

**Tim Henning and David P. Schweikard (eds.)**

*Knowledge, Virtue, and Action: Putting Epistemic Virtues to Work.*

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*Knowledge, Virtue, and Action* is a fine collection of 13 new essays that will be of interest primarily to epistemologists, though the book will also appeal to philosophers (like me) who work for the most part in closely allied areas such as ethics. The book's unifying theme is virtue epistemology, and this theme plays a major role in almost every chapter of the book. However, many other important themes are in the mix as well: Testimony is discussed in depth in the chapters by John Greco, Jennifer Lackey, and David P. Schweikard, as well as in a chapter co-written by Jesper Kallestrup and Duncan Pritchard. The subject of value in epistemology is at the top of the agenda in chapters by Frank Hoffmann and Jonathan Kvanvig. Luck and safety are the main topics of Elke Brendel's and Tim Henning's chapters, while Jason Baehr and Christopher Hookway focus their chapters on the nature and demands of the epistemic virtues. Of course, a number of the contributors think carefully about the analysis of knowledge, but Christian Nimtz makes this the main subject of his chapter. Thomas Grundman contributes a worthwhile chapter on peer disagreement, and Ernest Sosa revisits and expands his thinking on the distinction between animal and reflective knowledge, though the material in these two chapters feels less well integrated with the rest of the book. Philosophers who work on epistemology should seek out a copy of *Knowledge, Virtue, and Action* as quickly as possible. The collection is full of high quality work, and the individual chapters are written clearly, concisely, and with close attention to argument and rigor. It's a genuine pleasure to engage with it.

In the rest of this review, I discuss only *some* of the individual chapters of *Knowledge, Virtue, and Action*. A review of this length cannot do justice to *all* of the material on offer, and my choice of topics reflects my own interests. In order to add some cohesiveness to my discussion, I use John Greco's excellent chapter "Knowledge, Testimony, and Action" as a leaping off point. But I stress again that the collection contains much of value that is simply beyond the scope of what I can treat here.

Greco's main aim is to bring together work he has done on virtue epistemology with some outstanding questions about the nature of epistemic testimony. A little explanation is in order. For Greco, as for many contributors to this book, virtue epistemology places the exercise of virtuous agency at the heart of the concept of knowledge (15). On this view, S's knowing that P involves, very roughly, S's correctly deploying one or more of the intellectual virtues with regard to the formation and maintenance of her belief that P. It is not enough that S's merely comes to and continues to hold the belief that P by luck or happenstance alone. The right exercise of intellectual virtue allows (or at least *helps* to allow – see below) an agent to meet what is often called the "safety condition" for knowledge.

The virtue theoretic approach to knowledge raises questions about whether, and to what extent, one can know anything on the basis of the mere testimony of another person. An example might help to illustrate what is at stake. Suppose, for instance, that at time  $t_1$ , Alice tells Zed that her cat is on her mat. Though Zed has never seen Alice's cat or her mat, Alice appears to be a reliable authority on these things, and, for the sake of argument, we can assume that Alice does indeed know that her cat is on her mat. But can *Zed* correctly be said to know that Alice's cat is on her mat on the basis of no more than *Alice's* testimony?

Greco's response on behalf of the virtue epistemologist is to begin to develop what he calls the "'testimony relevant' intellectual virtues" (22). Importantly, however, even the exercise of such virtues is not enough for knowledge, according to Greco. In order for *S* to know that *P* on the basis of testimony, Greco maintains, *S* must exercise one or more testimony-relevant intellectual virtues in "a way that would regularly serve relevant informational needs" (22).

How successful can an approach to testimony like Greco's be? There is at least some reason for doubt. Let us return to Alice and Zed. Recall that at  $t_1$  Alice told Zed that her cat was on her mat. Suppose that Zed formed a belief about Alice's cat and her mat by deploying whatever testimony-relevant intellectual virtues Zed had at his disposal. Moreover, suppose that Zed did so in just such a way that would, as Greco puts it, regularly serve the relevant informational needs, whatever they happen to be. But it is now, let us further imagine, a later time; call it " $t_2$ ." And at  $t_2$ , Alice is not around, so she can no longer keep Zed posted about the comings and goings of her cat. Furthermore, Zed himself has no special access to facts about Alice's cat. As a result, it seems far less plausible to say that Zed knows at  $t_2$  that Alice's cat is on her mat. Yet – and this is the surprising point – the underlying reason that it is implausible to say that Zed knows that Alice's cat is on her mat at  $t_2$  is that Zed's belief is not sufficiently sensitive to changes in the location of Alice's cat. Moreover, Zed's belief lacks this sensitivity not only at  $t_2$  *but also at  $t_1$* . Hence, it appears that we might have been wrong to attribute to Zed knowledge that Alice's cat is on her mat at that time as well, despite the fact that Zed's belief was formed in just the way that Greco described: by making use of testimony-relevant intellectual virtues in such a way that it regularly serves the relevant informational needs.

For whatever it is worth, I don't seem to be entirely alone in having doubts about whether virtue epistemologists like Greco have provided an entirely satisfactory account of testimonial knowledge. In her chapter "Deficient Testimonial Knowledge," Jennifer Lackey develops (in far greater detail and with much more subtlety) a line of argument that is similar to this one, though it is aimed not directly at Greco but instead at work by Jonathan Kvanvig and Ernest Sosa. At any rate, thoughts of this kind might give us some pause before accepting something like the approach to testimony that Greco and other virtue epistemologists champion.

We saw a moment ago that, like many virtue epistemologists, Greco thinks that epistemic virtue and meeting the safety condition for knowledge are *very closely* related concepts. However, a number of the contributors to this volume question this idea. In their chapter, "Robust Virtue Epistemology and Epistemic Dependence" Jesper Kallestrup and Duncan Pritchard argue that,

whatever else one might accomplish by appealing to the intellectual virtues, one cannot provide a *complete* explanation of why mere lucky guesses and similarly fortuitous beliefs do not count as knowledge. Along comparable lines, Christian Nimitz makes the somewhat surprising case that the virtues “have (almost) nothing to do with why virtue-theoretic accounts are, at least in one essential dimension, arguably successful theories of knowledge” (189). Elke Brendel provides, in “Knowledge - Safe or Virtuous,” an interesting bookend to these two chapters by contending that a safety-based account does all one could hope for when it comes to providing an *analysis of the conditions* of knowledge. Such an analysis based on safety conditions Brendel holds, does what is needed to overcome lingering worries about Gettier cases, lottery puzzles, and other familiar problems that have concerned many epistemologists over the last few decades.

To be clear, most of these authors do *not* see virtue epistemology as useless or utterly wrong-headed. Quite the contrary. Brendel, for one, maintains that the epistemic virtues are likely to be quite useful when it comes to “identifying suitable ways of knowing” (242). Her idea, if I understand it correctly, is this: While one does not have to appeal to the concept of epistemic virtue to analyze the concept of knowledge, one does need a familiarity with these virtues in order to pursue knowledge in the sort of setting we are likely to find ourselves. It is not enough to be told, “Don’t rely on lucky belief.” We need the guidance of dispositions, for example, to consider evidence carefully, to submit our own hypotheses to scrutiny, and to choose reliable sources of data.

Now, I am in broad sympathy with Brendel’s idea that invocation of the epistemic virtues is required in order to make progress with suitable ways of knowing, but I can’t help but wonder if that doesn’t somewhat undermine the claim regarding the superfluousness of epistemic virtues in the analysis of knowledge. My worry is that the way that Brendel and others appeal to an understanding of the concept of safety itself involves an implicit appeal to the concept of epistemic virtue (or virtues). Think, for just a moment, about an analogous worry in ethical theory. One might try to defend the familiar view that appeals to human happiness do all one could hope for when it comes to providing an analysis of right action, as many utilitarians claim. An appeal to virtue, at least when it comes to outlining necessary and sufficient conditions for right action, would, therefore, be unnecessary. The problem for utilitarians of this stripe arises when one begins to put pressure on the idea of happiness to which one is appealing. This concept *might* already presuppose a substantive concept of virtue that is doing some heavy, though covert, lifting in the analysis of right action. (And here it is worth recalling that John Stuart Mill himself struggled over this point in Chapter II of *Utilitarianism*.) So, too, the analogous worry for philosophers like Brendel is that, when one puts much pressure on the concept of safety, then the concept of virtue will be shown to be doing some heavy, though covert, lifting in the analysis of knowledge. I have no smoking gun to reveal here, and the search for one is beyond the bounds of what I can provide in a review like this one, but I suspect it is a potentially worthwhile endeavor.

Finally, I should single out Tim Henning and David P. Schweikard’s introduction as being singularly helpful. It nicely summarizes a number of recent trends within epistemology and connects the individual chapters smartly and usefully with these trends. In fact, the introduction combines the qualities of clarity, breadth, and depth enough to make the volume as a whole

appealing as a text for advanced undergraduates and even graduate students who are eager to get their feet wet with recent work on epistemology.

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