

And so it goes. After two World Wars, the Holocaust, the Gulag, and assorted atrocities, with the illegitimacy rate at 30 percent—plus since 1960, with STDs, divorce, abortions, the hook-up culture, young men unwilling to commit—all the fallout predicted in *Humanae vitae*—one would think that theologians would not be enamored with the new, with a naive trust in the imperial self's desire and capacity to carefully discern, with the brave new world of modernity. As Samuel Johnson once said, some things are too important to be new.

But the really interesting question is, What is the sensibility behind this revisionism? What fuels it, drives it, generates it? Certainly the trigger point was *Humane vitae*, which unleashed a torrent of sympathy for the laity concerned about contraception, divorce, abortion, and homosexuality. However, as Max Scheler indicated in *Ressentiment*, this sympathy for the conflicted experience of the laity masks a revolutionary protest:

The pathos of modern humanitarianism, its clamor for greater sensuous happiness, its subterraneously smoldering passion, its revolutionary protest against all institutions, traditions, and customs which it considers as obstacles to the increase of sensuous happiness . . . above all this love of mankind is the expression of a repressed rejection, of a counter-impulse against God. It is the disguised form of a repressed hatred of God. Man is loved because his pain, his ills and sufferings in themselves form a gladly accepted objection against God's "wise and benevolent rule."¹

A bit harsh perhaps, but basically on target. Behind the facade of "moral reasoning" is the autonomous individual, the imperial self, and the will to control, to enjoy, to be free of all influence, to decide for oneself, to choose among the supposed infinite possibilities of life. As Hannah Arendt put it, everything is possible and nothing is true. The world is a field of pleasures to be enjoyed, over against the world as a spiritual crucible where one has to choose good and avoid evil, endure difficulties, put up with problems, and carry the Cross.

One is left with the clear realization, finally, that this book is a one-sided, breezy, selective history of twentieth-century moral theology, strikingly uncritical and behind the times. No one reads Fuchs any more, no one reads Häring, no one reads Curran, and shortly no one will read Keenan and friends. True, they have their academic chairs, their awards, and their honorary degrees. But in the last two decades of the millennium, the renewal of moral theology came with virtue ethics and the theology of the body, not with the revisionists. Ask not for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for them.

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¹Max Scheler, *Ressentiment*, trans. Lewis Coser and William Holdheim (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1994), 93, 98.

***Virtue Epistemology:
Motivation and Knowledge***

by Stephen Napier

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Linda Zagzebski's *Virtues of the Mind* sought to bring normative epistemology more in line with empirical discoveries in cognitive psychology. Stephen Napier's *Virtue Episte-*

mology, written twelve years later, continues that same project. Both understand human knowledge as an achievement of the virtuous inquirer, of the agent who acts, and this leads

to a shift in epistemology from an analysis of concepts about knowledge and justification to a study of human acts and *moral* virtues. This, in turn, opens up an important discussion about the environment in which we learn and the promotion of character formation in our schools and universities.

In *Virtue Epistemology*, Stephen Napier argues for the serious consideration of motivation in knowledge. Over 174 condensed pages, we are treated in eight chapters to a robust responsibilist contribution to the field of virtue epistemology. Chapter 1 is a general overview, and chapter 2 examines the relative strengths and weaknesses of virtue reliabilism as a competing account. In chapters 3, 4, and 5, Napier covers the topics of motivated belief in perception, memory, and testimony. Chapter 6 deals with moral expertise and *phronesis*, and chapter 7 is a virtue response to the atheist's challenge on the "hiddenness of God." The final chapter is a simple five-page wrap-up.

Responsibilism

As with virtue ethics, the focus of virtue epistemology is on the character of the agent rather than on the acts performed by the agent. That is why an analysis of the agent's actions is couched in thick virtue terms of generosity and courage rather than the thinner deontic notions of right and duty. The agent must not only do what is right; she has to feel like doing it as well! As the work of António Damasio has shown, people with frontal lobe disorders make incorrect assessments of human situations precisely because their reasoning is not in touch with their feelings. Taking stock of a situation and knowing which conventions to challenge calls for a *concern* for the truth.

Napier's internalist "concern for truth" provides contemporary epistemology with a way around Gettier problems—situations in which the agent has acted admirably but incorrectly and then chanced upon the truth anyway. The value problem of why the coffee machine (the knower) would matter when all we want is the coffee (the belief) is explained in terms of an inherent connection between believer and belief. Knowledge is a state of the

agent, not an output. The how of this anti-luck criterion is expressed as a story of the virtuous behavior of the agent rather than in terms of the truth properties of the belief itself. That said, Napier's Gettier-proof claims seem prematurely triumphant, since motivations alone cannot *entail* that a belief be true.

At the level of the senses, responsibilism often suffers from reliabilist criticisms that motivation plays little or no role in cases of so-called easy knowledge—cases of perception, memories of the recent past, simple testimony, etc. Contrary to our intuitions, Napier convincingly argues that the empirical evidence highlights the importance of the agent's attention span (and hence motivations) even when the formation of the belief would *seem* to be automatic.

A Virtue Account of Perception and Memory

Experimental psychology shows us that the amount of attention we pay in different perceptual contexts depends on the relative virtue of our motivations. Brown and Craik¹ show us that the encoding and retrieval of our experiences is not automatic. The more attention we pay to what we happen to be doing at a specific time, the better our recall will be of that event. Indeed, neuroscience suggests a connection between emotional states and attention, since the limbic regions of the brain that concern motivation fire at the same time as the frontal regions of attentional focus. But surely, taking a lazy look out the window at the landscape as the train rattles along involves no specific motivation that could be referred to as "virtuous." For memory to serve us well, we would need to notice if a detail in the background has been changed. Ronald Rensink, Kevin O'Reagan, and James Clark prove that we are subject to change blindness such that "in the absence of [focused] attention, the contents of visual memory are simply overwritten (i.e., replaced) by subsequent stimuli, and so cannot be used to make comparisons."² This means that there is no automatic memorial knowledge.

Although we may be at the rather thin end of the scale of virtue when considering

unconscious awareness skills, as opposed to thick virtues like intellectual fair-mindedness, yet, Napier argues, contemporary theories of knowledge are the poorer for ignoring motivation in perception and memory processing. Think of the vice of misattribution, bias in recall, or suggestibility. Character formation in love for the truth influences the most important human activities. A doctor, for instance, can confuse the common bile duct with the cystic bile duct because of misperception motivated by a preconceived scheme in the doctor's head about what should be there.

Testimony

Surely there is no need for me to have internalist access to the truth for there to be knowledge when I ask a stranger to tell me the time? A responsibilist would hold that epistemic virtue must be shown by the speaker in believing p (the acquisition condition) and in communicating p without the intention to deceive (the communication condition), and the receiver must demonstrate some critical awareness in her belief in that p from the speaker (the reception condition). Controversially, the acquisition condition does not entail belief that p is true on the part of the speaker. Napier puts forward the interesting case of a teacher who is a creationist but, in strict obedience to the board of studies' guidelines, faithfully passes on to his students what science has to say about evolution. Suffice that the evidence be presented fairly without commitment. One can understand this for a news reader, but what of the religion teacher when she must pass on beliefs of faith? Can a nonbeliever effectively transmit a teaching that he or she does not live or believe? I think that there is a shortfall in Napier's account here, since he himself would agree that a teacher who is not open-minded and alethic will fail to transmit a love for the truth to his or her students. Napier would perhaps respond with the weaker claim that one can be assessed only to the standard of how well one has *reported* views held by others, whether or not one accepts those views. It is one thing to accurately understand p , quite another to believe p .

Napier points out an important social component to testimony that rival internalist accounts need to consider. His favorite example is that of the magazine editor who receives multiple expert reports of a possible rare-bird sighting. While the individual expert may still be in doubt, the magazine editor has received so many such reports that he has greater justification in the receptor's belief than in the individual testifier's. Napier may well have added that the Evangelists could place themselves in a similar position with regard to appearances of the Risen Lord.

Moral Expertise: The Phronimos

Justification depends on the possession of adequate evidence for a belief, but when can we say that the evidence we have gathered is "adequate"? Making such a judgment calls for expertise. Since defeating arguments to any particular position are often present, we need to judge how strong are they vis-à-vis the beliefs that support our view. An expert can "get it right" in this chain of reasoning, and with even less information than might be available to a novice, because of a whole background of meta-beliefs and experiences of pattern recognition. Understanding and depth not only help us make better sense of what is going on; they also aid the framing of the right kind of questions for further exploration. Says Napier, "An expert is able to justify, explain, and do so from a comprehensive and deep network of beliefs (i.e., understanding)" (116).

And who qualifies as an expert? Reference needs to be made to personal qualities in answer to that question. The moral attitudes we hold and with which we identify significantly shape our epistemic judgments. We can "freeze" upon certain beliefs and refuse to countenance plausible alternatives or defeating evidence. Many a tutor has seen immature students defend a libertarian account of autonomy at which those who are parents in the classroom roll their eyes.

Phronesis seems a natural virtue for a virtue responsibilist to champion in epistemology because it is both moral and intellectual. What, though, of understanding or wisdom per se? With good reason Aristotle

tle and Aquinas have maintained a family resemblance between the intellectual and moral virtues rather than pool them together. This is where I think that virtue reliabilists have the upper hand over Zagzebski and Napier. Strictly intellectual virtues, once formed, are not lost through a failure to act. One may choose not to understand a particular person without loss to one's hermeneutic abilities, but one may not choose to ignore that person without committing an epistemic injustice.

The Hiddenness of God

Interestingly, Napier's work closes with a chapter on belief in God. This ties together various points brought up during earlier discussion, but perhaps more needs to be said explicitly to connect the issue of God with that of moral expertise and the correct delineation of background and evidence weighting.

The argument for God's nonexistence, and so the removal of any ultimate personal ground to our epistemic contexts, follows from His hiddenness. If a good and loving God existed, He would want us to enter into personal relationship with Him. The existence of reasonable nonbelief vitiates that claim, and so Schellenberg argues that agnosticism actually entails a belief in God's nonexistence. Napier raises several objections in response.

The first rejoinder concerns how a good and loving God would interact with His creation. God can want for a creature to further participate in the goodness and charity of His nature without requiring a corresponding growth in explicit propositional faith. By being "forced" to rely on the testimony of others in a personal and relational way, we are brought into greater solidarity with each other than if God were to direct His appeal only to solipsists.

The second counter-argument refutes the implicit charge that theistic belief is unreasonable and is based on inadequate investigation. In the interest of arriving at truth, the virtuous agent not only continues his inquiry; he also restricts it to his domain of competence. As Dirty Harry reflects in *Magnum Force*, "A man's gotta know his

limitations." The wise can recognize the limitations of their inquiry and not seek to exceed their own capacities to generate knowledge. "Knowing that God exists is quite different than knowing what God *would* do," says Napier (140). In other words, the atheist must be wary of hubris in her reading of the divine mind: the virtuous agent does not enter where angels fear to tread.

Implications of Napier's Work

Although Napier's investigations have much to say to the professional epistemologist, I think they are of great importance to teachers and lecturers. Schools of knowledge must pay attention to the person who knows and the community he or she learns in. Just as children are educated in religion with *Lives of the Saints*, virtue responsibilists would have us form intellectual character with biographies of outstanding scientists and researchers. We should seek to inspire young minds with the examples of Pasteurs and Lejeunes so that our students learn to hear out opposing viewpoints in their strongest forms. As any contributor to online comments will appreciate, such open-mindedness presupposes rare intellectual (and moral) virtue. A key normative implication of Napier's opus, then, is for educators to care for overall character formation and not just academic technique. This task is vital for a community's epistemic health. I would add that moral relativism is the bugbear that educators need to challenge, because it is a force for ignorance that has a corrosive effect on students' *love* for the truth. Books like *Virtue Epistemology* will prove to be an effective foil in fighting the good fight.

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