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## “Why Can’t We Be Friends?”

REFLECTIONS ON EMPIRICAL PSYCHOLOGY  
AND VIRTUE EPISTEMOLOGY

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### I. Introduction

According to standard versions of *virtue ethics*, a person’s moral character is the primary locus for ethical evaluation. It is also a predictor of her actions: courageous persons are likely to act courageously across a range of situations; compassionate persons are likely to act compassionately under many different circumstances; and so on. Further, the relevant character traits figure prominently into explanations of human actions: the courageous person acts courageously *because* she is courageous. Thus, virtue ethics seems committed to the claim that human agents have robust character traits such as courage, compassion, temperance, modesty, and wisdom—and that these traits explain a significant proportion of human behavior.<sup>1</sup>

Recently, moral philosophers have appealed to findings in social psychology to evaluate such empirical commitments. According to a prominent line of thought, there is little evidence for, and much evidence against, the claim that many human agents possess the classical moral virtues. Instead of resulting from robust moral character traits, morally relevant human behavior is highly susceptible to, and better explained in terms of, certain features of the agent’s situation. Call this view *ethical situationism*.<sup>2</sup> If true, this sort of situationism seems to threaten virtue ethics by threatening the descriptive psychology the latter presupposes. For if situationism is true, virtue ethics appears to provide an incorrect explanation for human behavior.

<sup>1</sup>For helpful discussion on this point, see Miller (2014a), chapter 8.

<sup>2</sup>See, e.g., Doris (1998, 2002); and Harman (1999) for seminal defenses of ethical situationism. In this connection, note that the version articulated here is one among several ways of formulating the view. For a review of alternative formulations, see Miller (2014a), chapter 4.

Discussion of ethical situationism comprises a large literature.<sup>3</sup> But ethical theory isn’t the only area of philosophy in which the notions of character and virtue are prominent. Since at least 1980, epistemologists have sought to develop *virtue epistemology* (VE)—an approach to epistemology that gives the notion of an intellectual virtue a fundamental role.<sup>4</sup> VE has matured into an important subfield of the theory of knowledge, encompassing differing conceptions of intellectual virtue. As we’ll see, some versions of VE propose novel solutions to traditional epistemological problems. Other versions promise to lead epistemology in new directions.

Given VE’s development, it was natural to expect that theorists would explore and test its empirical commitments against the findings of empirical psychology. Such an expectation has been met in a fast-growing literature concerning *epistemic situationism*, the view that human cognition typically results not from intellectual virtue or vice, but rather, is highly susceptible to epistemically irrelevant factors in a subject’s environment; moreover, the intellectual character traits and faculties most human thinkers have are not the virtues that figure prominently in virtue epistemologies. If few human thinkers have or exercise intellectual virtues, one might think, this spells trouble for VE.

This chapter explores the situationist challenge to VE. In section II, I distinguish between three varieties of epistemic situationism and five varieties of virtue epistemology. These distinctions foster the explication and evaluation of arguments discussed in later sections. In section III, I explain two important situationist arguments against VE. These arguments exhibit the grounds on which virtue epistemologies of various sorts have been charged with (i) skepticism, (ii) empirical inadequacy, and (iii) normative paucity. In section IV, I argue that once the varieties of situationism and VE are properly understood, the apparent tension between the two largely dissipates. The upshot of the chapter, then, is that many projects and positions within virtue epistemology can be reconciled with the findings of empirical psychology. In section V, I propose that this reconciliation might evolve into a mutually beneficial friendship.

## II. The Views

### A. VIRTUE EPISTEMOLOGY

VE comes in several varieties. It is useful to sort them in two ways: first, according to their corresponding conceptions of intellectual virtue; and second, according to the use to which they put the concept of an intellectual virtue.

<sup>3</sup> See Miller (2014a) for a helpful review of this literature.

<sup>4</sup> The literature on virtue epistemology was inaugurated by Ernest Sosa (1980).

Theorists commonly divide the territory into *reliabilist* and *responsibilist* conceptions of intellectual virtue.<sup>5</sup> *Virtue reliabilists* understand intellectual virtues as stable, reliable cognitive faculties, such as accurate vision, good memory, intuition, and conditionally reliable inferential capacities.<sup>6</sup> In contrast, *virtue responsibilists* model the intellectual virtues on the moral virtues; virtues are stable traits of *character*. Among the intellectual virtues, responsibilists include such traits as intellectual courage, open-mindedness, intellectual humility, intellectual carefulness, intellectual charity, and the like. Such virtues are stable, excellent traits of cognitive character involving a motivation for epistemic goods (e.g., knowledge and true belief) which typically require an agent's efforts for their acquisition and maintenance.<sup>7</sup>

Despite these differing conceptions of intellectual virtue, it would be a mistake to present reliabilist and responsibilist VE as altogether opposed to one another.<sup>8</sup> But for the purpose of mapping the conceptual territory at the highest level of taxonomy, we may divide virtue epistemologies as shown in figure 13.1:

Below this level, the most salient division among versions of VE concerns the work that the concept of an intellectual virtue does in the theory.<sup>9</sup> Virtue reliabilists typically employ the concept in analyses of epistemically important properties, such as *knowledge* and *justified belief*, and in responding to skepticism.<sup>10</sup> Virtue responsibilists, on the other hand, put their concept of an intellectual virtue to more varied use. Some think responsibilist virtues are needed to execute traditional epistemological projects like those noted earlier. Call this position *strong conservative virtue responsibilism*—“conservative” indicating that the view sticks to traditional epistemological problems, and “strong” indicating the conviction that responsibilist virtues are essential to solving these problems. Linda Zagzebski, for instance, analyzes both knowledge and justified belief in terms of responsibilist virtue. On her view, knowledge is a state of true belief arising from acts of intellectual virtue; and a justified belief is one that a person motivated by intellectual virtue, and, possessing the understanding of his cognitive situation, an intellectually virtuous person

<sup>5</sup> See Greco and Turri (2011).

<sup>6</sup> A *conditionally reliable* faculty or process is one that reliably yields true output beliefs, given true input beliefs. See Goldman (1976) for further discussion.

<sup>7</sup> For similar accounts, see Zagzebski (1996); Roberts and Wood (2007); and Baehr (2011).

<sup>8</sup> Arguably, a complete virtue epistemology will appeal to both reliabilist and responsibilist virtues. For one thing, it is difficult to see how responsibilist virtues could consistently lead to the truth unless the cognitive agents possessing them also possessed reliable faculties. And plausibly, at least under certain conditions, cognitive agents who possess responsibilist virtues will be better able to successfully employ their reliable faculties in order to find the truth and avoid error. See Greco and Turri (2011) and Baehr (2011).

<sup>9</sup> The taxonomy developed here follows that of Baehr (2011). See his helpful discussion in chapter 1 of that work, and in Baehr (2008).

<sup>10</sup> See, e.g., Sosa (2007, 2009); and Greco (2000, 2010).

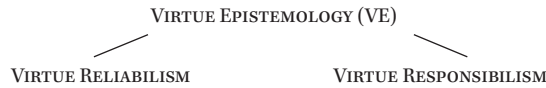


FIGURE 13.1 Varieties of Virtue Epistemology.

would have, might believe in like conditions.<sup>11</sup> By focusing on responsibilist virtues, Zagzebski argues, we can develop accounts of knowledge and justified belief that avoid many of the problems attending other views.<sup>12</sup>

Many virtue responsibilists reject this sort of research program. Such responsibilists doubt that their notion of an intellectual virtue will solve traditional epistemological problems.<sup>13</sup> For these theorists, responsibilist virtues enter the discussion either as *supplements* to the discussion of traditional epistemology, or as *independent* of traditional epistemology.

*Weak conservative virtue responsibilists* retain an interest in linking their view to traditional epistemological questions (thus, “conservative”) while rejecting the notion that responsibilist virtues foster answers to such questions (thus, “weak”). There are several possible projects and positions available to such responsibilists. To mention just two: Jason Baehr has argued that responsibilist virtues can play an important but secondary role in the complete understanding of reliabilist and evidentialist theories of knowledge.<sup>14</sup> And Christopher Hookway has argued that the virtue of *wisdom* can help agents discern a point beyond which one ought not to take skeptical questioning seriously.<sup>15</sup>

*Autonomous virtue responsibilism* is the view that responsibilist virtues are best employed in the service of projects that are *independent* of traditional epistemological questions. Instead, such virtues are better suited to address non-traditional questions that complement or replace the questions of traditional epistemology. Like conservative responsibilism, autonomous responsibilism comes in strong and weak varieties. *Weak autonomous responsibilism* seeks to complement traditional epistemology by analyzing individual intellectual virtues (cf. Roberts and Wood 2007) and shedding light on epistemological issues that traditional epistemology has left to the side (e.g., the notion of a virtuous *inquiry* explored in Hookway 2003). *Strong autonomous responsibilism* goes further. Instead of merely seeking to complement traditional epistemology, its proponents seek to *replace* much of traditional epistemology

<sup>11</sup> On these definitions, see Zagzebski (1996) and sections III and IV.

<sup>12</sup> Among the issues Zagzebski takes her version of VE to illuminate: the analysis of knowledge, the analysis of justified belief, the Gettier problem, the internalism-externalism debate, the proper response to skepticism.

<sup>13</sup> See, e.g., Baehr’s criticisms of Zagzebski’s account of knowledge in Baehr (2011, chap. 3).

<sup>14</sup> See Baehr (2011), chapters 4 and 5.

<sup>15</sup> Hookway (2003).

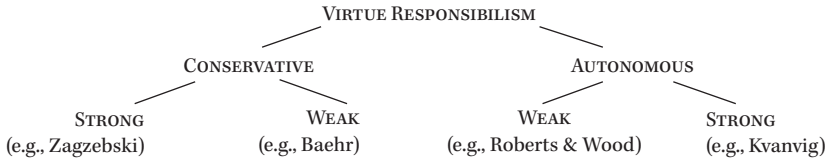


FIGURE 13.2 Varieties of Virtue Responsibilism.

with a virtue-centered picture that moves beyond the time-slice evaluations of belief that characterize the former.<sup>16</sup>

Virtue responsibilism, then, divides into the categories shown in figure 13.2.

These categories are helpful not only as means to conceptual understanding, but also as tools for evaluating situationist arguments. For as we'll see, these species of VE are not alike with respect to their empirical commitments, and therefore not alike in their vulnerability to the findings of empirical psychology.

## B. EPISTEMIC SITUATIONISM

Like VE, epistemic situationism comes in several varieties. Some of these are uncontroversial; others are disputed. *Weak epistemic situationism* is the thesis that subtle (and seemingly epistemically irrelevant) factors in a subject's situation can influence that subject's cognitive behavior. *Strong epistemic situationism about intellectual character* (Strong Situationism-<sub>CHAR</sub>) claims that "Most people's conative intellectual traits are not virtues" of the sort responsibilists discuss.<sup>17</sup> *Strong situationism about reliability* (Strong Situationism-<sub>REL</sub>) claims that human beings lack stably reliable faculties of the sort that virtue reliabilists require for knowledge. Weak epistemic situationism is relatively uncontroversial, and enjoys a wealth of empirical support.<sup>18</sup> The strong versions of situationism are more controversial, as is the extent to which they are grounded in empirical psychology.

Recently, Mark Alfano has argued for Strong Situationism-<sub>CHAR</sub>.<sup>19</sup> Alfano, Lauren Olin, and John Doris have argued for Strong Situationism-<sub>REL</sub>—all by appeal to numerous studies. And unlike Weak Epistemic Situationism, the strong versions pose at least a prima facie threat to VE. Accordingly, we'll now consider these views and their corresponding empirical support.

### 1. Strong Situationism-<sub>CHAR</sub>

Alfano's arguments for Strong Situationism-<sub>CHAR</sub> examine empirical research he takes to suggest that most people lack responsibilist virtues such as curiosity,

<sup>16</sup> See Kvanvig (1992).

<sup>17</sup> Alfano (2012), p. 234.

<sup>18</sup> See the studies cited in Alfano (2012, 2013); and Olin and Doris (2013).

creativity, mental flexibility and courage. Space here permits discussion of only a few relevant studies.<sup>19</sup>

Alfano cites research by Alice Isen and colleagues as showing that many subjects fail to exhibit creativity and mental flexibility. In studies designed to test for creativity in certain problem-solving tasks, many or most subjects in the control condition fail in their tasks—thus failing to exhibit creativity. By contrast, subjects in the “positive affect condition” fare much better at the tasks after eating candy or watching a short comedy video. Thus, when such subjects behave in characteristically creative ways, their conduct is best explained in terms of their exhibiting the local traits of *flexibility while in a good mood*, or *creativity while in a good mood*. This casts doubt on behavioral explanations that appeal to responsibilist virtues, which are cross-situational and consistent.

Consider the research Isen and her colleagues conducted on the Duncker candle task.<sup>20</sup> Subjects are presented with a book of matches, a box full of thumbtacks, and a candle. They are then asked to affix the candle to a cork board so that when the candle is lit, no wax drips on the floor. The only solution is to empty the box and use the tacks to pin the box to the board, using the box as a shelf. Isen and colleagues found that in the control condition, only 13% of subjects solved the task. By contrast, 75% of subjects who were given candy or who watched a brief comedy prior to the trial solved the problem.<sup>21</sup>

Consider next the empirical research concerning intellectual courage. Alfano cites numerous studies on his way to the conclusion that most people lack intellectual courage as a global virtue (a stable, excellent disposition that reliably manifests itself under the appropriate conditions across a wide range of situations). These studies reveal that “seemingly trivial and epistemically irrelevant situational factors influence [courage relevant] epistemic and doxastic conduct” (Alfano 2012, p. 240). Alfano thinks this suggests that most people have (at best) *courage-in-the-face-of-non-unanimous-dissent*. Central to Alfano’s treatment of intellectual courage is the kind of courage needed to speak one’s mind in the face of dissent. Several relevant studies seek to measure the effects of social pressure on subjects’ willingness to report on the deliverances of their senses. For example, Mufazer Sherif has tested the effects of social pressure in experiments involving the “autokinetic effect.”<sup>22</sup> Subjects are placed in a dark room in which there is a single point of light on the wall. Though the light remains stationary, when subjects’ eyes wander, the light appears to move, though it’s difficult to say by how much. Sherif placed subjects and confederates together in such a room. Confederates confidently affirmed an exact amount of light movement (say, three inches) and subjects always came

<sup>19</sup> Some paragraphs in this section are from King (2014).

<sup>20</sup> Isen, Daubman, and Nowicki (1987).

<sup>21</sup> For discussion of further studies on creativity, see Alfano (2012).

<sup>22</sup> Sherif (1937).

to agree with this unanimous answer, whatever it was. Sherif infers that this social pressure affected subjects' perception of reality. Alfano opts for the weaker conclusion that "apparent unanimity can generate consent when the object of judgment is highly ambiguous" (Alfano 2012, p. 243). In other words, apparent unanimity can alter a subject's verbal behavior under the specified conditions, even if it does not alter her *perception*.

As Alfano notes, one might doubt that it's a failure of courage to account for others' opinions in making a judgment about an ambiguous matter. What about cases in which the object of judgment *isn't* ambiguous? In such cases, perhaps subjects will remain steadfast even in the face of unanimous dissent. Seeking to test this hypothesis, Solomon Asch designed an experiment in which seven confederates and one subject judged (in order and aloud) which of two lines was longer.<sup>23</sup> Though the correct answer was always clear, in some cases all of the confederates "judged" the shorter line to be longer. As a result, many subjects concurred with the majority, despite expressing reservations about doing so. About a third accorded with the majority more often than not, and over the course of a typical trial, between 50% and 80% of subjects went along with the majority at least once. In follow-up studies, Asch found that this effect was absent in experiments involving just one confederate and a subject, and was weak when there were two confederates and one subject. With a group of three confederates, the social effect of majority opinion was very strong, though when just one confederate went against the group, more than 90% of subjects were willing to go against a majority of confederates. Alfano doubts that the relevant subjects possess intellectual courage as a global trait. Their actions, he thinks, reveal that they have only something like *courage-in-the-face-of-a-non-unanimous-majority*—a trait that falls short of the excellence that virtue responsibilists extol. Alfano concludes that if similar results can be replicated with respect to other virtues, then human subjects lack the intellectual virtues that figure prominently in virtue responsibilist theorizing. Even when they succeed in their cognitive tasks, their behavior is often best explained in terms of epistemically irrelevant but causally efficacious factors that comprise their epistemic situation, in conjunction with the relevant local traits.

## 2. Strong Situationism-<sub>REL</sub>

In their arguments for Strong Situationism-<sub>REL</sub>, Olin and Doris appeal to studies that appear to undermine the reliability of human thinkers across a range of cognitive contexts. But because such reliability is the central feature of reliabilist accounts of intellectual virtues (and is also required by Zagzebski's

<sup>23</sup>See Asch (1951, 1952, 1955, 1956).

account of responsibilist virtues<sup>24</sup>) Strong Situationism-<sub>REL</sub> poses a skeptical threat to these views.

As above, presentation of the relevant empirical studies must be brief. Consider the following conclusions, cited in Olin and Doris (2013), all of which seem to show that human cognitive function varies dramatically according to context, and often does so due to epistemically irrelevant factors:<sup>25</sup>

- Subjects are more likely to say that a written statement is true when the color in which it is printed makes it easier to read. They are more likely to say it is false if its color makes it difficult to read.<sup>26</sup>
- Subjects are more likely to judge a speaker to be credible (and to agree with the speaker’s arguments) if he or she speaks quickly. The phenomenon holds independently of the strength of the speaker’s arguments.<sup>27</sup>
- Subjects predict better performance for stocks with easy-to-pronounce names than for stocks whose names are harder to pronounce.<sup>28</sup>
- Subjects who are tired, or who are wearing a heavy backpack, are more likely to overestimate the slope of a hill, or the distance to a specified target object.<sup>29</sup>
- Subjects provide consistent, accurate judgments of distance on a lawn, but inaccurate judgments in a lobby, and inconsistent and inaccurate judgments in a hallway.<sup>30</sup> Their reliability appears to be significantly affected by their location (outdoors or indoors).

These studies and others lead Olin and Doris to conclude, “[T]he cumulative evidence that cognitive functioning is contextually variable—make that *enormously* contextually variable—seems to us irrefutable.”<sup>31</sup> And unreliability is just what we would expect given such variability—especially because the variability is often due to epistemically irrelevant factors. (We would expect epistemically irrelevant factors to bear a tenuous relationship to the truth.) Further, we have direct evidence that in the lawn/lobby/hallway studies, variation resulted in diminished performance. Whereas subjects perform reliably

<sup>24</sup> See Zagzebski (1996), chapter 4.

<sup>25</sup> See Olin and Doris (2013, pp. 670–672), for a summary of these studies.

<sup>26</sup> Reber and Schwarz (1999); cf. Alter et al. (2007); Song and Schwarz (2008).

<sup>27</sup> Smith and Schaffer (1995).

<sup>28</sup> Alter and Oppenheimer (2006), study 1; cf. McGlone and Tofighbakhsh (2000); Shah and Oppenheimer (2007, 2008).

<sup>29</sup> Proffitt et al. (2003); Proffitt (2006).

<sup>30</sup> Lappin et al. (2006); cf. Witt et al. (2007).

<sup>31</sup> Olin and Doris (2013, p. 671); emphasis in original. Thus, they say, “[A] wealth of evidence indicates that human cognition is highly contingent on contextual variation, making the cognitive capacities of normal people quite *unreliable*” (Olin and Doris 2013, 670; emphasis in original).



outdoors, merely moving them indoors appears to make them less reliable. Additionally, and by way of indirect evidence, there's no reason to think that such factors as font color or ease of pronunciation are the sorts of items that track the truth of the relevant judgments. These considerations, Olin and Doris think, cast doubt on the claim that human cognitive faculties are reliable.<sup>32</sup>

### III. The Charges

Let's now consider how Strong Situationism-<sub>CHAR</sub> and Strong Situationism-<sub>REL</sub>, respectively, figure into arguments against responsibilist and reliabilist VE.

Alfano argues that strong conservative virtue responsibilism—or at least the version defended by Linda Zagzebski—is vulnerable to skepticism. His argument is stated as an inconsistent triad:

(Non-skepticism): Most people know quite a bit.

(Strong Conservative Responsibilism): Knowledge is true belief acquired and retained through responsibilist intellectual virtue.

(Strong Situationism-<sub>CHAR</sub>): Most people's conative<sup>33</sup> intellectual traits are not virtues because they are highly sensitive to seemingly trivial and epistemically irrelevant situational influences.<sup>34</sup>

Alfano argues that Strong Situationism-<sub>CHAR</sub> conjoined with Zagzebski's account of knowledge, implies the denial of non-skepticism. Given Strong Situationism-<sub>CHAR</sub>, we must either go skeptical or give up the strong conservative responsibilist account of knowledge. But because non-skepticism is a "Moorean platitude" that most philosophers want to embrace, Alfano recommends that Zagzebski's account of knowledge (and similar accounts) be jettisoned.

Olin and Doris appeal to Strong Situationism-<sub>REL</sub> as a skeptical threat to any version of VE on which knowledge requires the possession of reliable belief-producing faculties. We may summarize their argument like this:

1. If human beings lack stably reliable cognitive faculties, then any version of VE on which knowledge requires stably reliable cognitive faculties is threatened by skepticism.
2. (Strong Situationism-<sub>REL</sub>) Human beings lack stably reliable cognitive faculties.

<sup>32</sup>I regret that space has not permitted discussion of studies related to the reliability of human inference. For discussion see Alfano (2013, chap. 6); and Fairweather and Montemayor (2014).

<sup>33</sup>Conative intellectual traits are traits of the mind that involve one's will or motivations.

<sup>34</sup>Alfano (2012, p. 234). What I call Strong Situationism-<sub>CHAR</sub> is just what Alfano calls "epistemic situationism." And what I call "strong conservative VE" is what Alfano calls "classical responsibilism."

3. Thus, any version of VE on which knowledge requires stably reliable cognitive faculties is threatened by skepticism.

Virtue reliabilists (and some strong conservative virtue responsibilists<sup>35</sup>) are committed to (1) by their analyses of knowledge. On such analyses, knowledge requires that an agent arrive at a true belief by way of a reliable faculty. In support of (2), Olin and Doris supply a staggering array of studies exhibiting the unreliability of certain belief-forming process-types across a range of circumstances (see section II). The conjunction of (1) and (2) entails (3). But the cost of skepticism is too high: most philosophers will abandon theses that are shown to imply skepticism.

The skeptical arguments against strong conservative responsibilism and reliabilist VE are importantly related to a second charge: *empirical inadequacy*. To put the point briefly, critics suggest that if these views are true, then *prima facie*, we would expect responsibilist and reliabilist intellectual virtues to be widely distributed over the population. But according to Alfano and Olin and Doris, these expectations are unmet. The empirical data violate what the theories predict. Thus, single features of the views—their empirical commitments—give rise to the twin problems of skepticism and empirical inadequacy.

As Alfano and Olin and Doris note, there are ways for virtue epistemologists to wriggle out of problematic empirical commitments. For instance:

- Strong conservative responsibilists might adjust their theories so that intellectual virtues are construed as *local* traits, such as *creativity-when-in-a-good-mood* or *courage-when-faced-with-a-non-unanimous majority*.
- Virtue reliabilists might adjust their theories so that the faculty-virtues required for knowledge are not broad-scope virtues like good vision or reliable memory. Rather, reliabilist virtues can instead be cast as narrow-scope virtues, such as the capacity to recognize words in the upper-right quadrant of one’s visual field, or the capacity to gauge the distance of nearby objects while standing outdoors.

Arguably, such moves can help virtue epistemologists avoid skepticism and empirical inadequacy. At risk, however, is their theories’ normative appeal. The worry is that local virtues such as *creativity-when-in-a-good-mood* aren’t epistemically praiseworthy in the same way as such global traits as creativity, intellectual courage, open-mindedness, and the like—because the latter traits are stable enough to manifest across a wide

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<sup>35</sup> E.g., Zagzebski (1996), who analyzes intellectual virtue partly in terms of a reliability component, and goes on to analyze knowledge and epistemic justification in terms of intellectual virtue.

range of situations.<sup>36</sup> Similarly, if reliabilist virtues are described as narrowly as *reliable-distance-judgment-for-nearby-objects-while-outdoors*, then they seem undeserving of their name—for they aren't cognitive *excellences*. While these “narrowing” strategies may enable virtue epistemologists to avoid skepticism and empirical inadequacy, they seem to do so at the price of normative paucity. That is, they reduce the extent to which the intellectual virtues are *excellences* that can provide a normative ideal and serve a regulative function. While one might sensibly aspire to (say) intellectual creativity or courage, no one ever aspired to creativity-when-in-a-good-mood or courage-under-favorable-conditions or upper-right-quadrant-recognition-reliability.

#### IV. Replies to Situationist Objections

If VE is to remain tenable in the face of situationist critiques, it must face up to the empirical data while avoiding both skepticism and normative paucity. How might that be done? Because the varieties of VE differ in their empirical commitments, we'll treat them separately, with special attention to these commitments.

##### A. STRONG CONSERVATIVE RESPONSIBILISM

Let's start by considering how the strong conservative responsibilist can parry the situationist attack. As noted above, Zagzebski is the most prominent exponent of such responsibilism. On her account, knowledge is a state of true belief arising from acts of intellectual virtue. The situationist critique appeals to psychological research that seems to show that most humans lack the relevant virtues, and thus—given Zagzebski's analysis—knowledge. So, Zagzebski's view seems to lead to skepticism.

The responsibilist's first attempt to deflect the skeptical charge may note that Zagzebski explicitly rejects the thesis that *acts* of intellectual virtue require *agents* who possess responsibilist virtues.<sup>37</sup> Zagzebski's account of knowledge requires acts of intellectual virtue and virtuous motivation, but it doesn't require that knowers *have* the virtues. It is thus compatible with the

<sup>36</sup> Alfano (2012) emphasizes this point in several places.

<sup>37</sup> Thus, she says, “[O]n my definition of an act of virtue, it is not necessary that the agent actually possess the virtue. But she must be virtuously motivated, she must act the way a virtuous person would characteristically act in the same circumstances, and she must be successful because of these features of her act. What she may lack is the entrenched habit that allows her to be generally reliable in bringing about the virtuous end. This definition permits those persons who do not yet fully possess a virtue but are virtuous-in-training to perform acts of the virtue in question” (Zagzebski 1996, 279.)

conjunction of Non-skepticism and Strong Situationism-<sub>CHAR.</sub><sup>38</sup> After the first round of the dialectic, the skeptical threat seems to have dissipated.

But situationist critics can strike back.<sup>39</sup> Zagzebski’s requirement of *acts of intellectual virtue* may not be as empirically thin as it appears—at least on the supposition that there are enough acts of intellectual virtue for her view to avoid skepticism. Here’s why. In order for Zagzebski’s analysis to avoid skepticism, there must be enough acts of intellectual virtue for it to be true that *most of us know quite a bit*. But now the critic can legitimately ask, “If we’re not intellectually virtuous, what is it that enables most of us to perform a lot of intellectually virtuous acts?”<sup>40</sup> As Alfano notes, the most obvious answers aren’t likely favorable news for the strong conservative responsibilist. Here are some possible answers, along with their attendant problems:

- *Suggestion 1*: Perhaps many acts of intellectual virtue are attributable to epistemic luck. *Problem*: This seems too convenient. On this suggestion, we’d have to think that most of us are *very lucky*. Further, certain varieties of epistemic luck are commonly thought to destroy knowledge rather than enable it.<sup>41</sup>
- *Suggestion 2*: Perhaps many acts of intellectual virtue are attributable to the fact that epistemic agents are *typically* in situations and moods that foster the exercise of “local” virtues, such as like creativity-while-in-a-good-mood. *Problem*: it is absurd to claim that epistemic agents are typically in virtue-friendly moods and situations. It is empirically obvious that cognitive agents traverse a wide range of moods and situations.
- *Suggestion 3*: Perhaps, despite their lack of responsibilist virtue, most people are motivated in the ways the virtuous person would be motivated, and act in ways the virtuous person would act. *Problem*: This seems like a disguised way to say that most people have responsibilist virtues. But in that case, the suggestion is empirically committed in a way that seems at odds with the empirical data, and strong conservative responsibilism turns out not square with Strong Situationism-<sub>CHAR.</sub> after all.

<sup>38</sup> See King (2014); Miller (2014b); and Turri (forthcoming) on this point.

<sup>39</sup> One way of doing so is to note that acts of intellectual virtue, on Zagzebski’s account, require *motivation* for epistemic goods. But perhaps empirical research will provide evidence that most of us lack the needed motivation. If that were to occur, Zagzebski’s responsibilism may court skepticism even if it doesn’t require virtue possession for knowledge. See King (2014) for further discussion of this point.

<sup>40</sup> Alfano (forthcoming) develops this point in detail, and considers several of the suggestions discussed in this section.

<sup>41</sup> In order to make significant trouble for Suggestion 1, those pressing this worry would need to show that the variety of epistemic luck involved in such acts of intellectual virtue is epistemically malignant—for some varieties of epistemic luck are compatible with knowledge. See Pritchard (2005) for a seminal study of epistemic luck.

The strong conservative responsibilist who follows Zagzebski must affirm that most of us perform many acts of intellectual virtue, but must do so in a way that allows her to avoid skepticism given her other commitments. As Alfano suggests, this may not be as easy as it first appears.

What's a responsibilist to say? Here I'll sketch two possible replies that seem to me neither clearly compelling nor clearly wrong. The first starts with an observation regarding Suggestion 2: it needn't be true that most of us are *typically* in moods and situations that foster acts of intellectual virtue for it to be true that many of us perform *quite a few* acts of intellectual virtue. So long as we're in such moods and situations fairly often, it may turn out that most of us perform quite a few acts of intellectual virtue, and thus, that most of us know quite a bit (by responsibilist lights), even if we're not actually virtuous. This is compatible with the idea that most of us experience a wide range of moods and situations, many of which foil our ability to perform acts of intellectual virtue. To illustrate: suppose I'm a cognitive agent who lacks responsibilist virtues and that I'm hardwired so that my moods typically run contrary to those of an intellectually virtuous agent. Worse still, suppose my circumstances are more often than not inimical to my performing acts of intellectual virtue (I'm often inundated with electronic distractions, social pressure, taxing puzzles, and so on). I might nevertheless be able to perform enough acts of intellectual virtue for it to be true that I know a lot. Perhaps several times a week—when I'm compiling my grocery list or walking the college quad or reading the newspaper—my circumstances are friendly enough to foster the right motivations and allow me to perform intellectually virtuous acts. Over time, these rare occasions help me build up a large stock of responsibilist-certified knowledge.

If this is right, it provides the strong conservative responsibilist with an explanation for how we perform many acts of intellectual virtue while acknowledging that responsibilist intellectual virtues are rare. But situationists may retort that this strategy comes at a price: acts of intellectual virtue performed only in favorable conditions may seem unimpressive. They seem at least partly, and perhaps significantly, attributable to the situations themselves and not to cognitively praiseworthy features of the agents who perform them—at least on the hypothesis that such agents lack intellectual virtue.<sup>42</sup> It strains language to label the relevant behaviors “acts of intellectual virtue.” So this way of advocating Suggestion 2 may avoid skepticism, but it may do so at the cost of reducing the normative significance of intellectually virtuous acts.

In light of potential problems with this strategy, let's consider another:

- *Suggestion 4:* Virtue responsibilists insist that intellectual virtues come in *degrees*. Perhaps very few agents possess global virtues to the fullest degree. Indeed, perhaps few of us possess the intellectual

<sup>42</sup> Alfano (2012) and Olin and Doris (2013) press this point.

virtues to such a degree that they make a strong showing in empirical studies. But perhaps we nevertheless possess the virtues to a significant, even praiseworthy degree. (We’re genuinely intellectually courageous in many contexts, but not courageous enough to pass Asch’s tests; we’re creative in many contexts, but not creative enough to solve the difficult Duncker candle task; and so on.) Thus, perhaps we have intellectual virtues to the degree needed to perform many acts of intellectual virtue, but not to the degree needed to perform well in empirical studies that set a “high bar” for intellectually virtuous behavior.

This reply, though not decisive, has two things going for it. First, since the notion of degrees of intellectual virtue is already a feature of virtue responsibility independent of the situationist objection, the appeal is not ad hoc. Second, the reply is at least consistent with the empirical data. The studies by Asch, Isen, and Sherif, for instance, seem to test for a high degree of virtue. These studies thus seem ill-suited to show that people lack lower or middling degrees of virtue—even praiseworthy degrees.

Of course, one might worry that the appeal to degrees of virtue purchases anti-skepticism and empirical adequacy at the cost of normative paucity. Whether it’s a low or middling degree of global virtue that’s allegedly possessed, or just virtue-in-the-situation, one might think it is not praiseworthy—again due to the effects of candy or comedy or confederates who enable one to act (say) courageously.

Whatever its initial appeal, we should tread cautiously in endorsing this line of thought. Consider the inference from claims like

So-and-so was enabled to act virtuously in part due to her mood

to claims like

So-and-so acted virtuously *because of* her mood,

and especially from the latter to

So-and-so isn’t virtuous to a praiseworthy degree.

No standard inference rule, inductive or deductive, licenses these inferences. To be sure, it is clear that subjects who only solve the Duncker candle task in the positive affect condition aren’t as praiseworthy as those who pass in the control condition. But still: if someone is a pack of Smarties away from solving such a difficult problem, it seems harsh to say she lacks a praiseworthy degree of global virtue. Consider an analogy. Suppose your friend can bench press 300 pounds, but only if he drinks a Red Bull energy drink. When he raises the weight cleanly, are you tempted to say that he succeeded in lifting the weight *because of* the Red Bull? Maybe—if “because of” means

“in part because of.” But are you tempted to say further that your friend isn’t *strong*, but perhaps only *strong-when-having-ingested-Red-Bull*? Probably not—especially if your friend can bench 290 or even 250 without ingesting the beverage. The fact that the energy drink helped your friend lift 300 pounds would not automatically license the claim that he’s not strong. Much would depend on other factors. Crucially, much would depend on how your friend fared with respect to other tests of strength. But if that’s the way things go with respect to athletic feats, why should they be different with respect to tests for intellectual virtue?<sup>43</sup>

## B. VIRTUE RELIABILISM

Recall the Olin-Doris argument discussed earlier:

1. If human beings lack stably reliable faculties, then any version of VE on which knowledge requires reliable cognitive faculties is threatened by skepticism.
2. (Strong Situationism-<sub>REL</sub>) Human beings lack stably reliable faculties.
3. Thus, any version of VE on which knowledge requires stably reliable cognitive faculties is threatened by skepticism.

There is much to explore here, as the fast-growing literature on reliabilist VE and situationism attests.<sup>44</sup> I offer a modest contribution to the discussion by further distinguishing between varieties of Strong Situationism-<sub>REL</sub>. Depending on the version, the view will be more or less plausible, its support from empirical studies will be more or less extensive, and it will be more or less poised to pose a skeptical threat to reliabilist VE.<sup>45</sup>

Here, as elsewhere, quantifiers are salutary. Strong Situationism-<sub>REL</sub> admits of at least three distinct readings. One possible reading is:

(Super-Duper-Strong Situationism-<sub>REL</sub>): Human cognitive faculties are never reliable.

No proponent of the situationist critique would advocate this claim. It is obviously false (insert your favorite counterexample), self-defeating (if human cognitive faculties are never reliable, then neither are the faculties that produced

<sup>43</sup>My discussion of strategies by which strong conservative responsibilists can deflect the situationist charge should not be taken to imply that I endorse such views *qua* accounts of knowledge or justified belief. To my mind, the views face pressing objections on other fronts. See Alston (2000); Greco (2000b); and Baehr (2008, 2011).

<sup>44</sup>See Olin and Doris (2013); Alfano (2013, chap. 6); Alfano (forthcoming); Fairweather and Montemayor (2014); and Pritchard (2014).

<sup>45</sup>Note that reliabilist virtue epistemology is not the only view potentially under pressure from empirical evidence of our unreliability. That empirical evidence is relevant to *any* account of knowledge (e.g., *simple reliabilism*) that requires such reliability.

the claim itself), and without empirical support. (To top it all off, the view has a dreadful name.)

Moving on, consider:

(Pretty Strong Situationism<sub>-REL</sub>): Human cognitive faculties are significantly less reliable than folk psychology would estimate.

This is the version of Strong Situationism<sub>-REL</sub> that is best supported by our empirical evidence. But what follows from the view? It doesn’t follow that we’re so unreliable that we can’t know a lot by virtue reliabilist lights. We could be significantly less reliable than folk psychology would estimate, yet still be reliable in many circumstances (and thus have a lot of knowledge by virtue reliabilist lights). In short, this version of situationism is ill-suited to ground a skeptical threat to virtue reliabilism—it’s just not strong enough to do skeptical lifting.

A final reading of Strong Situationism<sub>-REL</sub> lies between the previous two:

(Super-Strong Situationism<sub>-REL</sub>): Human cognitive faculties are only very rarely reliable.

This claim, if true, would spell skeptical trouble for virtue reliabilism. For if knowledge requires that we possess and exercise reliable faculties and we possess or exercise these only very rarely, then it follows that we have very little knowledge. Super-Strong Situationism<sub>-REL</sub> is strong enough to push us from virtue reliabilism to skepticism. However, this view runs into trouble over its empirical support. It is also vulnerable to a problem of self-defeat. Let’s take these problems in turn.

Suppose we take at face value the studies that show that we’re unreliable with respect to some propositions under certain conditions. As critics of reliabilist VE themselves note, it doesn’t follow that we’re almost always unreliable. We may be reliable in many more “friendly” epistemic contexts. However, here the virtue reliabilist encounters a dilemma. Olin and Doris explain:

The virtue epistemologist faces a decision: specify the domains [in which our faculties are reliable] *broadly* or specify domains *narrowly*. A broad specification counts a large and diverse range of circumstances as relevant to the functioning of a given epistemic virtue, while a narrow specification is restricted to a smaller, more uniform range. The broad horn appears to enjoy greater normative appeal. . . . However, there’s trouble on the empirical side, for the attribution of broadly specified virtues is compromised by evidence of cognitive unreliability . . . but . . . If the empirical threat is ameliorated by indexing to very narrow domains, the resultant conception of virtue seems normatively slight (678–579).



Some virtue reliabilists seem poised to grasp the narrow horn of the dilemma (the horn that specifies reliable domains narrowly).<sup>46</sup> I'll neither endorse nor reject this move here. Instead, I'll explore a strategy that involves the broad horn—the horn that allegedly forces us back to empirical research showing that our faculties are unreliable.

Consider *vision*, broadly construed. And now consider the hallway studies. Suppose they show that most of us are unreliable at judging distances in hallways. It doesn't follow that our visual processing systems are unreliable—even in hallways. To see this, suppose I'm terrible at discerning whether an object in a hallway is (say) ten feet away or twelve. I might nevertheless be perfectly reliable with respect to the following claims, under the same conditions:

- I'm in a hallway.
- The hallway comprises walls and a floor.
- I'm not outdoors or in a basketball arena or a bar.
- There is (is not) a door to my right.
- There is an object before me.
- The object is (is not) red.
- The object is (is not) a beer bottle.
- The object is more than two feet away, and fewer than fifty.

And so on. Presumably, even though I'm unreliable with respect to the distance judgment that the lab coordinators assign as the target proposition, I'm reliable with respect to the propositions above. My visual inputs can be counted on to yield true output-beliefs. And if so, on virtue reliabilism, my visual faculty (even broadly construed) still enables me to know a lot, notwithstanding the fact the empirical research reveals an important respect in which I'm unreliable.

Crucially, this line of thought can be repeated with respect to other faculties (e.g., reasoning and memory, along with other sensory faculties, such as hearing and touch). Empirical research identifying the unreliability of those faculties vis-à-vis certain propositions under certain circumstances will not show that those faculties fail to yield knowledge about *other* propositions in the same conditions. This significantly undermines the support that Super-Strong Situationism-<sub>REL</sub> receives from the psychological research. That is to say, human cognitive faculties appear remarkably reliable over wide ranges of propositions even in those contexts where studies show us to be cognitively vulnerable in some respects. The unreliability claim doesn't generalize far enough to generate a skeptical threat.<sup>47</sup>

<sup>46</sup> See, e.g., Turri (forthcoming).

<sup>47</sup> Thanks to Jason Baehr and Christian Miller for helpful discussion here.

Let’s turn to a further underminer for Super-Strong Situationism-<sub>REL</sub>. If this claim is true, then human cognitive faculties are only very rarely reliable. But anyone who thinks that thereby has a prima facie reason to suspect that any belief she holds was unreliably formed. She therefore has reason to doubt Super-Strong Situationism-<sub>REL</sub> itself. Further, she has reason to doubt that the empirical research supporting the view was reliably conducted. And she has reason to doubt the reliability of her inference from the empirical data to Super-Strong Situationism-<sub>REL</sub>. Perhaps such prima facie defeaters can be overcome, but at this stage in the game, the burden is on the situationist to show how this might be done. Those who wish to defend Super-Strong Situationism-<sub>REL</sub> will need to address this problem.

To sum up: it appears that Pretty Strong Situationism-<sub>REL</sub> enjoys significant empirical support, but is ill-suited for use in an argument that sticks virtue responsibilism with the skeptic’s bill. And the stronger versions of Strong Situationism-<sub>REL</sub> face problems of self-defeat and insufficient empirical support. Thus, while virtue reliabilists should remain attuned to insights from empirical psychology, they need not feel threatened by the empirically based skeptical attacks that have been launched so far.

### C. OTHER VARIETIES OF RESPONSIBILIST VE

To this point, we’ve focused on strong conservative responsibilist VE and reliabilist VE. Let’s turn to the remaining species of responsibilism:

- *Weak conservative responsibilism*: responsibilist virtue concepts can supplement the treatment of traditional epistemological issues, such as the criteria, extent, and sources of our knowledge and justified belief. However, responsibilist virtues aren’t essential to solving traditional epistemological problems.
- *Weak autonomous responsibilism*: responsibilist virtue concepts can prove helpful in addressing problems and issues that, while outside the scope of traditional epistemology, are nevertheless epistemological. VE is largely *independent* of (but compatible with) traditional epistemology.
- *Strong autonomous responsibilism*: responsibilist virtue concepts cannot be employed to address traditional epistemological problems, even in part. However, responsibilist virtues point to cognitive ideals and research programs that should *replace* those of traditional epistemology.

Note first that none of the above views implies that responsibilist virtues are central to the analysis of knowledge. Thus, as far as these views are concerned, it could turn out that few of us possess responsibilist virtues, while most of us nevertheless possess wide swaths of knowledge. In short, these

versions of responsibilism don't face a *skeptical* threat from the situationist critique.

How about the empirical inadequacy charge? Start by noting that our three versions of responsibilism do not, by themselves, carry empirical commitments that are at odds with any sort of Strong Situationism-<sub>CHAR</sub>, or with the empirical research itself. These versions of responsibilism, just as such, take no stand about the distribution of responsibilist virtues. This point counsels caution about the idea that all versions of responsibilist VE are ipso facto subject to the situationist critique.

Are the remaining varieties of responsibilism off the hook? Not automatically. For even if the *views* as such don't conflict with the empirical research, the *projects* undertaken by proponents of responsibilist VE may still court such conflict. Further, proponents of the above views never hold them in the abstract. Instead, they hold them because the views fit with some particular virtue-oriented project. One doesn't typically start out as a certain kind of responsibilist, and then seek out particular responsibilist projects. In most cases, the order of explanation is the opposite. In order to see how our three varieties of responsibilism fare with respect to the situationist critique, we'll need to examine the empirical commitments involved in the relevant projects.

For this task, a representative sampling will have to do. We'll briefly consider one project characteristic of weak conservative responsibilism, weak autonomous responsibilism, and strong conservative responsibilism. In each case, we'll see that the projects demand only modest empirical commitments, so that they are compatible both with the extant psychological research and with some varieties of Strong Situationism-<sub>CHAR</sub>. This is important. While most of the attention in virtue epistemology has gone to strong conservative responsibilism and virtue reliabilism, perhaps the majority of possible VE projects lie outside these categories. Thus, even if strong conservative and reliabilist VE are in trouble, it would not follow that VE itself should be abandoned. Rather, the bulk of the remaining projects could continue unhindered.<sup>48</sup>

### 1. Baehr's Weak Conservative Responsibilism

Jason Baehr (2008, 2011) has argued that something like the exercise of responsibilist virtues is needed to supplement reliabilist accounts of "high-grade" knowledge and evidentialist accounts of epistemic justification. Without appeal to responsibilist virtues, he thinks, such accounts fail to state *sufficient* conditions for their target concepts.

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<sup>48</sup> Olin and Doris acknowledge this point (2013, note 7), but do not elaborate. By virtue of his aim to provide a situationist challenge to "all versions" of responsibilism, Alfano seems at least initially committed to denying that there are species of responsibilism that can steer clear of the empirical research (2012, p. 225).

Baehr eschews the project of giving intellectual character virtues a central role in perfectly *general* analyses of ordinary knowledge and non-reflective, non-evidential varieties of epistemic justification. He grants that much “low-grade” knowledge can be achieved in just the way reliabilists suggest. Likewise, he grants that there are species of epistemic justification that do not require the correct (and virtuous) assessment of evidence. In this respect, the claims he advocates are considerably weaker than those of (e.g.) Zagzebski, who provides perfectly general analyses of ordinary epistemic properties. Baehr’s aim is simply to show that analyses of certain epistemic statuses require supplementation via intellectual character virtues.

Baehr’s supplementation of reliabilism and evidentialism might nevertheless incur empirical costs. If “high-grade” knowledge and certain varieties of epistemic justification require the exercise of intellectual virtue, then situationist data indicating that most of us lack intellectual virtue will imply that few of us achieve these epistemic statuses. By way of brief reply, note first that it’s not a Moorean platitude that many of us possess a lot of “high-grade” knowledge and reflective, virtuously achieved, evidence-based epistemic justification. So wherever Baehr’s analyses lead us, they appear not to lead us into *skepticism*—at least not skepticism about many varieties of knowledge and justification. Further, Baehr’s accounts could be amended so that, like Zagzebski’s, they require *acts characteristic of intellectual virtue*, rather than *exercises* of intellectual virtue, for high-grade varieties of knowledge and justification.

These admittedly brief comments suffice to show that Baehr’s weak conservative responsibilism carries lean empirical commitments. The commitments it does carry *may*, conjoined with the findings of empirical psychology, imply that certain exalted epistemic states are rarely realized. But we might have expected as much anyway. That’s about as bad as the news can get. Baehr’s projects don’t court skepticism about ordinary knowledge or justification, and it is by no means clear that they court empirical inadequacy. It seems, therefore, that at least some lines of weak conservative responsibilist inquiry can coexist peacefully with the extant empirical research.

## 2. Roberts and Wood: Weak Autonomous Responsibilism

Robert Roberts and Jay Wood (2007) undertake a responsibilist project intended to provide a conceptual map of the intellectual virtues. The authors begin by locating their project in relation to traditional epistemology. They indicate no desire to provide a rigorous definition of knowledge. Indeed, they chide epistemologists caught up in post-Gettier (1963) attempts to patch, puncture, and replace the traditional justified true belief account of knowledge.

Though they don’t reject traditional epistemology altogether, Roberts and Wood defend an independent kind of epistemology intended to offer both

lofty cognitive ideals and valuable cognitive guidance. Their favored brand of epistemology features detailed characterizations of such intellectual virtues as courage, caution, firmness, charity, generosity, and open-mindedness. The relevant characterizations typically include inspiring biographies of exemplars of the relevant virtue. For instance, Jane Goodall's persistence in studying an unpredictable and dangerous species of chimpanzees makes her an exemplar of intellectual courage.<sup>49</sup> Roberts and Wood go on to provide analyses of the virtues, and employ their exemplars to glean insights for the analyses. (For example, Goodall's resistance to *fears* and *threats* in her exercises of courage reveals that courage involves managing fears and properly responding to threats.) What emerges from their project, Roberts and Wood hope, is an understanding of responsibilist virtues that clarifies the nature of these virtues and the relations between them, along with inspiration to seek the virtues and their attendant epistemic goods.

Central to their project is the goal of conceptual clarity regarding responsibilist virtues. Such a pursuit does not require the empirical claim that responsibilist virtues are widely distributed. Indeed, among the first conceptual points Roberts and Wood make about virtues is that they are *excellences*: "We propose that in general a human virtue is an acquired base of excellent functioning in some generically human sphere of activity that is challenging and important."<sup>50</sup> Given this, one might think that if their responsibilism predicts anything, it predicts that responsibilist virtues will be rare. Finding the virtues to be so might actually *confirm* this sort of responsibilism.

However, Roberts and Wood haven't engaged in a project that is devoid of empirical commitments. One might think that their project requires at least a few real-life exemplars in order to support their characterizations of individual virtues. That would be a modest empirical commitment, but a commitment nonetheless. But, on reflection, their project may not even require this much. If we were to learn, for instance, that Goodall is a fiction, thinking about her story would still teach us about courage. Indeed, one might think, if exemplars did not exist, we'd have to invent them. What's most important is the *role* exemplars play. According to Roberts and Wood, the exemplars of intellectual virtues, along with the corresponding analyses, function as cognitive ideals that can perform an important normative function: namely, they give us actions to emulate and characters to strive for. And we don't need *actual* exemplars for that. So for this portion of their project, virtue responsibilists require only very weak empirical commitments to the effect that someone could have had such-and-such a character. Clearly, no psychological study threatens such claims.<sup>51</sup>

<sup>49</sup> See Roberts and Wood (2007), 145–8 and 223–4.

<sup>50</sup> Roberts and Wood (2007), 59.

<sup>51</sup> Thanks to Nathan Ballantyne for helpful discussion here.

One further respect in which Roberts and Wood appear empirically committed concerns the possibility of our *acquiring* intellectual virtues, or at least emulating virtuous exemplars in such a way that we perform acts of intellectual virtue. And perhaps such a commitment renders their view vulnerable to situationist attack. This worry is similar to one raised next in connection with Kvanvig’s strong autonomous responsibilism, so we’ll address it there.<sup>52</sup>

### 3. Kvanvig: Strong Autonomous Responsibilism

Jonathan Kvanvig (1992) argues that epistemic properties such as knowledge and justification cannot be analyzed in terms of intellectual virtue. In his view, the problems and projects of traditional epistemology leave little room for intellectual virtue concepts. But while some epistemologists might see this as a reason to jettison the concept of an intellectual virtue, Kvanvig takes it as his mandate to reject much of traditional epistemology and assert a virtue-centric alternative.

Let’s set aside Kvanvig’s arguments that much of traditional epistemology should be rejected and focus instead on his positive proposal: that one goal of epistemology is to provide advice that enables us to achieve true belief, avoid error, and develop the intellectual virtues.<sup>53</sup> This side of the project can be separated from the side that rejects traditional epistemology. (Indeed, *any* virtue epistemologist can accept the positive side of Kvanvig’s project, provided it is suitably recast as a supplement to traditional epistemology.)

On Kvanvig’s view, “[w]hat we really want from an epistemologist is an account of the cognitive life of the mind that addresses our cognitive experience and helps us understand how to maximize our potential for finding truth and avoiding error” (vii). For Kvanvig, the move toward such an account requires a paradigm shift from an individualist, Cartesian picture of epistemology to a socially oriented epistemology that both accounts for the communal aspects of knowledge and features an emphasis on the intellectual virtues. Central to Kvanvig’s project, then, is the idea that epistemology should be reoriented so that it serves a regulative function: helping *us* together achieve a greater proportion of true beliefs. Kvanvig emphasizes that we must be raised in the right kind of intellectual setting in order to possess a range of intellectual goods, including knowledge, intellectual virtue, and appropriate attitudes toward skepticism. Part of the relevant kind of socialization involves the emulation of exemplars of intellectual virtue.

<sup>52</sup> Though the evaluation of weak autonomous responsibilism in this section has focused primarily on the work of Roberts and Wood, there are several other proponents of the view. See, e.g., Code (1987) and Hookway (2003). Of course, the relevant projects must be individually assessed with respect to the situationist challenge. Not all versions of weak autonomous responsibilism carry the same empirical commitments. The point of the present section has just been to show that this version of responsibilism *need not* require ambitious empirical claims.

<sup>53</sup> See Baehr (2008) for critical discussion of Kvanvig’s arguments against traditional epistemology.

Like the weak autonomous responsibilism developed by Roberts and Wood, Kvanvig's brand of responsibilism carries lean empirical commitments. First, at least as Kvanvig explicates it, it requires there to be exemplars of intellectual virtue for the rest of us to emulate. Second, it requires that those of us who don't currently possess these virtues can come to improve our proportion of true beliefs to false ones—perhaps via exercises or actions characteristic of intellectual virtue. Thus, Kvanvig seems committed to the claim that we can progress toward intellectual virtue.

As we've seen, the first commitment is modest—exemplars of intellectual virtue needn't be common (or even actual) in order to play their regulative role. Further, it is plausible that there are at least some exemplars of responsibilist virtues to be found.<sup>54</sup> At any rate, such an empirical commitment is in keeping with even a “situationist-friendly” assessment of the empirical data. What about the second commitment? Here again, we find a claim that is compatible with the idea that very few of us possess the responsibilist virtues. Kvanvig's project requires that we *can* acquire responsibilist virtues, but needn't presuppose much about the actual distribution of these traits across the population. The psychological evidence indicates *at most* that very few of us currently possess responsibilist virtues. But the fact that we don't *currently* possess these virtues is weak evidence for the claim that such virtues are unattainable for us. (Compare: that very few preschoolers can read, write, and do basic arithmetic is weak evidence for the claim that they can't learn to do so proficiently. The prospect of acquired skills is a fundamental assumption of the educational process. Why then dismiss a similar prospect in the case of intellectual virtue inculcation?) At any rate, by virtue of its modest empirical commitments, Kvanvig's version of strong autonomous responsibilism squares with the available data, thereby avoiding the situationist critique.<sup>55</sup>

## V. Toward Collaboration

Having considered a number of situationist challenges to various kinds of virtue epistemology, we've seen that, on the whole, VE is compatible with the findings of empirical psychology. To sum up:

- Strong conservative VE needn't involve commitment to there being many robustly virtuous cognitive agents. Its accounts of knowledge

<sup>54</sup> At least *prima facie*, Roberts and Wood (2007) and Baehr (2011) are replete with accounts of actual exemplars. See also King (2014b).

<sup>55</sup> A similar point applies to the claim that a central goal of education should be the inculcation of responsibilist virtues. For detailed discussion of this point, see Battaly (2014) and Baehr (forthcoming). See Miller (2014a), chapters 8 and 9, for discussion of related issues regarding the inculcation of moral virtue.

and justified belief require only that there be many *acts* of intellectual virtue.

- Strong conservative VE faces an explanatory task of accounting for there being many acts of intellectual virtue without there being many robustly virtuous agents. One way in which this task might be accomplished is by appeal to the independently motivated concept of *degrees of virtue*.
- Reliabilist VE appears poised to fend off the situationist attack. The empirical research does not support forms of situationism about our reliability that are strong enough to saddle the virtue reliabilist with skepticism.
- The remaining varieties of VE are modest in their empirical commitments, and do not require acts or exercises of intellectual virtue for knowledge or justified belief. Such species of VE thus steer clear of skeptical threats from situationism and empirical inadequacy.

If these conclusions are right, many VE projects can coexist peacefully with empirical psychology, and even with several versions of situationism.

But why settle for peaceful coexistence when there are significant opportunities for friendly collaboration? The latter are worth exploring. For example, virtue reliabilists should eagerly assimilate data that reveals contexts in which our cognitive faculties are unreliable with respect to certain propositions.<sup>56</sup> Such data can both improve our estimations about the extent of our knowledge and forewarn us of epistemically malign circumstances. Similarly, virtue responsibilists can and should mine the psychological literature for insights about the situations that make us more (or less) likely to act characteristic of intellectual virtue. Such insights, coupled with regulative ideals gleaned from epistemic exemplars and analyses of individual intellectual virtues, might offer significant cognitive guidance.

These suggestions are admittedly speculative. And given their speculative status, the suggestions do not call for an arranged marriage between virtue epistemology and empirical psychology. But given what might be gained via collaboration between these approaches, it seems reasonable to suggest a trial friendship.<sup>57</sup>

<sup>56</sup> For a model of how this might look, see Alvin Goldman’s extensive interaction with empirical psychology in Goldman (1986). For recent work joining together themes from epistemology with psychological research see Kornblith (1999), Kelly (2008), and Ballantyne (forthcoming).

<sup>57</sup> Thanks to Jason Baehr, Nathan Ballantyne, and Christian Miller for insightful comments and helpful discussion. This publication was made possible through the support of a grant from The Character Project at Wake Forest University and the John Templeton Foundation. The opinions expressed in this publication are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of The Character Project, Wake Forest University, or the John Templeton Foundation. Finally, thanks to Whitworth University for providing research leave for this project.



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