

Knowledge Need Not Be Virtuously Motivated

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As far back as Socrates and Plato, philosophers have been occupied with trying to identify the essential features of important concepts like justice, love, virtue, beauty, and knowledge. Contemporary epistemologists are no exception. Much ink has been shed in epistemology in the last 50 years attempting to identify the essential ingredients of knowledge. One such attempt has come from virtue epistemologists, who give a central role to the concept of intellectual virtue in their reflection on knowledge and related dimensions of the cognitive life.¹

One major group of virtue epistemologists conceives of intellectual virtues on the model of moral virtues, that is, as intellectual *character* traits like reflectiveness, open-mindedness, fair-mindedness, carefulness and thoroughness inquiry, and intellectual courage, intellectual honesty, and intellectual rigor.² According to these authors, intellectual virtues are psychologically rooted in something like a “love of truth” or a firm and abiding desire for knowledge. Thus to be open-minded or intellectually courageous or intellectually thorough, say, is to be disposed to engage in cognitive activity characteristic of the virtue in question *out of* such a desire.³

As indicated, some proponents of character-based virtue epistemology have sought to defend an virtue-based account of knowledge according to which knowledge is (roughly) virtuously motivated true belief or true belief with its basis in something like a love of truth or knowledge.⁴ Our concern in this debate is not with the overall plausibility of such accounts. It is rather with the narrower question of whether knowledge must be virtuously motivated; or, alternatively, whether it is possible for a person to acquire knowledge without possessing intellectually virtuous motives. I shall be arguing that this is possible and thus that knowledge need not be virtuously motivated. The discussion will, I hope, shed some important light on two importantly different dimensions of human cognition. It will also illuminate the prospects of virtue epistemology, an issue I shall return to toward the end of the essay.

I

Before turning to the main argument, a bit more reflection on the guiding question is in order. First, the question is not whether knowledge *tends* to be virtuously motivated or is *usually* virtuously motivated. Rather, it is whether intellectually virtuous motivation is essential

to or required for knowledge—whether it is at least *possible* to acquire knowledge without being virtuously motivated. A second and related observation is that my burden here is relatively light. To prove my case, I need only make it plausible that in a *single* case knowledge is or can be acquired in the absence of virtuous motives. While I intend to do considerably more than this, the fact remains that the greater burden lies with one who claims that knowledge *must* be virtuously motivated. Third, it would be helpful, to be sure, if we had a more refined account of what “virtuous intellectual motivation” amounts to. We have said that to be virtuously motivated is to be motivated by something like a desire for truth or knowledge. But what is the full range of psychological states that might qualify as intellectually virtuous motives? This is no easy matter to sort out, and attempting to do so here would take us well beyond the allotted space. This is not a serious problem, however, for the arguments that follow are consistent with a wide variety of ways of thinking about what exactly intellectually virtuous motives amount to (more on this below).

II

Let “ $K \rightarrow VM$ ” be the thesis that knowledge must be virtuously motivated. In the present section, I identify two sets of considerations which suggest that this thesis is too restrictive, the second being more comprehensive and formidable than the first.

The first problem with $K \rightarrow VM$ is that it implausibly limits the class of knowers to those (a) who are personally *praiseworthy* or *admirable* and (b) who possess a capacity for rational *reflection* or *control*. It is widely accepted and very plausible that a love of truth and related motives are personally admirable or praiseworthy; indeed, many virtue epistemologists treat such motives as a fundamental virtue-making quality.⁵ A similar point holds for the claim that the possession of intellectually virtuous motives requires a capacity for rational reflection or control. This requirement stems from the fact that the motives in question instantiate a kind of genuine intellectual character excellence, which is a type of excellence that demands a certain kind or degree of rational reflection or control.⁶ Accordingly, if knowledge requires intellectually virtuous motivation, then one can know only if one is personally praiseworthy and has the relevant cognitive capacity.

This claim is highly counterintuitive. The bar for knowledge simply does not appear to be that high. I will not attempt to work out exactly whom this conception rules in and whom it rules out. I will note, however, that at a minimum it dictates that animals and small children cannot acquire any knowledge. For some this will by itself be sufficient grounds for concluding that $K \rightarrow$

VM is too demanding.

A second and more urgent problem with $K \rightarrow VM$ is that it flies in the face of a wide range of specific instances of knowledge. This includes many clear cases of immediate perceptual knowledge: e.g. my belief that there is (or seems to be) a computer monitor before me, that my children are making noise in the other room, that my coffee has a pleasant bitter taste, and so on. Surely these beliefs amount to knowledge. And yet it does not seem plausible to think that their formation involves the manifestation of any intellectually virtuous motives. Moreover, while immediate perceptual knowledge poses the most obvious problem for $K \rightarrow VM$, troubling cases of introspective, memorial, and even a priori knowledge can also be identified. My belief that my left ankle is sore, that I am anxious about meeting a deadline, that I ate a banana for breakfast, that I slept in my own bed last night, that seven plus five equals twelve, and that there are no four-sided triangles, are all clear instances of knowledge, and yet it is implausible to think that in forming or maintaining these beliefs I manifest anything that can reasonably be thought of as intellectually virtuous motives.

The foregoing considerations, as brief and straightforward as they are, provide strong *prima facie* support for the conclusion that knowledge without virtuous motivation is possible, and indeed, that it is actual and even quite pervasive. I will, then, allot most of the remaining space to a consideration of possible objections and replies.

IV

There are at least four main lines of objection that might be raised against the foregoing arguments and in support of $K \rightarrow VM$. I shall explain and respond to each one in turn.

It might be objected, first, that the cases in question do not amount to genuine knowledge. It is true that some historical philosophers (e.g. Plato and Aristotle) held views of knowledge according to which many of the beliefs countenanced in the previous section would not amount to genuine knowledge. Thus a defender of $K \rightarrow VM$ might appeal to these views in an effort to get around the argument in question.

This is not a very promising objection. First, very few philosophers today would be prepared to embrace the Platonic or Aristotelian epistemology and metaphysics that underwrite the objection.⁷ Second, it is not at all clear that these views really support $K \rightarrow VM$. That is, it is far from obvious that even if these views were correct, knowledge would be impossible in the absence of intellectually virtuous motives.⁸ Third, it is important to be clear that the cases in question not only satisfy modern and contemporary criteria for knowledge but in fact are among

the *clearest instances* of knowledge understood in a broadly modern or contemporary way. Like Descartes's *cogito* and Moore's conviction that he has hands, they are widely embraced as dialectical starting points. To the modern and contemporary mind, if any of our beliefs amount to knowledge, these beliefs do.⁹ I shall, then, assume that the real challenge for a defender of $K \rightarrow VM$ is to show, not that the beliefs discussed in the previous section fail to qualify as knowledge, but rather that these beliefs involve intellectually virtuous motives.

A second objection contends that in the cases at issue, the knowing subject is virtuously motivated because she is operating *as an intellectually virtuous person would* under similar conditions.¹⁰ There is no doubt that persons marked by qualities like intellectual carefulness, intellectual thoroughness, intellectual honesty, and intellectual rigor form basic sensory and related beliefs in the very spontaneous and unreflective way alluded to above. But not everything an intellectually virtuous person does is *characteristic* of intellectual virtue. When an intellectually virtuous person goes to sleep, checks the mail, eats lunch, or goes for a bike ride, she does not typically do so *as* an intellectually virtuous person. For the activities in question typically do not *implicate* or draw upon the relevant character virtues. The problem with the objection is that the same appears to be true of the cognitive activity that generates the relevant sensory and related beliefs. An intellectually virtuous person does not form these beliefs *qua* or *as* an intellectually virtuous person. In forming these beliefs, the person's volitional or motivational character is not engaged; or, to the extent that it is engaged, the corresponding psychological activity lacks the kind of admirable or praiseworthy quality characteristic of intellectual virtue.

A third and somewhat more promising objection claims that in the cases in question intellectually virtuous motives are present *but only at a low level*.¹¹ I do not wish to deny that in some of the cases at issue the belief might have a motivational or volitional aspect to it. For instance, my belief that seven plus five equals twelve might be the result of my *wondering* about the sum in question and *attending* to the relevant logical or mathematical relations. Similarly, basic sensory belief formation is sometimes motivated by a kind of interest in or curiosity about the states of affairs in question.

One problem is that even in cases of this sort, it is doubtful that the motivation is really intellectually virtuous. After all, animals and small children apparently can wonder, attend to, and be interested in or curious about a wide range of things and proceed to form certain beliefs as result. While we might be prepared to regard these beliefs as knowledge, we would not be willing to bestow upon their subjects the kind of praise or admiration we give to those with virtuous intellectual character.

A more serious problem, however, is that there remains a vast range of putative instances of knowledge in which the ascription of even a low-level psychological motivation seems extremely implausible. Suppose I am sitting around a seminar table with a group of graduate students and one of the students suddenly drops his laptop on the hardwood floor; or imagine that as we are talking the lights in the room suddenly go out.¹² Here I will immediately, without any sort of attention or curiosity whatsoever, form a corresponding sensory belief (e.g. a belief to the effect that a loud noise has just occurred or that the lighting in the room has changed). This belief is likely to qualify as knowledge; and yet it seems obviously false that it might be the product of any virtuous motives.¹³

This point can be brought into further relief by a consideration of cases in which a person acquires knowledge despite possessing intellectually *vicious* motives. Imagine a scientist S whose claim to fame is a certain heretofore empirically very impressive and successful theory T. While working in the lab, S encounters data from one of his highly reliable instruments that threaten to refute T. S might initially be incredulous. He might intensely desire that the data be false or misleading. He might even attempt to disbelieve his own eyes or to deceive himself concerning the data's devastating impact on T. Nevertheless, the data might be so clear and indisputable as to make an acceptance of them unavoidable. While it is not difficult to think that S might acquire knowledge of the relevant information, such knowledge surely need not be the product of intellectually virtuous motivation. Instead it might be the result of the more or less natural, automatic, or mechanical operation of S's cognitive endowment.¹⁴

This case and cases like it underscore an important distinction between two different dimensions of human cognition. The suggested picture is one according to which the operation of human cognitive faculties is in a certain respect *independent* of agency, volition, or psychological motivation. At a certain level these faculties operate naturally or automatically. This is not to deny that the rudimentary cognitive operations in question can be harnessed or cultivated by cognitive agents. On the contrary, on one very plausible way of understanding intellectual character and virtues, these are things that emerge from an agent's engagement with and cultivation of the more mechanistic side of her cognitive nature.¹⁵ What we have seen, however, is that the divide between the mechanistic and volitional dimensions of human cognition fails to correspond to the divide between unknowing and knowing, and more specifically, that untutored or rudimentary cognitive processes are capable of generating knowledge.

Before turning to consider a final objection, it is worth observing that even if the relevant cases were always to involve a low-level cognitive motivation (even motivation that could

reasonably be considered intellectually virtuous), while this might vindicate $K \rightarrow VM$, the thesis itself would be of minimal epistemological significance. We noted above that the significance of $K \rightarrow VM$ is tied closely to the viability of a virtue-based account of knowledge: if $K \rightarrow VM$ is true, this would seem to bode very well for such an account and thus also for the corresponding variety of virtue epistemology. However, for reasons I have discussed elsewhere and do not have the space to elaborate on here, a virtue-based account of knowledge will be viable only if intellectually virtuous motives must play a *significant* role in the formation or maintenance of any known belief, and more specifically, only if knowledge requires getting to the truth *on account of* or in a way that is *creditable* to the motives in question.¹⁶ The problem is that even if intellectually virtuous motives were to play the kind of minimal, low-level, or background role we have been considering, they clearly would not play this much stronger and more salient role. Therefore, even if it were true that knowledge is always virtuously motivated in the relevant low-level way, the epistemological significance of this fact would be questionable at best.

A fourth and more modest objection to the foregoing case against $K \rightarrow VM$ is that while virtuous motivation may not be required for knowledge *simpliciter*, it is required for a certain *high-grade variety* of knowledge. I have no interest in ruling out this possibility here. I will point out, however, that for it to be made plausible, considerably more would need to be said by way of support. Specifically, it would need to be shown that there exists a high-grade *pretheoretical* or *theory-neutral* concept of knowledge according to which the type of knowledge in question requires the possession of intellectually virtuous motives. This is because, in the absence of such a concept, the resulting account of “high-grade knowledge” is bound to appear stipulative and artificial, thereby casting doubt on its overall value or significance.¹⁷ It is true that some epistemologists have gestured at a distinction between high-grade and low-grade knowledge. Ernest Sosa, for instance, regularly appeals to a distinction between “animal” and “reflective” knowledge.¹⁸ What remains unclear, however, is whether it is possible to acquire the relevant kind of high-grade or reflective knowledge without possessing intellectual virtuous motives. Elsewhere I have offered reasons for thinking that it may be.¹⁹ If this is correct, the distinction in question does not favor even a chastened version of $K \rightarrow VM$.

We have considered a wide range of reasons for doubting that knowledge requires intellectually virtuous motivation. Despite this negative conclusion, it is important not to drive too deep of a wedge between the concept of knowledge and that of intellectual virtue or intellectually virtuous motivation. For the fact remains that much of the knowledge that we as human beings care about most, unlike knowledge of our immediate surroundings or of what we had for breakfast, is *difficult* to come by and indeed makes significant demands on our

intellectual *character* or on us as cognitive *agents*. Thus we must bear in mind that in many particular (and important) cases, acquiring knowledge *will* require the possession of intellectually virtuous motives.²⁰ This does not vindicate the claim that knowledge *per se* requires virtuous motivation. Nor does it support the attempt to offer a virtue-based analysis of knowledge.

V

I turn in this final section to consider the implications of the foregoing case against $K \rightarrow VM$ for the prospects of virtue epistemology. The argument implies, first, that virtue-based analyses of knowledge are in trouble. For, again, these are attempts to specify the necessary (and sufficient) conditions for knowledge, and we have seen that intellectually virtuous motivation is not required for knowledge. Moreover, while I cannot elaborate on the point here, this in turn suggests, contra the aspirations of some virtue epistemologists, that the concept of intellectual virtue or virtuous motivation does not merit a central and fundamental role within traditional epistemology. In short, this is because traditional epistemological questions and debates (e.g. skepticism, rationalism vs. empiricism, foundationalism vs. coherentism, internalism vs. externalism, etc.) are mainly limited to questions and debates about the *essential* or *defining* features of knowledge or epistemic justification (features, again, which do not include virtuous intellectual motivation). The upshot is that approaches to epistemology aimed at having a revolutionary or transformative effect on traditional epistemology are unlikely to succeed.²¹

But this does not spell doom for virtue epistemology as a whole, for it leaves open at least two additional theoretical approaches. First, it allows for the possibility that the concept of intellectual virtue or intellectually virtuous motives might play a *peripheral* or *auxiliary* role in connection with one or more traditional epistemological issues or debates. Second, it does nothing to undermine the rather plausible and attractive possibility that intellectual virtues and their role in the intellectual life can *in their own right* be fruitfully explored by epistemologists. In this way it leaves entirely untouched the prospects of what I have elsewhere referred to as “autonomous” virtue epistemology.²²

References

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¹ For overviews of the field, see Battaly (2008), Greco and Turri (2009), or Baehr (2004).

² These are so-called "virtue responsibilists" or proponents of "character-based" virtue epistemology. The other main approach to virtue epistemology is known as "virtue reliabilism" or "faculty-based" virtue epistemology. Defenders of this approach tend to conceive of intellectual virtues as reliable cognitive *faculties* like memory, vision, and introspection. For more on this distinction see Baehr (2006b).

³ See, for example, Zagzebski (1996), Montmarquet (1993), Roberts and Wood (2007), and Baehr (2011).

⁴ The main figure here is Zagzebski (1996; 1998). But see also Fairweather (2001) and Napier (2009).

⁵ See works cited in note 3 above.

⁶ See Zagzebski (1996) and Baehr (2011: Ch. 2 and forthcoming). See also Watson (2004: 1-2). I leave open the exact nature of the reflection in question.

⁷ This includes, for instance, Plato's doctrine of the forms and Aristotle's theory of abstraction.

⁸ See Baehr (2006a) for more on this point.

⁹ I develop this point in more detail in (2011: 40) and (2006a).

¹⁰ This argument is put forth, if not ultimately defended, by Zagzebski in (1996: 279-80).

¹¹ Zagzebski defends a reply of this sort in (1996: 280). A similar claim is defended in (Napier 2009: Ch. 3).

¹² I discuss similar cases in my (2006a) and (2011: 43-44).

¹³ This is not to deny that some beliefs might be formed in a way that is at once spontaneous and intellectually virtuous, e.g., such that they are a product of a cultivated doxastic habit. See my (2011: Ch. 4) and (2006b) for more on such cases. The beliefs we are concerned with at present, by contrast, are as natural, mechanical, and untutored as they come.

¹⁴ Of course, a person might acquiesce to the relevant evidence out of a countervailing sense of epistemic duty, say; however, this is not how I am imagining the sort of case at issue (nor do we need to appeal to any such sense in order to think of the relevant beliefs as knowledge).

¹⁵ See my (2011: Ch. 2) for more on this point.

¹⁶ See my (2006a) and (2011: 42-43). This is essential to dealing with the Gettier problem and related issues.

¹⁷ For more on this point, see Baehr (2008).

¹⁸ See his (2009).

¹⁹ See my (2006a) or (2008).

²⁰ For more on this, see my (2006b) or (2011: Ch. 4).

²¹ Elsewhere I have referred to these as instances of "conservative" virtue epistemology, since they appeal to the concept of intellectual virtue to deal with problems and questions within the epistemological tradition. For more on this and related points, see my (2008) or (2011: Chs. 3 and 10).

²² See my (2011: Ch. 10) for a more extensive development of these points.