# Incompetent Knowledge: Virtues and Virtualities

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**1.** A salient and attractive feature of the virtue approach in epistemology is that it is capable of placing human knowledge within a realm of genuinely epistemic phenomena in the world. Zagrzebski (2003) diagnoses that we are entering an askeptical period where the threat of skepticism is taken as dissolved or innocuous and epistemologists turn their eye to the connection between knowledge and the rest of the world by seeing knowledge within a more general context of practices with truth and action guidance. A symptom of this askeptical turn – or at least of the move towards seeing human knowledge within a broader epistemic realm – is the widespread use of expressions like animal knowledge as basis for comparison with human epistemic endeavors and norms. Philosophers have found themselves having to provide reasons to justify accounts of knowledge that cater for no more than the human experience.

If the goal becomes to understand knowledge using the resources of all sorts of phenomena where truth leaves a mark, to concentrate on human practices may sound parochial and limited. If epistemology is no longer to be placed in a skeptical scenario where each dealing with truth has to prove itself not to be an illusion, but rather in a metaphysical scenario where our access to some features of the world is taken as granted, the general phenomenon of acquiring truths is what seems to be requiring an account. Virtue epistemology is best described within this scenario: it is not about convincing anyone that we have genuine virtues geared towards capturing truths but rather about making use of virtues to understand (modest or impressive) episodes of knowledge.

Virtues have been used to bridge the gap between actions and their results – virtues point towards adroitness while considering any kind of goal-oriented behavior. They could be a good starting point for considering human knowledge within a broader context that includes animals and other agents. Plutarch, in his attempt to show how animals use reason, in his *Bruta animalia ratione uti*, appeals to virtues: animals are courageous, prudent, compassionate and even wise; Ulysses' old companion turned into pig by Circe's magic, persuades Odysseus that his life as a pig is not only happier but thoroughly more virtuous that that as a human. Virtues can be considered in different agents and can be compared by ethological considerations – and Plutarch engages in comparing the behavior of humans and pigs in relevantly similar situations (provided that they can be made relevantly similar).

To be sure, to place human virtues – and human epistemic virtues in particular – within the context of virtues in general is not to obliterate their peculiarity. Likewise, to claim that the virtues deployed in successful human knowledge are of the same sort as those used by other agents, is not to take humans to have solely animal knowledge, for instance. To place human knowledge in a broader epistemic context is not to reduce it to something else but rather to avoid taking it as a unique, fully *sui generis* phenomenon that cannot be explained in relation to anything else. Hence, features of human knowledge – such as its susceptibility to reflection and the import of reflective access, its association to knowing that one's own skills perform accurately, its capacity to discriminate adequate scenarios from others under normal circumstances – are best understood if taken together with other, more general, epistemic events. In his *Judgment and Agency* (2015), Sosa attempts to provide one such unified view where knowing reflectively and full well are understood in terms akin to that of animal knowledge – except for a second-order capacity of the knower that is present when full competence leads to full aptness in knowing. I think this is an attractive and fruitful move for it invites an externalist take on reflection and one that doesn't make it a dissociated *sui generis* phenomenon.

**2.** My main contention here is that knowledge is to be understood as being permeable or affected by truths. I conceive this contention as externalist in the following sense: a genuine episode of knowing doesn't have to be discriminated from episodes of illusion either by the knower or by any observing agent. That is, I take discrimination – and not reflective access, as Pritchard (2012) and others suggest – to be the main distinctive feature of an epistemological externalism. In terms akin to Lehrer & Cohen's (1983) new evil genius, there is no indepen-

dent factor that is common to a knower and her counterpart's brain is in a vat. However, as Sosa points out (2015: 15-16), this is not enough to dismiss the traditionalist claim that there is nothing in common between the good and the bad cases for there could be something in common which is not an independent factor. There could be a causal connection between what is known and the knower that would be present in bad cases but just not "in the right way" - to use the expression Sosa borrows from Davidson. Similarly, one can be in touch with the truth of one's belief but not in touch with other relevant truths – including truths about counterfactual situations – and therefore fail to know. In this case, the subject would merely have a true belief by chance and her having this episode of epistemic luck will make her access to the truth of her belief entirely different from the access a knower would have.

In any case, I would understand knowledge in terms of access to truths. It is in this sense that the understanding I suggest is externalist: there is no element of knowledge that is independent of truth. Hence, there is no element to knowledge such as justification if justification is independent of what is true about the world. Clayton Littlejohn (2012) has a factive account of justification, according to which there could be no justified false belief for falsehood precludes a belief from being justified. My proposal is akin to his, except I won't focus on justification but rather claim that knowledge in general is to be understood in terms of being permeated or affected by truths.

I present this sketchy externalist account of knowledge because it is useful to contrast it with Sosa's (2015) better virtue epistemology. As it was clear from the early days of the introduction of virtues in epistemological debates, an appeal to virtues – or, for that matter, to capacities – could be externalist, for one could be unaware of how virtuous one is – or how much of a capacity one is exercising. Bernard Williams, in his *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (1985), has argued that one can fail to act ethically if one engaged with virtues in too much of a third-person way. That is, if one asks oneself what the courageous (or prudent) line of action is before performing, it could mean that one doesn't have the virtues sufficiently ingrained for the act to be ethical. If I need to inquire as to what the virtuous course of action is, in this case, supposedly I have to be able to discriminate whether my action is indeed virtuous. To be sure, I could be aware of my (apparent) virtue as much as my counterpart's brain in a vat, but we could be in very different epistemic states for it is possible that only one of us is indeed acting virtuously. Furthermore, if there is a sense of unawareness that could spell virtue, this doesn't

entail that unawareness is itself epistemologically virtuous. In any case, it is clear that the emphasis on virtues could be externalist for one doesn't have to discriminate one's virtues in order to be virtuous.

Attention to virtues is certainly a way to entrench epistemic activity within the ethology of the agent – making it, for instance, part of human flourishing. However, the focus on virtues is still too much a focus on the structure of the agent – on her internal make-up, so to speak. The knower is supposed to be the seat of all the non-manifest features of knowledge – not due to the truths she accesses about the world (latent or occurrent) but rather due to her competence in performing a skill. The focus is on what the knower is capable of doing, and not on what truths were captured – it is couched in terms of competence rather than in terms of actual performance. Zagrzebski holds that the knower is to get credit for her episode of knowing and that knowledge is some sort of admirable true belief. A belief could be admirable for the competences of an agent but also because it is seated on other truths. Those truths set up the standard to capture them – and competences could be persistently insufficient if they are not tuned to what they aim to achieve. In fact, for each competence there is a class of truths latently accessed by the agent but different competences are different because they suppose familiarity with different truths. So, to play baseball and to play rugby require different classes of competences (presumably with overlaps) because the games are different – and not because the competences are inherently different. To focus on being permeable or affected by truths is to focus on truth percolations and not on the agent's ways to be prepared for them.

**3.** Sosa proposes his better virtue theory in terms of a theory of competence (2015: 95ff). His analysis involves his SSS (or SeShSi) scheme: in full competence, the innermost *seat* of a competence in the agent is joined by the agent being in the right *shape* – which is also inner – and the outer *situation* to be appropriate. Full aptness – accurate behavior because adroit – requires full competence and second-order competence in determining one's own competence. The SSS analysis is thought in terms of dispositions (and finks, and antidotes): the seat is not enough, the seat and the shape are not enough. It is like the analysis of first and second potentiality in Aristotle: seat is like first potentiality while shape and situation are more like second potentiality (or first actuality). While full competence requires SSS, partial competence could involve just part of the triad. Like with non-actualized potentialities – or with fink dispositions – there are competences, even full ones, that never get exercised, for there is something that

prevents them from being actualized. According to C. B. Martin's analysis of the conditional analysis, finkish dispositions are the main general obstacle to any attempt to understand dispositional predicates in terms of categorical ones in a conditional relation. The analysis has to be restricted to (eventually) actualized dispositions.

Now, conditional analyses are similar to tracking approaches to knowledge. Consider a conditional understanding of knowledge along the following lines: S believes p, p is true and a counterfactual conditional (c) holds:

(C) *not-p is true if and only if S believes it*.

That is, knowledge is true belief that would be corrected if the world were different. This condition of promptness to correction is what makes knowledge more invaluable – and belief more admirable – than mere true belief. This appeal to counterfactuals often makes tracking approaches look unattractive and encourage epistemologists to cash out the counterfactual vocabulary in different ways. To talk about competence – as it is an appeal to dispositions – can be seen as one of these ways. One ascribes to the subject S an inner structure that predisposes her to track truth. Sosa compares this competence with other non-epistemic capacities and makes use of the SSS structure of competence that is embedded in the AAA analysis of aptness (accuracy, adroitness and aptness – accurate because adroit). There is something internal to the knower that makes her competent if she is in the right shape and in the right situation. She can then access her competence supposedly by applied introspection: am I capable to shoot accurately from this distance (meaning the distance she is at in this particular moment)? The question addresses her competence, and not what she will end up doing. She doesn't discriminate cases where she will fail while being fully competent (bad cases) from cases where she succeeds while being fully competent (good cases). But she does discriminate competence. There is room for a competent and yet inaccurate action (a competently formed yet false belief).

4. It is to this analysis of (c) provided by Sosa that I want to contrast a virtuality-based analysis. I propose changing the focus from virtues and virtuosity to virtuality and the virtual. The counterfactual (c) could also be analyzed in other (equally modal) terms: there is something about the world that makes the conditional work. So one knows that it is going to rain not only by looking at the sky and sensing the actualities of the positions of the clouds and the direction of the wind but also by accessing the *virtuality* that were the wind blowing in the opposite

direction it wouldn't rain. This analysis in terms of virtuality is mute about the competences of the agent – what matters is that true relevant virtualities are believed together with the target belief (that it is going to rain). An admirable belief is one that is couched in terms of other true beliefs – incidentally, this is how we recognize genuine knowledge, by considering what *else* the believer knows apart from the target belief. Requiring known virtualities instead of acquired virtues moves the analysis more towards the external and the manifest and less towards the internal and the dispositional. To know is to know how things are and how they would have been given some other circumstances. In other words, the virtuality approach has it that knowledge never comes in isolation as it is always supported by other pieces of knowledge. It is however not enough to take knowledge as any critical mass of true beliefs.[1] The virtuality approach requires the agent to have true beliefs about the relevant virtualities, that is, about how the world would behave in slightly different circumstances. To be sure, knowing virtualities – as having competences – is not enough for knowledge and is not enough to discriminate good cases from bad cases, not even if we add the requisite of a second-order virtuality according to which one knows virtualities – for instance, in terms of laws – concerning one's reliability (something like "if the wind were moving rapidly I would hesitate in my prediction of rain").

Further, from a point of view like Goodman's, competences and virtualities are both translatable to counterfactuals and as such they are interchangeable. To some extent, they share advantages and blind-spots. Above all, both rely on counterfactual reasoning. Their truth-conditions are the same and they are verified (that is, manifest in actuality) precisely under the same circumstances. Verifying competences and verifying virtualities require similar procedures. However the metaphysical import is different: while dispositions are properties of the agent, virtuality points to salient features of how the world is. A view based on dispositions or competences ascribes properties to the agent, whereas a view based on virtualities ascribes no more than the present access to a critical mass of truths. One could, in principle at least, know of virtualities while having no specific competence – one could know about the sky in one's own town in a way that would enable one to knowingly predict rain there but not anywhere else. Clearly, competences, as much as virtualities, can be circumscribed to regions or times – the Barney case as studied by Sosa comes to mind – but talk about virtualities ascribes nothing to

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1    More on accounts of knowledge based on critical masses of beliefs in Bensusan & Pinedo (2014).

the agent but being permeated and affected by truths. What matters is to know the relevant truths, the truth of the target belief and the truth of the relevant virtualities. There is an element of skill associated with attaining truths, but skill – or the virtuous inner structure of the agent – doesn't have to be taken into consideration epistemically. It doesn't matter how competent a true believer is: if enough virtual truths are captured, there is knowledge.

Sosa (2015: 41-45) makes a number of remarks on how some virtues are not genuinely epistemic even though they contribute to the attainment of knowledge. Considering dedication to investigation, he writes:

> It might be that someone's obsessive pursuit of truth, even at the cost of malnourishment and depression, puts them in a position to attain truths that are denied to their healthy rivals. Even if such obsession to the point of ill health does reliably lead to truth on certain matters inaccessible otherwise (even if, I say), the exercise of such personal qualities (obsessiveness) would hardly constitute knowledge. (41-2)

Obsessiveness could help attaining knowledge in some circumstances but it is unclear how it turns a true belief into knowledge (one could phrase the difference in terms of admirable belief and admirably acquired belief). There are all sorts of competences and virtues that could help acquire knowledge but that are not manifested in the correctness of the belief; perhaps because the same knowledge could be acquired without them. Sometimes it is just a matter of luck that makes a capacity or a disposition fit to attain knowledge, a luck that is not epistemic luck but that invokes favors of the world in the sense that a particular (non-epistemic) disposition is rewarded with genuine knowledge. Sosa considers the case of the disposition towards laziness knower who

> […] could have as much knowledge in a given domain as would someone industrious. The lazy knower could just by luck be placed in the position to know, a position that the industrious knower would need to win with much effort and persistence. (45)

My claim is that no quality and no competence can itself constitute knowledge in all cases. No virtue is therefore epistemically relevant in all cases – there are cases where every virtue is epistemically as tangential as laziness or obsessiveness in the examples above. A belief

is admirable because it takes into account the particularities of its circumstances. An episode of knowledge can then be taken at face value: it is an episode. To be sure, knowledge arguably comes in degrees and when it does, those degrees have to do with what is further known around the target belief – what other virtualities are available.

There could be scenarios where a specific incompetence is epistemically rewarded. One could think of episodes where knowing something similar to what is taught could be disadvantageous – cases like learning a language too similar to an already known language. Sosa would then counter that in these scenarios the agent with the specific competence in question doesn't have full competence because there is no second-order right assessment of the competence in the specific scenario (seat and shape could be present but the assessment of the situation in such scenario would be flawed). It is as if there is a full competence applicable to each scenario and assessment is right only if it is aware of changes in the scenario. One has to be competent in soccer to play soccer – because competence in handball could be detrimental to soccer-learning. The main problem here is that of the individuation of competences. How should we proceed to distinguish different full competences associated with agents in different scenarios? Sosa argues that we don't have to be able to individuate virtues, nor even to be able to list them. It is enough to have a matching competence – to have the appropriate virtue. But it is not clear what exactly all this talk of virtues is offering. It seems that what matters clearly is not competence itself, but what it leads to; not only in terms of mere actualities, but in terms of what support it lends to the counterfactual that distinguishes a mere true belief from an epistemic state of genuine knowledge. This is the virtue of virtuality. It provides a metaphysics of knowledge, but not one to do with the inner structure of a successful knower but rather one to do with what has to be accessed in the world for knowledge to take place. To know something requires that one knows enough (of what is relevant for the target belief to be true).

**5.** In order to elaborate a bit further this virtuality-based alternative, I close with some brief remarks on perception. Perceptual knowledge can act as an heuristic model for knowledge in general. Let's take a traditionalist view of perception, starting with a roughly Lockean approach to perception: one perceives something real through ideas (of the mind). Perception extends from objects of one's mind towards something real that is being perceived. In other words, I take perception of something real to be indirect – but not by any means illusory or a product of an inference. So, one captures truths by perception through a mediation of the ideas that one

forms about what is captured. These ideas are what one is in cognitive contact with while being in touch with what is perceived. So, I can have the image of an oasis in front of me while indirectly seeing an oasis (the good case) or a bright spot in the desert (the bad case). The image of the oasis is not independent from what is being perceived indirectly and therefore is not exactly an independent common factor. (It is in this sense that this is a traditionalist view – as opposed to a disjunctivist view, in Sosa's terminology.) My perceptual contact with either the oasis or the bright spot is mediated by images. Those images are effects of what is seen. In the two scenarios, the virtualities to be accessed are different – what is in front of me affords different things when it is a bright spot or an oasis. I could not discriminate between the good and the bad case while still there could be counterfactuals that would hold between my beliefs and the perceived object. I would have perceptual knowledge if I form an image of an oasis and believe I'm in front of an oasis while indirectly perceiving an oasis, and I would believe differently if there were no oasis in front of me (no matter if I could discriminate between the good and the bad case). What matters is that there is some kind of dependence between what is indirectly perceived and the image formed. It is not enough to be in contact with a real oasis, one has to be in a position to know what would happen to one's perceptual state if no oasis were present.

Wettstein (2007), when describing the claim of direct reference accounts, coins the motto "there could be linguistic contact without cognitive contact". It is not enough for cognitive contact to match linguistic contact – for the match could be due to luck. Consider a case of Gettier-like case involving linguistic and cognitive contact. Suppose S says "Socrates loved long baths" while having only false beliefs about Socrates (beliefs that are true of Archimedes). Suppose it turns out that Socrates (too) loved long baths. The belief, while being about Socrates according to a direct reference approach to proper names, is only true due to favors of the world because linguistic contact is independent from cognitive contact. The truth that Socrates loved long baths doesn't affect S. In order for S to know that "Socrates loved long baths" she would have to know about the relevant connections between long baths and Socrates and how she would believe something different if Archimedes, rather than Socrates, loved long baths. Cognitive contact – or at least epistemic contact – requires some sort of counterfactual ability, both in the virtue and in the virtuality approaches. In the latter, however, such ability doesn't have to be accompanied by any further competence on the issue. Provided the relevant counterfactual situations are considered, a knower could be otherwise utterly incompetent. The talk of competence

(and virtues) is often no more than a shortcut for a more important consideration concerning access to counterfactuals (and virtualities).

Analogously, in the account of perception sketched above, there could be perceptive contact without cognitive contact. The image created by perception in an indirect scenario constitutes perceptual knowledge only if it is relevantly affected by what is in perceptual contact with the perceiver – affected to the point of being sensitive to virtualities. What is directly perceived is not an independent common factor, but rather can be adequately exploited to reveal either the oasis or the bright spot. Knowledge involves an element of the exploitation of the common image in the right direction. If it were a different image, the belief would be affected. In other words, it is not enough to have perceptual contact with the oasis: one should be able to make some sort of counterfactual connection between the image one sees and the perceived oasis. The virtue approach would say that one has to be a competent detector of oases. The virtuality approach would say that one can also appeal to any other kind of competence – a competence to navigate in a desert landscape, a capacity to locate oneself based on an ability to read maps, a knowledge of the map or a skill to detect small variations in humidity – or no competence at all. It is enough to have sufficient knowledge of virtual circumstances to support counterfactual abilities.

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*ABSTRACT*

The paper reflects on some elements of Sosa's recently proposed SSS scheme. It considers the dispositional elements involved in some virtue-based epistemological approaches and their underlying counterfactual structure. These considerations ground a contrast between the virtue-based approach and a proposed virtuality-based approach where the underlying counterfactual is associated with no talk of abilities, capacities or competences.

**Key words:** *Epistemology; epistemological virtues; Sosa.*

*RESUMO*

O texto reflete sobre alguns elementos do esquema SSS proposto por Sosa recentemente. Ele analisa os elementos disposicionais envolvidos em algumas epistemologias de virtudes e a estrutura contrafactual que a elas subjaz. Esta análise abre caminho para um contraste entre abordagens  baseadas em virtudes e uma abordagem baseada em virtualidades que é proposta e onde a estrutura contrafactual subjacente não está associada a nenhuma habilidade, capacidade ou competência.

**Palavras-chave:** *Epistemologia; virtudes epistêmicas; Sosa.*