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Epistemic Situationism

An Extended Prolepsis

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2.1 Introduction

My 2012 paper questioned the empirical credentials of one brand of virtue epistemology: responsibilism.¹ The master argument for this challenge is an inconsistent triad consisting of *anti-skepticism*, *epistemic situationism*, and *virtue epistemology*. According to anti-skepticism, almost all humans have quite a bit of knowledge. According to epistemic situationism, most people's intellectual dispositions are not virtues because they are highly sensitive to seemingly trivial and epistemically irrelevant situational influences. According to virtue epistemology, knowledge is true belief acquired and retained through intellectual virtue. Depending on how "quite a bit of knowledge" is spelled out, the inconsistency of this triad is clear. One can escape it only by conceding to the skeptic, by rejecting the virtue-epistemic theory of knowledge, or by refuting epistemic situationism.

Since 2012, over two dozen further publications by other authors, along with a few of my own, have addressed this problem and related issues.² These papers have also raised doubts about the empirical credentials of virtue reliabilism. The present volume represents the first sustained attempt by the broader community to grapple with the issues raised by these seminal papers. Central questions include:

1. What sorts of epistemic dispositions (i.e., dispositions that lead to the formation, sustenance, modification, integration, and elimination of truth-apt mental states) does today's best science warrant belief in?

¹ This chapter would be worse than it is had it not been for the comments, criticisms, and suggestions I received from Abrol Fairweather, Carlos Montemayor, Matt Stichter, Adam Morton, Gerard Saucier, Sanjay Srivastava, Jacob Levernier, John Turri, Joe Hoover, Azim Shariff, Duncan Pritchard, Sara Hodges, Holly Arrow, Kathryn Iurino, and others.

² Publications by others include Battaly (2014), Blumenthal-Barby (forthcoming), Brogaard (2014), Fairweather & Montemayor (2014a, 2014b), Miller (2014a, 2014b), Olin & Doris (2014), Pritchard (2013, 2014), Carter et al. (2015), King (2014), Samuelson & Church (2015), Sherman (2015), Turri (2015b), and Carter & Gordon (2014). My own contributions to this controversy include Alfano (2012, 2013a, 2013b, 2014a, 2014b, 2014c, 2015, 2016) and Alfano & Skorburg (forthcoming).

2. Can the dispositions referred to in the answer to the first question be considered epistemic virtues or vices? Are they reliable, unreliable, responsible, irresponsible, or what?
3. How problematic would it be for various brands of virtue epistemology if epistemic virtues were rare or non-existent? By the same token, how problematic would it be for various brands of virtue epistemology if epistemic vices were rife?
4. In light of the answers to the previous questions, how, if at all, should we reform our ways of attributing (both verbally and mentally) epistemic virtues and vices to ourselves and one another?

In brief, here are my answers to these four questions:

1. We have little reason to doubt the reliability of our perceptual faculties in normal conditions, so basic “animal knowledge” (Sosa 2011) derived from these sources stands unchallenged by the empirical literature. Nevertheless, our inferential dispositions seem to consist largely of unreliable heuristics, and our motivating traits to find the truth and avoid error tend to be at best highly “local” (intellectual-courage-in-the-face-of-non-unanimous-dissent and creativity-while-in-a-good-mood), not “global” (intellectual courage or creativity without qualification).³ Nevertheless, the plausible, public *attribution* of global traits tends to function as a self-fulfilling prophecy; for instance, people who are called curious tend to behave more curiously, acquiring what I have elsewhere dubbed *factitious* virtue (Alfano 2013a).
2. Heuristics, at least as we actually tend to use them, are not intellectual virtues because they are not sufficiently reliable. In the same vein, local epistemic traits resemble virtues, but only in an attenuated sense because they tend to be too normatively uninspiring to merit the title. Just as being faithful-in-one’s-fashion is not a virtue, so intellectual-courage-in-the-face-of-non-unanimous-dissent is not a virtue. Factitious virtues may not be outright virtues, but because they arise in part through praise, they bear a more complex relation to normative concepts and vocabulary.
3. Virtue reliabilism, which defines knowledge in terms of reliable capacities to form and sustain beliefs, leads to skepticism about inference (not all inference, but huge swaths of it). Unless it recognizes factitious virtues, virtue responsibilism, which defines knowledge in terms of epistemically well-motivating traits of character, leads to a broader skepticism about most alleged knowledge.
4. We should withdraw many of our knowledge claims based on supposedly reliable inferences. We should go on attributing responsibilist virtues, but not vices, charitably to encourage the development of factitious responsibilist virtues and forestall the development of factitious vices.

³ Battaly (2014) draws on the same sources to argue for similar conclusions. She seems to have arrived at her views independently, if a few years later.

In the remainder of this chapter, I will defend these answers by addressing the spirited resistance that has been offered by proponents of virtue epistemology. I first consider the argument that the triad is consistent after all. In particular, I consider the idea that skepticism does not follow from the conjunction of epistemic situationism and virtue epistemology. Next, I consider two arguments that epistemic situationism is false on empirical grounds. I then consider arguments for weakening virtue epistemology so that, even when conjoined with epistemic situationism, it does not lead to skepticism. I conclude with a brief reflection on the replication crisis in psychology, which may turn out to moot epistemic situationism after all.

2.2 Objection One: Virtue is Not Required for Knowledge

As I mentioned in my thumbnail sketch of the master argument above, I've argued that since virtue responsibilists define knowledge in terms of epistemic virtues, lack of epistemic virtue would lead to skepticism. Linda Zagzebski, for instance, defines knowledge as "a state of true belief arising out of acts of intellectual virtue" (1996: 271). In this section, I will take epistemic situationism for granted and explore one way in which virtue epistemologists might forestall skepticism nonetheless. Though Zagzebski is not the only responsibilist out there, her work is canonical. I should therefore have taken into account in my previous work that, for Zagzebski, an act of intellectual virtue need not be the act of an intellectually virtuous person (someone with the trait in question). Instead, such an act need merely be the act that such a person would undertake if they were characteristically motivated (1996: 279). It's clear, then, that when I moved from the lack of responsibilist traits to the lack of knowledge, I committed an enthymeme, as Miller (2014a), King (2014), and Turri (current volume) point out.

However, this enthymeme can be made good in three different ways. First, I could simply point out that, although Zagzebski's view is widely known, other prominent virtue epistemologists such as Sosa (2011) and Greco (2009, 2010) place stronger, virtue-requiring conditions on knowledge. Sosa (2011) goes even further with his AAA account, according to which knowledge is true belief that is *accurate* (true), *adroit* (epistemically virtuous), and *apt* (accurate *because* adroit). According to this view, the cognitive agent needs not only to *be* virtuous but also to *manifest* her virtue in forming a belief. Sosa and Greco aren't responsibilists, but both have recently incorporated responsibilist elements into their views. Indeed, Sosa (2015: 64) has recently argued that "reliabilist competence-based virtue epistemology must be understood broadly [...] with responsibilist agential intellectual virtues at its core." In the context of the broader community of virtue epistemologists, then, Zagzebski's view actually appears to be idiosyncratically weak in this regard.

But even if she is right to have such a weak account of knowledge, the skeptical conclusion is difficult to avoid. To see why, suppose for the sake of argument that

it's true that most people lack responsibilist virtues. (If it's false, then the master argument fails anyway.) The challenge for Zagzebski and her fellow travelers is to fend off skepticism: their preferred outcome is that, even if epistemic situationism is true, responsibilism does not entail skepticism. Skepticism would straightforwardly follow if knowledge required *possession* of intellectual virtues. But it threatens even if knowledge is defined more weakly in terms of *acts* of intellectual virtue. After all, if most people lack intellectually virtuous traits, whence come these acts of intellectual virtue that give rise to knowledge? Consider openmindedness, for instance: if most people are not openminded as such, but only good-mood-openminded, how is it that they perform openminded acts when in a neutral or bad mood? Or consider intellectual courage: if most people are not intellectually courageous, but only intellectually-courageous-in-the-face-of-non-unanimous dissent, how is it that they perform intellectually courageous acts when faced with unanimous dissent?

One way to answer these questions is to insist that people actually do possess global intellectual virtues, but that just takes us back to square one. This “answer” is simply a flat denial of epistemic situationism, not a response that avoids skepticism while granting epistemic situationism for the sake of argument. A second option is to claim that the localizing conditions for the narrow virtues people tend to possess are actually the default: good-mood-openmindedness is all we really need to get lots of acts of openmindedness because, by and large, people tend to be in good moods. As a look around at the world will confirm, however, people do not tend by and large to be in good moods. A slightly better version of this reply would be to hold not that people tend to be in good moods generally but that they tend to be in good moods while forming beliefs (i.e., when it matters, epistemically speaking). But this is too heroic a role for epistemic luck to play. Maybe some people are sensitive enough about their own cognitive constitution that they avoid forming beliefs while angry or sad or disgusted, but most of us are not. Furthermore, even if this were true, it would be misguided. While the evidence does suggest that people are more openminded when in a good mood, it appears that they form more accurate memories while in a bad mood (Kensinger 2007). More broadly, according to Schaller & Cialdini (1990) positive moods seem to be conducive to divergent exploratory cognition (the context of discovery), while negative moods seem to be conducive to convergent and disconfirmatory cognition (the context of hypothesis-testing). This suggests that there is no optimal emotional or mood state for cognitive functioning, and that different affective orientations are more suitable to some cognitive goals while other affective orientations are more suitable to others—a point which Nietzsche made in section twelve of the third essay of the *Genealogy of Morals* (1887/1967) and which Nicole Smith explores in her sophisticated contribution to this volume.⁴

⁴ Note in addition that this point is inconsistent with the SSS (seat-shape-situation) framework developed by Sosa (current volume). Mood and emotion are clearly components of what he would call *shape*, but in Sosa's view, it would appear that there is a uniquely best (set of) shapes for the expression of a competence or virtue. On the contrary, different emotions and moods are suited to different epistemic tasks and goals.

A third option is to argue that, despite the lack of global intellectual virtues and the fact that people do not systematically find themselves in the appropriate eliciting conditions for narrow intellectual virtues, they do manage to routinely commit acts of intellectual virtue. That is, people tend to do what the virtuous person would do for the reason the virtuous person would do it—even though they lack the virtue in question. This looks an awful lot like a disguised way of claiming that people do in fact possess global intellectual virtues, and hence of denying the proposition that we are allegedly granting for the sake of argument. What would explain the fact that, despite their lack of global virtues, people tend to be motivated as the virtuous person would be motivated and act as the virtuous person would act? Epistemic luck? That seems unlikely, and probably wouldn't help anyway.⁵

If the foregoing discussion is on the right track, then none of the virtue epistemologist's available responses to epistemic situationism are likely to forestall the skeptical conclusion. But even if my arguments so far fail, an additional problem threatens Zagzebski's (2010; forthcoming) "exemplarist" semantics for moral terms, which presupposes widespread virtue possession because it relies on Kripkean (1972) direct reference to exemplars of good character. The basic idea of this view is that all other normative terms are defined by reference to a good person. A good person is someone *like that* (referring ostensibly to an exemplar), and a right action is what such a person would perform in relevantly similar circumstances. But if intellectually good people are rare, then there may not be enough of them to ground the meaning of the term "good person." And if the sole foundational term of Zagzebski's semantics is ungrounded, so too are all the non-foundational terms.

How widely do virtues need to be distributed for Zagzebski's semantics to work? One could be forgiven for thinking that the answer is, "quite broadly, indeed." Zagzebski herself says that "given the importance of moral understanding by as many people as possible in a moral community, it is important that the ability to identify exemplars is spread as widely as possible" (2010: 51, n.6). This quotation refers to the ability to identify exemplars, not to exemplars themselves, but even if people have this ability, if they lack exemplars (and sufficient and sufficiently rich acquaintance with these) to ostend, all will be for naught. If there were a few universally recognized exemplars, this would not be a problem. This is presumably Zagzebski's private take on the matter, as the unacknowledged source of her exemplarism is Peter Abelard's "exemplar theory" of Christ and the atonement. But in a pluralistic semi-secularized world such appeals to religious figures cut no ice. Perhaps more to the point, a fine-tuned sensitivity to exemplars would itself be a virtue, so Zagzebski's virtue semantics presupposes the widespread instantiation of at least one virtue: the one that lets us detect virtuous exemplars. Furthermore, Zagzebski explicitly commits herself to the idea that there are plenty of virtuous people lying around waiting to be ostended when she says that

⁵ This is related to objection four from Turri and (especially) Pritchard, which I discuss below.

“many of us have known persons whose goodness shines forth from the depths of their being” (1996: 83)—whatever that means.

One might think this is too quick. After all, by relying on experts, we can refer to uranium despite the fact that it’s an extremely rare element. Perhaps good people are like uranium: by relying on experts, we can refer to good people despite the fact that they’re rare. But this solution raises a problem about expertise: who’s an expert on who’s a good person? Good people, presumably. After all, loving the good and hating evil are both qualities constitutive of goodness in and of themselves (Hurka 2001). In the epistemic context, this translates to loving the truth and hating error. According to the expertise rebuttal, then, the good people are to be identified by the good people—by themselves. So instead of pointing with the index finger and saying “that person,” Zagzebski’s theory relies on pointing with the thumb and saying “me” or perhaps “us.” This is troublesome for several reasons. According to Zagzebski (2010: 52), our good-person-ostending is guided by the sentiment of admiration, which leads to emulation. This suggests that good people need to admire themselves and be motivated to emulate themselves. This in turn suggests that good people can’t be modest or humble. Instead, they should be like Donald Trump, who on Christmas 2013 tweeted, “The new Pope is a humble man, very much like me, which probably explains why I like him so much!” Together with the admission that virtue is rare, this suggests that there will be a lot of misinformation about who is a good person. Good people, with well-tuned sentiments of admiration, will admire themselves; but by the same token, bad people, with poorly tuned senses of admiration, will often admire themselves too, and may fail to admire the good people.

In this section I’ve sown doubts about whether the virtue epistemologist can take epistemic situationism on board yet avoid falling into skepticism. All virtue epistemologies face difficulties on this front. Responsibilist virtue epistemologies that follow Zagzebski’s prominent lead face additional—perhaps insuperable—difficulties. In the remainder of this chapter, I consider three further ways of handling epistemic situationism. Two of them deny epistemic situationism on empirical grounds, arguing that there is in fact evidence for global epistemic virtues. The final response is a version of what I have previously (2013a) called the “retreat,” which is to propose a weaker version of virtue epistemology that is consistent with both the empirical evidence and anti-skepticism.

2.3 Objection Two: The “Big Five” to the Rescue

The situationist challenge relies on the claim that we lack sufficient evidence to believe that global traits of character as they are understood in virtue theory—whether moral or epistemic—are achievable for a sufficiently large proportion of people. This claim is often abbreviated into the much stronger claim that global character traits do not exist, but a careful review of the literature reveals that this is only an abbreviation. In response to the abbreviated claim, it might be argued that global traits of character *do* exist and

that, in fact, we have strong empirical evidence that they exist from the enormous literature on the so-called “Big Five” or Five Factor Model (McCrae & John 1992), which posits that the five dominant dimensions of personality differences are Openness, Conscientiousness, Extroversion, Agreeableness, and Neuroticism.

Doris (2002) and Prinz (2009) were the first to consider this argument in detail, and also the first to reject it. Several difficulties beset the appeal to the Big Five. First, Big Five traits are best understood as broad generalizations about behavior rather than as character traits in the virtue-theoretic sense: they do not license the prediction of particular behaviors, thoughts, deliberative strategies, perceptual sensitivities, or emotional reactions. Someone who is very high in agreeableness may nevertheless act aggressively. Someone who is very low in extroversion may nevertheless feel comfortable in a social setting. Someone who is very high in neuroticism may fail to be troubled by a disturbing episode, while someone who is very high in openness may nevertheless fail to deliberate responsibly about another person’s suggestion. Virtues as traditionally conceived are meant to license the prediction and explanation of particular cognitions, affects, and behaviors.⁶ Big Five traits at best license retrospective explanations, not predictions.

Second, as Miller (2014a) points out in his paper on the Big Five and situationism, these traits appear to be largely heritable, whereas character traits are meant to be acquired during the agent’s lifetime. Of course, wearing earrings is also heritable; we should be careful not to conflate heritability with *genetic* heritability. But McCrae et al. (2000: 174–5) insist that the kind of heritability they have in mind with the Big Five is genetic, not epigenetic or environmental. In response to this, one could give up the idea that agents are responsible for their own character or that character is acquired during the lifespan, which would in turn allow one to give up the claim that virtues and vices are acquirable—but it’s hard to find people who are willing to do this. Homer might be an exception: nobility seems to be largely heritable in the *Iliad*. But unless we are going to return to a pre-Socratic model of virtue, this is not an option in the twenty-first century.

Third, the Big Five are not normatively loaded in a way that would help in making virtue (or vice) attributions. For instance, it’s neither a virtue nor a vice to be extroverted. One might think that some of the factors—or at least some of their subfactors—would be normatively adequate, but, as Miller (2014a) has argued, this does not appear to be the case. In fact, there is a historical reason for this. When personality psychology was being developed in the first half of the twentieth century, the same zeitgeist that inspired the logical positivists to reject normative language as non-truth-apt (Ayer 1936) also led prominent personality psychologists such as Allport & Odbert (1936) to eschew evaluative language in their theories of personality. For instance,

⁶ Or at least what I’ve dubbed “high-fidelity” intellectual virtues require this much (Alfano 2013a). It’s unclear exactly which intellectual virtues are high fidelity and which are low fidelity. For instance, Carter & Gordon (2014) argue that I am wrong to think that openmindedness is high fidelity.

evaluative terms (“stupid,” “wicked,” “outstanding”), terms that name sentiments (“sad,” “angry”), and terms that were judged by the theorist to be response-dependent (“charming,” “dangerous,” “disgusting”) were not included in the psycholexical foundations of the Big Five. It should come as no surprise, then, that the Big Five model is normatively incommensurable with virtues or vices as ethicists and epistemologists understand them.

For these reasons, to date only one paper has invoked the Big Five to defend virtue theory against situationism, though primarily in the moral rather than the epistemic domain (Jayawickreme et al. 2014). The authors of this work develop a refined version of the aggregation argument due to Epstein (1983), who suggested that traits should be understood not as causally efficacious influences on every episode of behavior but in aggregate. From a virtue-theoretic point of view, aggregation is only a partial solution. Some virtues seem to require perfect or near-perfect consistency: if you abstain from sexual abuse of children 364 days a year, it seems preposterous to say that you have the virtue of self-control. Jayawickreme et al. (2014: 19) acknowledge this point but contend that it may apply to some virtues but not others. Which? They don’t provide a criterion, but place “everyday moral traits such as fairness and honesty” on one side of the divide (for which aggregation works) and sexual propriety and homicide-avoidance on the other. Jayawickreme et al. (2014) go on to contend that agreeableness and conscientiousness are associated with such low-fidelity virtues as compassion, prudence, and reliability. However, it should be noted that both agreeableness and conscientiousness are associated with *greater* willingness to shock an innocent stranger with up to 450 V of electricity in a Milgram-style experiment (Bègue et al. 2015).

However, one might think that judgment has been passed too quickly. It turns out that when a sixth factor is included, things look more promising. Based on factor analysis of lexical similarities across a variety of languages, Lee & Ashton (2004), for instance, posit that the sixth factor is Honesty/Humility. But Lee & Ashton (2004), like Allport & Odbert (1936), intentionally exclude highly evaluative terms from their analysis, so the same problem that plagues the Big Five also infects their Big Six.⁷ Saucier (2009), by contrast, explicitly set out to construct a Big Six taxonomy that included evaluative terms. The six factors in this model are Conscientiousness, Propriety (lack of cruelty, corruption, disgust, wickedness, evil, and insanity), Agreeableness, Emotional Resiliency (lack of depression, cowardice, fear, frustration, gloom, and sadness), Extroversion, and Originality (intelligence, talent, admirability, wisdom). This research program is only in its infancy, so it’s hard to say how successful Saucier’s version of the Big Six taxonomy will be, but early indications suggest that it is empirically better supported than the Big Five. More importantly for virtue theory, Saucier’s

⁷ One might be forgiven for wondering why honesty and humility were included when “highly evaluative” terms were excluded from the analysis. The answer is that personality psychologists working in this area have made somewhat haphazard but intuitive distinctions between (almost) purely evaluative concepts and what we in philosophy, following Bernard Williams, would call “thick” concepts—and that they excluded only the former from their analysis.

deliberate inclusion of evaluative, sentimental, and response-dependent terminology makes his version of the Big Six a better candidate for identifying virtues and vices—including intellectual virtues and vices such as intellect and originality.

Unfortunately, all of the *other* problems with the Big Five remain unabated. There is as yet no evidence that Big Six personality traits can be acquired. Nor is there evidence that Big Six traits could license the prediction of particular behaviors, thoughts, deliberative strategies, perceptual sensitivities, or emotional reactions. The propriety dimension does correlate with having *at least once in one's lifetime* engaged in morally questionable behaviors such as drunk driving, bar brawls, shoplifting, vehicle theft, assault, and delinquent gang activity (Simms 2007), but a single action does not in general constitute a vice, and people who are low in propriety may never engage in or even contemplate any such activities.

Perhaps more to the point, no one has yet mounted a defense of virtue *epistemology* using the Big Five or Big Six. As yet, the only defense has focused on virtue *ethics*, and as we have seen in this section, that defense is itself questionable. Perhaps this should be unsurprising. The dimensions of the Big Five and Big Six personality inventories are not meant to characterize the extent to which people *get it right* in their thought, feeling, and behavior, just the extent to which they tend to engage in certain patterns of thought, feeling, and behavior. As far as the psychologists are concerned, an agreeable person is an agreeable person, whether she is in the company of charmers or vulgarians. As far as psychologists are concerned, an open person is an open person, whether he is conversing with Socrates or a sophist. If epistemic virtues are meant to help us believe the truth and avoid error, then Big Five and Big Six traits are simply irrelevant to epistemic virtues. Indeed, unless this branch of personality psychology starts making more nuanced hypotheses and attending to *normative* criteria, it will never lend aid or comfort to the virtue theorist.

2.4 Objection Three: C.A.P.S. to the Rescue

“C.A.P.S.” stands for “cognitive-affective personality system”—a framework developed by Walter Mischel and Yuichi Shoda (1995) to bring together personists and situationists under an interactionist big tent. The framework is complicated and seems to be ill-understood by the philosophers who draw on it, so I will tarry over some of its details. C.A.P.S. is a theory about which kinds of entities belong in the ontology of a first-order psychological theory. Those entities include (features of) situations, cognitive-affective units, and behaviors. Situations themselves are subdivided into intrapsychological situations (e.g., moods), interpsychological situations (e.g., being threatened or teased), and extrapsychological situations (e.g., being in a loud environment). Cognitive-affective units are subdivided into encodings (e.g., categories for the self, others, events, and situations), expectancies and beliefs, affects and emotions, goals and values, and plans (Mischel & Shoda 1995). According to C.A.P.S., situations

differentially influence cognitive-affective units which differentially influence one another and together conspire to produce behaviors, which in turn influence situations. A first-order psychological theory counts as C.A.P.S.-theoretic if and only if it refers to the entities in the C.A.P.S. ontology and specifies the relations between them in ways that the C.A.P.S. framework sanctions. Thus, a C.A.P.S.-theoretic virtue psychology—a first-order theory that might substantiate the hypothesis that virtues as traditionally conceived are empirically supportable—would be framed in terms of the ontology furnished by the C.A.P.S. framework. Such a theory could then be tested to the extent possible given constraints of time, budget, experimental design, and research ethics.

In other words, *C.A.P.S. is not a theory of personality*. As Shoda & Mischel (2006) emphasize, it is a framework or meta-theory from which to build a theory of personality, and is intentionally “content free.” Despite this, Nancy Snow (2009: 13) suggests that it is “plausible to understand virtues as traditionally conceived as a subset of C.A.P.S. traits.” Daniel Russell (2009: 269; see also 2015) contends that a virtue as traditionally conceived is a particular kind of “pattern of cognitive-affective processes” in the C.A.P.S. vein. Jonathan Webber (2013) argues that C.A.P.S. “confirms the possibility of virtue.” All of the above are philosophers arguing from a misunderstanding of the C.A.P.S. framework for the empirical adequacy of virtue *ethics*, but some defenders of virtue *epistemology* also draw on the C.A.P.S. framework to bolster their arguments (Fairweather & Montemayor forthcoming).

However, once we recognize that C.A.P.S. is not a theory of personality, it is clear that C.A.P.S. lends no aid or comfort to virtue ethics and virtue epistemology in their fight against situationism. C.A.P.S. merely spells out what a theory of personality (and hence of virtuous personality) would look like. It is not itself such a theory. Philosophers who have relied on C.A.P.S. seem—one and all—to have misunderstood this point. It’s therefore worth emphasizing that no C.A.P.S.-theoretic model of virtuous personality has been formulated, let alone tested. Moreover, the C.A.P.S. ontology is incommensurable with the ontology of traditional virtue theory. Just to name the most glaring example, C.A.P.S. countenances powerful, unconscious influences of subtle, seemingly irrelevant intrapsychological situations on cognitive-affective units. There is no traditional virtue epistemology that makes a place for such processes in its ontology. Arguably, no normatively adequate virtue epistemology should countenance such processes.

But suppose that I’m wrong about this and that someone will eventually come along and construct a C.A.P.S.-theoretic virtue psychology. The question then would be whether there is any empirical support for that theory. One would have to actually do the theoretical and empirical dirty work to *establish* whether the theory was supported. There is some support for some first-order C.A.P.S.-theoretic models. For instance, Shoda et al. (1994) drew on nearly a decade of empirical research to argue for a C.A.P.S.-theoretic psychology of American children at a summer camp. This theory

had five situations (peer approach, peer tease, adult praise, adult warn, and adult punish), five behaviors (verbal aggression, physical aggression, whining, compliance, and friendliness), and no specified cognitive-affective units. Their meticulous work on this relatively modest model revealed consistency coefficients of 0.19 for friendliness, 0.28 for whining, 0.41 for compliance, 0.32 for physical aggression, and 0.47 for verbal aggression—higher than is often found (Mischel 1968, but still nothing like what one would need to reliably predict and explain particular behaviors (let alone cognitions and affects).

Thus, despite the claims by Snow, Russell, and Webber that C.A.P.S. already confirms the possibility of virtue, at best C.A.P.S. provides a framework for the development of a theory of virtue that could subsequently be tested. In context, then, we can see that the task of crafting and confirming a C.A.P.S.-theoretic virtue psychology would be monumental indeed. Thus, even in the best-case scenario, C.A.P.S. currently lends no credibility to traditional virtue theory. To reiterate, the best-case scenario is that a merely possible theory will someday be corroborated by hitherto non-existent data.

2.5 Objection Four: Abilism and Epistemic Dependence

The final objection I consider in this chapter comes from John Turri (current volume) and Duncan Pritchard (2014). Virtue reliabilism as it has been discussed thus far is the view that knowledge is true belief that is due to a reliable disposition of the cognitive agent. Though we find it convenient to say that some dispositions are reliable and others unreliable, cognitive dispositions differ in their reliability in a gradable rather than an absolute way. We judge a belief to be (categorically) reliably produced if it is produced (comparatively) reliably *enough*. Another way of putting this is that knowledge is true belief that manifests cognitive ability, and the level of ability in question comes on a sliding scale. We judge a belief to be (categorically) a manifestation of ability if it is (comparatively) a manifestation of *enough* ability. (Or enough of a manifestation of ability; the two can come apart.) Yet another way of putting this is that knowledge is true belief that is the product of cognitive agency, and that the level of cognitive agency in question comes on a sliding scale. We judge a belief to be (categorically) a product of cognitive agency if it is (comparatively) a manifestation of *enough* cognitive agency. (Or enough of a manifestation of cognitive agency; again, the two can come apart.) Reliability, cognitive ability, cognitive agency—a rose by any other name would smell as sweet. The point is that a *threshold* needs to be crossed before we are willing to say that someone's true belief counts as knowledge.

Although the details of their accounts differ, Pritchard and Turri both argue that the key to successfully revising virtue epistemology is lowering the threshold. For Turri (current volume), knowledge is to be defined as a “true belief manifesting cognitive ability,” or, more fully, “*approximately true belief manifesting cognitive power*.” Cognitive ability or power in turn is defined thus (following Doris 2002: 19):

If a person possesses a cognitive ability to detect the truth (of a certain sort when in certain conditions), then when she exercises that ability and forms a belief (on relevant matters and in relevant conditions) she will form a *true belief* at a rate exceeding chance.⁸

From here, the revision or rescue of virtue epistemology is straightforward: clearly, when people use heuristics, they exercise *some* degree of cognitive ability. The availability and representativeness heuristics are better than *chance*, after all. So, when they get it right by using the availability heuristic (or any other heuristic that works better than chance), they know what they truly believe. Note that this is a significant lowering of the threshold. As long as the cognitive agent is *better than chance*, she's good enough. Her true belief might not be reliably produced, but it is produced by a disposition that's better than chance. It's worth emphasizing here that reliability is typically understood to set a very high bar. Although it is hard to pin them down on an exact probability of verisimilitude, reliabilists often discuss probabilities greater than 0.90. Goldman (1986: 51) flirts with, but does not settle on, a probability threshold of 0.99. Adler (2005) considers a case where the threshold is 0.999. By contrast, Turri (2015a) as argued that at least *some* cases of knowledge (such as knowledge produced by explanatory reasoning) are unreliably produced. His claim in this context is that some true beliefs produced by heuristics are further examples of such knowledge.

Pritchard (2014) argues in a similar way that people who arrive at true beliefs via heuristics can be knowers. For him, the key distinction is between robust and modest virtue epistemologies.⁹ Robust virtue epistemology defines knowledge purely in terms of truth, belief, and virtue. Modest virtue epistemology, by contrast, adds a condition related to epistemic luck. For independent reasons, Pritchard rejects robust virtue epistemology, so he sees the fact that it is inconsistent with epistemic situationism merely as further evidence in favor of modest virtue epistemology. But is modest virtue theory threatened as well? Not according to Pritchard. The further condition he adds to knowledge is *epistemic dependency*, which has both positive and negative aspects:

It is positive when an agent exhibits a relatively low degree of cognitive agency, and yet qualifies as having knowledge nonetheless due to factors outwith her cognitive agency, such as epistemically friendly features of the environment. [...] And it is negative when an agent exhibits a high degree of cognitive agency—such that they would ordinarily count as having knowledge—and yet they lack knowledge nonetheless due to factors outwith their cognitive agency.

For instance, someone who naively asks a knowledgeable passerby for directions to a landmark can end up knowing the way to the landmark, despite exercising a relatively low degree of cognitive agency.¹⁰ By contrast, even a thorough and careful investigator can be fooled by an epistemically treacherous environment, and hence end up with true beliefs that do not count as knowledge despite exercising a high degree of cognitive agency. Pritchard contends that people who get things right when using heuristics or

⁸ Though I should note that Doris says “markedly above chance,” not just “exceeding chance.”

⁹ For more on this distinction, see Kallestrup & Pritchard (2013).

¹⁰ The example is due to Lackey (2007).

when openminded-because-in-a-good mood are like the person who naively asks someone for directions: despite exercising a low degree of cognitive agency, their true beliefs count as knowledge. After all, they did exercise *some* cognitive agency (they used a heuristic rather than flipping a coin or deciding arbitrarily what to believe; they were luckily openminded), and that was enough, given their epistemically friendly environment. Pritchard goes so far as to say that,

in order for the situationist challenge to impact even on modest virtue epistemology it needs to demonstrate in a wide range of cases not just that the agent's cognitive success, where it occurs, is not primarily creditable to her exercise of her cognitive abilities / intellectual virtues, but moreover that the agent's cognitive success is not *in any significant way* the product of her cognitive abilities / intellectual virtues.

Like Turri, then, Pritchard wants to lower the threshold: as long as the dispositions that lead to true beliefs involve some degree of cognitive agency, they can give us knowledge.

If virtue epistemology is revised as Turri and Pritchard suggest, epistemic situationism no longer threatens to lead us into skepticism.¹¹ However, it's important to emphasize just how radical Turri's and Pritchard's proposals are. They verge on replacing "∀" with "∃." Traditionally, virtue epistemologies have held that a true belief counts as knowledge only if epistemic virtue played a primary role in its acquisition. Now the claim is that a true belief counts as knowledge only if epistemic virtue played some role, however minimal, in its acquisition. (For Turri this holds generally, whereas for Pritchard it holds when epistemic dependence lowers the threshold.) It should come as no surprise, then, that both Turri and Pritchard have an ambivalent relation to the label "virtue epistemologist." Pritchard calls his own view *anti-luck virtue epistemology* because it countenances epistemic dependency as an independent contributor to knowledge. In his recent work, Turri (2015b; forthcoming) has abandoned the label entirely, instead calling his view *abilism*.¹²

Within this dialectic, then, following Turri or Pritchard should be seen as a concession to epistemic situationism. Robust virtue epistemology is abandoned in favor of a weaker theory of knowledge. It's a concession that I am happy to accept, but some virtue epistemologists may find it too much to stomach. In these kinds of arguments, it's often hard to find any principled position that is also reasonable (or a reasonable position that is also principled). I'll try, however, to raise some doubt about the lowering of the threshold. Consider a student taking a multiple choice test, with four potential answers per question. As in the popular game show, *Who Wants to be a Millionaire?*, she has a "lifeline": once during the test, she can ask the teacher to eliminate two of the four

¹¹ Sosa (current volume) also seems to lower the bar in this way. He argues that virtue theorists "should accept that there are no virtues of the sort *virtue theory had imagined*, since, after all, we are *less* robustly, globally virtuous than we had believed commonsensically," but that the more fragmented and less reliable dispositions left in the wake of this admission can still be considered virtues.

¹² It is unfortunate that this label is homonymous with the term that designates bias against people with disabilities.

potential answers for a given question. Suppose that she encounters a question where she has no clue which answer is right. She uses her lifeline, reducing the number of potential answers to two, then guesses. As it turns out, she guesses correctly. Does it make sense to say that she knows the answer to this question? One might object that she doesn't believe that she got it right, since she was guessing. Suppose further, then, that she had already decided that one of the four potential answers was wrong, and that *it* was the one she didn't choose after eliminating two others with her lifeline. Now she does believe that the selected answer is correct. Does she know? Virtue epistemologists may be hard-pressed to admit this, but on Turri's and Pritchard's views, she does know. After all, she did manifest cognitive ability (Turri): she used a lifeline to narrow the choices. And her success is, in a significant way, due to her exercise of cognitive agency (Pritchard). One might worry that we may end up counting too many beliefs as knowledge.

2.6 Conclusions

I've argued that extant responses to epistemic situationism fall into one of three categories. First, there are failed attempts to show that, even if epistemic situationism is true, virtue epistemology is not led into skepticism, based on the distinction between virtuous traits and virtuous acts. Second, there are empirical arguments against epistemic situationism that appeal to the Big Five (or Big Six), or to C.A.P.S. Third, there are concessions that radically revise virtue epistemology by significantly lowering the bar for what counts as knowledge. Such revisionary accounts include both Pritchard's anti-luck virtue epistemology and Turri's abilist epistemology. In this final section, I explore an alternative response that casts doubt on epistemic situationism itself by referring to the emerging *replication crisis* in psychological science. This argument is purely negative, unlike the appeals to the Big Five and C.A.P.S., in that it alleges that the evidence *for* epistemic situationism is questionable, not that there is positive evidence regarding epistemic virtues. It is therefore weaker than the empirical defenses considered above.

Epistemic situationism is an empirical proposition about how actual human animals think, feel, decide, and behave in epistemic contexts. In my own work, I've framed this proposition as an inference to the best explanation of decades of work in psychological science, especially social psychology. Over the last few years, though, psychological science in general and social psychology in particular have come in for serious methodological criticism. As anyone familiar with the philosophy of science knows, scientific results should be reproducible. If one lab finds that X predicts Y or that A's effect on B is mediated or moderated by C, then another lab employing the same methodology with a similar pool of participants should find the same. Naturally, data are noisy, so not every attempt to replicate an effect will succeed, but large-scale systematic attempts to replicate should succeed.

Recent systematic efforts to perform such replications, though, indicate that fewer than half of the effects documented in prominent psychological journals can be reproduced and that when effects are reproduced their sizes are much smaller.¹³ Not all of the effects studied by the replicators are relevant to epistemic situationism, of course, and not every effect relevant to epistemic situationism has received the replication treatment. This means that it would be premature to question the abductive inference to epistemic situationism as a whole. Nevertheless, there are significant grounds for caution. The evidence for epistemic situationism falls into several categories (for more detail, see Alfano 2013a, Chapters 5 and 6):

- *Social* effects on belief-formation and -expression such as the Asch paradigm and pluralistic ignorance;
- Use of unreliable *heuristics* such as availability, representativeness, and recognition building on research by Slovic, Lichtenstein, Kahneman, Tversky, and Gigerenzer;
- *Mood* effects on belief-formation and -revision, and
- Effects consistent with the *embodied and metaphorical cognition* approach inspired by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson (2003) and investigated by, among others, Jonathan Bargh.

Efforts to replicate studies in these areas have met with uneven success. Social effects seem to be robust, if weaker than we were initially led to believe. Likewise, heuristics replicate, though with weaker effects than originally documented. The effects of mood are harder to replicate, and replications of embodied and metaphorical cognition almost always fail. In light of these mixed results, it would seem that the heuristics-based challenge to reliabilism about inference (Alfano 2014c) still stands. It might be prudent for the moment, however, to suspend judgment about both responsibilism and the situationist challenge to responsibilism.

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¹³ See Klein et al. (2014), Klein et al. (2015), Ebersole et al. (forthcoming), and Open Science Collaboration (2015).

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