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0521578264 - Virtues of the Mind: An Inquiry into the Nature of Virtue and the Ethical Foundations of Knowledge

Linda Trinkaus Zagzebski

Excerpt

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Part I

The methodology of epistemology

The nature of knowledge is arguably the central concern of epistemology and unarguably one of the major interests of philosophy from its beginning. Ever since Plato and no doubt long before, knowledge has been held in high regard. Plato called knowledge the most important element in life (*Protagoras* 352d) and said that the only thing truly evil is to be deprived of it (*Protagoras* 345b). Even today, few deny that it is the chief cognitive state to which we aspire, and some claim that it is the chief state of any kind to which we aspire. The possession of knowledge is one of life's great joys – or, at least, one of its benefits. In short, knowledge is valuable.

The valuational aspect of knowledge and of the related states of justified, rational, or warranted belief has led to numerous parallels between moral and epistemic discourse. As Roderick Chisholm observed years ago, “many of the characteristics philosophers have thought peculiar to ethical statements also hold of epistemic statements” (1969, p. 4). Since then epistemologists have routinely referred to epistemic *duty* and *responsibility*, to epistemic *norms* and *values*, and to intellectual *virtue*. On occasion they also use forms of argument that parallel arguments in ethics. In some cases this is done consciously, but in other cases it appears to be unnoticed, and the epistemological discussion is carried on without attention to the fact that the corresponding

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discussions in ethics have by now become more advanced.¹ Section 1 will be devoted to an examination of these parallels. In 1.1 I argue that when epistemologists borrow moral concepts, they implicitly borrow the types of ethical theory in which these concepts are embedded. An awareness of the fact that moral concepts function in different ways in different types of moral theory can illuminate their use in epistemology. Almost all contemporary epistemic theories take an act-based moral theory as their model, even most of those that use the concept of intellectual virtue. But I argue in 1.2 that a virtue-based epistemic theory has certain advantages over a belief-based theory that parallel some of the advantages of a virtue-based ethical theory over an act-based ethical theory.

In section 2 I defend the desirability of a virtue approach from a different direction – from problems in contemporary epistemology. First, there are the problems surrounding the concept of justification, which have led to the present impasse between internalism and externalism. I suggest that since justification is a property of a belief, it is very difficult to adjudicate disputes over this concept if the belief is treated as the bottom-level object of evaluation. Instead, if we focus on the deeper concept of an intellectual virtue and treat the justifiability of a belief as derivative, these problems no longer loom so large and we may hope that the internalism/externalism dispute will lose much of its sting. Another problem in epistemology is the worry that making the single belief state of a single person the locus of evaluation is too narrow. For one thing, it has led to the neglect of two epistemic values that have been very important in the history of philosophy: understanding and wisdom. For another, the social basis for knowledge and justification needs to be recognized, as well as the

¹ Jonathan Dancy has made a similar point in discussing the analogies between ethics and epistemology: “In general, ethics as a subject has been more exhaustively investigated, and the tendency has been for epistemologists to use for their own purposes results which they take to have been established on the other side. Since they are commonly ill-informed about the solidity of these ‘results,’ the resulting epistemology is often unstable” (Dancy and Sosa 1992, p. 119). Dancy goes on to mention virtue epistemology in particular and the desirability of its being informed by results in ethics.

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connection between epistemic states and noncognitive states of the believer. These concerns can be handled more readily by a virtue approach. Then in section 3 I look at a particular form of the connection between cognitive and noncognitive states: the connection between believing and feeling. There are numerous ways in which believing includes or is caused by feeling in the broad sense, including emotion and desire, and this gives us another reason to use ethics, particularly virtue ethics, in analyzing the normative aspect of belief states.

I will make a close association between theoretical ethics and normative epistemology in this book. But before that can be done convincingly, one objection to connecting moral and epistemic evaluation should be considered. This is the claim that whereas acts are voluntary, beliefs are not, so there is an important disanalogy between the primary object of moral evaluation – the act – and the primary object of epistemic evaluation – the belief. In 4.1 I argue that since the point of a virtue approach is to shift the locus of evaluation from the act/belief to the virtue, it follows that this objection largely misses the point, but I then go on to argue in 4.2 and 4.3 that in any case, beliefs and acts are sufficiently similar in voluntariness in a wide range of cases to permit similar types of evaluation.

1 USING MORAL THEORY IN EPISTEMOLOGY

The relationship between ethics and normative epistemology is both close and uneasy. The so-called ethics of belief debate has called attention to the idea that we can be commended or criticized for our beliefs and other cognitive states, but it is disputable whether the sense of evaluation intended is distinctively moral. As we have already seen, moral terminology is often used, but epistemic evaluation is conducted within practices that do not include some of the characteristic components of moral evaluation, most significantly, a system of rewards and punishments. Still, it is worth considering the indications that we think of ourselves as responsible for our epistemic states in a sense at least close to that of the moral. Michael Stocker (1982) has presented a

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prima facie case for the affirmative, arguing that responsibility for physical acts is linked with responsibility for mental goings-on, including beliefs, but this position is controversial, and since it makes responsibility for cognitive activity derivative from responsibility for overt acts, it limits the scope of cognitive responsibility in a way I believe seriously underrates the true extent of our cognitive responsibility. More recently, Christopher Hookway (1994) has argued that epistemic evaluation ought to focus on the activity of inquiry rather than on beliefs, and that the ethics of inquiry will show the proper place of self-controlled personal responsibility in epistemic evaluation.² This approach seems to me a promising one.

The ambivalence about our responsibility for having knowledge or justified belief is dramatically exemplified in the present impasse between internalism and externalism. The internalism/externalism distinction can be applied either to theories of justification or to theories of knowledge. Clearly, no matter how we define knowledge and justified belief, they will turn out to be highly desirable and important cognitive states, and this means there is something good about these states. But the type of good intended is not always clear, and this confusion is at the root of the internalist/externalist debate. Internalists about justification require that the factors needed for justification be cognitively accessible and internal to the believer, whereas externalists deny this, maintaining that the believer need not be aware of the feature or features that make her belief justified. A parallel distinction has been made in the account of the normative component of knowledge.³ Internalists think of knowledge or justified belief as

² In this connection Kenneth W. Kemp has told me that he thinks that the root of the difference between me and Aristotle is that the form of intellectual activity which is my paradigm is that of inquiry, while for Aristotle the paradigm is that of contemplation. The work that follows may serve to confirm Kemp's appraisal.

³ There are many different ways of drawing the distinction between internalism and externalism. Probably the most common one is to define internalism as the view that *all* justifying features of a belief be cognitively accessible and internal to the agent, whereas externalists claim that *some* justifying features are external or inaccessible. But it is clear from the discussion of reliabilism, the most popu-

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good in a sense similar to the way we think of acts, motives, and persons as good. These are the objects of praise when they are good and blame when they are bad. Externalists think of knowledge or justified belief as good in the sense we think of eyesight, hearing, intelligence, or musical talent as good. We may, in some circumstances, praise very high quality in these faculties, but we tend not to blame deficiencies in them and generally neither praise nor blame them when they are normal. Given this fundamental difference in the senses in which epistemic states can be good, it is not surprising that the internalism/externalism dispute has so far been intractable.

Later we will consider the problem of the extent to which our behavior of any kind is under our control, but at the outset it is worth remarking that we do think our cognitive behavior as well as our overt behavior can be favorably affected by effort and training on our part. Some of the most important questions we ask about our lives include “What should I think about?” and “What should I believe?” as well as “What should I want?” and “What should I do?” Furthermore, we criticize others for their beliefs as well as for their actions, and we probably are even more inclined to criticize their beliefs than their feelings and desires. For example, a person who cannot help feeling envious but attempts to control such feelings is not criticized as much as someone who permits his envy to influence his beliefs on the morality of social and economic arrangements. The same point applies to beliefs formed, not out of undue influence by the passions, but by a more obviously “mental” error. So we blame a person who makes hasty generalizations or who ignores the testimony of reliable authority. Such criticism is much closer to *moral* criticism than the criticism of bad eyesight or poor blood circulation. When people call others shortsighted or pigheaded, their criticism is as much like moral criticism as when they call them offensive or

lar version of externalism, that externalists generally believe that the most important or salient justifying features typically are inaccessible to the agent’s consciousness. This permits hybrid positions according to which some important justifying features are and some are not cognitively accessible. See Laurence Bonjour’s contribution to Dancy and Sosa 1992, p. 132, for an explanation of the way this distinction is used in the contemporary literature.

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obnoxious; in fact, what is obnoxious about a person can sometimes be limited to a certain pattern of thinking. The same point can be made, in differing degrees, of a variety of other names people are called for defects that are mostly cognitive: mulish, stiff-necked, pertinacious, recalcitrant, or obstinate; wrong-headed, vacuous, shallow, witless, dull, muddleheaded, thick-skulled, or obtuse. Of course, the connotation of blame in the use of these terms may be partly conveyed by tone of voice, but their usage definitely differs from that of the purely nonmoral labels given to the brain damaged or congenitally mentally retarded. What's more, the association of praise and blame is explicitly extended to states of knowledge and ignorance when we use such expressions as "She should have known better."

It will take most of this book to demonstrate that epistemic evaluation is a form of moral evaluation, but I hope these few considerations explain in part the strong attraction to concepts and forms of argument from ethics in epistemological discourse, even in discourse on the nature of knowledge. I believe the way ethics is used in epistemology should be taken very seriously since much depends upon it: the choice of concepts used and their theoretical interconnections, what is taken for granted and what is assumed to need close argument, and even the social practices that the background ethical theory promotes. Epistemologists use ethical theory anyway. I suggest that it be done self-consciously and advisedly. In 1.1 and 1.2 I will look at the ethical theories that provide contemporary epistemologists with their models and will defend the use of a true virtue theory in epistemology.

1.1 Contemporary epistemic theories and their ethical models

A significant way in which contemporary epistemic theory parallels moral theory is that the locus of evaluation is the individual belief, just as the locus of evaluation in most modern ethics has been the individual act. Epistemologists assume that the normative concepts of interest to their inquiry are properties of beliefs in one of two senses of "belief": either they are properties of the psychological states of believing, or they are properties of the

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propositional objects of such states. Disputes between foundationalists and coherentists and between externalists and internalists are disputes about the nature of such properties.

There are several epistemic analogues of the concept of a right act, and all of them are categories of belief. Perhaps most important for contemporary discussion is the concept of a justified belief. To be justified is a way of being right. Alternatively, epistemologists may speak of a warranted, rational, or well-founded belief, and in each case the concept used may or may not be understood as a component in the concept of knowledge. So there may be more than one way of being right epistemically. Having a belief that is justified or rational or well founded is one way of being right. Another way is to have whatever it takes to convert a true belief into knowledge. In each case the epistemological concept is the analogue of the right act. So just as the right act is usually the primary concept for moral philosophers, the justified (rational, warranted, well-founded) belief is the primary concept for epistemologists. Even when the question addressed is the nature of knowledge, the focus is still on the belief and its normative properties. As Roderick Firth puts it, "The ultimate task of a theory of knowledge is to answer the question, 'What is knowledge?' But to do this it is first necessary to answer the question, 'Under what conditions is a belief warranted?'" (1978, p. 216). Firth calls this "the unavoidable first step," but in practice the first step is generally the major part of the theory. So whether the epistemologist is concerned with rational belief or with knowledge, the theory virtually always focuses on the belief and it makes the evaluation of belief conceptually basic.

Since contemporary epistemology is belief-based, it is no surprise that the type of moral theory from which these theories borrow moral concepts is almost always an act-based theory, either deontological or consequentialist. So we generally find that epistemologists refine their inquiry into one of two types of questions: (1) Does the belief violate any epistemic *rules* or any epistemic *duties*? Is it epistemically *permissible*, within one's epistemic *rights*? Theories of this sort take deontological moral theories as their normative model. (2) Was the belief formed by a reliable process for obtaining the truth? Theories of this sort are the forms

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of reliabilism, structurally parallel to consequentialism. In reliabilist theories the epistemic goal is to bring about true beliefs and to avoid bringing about false beliefs, just as on consequentialist theories the moral goal is to bring about good states of affairs and to avoid bringing about bad states of affairs. And like most consequentialist ethics, reliabilism understands the good as quantitative. Whereas the utilitarian aims to maximize the balance of pleasure over pain, the reliabilist aims to maximize the balance of true over false beliefs.

So both deontological and reliabilist theories in epistemology have structural similarities with act-based ethics. An interesting variant is the theory of Ernest Sosa, who, in his well-known paper "The Raft and the Pyramid" (1980), proposed that epistemologists focus on intellectual virtue, a property of a person, rather than on properties of belief states, and argued that the concept of intellectual virtue can be used to bypass the dispute between foundationalists and coherentists on proper cognitive structure. I find Sosa's suggestion illuminating but have been disappointed that he has not adapted his concept of virtue from a virtue theory of morality. Rather, his model of a moral theory is act-based, and his definition of virtue is consequentialist: "An intellectual virtue is a quality bound to help maximize one's surplus of truth over error" (1985, p. 227; reprinted in Sosa 1991, p. 225). On the other hand, Sosa's idea of justification is more deontological, involving the adoption of a belief through "cognizance of its according with the subject's principles, including principles as to what beliefs are permissible in the circumstances as viewed by that subject" (1991, p. 144). Sosa's theory, then, combines consequentialist and deontological approaches with an informal concept of virtue that is not embedded in aretaic ethics. Like a virtue ethicist, he is sensitive to the importance of the social environment in his understanding of intellectual virtue, but Sosa does not go very far to connect his use of the concept of intellectual virtue with its use in ethics, and he apparently believes Aristotelian ethics to be generally inapplicable to his concerns.⁴ In any case, he makes no attempt to integrate

⁴ In "Intellectual Virtue in Perspective" (1991, p. 271) Sosa dissociates his use of the concept of a virtue from the Aristotelian sense. In referring to the faculty of

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intellectual virtue into the broader context of a subject's psychic structure in the way that has been done by many philosophers for the moral virtues. What's more, Sosa's examples of intellectual virtues are faculties such as eyesight and memory, which are not virtues at all in traditional virtue theory. It turns out, then, that his plea for a turn to the concept of intellectual virtue actually has little to do with the concept of intellectual virtue *as* a virtue in the classical sense.

In fairness to Sosa, however, it ought to be pointed out that virtue ethicists have had little to say about intellectual virtue either. Generally the only intellectual virtue that gets any attention is *phronesis*, or practical wisdom, but that is examined only because of Aristotle's connection of *phronesis* with the distinctively *moral* virtues. The intellectual virtues that have direct relevance to epistemic evaluation are typically ignored altogether, so it is no wonder that Sosa has not found much help in virtue ethics for the analysis of the concept he believes is central to epistemology. Virtue theory simply has not kept pace with the needs of epistemology if Sosa is right. I think, then, that Sosa's insight that it would be fruitful for epistemology to make the primary object of evaluation intellectual virtues and vices and to

sight, he says, "Is possession of such a faculty a 'virtue'? Not in the narrow Aristotelian sense, of course, since it is not a disposition to make deliberate choices. But there is a broader sense of 'virtue,' still Greek, in which anything with a function – natural or artificial – does have virtues. The eye does, after all, have its virtues, and so does a knife. And if we include grasping the truth about one's environment among the proper ends of a human being, then the faculty of sight would seem in a broad sense a virtue in human beings; and if grasping the truth is an intellectual matter then that virtue is also in a straightforward sense an intellectual virtue." In this passage Sosa seems to treat sight as the virtue of the eye, but in Plato and Aristotle sight is the function of the eye, not its virtue. Plato (*Republic* 352e–353c) and Aristotle (*Nicomachean Ethics* [hereafter abbreviated *NE*] II.6.1106a14–27) both accept an analogy according to which a person's (or soul's) virtue is related to his function as the eye's virtue is to the eye's function. The eye's virtue is a trait that enables the eye to see well. Extending the analogy in the way Sosa desires, we should say that grasping the truth is a function of the intellect, not its virtue. The virtues would be those traits whereby the intellect is enabled to grasp the truth well. I thank Charles Young for noticing this problem in the way Sosa relates the concept of virtue to that of a function.

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attach secondary justification to individual beliefs because of their source in intellectual virtues is a significant contribution to the field. In addition, his suggestion that “[w]e need to consider more carefully the concept of a virtue and the distinction between moral and intellectual virtues” (1980, reprinted in Sosa 1991, p. 190) strikes me as exactly right and is advice I am following in this book.

In the years since Sosa introduced the concept of intellectual virtue into the epistemological literature, the term “virtue epistemology” has become known as another name for reliabilism and related theories such as Plantinga’s theory of proper function (Greco 1992, 1993; Kvanvig 1992). But as we have seen, reliabilism is structurally parallel to consequentialism, not virtue theory, and although Plantinga’s theory does not have a consequentialist structure, it is not modeled on a virtue theory either, and, like Sosa, Plantinga focuses on faculties, not virtues.

Like Sosa, Greco defines an intellectual virtue in terms of its propensity to achieve a certain consequence:

What is an intellectual virtue or faculty? A virtue or faculty in general is a power or ability or competence to achieve some result. An intellectual virtue or faculty, in the sense intended above, is a power or ability or competence to arrive at truths in a particular field and to avoid believing falsehoods in that field. Examples of human intellectual virtues are sight, hearing, introspection, memory, deduction and induction. (1992, p. 520)

It is quite obvious that sight, hearing, and memory are faculties, and (as mentioned in n. 4), the Greeks identified virtues, not with faculties themselves, but with the excellences of faculties. The sense in which Greco’s examples can be considered virtues, then, is misapplied if it is intended to reflect the way the concept of virtue has been used in ethics. In fact, it has little connection with the history of the concept of intellectual virtue, although that history is quite sparse, as already noted. Aristotle’s examples of intellectual virtues include theoretical wisdom (*sophia*), practical wisdom (*phronesis*), and understanding or insight (*nous*). Hobbes’s list includes good wit and discretion; Spinoza’s primary