ON EPISTEMIC EXPLANATIONS: RESPONSE TO TWO CRITICS*

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A. Response to Mona Simion: Negligence and Inadequacy in Telic Epistemology

Simion focuses on my account of suspension, and more specifically on the importance of negligence for that. In her view, I do well to invoke negligence in my attempt to explain proper epistemic suspension, but she argues that my attempt does not succeed.

1. She gives two examples, both cases of sexist epistemic shortfall.
   In one case, you dismiss a woman’s testimony on a certain question, although you should accept her testimony instead, which would tip the balance, requiring you to believe rather than suspend on that question.
   In a second example, you do not even get so far as to consider the woman’s testimony, since sexist bias blinds you to its existence, and dooms your suspension. And it is said to be impossible for my telic virtue epistemology to account for that fact. Your failure would not be an attempt, and so it would not fall under telic normativity, which makes my account irrelevant.

2. Mona adduces the following claim in my text:
   If you can assess your first-order competence by more reliable means but fail to do so, then you are negligent.
   (This volume, 461)
   But she rejects this view. She rightly points out that we cannot require you to keep on pondering on pain of culpable negligence, just based on the fact that there is some possible improvement, however minor, that you do not make.

3. Here I must agree. I, too, reject the passage that she quotes, under the interpretation that she gives it. The passage is at best ambiguous.

* This derives from an APA/PD Author/Critics Session of April 2021 on my Epistemic Explanations (2021). This publication, deriving from that symposium, contains the critiques of Mona Simion and Allan Hazlett. A later symposium will contain the exchange between Peter Graham and myself. My excellent critics have made many perceptive comments, and I must acknowledge how helpful it has been to work through their insightful commentary. My grateful thanks to Allan and Mona, and also to Peter!
Suppose a thinker fails to register some fact, a failure that epistemically spoils their suspension on a given question. A failure to register a fact is not an attempt, which does raise the question of how telic normativity could be relevant. Our account of how negligence bears on suspension must provide a way for us to assess failures, including failures for which the agent bears no responsibility. Again, the correct formulation must provide a way for us to make such an assessment within the telic normativity of attempts, even if the item assessed is not itself an attempt.

What sort of explanation can telic virtue epistemology provide for the fact that sometimes a thinker should make an attempt that they do not make? That is a challenging question for my telic account. What is more, if a thinker fails to so much as register a pertinent available fact, this failure, too, can be subject to proper telic assessment. However, the failure to register a pertinent available fact is neither an attempt nor even the failure to make an attempt.

4. In response, I first focus on my text targeted by Mona:

If you can assess your first-order competence by more reliable means but fail to do so, then you are negligent.

(This volume, 461)

Again, this is clearly incorrect under the interpretation of ‘fail to do so’ as merely ‘do not do so.’ Suppose a performance of yours would be better if only you did something that you omit doing. This does not entail that your performance is unsatisfactory, much less that it is culpably so. Your performance may already be excellent and may need no improvement.

Negligence would reside rather in the combined fact that your performance could easily enough have been improved by some action that you should have taken but did not take.

5. Here now is a better formulation of a condition sufficient for negligence, which improves on the ambiguous formulation:

If (a) you assess your first-order competence by means that are insufficiently good for the purpose, insufficiently reliable, while (b) you can easily enough assess your first-order competence by better, more reliable means that would be sufficiently good, but (c) you do not do so when you should do so, then you are negligent in that deplorable omission.

And your first-order performance also then suffers from negligence. You then perform negligently in making that first-order attempt.

6. Compare this. In London you omit looking both ways on an occasion when you cross a busy street. That is a negligent omission on your part. Negligence attaches not only to that omission but also by extension to your crossing of that street. Your attempt to get across the street is negatively
assessable in the respect that you omit proper precautions. Your means are insufficiently reliable means to a safe crossing of that street.

Similarly, if you omit taking into account pertinent testimony within your ken, and even if you do not so much as register the existence of the testimony, you are negatively assessable for that unfortunate lack. You are negatively assessable for that lack even if it is not an omission that is intentional, nor even so much as attributable to you.

Here the negative assessment takes the form of judging you to be defective. And you are not relieved of the negative assessment simply because you are not at fault for the defect. Being judged defective is still a negative assessment in any case, even without assignment of fault.

But why is that assessment telic? How could such a defect, such a sheer absence, be telic? Isn’t telic assessment necessarily assessment of some sort of agency?

7. Telic assessment does involve agency and the aims of agency, and the attempts to attain those aims, but telic assessment can be explicable in a way that essentially involves agency even when it is not assessment of the exercise of agency. And telic assessment can moreover thus involve agency, even when it is not even assessment of an omission of agency. Rather, assessment can be telic because it assesses conditions for AAA agency, such as conditions for the possession of adroitness, or conditions for the attainment of aptness.

In a given domain there will be agents and distinctive aims, as in the case of archers, whose competences we can obviously assess. Thus, we can assess their level of skill, as well as their pertinent shape and situation. None of these is an attempt nor even an omission of an attempt. What makes such SSS assessment telic nonetheless is its relevance to the quality of the archer’s shots. Skill, shape, and situation are “better” or “worse” depending on how well they contribute to the success of the agent’s pertinent attempts. And this makes possible all sorts of assessments that are “telic” despite not assessing any attempt or omission.

8. Lacks and omissions can diminish the agency of an agent, and can thus be negatively assessable telically, with a view to that agent’s potential for success and aptness in the pertinent domain.

Not all such lacks or omissions can be blamed on the agent. Not all such can derive from negligence, but some can, and these might then derive from the agent’s attributable shortfall. The agent is then negatively assessable for the lack or the omission.

When you cross that London street without looking, the failure to look is presumably attributable to you. Looking is something you could easily enough have done and should have done before crossing. Its omission is on you and is a clear case of negligence.
If you are elderly and frail and could not have jumped to avoid being hit by a double decker, this is not a case of negligence. You are not responsible for the lack of the evasive movement. This lack is not attributable to you that way. Even so, your disability may be an unfortunate defect that is the end of you. And that is also a negative assessment even with no attribution of fault.

9. And those distinctions clearly apply even when we are not assessing life or death performances. In any domain of performance, the distinctions will be relevant in analogous ways. The theory of knowledge, with its distinctive aims and attempts, is then just a special case. And there will be pertinent sorts of assessable omissions and lacks that are distinctively gnoseological. Ulterior practical values are irrelevant to this distinctive sort of assessment, just as they are irrelevant to the telic assessment of your walk aimed at safely crossing a certain street. The constitutive aim at a safe crossing opens that attempt to distinctively telic assessment. We can then assess the success of that attempt, and also its degree of competence, and finally also its aptness. Your safe street crossing can be a top-notch performance, even if it is an awful attempt aimed at reaching your intended victim of murder.

10. Finally, if we return to the shortfalls of Simion’s sexist thinker, his epistemic activities are exposed as epistemically defective. The sexist’s failures to so much as consider pertinent testimony, or to give it its proper weight, involve either (a) negligence or (b) defect. Thus, they are negatively assessable by the lights of telic virtue epistemology.

B. Response to Allan Hazlett: The Problem of Epistemic Unity, and Hazlett’s “Alternative” Solution

1. Hazlett begins with a capsule statement of some facts, in which judgment is characterized as representation that can be correct or incorrect, whereas suspension is viewed as just forbearing judgment:

   Judgment and suspension are two fundamentally different kinds of thing: judgment is a representation that can be correct or incorrect, and suspension isn’t. . . . Telic virtue epistemology . . . gives pride of place to the idea that judgment aims at truth. Suspension, however, does not aim at truth, . . . Suspension, unlike judgment, cannot be true.
   (This volume, 467)

   That is the basis on which he poses his main question: How then can we ever attain a unified account of epistemic evaluation?

2. My book, *Epistemic Explanations*, is said to propose a solution according to which judgment “narrowly aims at truth and broadly aims at judging
if and only if you would judge successfully.” Because both judgment and suspension share this broad aim, my proposal can be thought to attain the desired unity of epistemic assessment that covers them both.

In his paper, Hazlett articulates what he considers an alternative solution to the unity problem. According to his view, “judgment aims at truth and suspension aims at avoiding falsehood. Telic virtue epistemology is vindicated—but only by treating avoiding falsehood as a fundamental epistemic value, alongside truth.”

3. However, I have to wonder how “alternative” this solution really is. According to my approach, judgment does aim at truth, and suspension does aim at avoiding falsehood. After all, consider what my view says about the “epistemic decision problem,” as you face a question whether \( p \), and you try to decide whether to judge (positively or negatively) or to omit judgment.

Let us put aside for a moment my focus on aptness. Let us rather focus with Allan just on truth. Of course, in aiming at aptness one does aim at truth (at truth plus). So, in order to simplify the comparison between our two proposals, let me drop the aptness component of my view (which I will restore below).

Again, according to my actual view, at an epistemic decision juncture, one has a biconditional aim: to judge if and only if one’s judgment would be successful. However, in my view, a judgment is distinct from a mere guess partly because in a judgment we aim not just at truth (however luckily attained); in a judgment we aim at truth through competence (not just by luck).

However, for comparison with Allan’s proposal, we are trimming my view for a moment, so as to consider the thinner view according to which a judgment is just an alethic affirmation.

So, in what follows, I adopt the view of judgment as just alethic affirmation, which I do just as a way to simplify the comparison between views with two logical forms—Allan’s and my own.

4. And now we have the following two options:

a. Allan’s option: At the epistemic decision juncture, where we face a question \( \langle p? \rangle \), we have two different “fundamental” aims: judgment aims at truth, and suspension aims at avoiding falsehood.

b. My trimmed option: At the epistemic decision juncture, where we face a question \( \langle p? \rangle \), we have the following aim: to judge iff one’s judgment would be true.

However, Allan’s option now very nearly just follows from my (trimmed) option.
5. For, consider your option at a decision juncture. Suppose you make your
decision, so that you judge or suspend.

If you judge, then presumably you aim for truth; you aim to get it right
thereby, through your judgment.

If you suspend, then presumably you aim to avoid falsehood.

That is what you must aim for in judging and suspending respectively,
given the biconditional aim of my account: namely to judge if and only if
one’s judgment would be true.

So, if you as thinker at a juncture host my biconditional aim—to judge
if and only if your judgment would be true (and otherwise suspend)—then,
if you do judge you will be aiming more specifically at truth, and, if you do
suspend you will be aiming more specifically at avoiding falsehood.

6. I say that Allan’s view “very nearly” follows from my trimmed option. I
qualify only because of his claim about what is “fundamental.” However, it
is not clear to me why we should include that feature. How does it properly
play a role in epistemic assessment?

Just consider yourself in a case (case 1) where you suspend, in doing
which you pursue the objective of avoiding falsehood. Our views, Allan’s
and mine, now agree on that much.

And compare a case (case 2) where you do judge, in doing which you
pursue the objective of attaining truth. Here again our views agree.

So, where’s the disagreement? I see no potential for disagreement except
only on the issue of “fundamentality.” Allan thinks that in both cases (1
and 2) we have a fundamental aim.

But what does that mean? Perhaps it means that in neither case my
objective is based on any more fundamental aim that might be operative in
my deliberation and agency on the pertinent occasion. So, let’s pause over
this.

7. In both cases—case 1 and case 2—I take up a question \(<p?>\). I might do
so consciously and deliberatively, or I might do so in passing, implicitly, just
as a walker sauntering along a country road or city street, while implicitly
and automatically taking note of various conduct-guiding features of my
path, where in each such case I either judge or omit judgment.

As I move along my path, my intellectual conduct plausibly has the
following feature on each of those questions that I face either consciously
and deliberatively or implicitly and functionally: I mean the feature that in
each case I am guided a certain way in my selection (conscious or implicit)
on whether to affirm alethically. I am guided by the objective to affirm
alethically if and only if my affirmation would be true.

There are also infinitely many questions attached to my trajectory, none
of which do I take up even implicitly. That infinity stays below my threshold
of even implicit consideration. But, for any question that rises above my
threshold of consideration, its so rising comes with options for intellectual
agency. In particular, in each case of such a question \(<p?>\), I face the option whether to affirm or not. An epistemically distinctive question then arises, that of whether to affirm *alethically*, as the “taking up” of that question is precisely the adoption of that epistemically distinctive objective.

There are ever so many questions that one would need and want to take up that way. One wants to guide one’s walk so as to make it a safe walk, for example, and inherent in that would be the objective of forming *correct* beliefs on a world of questions that one faces sequentially as one proceeds on one’s path. (Is that a dog I see? Or a coyote? A dog, ok. Is it vicious? As I pick up a stick, is that poison ivy right next to it? Etc., etc.)

As the pertinent questions flood in with each step, we take up what to do about all the many questions that may come up. Even when our attention is not focused on a certain prominent animal, it’s not as if we have no interest in *whether* there is any such, any coyote, or vicious dog? Rather, we are constantly assured that there is *not* any such, *at least implicitly*. It’s not as though we are blissfully unconcerned. At least there seems a clear difference in *degree of* concerns, as we move from sitting in our living room to a walk on the country road.

We take such practical safety questions up mostly implicitly or automatically, but sometimes through more conscious and deliberative inquiry. Either way, we would want to judge on a question taken up if and only if one’s judgment would be correct.

So, in each such case, we may properly either judge or suspend. If we judge, we presumably do so with the aim of successful (i.e., true or correct) alethic affirmation. And if we suspend, we then presumably do so with the aim of avoiding failed (i.e., false or incorrect) alethic affirmation.

Given the reflections above, however, in neither case would our intellectual action have *thereby* a fundamental, underived aim or objective. That is to say, whether we judge or suspend, we do so as a result of a certain deeper aim as we saunter along: namely, the aim, concerning questions that we take up, to affirm *alethically if and only if* our alethic affirmation would succeed.

**C. A Deeper Disagreement**

1. However, my preferred biconditional aim is in fact more complex than the trimmed option above. For my fuller view, we begin with the following:

   If you are at an epistemic juncture facing a question whether \(<p?>\), then your proper aim is to judge on that question if and only if your judgment would succeed, and otherwise suspend.
And now we need some clarity on just what a “judgment” is. My view of that is spelled out in the book,¹ but the main relevant item for present purposes is the distinction between the following two things:

*first*, mere alethic affirmation, even successful such, and even *aptly* successful such,

*second*, judgment, whose aim includes truth, an aim that is shared with alethic affirmation, but goes beyond that.

Thus, a mere alethic affirmation can be a sheer guess, as with the prize show contestant. But a judgment needs to aim higher. If you are an oncologist, under your Hippocratic Oath, you cannot be satisfied with a guess. You must aim not just at getting it right. You must aim at doing so competently and indeed aptly, so that your diagnosis gets it right through your medical competence and is thus not just a true diagnosis but an apt one.

2. And that will have substantial implications for what proper suspension of judgment requires. Avoiding falsity is not enough.

Early virtue epistemology was already well aware of that. Take, for example, a passage crucial for even minimally adequate understanding of Cartesian epistemology:

If . . . I simply refrain from making a judgment in cases where I do not perceive the truth with sufficient clarity and distinctness, then it is clear that I am behaving correctly and avoiding error. But if in such cases I either affirm or deny, then I am not using my free will correctly. If I go for the alternative which is false, then obviously I shall be in error; if I take the other side, then *it is by pure chance that I arrive at the truth*, and I shall still be at fault since it is clear by the natural light that the perception of the intellect should always precede the determination of the will. In this incorrect use of free will may be found the privation which constitutes the essence of error.²

And here is another relevant passage:

It is also certain that when we assent to some piece of reasoning when our perception of it is lacking, then either we go wrong, or, if we do stumble on the truth, *it is merely by accident*, so that we cannot be sure that we are not in error.³

3. Here we have a clear statement of telic virtue epistemology. According to this view of judgment, if we are to avoid failure when we judge, we must

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¹ On pp. 22–27.
² From *Meditation IV*, CSM II: 41; emphasis added.
³ CSM I: 207; emphasis added.
avoid not just Jamesian falsehood. We must avoid Cartesian inaptness. And this will make quite a difference to our proper epistemology of suspension of judgment.⁴

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References:

⁴ And the multi-chapter treatment of suspension in Epistemic Explanations depends heavily on my account of what constitutes judgment, and thereby clarity on what its suspension might hence involve, with implications for its proper assessment. (See Part II, “The Nature and Varieties of Suspension,” Chapters 3–6.) Moreover, as I will be arguing elsewhere, proper knowledge-endowing competence needs to be double-barrel in a way that aligns with my biconditional aim and eschews Allan’s division of aims into separate “fundamental” ones.