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## CHARACTER, RELIABILITY, AND VIRTUE EPISTEMOLOGY

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The field of virtue epistemology is routinely characterized as the epistemological analog of virtue ethics. While there are indeed obvious similarities between the two fields, there is also an important dissimilarity. Virtue ethicists generally agree about the basic structure and paradigm cases of moral virtue. They think of moral virtues as acquired excellences of (moral) character like generosity, courage, honesty, and temperance. Virtue epistemologists, on the other hand, are divided about the nature of an intellectual virtue. “Virtue responsibilists” conceive of intellectual virtues as the intellectual counterpart to moral virtues. These include traits like fair-mindedness, open-mindedness, intellectual carefulness, intellectual courage, and the like. “Virtue reliabilists” conceive of intellectual virtues as any reliable or truth-conducive quality of a person. They cite as paradigm cases of intellectual virtue certain cognitive faculties or abilities like vision, memory, introspection, and reason.<sup>1</sup>

This disagreement has resulted in two rather disparate approaches to virtue epistemology, as the proponents of each approach tend to focus exclusively on the qualities they regard as intellectual virtues and to say little about the qualities that interest the other group. Virtue reliabilists, for example, generally do not concern themselves with traits like open-mindedness or

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<sup>1</sup> The terms “virtue reliabilism” and “virtue responsibilism” originate (respectively) with Lorraine Code, “Toward a Responsibilist Epistemology,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 45 (1984), pp. 29-50, and Guy Axtell, “Recent Work in Virtue Epistemology,” *American Philosophical Quarterly* 34 (1997), pp. 1-27. For recent overviews of the field, see: John Greco, “Virtue Epistemology,” in Edward Zalta (ed.), *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2002/entries/epistemology-virtue/>), and “Virtues in Epistemology,” in Paul Moser (ed.), *Oxford handbook of Epistemology* (Oxford: OUP, 2002), pp. 287-315; and Linda Zagzebski, “Virtue Epistemology,” in Edward Craig (ed.), *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 1998), pp. 617-21.

intellectual courage. And when they do, it is often just to point out that these qualities are not very relevant to their preferred set of epistemological projects. Likewise, virtue responsibilists, by limiting their interest to the character traits of a good knower, usually have little to say about the epistemological significance of cognitive faculties like memory and vision.

My immediate concern here is virtue reliabilists' neglect of responsibilist character virtues. Much of the paper is devoted to showing that these traits satisfy virtue reliabilists' formal conditions for an intellectual virtue and that consequently virtue reliabilists must include these traits in their repertoire of intellectual virtues. Indeed a failure to do so, I explain, leaves virtue reliabilists unable to account for some of the most valued kinds or instances of knowledge. I also explain how the same basic argument can be leveled against any reliabilist epistemology. Toward the end of the paper, I examine the implications of the argument for the theoretical focus of virtue reliabilism and reliabilism in general. I argue that it leads to new questions and challenges that any reliabilist epistemology must address.

## I

I begin by showing that virtue reliabilists are indeed committed to denying the responsibilist's character virtues the status of intellectual virtue.<sup>2</sup> Alvin Goldman is one of the originators and most able defenders of reliabilism. While it is not entirely clear that Goldman should or even wishes to be classified as a virtue epistemologist, he sometimes aligns himself with the movement. In "Epistemic Folkways and Scientific Epistemology," for example, he identifies "the concept of justified belief with the concept of belief obtained through the exercise of intellectual virtues (excellences)." Goldman goes on to say that "the virtues include belief

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<sup>2</sup> I use the term "intellectual virtue" mainly (though not exclusively) in a quasi-technical way to refer to those traits which, from a virtue reliabilist perspective, contribute logically to the justification or warrant component of knowledge.

formation based on sight, hearing, memory, reasoning in certain ‘approved’ ways, and so forth.”<sup>3</sup>  
This suggests that Goldman is thinking of intellectual virtues at least primarily as certain cognitive faculties or abilities, rather than as character traits.

This does not prove, however, that Goldman would exclude the relevant character traits from a more exhaustive list of the virtues. But that he does intend such an exclusion seems clear from passages like the following:

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.<sup>4</sup>

Here Goldman identifies certain intellectual character virtues (e.g., perceptiveness and thoroughness) by name. But he seems to think that these traits – as opposed to cognitive faculties like hearing and memory – are not really intellectual virtues at all and thus that a consideration of them is not relevant to the project that most interests him and other reliabilists (i.e., the analysis of knowledge).

John Greco is also a chief proponent of reliabilism and of virtue reliabilism in particular. Like Goldman, Greco offers a definition of knowledge that gives a central role to intellectual

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<sup>3</sup> *Liaisons: Philosophy Meets the Cognitive and Social Sciences* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992), pp. 157-58.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 162.

virtues conceived as reliable “abilities or powers” like perception, memory, and reason. He says that “S has knowledge regarding p if and only if S believes the truth regarding p *because* S believes p out of intellectual virtue.”<sup>5</sup> But unlike Goldman, Greco says a good deal about the epistemological role of intellectual character virtues. He does so in the context of considering which of the two main conceptions of intellectual virtue (i.e., the reliabilist’s or the responsibilist’s) is preferable. Greco claims that epistemologists appeal to virtue concepts in an effort to deal with certain substantive philosophical problems (e.g., problems concerning the nature of knowledge) and that whichever conception of intellectual virtue deals with these problems most effectively is preferable.<sup>6</sup> He goes on to argue that a character-model of intellectual virtue is unhelpful for giving an account of the nature of knowledge. His reasoning is that an analysis of knowledge aims to specify the necessary and sufficient conditions for knowledge; however, because it is often possible to acquire knowledge *absent* an exercise of intellectual character virtues, such an exercise cannot be necessary for knowledge.<sup>7</sup> Greco concludes that a responsibilist conception of intellectual virtue should be rejected on the grounds that it is “too strong” to deal effectively with traditional epistemological problems like the analysis of knowledge.<sup>8</sup>

Notice, however, that this by itself does not entail that character virtues are irrelevant to a virtue reliabilist analysis of knowledge. Greco’s main claim is that intellectual virtues should not be *defined* as traits of intellectual character. But this leaves open the possibility that the intellectual character virtues might satisfy the virtue reliabilist’s more general or formal

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<sup>5</sup> “Virtues in Epistemology,” p. 311; his italics.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 296.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 296-97. This includes various instances of perceptual, a priori, introspective, and memorial knowledge. For an in-depth discussion of this point and its implications for virtue responsibilism, see Jason Baehr, “Character In Epistemology,” in *Philosophical Studies*, forthcoming.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 297. Greco does not, however, dismiss this conception as altogether irrelevant to epistemology, since he thinks there are likely to be other, less traditional epistemological questions to which it might be relevant. See, e.g., pp. 297-98.

conditions for an intellectual virtue, which in turn would entail, contrary to Greco's apparent suggestion, that character virtues *are* essential to a virtue reliabilist analysis of knowledge.

While a legitimate possibility, and one that will be explored in much greater detail below, this is not something that Greco considers; nor would he seem very interested in doing so. This is evident, first and most obviously, in the fact that he makes no mention of this possibility.

Greco's discussion of character virtues certainly leaves the impression that he is thinking of these traits as relevant, at best, only to less traditional and less mainstream epistemological projects. If to the contrary he holds that character virtues can satisfy the conditions for intellectual virtue and thus contribute to knowledge, we would expect him to be explicit about this. Second, intellectual character virtues do not appear on any of Greco's various "lists" of intellectual virtues; rather, when citing examples of intellectual virtue, Greco refers exclusively to cognitive faculties or capacities like vision, memory, reason, and the like.<sup>9</sup> But again, if he thinks character virtues can satisfy the conditions for an intellectual virtue, we would expect them to receive mention in this context. Third, Greco clearly aligns himself with Sosa's general account of intellectual virtue, and he attributes to Sosa the view that intellectual virtues are "cognitive abilities *rather than* character traits."<sup>10</sup> It seems clear, then, that Greco is committed to denying that character virtues should be regarded as intellectual virtues in the sense relevant to a virtue reliabilist account of knowledge.

Ernest Sosa is perhaps the most familiar and prolific advocate of virtue epistemology and of virtue reliabilism in particular. He claims that a true belief is justified and is an instance of knowledge only if it is produced or sustained by an exercise of intellectual virtue.<sup>11</sup> Later on I

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<sup>9</sup> See, e.g., his *Putting Skeptics In Their Place* (Cambridge: CUP, 2000).

<sup>10</sup> "Virtues in Epistemology," p. 295; my italics.

<sup>11</sup> *Knowledge In Perspective* (Cambridge: CUP, 1991), pp. 144, 239-42, and 289-90. As I note below, an additional requirement for what Sosa calls "reflective" or "human" knowledge is that the person in question have an "epistemic

consider how some of Sosa's discussions of intellectual virtue support thinking of character virtues as intellectual virtues in a reliabilist sense; but with regard to his own position on the matter, there is good reason to think that he rejects this claim. First, Sosa regularly cites examples of the traits he regards as intellectual virtues. And these examples, like Greco's, include the usual reliabilist faculty virtues and other similar traits – *not* any intellectual character virtues.<sup>12</sup> Given Sosa's extensive treatment of the structure and epistemological significance of intellectual virtue, it would be very odd if he thought that character virtues qualified as intellectual virtues and yet never mentioned or elaborated this point. Second, Sosa regularly uses the terms "virtue" and "faculty" interchangeably.<sup>13</sup> While it is natural to refer to capacities like introspection, memory, and so forth, as cognitive "faculties," it is much less natural to refer to character traits like fair-mindedness and intellectual honesty in this way. A related point concerns Sosa's tendency to describe intellectual virtues as "input-output devices"<sup>14</sup> and as "truth-conducive belief-generating mechanisms."<sup>15</sup> While this seems like a fitting description of faculty virtues, it is much less fitting as a description of character virtues. Character virtues do, in some sense, give rise to or "generate" beliefs. But they do so in a way that hardly seems mechanistic. An exercise of intellectual character virtues – as with moral virtues – involves a person's *agency*: to exercise a character virtue is, for example, to *deliberate* and to *choose* in certain way. Thus beliefs that emerge from inquiry involving intellectual character virtues are unlikely to have been produced in a very mechanical or input-output way. This further suggests that Sosa is not thinking of character virtues as intellectual virtues in the relevant sense. Finally,

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perspective" on the known belief, which consists of a coherent set of additional beliefs concerning the source and reliability of the original belief (*ibid.*, Chapter 11). Our concern here, however, lies with the virtue component of Sosa's analysis.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, Chapters 8, 13, and 16.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 138-39, 234-36, and 273-74.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 227.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 271.

Sosa sometimes describes a true belief generated by an exercise of intellectual virtue as mere “animal,” “servomechanic,” or “metaphorical” knowledge.<sup>16</sup> But for similar reasons, this is likely to be an obvious *mischaracterization* of a belief arrived at through an exercise of intellectual character virtues. Again, reaching the truth via an exercise of character virtues makes demands on a person *qua agent*. Consequently, the resulting knowledge is unlikely to amount to “animal” or “servomechanic” knowledge at all. These considerations strongly suggest that Sosa does not regard the character traits in question as intellectual virtues. And since the concept of an intellectual virtue occupies the leading role in his account of knowledge, he also apparently believes that matters of intellectual character do not have an important role to play in a reliabilist analysis of knowledge.

## II

Having shown that virtue reliabilists do not regard character virtues as intellectual virtues of a sort relevant to a philosophical account of knowledge, my aim in this section is to demonstrate that this is a mistake. I argue that character virtues sometimes satisfy virtue reliabilists’ formal conditions for an intellectual virtue. This point, together with the fact that virtue reliabilists generally view knowledge as (roughly) true belief arising from an exercise of intellectual virtue, reveals that intellectual character virtues are indeed relevant to virtue reliabilist accounts of knowledge. I also explain why a similar point holds for any reliabilist account of knowledge.

Virtue reliabilists are committed to a formal conception of intellectual virtue according to which intellectual virtues are personal qualities that, under certain conditions and with respect to

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<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 240 and 275.

certain propositions, are helpful for reaching the truth and avoiding error.<sup>17</sup> This general characterization has been specified in numerous ways, but for the moment, I note just one. According to virtue reliabilists, a personal quality is an intellectual virtue only if it plays a *critical* or *salient* role in getting a person to the truth, only if it *best explains* why a person reaches the truth.<sup>18</sup> Thus a personal quality is not an intellectual virtue if it tends to play only a minor or supporting role in reaching the truth.

This characterization reveals that virtue reliabilists do not make a *principled* exclusion of intellectual character virtues from their repertoire of intellectual virtues. There is nothing in their formal definitions of an intellectual virtue that would prevent character virtues from qualifying as intellectual virtues in the relevant sense. Nevertheless, when they go on to develop their accounts of intellectual virtue and its role in knowledge, they tend to focus exclusively on cognitive faculties and abilities, giving little or no attention to any character virtues.

Is this neglect of intellectual character virtues warranted? Or do intellectual character virtues sometimes play a critical or salient role in reaching the truth? This depends largely on the subject matter in question. With regard to many propositions or kinds of propositions, reaching the truth is a rather simple and straightforward affair. Reaching the truth about the appearance of one's immediate surroundings, for instance, typically requires only that one's visual faculty be in good working order. A similar point could be made about several instances of introspective, memorial, and a priori propositions, for example, that one has a headache, that one drove to work, or that two plus three equals five. It may be that if one were entirely uninterested in the truth about these matters, or desired for some reason to avoid the truth, the proper functioning of

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<sup>17</sup> See, for example: Goldman, *op. cit.*, pp. 157-63; Sosa, *ibid.*, pp. 138, 225, 242, and 284; and Greco, "Virtues In Epistemology," pp. 287 and 302. For simplicity, I will mostly ignore the end of avoiding error and will focus instead on that of reaching the truth. However, similar points apply to the former end.

<sup>18</sup> See, e.g., Greco, "Knowledge as Credit for True Belief," in Michael DePaul and Linda Zagzebski (eds.), *Intellectual Virtue* (Oxford: OUP, 2003), pp. 155-79.

one's cognitive faculties would be insufficient for reaching the truth. In most cases of this sort, however, what fundamentally explains or causes one to reach the truth is not an attitude or state of character, but rather the proper functioning of one's basic cognitive endowment. Thus if we limit our attention (as most contemporary epistemologists do) to the sorts of ordinary and mundane truths just noted, it seems that intellectual character virtues do *not* satisfy the virtue reliabilist's conditions for an intellectual virtue.

But of course reaching the truth is not always so easy. This is so especially with regard to the domains of human knowledge that humans tend to value most. Getting to the truth about historical, scientific, moral, philosophical, psychological, or religious matters, for instance, can make significant agency-related demands: it can require considerable concentration, patience, reflection, honesty; it can require the possession of certain intentions, beliefs, and desires. While reaching the truth in these areas does typically require that our cognitive faculties be in good working order, this is not usually what explains or at least what *best* explains our actually getting to the truth. Rather, reaching the truth in these areas is often explained largely or most saliently in terms of an exercise of certain traits of intellectual character: traits like intellectual carefulness, thoroughness, tenacity, adaptability, creativity, circumspection, attentiveness, patience, and honesty.

Consider some examples:

(1) A field biologist is trying to explain a change in the migration patterns of a certain endangered bird species. Collecting and analyzing the relevant data is tedious work and requires a special eye for detail. The biologist is committed to discovering the truth and so spends long hours in the field gathering data. He remains focused and determined in

the face of various obstacles and distractions (e.g., conflicting evidence, bureaucratic road blocks, inclement weather conditions, boredom, etc.). He picks up on important details in environmental reports and makes keen discriminations regarding the composition and trajectory of several observed flocks. As a result of his determination and careful and insightful methods of inquiry, he discovers why the birds have altered their course.

(2) An investigative reporter is researching a story on corporate crime and begins to uncover evidence indicating that some of the perpetrators are executives in the very corporation that owns his newspaper. The reporter believes that he and his readership have a right to know about the relevant crimes, so he persists with the investigation, recognizing that it may cost him his job and perhaps more. Undaunted even by personal threats, the reporter proceeds with his investigation and after several months of rigorous intellectual labor uncovers and exposes the executives' misdeeds.

(3) An historian has garnered international recognition and praise for a book in which she defends a certain view of how the religious faith of one of America's "founding fathers" influenced his politics. While researching her next book, the historian runs across some heretofore unexamined personal letters of this figure that blatantly contradict her own account of his theology and its effects on his political thought and behavior. She does not ignore or suppress the letters, but rather examines them fairly and thoroughly. Because she is more interested in believing and writing what is true than she is in receiving the

praise of her colleagues and readers, she repudiates her influential account, both privately and in print.

In each of these scenarios, reaching the truth is not simply or even primarily a matter of having good eyesight, a good memory, or making valid logical inferences. Rather, the individuals in question reach the truth because they manifest certain inner attitudes or character traits. These traits seem to account most saliently for or to best explain why the individuals get to the truth. The biologist, for example, discovers why the relevant bird species has altered its migratory course on account of his patient, focused inquiry and his refined powers of observation and discrimination. The reporter uncovers a corporate scandal because he is intellectually courageous and autonomous. And the historian accepts and acknowledges a major error in her work because of her intellectual openness, humility, and general love of truth.

Therefore intellectual character virtues *do* sometimes satisfy the virtue reliabilist's conditions for an intellectual virtue: with regard to certain propositions or situations, intellectual character virtues can play a critical or salient role in getting a person to the truth.<sup>19</sup> These are cases in which reaching the truth requires more than the routine operation of a person's basic cognitive endowment – cases that make significant demands on a person *qua agent*. Moreover, they often are cases in which something very important is at stake, for instance, knowledge of important historical events and realities, the complex operation and structure of the natural world, the just or unjust treatment of a particular person or group of people, etc. It follows that

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<sup>19</sup> Robert Roberts and Jay Wood draw a similar connection between intellectual character virtues and Alvin Plantinga's reliabilist or quasi-reliabilist epistemology in "Proper Function, Emotion, and Virtues of the Intellect," *Faith and Philosophy*, 21 (2004), pp. 3-24. One important difference between their discussion and the present one, however, is that they say little about how exactly a reliabilist might make use of or incorporate the insight that character virtues often are crucial to an agent's reliability or proper function.

virtue reliabilists' inattention to the domain of intellectual character leaves them unable to adequately account for some of the most important kinds or instances of knowledge.

It is important to note that while virtue reliabilists have generally avoided discussions of intellectual character in their treatment of intellectual virtue, they have (apparently without realizing it) not done so in their discussions of intellectual *vice*. Given the qualities that reliabilists identify as intellectual virtues, one would expect that when discussing intellectual vices, their concern would be things like a deteriorating memory, far-sightedness, hardness of hearing, etc. But this is not what one typically finds. Goldman, for example, cites guesswork, wishful thinking, and ignoring contrary evidence as paradigm intellectual vices.<sup>20</sup> Sosa cites haste and inattentiveness.<sup>21</sup> And Greco cites wishful thinking and superstition.<sup>22</sup> Virtue reliabilists are right, even by their own standards, to identify these qualities as intellectual vices, since they significantly hinder a person's ability to reach the truth. But the qualities in question generally are not a result of defective cognitive faculties or abilities of the sort that usually interest the reliabilist. Rather, they are more accurately described as states or manifestations of vicious intellectual *character*.

This adds to the surprise that virtue reliabilists have not given significant attention to virtues of intellectual character, for these qualities are the virtuous counterparts to the qualities they identify as intellectual vices. It is as though virtue reliabilists have recognized that certain traits of intellectual character tend systematically to *block* access to the truth (and hence are intellectual vices) while failing to acknowledge that others play a systematic and salient role in *reaching* the truth (and hence are intellectual virtues).

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<sup>20</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 162.

<sup>21</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 229.

<sup>22</sup> "Virtue Epistemology," in Jonathan Dancy and Ernest Sosa (eds.), *The Blackwell Companion to Epistemology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), p. 520-22, at p. 521.

Before turning to consider a possible objection to this argument, it is worth pointing out that its scope is not limited to *virtue* reliabilism: it has implications for virtually *any* version of reliabilism. Consider, for example, a version of reliabilism that makes the doxastic processes or methods employed by a cognitive agent (rather than any quality of the agent herself) the source of epistemic justification.<sup>23</sup> According to such views, a belief is justified (roughly) just in case it is produced by a reliable process or method. The intellectual character virtues, in addition to satisfying the formal conditions of a reliabilist account of intellectual virtue, also satisfy the conditions for a reliable process or method. This is because forming beliefs via an exercise of intellectual character virtues involves instantiating certain reliable processes or employing certain reliable methods that are characteristic or expressive of these virtues (e.g., the processes or methods involved with fair or careful or tenacious inquiry). And with respect to certain kinds or cases of knowledge, cognitive performances of this sort are essential to reaching the truth. Therefore even reliabilists who explain justification in terms other than intellectual virtue must give a significant epistemological role to the intellectual character virtues if they hope to account for the full range of human knowledge.

How might a reliabilist or virtue reliabilist try to get around this conclusion? A virtue reliabilist<sup>24</sup> might attempt to make a principled exclusion of intellectual character virtues in something like the following way.<sup>25</sup> Epistemologists like Sosa and Goldman originally introduced the concept of an intellectual virtue into the epistemological discussion in an effort to explain what distinguishes instances of knowledge from instances of mere true belief. The

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<sup>23</sup> See, e.g., Goldman, "What is Justified Belief?" in George Pappas (ed.), *Justification and Knowledge* (Boston: D. Reidel, 1981), pp. 1-25.

<sup>24</sup> For ease of discussion, I will focus on a version of the objection couched in *virtue* reliabilist terms. However, an analogous point could easily be raised from the standpoint of other forms of reliabilism as well. My reply is applicable to either version of the objection.

<sup>25</sup> This objection was presented to me by Stephen Grimm in his comments on an earlier draft of this paper at the 2004 Inland Northwest Philosophy Conference.

difference, they argued, has to do with the *source* or *origin* of the beliefs in question. A true belief counts as knowledge only if its source is reliable; and an intellectual virtue is a reliable source of belief. Thus for virtue reliabilists, the class of intellectual virtues is limited to certain reliable *sources* of belief. Intellectual character virtues like open-mindedness, intellectual tenacity, and carefulness, however, would not appear to be *sources* of belief – at least not in the same way that cognitive faculties like introspection and vision are sources of belief. Therefore, the objection goes, there are principled grounds for excluding the intellectual character virtues from a reliabilist account of knowledge.

But is it right to think that character virtues are not “sources” of belief in the sense relevant to virtue reliabilism? This depends of course on what the reliabilist has in mind or ought to have in mind by this notion. On a broad construal, something is a source of a belief just in case it is the *cause* or *salient* cause of that belief. This would seem to be the conception most relevant to any version of reliabilism, since reliabilists often define knowledge as (roughly) true belief *caused* by an intellectual virtue or other mechanism. Goldman, for instance, says: “According to reliabilism, the epistemic status of a belief depends on its *mode of causation*.”<sup>26</sup> But on this broad conception of what it is to be a source of belief, intellectual character virtues *are* sources of belief. As explained above, intellectual character virtues are sometimes the cause or salient cause of a person’s reaching the truth.

For the objection in question to have any force, a narrower conception of a “source” of belief must be assumed. According to one such conception, something is a source of belief just in case it generates beliefs independently of other beliefs or generates them in an immediate or

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<sup>26</sup> “Reliabilism,” in Edward Craig (ed.), *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (<http://www.rep.routledge.com/article/P044SECT1>), sec. 1, par. 7. The notion of causation would also seem to unify or explain several other common ways of stating the reliabilist’s central claim: for instance, that knowledge is true belief arrived at “by way of,” “through,” “as a result of,” etc., an exercise of intellectual virtues; or that it is true belief “produced by,” “generated by,” “with its source in,” etc., intellectual virtues.

noninferential way. This conception coheres well with many of the traits that virtue reliabilists regard as intellectual virtues, for example, introspection, intuitive reason, and the various sensory faculties. Moreover, it succeeds at excluding intellectual character virtues, since these traits do not give rise to or generate beliefs in the immediate or noninferential way typical of many faculty virtues. If this conception of a source of belief can reasonably be attributed to virtue reliabilists, it would appear to yield a principled objection to the foregoing argument.

But there are good reasons for thinking that virtue reliabilists do not and should not accept this conception. First, it rules out some of the traits that virtually all reliabilists regard as intellectual virtues. As noted above, reliabilists commonly cite certain “approved ways of reasoning” like inductive and explanatory reasoning as paradigm cases of intellectual virtue. While these forms of reasoning count as sources of belief in the broad sense noted above, they are not sources of belief in the present, narrower sense. Indeed they are methods of *inference*, of drawing certain conclusions on the basis of *other* claims or beliefs; they do not generate beliefs in an immediate or noninferential way. Sosa himself draws a distinction along these lines between “generation” faculties and “transmission” faculties, both of which he regards as intellectual virtues. He comments: “There are faculties of two broad sorts: those that lead to beliefs from beliefs already formed, and those that lead to beliefs but not from beliefs. The first of these we call ‘transmission’ faculties, the second ‘generation’ faculties.”<sup>27</sup> Sosa cites intuitive reason, perception, and introspection as examples of generation faculties; he cites deductive, inductive, and explanatory reasoning as examples of transmission faculties. Thus virtue reliabilists do not limit the class of intellectual virtues to those faculties that generate beliefs in an immediate or noninferential way.

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<sup>27</sup> Sosa, *op. cit.*, p. 225. Sosa draws a similar distinction between “fundamental” and “derived” faculties or virtues (p. 278).

Second, virtue reliabilists are *right* not to employ this narrower conception of what counts as a source of belief. For if a virtue reliabilist were to limit the class of intellectual virtues to those cognitive faculties that qualify as sources of belief in this sense, the scope of knowledge would be limited to *immediate* knowledge, e.g., knowledge of (perhaps just the appearance of) one's immediate surroundings, direct intuitive or a priori knowledge, introspective knowledge, etc. Inferential knowledge, the kind of knowledge we (seem to) acquire from various reliable ways or methods of reasoning, would be impossible. Thus to avoid a form of radical skepticism, virtue reliabilists must reject this narrower conception of what counts as a source of belief.

Is there perhaps a less restrictive understanding of what it is to be a source of belief that would exclude intellectual character virtues while including the full range of reliabilist faculty virtues? This is highly unlikely, for as I turn now to consider, close inspection reveals that character virtues and faculty virtues are in a certain sense inseparable. This is because an exercise of character virtues is sometimes (perhaps always) *manifested* in and partly *constituted* by an operation of certain faculty virtues.

This is most evident in connection with some of the reliable methods or forms of reasoning just discussed. Note first that these methods are more accurately described as forms of intellectual *activity* than as mere default modes of cognitive functioning. There typically is a more active dimension to inductive or deductive reasoning, for instance, than there is to the routine operation of one's sensory faculties. Given that exercising a character virtue also usually involves engaging in a certain kind of intellectual activity, it should not be surprising that these forms of reasoning might intersect or overlap with intellectual character virtues. Recall the historian who, out of open-mindedness, intellectual humility, and a genuine commitment to the truth, encounters and accepts data that undermines her acclaimed scholarly work. How exactly

should we understand the connection between her acts of reasoning and her exercise of various character virtues? One reply is that her intellectual openness and commitment to the truth enable her to continue investigating (rather than to bury) the relevant data once she realizes that it threatens her position. While this much is correct, the traits in question might also lead her to *think through* the data in reasonable (rather than sloppy and defensive) ways or to *draw valid conclusions* from it (rather than to distort its implications). Her open-mindedness, for instance, might cause her to avoid committing a certain logical fallacy that most others in her situation would commit or to perceive an otherwise easily missed logical connection. Here, a sharp distinction cannot be drawn between the historian's reasoning and her exercise of various character virtues. It is not as though she displays open-mindedness and *subsequently* reasons in the ways in question. Rather, her exercise of open-mindedness is partly *constituted* by her acts of reasoning.

This relation between intellectual character virtues and standard reliabilist virtues is not limited to methods or acts of reasoning. It can also extend to the functioning of basic cognitive faculties like vision. We noted, for instance, that the field biologist discussed above reaches the truth about a change in migration patterns on account of his intellectual carefulness, concern with detail, and other intellectual character virtues. This might involve the following. As the biologist studies the birds' new winter habitat, he *notices* or *sees* certain subtle but critical geographical details that would normally go unnoticed. His exercise of certain character virtues in this case is partly constituted by the operation of his visual faculty: his inquiring in a careful and attentive way just is (or mostly is) a matter of making certain visual observations.

The tight logical connection between character virtues and faculty virtues is also evident in the fact that when epistemologists seek to 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. He says that "[t]hrough greater *attentiveness* and *circumspection* one can normally improve the quality of one's introspection and thus enhance its accuracy."<sup>28</sup> He also remarks that the process of forming beliefs through introspection "can of course go wrong in various ways," for example, through an exercise of "haste" or "inattentiveness."<sup>29</sup> Sosa concludes that "a belief's justification derives from the endowments and conduct that lie behind it."<sup>30</sup> A second example is Sosa's discussion of "ampliative" or "coherence-seeking" reason, which he describes as a subfaculty of reason proper which incorporates nondeductive methods of reasoning including inductive and explanatory reasoning. While at times Sosa describes this trait as a kind of default cognitive mode (thereby suggesting parity with other faculty virtues like vision or memory), at other times he describes it in more active and psychologically richer terms. He refers to it, for instance, as "reason as we know it, with its *thirst* for comprehensive coherence," as "an *inner drive* for greater and greater explanatory comprehensiveness," and as "a rational *drive* for coherence."<sup>31</sup> Here coherence-seeking reason seems less like a natural or default cognitive mode than it does a cultivated excellence of intellectual character.<sup>32</sup>

It is clear, then, that the kind of fundamental and categorical distinction between character virtues and faculty virtues central to the objection above is unwarranted. Again, an

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<sup>28</sup> Sosa, *op. cit.*, p. 228; my italics.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 229.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 232.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 211, 145, and 209 respectively. The italics in these quotations are mine.

<sup>32</sup> For a related discussion of Plantinga's treatment of the proper function of cognitive faculties, see Roberts and Wood, *op. cit.*

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.

### III

Thus far I have mainly been concerned with showing (1) that virtue reliabilists tend to neglect matters of intellectual character and (2) that because intellectual character virtues sometimes satisfy virtue reliabilists’ formal conditions for an intellectual virtue, this neglect is unwarranted. We have seen that as a result, virtue reliabilists (and reliabilists in general) must add the character virtues to their repertoire of intellectual virtues (or alternative justification-conferring qualities). But what additional implications, if any, does the argument have?

One implication, which resembles a claim sometimes made by virtue ethicists, concerns the general scope or orientation of virtue reliabilism.<sup>33</sup> Virtue ethicists often claim that modern ethical theories tend mistakenly to neglect or ignore the *person* in their accounts of the moral life and that a return to the notion of virtue in moral philosophy offers a way of correcting this problem.<sup>34</sup> A similar point could be made about virtue reliabilism. We have seen that virtue reliabilists tend to characterize knowers in highly mechanistic and impersonal terms. This is evident in their tendency, noted above, to describe intellectual virtues as “truth-conducive belief-forming mechanism[s]” or as “input-output devices” and to liken knowers to thermometers,

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<sup>33</sup> As in the previous section, I will initially limit my attention to *virtue* reliabilism; later on I will consider the implications for reliabilism in general.

<sup>34</sup> One of many examples is Michael Stocker, “Emotional Identification, Closeness, and Size: Some Contributions to Virtue Ethics,” in Daniel Statman (ed.), *Virtue Ethics* (Washington, DC: Georgetown UP, 1997), pp. 118-27.

thermostats, and the like.<sup>35</sup> This is true even of Greco's "agent reliabilist" approach to epistemology, which stresses the natural cognitive faculties and abilities of knowers rather than their actual agency.<sup>36</sup> We have also seen, however, that this limited focus yields an incomplete account of epistemic reliability, for epistemic reliability is a function, not just of one's basic cognitive functioning, but also of one's cognitive *character*. Therefore one lesson to be drawn is that virtue reliabilism must expand its focus to include the *character* of epistemic agents or the epistemic agent *qua* agent.

A related implication concerns the general structure of virtue epistemology. We noted early on that standard characterizations of virtue epistemology divide the field into two main camps: virtue reliabilism and virtue responsibilism. And the impression one gets from the literature is that the division between the two camps runs deep: virtue reliabilists are said to limit their focus to cognitive faculties and related abilities while virtue responsibilists limit their attention to matters of intellectual character. But in light of the fact that virtue reliabilists must expand their focus to include the epistemic agent *qua* agent, it is obvious that this way of carving up the field will not do. This does not entail that any distinction between virtue reliabilism and virtue responsibilism must be abandoned. But it does mean that we shall be forced to rethink the relation between the two approaches and to that extent the overall structure of the field of virtue epistemology.

But the argument also has certain *theoretical* implications for virtue reliabilism. We can begin to see what these are by noting, first, that an important requirement of any fully adequate reliabilist epistemology is to give an account of the reliability of the processes or traits that it regards as contributing to knowledge. Sosa and others have shed a great deal of ink developing

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<sup>35</sup> See, e.g., Sosa, *ibid.*

<sup>36</sup> See Greco, *Putting Sceptics In Their Place*, Chapter 7. While Greco often speaks of "cognitive character," he seems mainly to have in mind one's native cognitive endowment.

such an account for faculty virtues. However, as I turn now to argue, character virtues are structurally different from faculty virtues such that existing models of reliability seem inapplicable to character virtues in important ways. The result, we will see, is that a certain amount of theoretical work must be done by virtue reliabilists before they can offer an adequate account of the reliability of character virtues.

Two related differences between faculty virtues and character virtues concern the conditionality or relativity of their reliability. Reliabilists often point out that the reliability of faculty virtues is not unconditional; rather, it is relative to certain kinds of truths or to certain “propositional fields” as well as to certain environmental conditions.<sup>37</sup> I will discuss each of these parameters in turn.

Consider the faculty of hearing. Clearly this faculty is reliable with respect to certain kinds of propositions (e.g., those concerning the sound or spatial location of nearby objects) but not with respect to others (e.g., those concerning the color, shape, or the scent of things). In the case of faculty virtues like hearing, it is reasonably easy to arrive at a plausible specification of the relevant propositional fields. A propositional field can be specified or at least substantially narrowed in such cases simply on the basis of the *content* of the propositions in question: propositions about the color and the shape of things, for example, are epistemically “relevant” to the faculty of vision but not to the auditory or olfactory faculties since the former but not the latter is helpful for reaching the truth about the subject matter in question. The fairly obvious and natural correspondence between particular faculty virtues and particular fields of propositions is also evident in the fact that it makes good sense to speak of “visual propositions,” “introspective propositions,” “a priori propositions,” “memorial propositions,” and the like.

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<sup>37</sup> See, e.g., Sosa, *op. cit.*, pp. 138, 242, 277, 287, and elsewhere. A subtle distinction can be drawn between the “environment” and the “conditions” relevant to a particular virtue; however, for ease of discussion, I shall treat these as a single parameter.

But character virtues are fundamentally different from faculty virtues in this respect. We noted earlier that at a certain level, it is clear that character virtues are critical for reaching the truth with regard to certain subject matters but not others. For instance, while not essential to reaching the truth about, say, the general appearance of one's immediate surroundings, an exercise of character virtues is essential to the acquisition of much "higher grade" knowledge (e.g., scientific, philosophical, or historical knowledge). Notice, however, that the correspondence here between character virtues and certain propositional fields is extremely *general*. It fails to tell us anything about the propositional fields relevant to any *particular* character virtues.

The problem is that it is difficult and perhaps impossible to provide this kind of narrower specification for individual character virtues. This is due to certain uniquely "situational" aspects of these traits. We generally cannot tell just by considering the content of a particular proposition, for example, which (if any) character virtue is likely to be helpful for reaching the truth about it. Instead, the applicability of a character virtue to a particular proposition or field of propositions usually depends in a very deep way on highly contingent features of the person or situation in question. The virtues of intellectual caution and carefulness, for instance, might be required in one situation to reach the truth about a proposition which in another situation could be known only via an exercise of intellectual courage and perseverance.<sup>38</sup> In contrast with faculty virtues, the relevance of a character virtue to a particular field of propositions is not given by the content of the propositions themselves. This is reflected in the fact that it makes little sense to speak of "intellectual courage propositions," "fair-mindedness propositions," etc. Again, the kind

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<sup>38</sup> Imagine, for instance, that the first person is a very free-thinking individual in a very free-thinking society and the second is a rather timid and unconfident inquirer in a society where the flow of information is highly regulated and censored. Note as well that this is not an exception to the rule for character virtues, for again, there is a general lack of any initial or principled correspondence between individual character virtues and particular propositional fields.

of subject matter with respect to which intellectual courage or fair-mindedness are likely to be reliable is a deeply contingent and variable matter.

It follows that a number of questions must be addressed if we are to have an adequate grasp of the reliability of character virtues: Is the reliability of (individual) character virtues “field-relative” at all? If so, how are these fields determined and what are they? If not, then what alternative parameter or parameters might be useful for characterizing the reliability of character virtues? Without answers to these and related questions, our grasp of the reliability of character virtues is importantly incomplete.

A second and related point concerns the kinds of environmental conditions under which intellectual character virtues are reliable. As noted above, reliabilists like Sosa regularly point out that any given faculty virtue will be reliable relative to certain environments but not others. Vision, for instance, is reliable in good lighting and in “normal” environments, but not in complete darkness, a funhouse, or a smoke-filled room. Similarly, hearing is reliable only where there is not a lot of background noise, where one is not submerged in water, and so forth. These examples indicate that the environmental conditions relevant to a particular faculty virtue typically can be specified by reference to the faculty’s natural or proper function: a faculty is reliable only with respect to environmental conditions that permit or do not obstruct or interfere with such functioning.

The reliability of character virtues is also relative to certain environmental conditions. Open-mindedness or intellectual courage, for example, can do more cognitive harm than good if exercised in the wrong situation. Yet the environmental conditions relevant to the proper functioning of character virtues would seem to be categorically different from those relevant to faculty virtues. This can be seen in the fact that character virtues often are *helpful* for reaching

the truth in the face of the very sorts of environmental conditions that tend to *interfere* with the performance of faculty virtues.

We can begin to see how by noting that it does not seem quite right to think of the reliability of character virtues like intellectual perseverance or keen attentiveness as relative to environments with good lighting, little background noise, few distractions, etc. It is not that these virtues are *unreliable* with respect such environments; it is just that their exercise is often unnecessary. For these are situations in which a person often can reach the truth just by virtue of the proper functioning of his basic cognitive faculties. To know that there is a substantial plot of grass outside my window, for instance, I need not be intellectually perseverant or attentive; I just need decent vision and a minimal amount of lighting.

Under what conditions, then, *do* character virtues tend to be reliable? These traits are especially helpful for reaching the truth where the truth is hard to come by. And often what makes the truth hard to come by are precisely the environmental or situational factors that can undermine or interfere with the reliability of faculty virtues: a gap between appearance and reality, untrustworthy interlocutors, incomplete or misleading evidence, and the like. What this shows is that character virtues are reliable with respect to very different sorts of environmental conditions when compared with faculty virtues. In fact, in a certain sense, the situational relevance of character virtues picks up where that of many faculty virtues leaves off. Therefore, to arrive at an illuminating account of the reliability of character virtues, we also must attempt to clarify the sorts of environmental conditions under which they are reliable.

A third issue related to the reliability of character virtues concerns the tighter “unity” of these virtues when compared with faculty virtues. Unlike faculty virtues, character virtues typically are reliable only when possessed in *conjunction* with other character virtues. Open-

mindedness, intellectual caution, or intellectual tenacity, for example, are unlikely to be very helpful for reaching the truth if possessed in isolation: open-mindedness typically must be tempered by a kind of mindfulness and adherence to arguments and evidence, intellectual caution by a firm commitment to discovering the truth, and intellectual tenacity by a willingness to revise a belief or course of inquiry if the evidence finally calls for it. Similarly, the genuine possession of a single character virtue often seems to presuppose the possession of others virtues. It would seem, for example, that to be genuinely intellectually fair, one must also be intellectually careful and patient, which in turn would seem to require that one be intellectually attentive and determined.

This deep interconnectedness among character virtues generates additional questions that must be addressed if we are to have a proper grasp of the reliability of these traits. For instance, to what extent and in what way are the character virtues unified? Does the possession of a single intellectual character virtue entail the possession of all the others? If not, which subsets of character virtues “go together”? And how exactly are these virtues related to each other such that when (but only when) taken together they are reliable? Finally, if the relevant traits are reliable only when possessed in conjunction with other such traits, in what sense are they, when considered individually, really intellectual *virtues* at all? Would it not be more appropriate to think of the relevant *clusters* of traits as intellectual virtues – or perhaps (given a strong unity thesis) only the entire *set* of traits?

For ease of discussion, I shall continue to describe the individual traits themselves as intellectual virtues. A fourth challenge posed by the foregoing argument concerns the *application* of virtue reliabilism (and reliabilism in general – see below) to particular beliefs. To explain the justification of a particular belief formed by one or more character virtues, the virtue reliabilist

must provide a characterization of these virtues according to which they are clearly reliable. And as we saw above, this characterization must be reasonably specific. (Again, if the characterization is too general, the reliability of the traits will appear questionable.) When providing this kind of specification of *faculty* virtues, virtue reliabilists appeal to certain logical parameters like the propositional field and environmental conditions relevant to the faculty in question. (Vision, for instance, can be characterized as reliable *with respect to* claims about appearances and when operating at close range in normal well-lit environments.) We have seen, however, that it is far from clear how or whether these parameters apply to the reliability of character virtues. Thus until further light is shed on how best to understand and characterize the reliability of character virtues, virtue reliabilists' ability to explain the justification of beliefs produced by such virtues will be significantly limited.<sup>39</sup>

This problem is compounded by the apparent “unity” of the intellectual virtues. We saw above that, unlike the possession of faculty virtues, the possession of a single character virtue often seems to presuppose that of several others. Because these interrelations among character virtues are often very complex and difficult to discern, the task of providing a precise and accurate description of the character virtue or virtues involved in the production of particular beliefs is more difficult than it might initially appear. To complete this task adequately, we shall need a better understanding than we presently have of the deep interrelatedness or unity of the character virtues. And again, absent such an understanding, virtue reliabilists will be unable to give a full account of the justification of certain beliefs (*viz.*, beliefs produced by character virtues that are “unified” with other character virtues in the relevant sense).

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<sup>39</sup> This problem bears an obvious similarity to the so-called “generality problem” for reliabilism. The challenge here, however, is not that of choosing in a nonarbitrary way between a *variety* of applicable characterizations of the relevant faculty or process, but rather that of identifying just a *single* applicable characterization.

It is worth pausing again to note that the theoretical questions and problems identified in this section are relevant, not just to virtue reliabilism, but to any form of reliabilism. Like the virtue reliabilist, the method or process reliabilist, for instance, also must provide an illuminating explanation of the reliability of those methods or processes they regard as capable of conferring justification. Since, as was pointed out earlier, these include the methods or processes characteristic or expressive of the intellectual character virtues, reliabilists of this stripe also must reckon with questions about the logical parameters and unity of the character virtues. For again, in the absence of a better understanding of these matters, they will be unable to account for the reliability of some of the very methods or processes they deem (or at least should deem) central to justification. As noted in connection with virtue reliabilism, this is a problem both in its own right and as it relates to the application of their view to particular beliefs. Therefore, reliabilists in general must pay greater attention to matters of intellectual character and must address the theoretical questions and challenges that accompany this shift in focus.<sup>40</sup>

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