalist/coherentist dilemma, to see what can be achieved by this juxtaposition. What is immediately obvious is that, given the complex nature of the intellectual virtues as such, no theory of intellectual virtue will be able to provide either an alternative foundation to traditional ones, or a solid alternative recipe for coherence, to solve the coherentists' problems. A theory of intellectual virtue cannot offer an easy calculus for assessing knowledge and belief claims. It cannot provide a decision-making scale against which specific knowledge claims can be measured in such a way that, if they attain a certain level and achieve a certain number of points, they may rightfully be regarded as valid. Indeed, it cannot provide any definite and final answers.

I do not think these failures render Sosa's proposal, or my view of how it might be developed, either invalid or vacuous. The point is not to propose different ways of finding foundations, or of making coherence work. It is to suggest not only that these methodologies, but also, more importantly, that the presuppositions and expectations that underlie them, are misguided. Taking this proposal as my point of departure, I have been arguing that a theory of epistemic responsibility can offer a different approach to epistemology, based upon an entirely different set of expectations from those that have long constituted the fundamental motivations of foundationalism and coherentism.

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22 In this connection, see G. Taylor's interesting paper, "Integrity," in *P.A.S.S. Vol. LV* (1981). In his discussion of Taylor's paper, R. Gaita draws attention to the delicate balancing process that is necessary if integrity is not to merge into dogmatism.

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From this discussion of epistemic responsibility it emerges as a requirement of a viable epistemology that it take adequate and realistic account of the extent to which cognitive activity is a communal process. From the beginning of cognitive life, one of the most important tasks that faces the would-be knower is that of learning who is to be trusted, not only in matters traditionally construed as moral but, even more importantly and fundamentally, in matters of knowledge and belief. The wolf boy of Avignon knows little, if anything, of what the ‘average’ human being knows. This cannot be explained by saying that the world is not there for him to experience and know; it cannot be adequately explained by his not having human language. Most important in accounting for the degree of his knowledge or ignorance is the fact of his having had no access to a human community of knowers. I do not mean to imply that he knows nothing; clearly, he knows a good deal of what wolves know. My point in citing this example is to illustrate the vital degree of dependence of the knowledge-seeker upon the epistemic community. An epistemology that conceives of knowledge as a monolithic, firmly grounded, impersonal structure entirely overlooks this crucial fact.

The reader will no doubt have little hesitation in acknowledging the extent to which childhood learning is dependent upon nurture. However, I am making a much more wide-ranging claim than this in my insistence upon the centrality of the epistemic community. The adult, too, even the most thoughtful and intellectually competent one, even the solitary researcher, is similarly dependent upon the testimony of others: of friends with tales to recount and information to convey, of newspaper reporters, newscasters, writers of scholarly works, tabulators of scientific findings, colleagues who claim to be informed, and ‘specialists’ in all subjects, both esoteric and commonplace. The dependence is by no means absolute. The discerning will always choose and consider before accepting any account. But we believe and claim to know far more than we will ever conceivably experience at first hand. The success of the entire cognitive enterprise is dependent upon something like an honourable and cooperative, if tacit, agreement between information purveyors and knowledge seekers, where participants in the agreement sometimes are in the role of giving, sometimes of seeking. On both sides, epistemic responsibility is of the essence.

Broadening the concept, and widening the epistemological scope, of intellectual virtue does not dispense with the need to follow traditional evidence- and justification-seeking procedures. As I have indicated above (pp. 30-31), the fact that X, who is epistemically responsible, believes or claims to know that p does not make p true. It does, however, if X has indeed proved epistemically responsible, make it reasonable to consider
the claim seriously, even to accept it, provisionally at least. If Y, who is notoriously irresponsible, were also to claim that p, it would be much less reasonable to take him at his word. To some degree, as such examples suggest, a broadened notion of intellectual virtue will impinge upon, and to an extent even dictate the nature and reasonable scope of acceptable evidence- and justification-seeking procedures, while shifting focus to encompass the character of the seeker, as well as the nature of the procedures themselves.

I have not been concerned specifically with questions of philosophy of science in this paper. I should make clear, though, that science, as part of knowledge in general, is prey to the foundational difficulties faced by all attempts to establish knowledge claims or systems of knowledge and/or belief. In some senses, science is a special, exceptional kind of knowledge, to which my observations may seem not to apply. It is knowledge that seems to be reliable in itself, regardless of whose it is; knowledge whose reliability seems steadily to be increasing. (Here ‘reliability’ is the appropriate term.) The extraordinary reliability of science can be accounted for, in part, by its peculiar and highly successful methodology that, in as impersonal a way as possible, dictates the nature of the process, and so shapes the ensuing product.

However, scientific knowledge does not stand wholly beyond the scope of this discussion. Its foundations are by no means absolute in the way that they were long believed to be. The continuing success of the scientific enterprise depends, at the very least, upon the responsible commitment of a community of practitioners within the method. Here, too, there is something resembling a tacit agreement. Part of the responsibility of this commitment entails an acceptance of the need constantly to scrutinize the method itself, as well as the procedures within it, even if this should lead to the necessity of modifying the method, or of loosening the demands of its orthodoxy, when the direction of research shows this to be appropriate.

Science is one sort of knowledge among many, albeit an important and distinctive sort. But it is not a paradigm for knowledge in general in the sense that only those methodologies that are modeled upon it can merit philosophical respect. Nor is it paradigmatic in the sense of being absolutely grounded and hence escaping the foundationalist/coherentist dilemmas discussed above. Indeed, the persistence of these dilemmas can be attributed, at least in part, to the mistaken assumptions first, that scientific knowledge is certain knowledge, and secondly, that any other mode of enquiry that aspires to respectability must proceed according to a scientific model.
In this discussion I have contended that the quest for epistemological foundations cannot be sustained with any hope of success. I have suggested that shifting the emphasis of epistemological enquiry to a study of intellectual virtue will enhance the confidence it is reasonable to put in knowledge claims, even when absolute certainty is acknowledged to be impossible. In the *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle observes that “an educated person will expect accuracy in each subject only so far as the nature of the subject allows” (Bk. 1, chap. 2). In like vein, I am urging that, as theorists of knowledge, we need to be reasonable in our expectations, in order not to impede genuine possibilities of insight with the imposition of unattainable goals. Epistemic responsibility is a stringent requirement, but not an impossible one. Perfect certainty is more than we can hope to achieve.  

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