

Epistemic Virtues and their Limits

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I. Virtue Epistemology proposes to shift the focus of justification from the properties of beliefs to the believer himself. Sosa has developed a perspectivist virtue theory according to which a belief is justified if it is grounded in an intellectual virtue, conceived as a reliable ability or power to form beliefs, such as accurate perception, good reasoning, clear memory, etc., together with another belief that would indicate that the belief in question was formed *from* an intellectual virtue. This view takes the believer to be reliable in forming his or her beliefs. Further developments of virtue epistemology, though, understood that what constitutes intellectual virtues are not abilities or powers but personality traits such as intellectual courage, open-mindedness, rigor and things of the kind, and this opened the door to subsume intellectual virtues to the moral ones. This view, on its turn, takes the believer to be responsible in forming his beliefs.

In most of this comment, I follow Robert Audi (2001, 2004, 2013) and draw a comparison between moral and intellectual virtues so as to highlight the importance of intellectual virtues in well conducting our cognitive behaviors or intellectual lives. The analogy with Ethics is clarifying in so far as it shows that truth and falsity work as cognitive ends (positive and negative ends) just as the good and the evil work as ends for actions. Although beliefs are not actions and are not directly voluntary, this might be important for virtue epistemology because it is up to us to decide to form beliefs only if we have good grounds to do so. It is here that we find a central role of the intellectual virtues: to demand that we know what kind of proposition requires good grounds and to demand that we believe those propositions only if we do have good grounds for them.

If we explain what it is to act *from* a moral virtue, we can then explain what it is to form a belief *from* an intellectual virtue, making clear that intellectual virtues are good and that it is desirable that one's beliefs be guided by them. We may define a virtue as a character trait that tends to influence one's conduct, such as caution, justice and honesty. These are virtues because they indicate normative reasons to do what we should in a certain context and, more than this, they motivate us to do what we should for an appropriate kind of reason. But if I am to be virtuous, it is not enough that I act in accordance with a virtue. I must act *from* a virtue, in the sense that my action must be aretaically grounded, that is, my action must be grounded either directly or indirectly in a virtue, and so my beliefs and desires must be appropriately connected with elements of the virtue I possess. This connection makes me see which is the end of the virtue and it becomes essential that my action be guided by these cognitive and motivational elements of character. We can see here that the aretaic notion of an end must be understood internally, since it requires an appropriate basis of the action, so that it is not enough an external realization of a good.

There are plenty of suggestions about what counts as an epistemic virtue, but even if they are analogous to moral ones there is no need to single out any of the many ethical theories to understand the many accounts of what a moral virtue is and only then seek for their epistemological correspondence. It is enough that some intellectual traits be taken as clear cases of epistemic virtues. They may be related to competences or abilities, such as clear perception, good memory, careful introspection, and rigorous reasoning, without which we would hardly have any knowledge, or related to character traits such as open-mindedness, rigor, insightfulness, curiosity, creativity, and resourcefulness. All these are epistemic virtues, not only in the sense that they are admirable but also in the sense that without them we would very likely have less knowledge, if any. All these are desirable traits of the character of the believer and of the epistemic agent, meaning that the lack of them would count as intellectual malfunction. But whereas perception, introspection, memory, and reason are essential to form beliefs and to obtain knowledge, character traits seem to be simply *means* to reach the epistemic goal of avoiding believing falsehoods and seeking to believe significant truths. They are not taken to be intrinsically good, since they only play the role of well conducting our intellectual lives, becoming essential only to our intellectual flourishing but inessential to reaching the truth.

II. In his “Virtue Epistemology: character versus competence”, Sosa defends his position against Jason Baehr’s accusation of negligence. According to Baehr (2011), Sosa should have expanded his virtue reliabilism so as to include character traits (a character-based dimension) into his account of knowledge. The defense advances four claims: the first is that virtue reliabilism has always left the door opened to active, volitional or character based dimension, and so virtue reliabilism includes more than just the faculty-based dimension of human cognition; the second is that character-based intellectual virtues is a partial and inadequate account of human cognition; the third is that virtue reliabilism includes in its conception a sort of character-based intellectual virtue that is a special case of reliable-competence intellectual virtue; the fourth claim is that character-based intellectual virtues are *auxiliaries* to the special sort of reliable-competence intellectual virtues.

These four claims purport to demonstrate that *reflective* (therefore human) knowledge requires free endorsement by the subject who judges and that the subject’s beliefs are always aided by reason, or, as we can read, “reason is always at least a silent partner (...) a silent partner whose very *silence* is a contributing cause of the belief outcome.” As we can see, Sosa’s view is not restricted to faculty-virtues seen as mechanisms of belief formation. This is admitted by Baehr himself in a quotation brought by Sosa: “an additional requirement for what Sosa calls ‘reflective’ or ‘human’ knowledge is that the person in question have an ‘epistemic perspective’ on the known belief, which consists of an additional set of coherent beliefs about the source and reliability of the original belief”. So, reflective knowledge requires more than reliable faculties. There is, therefore, room for agential competences in Sosa’s view.

Baehr wants to focus on agential virtues, which exhibit (at least) five features: a) they are exercised in intentional agency; b) they develop through repeated agency; c) their possessor is praiseworthy for having them; d) agential success depends on them and e) they contribute to intentional inquiry. Character traits such as open-mindedness, intellectual courage, etc., all have these five features and so they are “reliable means to reaching the truth and avoiding error”. So far as Baehr restricts his attention to the role of agential, character-based virtues, it follows that he seems to be taking virtue reliabilism too simplistically. Sosa claims that knowledge is “belief that is correct (...) through the exercise of competence” and points that correctness *through* competence means that the exercise of competence puts the believer in a position to know. Hence, it seems that, in so far as Sosa takes knowledge to be belief *out of intellectual virtues*,

where understood as competences, the manifestation of these virtues yield true beliefs and explain *why* the believer reaches the truth. That is why Baehr objects against virtue reliabilism. For him, this virtue theory ignores character traits that help reaching the truth, such as open-mindedness, courage, curiosity, etc.

In his reply, Sosa says that there are competences that *constitute* knowledge when exercised and there are competences that, when exercised, reliably help searching for truth (and are even the explanation of why truth is reached) but *do not constitute* knowledge. If one clearly sees a vase of red roses on the table, then this perceptual belief manifests cognitive competence, and this belief *does* constitute knowledge. But persistence and resourcefulness, even if they indirectly lead us to the truth, need not (and normally do not) manifest cognitive competence and so *do not* constitute knowledge. A belief will constitute knowledge only when its *correctness* manifests cognitive competence.

III. Now, I would like to resume the concept of knowledge as justified true belief (and something else if it is the case) and see to what extent character-based intellectual virtues such as the ones mentioned above are tied to justification and knowledge. Are intellectual virtues of this kind necessary conditions for justified beliefs and for knowledge? Let us say that (at least in the relevant cases) I am quite careful, rigorous and attentive in forming my beliefs, and just now, when I enter the room, I see a vase with red roses on the table and come to believe, based on my perceptual experience, that there is a vase with red roses on the table. Since I was guided by dispositions that reflect features of intellectual character and my belief is held from epistemic virtues such as carefulness, rigor, attention, it would be uncontroversial that my belief is correct and that I am justified in holding it. But it also seems that I would be justified in holding the belief that there is a vase with red roses on the table, which I formed through clear perception, even if I lacked those character-based virtues. We could even think whether it is possible to develop any intellectual virtue without having formed any justified belief first. We reinforce children, students and other people when they form a belief, under conditions that justify it, even if they have not yet developed virtues of being careful, attentive and the kind. It is doubtful, then, that people do not have justified beliefs before having relevant traits of intellectual character. It is because I respond adequately to clear perception, good memory, and careful introspection

that I can reinforce dispositions for developing intellectual virtues. In fact, good moral and intellectual habits are gradually acquired and to say that we would perform virtuous actions or form justified beliefs only if we had previously an advanced moral or intellectual development to indicate possession of moral or epistemic virtues would sound at least artificial.

This is quite consistent with Sosa's position: Human knowledge is explained through knowledge-constitutive competences. Certain character traits, important as they may be, may also be seen as *auxiliary* intellectual virtues, and so do not belong to the group of knowledge-constitutive intellectual virtues. If things go this way, this view could be paired with a neo-foundationalism, such as Audi's: if a justified belief can be obtained independently of character-based intellectual virtues, then a belief being grounded in an character-based intellectual virtue is not *constitutive* of that belief justification and so character-based intellectual virtues become *inessential*. If we take knowledge to be, at least, *justified* true belief then a true belief *out of intellectual virtue* would not do the job, unless intellectual virtues are understood as cognitive faculties or competences or intellectual powers such as accurate perception, brilliant memory, cautious introspection, rigorous reasoning, which would, at least normally, produce the justification required.

In fact, foundationalism has taken on new breath through what has been called *Phenomenal Conservatism*. The main principle, as Huemer (2001) put it, is this: "If it *seems* to S that P, then, in the absence of defeaters, S thereby has justification for believing P". So, in the absence of defeaters, there is a presumption of rationality (which is the same as justification), which Audi called "doxastic innocence": "when we believe or presuppose that another person is rational and we know the person believes something, then if we have neither evidence regarding it nor any inclination to believe or disbelieve it, we tend to assume or presuppose that the belief is rational". It seems we could hold doxastic innocence because, normally, if we consider a proposition we believe, it appears true to us: "it presents an appearance of truth". There is a connection between propositional seemings and the justification for us to believe the proposition that seems true to us. The justification of a proposition is obtained on the basis of the believer's grounds for that proposition, that is, the causal basis of the belief. Evidently, there are many kinds of grounds that yield propositional seemings but *not all grounds* do so and not all propositional seemings are grounds or suffice for justification. As I go down the street, I see and hear many things, but since I do not pay attention to those visual and auditory stimuli they

do not yield any beliefs. Besides, there are cases in which I see and hear things but I am too absent-minded or the environmental conditions are not proper to give me enough support to my beliefs. So, if perception (or memory or introspection or reason) is the ground for p then it is a basis on which p acquires at least *prima facie* justification, provided that perception (memory, introspection or reason) is functioning properly so as to yield correct beliefs. This means that perception or other sources alone do not yield a belief. Reasons that discredit the source of the belief must not concur.

IV. If these ideas are plausible (and I think they are), then we can look for the place of character-based intellectual virtues. If I form a true belief out of conscientiousness, curiosity, imagination, rigor, etc., this does not mean that that belief amounts to knowledge. Some justified true beliefs fail to constitute knowledge, even though they could be epistemically virtuous. If I take my watch to be normally accurate, and it now seems to be running as usually it does and I read on it 10:00, then based on my reading I am justified in believing it is 10:00, even if my watch is malfunctioning. So it is a virtuous true belief, but it is not a case of knowledge because of the presence of defeaters (in this case the unreliability of my watch).

The same way, knowledge need not be grounded in intellectual virtues. Knowledge is prior to at least some intellectual virtues. Insight, for example, is an intellectual virtue that is knowledge-entailing. If I am insightful, then the belief I form through insight cannot be false. My insight *is* a case of knowledge. The same happens with wisdom. A wise person judges right because she *knows* the truth of what she is judging.

There seems to be internal and external virtues to be considered. If I am judicious, rigorous, curious, conscientious (and have other internal traits) I can be excusable in respect of my errors and this will not undermine justification. But if we conceive of intellectual virtue as a kind of power to yield knowledge and if we take into consideration survival and scientific knowledge, where a priori knowledge and other internally grounded knowledge do not seem important, then a full-blooded account of intellectual virtue seems to require external virtues as well. But to know that one has these external virtues will be possible only on the basis of internal grounds, otherwise the agent would not be able to know that he has any intellectual virtue. It might be desirable that we have a way of knowing with certainty that we are virtuous at least regarding

our own beliefs without dependence on what happens outside. As a response to skepticism, this internalist approach is helpful because, as Audi points out, "If one cannot show that there is knowledge of the world, it would be good at least to be able to know with certainty that we have intellectual virtues". But in the end it may be required that to achieve justified belief (and moral praiseworthy actions) we depend on some external conditions. If we are dealing with justification of a belief actually held (what is called doxastic justification, in contrast with situation or propositional justification), the belief is based causally on what justifies it, then the notion of a justified belief is not entirely internal, in the sense that this causal relation is not totally accessible to introspection or reflection. But the notion of an epistemically responsible agent remains internal and even if I cannot know I have justified beliefs I still could have internal justification for believing this. But if a paradigmatically intellectually virtuous person must show wisdom, sound judgment, insight and many other traits that entail knowledge, then the general notion of intellectual virtue will need an externalist component. Internalism may suffice for justification, but not for knowledge.

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ABSTRACT

The perspectivist virtue theory developed by Sosa requires two elements for a belief to be correct. First, the belief must be formed from a reliable ability or competence; second, the believer must have a higher order belief according to which he forms his beliefs from reliable abilities or competences. This conception faces Jason Boehr's accusation of negligence for not allowing character traits to have a place in the justification project. I will show Sosa's reply to this accusation and I propose to follow Audi and show that character traits, though interesting and desirable, play only an auxiliary role in the justification of beliefs and are inessential for knowledge.

Key words: *Intellectual virtues, Sosa, foundationalism, phenomenal conservatism.*

RESUMO

A teoria perspectivista das virtudes intelectuais desenvolvida por Sosa requer que a crença seja formada por uma habilidade ou competência confiável, além de exigir do agente doxástico uma crença de que ele forma suas crenças através de habilidades ou competências confiáveis. Essa concepção enfrenta a acusação promovida por Jason Boehr de que o perspectivismo de Sosa negligencia o papel dos traços de caráter na justificação epistêmica. Quero mostrar a resposta de Sosa à acusação de Boehr e proponho seguir Robert Audi e mostrar que os traços de caráter, embora sejam interessantes e desejáveis, desempenham apenas um papel auxiliar na justificação de crenças e não são essenciais para o conhecimento.

Palavras-chave: *virtudes intelectuais, Sosa, fundacionismo epistêmico, conservadorismo fenomênico.*