Epistemic Situationism

EDITED BY
Abrol Fairweather
and Mark Alfano
## Contents

*Contributors*  
vii

**Introduction: Epistemic Situationism**  
*Abrol Fairweather*  
1

1. *Is Every Epistemology a Virtue Epistemology?*  
*Lauren Olin*  
20

2. *Epistemic Situationism: An Extended Prolepsis*  
*Mark Alfano*  
44

3. *Virtue Epistemology in the Zombie Apocalypse: Hungry Judges, Heavy Clipboards, and Group Polarization*  
*Berit Brogaard*  
62

4. *Situationism and Responsibilist Virtue Epistemology*  
*James Montmarquet*  
77

5. *Virtue Theory Against Situationism*  
*Ernest Sosa*  
90

6. *Intellectual Virtue Now and Again*  
*Christopher Lepock*  
116

7. *Responsibilism out of Character*  
*Kurt Sylvan*  
135

8. *Epistemic Situationism and Cognitive Ability*  
*John Turri*  
158

9. *Epistemic Situationism, Epistemic Dependence, and the Epistemology of Education*  
*I. Adam Carter and Duncan Pritchard*  
168

10. *The Situationist Challenge to Educating for Intellectual Virtues*  
*Jason Baehr*  
192

11. *Feminist Responsibilism, Situationism, and the Complexities of the Virtue of Trustworthiness*  
*Heidi Grasswick*  
216

12. *Moods and their Unexpected Virtues*  
*Nicole Smith*  
235

*Index*  
257
Contributors

MARK ALFANO, Delft University of Technology and Australian Catholic University
JASON BAEHIR, Loyola Marymount University
BERIT BROGAARD, University of Miami
J. ADAM CARTER, University of Glasgow
ABROL FAIRWEATHER, San Francisco State University
HEIDI GRASSWICK, Middlebury College
CHRISTOPHER LEPOCK, Athabasca University
JAMES MONTMARQUET, Tennessee State University
LAUREN OLIN, University of Missouri-St. Louis
DUNCAN PRITCHARD, University of Edinburgh
NICOLE SMITH, University of Texas-Austin
ERNEST SOSA, Rutgers University
KURT SYLVAN, University of Southampton
JOHN TURRI, University of Waterloo
Introduction
Epistemic Situationism

Abrol Fairweather

The essays collected here constitute the first sustained examination of epistemic situationism, the clash between virtue epistemology and situationist research in social psychology. With details to follow on both, let’s quickly explain how “epistemic” and “situationism” are to be understood in this debate. Situationism in philosophy began as a challenge to the psychology of character traits (e.g., “Jones is courageous, nervous, and open-minded”), specifically targeting virtue theories in ethics that rely on a trait-based psychology, (virtues and vices are positive and negative character traits respectively). A lineage of increasingly sophisticated research in social psychology appears to show that (often trivial) environmental variables have greater explanatory power in actual human behavior than character traits. Our familiar practice of explaining an agent’s behavior as the product of their character is misguided because variables in the environment are what really cause human behavior, not internal character traits. Situationists claim that social psychology falsifies character-based psychology, and thus any character-based ethics (virtue ethics) as well.

As a first approximation, epistemology is the branch of philosophy that pursues fundamental questions about the nature of knowledge: what is the definition of knowledge? Is knowledge possible? If so, what are the fundamental sources of knowledge? Since the publication of Ernest Sosa’s The Raft and the Pyramid (1980) and Linda Zagzebski’s Virtues of the Mind (1996), many contemporary epistemologists have defended virtue-theoretic answers to these epistemological questions. In the process, virtue epistemologists raised (or renewed) important questions about the value of knowledge, understanding, and wisdom. While there are internal differences within virtue epistemology between responsibilists and reliabilists (discussed further below), all virtue epistemologists analyze epistemic achievements in terms of epistemic virtues and vices in some fashion. The crux of the problem explored in the current volume is that virtue epistemology appears to assume the same type of character-based psychology that virtue ethics does, and thus appears equally subject to the objections raised by situationist social psychology.
Virtue epistemology continues to flourish in both responsibilist (Baehr 2011) and reliabilist forms (Sosa 2015), and is increasingly pursued in applied areas such as education, feminism, and social justice (see especially Fricker 2007). On traditional questions about the nature of knowledge and justification, epistemic externalists found virtue epistemology attractive because many problems facing process reliabilism (e.g., epistemic luck, the generality problem, and the value problem) find nice solutions by shifting the target of epistemic evaluation away from impersonal processes to agent-level cognitive abilities and intellectual character traits. Epistemic internalists have reasons to find virtue epistemology attractive because motivational states are essential to Aristotelian virtues, and we typically have access to and can be praised and blamed for our motives. All the while, increasingly rigorous questions about character-based psychology in ethics were developing in the situationist literature.

A few insightful philosophers have begun to examine the (apparent) clashes between situationist psychology and virtue theoretic epistemology (Alfano 2013, 2014; Olin and Doris 2014; Brogaard 2014; Battaly 2014). This “convergence of the twain” is important for a few reasons. Much of the psychological research that raises questions about the empirical adequacy of virtue ethics also appears to raise doubts about the empirical adequacy of the epistemic psychology assumed by virtue epistemology. Responsibilist virtue epistemology appears particularly vulnerable here, because epistemic virtues like open-mindedness, conscientiousness, and humility are traits, as are their corresponding vices.

While responsibilist virtue epistemology appears vulnerable to essentially the same challenge situationists have raised to virtue ethics, reliabilist virtue epistemology appeals to the psychology of cognitive skills (basic inference), abilities (memory), and competences (perception). While this is not a trait-based epistemic psychology, research in cognitive science and behavioral economics raises concerns about the robustness and reliability of these dispositions and powers as well (for a recent and comprehensive account see Kahneman 2011, Ariely 2008). If virtue epistemology of either sort presupposes a psychology that is undermined by diverse and consistent empirical results from the relevant sciences (most notably social psychology), this spells trouble for what has been a very successful thirty-four years and counting for virtue theory in epistemology. A weak psychology is particularly troublesome for virtue epistemology because a fundamental commitment of the view is affirming an agent-to-attitude direction of analysis (see Greco and Turri 2012). On any virtue-epistemic account, agent-level psychological mechanisms must play an essential role

---

1 See for example Greco 2007 for arguments that each of these concerns facing process reliabilism can be met by a properly formulated “success from ability” criterion for knowledge. However, Pritchard 2012 argues that the ability requirement does fully address anti-luck concerns.

2 An additional source of interest in virtue epistemology comes from the broader shift in epistemic axiology in general, including the considerable work on epistemic value (see Kvanvig 2003, Zagzebski 2003, Pritchard 2007) required by virtue-theoretic accounts of knowledge, understanding, wisdom, and other important achievements.
in generating and transmitting epistemic value to beliefs and other epistemically
significant states. Any adequate virtue epistemology will have to provide an adequate
characterization of these agent-level commitments. This is the demand of virtue
epistemology made by epistemic situationism, and the current volume is the first
devoted to the topic.

The positions defended in the essays collected here fall along a graded spectrum of
conservative, moderate, and radical responses to the empirical findings in social
psychology. A conservative virtue-theoretic response claims that no substantive
change is needed to existing accounts of intellectual virtue, and will then go on to clar-
ify how situational variables are already accounted for in the dispositional structure of
virtues as currently understood (i.e., as person-level dispositions functioning in nor-
mal environments). Ernest Sosa (this volume) provides a defense along these lines
without dismissing the importance of the situationist research. The conservative
response, if successful, is a victory for virtue epistemology.

A moderate response claims to retain a properly virtue-theoretic account of
knowledge (or other epistemic achievements) but demands some non-trivial revision
to our current understanding of the nature of epistemic virtues (e.g., by adding more
weight to environmental variables in explaining epistemic success and thereby
diminishing agent-based credit for success). A successful moderate response will be
empirically informed but at some cost to traditional virtue epistemology, or at least
with some change in its wake, which may turn out to be a change for the better. In this
volume, essays by John Turri, Christopher Lepock, James Montmarquet, and Carter &
Pritchard argue for modest but important adjustments to standard accounts of epi-
stemic virtue in order to better incorporate the empirical findings used by situationists.
Berit Brogaard (this volume) proposes more significant adjustments that nonetheless
ultimately support a virtue-theoretic structure for epistemic evaluation. Depending on
the nature of the revisions made by given virtue epistemologists, a successful moderate
response might be claimed as a victory for either side.

A successful radical response is the situationist’s victory. Essays by Alfano and Olin
attempt a knock-out punch against virtue epistemology, arguing that no plausible
adjustment to virtue epistemology is available, or at least none that leaves us with a
properly virtue-theoretic epistemology. If this ambitious line of attack is successful
against virtue epistemology, one interesting question will be whether it extends to
other epistemic perspectives as well. Lauren Olin (this volume) argues that the
epistemic challenge from situationism extends beyond virtue epistemology to other
contemporary perspectives in epistemology.

Orthogonal to this continuum of conservative, moderate, and radical responses are
considerations about the practical applications of virtue epistemology. Intellectual vir-
tue theory has informed work in educational curricula (critical thinking in particular),
and has fruitfully engaged with feminist epistemology and social justice more broadly.
How will an empirically informed practical virtue epistemology respond to the
situationist challenge? In this volume, essays by Heidi Grasswick, Jason Baehr, and
Carter & Pritchard address these issues in practical virtue epistemology. Grasswick argues that feminist epistemology has always been more responsive to environmental variables affecting our intellectual life than virtue epistemology.\(^3\) Feminist epistemology may thus have much to offer virtue epistemologists who need to provide situationists with an explanation of the significance of the environments in which knowing subjects are embedded. Another real-world application comes from combining virtue epistemology and psychology to inform educational curriculum and practice. Jason Baehr and Carter & Pritchard examine how, whether, and which intellectual virtues are appropriate foundations for real-world educational curriculum design and implementation practices.

In what follows, situationism and virtue epistemology will be presented in a bit more detail, especially for the reader who is less familiar with either or both. The prospects for sparking future work in epistemology, ethics, philosophy of mind, and psychology will be considered, and the chapters in the current volume summarized.

### 0.1 The Situationist Challenge to Virtue Ethics

In “Modern Moral Philosophy,” G. E. M. Anscombe (1958) exhorted moral philosophers to examine the psychological presuppositions of their normative theories. Heeding Anscombe’s exhortation, a responsible moral philosopher must keep an eye on the conditions required for real-world psychological realizations of their norms. While Anscombe, Geach, Foot, Williams, and others thought this favored a turn away from consequentialist and deontological ethics and toward the virtues, the situationist critique suggests that it may be virtue ethics itself that falls prey to heeding Anscombe’s exhortation.

Why is virtue ethics (potentially) vulnerable here? Virtue theories in ethics typically require manifesting good character traits for full moral praise, not just performing good actions, and this entails a number of unique requirements for praiseworthy conduct in virtue ethics. First, a good action can be defined as the action that a virtuous agent would perform in the circumstances. The action of the virtuous agent sets the standard of evaluation for all actions of that kind. Second, good motivations will typically be included in characterizing virtuous actions, since a courageous act will need to be motivated by an appropriate consideration for the wellbeing of another in the face of (perceived) danger, not just for fame or fortune or in ignorance of present danger. However, while deserving of some praise, a courageous action might be an isolated occurrence in an otherwise cowardly person. A courageous action performed by a person with a courageous character is a greater moral achievement than a courageous action alone.

This last point is an interesting, and perhaps problematic, feature of virtue theories. Some special features of rational agents—their tendencies, habits, and dispositions to act and believe in certain ways in appropriate conditions—confers epistemic value

\(^{3}\) A recent example of accomplishing both is Fricker’s *Epistemic Injustice* (2007).
upon their beliefs. These special features are the agents' virtues, rather than specific actions themselves. Virtues are typically understood as positive character traits of some kind. In psychology, character traits are described as cross-situationally robust dispositions to trait-relevant behavior. Thus understood, virtues and vices of persons are special cases of the broader category of robust dispositions to act.

What is it for something to possess a “cross-situationally robust” disposition? At a minimum, this means that any item with such a disposition will exhibit a consistent pattern of behavior across a diverse range of circumstances, not just in one or two narrowly circumscribed situation types; behavioral consistency is robust across a range of different situation types. We can clearly see cross-situational robustness in non-personal dispositions like the fragility of a glass. The characteristic manifestation of fragility is shattering, and we expect a fragile glass to shatter in a certain range of environments and circumstances (and not in others); this pattern is what makes it “cross-situationally robust.” Unless the disposition is “masked” by, e.g., bubble wrap, an unimpeded fall from a sufficient height to a stone-covered ground, gravel road, or tile floor will shatter a fragile glass. Moreover, this manifestation (in the absence of masks) will occur irrespective of the day of the week, time of day, or scent in the air. As we increase the situation types in which shattering ought to occur, we increase the cross-situational robustness of the disposition. This is (part of) the metaphysical structure of virtues, and it is particularly important to keep our eye on this as we unpack the challenge of situationism because virtue manifestation is only expected and predicted within specific environments. Virtue epistemologists thus already have their eye on the role of environments in some respects (e.g., in specifying both normal conditions for manifesting a virtue and safety requirements that guard against epistemic luck which employ talk of nearby and distant possible worlds, as well as relevant environments in these worlds).

If a person possesses a robust trait, we should be able to predict their behaviors in the relevant circumstances pretty well. If a person really is courageous or generous, we can reasonably predict that they will perform the courageous or generous act when in circumstances that call for it; otherwise the attribution of the virtue itself would be out of place. The heart of the problem for virtue ethics is that the behavioral consistency predicted by trait possession (putatively) fails again and again, and the reason is that morally irrelevant environmental variables appear to explain behavior, not an agent’s dispositions, traits, or abilities. This suggests that most people do not in fact possess personal traits that predict and explain behavior in the way that virtue ethics must assume. Manifesting robust, predictive, explanatory traits of character is precisely what confers the extra value of an act from virtue compared to a merely virtuous act alone.

The evidence suggesting that people rarely, if ever, possess robust, predictive, explanatory traits comes from an increasingly sophisticated line of research dating back to Asch (1963), Darley and Batson (1973), Isen and Levin (1972), Milgram (1974), and continuing today with recent research from Kahneman (2011) and Ariely (2008),
and now constitutes a mature field of social psychology. These scientific developments look like bad news for virtue ethics. Importantly, the situationist challenge is neither made on speculative theoretical grounds nor supported only by intuitive responses to thought experiments; it is based on a maturing tradition of empirical research in social psychology.

Here is a characteristic example of the way experimental results in social science have (putatively) undermined trait attributability. In the “Good Samaritan” study, Darley & Batson (1973) recruited a group of participants from the Princeton Theological Seminary, all of whom were told they had a lecture to deliver across campus, either on the topic of job prospects for seminarians or, ironically, on the New Testament parable of the Good Samaritan, where a robbed and beaten man is ignored by a priest but helped by a lowly Samaritan. The moral of the story, which the seminarians presumably know quite well, is that everyone—even a stranger—is a fitting object of compassion. Darley and Batson arranged for each seminarian to encounter a distressed confederate slumped on the ground along the path to the building where they were scheduled to speak. Some were told that they had time to spare (low hurry cases), others told they were just on time (medium hurry cases), and still others that they were running late (high hurry cases). Experimenters covertly observed whether the participants stopped to help like the Good Samaritan or walked by without helping. In low hurry cases, 63 percent stopped to help (not bad), in medium hurry cases 45 percent stopped, but only 10 percent in high hurry cases. Evidently, the more of a hurry a person is in—even a seminarian prepared to discuss the Good Samaritan—the less likely the person is to engage in helping behavior. The upshot for our purposes is that situational variables in the environment, rather than internal character traits, explain how likely a person is to stop and help a person in need. In itself, this one experiment is not a decisive finding that people lack personality traits, but this type of result has seemingly been achieved very consistently, and with better experimental design supporting the findings over the years of steady growth in personality psychology.

In the philosophical literature, the situationist challenge started with Gilbert Harman (1999) questioning the very existence of personality traits, followed soon after by Doris’s (2002) weaker claim that only narrow trait attributions can be empirically supported. A narrow trait is stable and predictive, but only within a limited range of circumstances (traits have very limited robustness). For example, a person might have “battlefield courage” rather than courage tout court, or “workplace honesty” rather than honesty tout court. Doris grants that psychological research shows that people sometimes manage narrow-trait consistent behavior, but not the broad-trait consistent behavior required for robust-trait possession.

While narrow traits are predictive and explanatory across a restricted domain of situations, it is the restricted range that creates a new problem. In addition to being predictive and explanatory, to say that someone has a virtue is clearly to praise them in
some way. Thus, any trait that constitutes a virtue must confer some praise or credit on its possessor. However, narrow traits do not seem particularly praiseworthy. Consider workplace honesty. A person who is honest at work but not with friends or family, nor in public transactions, is hardly praiseworthy with respect to their honesty. Empirically adequate narrow traits now raise a worry about normative inadequacy. Even if people have some personality traits, these will not confer the praiseworthiness typically associated with virtue.

The situationist thus presents virtue ethics with a dilemma: any virtue ethics can require either robust personal traits for virtue or narrow personal traits for virtue. If virtue ethicists require robust traits then normative adequacy is secured, but at the cost of empirical adequacy. If they require narrow traits, then empirical adequacy is secured, but at the cost of normative adequacy. In either case, the research suggests that human beings generally do not possess character traits that are both robust and praiseworthy. With narrow traits, the very move that secures the empirical side of epistemic psychology creates a problem for the normative side.

There have been numerous responses to ethical situationism (including Miller 2003, Merritt 2000, and Sreenivasan 2002). One significant problem is that the results of many studies that were seen as authoritative by psychologists and philosophers have failed to replicate. Assessing this situation is work in progress at the moment in social psychology and it has raised some eyebrows. A more philosophical fault may be found in any given philosopher’s interpretation of (let us grant) reliable psychological data. Some critics of situationism (Flanagan 2009, Sosa 2009) point out that virtues have always been defined in terms of expected manifestations in relation to certain environments, and thus have always sufficiently incorporated environmental considerations into moral psychology. How best to characterize this “ecological” structure where states of agents essentially involve states of their environment is currently an open debate related to issues in many areas of philosophy, including interesting work on extended cognition, extended knowledge, and extended character (Alfano & Skorburg forthcoming a, forthcoming b).

Suppose that virtue ethics is able to locate an empirically and normatively adequate moral psychology. One interesting question now is whether virtue epistemology can use the same form of response to respond to epistemic situationism; a common problem may find a common solution. On the other hand, perhaps virtue epistemology will need to construct an independent response because of relevant differences between moral and epistemic normativity.

Perhaps the most sustained empirical defenses against situationism in virtue ethics come from Nancy Snow (2010) and Daniel Russell (2009), both of whom develop accounts of construal-based dispositions grounded in research by Walter Mischel and Yuichi Shoda (1995). These are called C.A.P.S. (cognitive-affective personality system) traits, and they add interesting nuances to the dispositional structure of personality traits. C.A.P.S. traits are consistent with some degree of behavioral variability because
individual differences in people create different “personality signatures,” but the personality signatures themselves are stable and reliable over time and across situations. Mischel and Shoda introduce a very important methodological and psychological refinement here by requiring that behavioral predictions must be based on how agents construe their situation (a construed stimulus condition), rather than the objective features of the situation (an objective stimulus condition) alone. Construal will differ between people because of individual differences, but when we fix the behavioral consequences of a given disposition to circumstances as construed by the agent, it is argued that personality coefficients turn out to be much higher, close to what is needed for true robust virtue attributions (about (0.3)). This shift to subjective construal is intuitive because we generally assess a person’s behavior in a given situation relative to how they perceive it. If these differences in defining and measuring trait possession are included, the “rarity” of virtue is much less of a worry, and predictive models perform much better.

This is one example of virtue ethics aiming to meet the empirical challenge with an empirical response by providing an empirically adequate virtue-theoretic psychology. Below, we look at virtue epistemology, the epistemic analogue to virtue ethics. Is the epistemic form of virtue susceptible to the same challenges? If so, can virtue epistemology utilize the best response available to virtue ethics, or will differences in moral and epistemic normativity require different responses? If an adequate response can be found, will it be “virtue responsibilism” or “virtue reliabilism” that has better support? We turn to these issues now.

### 0.2 The Rise of Virtue Epistemology

The post-Gettier literature in epistemology was dominated by debates between internalist, externalist, coherence, and foundationalist theories of knowledge and justification until Ernest Sosa (1980), Lorraine Code (1987), and Linda Zagzebski (1996) brought virtue-theoretic approaches onto the scene. While virtue epistemology now admits of many variations, the fundamental unifying commitments are that epistemology is a normative discipline, and that accounting for the normativity of epistemology must essentially involve the intellectual virtues (see Greco & Turri 2012). The essential shift in virtue epistemology is from belief-based epistemic norms to agent-based epistemic norms. The former confers epistemic good-making properties on agents due to the epistemic good-making properties of their beliefs, and the latter confers epistemic good-making properties on beliefs due to the epistemic good-making properties of the agent (their epistemic virtues). The direction of analysis where normative properties of agents confer normative properties on beliefs is

---

4 There will also be times where we praise or blame a person for construing a situation in a certain way to begin with, not just whether they are internally trait consistent, but this still shows the importance of including construed stimulus conditions in a theory of virtue.
essential to virtue epistemology. Some form of this virtue-theoretic direction of analysis is accepted by all virtue epistemologists.

In the maturing post-Gettier literature, the turn to virtue-theoretic epistemology had much to offer, and was arguably the source of a broader “value turn” in epistemology (Riggs 2008, Pritchard, Millar & Haddock 2010). One hope was that virtue epistemology would synthesize the hardened opposition between externalist and internalist theories of knowledge (as is often claimed for virtue ethics vis-à-vis consequentialist and deontological theories in ethics). What actually happened in the early phase is that virtue epistemology split into two (seemingly opposing) camps that left many of the issues dividing internalists and externalists standing between them. The main division was between virtue reliabilism and virtue responsibilism, with further differentiation emerging within each. Virtue reliabilism defines knowledge as a species of success generated from ability, where abilities are veridically reliable cognitive capacities, skills, and powers that regularly produce true beliefs (under normal conditions). Virtues in this sense will typically include memory, vision, inductive and deductive inference, capacities involved in giving and receiving testimony, and so on.

The second branch is virtue responsibilism (including Linda Zagzebski 1996, James Montmarquet 1987, and Jason Baehr 2011), which models epistemic virtues on traditional Aristotelian virtues including open-mindedness, conscientiousness, intellectual courage, intellectual humility, curiosity, and so on. Virtues of this sort have conative and well-defined motivating states as constituents, and appear to differ from reliabilist virtues in this respect. Additional forms of virtue epistemology are continuing to be developed, and the breadth of the field is impressive. There are “regulative” virtue epistemology, inquiry responsibilism, radical autonomous virtue epistemology, anti-luck virtue epistemology, with applications in educational curricula in general and critical thinking in particular.

0.3 The Convergence of the Twain

As these two literatures proliferated (situationism in ethics and virtue epistemology), it took a while to see an overt situationist challenge to virtue epistemology in the philosophical literature. Mark Alfano (2013) and Olin & Doris (2014) identified the relevant research in social and cognitive psychology and brought the argument from ethics to epistemology. Is there any more reason to believe in cross-situationally stable traits in epistemology than in ethics? Epistemic situationism presses this question against responsibilist and reliabilist virtue epistemology, arguing that the news is bad in both cases. Virtue epistemology is both normatively and empirically committed to some

---

5 Whether virtue reliabilism also needs a robust account of epistemic agency and motivation is a matter of current interest in epistemology, especially in light of Ernest Sosa’s recent Judgement and Agency (2015), and this carries a greater commitment to the kinds of motivating states that have been characteristic of responsibilist virtues.
species of personal dispositions (those that constitute the virtues), so it has the same vulnerabilities as virtue ethics.

Virtue epistemologists will clearly have much to say in response, but the epistemic situationism debate has just begun. The issue is fertile, and continued work on epistemic situationism should bring important rewards for understanding the intersection of psychology and epistemology.

We can appreciate the form and substance of the challenge posed by epistemic situationism by examining Alfano’s inconsistent triad and the dilemma developed by Olin and Doris. Alfano argues that the following constitutes an inconsistent triad:

(a) Non-skepticism (most people know a good bit);
(b) Virtue epistemology (knowledge requires true belief from intellectual virtue);
(c) Epistemic situationism (empirical results in social and cognitive psychology).

An empirically adequate (c), non-skeptical (a) virtue epistemologist (b) must affirm all three. However, since cognitive situationism (putatively) shows that the conditions for virtue are rarely met, a virtue epistemologist will have to accept non-skepticism in order to retain empirical adequacy. Most virtue epistemologists will want to avoid skepticism. On the other hand, the only way to avoid skepticism and still hang on to virtue epistemology is to deny epistemic situationism, but this brings empirical inadequacy. A third option which allows one to avoid skepticism and secure empirical adequacy is to abandon virtue epistemology (b). Naturally, this is not an attractive move for virtue epistemologists. As noted in our distinction between the conservative, moderate, and radical responses above, revisions to any given set of virtue-theoretic requirements for knowledge might be more or less extreme. If empirical results in psychology simply force some fine tuning of the conditions for manifesting virtue, then situationism can be accommodated as a helpful catalyst for improvement in virtue epistemology.

Olin & Doris (2014) express the challenge as a dilemma. Any fully adequate epistemology must be empirically adequate and normatively adequate. The first requires that the empirical presuppositions of any theory of epistemic achievements (knowledge, justified belief, understanding, wisdom) must be borne out by, or at least not inconsistent with, the best available psychological explanations of cognition and other relevant phenomena. Olin and Doris argue that social psychology only licenses narrow-trait (and ability) attribution. While these will enable an empirically adequate virtue epistemology, any such theory will suffer a loss of normative adequacy. Possessing and manifesting narrow traits is generally less praiseworthy than epistemic virtues need to be in order to explain our normative practices of attributing knowledge and other praiseworthy states to cognitive agents. It seems clear that a person who is honest only with their male friends at work is less praiseworthy than a person who is honest across most or all situation types. Likewise, a person who reasons well only after receiving a compliment seems less epistemically praiseworthy than a person who reasons well with or without the compliment.
One clear reason for withholding praise from or reducing praise to the agent is that epistemically irrelevant features of the environment (the presence of friends or compliments), rather than epistemically relevant features of the agent, are doing too much explanatory work. However, there is wide agreement amongst virtue epistemologists that epistemic achievements should be credited to an agent’s abilities. A virtue epistemologist can insist on attributing broad virtues that carry greater praiseworthiness, but Doris and Olin argue that attributions of broad traits will turn out to be mostly false, and we thereby lose empirical adequacy.

An interesting empirical response for virtue responsibilism might be found in the same research on C.A.P.S. traits that virtue ethicists have appealed to. While sharing a common character-based psychology leaves virtue responsibilism vulnerable to the same empirical challenge as virtue ethics, for this very reason it may enable a shared empirical response. Virtue responsibilists would thus pursue an epistemic version of C.A.P.S. traits. Virtue-consistent behavior (now for epistemic virtues) would be defined relative to how an agent construes epistemically relevant features of the situation, not the objective features of the situation itself. Perhaps this has promise, but fundamental differences between ethics and epistemology may also make this problematic, despite the shared character-based psychology. Epistemology is largely concerned with factive achievements (i.e., getting things right about the world). If a person consistently misreads their epistemic environment as calling for, say, open-mindedness, but the beliefs of their peers are all epistemically deficient, there is no objective epistemic advantage to open-mindedness. More generally, even if such an agent manifests construal-consistent behavior, it is arguable that this would not be intellectually virtuous if the construal does not track objective features of the epistemic environment. Epistemic C.A.P.S. traits are not factive in this sense and this may be a problem for any attempt to model an epistemic response to situationism on the response available in virtue ethics. We would also need an empirically defensible account of “epistemic construal content.” These may not be insuperable barriers, but they must be worked out in any epistemic C.A.P.S. response for responsibilist virtue epistemology.

An interesting empirical response for virtue reliabilism comes from research on “bounded rationality” (see Gigerenzer & Selten 2002, Morton 2012, Fairweather & Montemayor, 2014). This approach takes cognitive limitations into account in defining human rationality. Human beings are limited in the amount of information they can process (“seven plus or minus two” items at a time) in a manageable time frame (short enough to enable choice and action in real time), and in the complexity of the tasks they can reliably complete. Thus, rather than evaluate cognitive agents based on how closely they approximate ideal standards of rationality (e.g., under a Bayesian model), we should construct norms that build in considerations of cognitive limitations from the beginning. Bounded reasoning can involve “criteria and thresholds” rather than step by step calculations. It can also employ heuristics and shortcuts rather than longer and more cumbersome calculations, with equal or greater effect. Describing the efficacy of the “gaze heuristic,” Gigerenzer (2007) compares an outfielder
chasing a fly ball who attempts to calculate the likely location of the ball based on its current trajectory and velocity and run to the relevant location, to another outfielder who simply keeps the ball fixed in the center of the field of vision while they run. The latter is the preferred method amongst reliable outfielders, while the former is unlikely to be possible in real time and is also more prone to error by most cognitive agents attempting it.⁶

Henderson & Horgan (2014) argue that, in epistemically virtuous agents, locally reliable heuristics fall under the modular control of broader global processes because of information provided by the environment. Epistemic virtues will thus involve broad integrating processes that mobilize quick, modular, cognitively optimized heuristics and information about the current environment. Since information about the environment reliably triggers environmentally appropriate heuristics in virtuous agents, heuristics are “ecologically rational” and locally reliable when they are properly controlled. Thus, even if heuristics are as dominant in human cognition as Alfano and others argue, this would not rule out some form of virtue epistemology. Christopher Lepock looks closely at bounded rationality in his contribution to the current volume. I encourage the reader to explore Epistemic Situationism and the many issues at the intersection of virtue epistemology and situationism that will be illuminated. The essays collected here present an insightful spectrum of arguments on a topic that is still rich with potential. We hope that many directions for future research in epistemology are furthered in the essays collected here.

0.4 Summary of Chapters

0.4.1 “Is every epistemology a virtue epistemology?”

Lauren Olin, University of Missouri-St. Louis

The last several decades have witnessed the emergence of virtue epistemology, which Ernest Sosa proposed as an alternative to foundationalism and coherentism in 1980. However, Lauren Olin argues that traditional foundationalist and coherentist epistemologies are themselves virtue epistemologies because they rely on a psychology of robust epistemic dispositions. If Olin is correct, foundationalism and coherentism will be undermined by successful situationist arguments that are intended to show that the psychological theories presupposed by virtue epistemology are not empirically sustainable. Drawing on evidence from psychology and cognitive science, Olin argues that the empirical charges recently levied against virtue epistemologies are successful in raising suspicion about the psychological realizability of epistemic virtues, both perceptual and cognitive. Research on vision, metacognition, memory, and inference

⁶ Another well-known example is a group of Germans who correctly answered questions about the relative population sizes of U.S. cities, only one of which was familiar to them. They employed the recognition heuristic and were epistemically successful in doing so.
INTRODUCTION

0.4.2 “Epistemic situationism: an extended prolepsis”

MARK ALFANO, DELFT UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY AND AUSTRALIAN CATHOLIC UNIVERSITY

Mark Alfano examines a number of empirical research programs that might be used by empirically-minded virtue epistemologists to resist epistemic situationism, including work on the “big five” (or six) personality traits and C.A.P.S. traits. However, Alfano argues that none of these will suffice to establish widely distributed virtues, and that virtue epistemology thus leads to skepticism, at least so long as it takes up the call to provide an empirically adequate psychology. Big five (and six) traits are too normatively ambivalent to count as virtues, and they do not license the explanation or prediction of particular episodes of behavior or cognition. C.A.P.S. is actually a metatheoretic framework that specifies an ontology for first-order psychological theories, not a theory of traits in its own right. Hence, appeals to C.A.P.S. in the context of this debate constitute a category mistake. Alfano argues against a range of positions in virtue epistemology, including the work of leading figures such as Linda Zagzebski, Ernest Sosa, and John Greco.

0.4.3 “Virtue epistemology in the zombie apocalypse: hungry judges, heavy clipboards, and group polarization”

BERIT BROGAARD, UNIVERSITY OF MIAMI

Brogaard argues that both responsibilist and reliabilist virtue epistemology are threatened by two problems: our heavy reliance on external devices, and the massive influence of epistemically irrelevant factors on our cognitive lives. In the former case, credit for cognitive success is attributable primarily to the external device, not the epistemic agent, as virtue reliabilists like Sosa, Greco, and Kelp would have it. Virtue reliabilists thus cannot explain how belief states that rely heavily on external gadgets can come to count as knowledge. In the second case, experimental evidence shows that there is no consistent way that we behave over time as would need to be the case to justify trait attributions as responsibilists suggest. If there are significant situational influences on belief formation, then it is hard to see how virtuous cognitive mechanisms can ever be the relevant source of cognitive success. Hence, neither cognitive abilities nor so-called character traits enable the agents who possess them to be cognitively successful in a wide range of situations. However, Brogaard does not see the demise of virtue epistemology here, but proposes a situationist-friendly virtue epistemology that accommodates the empirical data while maintaining the basic tenets of virtue epistemology. When we rely on external knowledge-gathering devices that are
sufficiently integrated into our knowledge-gathering system we are influenced by situational factors, but not epistemically irrelevant ones. When situational influences are epistemically relevant by being cognitively integrated and thereby improving our cognitive abilities, the cognitive success that results from the knowledge-gathering process is knowledge.

0.4.4 "Situationism and responsibilist virtue epistemology"

JAMES MONTMARQUET, TENNESSEE STATE UNIVERSITY

James Montmarquet examines a number of responsibilist rejoinders to situationism that all accept narrowed virtues, but do not sacrifice praiseworthiness. He proposes that responsibilist traits should not be seen as virtues primarily—or only—for their truth conduciveness, but will be situationally tailored to situations in a variety of value-conferring ways in the context of inquiry. Montmarquet argues that the best path for virtue epistemology is to reconcile the narrowed traits suggested by the empirical research with inquiry responsibilism. Here, we are interested in the highly specific demands of a given situation and how well the subject’s inquiry has responded. Narrow traits for inquiry responsibilism do not present a problem of normative adequacy. Epistemic responsibility in any specific case is primarily about the adequacy of one’s response to the complex demands of that situation; hence, whether or not it is couched in virtue terms, such responsibility will be highly situational from the start—but not for reasons having anything special to do with situationist discoveries.

0.4.5 "Virtue theory against situationism"

ERNEST SOSA, RUTGERS UNIVERSITY

Ernest Sosa begins by distinguishing crude virtue psychology (CVP) from sophisticated virtue psychology (SVP), arguing that situationists have only targeted the former, while virtue epistemology (and virtue ethics) enlist the latter. In contrast with the CVP attacked by Doris, Harman, and by Nisbett and Ross, the character traits of interest to SVP are a broader whole that includes fundamental motives, desires, and goals. Given how often we are evaluatively conflicted—how often we must make hard choices—it can hardly be a surprise that we fail to be cross-situationally consistent at the level of external situations and attendant behaviors. The consistency is found, rather, internally, in the complex inner structure that is one’s relevant character. While the move to SVP is important, it will not disarm the situationist threat on its own. Sosa then articulates a new and thorough account of virtue with an “SSS” structure: seat, shape, and situation. Such competences turn out to be a special case of a “disposition to succeed,” and according to Sosa these are compatible with variability and situational influence. This also shows that no general reliability requirement need be satisfied in order to have a performance skill.
0.4.6 “Intellectual virtue now and again”

CHRISTOPHER LEPOCK, ATHABASCA UNIVERSITY

Christopher Lepock provides an account of “high-level” intellectual virtues like conscientiousness, intellectual courage, and originality that serve as thick evaluations of cognition. It is essential to recognize that the range of an agent’s capacities is a matter of degree: for any capacity a person can function across greater or smaller ranges of environments with higher and lower rates of success. On Lepock’s account, virtue terms identify properties of agents in virtue of which they resist a broad range of situational influences relatively reliably. We live in a variable and often uncompromising world, thus it is valuable for us to be able to resist or counteract situational influences, allowing us to cognize effectively in a wider range of environments. Lepock argues that high-level virtues are not global, but are relatively broad intellectual traits, problem-solving skills, and abilities that operate over a distinctively wider range of situations than is typically recognized. However, Lepock’s view carries a degree of revisionism, as the nature of the virtues will not be exactly as traditional virtue theory has them. The use of heuristics and other fast and frugal cognitive abilities will be important elements of virtues in his account, and the degree of cross-situational stability will be worked out in ways that may not comport with traditional views in virtue epistemology.

0.4.7 “Responsibilism out of character”

KURT SYLVAN, UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHAMPTON

Kurt Sylvan develops a novel version of responsibilism that will be immune to objections raised by situationists, and which has many advantages over other forms of virtue epistemology. His version of responsibilism dispenses with the ubiquitous but (he argues) mistaken idea that responsibilist virtue properties must be understood in terms of character traits. An often overlooked form of virtue ethics suggested by J. J. Thomson claims that virtue properties are normatively fundamental, but adds that act-attaching properties are prior to person-attaching properties, and thus require no backing by character traits. Responsibilism of this sort would not presuppose the psychology of traits that situationists target. Sylvan argues that, far from being an ad hoc retreat, this view is highly attractive on independent grounds.

0.4.8 “Epistemic situationism and cognitive ability”

JOHN TURRI, UNIVERSITY OF WATERLOO

John Turri evaluates the situationist challenge and outlines a successor to virtue epistemology: abilism. Abilism delivers all the main benefits of virtue epistemology and is as empirically adequate as any theory in philosophy or the social sciences could hope to be. Leading virtue epistemologists defend the view that knowledge must proceed from
intellectual virtue and they understand virtues either as refined character traits cultivated by the agent over time through deliberate effort, or as reliable cognitive abilities. Turri argues that a subtle but powerful adjustment to how abilities are defined suffices to defuse the situationist challenge to reliabilism. Turri proposes that if a person possesses an ability then it must be the case that, when it is exercised, they will produce the outcome relevant to that ability at a rate exceeding chance. This does not require reliable abilities as traditionally understood. In this way, an ability-based virtue epistemology can accommodate empirical research that demonstrates a lack of reliability.

0.4.9 “Epistemic situationism, epistemic dependence, and the epistemology of education”

J. ADAM CARTER, UNIVERSITY OF GLASGOW AND DUNCAN PRITCHARD, UNIVERSITY OF EDINBURGH

Carter and Pritchard grant that the situationist challenge to virtue epistemology is *prima facie* strong, at least insofar as one’s focus is the kind of rationally grounded knowledge typically possessed by mature humans. However, the situational influence on cognitive performance that epistemic situationists can credibly lay claim to is in fact consistent with a *modest virtue epistemology* which is motivated, in contrast to a *robust virtue epistemology*, by appeal to the phenomenon of *epistemic dependence*. Carter and Pritchard argue that, once one appreciates the epistemic dependence of knowledge, there is no essential tension between *bona fide* rationally grounded knowledge, by virtue-theoretic lights, and the influence of situational factors on the acquisition of such knowledge, although it involves less by way of cognitive achievement than we often suppose. Epistemic situationists can thus lay claim to a mitigated version of their main thesis. Ramifications for the work in the *epistemology of education* are then explored, where it is argued that situational factors can in fact be exploited in order to develop, in pedagogical settings, cognitive ability and thereby enable students to exhibit higher levels of cognitive achievement.

0.4.10 “The situationist challenge to educating for intellectual virtues”

JASON BAEHR, LOYOLA MARYMOUNT UNIVERSITY

Intellectual virtues such as curiosity, open-mindedness, attentiveness, intellectual courage, and intellectual tenacity are clearly important to educational theory and practice. Hence, if situationist critiques of moral character and virtue ethics are successful, this may spell trouble for the application of virtue epistemology to educational theory and practice. Baehr introduces three criteria according to which virtue possession can be evaluated: scope, frequency, and motivation. A person might also exhibit these aspects of virtue maximally, robustly, or minimally. Baehr carefully articulates conditions for maximal, robust, and minimal virtue with respect to scope, frequency, and motivation, and argues that a viable defense against situationist challenges for the
educational use of virtue epistemology is available once the above distinctions are respected. He also concedes that the project of educating for intellectual virtues must listen closely to developments in situationist psychology.

0.4.11 “Feminist responsibilism, situationism, and the complexities of the virtue of trustworthiness”

HEIDI GRASSWICK, MIDDLEBURY COLLEGE

Heidi Grasswick identifies important differences between “classical responsibilism” and "feminist responsibilism" that enable feminist virtue responsibilists to incorporate situational variables but to avoid the attacks of skepticism to which other forms of responsibilism may fall prey. Since the situationist critique of virtue epistemology has targeted responsibilists more than reliabilists and feminist virtue epistemologists tend to be responsibilists, it is worth examining the relationship between feminist responsibilism and situationism. Feminists share many of the concerns of the situationists, and can even be understood as expanding the situationist position, because the ”social location” of knowers is a focal concern for both. Grasswick examines the specific virtue of trustworthiness as an illustration of the complexities that come with a socially-situated virtue account and argues that the deeply social nature of inquiry leads us to conceptualize “situation” in a very different way from some of the original situationists.

0.4.12 “Moods and their unexpected virtues”

NICOLE SMITH, UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS-AUSTIN

Nicole Smith draws upon “affect as information” research on moods and defends an account of mid-level virtues for epistemology. While much research has gone into emotions, far less has focused on moods, in particular on their epistemic role. Moods are evaluated for reliability, power, and portability. Smith argues that moods are reliable and powerful, but they are not very portable, which means that their reliability and power only operate in a narrow range of circumstances. She examines creativity and flexibility to develop a virtue responsibilist response to epistemic situationism that uses moods as essential components of mixed epistemic virtues.

References


INTRODUCTION


