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Virtue Epistemology and the Value of Knowledge

ABSTRACT: Virtue epistemologists like Ernest Sosa and John Greco have attempted to explain why knowledge is more valuable than mere true belief. In this talk I demonstrate that both of their accounts fail so profoundly that it is difficult to see how virtue epistemology alone contains the resources to explain the value of knowledge. According to the virtue theoretic approach, knowledge is a kind of success from ability. Knowledge constitutes a competent epistemic performance, and some performances are better than others; not better because they are more accurate, but better because they exhibit the skill of the performer. It is in this way that the performance of knowledge is better than the lucky success of mere true belief. I will show that the Sosa/Greco model entails the false result that the blind review of scholarship should be abolished. This entailment is, by *modus tollens*, a counterexample to their view. Since it is often held that a comprehensive theory of knowledge ought to explain the value question, the failure of virtue epistemology to do so is a black mark against the virtue approach altogether.

KEYWORDS: virtue epistemology, value problem, Ernest Sosa, John Greco, *Meno* problem

The two most prominent defenders of virtue epistemology are Ernest Sosa and John Greco. Both of them offer virtue theoretic accounts of what makes knowledge more valuable than mere true belief. And both of their accounts fail so profoundly that it is difficult to see how virtue epistemology alone contains the resources to explain the value of knowledge. Since it is often held that a comprehensive theory of knowledge ought to explain the value question (e.g. by Greco 2010, p. 91 and Kvanvig 2003), the failure of virtue epistemology to do so is a black mark against the virtue approach altogether.

Both Sosa and Greco explicitly and in great detail argue that knowledge is analogous to success in sports; indeed, the covers of their most recent books have athletes on them. Knowledge is just like the sort of success achieved by an athlete through her competent performance. According to Greco, knowledge is a kind of success from ability; a true belief counts as knowledge if one gained the truth as a causal result of one's intellectual ability (Greco 2010, p. 71).

Sosa's account is essentially the same, differing only in the technical details. For him, one possesses knowledge just in case one's belief is accurate (true), adroit (arrived at in a way that manifests competence), and apt (the truth was gotten as the causal result of competence) (Sosa 2011, p. 44). This is Sosa's AAA account of knowledge. Sosa's knowers, who acquire the truth according to his AAA structure, are exactly like expert archers who hit the bulls eye by virtue of their skill. Knowledge is achieved when the truth is gained as the causal result of epistemic competence, in a way that reflects that competence.

How do these virtue accounts explain why knowledge is more valuable than mere true belief? For virtue theorists, knowledge is a kind of performance, and some performances are better than others; not better because they are more accurate, but better because they exhibit the skill of the performer. As Sosa writes, not only is it that "knowledge is incompatible with getting it right by dumb luck" (Sosa 2011, p. 176), but "enlightened discovery is more admirable than is any comparable luck that may reward groping in the dark" (Sosa 2011, p. 146).

Greco concurs that it is the excellent performance that makes a particular achievement superior to an otherwise identical one. He writes, "knowledge is a kind of success from ability, and in general success from ability is both intrinsically valuable and constitutive of human flourishing, which is also intrinsically valuable" (Greco 2010, p. 99). He offers an example of an athlete who runs a race that exhibits her athletic excellence. It is more valuable if she wins because of that excellence than if she wins because all the other runners got sick before the race. Greco argues that it is winning as the result of ability that is the most valuable, and the same is true with intellectual ability and knowledge. The value of knowledge is that is it success as the result of ability, which is "opposed to getting things right as the result of blind chance or dumb luck" (Greco 2010, p. 97). In short, both Sosa and Greco consider epistemic normativity to be a special case of performance normativity (Sosa 2011, p. 43).

In a telling passage Sosa writes, "A performance that attains its first-order aim without thereby manifesting any competence is a lesser performance. The wind-aided shot scores by luck, without thereby manifesting competence. It is hence a lesser shot by comparison with one that hits the marks and thereby manifests the archer's competence. A blazing tennis ace is a lesser shot if it is a wild exception from the racket of a hacker, by comparison with one that manifests superb competence by a champion in control. And so on" (Sosa 2011, p. 60).

Note that Sosa is not praising the tennis pro—he is praising *the shot itself*. The *ace* is better when delivered by Roger Federer instead of a weekend hacker. What makes the ace better? Not its spin, speed, placement, or even the kinesthetic mechanics of that particular serve; even Joe Average occasionally

fires a flawless serve. Sosa's position is that we can't actually know how good a shot is until we know who hit it. An observer behind a veil of ignorance cannot tell how good a serve was merely by watching it. She must also know whether the serve manifested, and was the causal result of, tennis competence. No one denies that Federer on the whole is more praiseworthy than Joe Average. Is a specific Federer performance—a serve—better than an otherwise identical serve from Average? Sosa claims the answer is yes.

The epistemic analogue Sosa wants is that knowledge is more praiseworthy than mere true belief, *not* that a knower is more praiseworthy than the non-knower who lucked into the truth. It is its causal origin in a competent actor that makes the epistemic performance normatively superior. While Greco does not lay out his cards quite so starkly, it is clear that he is committed to the same position. The victory of Greco's runner is more valuable when she wins because of her athletic excellence than an otherwise identical victory achieved because her opponents took ill. For Sosa and Greco, if one does not know the overall competence or general ability of an actor to perform a type of action, then it is impossible to evaluate adequately any particular performance of that type.

Here is a counterexample to the virtue epistemological account of the value of knowledge. Just as a Federer ace is qualitatively superior to the same shot from an amateur, a philosophy article is more valuable when written by one of the certified geniuses in the profession than when it is written by an adjunct hack at Fly-By-Night Online Community College, even if the papers are word-for-word identical. To paraphrase Sosa, a brilliant article is a lesser piece if it is a wild exception from the pen of a hacker, by comparison with one that manifests superb competence by a champion scholar in control. If one does not know the overall competence or general ability of an actor to perform a type of action (like writing philosophy articles), then it is impossible to evaluate adequately any particular performance of that type (like any specific article). Thus a referee can't judge an article—a kind of performance—without knowing the general competence of the author, which requires knowing the identity of the author.

If the virtue epistemologists are right that the quality of a philosophy article depends in part on the identity of the author, then it is a powerful argument for abolishing blind review. It is impossible to accurately assess a submitted paper until the author's identity is known, just as there is no way to assess a tennis ace until we know who served it. Yet the entire rationale of blind review presupposes that knowing the identity of the author is immaterial to determining the excellence or deficits of the paper itself. The fear is that knowing the author's identity leads to bias, which *undermines* the objective assessment of the paper's merits and inhibits the search for knowledge. (It is

ironic, and somewhat disturbing, that the editor of two of the premiere journals in philosophy endorses an epistemology that entails blind review ought to be abolished.)

Collectively pursued knowledge is best attained when instead of the advice of Sosa and Greco we follow Nietzsche's: "My view is that one does best to separate an artist from his work, not taking him as seriously as his work. He is, after all, only the precondition of his work, the womb, the soil, sometimes the dung and manure on which, out of which, it grows—and therefore in most cases something one must forget if one is to enjoy the work itself" (*On the Genealogy of Morals*, III:4). A philosophical discovery by a minor researcher is not less valuable than one by a titan; this is a truism of scholarship endorsed by everyone except, evidently, virtue epistemologists.

If knowing the author of a paper is irrelevant to determining the paper's quality, then by parity of reasoning a 130 mph down-the-line ace from a hacker is every bit as good as the identical shot from Federer. Or imagine a journeyman painter in Rembrandt's workshop who one day paints a masterpiece; the best painting of his career and comparable to what Rembrandt himself does all the time. It is elitist fetishism to insist that a Rembrandt painting is better than the journeyman's masterpiece solely because it was Rembrandt who painted it. Likewise it seems that a true belief that falls short of knowledge is no worse off than knowledge itself.

Virtue epistemologists have little recourse. One possibility is to argue that knowledge is unique, and that epistemic normativity is unlike other forms of performance normativity. Yet to insist that knowledge is different from other performances is not only ad hoc, but against the spirit of virtue epistemology more broadly. What's worse is that it leaves the value problem hanging, without a virtue epistemic solution. If knowledge is somehow special and different from other forms of success from ability, we still need an account of why it is better than mere true belief. It can't be because of its causal origin in a virtuous performance, as argued above.

Another alternative is for virtue epistemologists to claim that it is the actor who is virtuous, not the action, more in line with virtue ethicists who locate normative properties primarily in the characters of agents. Yet it does not solve the value problem. If epistemic virtue is a quality of believers, not beliefs, then at best we have an account of what makes a *knower* better than a mere true believer. It is not an explanation of what makes *knowledge* better than mere true belief.

Virtue epistemologists such as Sosa and Greco argue that knowledge is more valuable than mere true belief because knowledge is the result of an adroit cognitive ability and is thereby more admirable and valuable than an identical success that is accidental, or the result of lesser ability. Their position

entails that the quality of a philosophy paper cannot be fully determined until the author is known, a position that vitiates blind review. This entailment is a counterexample to the virtue solution to the value problem. I conclude that virtue epistemology cannot explain the value of knowledge.

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