

Lecture 6: Virtue Epistemology

Think about the relationship between acts and agents in various contemporary moral theories.

Act-based theories: Consequentialism and deontology are generally taken to be act-focussed theories. The primary objects of evaluation are an agent's act. Acts can be right or wrong in virtue of their features – e.g. whether they maximise utility, whether they conform to the categorical imperative, etc.

Virtue theories in ethics define or explain act evaluations in terms of the moral virtues and vices, rather than the other way around. For example, in *On Virtue Ethics*, Rosalind Hursthouse explains right action in terms of the moral virtues as follows: 'An action is right iff it is what a virtuous agent would characteristically . . . do in the circumstances' (Hursthouse 28).

Now, just as ethics deals with evaluating actions, epistemology deals with evaluating beliefs: we can think of beliefs as playing the analogous role to actions in epistemology, we get a similar picture for epistemology:

In belief-based epistemology, beliefs are the primary objects of epistemic evaluation. Beliefs are justified/unjustified, they qualify as knowledge or not primarily in virtue of their features. Most traditional accounts of knowledge are belief-based accounts.

In contrast, virtue epistemology takes intellectual virtues and vices to be more fundamental than justification, knowledge, or any other type of belief-evaluation. Knowledge, justification are explained in terms of these virtues, not the other way around.

What is the motivation for virtue theories in epistemology?

- 1) Solve traditional problems, like the Gettier problem
- 2) Open new conceptual space. Zagzebski, for example, argues that virtue epistemology gives us the resources to address an important type of knowledge that has been neglected by traditional epistemology: high-grade knowledge. She also argues that virtue epistemology is better suited to shed light on other epistemic phenomena that traditional epistemology neglects, in particular, understanding and wisdom.

What are Intellectual Virtues?

1. Sosa

Recall, Aristotle: anything has a function and whether it's a good instance of that thing depends on how well it performs its function. A good knife is a knife that cuts well.

This is the starting point for Sosa's account of intellectual virtues. Sosa argues that anything with a function, natural or artificial, has virtues. Virtues are the qualities of a thing that enable it to perform its function well. Our primary intellectual function is attaining truths, and so the intellectual virtues are whatever faculties enable us to do that, whether natural or acquired. According to Sosa, virtues are instrumentally valuable.

Similarly, Greco argues:

'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)

2. Zagzebski

Zagzebski takes intellectual virtues to be acquired habits of action and motivation. She agrees with Sosa that they also involve reliability. But Zagzebski argues that Sosa and Greco are mistaken in counting faculties like memory or eye sight as virtues. Her list of intellectual virtues includes: open-mindedness, intellectual courage, intellectual autonomy, intellectual humility, and thoroughness.

Why? Agents merit praise for possessing intellectual virtues. It takes effort to acquire them. But agents do not warrant praise for possessing natural faculties. So natural faculties cannot be virtues.

Zagzebski argues that we need a richer conception of intellectual virtues. They involve both appropriate motivation and appropriate action. Each virtue involves an underlying motivation for "cognitive contact with reality" (truth, knowledge, understanding). This underlying motivation gives rise to the specific motivation involved in distinct intellectual virtues (for example, keeping alternatives in mind, for the virtue of open-mindedness). Second, to be virtuous, one must reliably attain success in one's end.

Intellectual virtues, like ethical virtues, involve hitting the mean between two vices of excess. To be open-minded, one must 'actually be receptive to new ideas, examining them in an even-handed way' (177). That is, one must perform intellectual actions – e.g., entertaining alternatives – which hit the mean. Zagzebski thinks that open-mindedness, like many of the intellectual virtues, lies in the middle between a vice of excess and a vice of deficiency. The dogmatic person ignores alternatives she should consider; whereas the person we might label 'naïve' considers alternatives she should ignore. The open-minded person hits the mean in her intellectual actions – considering and ignoring alternatives appropriately.

Virtues are instrumentally, constitutively, and intrinsically valuable. They are instrumentally valuable insofar as they reliably produce true beliefs. They are constitutively valuable because they may be constituents of eudaimonia or autonomous agency. (cf Haslanger, last week) And motivation for truth may be intrinsically valuable.

Virtue Epistemology, Applied

Zagzebski:

'Knowledge is a state of belief arising out of acts of intellectual virtue' (271)

'An act of intellectual virtue is: an act that arises from the motivational component of [the virtue], is something a person with [the] virtue would . . . do in the circumstances, is successful in achieving the end of the . . . motivation, and is such that the agent acquires a true belief . . . through these features of the act.' (270)

Thus, knowledge requires an intellectual act: (1) that arises from virtuous motives; (2) is what the virtuous person would do; (3) that attains the ends of those motives; and (4) attains a true belief because of those virtuous motives and actions.

Note: Knowledge does not require full-blown virtue possession. You can perform an act of open-mindedness even if your disposition to be open-minded is not yet fully stable.

Sosa:

Sosa distinguishes between animal and reflective knowledge. An agent has animal knowledge if and only if her belief is apt. A belief is apt if it is, true, produced by an intellectual virtue, and the agent obtains the truth because her belief is produced by an intellectual virtue. Reflective knowledge,

requires more than just apt belief: it requires that "that under the light of reflection one must be able to defend the reliability of one's sources" for the belief that p (p. 139)

Problem case #1: Perceptual Knowledge

Problem case #2: Higher-level knowledge, acquired as a result of intentional inquiry.

Problem case #3: Understanding and wisdom.

Other uses of virtue epistemology: Recent work on testimonial (in)justice.