

# The Truth and the Right in Virtue Epistemology

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## Abstract

Duncan Pritchard recently orchestrated a stronger than usual, multitier attack on virtue-theoretical accounts of knowledge. On the first tier, he argues that varieties of these accounts inadequately guard against epistemic luck objections, turning out to be either plainly false or ill-motivated. On the second tier, holding to the notion that knowledge requires non-lucky true belief and that knowledge must also be creditable to the agent as a valuable achievement, Pritchard argues that this twofold conception of knowledge, albeit tenable, fails to illuminate how knowledge is distinctively valuable. Thus, virtue-theoretic approaches to knowledge of this sort are unable to establish that knowledge has final value that makes it epistemically pursuit-worthy. I take it that Pritchard's objections largely hit their mark, undermining many presently available virtue-theoretical accounts of knowledge, including Linda Zagzebski's and John Greco's. However, this should not lead us to abandon virtue epistemology entirely. With the aim of pointing virtue epistemology in a more fruitful direction, I suggest a virtue-theoretic account of knowledge that differs from those presently available. I present the value of knowledge not as a feature of cognitive achievement but as the upshot of respecting truth. This restructuring of the source of knowledge's value circumvents the course of Pritchard's objections.

\*\*\*Draft Paper\*\*\*

# The Truth and the Right in Virtue Epistemology

## 0. Introduction

Part of the epistemological enterprise concerning knowledge is to explain how it is that knowledge is more epistemically valuable than mere true belief. The epistemological project of virtue theory aims at doing so at least partially in terms of epistemic virtues. Though virtue epistemology has never been without significant criticisms, Duncan Pritchard recently orchestrated a stronger than usual, multitier attack on virtue-theoretical accounts of knowledge. On the first tier, he argues that varieties of these accounts inadequately guard against epistemic luck objections, turning out to be either plainly false or ill-motivated (2008). On the second tier of his attack, Pritchard's position shifts, No longer holding to the notion that knowledge merely requires non-lucky true belief, and adding that knowledge also be creditable to the agent as a valuable achievement, Pritchard argues that this twofold conception of knowledge, albeit penultimately tenable, fails to illuminate how knowledge is distinctively valuable. Thus, virtue-theoretic approaches to knowledge of this sort are unable to establish that knowledge has final (i.e., non-instrumental) value that makes it epistemically pursuit-worthy (manuscript).

I take it that Pritchard's objections largely hit their mark, undermining many presently available virtue-theoretical accounts of knowledge, including Linda Zagzebski's and John Greco's (2003; 2007). However, this should not lead us to abandon virtue epistemology entirely - I do not take Pritchard as arguing to this end anyway. With the aim of pointing virtue epistemology in a more fruitful direction, I suggest a virtue-theoretic account of knowledge that differs from those presently

available. I present the value of knowledge not as a feature of cognitive achievement but as the upshot of respecting truth. This restructuring of the source of knowledge's value circumvents the course of Pritchard's objections. For purposes of orienting the reader to the relevant issues, I will first layout Pritchard's objections and then move to argue for a defining of knowledge as respecting truth. I do so by offering a description of knowing.

## 1. Pritchard's Argument Against Virtue-Theoretic Theses

Let us remember that the arguments I present here are engaged in a particular type of project: describe knowledge so it is consistent with the epistemological rule of thumb that knowledge is epistemically more valuable than mere true belief. Whether it is or is not in fact can be left for elsewhere. Standard, non-virtue-theoretic descriptions argue that the difference is comprised of some characteristic of beliefs. Virtue epistemologists' alternatively argue that it is features of agents that make-up the difference between true belief and knowledge. The strong virtue-theoretic approach is championed by Zagzebski (1996; 1999; 2003). For her, knowledge is defined entirely in terms of cognitive faculties and epistemic virtues; the weak approach is championed by Greco (2004; 2007). For him, knowledge is defined *at least partially* by cognitive faculties and epistemic virtues. Pritchard argues that both approaches inadequately guard against epistemic luck objections, even in the light of the fact that *avoiding* epistemic luck is a principal motivation for accepting them (2008).

Greco's reliabilist, faculty-based definition of knowledge holds that an agent's properly functioning cognitive faculties reliably yield beliefs that count as knowledge in such a way that the agent deserves credit for that knowledge. However, these types of accounts end up appealing to non-virtue-theoretic anti-luck conditions. The appeal to

these anti-luck conditions shows that epistemic virtues and cognitive faculties *alone* do not protect a virtue account of knowledge from being Gettierized. A viable conception of knowledge requires other factors, namely *reliability*. However, Pritchard argues that reliability is just a form of the *safety condition* on knowledge - exemplified, e.g., by Ernest Sosa (1999). Since weak virtue-theoretic accounts of knowledge must appeal to the safety condition (and the like), they are not advanced from accounts of knowledge that are presently available. Thus, the approach does nothing novel in defining how one knows (Cf. Alvin Plantinga's warrant as proper functioning cognitive faculties (1993) and Fred Dreske's safety analysis of knowledge (1971)). In turn, weak virtue-theoretic definitions of knowledge lack motivation that sustains them in discussions about the definition of knowledge.

Strong versions of the virtue-theoretic approach, now using Zagzebski's as our example, claim that epistemic virtues and cognitive faculties are necessary and sufficient for defining knowledge. Her non-reliabilist, character-based approach seemingly avoids the pitfalls of weak accounts. Consider Zagzebski's definition of knowledge: S knows P if, and only if, S's believing P results from the appropriate act of intellectual virtue - associated with the proper motive and disposition - and S obtains a true belief, namely P, because it results from that act (Zagzebski 1999, 2003). What makes S's true belief count as knowledge is that P results from acts of intellectual virtue, an internal component of the agent. This is consistent with Zagzebski's advocating epistemic internalism rather than epistemic externalism. Zagzebski thinks that epistemic internalism does not require that the agent have epistemic access to how she knows, a happy alternative considering that epistemic externalism entails that an agent's beliefs

can be Gettiered. Pritchard, however, rightly argues that strong versions turn out to be false.

Pritchard argues that Zagzebski is wrong about the internalist perspective. An agent must be able to show on good grounds that her knowing P results from the appropriate virtue. Doing so, however, requires a non-virtue-based requirement for knowing. The requirement is nevertheless insufficient. As Pritchard points out, agents can get *lucky* here too. They can be lucky regarding whether their beliefs were formed in the right way: i.e., from the right motives, associated correctly with the appropriate epistemic virtue for knowing P.

By these lights, I develop what I call a respecting truth approach to the virtue-theoretic definition of knowledge. It is motivated by Pritchard's criticisms of virtue epistemology and, in turn, objections of Pritchard raised by Guy Axtell (1997). Axtell argues that Pritchard's objections fail to be sensitive to the fact that virtue-theoretic accounts of knowledge are not just *internalist*, they also have an *externalist* component. Pritchard summarily dismisses the possibility of a compatibilist internalist/externalist conception of knowledge, pointing out that such a view has yet to be developed. Moreover, he points out that his argument stipulates that the internalist and externalist conceptions of knowledge are mutually exclusive, the distinction based on common, accepted intuitions about knowledge.

In the second tier of arguments against virtue-theoretic approaches, Pritchard says that even if we accept that knowledge integrates both a virtue and an anti-luck component, the virtue epistemologist still lacks a plausible set of reasons that explains why knowledge is more valuable than mere true belief (manuscript). This does not

dispatch the whole of virtue epistemology, however. In what follows, I present a virtue-theoretic account of knowledge that reconciles with Pritchard's worthwhile objections.

## 2. A Different Approach

What follows from the considerations I present below is a virtue-theoretic definition of knowledge, according to which, epistemic virtues and cognitive faculties associate with true belief to make it count as knowledge. In a slogan, knowledge is true belief formed on the basis of the appropriate epistemic response to the target. A distinguishing feature of my account is that it treads away from the notion of epistemically good features that add to true belief for it count as knowledge and towards the notion of *epistemic rightness*, which I explain shortly.

This approach to knowledge is, in the very least, problematic in a way different from those presently available. In this way, we save the motivation for a virtue-theoretic definition of knowledge. That is, if the definition of knowledge I offer here to a significant degree avoids epistemic luck objections, and if the way it avoids such objections is relatively novel, adding substantive material to the debate over the definition of knowledge, then I will manage to salvage a virtue-theoretic approach that is not the subject of Pritchard's objections - one which I hope will score points for the virtue approach to knowledge overall. Let us move now to clarify the more technical terminology.

### 2.1. Aim, Target, and Epistemic Rightness

It is not uncommon to find analogies draw between virtue theory and archery. An archer hitting her target represents purposeful skill, mirroring acts of epistemic virtue

that result in knowing. Just as the archer's *aim* is distinguished from the *target* at which she aims, so too are these notions distinguishable here. For *our* purposes, I want to suggest that we ought to think of the target as the propositional content of the belief in question, the proposition that P expresses (namely, p). The content so understood is (roughly) the *meaning* of the proposition. This should not be so strange since standard attempts to define knowledge do so in the context of propositional knowledge. Now, one's aim, or, rather, the *aim* of her epistemic virtues, is the proper ascription of truth-value to the target, or (basically) at *getting one's belief right*.

Consider this common example: S knows that there is sheep in the field. S knows there is a sheep in the field if, and only if, S's true belief that there is sheep in the field results from hitting the target, the target being the meaning of the proposition 'there is a sheep in the field'. This is target for S's - for lack of a better description - sheep-detecting epistemic virtues. The meaning of the proposition expressed by the belief that there is a sheep in the field entails that (e.g.) the relevant sheep is not a fake sheep and that the sheep is in fact in the relevant field. There may in fact be a number of contingencies that the virtuous agent must at least hypothetically be able to make an account for. Hitting the target 'there is a sheep in the field' is just to get one's belief right that there is (in fact) a sheep in the field, attending to its requisite entailments.

The idea I am trying to get at here is one of *epistemic rightness*. Rather obliquely put, epistemic rightness supervenes on the facts of the matter when S forms her true belief on the basis of the appropriate response of S's epistemic virtues to the target. There may be more than one way to hit the target and to get one's belief right, since there might be a variety of appropriate responses from epistemic virtues. However, epistemic rightness is not determined by whether S gets her belief right. Rather,

epistemic rightness just is the condition of S getting her belief right in the sort of way that is appropriate.

Key now is the notion of *appropriate*. It would be circular to stipulate that appropriate epistemic virtues are ones on which rightness supervenes; and, Pritchard's object's notwithstanding, otherwise problematic to appeal to ideal knowers or a notion of reliably hitting the target. I want to suggest another move. One based on a notion that some might find queer. However, with some explanation, I hope to show that the definition of appropriate fits with intuitions about epistemic value.

We can draw out this somewhat queer component as we shine some light on two distinct notions of appropriate. Regarding any particular target, an epistemic virtue is appropriate if, and only if, it responds to its target in the epistemically right manner, i.e., in the right way, from the right reasons, and at the right time; or, as I have summarily put it, *by getting it right*. There is also a more comprehensive sense in which an epistemic virtue (or set of epistemic virtues) is appropriate. That is, the epistemic virtue(s) must belong to S. That is to say, S's having the relevant epistemic virtues must be as stable character traits resultant of S's respecting *truth*. The idea behind this is that if truth has a value such that respecting truth leads to the formation of virtuous epistemic dispositions of character (or cognitive traits) that respond to targets in certain ways, then hitting a target (rightly) of any epistemic virtue is resultant of a process of cultivating and honing of that epistemic virtue. It is well-cultivated and honed epistemic virtues that take account of the subsidiary contingencies of the meaning of propositions. That is, sheep-detecting virtues that are well-cultivated automatically take account of whether (e.g.) the sheep in the field is not a fake sheep. This is not to imply that the activity of epistemic virtues is a reliable belief forming process *and* is what is added to true belief to make it

knowledge. It may very well be the former without entailing that I include the latter in the concept of virtue-theoretic knowledge. Rather, an epistemic virtue comes to be had just because respecting truth is the sort of thing that makes its exercise appropriate in respect to getting her belief right. In other words, the value of truth is such that our paying attention to it (i.e., respecting it) facilitates the development of epistemic virtues that respond appropriately to their relevant targets.

This may seem like a queer metaphysical claim to some since it seems strange to think that respecting truth will necessitate that one develop a virtuous epistemic character which yields knowledge. However, I do not think it is as strange as it first seems. It is at least consistent with the ways that Zagzebski argues that true belief is epistemically valuable. Acts of intellectual virtue result from an agent's motives. The primary epistemic motive is *the love of truth*. By way of brevity, it suffices to say that epistemic virtues are similar to moral virtues, though with epistemic aims. But, Zagzebski does not move to say that the sources of knowledge's value *is* the love of truth, only that it is one's motive to reach knowledge. Notice also that I am not arguing as Jonathan Kvanvig does regarding whether truth is an epistemic goal (2006). He treats truth as an instrumental value for epistemic achievement.

I realize that there is much more to say to these regards. However, rather than wallow in metaphysical dilly-dallying and for the purpose of argument, it is sufficient to make the following conditional claim: If truth has (or is) the sort of value that by respecting it one *develops* appropriately responsive epistemic virtues, then epistemic virtues responding to their targets are appropriate given that the agent has respected truth. The value of truth is thus conveyed via the activity of an agent's epistemic virtues, but they are not the source of knowledge's value. One might be quick to point out that

true beliefs have 'truth' as well so might not mere true belief have the same value as knowledge? I think not. Knowledge is more valuable than mere true belief because, in cases of knowledge, the value of truth is transmitted in an epistemically righteous way, ala appropriate epistemic virtues. Cases of mere true belief lack this quality. Conceiving the structure of knowledge's value in this way also fits the intuition that agents must be responsible for their knowing. Let's now turn to examine, how this account of knowledge can respond to epistemic luck objections.

## 2.2. Avoiding Being Lucky

Let us examine Jennifer Lackey's Chicago Visitor Case (2007). An epistemically virtuous agent, Morris, is about to step off the train and needs to get (very quickly) to Sears Tower. He decides to ask the first passer-by - who just so happens to be a native of Chicago that knows how to get to Sears Tower. I will say that a majority of people have the intuition that Morris now has (propositional) knowledge of how to get to Sears Tower. Lackey's contention is that the virtue-theoretic criterion that Morris be responsible for his knowing is not met. He is just lucky he has the correct directions. Responding to Lackey's argument, I need only to show how on the respecting-truth-based approach Morris is responsible for his beliefs epistemic value and that his knowing is not the effect of epistemic luck.

It is prudent to first identify the target in question. The target here is a set of related propositions that make up how Morris travels successfully between the train station and Sears Tower - let us call these "p" and beliefs expressing them "P." It is not immediately clear what sort of epistemic virtues would have been appropriate for Morris's hitting the target (p). After all, Morris just asks the first person he sees when he steps off the train. However, that is not to say that none exists. Suppose for argument

that there are relevant sets of epistemic virtues, ones that Morris has painstakingly developed through his years of travel. These get-the-right-direction-virtues might consist in the ability to identify individuals whom can give knowledgeable directions, e.g., adults standing near the track, and the ability to determine the veridicality of their testimony (e.g., Morris can easily identify those persons' testimonies that are false). This latter epistemic virtue may be is the upshot of a cognitive ability to recognize when people are unsure, lying, or of incredulous character (i.e., those individuals that believe their direction-testimony is true even if it is not). Given these considerations, I think it is pretty clear that the respecting-truth-based approach can show how Morris is responsible for his knowing, in a way consistent with the virtue-theoretic thesis and, moreover, that does not rely on transmission of knowledge (or warrant) through testimony. Morris simply exercises the appropriate epistemic virtues for the situation at hand.

Less clear, however, is how Morris is neither veritically lucky nor reflectively lucky. If Morris is lucky in either of these ways, he will fail to be appropriately responsible for his knowing. The contention is that Morris is veritically lucky because he just so happens to ask someone who knows how to get to Sears Tower. This, however, is not undermining of Morris knowing because the fact that he asks whom he does and not somebody else is not integral in the respecting-truth-based description of his knowing that p. It *would* be a matter of luck if his asking the native Chicagoan is required for his belief's epistemic status, but it is not in this case. To see this, consider that Morris is standing in front of the departures/arrivals information screen to determine when his train departs later in the day. Is Morris lucky that he is standing in front of this screen and not the one on the other side of the plaza? I think not. Likewise, I do not think it is a *relevant* matter of luck that he asks whom he does. This is just an instance of evidential

luck. Asking whom he does just places Morris in the position to exercise his epistemic virtues.

Regarding Pritchard's reflective luck objection, it is necessary that I finesse it a bit since it applies only to internalist conceptions of virtue-theoretic knowledge. Note that I have attempted to show how the exercise of epistemic virtue is both internally and externally circumscribed. That is, the agent must form her belief on the basis of the appropriate epistemic virtues - an internal constraint - and the agent must form her belief while getting her belief right - an external constraint. With this in mind, I think some headway can be made regarding the reflective luck objection. In order for Morris to be reflectively lucky he must be mistaken regarding his epistemic virtues. That is, on reflection, Morris is able to determine which epistemic virtues that are responsible for his knowing that *p*, but do so on poor grounds. Thus, it is possible that Morris comes to know that *p* on the basis of some other epistemic virtues, ones *also* appropriate for the target. In this case, Morris is just lucky that the epistemic virtues that were in play turned out to be appropriate and that he gets his belief right. This is something like knowing that there is a sheep in the field when the sheep you are looking at is a fake sheep, but, in the back of the field, there is a real sheep. I cannot say that I am resolved on this issue since there seem to be two competing intuitions. One where Morris is lucky to have had appropriate virtues responding to the target and another where Morris is still responsible for knowing since he is also responsible for the formation of the virtues that DO hit the target. To this latter point, it is not clear that reflective luck has to do with being lucky about knowing that *p*, but - rather - being lucky about knowing that you know that *p*. Nevertheless, I think there is much more to be said here to reconcile these competing intuitions.

Before closing, let us tally things up to find out to what this account commits us and to what definition of knowledge it points us toward. I have already noted that the above account does not commit us to reliabilism; and, following Pritchard, it does not reduce to a safety analysis of knowledge. Rather, I have perched my conception of knowledge on a seemingly perilous notion of respecting truth. Attractively, respecting truth leaves us with a rebuttal to those that doubt such a conception. Consider that S knows that p but under the condition that S has never had concern or respect for truth in general, or in this particular case. I do not think that our intuitions about knowing will indicate that in this case S knows that p. We generally think that knowing entails concern for truth. For this reason, perhaps that knowledge entails respecting truth is not so perilous after-all. Moreover, when we construe the value of knowledge as the upshot of respect for truth, we avoid the value problem that plagues other virtue-theoretic accounts of knowledge. That is, according to the respecting-truth-based account of knowledge, cognitive achievement is not the locust of knowledge-value. Knowledge is not distinctively valuable *because of* the cognitive abilities of the knower. Rather, the value of knowledge is just to be epistemically righteous. Thus, knowledge has a distinctive *final* value, i.e., a unique and distinct non-instrumental value. The value of knowledge is unique in the sense that is unlike the value of mere true belief, distinct in the sense that it is not the sort of thing that adding a little more of it to true belief results in those beliefs counting as knowledge. The unique value of knowledge is an artifact of epistemic righteousness.

### 3. Conclusion

I hope to have shown that a respecting-truth-based approach is a viable alternative as a virtue-theoretic account of knowledge. It avoids being too strong by avoiding dependence on non-virtue-theoretic subsidiary requirements like reliable belief forming processes. It avoids being too weak by retaining something novel that motivates the account. Moreover, it offers a viable and interesting valuation of knowledge that relies on a *metaphysical* claim about the value of truth.

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