Lecture 5
Rejecting Analyses I: Virtue Epistemology

1. Beliefs and Agents

We began with various attempts to analyse knowledge into its component parts. Given the intuition that knowledge is something, in some sense, more valuable than merely true belief, we searched for properties that, when added to true belief, would be necessary and sufficient for knowledge.

In discussing accounts of justification, we encountered the intuition that epistemic agents should act in ways that are epistemically responsible. It is this intuition that motivates the class of theories that come under the heading *virtue epistemology*.

In virtue epistemology, "agents rather than beliefs are the primary objects of epistemic evaluation, and intellectual virtues and vices, which are evaluations of the agents, are the fundamental concepts and properties" (Heather Battaly 2008: 640).

2. Varieties of Virtue Epistemology

There are different kinds of virtue epistemology. Accounts are often divided into two main categories: *virtue reliabilists* and *virtue responsibilists*. These two kinds of virtue epistemology disagree about what intellectual virtues consist in.

Virtue Reliabilists

This version of virtue epistemologist draws heavily on the process-reliabilist's position, but uses to the notion of an intellectual virtue to solve problems faced by the latter's theory. Ernest Sosa is a prominent example of virtue-reliabilist.

On Sosa's account, "for a belief to be **justified** is for it to *manifest a truth-conducive* ***faculty*** *or* ***intellectual virtue***" (2010: 273, my emphasis).

And, **knowledge** "is true belief out of **intellectual virtue**, belief that turns out right by reason of the virtue and not just by coincidence" (277, my emphasis).

Faculty = a virtue or competence such that an epistemic agent S has said virtue only if there is a field of propositions F and a set of circumstances C (that are accessible within S's epistemic perspective) in which S would likely distinguish the true from the false in F in C.
E.g. Vision. The field would include propositions about the appearance of things; the circumstances would include standard conditions of observation.

From here, S can be said to have a given intellectual virtue V(C, F) relative to some environment E just in case S has an inner nature I such that if (i)-(iv) obtain, S is very likely right with respect to P.

(i) S is in E and has I
(ii) P is a proposition in field F
(iii) S is in conditions C with respect to P
(iv) S believes or disbelieves P

And from this, S can be said to believe some proposition *P*, at time *t*, out of intellectual virtue just in case,

(1) S is in an environment E such that S has intellectual virtue V(C, F) relative to E
(2) P is a proposition in F
(3) S is in C with respect to P
(4) S believes that P

Notice that the reliability of the virtue is indexed to a particular epistemic agent. This is part of what distinguishes virtue-reliabilism from process-reliabilism.

Sosa's "virtue perspectivism", as he calls it, makes several distinctions that allow it to accommodate both internalist and externalist intuitions about our beliefs.

Justification/Aptness
"*Justification* of a belief that P requires the (implicit or explicit) use of reasons in favour of P" (290). This is an *internalist* notion.

Aptness of a belief concerns the truth-conduciveness of the method used to form the belief. A belief can be apt without being justified. This is an *externalist* notion.

Animal Knowledge/Reflective Knowledge
Animal knowledge consists in true beliefs that are apt but (often) not justified. They arise out of (an) intellectual virtue, but the agent often is not aware of this (though they may be so). The agent must conform to this virtue not by accident but because they possess that virtue. E.g. a child knows that the ball is on the grass because their belief is a result of using the virtue of vision. Their belief is *apt* but, they couldn't give you an explanation of their belief in terms of the reliability of vision.

Reflective knowledge consists in true beliefs that are justified. Again, they must arise out of intellectual virtue, where the agent must conform to the virtue because they possess that virtue (and not merely by accident).

Virtue Responsibilist
This version of virtue epistemologist draws heavily on its ethical counterpart. It "begins with the intuition that what makes an agent an excellent thinker are active features of her agency: actions, motivations, and habits over which she has some control and for which she is (to some degree) responsible" (Battaly 2010: 648).

There is some disagreement between responsibilists over whether virtues must be reliable or not. Montmarquet (1987) argues that they need not be; on his position virtues need only be desirable to those agents who want truth. On the other hand, Zagzebski (1996) argues that they *do* have to be reliable, in some sense; she takes virtues to be traits a virtuous agent would possess involving a motivation to achieve a particular epistemic end, and reliability in leading to that end (where the end must always include attaining truth).

Some intellectual virtues countenanced by Monmarquet and Zagzebski include:

Intellectual courage – willingness to investigate non-orthodox ideas; willingness to challenge orthodox ideas

Impartiality – openness to other's ideas; lack of personal bias

Intellectual humility – sensitivity to one's own fallibility

Thoroughness – willingness to research and investigate

On these views, a virtuously formed belief is *justified*, and a virtuously formed true belief is *knowledge* (modulo each's conception of what it takes to be an intellectual virtue).

There is some debate over whether the reliabilist/responsibilist distinction is a useful one in carving up the virtue epistemological landscape. Indeed, notice that the idea of reliability seems to appear on either side of the divide. So far, we have seen a distinction between those theories that require virtues to be reliable and those that do not (Zagzebski/Sosa vs. Montmarquet). And we have seen a distinction between those theories that allow faculties to be virtues, or only traits (Sosa vs. Montmarquet/Zagzebski).

There is yet a further distinction to be made between those virtue epistemological accounts that seek to participate in the defining of knowledge and justification, and those that eschew this practice altogether. Call these *theorists* and *anti-theorists* respectively. Those we've talked about so far can broadly be classed as theorists.

3. <u>Anti-Theorists</u>

Virtue anti-theorists agree with other virtue epistemologists that the epistemology debate so far needs to change, and should do so by shifting focus in some way to the notion of intellectual virtues.

So far, we have discussed those that are interested in offering definitions of justification and knowledge in terms of intellectual virtues. But some virtue epistemologists disagree with this approach. For instance, Lorraine Code (1987) argues that we should adopt virtue epistemology, but that doing so will not "provide a decision-making scale against which specific knowledge claims can be measured for validity" (63).

While some argue that, given this, we should give up on the project of defining knowledge and justification altogether (Kvanvig 1992). Other argue for a more inclusive view of epistemology; one that includes the

traditional enterprise, but adds other hitherto ignored questions about knowledge. For instance, Miranda Fricker (2007) argues that the traditional enterprise is not "conducive to revealing the ethical and political aspects of our epistemic conduct" (2). She argues that intellectual virtues are invaluable to understanding these aspects of our epistemic lives; however, she takes this view to be consistent with allowing the traditional analytic enterprise to continue.

4. Problems for Virtue Epistemology

As with any position in philosophy, virtue epistemologies of all sorts face objections.

Some argue (e.g. Lockie 2006) that the virtue epistemologist's claim to provide an irenic solution to the internalist/externalist debate is ill-founded. Lockie in particular argues that as soon as one asks about the nature of the epistemic agent (information-processor or free self with choice over cognitive conduct?), the debate reemerges. Similarly when one asks what the *value* of the virtues are (as merely means to truth or as part of practical wisdom?).

Second, there is a question as to whether the character-first picture is correct. What is it for an agent to have a particular character? If character reduces to actions, then we have to be able to describe the formation of particular beliefs as epistemically good independently of the agent's character.

NEXT WEEK: Knowledge First