Abstract

In his contribution, Ernest Sosa tries to integrate responsibilist elements into the heart of his reliabilist virtue epistemology. He distinguishes between character virtues, which he deems peripheral or auxiliary, and agential competences, which he deems necessary for high-grade reflective knowledge. In doing so, Sosa distinguishes between dispositions whose exercise enables knowledge (e.g., Baehr’s responsibilist virtues) and those whose exercise constitutes knowledge. The latter are in “the charmed inner circle for traditional epistemology” because their manifestation in the correctness of a belief “constitutes a bit of knowledge,” whereas the former are beyond the pale of this charmed inner circle because their manifestation merely helps to “put you in a position to know” (emphasis in original). Sosa’s agential virtues are more than mere capacities like memory and eyesight, but less than the personal-worth-enhancing virtues championed by Zagzebski and Baehr because they don’t essentially involve motivation. In his response, Jason Baehr argues that, while the agential competences that Sosa lionizes may indeed contribute to or constitute knowledge, character virtues such as open-mindedness and intellectual courage do as well. In other words, the distinction between character virtues and agential competences does not divide dispositions that don’t from dispositions that do belong in the “charmed inner circle.” He identifies two ways of arguing for this. First, he tries to show that character virtues straightforwardly satisfy reliabilist criteria for being epistemic virtues. Second, he tries to show that there is little to no substantive difference between Sosa’s agential
competences and his own character virtues. Baehr concludes by arguing that virtues of intellectual character fall in the intersection of epistemology and ethics, not—as Sosa might be taken to suggest—solely on the ethical side of the divide.

**Virtue Epistemology: Character Versus Competence**

*Ernest Sosa*

Having been invited to debate with Jason Baehr the question of how moral and intellectual virtues are related, I will open the debate by discussing his recent book, *The Inquiring Mind* (2011). An outstanding contribution to virtue theory, the book can be viewed as an insightful treatise on that question.

For several decades now, it has been received wisdom that there are two quite distinct forms of virtue epistemology. One of these finds in epistemology important correlates of Aristotle’s moral virtues. Such responsibilist character epistemology builds its account of epistemic normativity on the subject’s responsible manifestation of epistemic character. The other form of virtue epistemology cleaves closer to Aristotelian intellectual virtues, while recognizing a broader set of competences still restricted to basic faculties of perception, introspection, and the like. This orthodox dichotomy of our field is deeply misleading and will be challenged in this chapter.

In his book, Baehr argues for a distinctive approach, while presupposing the dichotomy and offering detailed critiques of rival approaches. Against my own virtue reliabilism, he charges that it deplorably neglects responsibilist, agential intellectual virtues. Against other responsibilists, he argues that character epistemology can have only very limited success with the issues of traditional epistemology, such as skepticism and the nature of knowledge. Given that there is more to epistemology than those perennial issues, he proposes a focus on his preferred character, responsibilist, agential virtue epistemology. This in his view is how we can best locate epistemological character traits within epistemology, thus bringing epistemology and ethics closer together than in the past. What is more, not only have virtue reliabilists neglected responsibilist, agential intellectual virtues, which are so important for issues beyond those of traditional epistemology. They have even overlooked how important responsibilist virtues are in dealing with those traditional issues once we consider levels of human knowledge more sophisticated than those attainable through simple mechanisms such as sensory perception.

Given how thoroughly and how well Baehr has discussed those issues in his book, that is an excellent place to start our own discussion. In particular, I will discuss his critique of my own alternative approach and offer a defense.
In its discussion of my views the book misfires, or so I will argue. But I hope to rise above polemics to an overview of virtue epistemology, one that reveals more fully the current state of the field, and the options now available at its cutting edge.

Baehr contends “... that the concept of intellectual virtue does merit a secondary or supporting role” (p. 47) in traditional epistemological inquiry into the nature, conditions, and extent of human knowledge. By intellectual virtues, moreover, he means responsibilist, agential, character intellectual virtues, not reliabilist faculties. He concludes Chapter 4 as follows:

We have seen that virtue reliabilists ... must expand their focus to include, not just the more mechanical or faculty-based dimension of human cognition, but also the more active, volitional, or character-based dimension. ... The cost of not doing so, we have seen, is that reliabilists are unable to account for the sort of reliability involved with ... much of the knowledge that we as humans care most about. (p. 67)

I will defend four claims in response.

First, from its inception, virtue reliabilism has always had that expanded focus.
Second, responsibilists have advocated a distinctive conception of responsibilist, character-based intellectual virtue, but it is partial and inadequate.¹
Third, and ironically, we should recognize a sort of active, volitional intellectual virtue that will be a special case of reliable-competence intellectual virtue.
Fourth and finally, we can best understand the responsibilist, character-based intellectual virtues highlighted by responsibilists as auxiliary to the virtues that are a special case of reliable-competence intellectual virtue.

A true epistemology will indeed assign to such responsibilist-cum-reliabilist intellectual virtue the main role in addressing concerns at the center of the tradition. To anticipate, here is why that is so: because the sort of knowledge at the center of traditional epistemology, from the Pyrrhonians through Descartes, is high-level reflective knowledge. This is a knowledge requiring free, volitional endorsement by the subject who judges, or the corresponding disposition. Ironically, our reliabilist framework did always potentially, and does increasingly (actually and explicitly) give the place of honor to the agential, volitional approach, a central place that responsibilists either emphatically deny to it (Baehr), or do not successfully provide for it (Zagzebski).
So, my main thesis will be that reliabilist, competence-based virtue epistemology must be understood broadly, in a more positively ecumenical way, with responsibilist agential intellectual virtues at its core. Before we turn to that, however, here follows a defense against the specific critique offered by Baehr in his book.

Character Theory versus Competence Theory

We begin with quotations showing responsibilist competences to have been present in virtue reliabilism from its inception. Here are two relevant passages (from among many).

1. First an early passage:

Note that no human blessed with reason has merely animal knowledge of the sort attainable by beasts. For even when perceptual belief derives as directly as it ever does from sensory stimuli, it is still relevant that one has not perceived the signs of contrary testimony. . . . [E]ven when response to stimuli is most direct, if one were also to hear or see the signs of credible contrary testimony, that would change one’s response. The beliefs of a rational animal hence would seem never to issue from unaided introspection, memory, or perception. For reason is always at least a silent partner on the watch for other relevant data, a silent partner whose very silence is a contributing cause of the belief outcome. (Sosa 1991, p. 240)

That same view stays in place over the many succeeding years until we reach the following:

I speak of “mechanisms” or processes of belief formation, and sometimes of “input/output mechanisms,” but I want to disavow explicitly any implication that these are simple or modular. . . . [A] mechanism can be something close to a reflex, or it can be a very high-level, central-processing ability of the sort that enables a sensitive critic to “decide” how to assess a work, based on complex and able pondering.

Of course the intention was always to explain knowledge of all sorts, including sorts where the competences involved are those of a skilled art critic, scientist, mathematician, or detective, and not just the sorting competence of a chicken sexer.

2. Those quoted passages should already lay to rest the notion that virtue reliabilism is restricted to peripheral or modular or automatic mechanisms of belief formation. What then can possibly have suggested that virtue reliabilism
does exclude the more sophisticated, actively volitional dimensions of our cognitive lives? Consider this from Baehr’s (2011) book:

The tight logical connection between character virtues and faculty virtues is also evident in the fact that when epistemologists offer detailed characterizations of the latter, they have a hard time avoiding talk of the former. Sosa, for instance, in a discussion regarding the fallibility of faculty virtues, notes that the reliability of one’s cognitive faculties can be affected by one’s intellectual conduct. Interestingly, the conduct he proceeds to describe is precisely that of certain intellectual character virtues and vices... Again, an exercise of character virtues is often manifested in and partly constituted by the operation of certain faculty virtues. Moreover, as the passages from Sosa indicate, the reliability of faculty virtues often implicates one or more character virtues. Therefore the attempt to make a principled exclusion of character virtues from the reliabilist repertoire of intellectual virtues on the grounds that faculty virtues but not character virtues are “sources” of belief seems bound to fail.

The restrictive view attributed to me may well need correction, but it never has been my view. The attribution is based on no supportive reference, but only on what is “suggested” by the simplicity of the examples that I use as clear cases of simple knowledge to be explained. It is assumed that the view is restricted to the sorts of competences in examples of simple perceptual, introspective, or mnemonic knowledge. But no such explicit restriction can be found in my published work. Passages are cited (as Baehr indicates above) where I show clear signs of making no such restriction, but those passages are used (surprisingly) to demonstrate the inadequacy of my view, for imposing such a restriction. Nevertheless, what has never been excluded from my virtue reliabilism is agential competences.

On the contrary, the right conclusion is that the restrictive view is not my view. I restrict not the competences but only the examples. I focus on those simple enough to reveal more starkly certain basic problems that any theory of knowledge must solve. Further problems may of course arise when less simple instances of knowledge are highlighted. But first things first, and frankly it has been challenging enough to try to deal with the simpler examples first. Although I have always recognized both an animal and a reflective level of knowledge, as it happens, my current project is to develop the more agential and reflective side of my virtue epistemology.

3. What could have led to the misunderstanding of my position? In part, the reason may perhaps emerge in the following note of Baehr’s:

As I note below, 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 (see 1991: ch. 11). Our concern here, however, lies with the virtue component of Sosa’s analysis. [Italics added. The reference is to my (KIP) Knowledge in Perspective (Cambridge University Press, 1991).]

Here Baehr restricts his discussion of my views to their animal component, leaving aside the reflective component. Is it any wonder that virtue reliabilism is thought to neglect the active, agential, responsibilist side of epistemology, when its attempt to do so is arbitrarily left out of account?

Does virtue reliabilism leave out agency? Does it at least leave out the conscious, intentional, volitional agency that is involved in deliberation and in conscious pondering, or weighing of reasons? Not at all; at most, the animal side of virtue reliabilism would be guilty of such negligence if it aspired to be an account of all human knowledge. But it has no such ambition. Rather, it has always been joined to an account of the more distinctively human sort of knowledge, the reflective sort.

4. Baehr lays out what he takes to be the formal conditions that must be satisfied by any intellectual virtue, according to Competence Virtue Epistemology (CVE):

WIVA What Intellectual Virtues Are According to CVE (according to Baehr)

[Intellectual virtues are] personal qualities that, under certain conditions and with respect to certain propositions, are a reliable means to reaching the truth and avoiding error.

And he attributes to John Greco the idea that intellectual virtues would need to play a critical or salient role in explaining why a person reaches the truth.

Baehr focuses on agential virtues. These virtues have, in his view, certain distinctive features:

a. They are virtues exercised in intentional agency.
b. They are developed through repeated agency.
c. They bear on the personal worth of the possessor.
d. They aid agential success.
e. In epistemology, they concern intentionally conducted inquiry.

Because of its focus on traditional faculties such as perception, memory, and inference, virtue reliabilism is said to overlook character traits, such as open-mindedness and intellectual courage. These traits are said to possess the five features of agential virtues listed, and to satisfy the formal conditions accepted
by competence virtue epistemology (spelled out in WIVA above). Such overlooked character traits are indeed, under certain conditions and with respect to certain propositions, a reliable means to reaching the truth and avoiding error, and their exercise can most saliently explain why the subject gets it right in believing as they do.

Does competence virtue epistemology (virtue reliabilism) plead guilty?

5. Reliabilist intellectual virtues, according to Baehr’s WIVA, are to be understood simply, by definition, as traits (a) whose manifestations reliably yield true belief, and (b) that play a salient role in explaining why one reaches the truth in cases where one does so. That is indeed an account in the literature, an account of epistemically relevant belief-yielding sources. And there are early passages of mine, such as the following, which might misleadingly suggest that I subscribe to that account:

“We have reached the view that knowledge is true belief out of intellectual virtue, belief that turns out right by reason of the virtue and not just by coincidence.”

Although I later retain that view of knowledge,10 my account of intellectual virtues still differs from WIVA in a way that matters for how we should understand virtue reliabilism, or so I will now argue.

6. CVE aims to solve two Platonic problems: the Theaetetus problem as to the nature of knowledge, and the Meno problem as to its distinctive value. In connection with the definitional problem, CVE proposes that knowledge is belief whose correctness manifests the believer’s pertinent competence. So, the pertinent competence (the pertinent reliabilist intellectual virtue) must be one whose exercise can constitute knowledge. That is what I claim knowledge to be: belief that is correct, that thus succeeds, through the exercise of competence. However, it is crucial to restrict the “through” appropriately. When the correctness of a belief is due to competence in a way that constitutes knowledge, it is not enough that the competence reliably puts one in a position to know, in a position where one can now exercise one’s knowledge-constitutive competences, those whose exercise does constitute knowledge.

It may be thought that a virtue such as open-mindedness or intellectual courage could be such a directly knowledge-constitutive virtue. Accordingly, Baehr alleges, the reliabilist, competence-based view neglects responsibilist virtues that it should welcome within its fold, since they too can be important in explaining how a subject gets it right. And it must indeed be granted that, in certain instances, a responsibilist virtue can provide the salient explanation, especially where the truth must be won through complex and competent effort. Courageous and open-minded pursuit of truth—by a scientist, or journalist, or detective—might well enable someone to uncover a truth that escapes all others. Baehr has a telling objection to any form of reliabilist virtue
epistemology that requires for knowledge only that the correctness of the knowing subject’s belief must derive somehow, perhaps at a great remove, from the exercise of a certain intellectual virtue that is normally a reliable aid to reaching the truth. Such a form of virtue epistemology would be negligent if it ignored, or declared irrelevant, any responsibilist virtues that did help one attain truth, including open-mindedness and intellectual courage.

However, Baehr’s objection is not relevant to my own form of virtue reliabilism, since the intellectual virtues or competences that matter for my view are not simply those whose exercise through inquiry can reliably help one reach the truth. Rather, they are competences whose exercise can constitute knowledge. And a competence whose exercise reliably aids our search for truth—even so as to be the salient explanation of why truth is then attained—might easily be one whose exercise would not constitute knowledge. It may just fail to be of the right sort to be thus constitutive.

For example, a scientist may follow a healthy regimen with great discipline, and her good health may help explain why she makes her discoveries, by contrast with her wan, depressed rivals; and may even be the salient explanation.

Or, it might work the other way around. 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. The long hours, the intense concentration, the single-minded avoidance of distractions, may put the inquirer in a situation, or enable her to attain a frame of mind, or certain skills, through all of which she can have and exercise the competences more directly relevant to the attainment of knowledge. She might acquire important data through a perilous voyage to distant lands, or through observations of the night sky, none of which she could have done without persistent dedication over many years with enormous care.

7. But the point does not require reference to the heroics of a Darwin or a Brahe. A simple example from everyday life should suffice. Suppose a mysterious closed box lies before us, and we wonder what it contains. How can we find out? We might of course just open the lid. In pursuit of this objective we will then exercise certain competences, perhaps even character traits (if the box is locked, or the lid stuck), such as persistence and resourcefulness. And perhaps these qualities (in certain contexts, and in certain combinations) do lead us reliably to the truth. Nevertheless, the exercise of such intellectual virtues need not and normally will not constitute knowledge, not even when that exercise does indirectly lead us to the truth.

Contrast what happens when we manage to open the lid and look inside. Now we may immediately know the answer to our question, with a perceptual
belief—say, *that there is a necklace in the box*—which manifests certain cognitive competences for gaining visual experience and belief. Perhaps this complex, knowledge-constitutive competence first leads to things seeming perceptually a certain way, and eventually to the belief that things are indeed that way, absent contrary indications. A belief manifesting such a competence, and crucially, one whose correctness manifests such a competence, does constitute knowledge, at a minimum animal knowledge, perhaps even full-fledged knowledge (including a reflective component).

It is such knowledge-constitutive competences that are of main interest to a CVE aiming to explain human knowledge. Other epistemically important traits—such as open-mindedness, intellectual courage, persistence, and even single-minded obsessiveness—are indeed of interest to a broader epistemology. They are of course worthy of serious study. But they are not in the charmed inner circle for traditional epistemology. They are only “auxiliary” intellectual virtues, by contrast with the “constitutive” intellectual virtues of central interest to virtue reliabilism.

My distinction has on one side intellectual virtues whose manifestation helps to put you in a position to know, and on the other intellectual virtues whose manifestation in the correctness of a belief thereby constitutes a bit of knowledge. In my view, a competence can constitute knowledge only if it is a disposition to believe correctly, one that can then be manifest in the correctness of a belief. A competence in general is a disposition to succeed when one aims to attain certain objectives, and a competence to believe correctly is a special case of that.

**Responsibilist Virtue Epistemology: Baehr versus Zagzebski**

Here is the internecine disagreement in brief.

1. Baehr and Zagzebski share a high-minded conception of intellectual virtues. For them these are character traits that bear on the personal worth of the person. They are inherently motivational. Such virtuous character traits are manifest in actions that must be motivated by a virtuous pursuit of the truth. In their view, a belief that derives (at least in important part) from such a virtue must derive from actions that express the subject’s love of truth.

2. Zagzebski believes that such character-based responsibilist epistemology can help with the traditional problematic of epistemology, at the core of which is the project of defining knowledge. Indeed, for Zagzebski it is emphatically *this* motivational component that explains the distinctive value of knowledge above whatever value might be found in the corresponding merely true belief. So, she proposes that knowledge is best understood as belief that gets it right through such responsibilist intellectual virtue.\(^\text{11}\)

3. For Baehr, however, that approach is blocked by simple counterexamples, such as a pang of pain, or a strike of lightning out of the blue, which one
knowingly discerns with no delay. These one can’t help knowing, sans deliberation and unmotivated by love of truth.

4. Zagzebski responds:

[My definition] . . . does not rule out easy knowledge by sense perception. A person who believes that she sees an easily identifiable object typically knows that she sees the object, provided that there are no indications in her environment that she should not trust her visual sense or understanding of the concept under which the object falls. 

And she extends the point to testimony, and presumably would go further.

5. But Baehr insists as follows:

[If as I work late at night there is a power outage] . . . I am, as it were, overcome by knowledge that the lighting in the room has changed. . . . Nor is it plausible to think that I am “trusting my senses” in the relevant, motivational sense. . . . Again, knowledge of this sort seems not to involve or implicate the knower’s agency at all.

And this line of criticism seems right at least to the following extent. We cannot explain the appropriateness of the belief that the room has gone dark as a matter of non-negligent agency, if that belief is not at all a product of intentional agency, which is the sort of agency important to character epistemology. Surely motivation relates to agency, not to passive reactions.

It might be replied that one can take a kind of agential credit for a locomotive’s staying on a certain track, despite one’s having actively intervened not at all. One might still deserve credit even so, if there have been junctures where as conductor one could have intervened, where one was free to intervene and, without negligence, freely opted not to do so. Unfortunately, this will not do. The problem is that in the cases urged by the critics, there is no freedom to intervene in what seems clearly to be a belief, and even an instance of knowledge, as with the knowledge that the room has gone dark.

6. Here is the upshot. If we restrict responsibilist virtues to those that are both agential and bear on the personal worth of the agent, in virtue of their motivational component, then Baehr is right to think that we cannot build a traditional epistemology on such virtues, and Zagzebski wrong to think otherwise. Not even knowledge can be accounted for in those terms. However, in my view Zagzebski is right to think that a traditional epistemology can be built on responsibilist virtues, and Baehr wrong to think otherwise. Where they both go wrong is in supposing that responsibilist virtues must involve the personal worth of the agent, must be virtues of that sort, involving motivation that passes muster.

Moreover, my point here cannot be dismissed as merely terminological. Understood in a metaphysically interesting way, my claim is that the relevant
natural kinds for building a responsibilist virtue epistemology are not just the following two: (a) non-agential faculties, and (b) personal-worth-involving, motivationally appropriate agential virtuous competences. We may or may not consider the latter to be a category or kind worth emphasizing. We may or may not consider it worth emphasizing in a responsibilism that aspires to solve traditional epistemological problems. Regardless of all that, there is at a minimum also or instead the following epistemic kind: (c) agential virtues. These obviously go beyond non-agential faculties. So, they go beyond a reliabilism restricted to such faculties. And so I submit that they can reasonably be considered “responsibilist” intellectual virtues, in the sense that agents would be epistemically, agentially responsible in exercising them, and irresponsible through their neglect, and even vicious through exercise of conflicting dispositions. In other words, they are traits or competences of agents as agents. And among these are the traits or competences of conscious, intentional agents as such.

**Virtue Epistemology: Responsibilism as a Kind of Reliabilism**

1. In order to circumvent the impasse within responsibilism, we must first be clear that epistemology is not a department of ethics. An extremely high epistemic status, certain knowledge, can be attained with a deplorable state that represents a sad waste of time, as when someone spends a morning determining with certitude how many beans are left in their coffee bag.

Moreover, that is quite compatible with there being special instances of knowledge that are outstanding accomplishments, which require an admirable love of truth (on a certain matter) and willingness to pursue it with persistent toil and sacrifice. And it is also compatible with the fact that possessing knowledge of a certain sort, for various sorts, is an indispensable part of any flourishing life. Moreover, having sufficient knowledge of a certain sort may be indispensable without any particular bits of knowledge of that sort being indispensable, or even much desirable.

Independently of all that, it remains that there is a distinctive dimension of epistemic assessment isolated from all such broadly ethical (or prudential) concerns. Moreover, within this epistemic dimension, love of truth plays a negligible role at most, if any at all. Hedge fund managers, waste disposal engineers, dentists, and their receptionists, can all attain much knowledge in the course of an ordinary workday despite the fact that they seek the truths relevant to their work only for their instrumental value. That is why they want them, not because they love truth. That seems indeed to be true of service professionals generally, including medical doctors and lawyers. It is not love of truth that routinely drives them in their professional activities, by contrast with desire for professional standing, wanting to help someone, or trying to make a living.

Disinterested, high-minded motivation must be distinguished from intentional, volitional agency. Dispositions to succeed when one tries need not be
closely allied with, and much less do they need to be constituted by, a high-minded motivation, one that can bear on the personal worth of the agent, on how fine a person they are. Professionals are indeed routinely engaged in intentional, volitional truth-seeking in their work lives, even when they do not disinterestedly, lovingly seek the truth. An assassin may even have no desire whatever for the truth on the location of his victim except only for the fact that it will make his crime possible. Indeed, if he thought a false belief would at that juncture get him more efficiently to his objective he would heartily approve of his so believing, and would be glad he did so, with no regrets whatever. His search for truth, since agential, is subject to the full range of responsibilist assessment nonetheless. And his knowing the location of the victim in believing as he does about that location, is still better epistemically than his merely believing correctly, and of course better epistemically than his believing incorrectly. Similarly, his shot may be an excellently apt shot, and thereby better than an inapt shot (whether successful or not), despite the murderous motivating intention. (That is to say, it is better as a shot; it is a better shot. It need not be a better entity, or a better thing to happen, nonetheless.)

In conclusion, once we distinguish the sort of comparative evaluation (epistemic performance evaluation) that is involved in our taking knowledge to surpass merely true belief in (the relevant sort of) value, this removes any temptation to take personally laudable motivation to be the key, even if in a broad sense one’s cognitive prowess may be a component of one’s personal worth, as might be the shooting prowess of our assassin. Broad “personal worth” is not what responsibilist, character epistemologists have in mind, at least not Baehr. The assassin is not a better person for being such a good shot. A more accomplished person, yes, but not a better person, in any sense closely related to ethical assessment.

Let us turn now to a second distinction that will help accommodate responsibilism properly in epistemology.

2. At a certain level of abstraction, we can distinguish two sorts of “belief,” one implicit and functional, the other explicitly, consciously intentional. It is the latter that needs to be explored in giving responsibilism its proper place in epistemology. This is because it is conscientiously reasoned choice and judgment that most fully manifests our rational nature. It is with such choice and judgment that we reach the level of human functioning that most fully manifests our philosophical attainment. Accordingly, it is such consciously, rationally endorsed judgment that is at the focus of the epistemological tradition from the Pyrrhonians through Descartes. It is not only the act of conscious, intentional judgment that is at the core, however, since by extension, there is also the correlated disposition to judge upon consideration.

Still, although we do not here focus on functional, implicit belief, what we learn about conscious, intentional belief should carry over to belief generally, whether intentional or functional. The key to the carryover would be a
conception of functional belief as still aimed at truth, or at representing accurately and reliably enough. Functional belief might aim at truth functionally: for example, through psychological or biological teleology. This would enable thinking of functional belief also as a kind of action, even when it is only implicit, and not consciously intentional. Anyhow, I distinguish such functional belief only to put it aside, so as to focus on the sort of belief that does turn out to be a form of intentional action.

What is intentional belief? How is it structured? We focus on affirmation, and the corresponding disposition to affirm, in the endeavor to answer a given question correctly. Consider the great importance of these for a collaborative social species. They seem essentially required for collaborative deliberation and for information sharing. Take collaborative deliberation, right up to the most complex, as in a nation’s governance; also, information sharing, crucial as it is in a great many contexts, prominently in scientific inquiry.

Such affirmation is largely conscious and intentional. If you add a column of figures in your head, for example, you may seemingly obtain a certain result. But if the problem is complex enough, you may still hesitate to affirm accordingly. You may first take out pencil and paper, or a calculator. Eventually, coincidence of results may provide strong enough evidence, which leads you to assent (perhaps properly so). You decide when to assent, you wait until the evidence is strong enough.15

We focus on such intentional, judgmental belief. How is it structured? Judgmental belief is definable as a certain sort of disposition to affirm. What sort of disposition? For a start, let us take judgment that p to be a certain sort of affirmation in the endeavor to get it right on whether p. Judgmental belief can then be understood as a certain sort of disposition to judge in the endeavor to get it right on whether p, if one so endeavors.

Compare pragmatic affirmation, whether as a means to reduce cognitive/affective dissonance, or to instill confidence that will enhance performance, or the like. On our conception, the latter is not proper belief. It is rather a sort of “make-belief” or mock belief.16

3. What distinguishes real belief from make-belief? The difference involves the subject’s intentions. In make-belief one affirms in pursuit of some non-epistemic, practical aim. By contrast, in judgment and judgmental belief one constitutively aims at getting it right on the question addressed. Perhaps that is all there is to the difference?

Before us so far is a partial account of judgment as a certain sort of affirmation in the endeavor to get it right on whether p. Judgmental belief could then be understood as a corresponding disposition: to judge in the endeavor thus to get it right on whether p, if one so endeavors.

4. Suppose that reflective knowledge is knowledge properly so-called, and that the highest level of reflective knowledge, of distinctive interest to the philosopher, is the knowledge that gains conscious, agential, judgmental
endorsement. This is the knowledge at the center of the epistemological tradition from the Pyrrhonians to Descartes and beyond. It is not the knowledge that is acquired implicitly with the normal automatic processing that standardly occurs in the normal course of a day. Rather, it is the knowledge that does or at least can stand up to conscious reflective scrutiny, no holds barred. Included here in the knowledge that falls short is not only the implicit belief acquired automatically, but even the explicit and conscious judgment that merely reflects unexamined assumptions absorbed through the force of the culture’s hidden persuaders. These judgments can be willingly rendered, explicitly and consciously, while they may still fall short because unendorsed and not properly endorsable by that subject, who lacks the rational wherewithal even dispositionally.

Envoi

Finally, an irenic parting. Again, we should gladly recognize the many important intellectual virtues beyond the knowledge-constitutive. And we should welcome the philosophical study of such virtues. There are non-constitutive auxiliary virtues whose virtue must be understood within the framework of virtue reliabilism. The reason for this is that what makes them auxiliary virtues is mostly that their exercise enables us to acquire or sustain the complete competence—the Skill, Shape, and Situation, SSS complete knowledge-constitutive competence—in virtue of whose manifestations we know answers to questions in a given domain. (Recall how the competence to drive safely on a certain road would be constituted by the innermost Skill that the driver retains even asleep, by the Shape that requires his being awake and sober, and by the Situation involving a road that is dry enough and not covered by a thick layer of oil.) We are helped to understand why those auxiliary competences count as auxiliary epistemic virtues (and not just as general moral or other practical virtues), then, if we understand the structure of knowledge-constitutive competences, and can better see which and how auxiliary virtues might enable us to attain and exercise our knowledge-constitutive virtues.

Character Virtues, Epistemic Agency, and Reflective Knowledge

Jason Baehr

Ernest Sosa was the first philosopher to deploy the concept of intellectual virtue in the service of contemporary epistemology. His contributions to what has since become a leading approach to epistemology are second to none in volume, quality, and impact. For these and other reasons, it is an honor to have
Sosa carefully address some of my own work in virtue epistemology and to engage with him on several matters central to the field.

Per the debate format, I will take aim at what I take to be a couple of the central claims of Sosa's discussion in this chapter. However, my criticisms are intended to be constructive and illuminating. Rather than try to uncover any deep flaws in Sosa's brand of virtue epistemology, my aim is to push him further along what appears to be his present trajectory, that is, toward an even wider embrace of intellectual character virtues like open-mindedness, attentiveness, intellectual carefulness, intellectual thoroughness, and intellectual courage. I argue that Sosa should conceive of intellectual character virtues, not merely as “auxiliary virtues” or as what I shall refer to here as “epistemic enablers,” but also as constitutive elements of knowledge or as “epistemic contributors.”

I begin by addressing some interpretive issues concerning the discussion of mine to which Sosa is responding. Next I argue that while intellectual character virtues sometimes function in the merely auxiliary way Sosa describes, they also regularly manifest in knowledge-constitutive epistemic performances. After also considering the relationship between intellectual character virtues and epistemic agency, I conclude, contra Sosa, that intellectual character virtues like open-mindedness, attentiveness, and intellectual carefulness are a part of the “charmed inner circle for traditional epistemology.” I close with a discussion of whether a concern with the dimensions of intellectual character that do not partly constitute knowledge is best understood as proper to epistemology, ethics, or both.

A quick note about terminology. Throughout the chapter, I will refer to the traits in question simply as “character virtues” (dropping “intellectual” for simplicity). Also, I will use the term “intellectual virtue” in a quasi-technical way to refer to whatever personal qualities or abilities contribute to knowledge understood within a virtue reliabilist framework.

Interpretive Issues

Sosa argues that contrary to what I suggest in my book, something like character virtues have always been a part of the reliabilist repertoire of intellectual virtues: “responsibilist competences . . . have been present in virtue reliabilism from its inception” (p. 64). This claim strikes me as partly right and partly wrong. In some sense, the idea that character virtues have always been present in reliabilism is precisely what I was attempting to defend in my book (2011). A “central claim” of the relevant chapter is that “character virtues satisfy virtue reliabilists’ formal requirements for an intellectual virtue” (pp. 47–48). In other words, by reliabilists’ own lights, character virtues are intellectual virtues. A trickier question concerns the extent to which this point has been recognized or accepted by reliabilists. In his discussion in this
chapter, Sosa makes clear that he has always thought of epistemic reliability as involving a volitional and characterological dimension. And he cites some passages from his earlier work that suggest as much. Sosa is correct that I interpreted him as failing to fully recognize or accept that character virtues satisfy the conditions for an intellectual virtue. While this interpretation was at least somewhat tentative (I argued merely that “there is reason to think” that Sosa does not regard character virtues as intellectual virtues and that he “apparently believes” as much), and while I did offer several reasons in support of this interpretation (including its endorsement by fellow reliabilist John Greco), I now see that it was both mistaken and hasty. I am grateful to Sosa for this correction.

It would also be a mistake, however, to conclude that reliabilists in general have been or are committed to including character virtues in their repertoire of intellectual virtues. In the chapter Sosa criticizes, I also look closely at the views of Greco and Alvin Goldman (pp. 49–50). Unlike Sosa, these authors are more explicit about their exclusion of character virtues. Goldman (1992), for instance, says:

In the moral sphere ordinary language is rich in virtues terminology. By contrast there are few common labels for intellectual virtues, and those that do exist—‘perceptiveness,’ ‘thoroughness,’ ‘insightfulness,’ and so forth—are of limited value in the present context. I propose to identify the relevant intellectual virtues . . . with the belief-forming capacities, faculties, or processes that would be accepted as answers to the question ‘How does X know?’ In answer to this form of question, it is common to reply, ‘He saw it,’ ‘He heard it,’ ‘He remembers it,’ ‘He infers it from such-and-such evidence,’ and so forth. Thus, basing belief on seeing, hearing, memory, and (good) inference are in the collection of what the folk regard as intellectual virtues. (p. 162)

I conclude that while Sosa has always thought of certain instances or types of knowledge as requiring something like an exercise of character virtues, the same cannot be said of virtue reliabilists or of virtue reliabilism in general.

**Character Virtues: Epistemic Contributors or Mere Enablers?**

The foregoing, largely irenic picture is not entirely accurate. When Sosa says that “responsibilist competences . . . have been present in virtue reliabilism from its inception,” he apparently is not talking about familiar responsibilist traits like open-mindedness and intellectual courage. Rather, he seems to be referring to a different set of agential or character-based abilities that fall somewhere between “non-agential faculty virtues” and responsibilist character
virtues (see especially the discussion on pp. 64–9). This is strongly suggested by Sosa’s description of responsibilist character virtues as “auxiliary virtues” that put a person “in a position to know” but do not constitute knowledge and therefore are not intellectual virtues in the strict sense (p. 67).

To state Sosa’s position more simply, it will be helpful to have at our disposal a distinction between “epistemic enablers” and “epistemic contributors.” Epistemic enablers are qualities that, in Sosa’s words, put one “in a position to know, in a position where one can now exercise one’s knowledge-constitutive competences” (p. 67) and epistemic contributors are qualities of the latter sort—qualities in virtue of which one knows. Accordingly, Sosa appears to be committed to the following claims:

1. Character virtues function merely as epistemic enablers.
2. There is, however, a related but distinct set of characterological or agential virtues—call them “reliabilist agential virtues”—that are epistemic contributors.
3. Thus reliabilist agential virtues but not character virtues belong in the reliabilist repertoire of intellectual virtues.

This interpretation of Sosa’s position is borne out by several passages in his discussion above, including the following:

... we can best understand the responsibilist, character-based intellectual virtues highlighted by responsibilists as auxiliary to the virtues that are a special case of reliable-competence intellectual virtue. (p. 63)

... open-mindedness, intellectual courage, persistence ... are not in the charmed inner circle for traditional epistemology. They are only “auxiliary” intellectual virtues, by contrast with the “constitutive” intellectual virtues of central interest to virtue reliabilism. (p. 69)

While these and related passages seem clearly to support (1)–(3), there is some textual evidence for thinking that in fact Sosa wants to leave the door open to the possibility that character virtues can be epistemic contributors. Specifically, at one point he says of persistence and resourcefulness (two clear examples of character virtues) that the “the exercise of such intellectual virtues need not and normally will not constitute knowledge, not even when that exercise does indirectly lead us to the truth” (p. 68). “Need” and “normally” suggest the possibility that at least in certain cases character virtues do function as epistemic contributors.

How, then, should we understand Sosa’s position here? I think the total evidence of his discussion above favors the stronger interpretation according to which character virtues are not epistemic contributors. 20 Again, this
impression is difficult to escape given his straightforward claim that character virtues “are not in the charmed inner circle for traditional epistemology.” And it seems especially clear in his remark that character virtues “are only ‘auxiliary’ intellectual virtues, by contrast with the ‘constitutive’ intellectual virtues of central interest to virtue reliabilism” (emphasis added). I will, at any rate, assume this stronger interpretation in the remainder of the chapter. However, even if this interpretation is mistaken, there remains plenty of notable distance between Sosa’s view and my own. At most, Sosa appears open to the possibility that character virtues are epistemic contributors only in rare or non-standard cases. Against this claim, I turn now to argue that it is not in fact rare or unusual for an exercise of character virtues to partly constitute an item of knowledge.

We may begin by considering Sosa’s case for the claim that character virtues do not function as epistemic contributors. His discussion suggests two main arguments for this claim. The first is that character virtues—at least as understood by some responsibilists—are too normatively demanding. Sosa correctly notes that for both Zagzebski and me, to possess a character virtue, one must be disposed to engage in a certain kind of intellectual activity characteristic of this virtue out of something like a “love” of truth or other epistemic goods. Now, as Zagzebski and I think of it, the “love” in question need not be understood in strongly desiderative terms (hence the scare quotes). I claim, for instance, that “the positive orientation central to personal intellectual worth is not necessarily desiderative in nature . . . it can also take a purely volitional form” (p. 109). In other words, one’s personal intellectual worth can be enhanced on account of a volitional commitment to reaching the truth even if this commitment is not rooted in a strong desiderative or affective attachment to truth. A more accurate way of understanding what Zagzebski and I are getting at here is in terms of the notion of intrinsic epistemic motivation. We maintain that virtue-manifesting intellectual activity must be motivated at least partly by an intrinsic concern with epistemic goods like truth and knowledge—a concern or desire for these goods as such or considered in their own right, not merely for the sake of some additional (potentially non-epistemic) good that might result from their acquisition.21

Thus the motivational requirement on intellectual virtue that Zagzebski and I subscribe to may not be quite as “high minded” or demanding as Sosa suggests. This clarification notwithstanding, Sosa rehearses a convincing case for the claim that even a weaker motivational requirement of the sort just sketched is problematic vis-à-vis an attempt to give a virtue-based account of knowledge. The problem is that a great deal of knowledge evidently can be acquired in the absence of virtuous epistemic motivation. My knowledge, at the onset of a sudden and unexpected power outage, that the room has suddenly gone dark need not manifest any intrinsic concern with getting to the
truth. Such knowledge might come to me entirely unbidden. In fact, if it is sufficiently important to some other purpose of mine that the room remains lit (e.g., if I am struggling to meet an imminent writing deadline), I might even will that the proposition in question be false, while nevertheless still knowing it to be true.

While Sosa is correct that we should not think of intrinsic epistemic motivation as a requirement for knowledge, this does not warrant a dismissal—even from a reliabilist standpoint—of traits like open-mindedness, intellectual carefulness, intellectual thoroughness, intellectual honesty, or intellectual rigor. As Sosa’s own discussion suggests, a person can have a settled disposition to think and reason in ways that are open, careful, thorough, honest, and rigorous, while having little or no intrinsic concern with any epistemic goods:

Hedge fund managers, waste disposal engineers, dentists, and their receptionists, can all attain much knowledge in the course of an ordinary workday despite the fact that they seek the truths relevant to their work only for their instrumental value. That is why they want them, not because they love truth. That seems indeed to be true of service professionals generally, including medical doctors and lawyers. It is not love of truth that routinely drives them in their professional activities, by contrast with desire for professional standing, wanting to help someone, or trying to make a living. (p. 71)

While Sosa does not put the point quite this way, if the people he describes are habitually and intelligently attentive to important details, careful and thorough in their research, if they are regularly open to expert advice, listen fairly to alternative standpoints, and persist in their attempts to acquire knowledge, then surely it will make sense to think of them as having the traits of attentiveness, intellectual carefulness and thoroughness, open-mindedness, fair-mindedness, and intellectual persistence. Further, given the plausible assumption that these traits are epistemically reliable, it will also make sense to think of them as virtues in some legitimate and familiar sense.

As this suggests, it is at least open to Sosa to treat broadly motivated attentiveness, intellectual carefulness, and so on as epistemic contributors, where such motivation includes either intrinsic epistemic motivation or the sort of instrumental motivation just described. Again, he could treat these traits as such because of their contribution to their possessor’s epistemic reliability. In fact, a similar view has already been defended by Julia Driver (2000), who claims that a trait like attentiveness or intellectual carefulness is an intellectual virtue if and only if “it systematically (reliably) produces true belief” (p. 126). While, in my own work, I have defended an account of intellectual
virtue whereby intrinsic epistemic motivation is a necessary feature of an intellectual virtue, I have also taken pains to endorse pluralism about kinds or concepts of intellectual virtue that leaves room for a conception of precisely this sort:

I think a single trait of character can be intellectually excellent and thus an ‘intellectual virtue’ in more than one way . . . a character trait’s being epistemically reliable or truth-conducive is both necessary and sufficient for its counting as an intellectual virtue according to a certain viable ‘externalist’ model of intellectual virtue. (2011, p.105)

Finally, for reasons noted above, I maintain that this is the right conception to adopt where the objective is to offer a philosophical account of knowledge anchored in the concept of intellectual virtue.

To summarize: given Sosa’s theoretical aims, he is right to deny a motivational requirement on intellectual virtue; however, this does not warrant banishing character virtues from the “charmed inner circle” in traditional epistemology. For, again, a person can possess the trait of open-mindedness, intellectual carefulness, or intellectual courage without being motivated by a concern with epistemic goods as such. Further, these traits can be viewed as epistemic contributors on non-motivational grounds. Indeed, reliabilists in particular are in a good position to view them as such, for the traits in question contribute importantly to epistemic reliability.

While the latter move is open to Sosa, he seems unlikely to make it. For he also gives a second reason for thinking that character virtues are not epistemic contributors. A central thesis of Sosa’s discussion is that while character virtues can put us in a position to know, they are not the sort of cognitive competence in virtue of which we acquire knowledge—they are not knowledge-constitutive. Referring to character virtues, he comments:

When the correctness of a belief is due to competence in a way that constitutes knowledge, it is not enough that the competence reliably puts one in a position to know, in a position where one can now exercise one’s knowledge-constitutive competences, those whose exercise does constitute knowledge. (p. 67)

In what sense do character virtues put us in a position to know? Sosa explains:

The long hours, the intense concentration, the single-minded avoidance of distractions, may put the inquirer in a situation, or enable her to attain a frame of mind, or certain skills, through all of which she can have and exercise the competences more directly relevant to the attainment of
knowledge. She might acquire important data through a perilous voyage to distant lands, or through observations of the night sky, none of which she could have done without persistent dedication over many years with enormous care. (p. 68)

Again, for Sosa, while cognitive activity of the sort just described can facilitate knowledge, it is not constitutive of knowledge. He illustrates this point with the following example:

Suppose a mysterious closed box lies before us, and we wonder what it contains. How can we find out? We might of course just open the lid. In pursuit of this objective we will then exercise certain competences, perhaps even character traits (if the box is locked, or the lid stuck), such as persistence and resourcefulness. And perhaps these qualities (in certain contexts, and in certain combinations) do lead us reliably to the truth. Nevertheless, the exercise of such intellectual virtues need not and normally will not constitute knowledge, not even when that exercise does indirectly lead us to the truth. (p. 68)

What does constitute knowledge in such a case? The fairly obvious answer is visual perception. While character virtues may put one in a position to know by helping one figure out how to open the box, one knows what is in the box on account of seeing it.

A slightly different way of putting this point is that while intellectual virtues are manifested in the process of inquiry, which often leads to or terminates in the formation of a belief, they do not manifest in belief-formation itself. Understood in this way, I concur with much of what Sosa has to say. I agree, for instance, that character virtues do bear frequently and centrally on the process of inquiry and therefore often leave their possessor in a good position to acquire knowledge. I also agree that character virtues do not (typically) manifest in the automatic or agency-independent formation of beliefs. However, Sosa himself makes a good case for thinking that belief formation is not always passive or automatic—as in cases of what he calls “intentional, judgmental belief” (p. 73). The question, then, is whether character virtues can manifest in knowledge-constitutive cognitive performances of this sort. Sosa seems to think not. I disagree.

I maintain that character virtues regularly manifest in cognitive acts like judging, perceiving, noticing, and grasping and that such acts often enough are knowledge-constitutive in Sosa’s sense. Consider, for instance, a case in which a person notices an important visual clue or detail on account of his focused attention or attentive observation. As I am conceiving of the case, it is not as if the person exercises attentiveness and then, only subsequently, sees the relevant detail. Rather, attentiveness is manifested in the act of visual
perception itself. It is in or through focused or attentive looking that the
detail is perceived. To come at this from another angle, consider how we
might answer the following question: on account of which cognitive com-
petence does the person acquire knowledge? One answer might be: good
vision. But this is an underdescription. For it could be that most people with
perfectly good vision would fail to see the relevant detail. A better answer
would be something like: attentive and careful visual perception. This puts
the spotlight back on character virtues. It suggests that the person acquires
knowledge on account of his intellectual attentiveness and carefulness, that
is, on an account of a manifestation of these traits in the operation of his
visual faculty.

Alternatively, consider a case in which, through an act of honest intro-
spection, a person becomes aware of the fact that she doubts a certain claim
that she has long taken herself to firmly believe. Again, it would be mis-
guided to say that this person manifests intellectual honesty and then, in a
separate cognitive act, becomes aware of the relevant fact. Instead, it is thor-
ough or in virtue of her introspective honesty that she grasps her doubt.
Her intellectual honesty manifests in an act of introspection. Or, consider
a similar case in which a person is presented with counterevidence that
defeats the justification of one of her beliefs. The defeating relation is sub-
tle enough that it could easily be missed, even by people whose cognitive
faculties are operating normally. The person in question, however, is habit-
ually thorough and open-minded. In an exercise of these traits, she grasps
and accepts the fact that her belief is unjustified. Again, by all appearances,
her knowledge of this fact is partly constituted by her thorough and open-
minded use of reason.

These examples underscore a critical point: namely, that the exercise or
manifestation of character virtues cannot be divorced from the operation of
perceptual or other cognitive faculties like introspection and reason. It may
be tempting to think that the operation of character virtues somehow pre-
cedes and thus is distinct from the operation of cognitive faculties. However,
this is a mistaken view. Intellectual character virtues manifest in the operation
or exercise of cognitive faculties. They harness and regulate these faculties in
rational and reliable ways. Indeed, what would it be for a person to exercise
open-mindedness, attentiveness, or intellectual carefulness without making
use of one or more cognitive faculties? Could we even begin to describe the
operation of a character virtue without reference to the operation of a cogni-
tive faculty?

The emerging picture is one according to which character virtues are
both epistemic enablers and epistemic contributors. In some situations,
character virtues may—in precisely the way Sosa describes—put one in
a position to acquire knowledge without partially constituting that knowl-
edge. In other situations, however, they may be manifested in cognitive
performances—in judging, perceiving, noticing, grasping, etc.—that do contribute to knowledge.

Character Virtues and Epistemic Agency

One way to put the conclusion just reached is that the class of character virtues intersects with the class of reliabilist agential virtues. Alternatively: character virtues sometimes function as reliabilist agential virtues. Now I want to look more closely at this relationship. How exactly do character virtues stand relative to the agential virtues described by Sosa?

To answer this question, we will need to get further clarity on what exactly the latter virtues amount to. This is not an easy task. Sosa makes the following claims about reliabilist agential virtues: (a) they aim at truth; (b) agents are responsible for their exercise and irresponsible for neglecting their exercise; (c) they involve intentional, volitional agency; and (d) they are manifested in the conscious, reflective scrutiny and “conscious, agential, judgmental endorsement” (p. 73) of first-order beliefs. While this characterization is suggestive, Sosa does not provide any specific examples or concrete cases of agential virtues. This raises the question of how, more precisely, we might think of them. That is, how might we understand the volitional, truth-oriented competences in virtue of which a person with reflective knowledge responsibly scrutinizes or endorses her first-order judgments?

We can begin by noting how such scrutiny or endorsement might go wrong, for example, how it might be irresponsible. As Sosa suggests elsewhere (2011), one might engage in second-order reflection on a first-order judgment in ways that are biased (p. 16). Similarly, such reflection can be hasty, shallow, superficial, provincial, cowardly, or the like. Indeed, it is difficult to imagine other sorts of ways in which such reflection might go wrong that are at once volitional and a matter of personal responsibility. In any case, given this understanding of what it is for reflective scrutiny and endorsement to go wrong, a certain conception of responsible doxastic reflection immediately presents itself. Specifically, responsible scrutiny and endorsement of a first-order belief is scrutiny and endorsement that is honest, fair, careful, thorough, open, courageous, and so on. Put in agential terms, the claim is that responsible doxastic reflection requires an exercise of character virtues like intellectual honesty, fair-mindedness, intellectual carefulness, intellectual thoroughness, open-mindedness, and intellectual courage.

A more controversial question is whether the class of reliabilist agential virtues is reducible to the class of character virtues. I am not sufficiently confident about how Sosa is conceiving of reliabilist agential virtues to defend an affirmative reply to this question. Thus I leave open the possibility that some reliabilist agential virtues are not character virtues. However, the point remains that it is difficult to say much about the way in which the kind of
“conscious, agential, judgmental endorsement” in question might be good or responsible without invoking the language of character virtues. For this reason the difference between character virtues and reliabilist agential virtues is at best unclear.

This leads to a further point. Consider how moral virtues are sometimes thought to stand relative to practical reason or moral agency. Aristotle, for instance, thinks of moral or ethical virtue as (largely) constituted by a disposition to choose in accordance with a mean—to choose the right actions, at the right time, in the right amount, toward the right person, and so on. For Aristotle, *individual* moral virtues capture what this looks like from one situation to another: in some contexts, excellence in moral agency looks like giving a certain amount of one’s financial resources to a particular cause and in a particular way (generosity), while in other contexts it might look like facing down one’s fears confidently and in the service of a worthy end (courage), while in others still it might look like resisting or regulating one’s bodily appetites (temperance). One way to put Aristotle’s view is that moral virtues constitute the excellences of practical reason or moral agency.

What might a similar view amount to in epistemology? As Sosa makes clear, some knowledge can be acquired independently of epistemic agency. In other cases—and especially in cases of reflective knowledge, which Sosa describes as “at the center of the epistemological tradition from the Pyrrhonians to Descartes and beyond” (p. 74)—knowledge makes significant agential demands. As we have seen, this does not mean merely that agency must be *operative* in the formation of the relevant belief, even operative in a strong and central way. Rather, agency must be involved in ways that are *good or excellent*. We have seen further that the excellence in question is naturally describable in virtues terminology. This suggests the following general picture: just as moral virtues are the excellences of moral agency, intellectual character virtues are the excellences of epistemic agency. On this view, the concept of intellectual character virtue picks out what it is for epistemic agency to function well—or in a responsible, truth-oriented way—from one situation to another. Again, in some contexts, this might amount to exercising caution in the drawing of a conclusion, in others it might look like honestly and courageously confronting a piece of counterevidence, and in others still like carefully and thoroughly probing the evidential basis of a belief. I mention this view as a possibility that merits further consideration. Though I lack the space to explore the view in detail here, to the extent that it is plausible, the distinction between character virtues and reliabilist agential virtues looks fragile indeed.

This has further implications for our understanding of the relationship between character virtues and knowledge. Sosa argues that reliabilist agential virtues are crucial to the possession of knowledge, particularly reflective knowledge. If this is right, and if the difference between reliabilist agential virtues and character virtues is slim (or non-existent), then character virtues also
turn out to be critically important to knowledge—not merely in an indirect or instrumental fashion, but constitutively.

**Epistemology, Ethics, or Both?**

I close with a brief reflection on the boundaries of epistemology and on where a concern with character virtues falls with respect to these boundaries. If we are right to think that character virtues figure centrally into the conditions for reflective knowledge, then it is beyond question that a certain kind of philosophical reflection on these traits is proper to epistemology. But imagine that our concern is with the way in which character virtues bear on the cognitive life more generally, for example, with how they are related to “cognitive flourishing” or a good intellectual life. At a couple of different points in his discussion, Sosa alludes to the view that a concern with the aspects or dimensions of virtuous intellectual character that are not knowledge-constitutive, while philosophically legitimate, is proper to ethics rather than epistemology. Sosa does not explicitly endorse this claim; nor do I think this is his considered position on the matter. However, it would not be very surprising if no small number of epistemologists were to be tempted by this perspective. This is especially true given that the dimensions in question are personal and normatively robust. Once a concern with these dimensions is divorced from a concern with the nature of knowledge, it might seem than any remaining philosophical work in the vicinity would fall to moral philosophers, not epistemologists.

Where, then, does broader philosophical reflection on intellectual character—reflection on character virtues and their role in the cognitive life, considered apart from their status as epistemic contributors—figure relative to the boundaries of epistemology? In the remainder of this chapter, I argue that such reflection lies at the intersection of epistemology and ethics. It is properly epistemological; however, on a sufficiently broad conception of the field, it also falls within the purview of ethics.

First, despite the fact that intellectual character virtues, especially when conceived of as involving an element of intrinsic epistemic motivation, bear on the personal worth of their possessor in a manner analogous to moral virtues, it is important not to lose sight of the fact that they nevertheless aim at and are reliably productive of distinctively epistemic goods like truth, knowledge, and understanding. Indeed, this is one familiar way of trying to demarcate intellectual character virtues from moral virtues. A related point, also widely acknowledged, is that intellectual character virtues have a unique and central bearing on the process of inquiry, which of course is also epistemically oriented. These aspects of character virtues are significant, for epistemologists have long been focused on the personal capacities, cognitive faculties, and epistemic practices that aim at and reliably lead to true belief. Nor has their concern with these things been limited to whether or how they figure
into the necessary and sufficient conditions for knowledge.\textsuperscript{32} Accordingly, why not think of philosophical reflection on the intentional and causal relations between character virtues and epistemic goods as proper to epistemology?

A reply might be that any kind of philosophical reflection on personal character is proper to ethics. On a sufficiently broad conception of ethics, this may be correct; however, this hardly shows that such reflection is proper \textit{merely} to ethics. Indeed, it seems arbitrary in the extreme to treat the \textit{non-volitional} or \textit{non-characterological} aspects of human psychology that are aimed at and productive of epistemic goods as falling within the purview of epistemology, while treating the volitional and characterological aspects that are similarly aimed and productive as proper only to ethics. A much more plausible position is that reflection on both sets of qualities or capacities is proper to epistemology, even if reflection on the volitional and characterological qualities is also proper to ethics, broadly conceived.

Second, it is significant that epistemic ends can conflict with what we typically think of as moral ends.\textsuperscript{33} Consequently the personal qualities aimed at and productive of these ends can conflict as well. Imagine, for instance, a scientist enthralled with his quest for empirical knowledge. He sees explanatory understanding of a certain dimension of scientific reality as an estimable human good, one that is worth pursuing and acquiring at least partly for its own sake. This orientation in turn compels him to inquire in ways that are careful, thorough, tenacious, honest, open, and so on. However, the scientist is so deeply and personally invested in his quest for understanding that he severely neglects his various duties to his spouse, children, friends, and neighbors. At first glance, the scientist would appear to be intellectually virtuous but not morally virtuous. Given this tension between intellectual character virtues and paradigmatic moral virtues, the instinct to classify broad philosophical reflection on the former as proper to ethics but not epistemology seems misplaced.

There are, of course, relatively broad conceptions of morality according to which the type of conflict in question is not really between epistemic ends and moral ends but rather between moral ends of two different types or varieties (viz. epistemic and moral in some more familiar or paradigmatic sense). Take, for example, the view that the moral domain is coextensive with the domain of human flourishing. Presumably the scientist, on account of his virtuous orientation toward and pursuit of epistemic goods, is flourishing in certain respects. (Compare him with a person who is similarly neglectful of his most important relationships but who, unlike the scientist, is also intellectually indifferent, lazy, hasty, biased, narrow-minded, etc. Surely the latter person is flourishing to a lesser extent than the scientist.) This reopens the possibility that a concern with the relevant dimensions of intellectual character is proper only to ethics, broadly construed. However, unless one has a good principled reason for excluding all characterological considerations from epistemology,
How Are Virtues Related?

this response is liable to fall flat. Again, a more plausible conclusion is that the concern in question is proper to both epistemology and ethics, broadly construed.

I conclude that philosophical reflection on the role of character virtues in the cognitive life is proper to epistemology even when such reflection is abstracted from any concern with whether or how character virtues constitute knowledge. But it need not be proper only to epistemology. On a sufficiently broad conception of ethics, such reflection falls within the purview of this field as well. It represents a point of intersection between epistemology and ethics. This underscores the possibility of innovative philosophical work that brings together the best thinking and theoretical resources from epistemology with the best work in areas like virtue ethics, moral psychology, and action theory. The potential result is a deeper philosophical understanding of the personal or characterological dimensions of the life of the mind.

Study Questions

1. Give examples of dispositions that are (a) agential competences but not character virtues, (b) character virtues but not agential competences, and (c) both agential competences and character virtues.

2. Some philosophers have argued that knowledge is more valuable than mere true belief not because it leads to better consequences but because it manifests virtue. How would Sosa respond to this claim? How would Baehr respond?

3. In the previous controversy, Robert Roberts and Nancy Snow agreed that virtue contributes to flourishing. They were focused, however, on moral virtue. Does intellectual virtue of the sort that Sosa or Baehr identify contribute to flourishing? Explain.

4. Should at least some intellectual virtues be conceived of as having an element of intrinsic epistemic motivation? Explain.

5. What is the point of distinguishing between things that fall within the “charmed inner circle” of epistemology and things that don’t?

Notes

1. On this, as we shall see, there is dissension in the ranks of responsibilists. Zagzebski hopes and believes that responsibilist virtue theory can solve traditional problems of epistemology, whereas Baehr declares defeat, at least in crucial part. Here I side with Zagzebski’s aspirations, but agree with Baehr that they have not been attained so far. Rather than conceding defeat, however, I will offer a better responsibilist account, one that welcomes responsibilism at the core of virtue reliabilism.

2. In what follows I will characterize my view indifferently as “reliabilist” or “competence” virtue epistemology (CVE).


4. These passages are from the concluding paragraphs of Section 4.2 of Baehr’s book.
5. What follows will take up problems of epistemic agency as its main focus and will exploit
distinctions that deal directly with additional problems that arise once virtue epistemology
becomes more explicitly and voluntaristically agential.
6. This is note 4 of Chapter 4 of Baehr’s book.
7. In fact, not even animal knowledge is necessarily so exclusive, as should have been clear
already in the main text, and will be emphasized in section D3 below.
8. Baehr, passim; e.g., Section 2.2.1, pp. 22–25.
9. Sosa (1991, p. 277). This, by the way, is the earliest statement of the knowledge as apt belief
view of knowledge, so in advocating it, I do not follow suit, contrary to Baehr’s footnote 8,
on p. 37.
10. This is emphasized in footnote 2 of Chapter 2 of my book A Virtue Epistemology (2007).
That footnote makes it explicit that the view developed in that later book is essentially that
same view, now better formulated, based on an improved conception of aptness, and explicitly
amplified to cover performances generally. And the conception of intellectual virtues
required for this view differs importantly from the WIVA that Baehr attributes to virtue reliabilists.
11. Occasionally, and more recently, she takes the somewhat different view that it is the know-
ledge that does manifest such high-ranking virtues that has relevant distinctive value, even
if there is a lower order of knowledge that lacks it. But this will not help with the Meno
problem, which is not really solved through appeal to such worthy belief motivated by the
love of truth. What makes knowledge of the right way to Larissa better than mere true belief
need not depend on such knowledge’s being an achievement that deserves admiration, nor
that it be pregnant with pragmatic value. This is increasingly clear if we switch the example
to one of knowing which is the shortest road to Larissa. Of the two obvious roads, the short-
est may be just infinitesimally shorter, so that its increment of pragmatic value is negligible.
Moreover, one’s knowledge may have been attained through the most ordinary testimony, by
asking a passerby, which would merit little personal credit or admiration. And yet knowing
what one believes is in that case still better than merely getting it right by luck. The sense in
which it is still better comports with the fact that epistemology is not a department of ethics.
Epistemic attainments, like good shots, are not quite generally and inherently valuable in
any objective sense. In spite of that, the good ones are still “better” than alternatives even so.
Knowledge is in that way a better attainment than belief that does not succeed or does so just
by luck. But this general superiority is not a quasi-ethical matter of motivation. It is rather
a matter of competence, which is often and importantly enough a matter of intentional
agency, but can also be just a matter of functional, biological or psychological teleology.
13. The Inquiring Mind, p. 44.
14. Though see Alfano (2012; 2013a, Chapters 5–6; 2014b).
15. This is both how it seems (at least to me) and, in the absence of any ostensible defeating
reason, this is (I say) how it is. I find that claim no less proper than the following: that some-
times I decide to raise my right hand and that sometimes I know that I see my right hand
(and see it go up); that these things seem to me to be so, and that, in the absence of ostensible
defeating reasons, they really are so.
16. I have been asked whether this cuts psychological reality at the joints. Although I am not
entirely sure what is at issue in this question, I do think there is such a thing as the act of
affirming, and that it can take the form of public assertion or that of private affirmation to
oneself. I think that this is an act of crucial importance for a social species that depends as
heavily as we do on collective deliberation and on the sharing of information. Moreover,
it also seems crucial to distinguish various importantly different objectives that one might
have in performing that act. And, for epistemology, there is a particularly important inten-
tion that one might have in performing it, namely that of getting it right thereby on the
relevant “whether” question. So, I submit that we do well to recognize that particular act for
special attention: the act of affirming in the endeavor thereby to get it right reliably enough,
the act of judgment. Closely related to that is of course the corresponding disposition, which one might then label "judgmental belief."

17. And celebrate their insightful study, as in the books of Zagzebski (1996) and Baehr (2011).


19. At least for traditional epistemology as approached from a reliabilist perspective. For the purposes of this paper, I will, with Sosa, be taking this perspective for granted.

20. Of course, reliabilist agential virtues may be “character virtues” of a sort; but I am here using “character virtues” to refer to those traits of intellectual character of interest to virtue responsibilists—traits like open-mindedness, intellectual courage, intellectual honesty, and so on.

21. Such motivation is important to their status as traits that contribute to personal worth. See my (2011, Ch. 6). For a similar view, see Zagzebski (1996).

22. It is worth bearing in mind that to be reliable, such dispositions presumably will need to be grounded in an immediate or instrumental concern with truth or accuracy and that this concern will need to be reasonably stable and broad. While these conditions are plausibly met by the service professionals noted above, it is doubtful that they are met in Sosa’s assassin case discussed on p. 72. The underlying disposition guiding the assassin’s cognitive activity is evidently quite narrow and unstable.

23. Sosa says: “In my view, a competence can constitute knowledge only if it is a disposition to believe correctly, one that can then be manifest in the correctness of a belief” (p. 69).

24. I say “typically” to allow for the fact that they can be manifested in, for instance, passive “noticings” or similar cognitive events that are the result of virtuous cognitive habits developed over time.

25. See Sosa’s discussion on pp. 7, 12, and 21.

26. For Aristotle, virtues have an affective dimension as well; however, this is less immediately relevant to moral agency, which is my primary concern here.

27. This bearing might be logical, causal, intentional, or otherwise; and the states in question might include epistemic goods other than knowledge, for example, understanding, insight, or wisdom.

28. The latter impression is based on personal conversations with Sosa.

29. It might be wondered why we should care about this question in the first place. I briefly note two reasons. First, it is not difficult to imagine that the instinct to punt the relevant kind of reflection on character virtues to ethics might be due in part to a kind of dismissiveness (“I’m interested in the analysis of knowledge, which is a central epistemological project; insofar as character virtues aren’t relevant to this project, I’m not interested in them, and they’re not important to epistemology”). Such dismissiveness is worth calling out and resisting on principle. Second, given that character virtues aim at epistemic goods, are reliably productive of such goods, and have an important cognitive and epistemic component (Baehr 2013), it would be unfortunate if epistemologists, who are experts on such things, were to leave such reflection entirely to their colleagues in ethics. In other words, epistemologists have theoretical resources and expertise that would substantially benefit the philosophical work that gets done in this area.

30. See Chapter 6 of my 2011 monograph, Knowing Full Well, for more on the aim of character virtues and Chapter 4 for a discussion of their reliability. See the appendix of that work, Zagzebski (1996), and Driver (2000) for discussions of the distinction between intellectual virtues and moral virtues.

31. See Hookway (2003) for more on the role of character virtues in the context of inquiry and for a supporting account of the scope of epistemology.

32. From a historical standpoint, one thinks of work by philosophers like Locke and Descartes that is widely regarded as a contribution to the theory of knowledge but the scope of which is much broader than that of recent epistemology. More recently, William Alston (2005) has vigorously defended a broad conception of epistemology. He comments: “[W]hat can be said
on the subject of what does and does not count as epistemology? I think the best we can do is the following. What we call 'epistemology' consists of some selection from the problems, issues, and subject matters dealt with by philosophers that have to do with what we might call the cognitive side of human life: the operation and condition of our cognitive faculties—perception, reasoning, belief formation; the products thereof—beliefs, arguments, theories, explanations, knowledge; and the evaluation of all that. So a very broad conception of epistemology would be *philosophical reflection on the cognitive aspects of human life*” (pp. 2–3). Interestingly, Alston goes on (pp. 3–4) to identify reflection on intellectual character virtues considered apart the analysis of knowledge or justification as a prime example of philosophical work that falls within these boundaries and that merits closer attention among epistemologists.

33. “Typically think of” is significant because, as I get to below, on a broad enough conception of the moral, epistemic ends may be moral ends of a particular sort.

34. For an example of work in this direction, see Miranda Fricker’s groundbreaking book, *Epistemic Injustice* (2007).