

‘KNOWLEDGE AND VIRTUE:
RESPONSE TO KELP’

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In a very interesting paper, ‘Pritchard on Virtue Epistemology’, Christoph Kelp argues that my recent critique of a proposal that I refer to as robust virtue epistemology (RVE) fails to go through.¹ What is distinctive about RVE is that it tries to completely analyse knowledge into true belief and a virtue-theoretic condition (e.g., some sort of demand that the true belief be appropriately due to the agent’s cognitive ability). In particular, RVE does not involve any appeal to an anti-luck condition.²

As Kelp makes clear, my argument against RVE is based on two types of counterexample. Neither example is meant to constitute a knock-down argument on its own, in that I grant that there is scope to reject the intuitions in play in each case. My claim, however, is that once you push both objections together then RVE is in serious trouble since it is, in effect, being pulled in two directions. This is because while the one kind of case puts pressure on the proponent of RVE to strengthen the proposal, the other kind of case puts pressure on the proponent to weaken it. It is thus hard to see how one could defend RVE from this pair of objections in a principled manner.

Kelp’s way of defending RVE involves noting that there are in fact two ways of spelling-out the RVE proposal, and he claims that taking either of these routes will supply one with a way out of one the objections. Hence he concludes that RVE does not face the “double bind” (p6) that I allege.

Before I get into the substance of Kelp’s arguments in this regard, a dialectical point is in order. For note that while Kelp is entirely right that I hold that it is the two-pronged nature of my attack on RVE that ensures that it faces a pretty formidable challenge, it doesn’t

follow that if one of the objections that make up this two-pronged attack is blocked then RVE has no case to answer. Indeed, it will still follow that RVE faces a counterexample and hence that some work will need to be done by the proponent of RVE to rescue the view (such as to reject the intuition in play and explain why). So I don't agree with Kelp that it is enough to defend RVE that one simply shows that there is no double bind in play, since even a single bind represents a case that needs to be answered. Anyway, with that point in mind, let's look a little closer at Kelp's arguments.

Recall that what makes a virtue epistemology robust is that it aims to exclusively define knowledge in terms of a true belief that is the result of a virtue-theoretic condition. Clearly, however, any version of RVE which simply argued that knowledge is true belief that is produced by a reliable epistemic virtue will be susceptible to straightforward Gettier-style counterexamples. After all, one can easily imagine cases in which one's reliable epistemic virtue would have ordinarily led you astray but where you have a true belief regardless because of luck.

Think, for example, of the stock Gettier-style case of someone—let's call him 'Roddy'—seeing what he takes to be a sheep in good cognitive conditions, and so immediately forming the belief that there is a sheep in the field. The belief is true, and it is also the product of reliable epistemic virtue, at least insofar as any perceptual belief is the product of reliable epistemic virtue. The twist in the tail, however, is that what Roddy is looking at is not a sheep but rather a sheep-shaped object—a big hairy dog, say—which is obscuring from view the genuine sheep hidden behind. Clearly, knowledge is not gained in this case despite the presence of a true belief and the exhibition of a reliable epistemic virtue.³

The way that proponents of RVE get around this problem is to argue that what is required for knowledge is not merely the conjunction of cognitive success (i.e., true belief) and cognitive ability (i.e., reliable epistemic virtue), but rather a cognitive success that is *because of* cognitive ability. Read intuitively, adding the 'because of' relation here certainly seems to do the trick. Consider again the case of Roddy. Although there is both cognitive success and cognitive ability on display here, we would not regard Roddy's cognitive success as being because of his cognitive ability. Instead, it is due, if anything, to the good fortune that there happens to be a sheep hidden from view behind the sheep-shaped object that Roddy is looking at.

So far, then, so good. Unfortunately, the addition of this 'because of' clause will not

deal with other key cases that you would want your theory of knowledge to handle, and in particular it will not deal with the two types of cases that I put forward. On this basis I conclude that RVE is not sustainable as a theory of knowledge. Let's briefly review the arguments here.

First, consider the barn façade case that I claim is representative of the one type of counterexample facing RVE.⁴ In this example our agent, let's call him 'Barney', gets to have a good look at a barn-shaped object in good cognitive conditions, and so forms the belief that what he is looking at is a barn. This belief is true, in that the object before him is indeed a barn. The twist in the tail, however, is that unbeknownst to Barney he is in barn façade county where most of the objects that look like barns are actually barn façades. Does Barney know that this object before him is a barn? Intuitively not, and the reason for this is that his belief, just like Roddy's belief, is only luckily true. In short, he could very easily have been mistaken, since had he looked at one of the other barn-shaped objects in the vicinity then he would have formed a false belief, and whatever else we might think about knowledge, it certainly doesn't seem to be compatible with luck of this sort.⁵

Notice, however, that the kind of luck in play here is subtly different to that in play in the Roddy example, even though the upshot (i.e., that the belief is only luckily true and so doesn't count as a case of knowledge) is basically the same. The reason for this is that Barney really does see a barn, unlike Roddy who only thinks that he sees a sheep. Elsewhere I have characterised this point by saying that while in standard Gettier-style cases like the Roddy example the knowledge-undermining luck in play is of an 'intervening' variety, such that something actually gets between the agent's cognitive ability and her cognitive success, in the barn façade case and cases like it the luck at issue is of a purely 'environmental' type.⁶

We can make this point more vivid by considering an analogue case outside of epistemology. Imagine an archer, let's call him 'Archie', who skilfully fires his arrow at a target. In one kind of case, we can imagine him being successful but in such a way that intervening luck is in play. Perhaps, say, a freak gust of wind blows the shot off-course but that a second freak gust of wind fortuitously blows it back on course again. The success would then be lucky in the relevant sense—i.e., in that Archie could very easily have been unsuccessful—even though there is the applicable skill on display.

In contrast, we can image a variant of this example in which specifically environmental luck is in play. This time we stipulate that the skilful shot is not interfered with

and hence goes straight to the target as intended. The twist to the story, however, is that Archie had a range of targets to shoot at and unbeknownst to him he just so happened to choose the one target that was not fitted with a forcefield which would repel any arrow fired at it. Again, Archie's success is lucky in the relevant sense—he could so very easily have been unsuccessful—even though there is the applicable skill on display. Clearly, though, the luck at issue here is environmental rather than intervening.

What is interesting, however, is how we respond very differently to the presence of these types of luck. In particular, notice that while intuitively Archie's success in the first kind of case in which intervening luck is present is not in any sense because of his skill, in the second case where specifically environmental luck is present we draw the opposite conclusion. After all, in the second case wouldn't we naturally say that Archie's success *is* because of his cognitive ability? But if that's right then it seems that when attributing a success to an agent's skill we are prepared to allow the presence of specifically environmental luck. If this point is applied in the epistemological arena, however, then it follows that the cognitive success in the Barney case should be similarly creditable to Barney's cognitive skills, and hence by the lights of RVE he should be treated as having knowledge. After all, it really is Barney's cognitive skills that are enabling him to gain his cognitive success, just as it really is Archie's archery skills that are enabling him to hit the target in the analogous example involving environmental luck. Given that intuitively Barney lacks knowledge in this case, it follows that RVE cannot, it seems, deal with the specific problem posed by environmental luck.

Now let's look at the second kind of counterexample I offer against RVE. This kind of example can be represented by cases of testimonial knowledge which is gained in epistemically friendly environments by for the most part trusting the word of another. Imagine an agent, let's call her 'Jenny', who gets off a train station in an unfamiliar town and asks someone who looks remotely plausible as an informant for directions. Jenny is indeed in a good cognitive environment in this regard, in that people around those parts do tend to tell the truth to strangers about this sort of thing, and aim to be as helpful as they can. The person she asks is knowledgeable in the relevant regard and communicates what she knows to Jenny, who believes what she is told and goes on her way to her destination.⁷ Does Jenny gain knowledge from this interchange? Intuitively she does.⁸

Crucially, however, Jenny's cognitive success does not seem to intuitively be because

of her cognitive ability, but seems creditable, if to any individual agent, to her informant. Again, then, we find that RVE is generating the wrong conclusion, since it seems that it must deny knowledge in this case even though knowledge is intuitively possessed. Note too that while the Barney case is meant to be an example in which the agent intuitively doesn't have knowledge but RVE predicts that he does, the Jenny case is meant to be an example in which the agent intuitively *does* have knowledge and yet RVE predicts that she *doesn't*. Thus the two types of counterexamples pull the proponent of RVE in two different directions—on the one hand to make the view more austere so that it can deal with Barney cases, and on the other hand to make the view more permissive so that it can deal with Jenny-style cases. This is why, I claim, that meeting both problems is especially problematic for proponents of RVE. In particular, while I grant that there are moves that can be made to evade each of these problems when taken individually which have some *prima facie* plausibility (though I don't think they work on closer inspection),⁹ I think proponents of RVE will find it difficult to formulate a principled strategy which can simultaneously handle both types of case.

This is where Kelp's strategy for dealing with the problem is novel, since he argues that once we move away from the intuitive reading of the 'because of' relation and fill-in the two available accounts of this relation in the contemporary literature, then only one of these cases will stand. More specifically, he argues that there is no particular rendering of the RVE thesis which faces both of these counterexamples. So while a long way from being off-the-hook, RVE doesn't quite face as stiff a problem as I have suggested.

Kelp is entirely right that there are these two ways of spelling-out the 'because of' relation in the contemporary literature. The first, and most developed account, is due to John Greco (2002; 2007; 2008; 2009). According to this proposal, we are to read this relation in causal explanatory terms such that, roughly, the agent's cognitive ability is the most salient factor in a causal explanation of the agent's cognitive success. As I've put it elsewhere, on this view when one has knowledge one's cognitive success needs to be *primarily creditable* to one's cognitive ability. The second proposal is due to Ernest Sosa (2007) and argues that we should instead think of this relation in terms of the manifestation of a power.

To see how these two accounts can come apart, consider a glass that was broken as a result of someone deliberately smashing it against a wall. Ordinarily, the most salient part of the causal explanation of why the glass broke will be that someone smashed it against the wall, and in this sense it will be true to say that the glass broke because it was smashed

against the wall. Note, however, that this is consistent with the claim that it was because of the glass's fragility that it broke, since here we are specifically talking about the manifestation of a power and not offering a causal explanation. The interesting question for us is whether these two accounts of the 'because of' relation predict different results in Barney and Jenny-style cases, as Kelp suggests. In particular, he argues that the causal explanatory reading of RVE can deal with Barney-style cases, while the power manifestation reading can deal with Jenny-style cases, and thus there is no consistent reading of RVE on which both problems apply. Let's take these points in turn.

First, why does Kelp claim that the causal explanatory reading of RVE can deal with Barney-style cases? Well, alleges Kelp, this is because Barney's cognitive success is not primarily creditable to his cognitive abilities but is rather due to "the fact that he happens to look at the only real barn in a field otherwise full of fakes" (pp4-5). Kelp doesn't offer an argument for this claim but rather states it as an obvious truth. It is, however, far from obvious; indeed, it strikes me as just plain wrong.

Remember that it is crucial to the Barney case that he really does get to see the barn in good cognitive conditions to determine that it's a barn. Indeed, think again about the analogous Archie case which also specifically involves environmental luck. Is it really any less of an achievement on Archie's part to hit the target in this case because of the fact that he could've chosen a different target and would have missed had he done so? It's hard to see why, since after all the fact of the matter is that he didn't choose one of the other targets and he skilfully hit the target that he opted for. The same seems to go for the parallel case of Barney. Had he looked at one of the other barn-shaped objects in the vicinity then he would have formed a false belief, but this doesn't seem to in any way lessen his cognitive achievement in gaining a true belief about the barn before him. As far as intuition goes, then, it seems that Kelp is wrong to suppose that the causal explanatory reading of RVE can deal with this case, and since Kelp doesn't offer any arguments in support of this intuition, the 'double-bind' problem still stands for this version of RVE.

That leaves the power manifestation reading of RVE, which Kelp thinks can handle Jenny-style cases. The reason why Kelp thinks this is because, as I grant, Jenny does exhibit *some* cognitive ability in gaining this knowledge. After all, we are clearly meant to read this case such that, for example, she wouldn't ask anyone or anything (she wouldn't ask a child, say, or a lamppost), and we would also expect her to be reasonably sensitive to potential

defeaters (e.g., if she were told something by her informant which was obviously false then we would expect her not to believe what she is told). Accordingly, argues Kelp, we should grant that her cognitive success does indeed manifest her cognitive powers.

Again, though, I think intuition is squarely against Kelp on this point. For doesn't it seem far more natural to say that Jenny's cognitive success is the manifestation of her *informant's* cognitive powers than her cognitive powers? For note that while it is not in doubt that cognitive powers are being manifested here, Sosa surely has a more demanding conception of knowledge in mind than merely that one needs to be cognitive successful and in addition manifest one's relevant cognitive powers, since if that's all there is to knowledge then we know an awful lot that we shouldn't know. In the Roddy case, for instance, we have an example of an agent being cognitively successful and in addition manifesting relevant cognitive powers, but there's no temptation here at all to say that he has knowledge.

So if Sosa's rendering of RVE is not to reduce to absurdity, then the idea must be that when one has knowledge then one's relevant cognitive powers are being manifested to a pretty significant extent, even if not to the extent required by the causal explanatory construal of RVE. But so construed the problem that I put forward remains since Jenny clearly does not exhibit her cognitive powers to the relevant degree by anyone's lights. It follows that once we understand Sosa's proposal along plausible lines then it doesn't offer the route out of this problem that Kelp supposes.

Again, then, we find that whatever the rendering of RVE that we opt for the view does indeed face a double-bind as I suggest. *Contra* Kelp, RVE is still in serious trouble as a theory of knowledge.¹⁰

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NOTES

¹ I offer this critique in a number of places, including Pritchard (2008a; 2008b; 2009a, ch. 3; 2009b; cf. Pritchard 2008d). For the canonical statement of this critique, however, see Haddock, Millar & Pritchard (forthcoming, ch. 2).

² For the main defences of RVE, see Sosa (1988; 1991; 2007), Zagzebski (1996; 1999) and Greco (e.g., 2002; 2007; 2009).

³ The case is described in Chisholm (1977, 105).

⁴ The barn façade case is described in Goldman (1976), who credits it to Carl Ginet.

⁵ In the recent literature, the claim that knowledge entails a true belief that could not have easily been false is referred to as safety (i.e., when one knows, one's belief is safe). For the key discussion of safety, see Sosa (1999). See also Pritchard (2002; 2005; 2007; 2008c).

⁶ I draw this distinction between intervening and environmental epistemic luck in a number of places. See, for example, Pritchard (2008a; 2008b; 2009a, ch. 3; 2009b) and Haddock, Millar & Pritchard (*forthcoming*, ch. 2). For more on epistemic luck more generally, see Pritchard (2005; 2007).

⁷ This example is adapted from one offered by Lackey (2007, §2).

⁸ What's certainly true is that most people working in the epistemology of testimony would agree that she has knowledge anyway, though there may be a few dissenters, such as Fricker (1995). For more on the epistemology of testimony, see Adler (2006).

⁹ I survey, and reject, some of these strategies in Haddock, Millar & Pritchard (*forthcoming*, ch. 2).

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