

## Virtue epistemology<sup>1</sup>

Knowledge is central to life. Without any knowledge at all, we would die, very quickly. At the most basic level, as physical creatures, we want to know where to find food and shelter. We develop technology to help meet these needs and others, so we need to understand how things happen in the world and how we can affect it. As social creatures, we want to live with other people and make arrangements with them. We want to know what people expect, how they feel, or just where to meet on Saturday night. We need to communicate, so we need to know a language. As curious creatures, we simply want to know - how did I come to exist, what am I, how did the universe begin, what is right and wrong, does God exist? In these and countless other ways, knowledge matters to us.

But what is knowledge? According to virtue epistemology, you know that p if and only if

1. p is true;
2. you believe that p;
3. your belief is a result of you exercising your intellectual virtues.

The thought behind (3) is that knowledge is a form of achievement for which you deserve credit. Virtue epistemology focuses on the person and what they do in forming their beliefs.

There are different versions of virtue epistemology, with different understandings of 'virtue' and different analyses of knowledge in terms of virtue. We will discuss Zagzebski's analysis of knowledge in her article 'What is knowledge?'.

### ZAGZEBSKI'S ANALYSIS OF KNOWLEDGE

Zagzebski's definition of propositional knowledge is 'belief arising out of acts of intellectual virtue'. In other words, you know that p if and only if

1. you believe that p
2. your belief that p arises from an act (or acts) of intellectual virtue.

We associate virtues more with ethics, but here we are concerned with intellectual virtues. However, Zagzebski notes that we think knowledge is good; it is desirable and perhaps it is praiseworthy in some sense. Knowledge is undoubtedly good for helping us satisfy our needs and desires (from knowing where the closest supermarket is to finding a cure for cancer); many people have thought that it is also good in itself, irrespective of whether we can use knowledge (e.g. knowing

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<sup>1</sup> This handout is based on material from Lacewing, M. (2017) *Philosophy for AS and A Level: Epistemology and Moral Philosophy* (London: Routledge), Ch. 2, pp. 58-64

about the origin of the universe). Whatever the reason why knowledge is good, we seek out knowledge for ourselves and support others who do so. We understand that knowledge can be difficult to acquire, requiring motivation or special skills, and we value these.

Zagzebski develops her account of an intellectual virtue from Aristotle's theory of virtues. A virtue is a state of a person that is good by way of helping the person achieve some good purpose or goal. Moral virtues, such as generosity or kindness, aim at moral goods, such as well-being. Intellectual virtues aim at intellectual goods, especially truth. Zagzebski defines a virtue as having two components.

1. A virtue motivates us to pursue what is good; in the case of intellectual virtues, we are motivated to discover the truth - so we care about believing what is true, not false.
2. A virtue involves a component that enables us to be successful - it gives us the ability to be reliable in forming true beliefs.

For example, being open-minded is an intellectual virtue that disposes us to care about carefully considering views that conflict with our own and it enables us to do this successfully.

Now, someone who has an intellectual virtue will reliably believe what is true, but not always. Everyone makes mistakes. So while a belief that is the product of a person's exercising their virtues is epistemically good, it is still not completely good if it is false. On the other hand, a belief that is true is good, but it is not completely good if it is only accidentally true. For example, someone on a jury might think that the person on trial is guilty just from the way they dress. Their belief, that the person is guilty, might be true; but how someone dresses isn't evidence for whether they are a criminal! True beliefs can be formed or held on irrational grounds, for no good reason. Or again true beliefs can just be lucky. For example, there is a lot of evidence that astrology does not make accurate predictions, and my horoscope has often been wrong. Suppose on one occasion, I read my horoscope and believe a prediction, although I know there is evidence against thinking it is right. And then this prediction turns out true!

We can find parallels in ethics. Helping someone is good - but if one does so accidentally, then the act is not completely good. Aiming to help someone is good - but if one fails, then again the act is not completely good. And aiming to help, messing it up, but through sheer good luck, ending up helping after all is still not completely good!

The morally best action will be one that aims to help, succeeds, and succeeds as a result of acting in the way a virtuous person would act. Call this an 'act of virtue'. People with the relevant virtue, e.g. kindness, will be disposed to help and will reliably succeed, so they will reliably perform acts of kindness. However, Zagzebski notes that someone could perform such an action without having the virtue of kindness (the disposition to help reliably on many occasions) as long as they act in the way a virtuous person would act on this occasion.

Similarly, someone may form a belief on the basis of an act of intellectual virtue, e.g. being open-minded on this occasion, without being open-minded generally. As long as, on this occasion, the person is motivated to find the truth (as a virtuous person would be) and does what a virtuous person would typically do (e.g. carefully considering a view that conflicts with their own), and the person succeeds in forming a true belief as a result, then the person performs an act of intellectual virtue.

We can now say that knowledge is belief arising out of acts of intellectual virtue. We don't need to mention that it is true belief, because we have defined 'an act of intellectual virtue' as entailing that the belief formed is true. Virtues dispose us to succeed reliably, acts of virtue are ones in which we do succeed, and we succeed because we do what a person with the relevant virtues would do. That is why Zagzebski's analysis of knowledge has just two conditions: that *p* is true is entailed by the second condition, that the belief that *p* arises out of acts of intellectual virtue.

## EVALUATING THE ACCOUNT

(Before reading further, to understand Gettier cases and the challenge they raise, you should read the handout 'Gettier's objection to the tripartite definition of knowledge'.)

Our first question must be, Does the account avoid Gettier counter-examples? It should: it avoids the gap between truth and the 'third condition' that allows Gettier cases to be constructed. On Zagzebski's definition, not only must the belief be true and be produced by acts of intellectual virtue, but its truth must be the result of such acts.

Zagzebski provides a Gettier case to test definitions of knowledge. Dr Jones has very good evidence that her patient, Smith, is suffering from virus *X*, e.g. the symptoms and the lab tests are all consistent with Smith having this virus and no other known virus produces these results. This seems a good way to discover whether someone is suffering from virus *X*. Jones therefore believes that Smith has virus *X*, and it would seem that Jones has exercised her intellectual virtues in coming to this belief. However, Smith's symptoms and lab results are caused by Smith having the unknown virus *Y*. But, by chance, Smith has *just* caught virus *X*, so recently that it has not caused any symptoms nor does it show up in lab tests. So Dr Jones' belief that Smith has virus *X* is true. So her belief is both true and she has exercised her intellectual virtues in coming to the belief. But she does not know that Smith has virus *X* because the way in which she acquired the belief has nothing to do with the fact that Smith has virus *X* as it is all caused by virus *Y*.

Zagzebski responds that while Dr Jones reached her belief that her patient has virus *X* through various intellectually virtuous activities, these didn't lead her to the truth about her patient (that his symptoms etc. are caused by virus *Y* and he has only just acquired virus *X*.) So while Dr Jones' belief is true and formed through intellectually virtuous activities, it isn't true because Dr Jones' performed acts of intellectual virtue. This demonstrates the importance of saying that knowledge is belief acquired *because* of acts of intellectual virtue.

However, here's another Gettier case, from Alvin Goldman's article 'Discrimination and Perceptual Knowledge'. Henry is driving through the countryside. He doesn't know it, but in this part of the country - call it 'Barn County' - there are lots of fake barns, mere barn facades. But they have been built so that they look just like real barns when seen from the road. As he drives along, Henry often thinks 'There's a barn', or 'Hey, there's another barn'. These beliefs don't count as knowledge because they are false. But just once, Henry thinks 'There's a barn' when he is looking at the one and only real barn in the area. This belief is true. We should say that it is not knowledge, because it is only a matter of luck that Henry's belief is true in this one instance.

This challenges Zagzebski's analysis as follows. Normally, of course, when Henry sees and recognises a barn, he believes it is a barn because he sees and recognises it by paying attention to his environment. So normally, his belief arises from acts of intellectual virtue. In Barn County, he performs the same acts to acquire the true belief 'there's a barn'. Should we say that because he is in Barn County, his true belief is true not because of Henry's intellectually virtuous activities but because of luck (and so it isn't knowledge)? Or should we say that his true belief is the result of his acts of intellectual virtue (and so it is knowledge) since he does reach the truth that there is a barn, even if he doesn't reach the truth that this is the only barn in the area? We need to know more about what it is for a belief to be true because it arises from acts of intellectual virtue before we can reach a verdict in cases like this. As it stands, the analysis is too vague.

A second issue is this. We noted above that knowledge is good - certainly desirable and perhaps also praiseworthy. Zagzebski's theory explains the goodness of knowledge in terms of intellectual virtues. Does this restrict knowledge to adult human beings? Or can children and animals perform 'acts of intellectual virtue'? If we define 'virtue' broadly enough, Zagzebski says, acts of intellectual virtue can include not only intellectually demanding actions, such as engaging in complex reasoning, but also relatively automatic, unconscious ones, such as looking or remembering. In these latter cases, the motivation to 'find the truth' doesn't need to be obvious - one simply wants to know what is in one's environment or what happened yesterday. And the relevant virtues, e.g. being attentive, need not demand much - an attentive person need only pay as much attention as needed to reach the truth. So young children, at least, can have knowledge just as soon as they can tell the difference between truth and falsehood and are motivated to find the truth.

A third issue concerns the place of virtue in knowledge. There are two objections here:

1. Suppose someone generally believes whatever they read on the internet. They don't exercise caution or check other sources of evidence. So they don't have some important intellectual virtues. Now suppose that on one occasion, they come across some strange and interesting claim and really want to know if it is true, so they do spend enough time finding other evidence, and so reach the truth. They have performed an act of intellectual virtue. But this is completely out of character. Do we really want to say that this person has knowledge,

given that for lots of relevantly similar claims, they simply can't be bothered to find out what is true? Isn't their true belief still only 'accidentally' true even though it arose from acts of intellectual virtue? Should we grant knowledge only to people who have intellectual virtues, at least to some significant degree?

2. Why does someone's motive make a difference to whether they have knowledge or not? Take animals: they simply acquire true beliefs in a very reliable way. Do their motives really matter? We can extend the case to people as well. As long as one discovers the truth reliably, and on this occasion, one belief is true because of one's ability to discover the truth reliably, what should motives matter? So do we need virtues, rather than reliable processes, in the analysis of knowledge?