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INTEGRITY, COURAGE, SCEPTICISM

Abstract. Does our inability to always self–attribute epistemic courage when we manifest it (a limited kind of reflective scepticism about epistemic courage) conflict with the virtue of integrity? I articulate this problem, and argue that it can be eschewed if we construe integrity along meliorist rather than perfectionist lines.

Keywords: integrity, courage, scepticism, awareness

I start by setting the stage for the problem I intend to articulate and then to address that problem. At a first pass, amending which does not change what follows, here are a few basic tenets regarding virtues. Aristotle teaches that virtues are the moderation flanked by vices. Courage, for instance, is a mean between cowardice and rashness. In fact, we will need less than this in what follows, although I will refer to it cavalierly as a view in the neo-Aristotelian family. What I will need is only the view that virtue might be a *via media* among non-virtuous features, be they vices or amoral dispositions or simple variation among situations.

Turn now to Kant, who teaches that at most God and our first-personal conscious awareness can distinguish acts of duty (and virtue) from acts that merely agree with duty but are done out of interest or inclination. Suppose that Kant is right in this. Suppose further that introspection is an unreliable guide to our mental states (broadly

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construed). Since I will primarily be concerned with a problem that can be raised first–personally, it is immaterial whether we assume that God doesn't exist; or whether we alternatively make the weaker assumption that God doesn't always reveal the naked truth to us and we don't know which situation we are in now; or whether we make the even weaker assumption that even if truth were revealed to us, revelation doesn't – or not always, at least – carry enough justificatory weight in context.

From these broadly Kantian assumptions it follows, or at least seems to follow, that we will not be able to justify a verdict of whether the act committed was one of virtue or not. Perhaps it was, instead, an amoral or even immoral act, but in ways not transparent to us in reflective consciousness. Scepticism is not nihilism. I am not claiming that there are no acts of virtue – or courage; I only claim that, if Aristotle and Kant are both right,[2] and if the additional assumption that our introspection is unreliable holds, then one cannot justify – or know – performing or having performed acts of virtue. Nor need this be entirely accurate from a purely historical point of view; my aim now is only to articulate a conceptual problem. Now apply all this to courage: the view *could be* restricted in that one can be sceptical about whether one performs (or has performed) acts of courage, all the while perhaps not always exhibiting a similar scepticism about other acts of virtue, *e.g.* ones of generosity.

And illustrate with an imaginary example. Suppose you pass by a homeless person that seems to you – and is – hungry, and you have a sandwich in your backpack. You did not intend to give it to anyone else who needed it more. Instead, you had planned to eat it yourself. But you're really not that hungry, and your plan was only tentative – you hadn't promised to yourself you'd eat that sandwich no matter what. You give the sandwich to the homeless person. Not before you quickly check yourself for reasons: it's not to make you feel good, it's not for advertising or self-promotion, etc. In the quick of an eye, you gauged that the homeless person could use that sandwich more. And you

[2] One might plausibly object that Aristotelianism and Kantianism are entirely different views. My target here are views that regard both virtues and principles as key to rightness and goodness – indeed or thought alike. Rosalind Hursthouse's (2006) proposal to translate back and forth between the jargon of Aristotelian virtues and that of Kantian principles is an excellent example of the sort of mixed views I consider.

proceeded accordingly. So, you know this was an act of generosity. If repeated, in the right circumstances, with the right motivating reasons, it might instill or reinforce the virtue of generosity in you.

Switch now to courage, extending the scenario. As you step away, you see a man approach the homeless person menacingly and bullying them, maybe kicking them directly. Again, you need to read the situation as it unfolds[3]. The aggressor is well built, so you might suffer some injuries. But the law is on your side, you see cameras. Cameras record; they don't interfere. You decide to step in and be brave. Brave, not hasty because you would have materially profited from some other way out. Upon quick but clear deliberation you decide that interfering is risky, but the cost is worth it. Deliberation tones down your outrage, eases you into the act of courage, but perhaps it was the outrage itself that moved you away from fear and laziness. Absent your deliberation – as speedy or as accurate as it may be – you would have simply traded your momentary cowardice for an instance of hastiness, rashness, juvenile impetuousness.[4]

But now, you granted Kant was right. If introspection is unreliable, how do you know that you deliberated – rather than daydreaming deliberation? How do you know you acted bravely rather than with hasty self-deception? Again, scepticism is no nihilism. No one denies you were brave. But how do you know it? To ease you into scepticism, consider how underdetermined this imagined scenario is. Just how better-built is the aggressor than you yourself? Do you have any history of self-defense or martial arts? Just how outraged are you? If too much, wasn't this natural inclination rather than reason that prompted you to act? If too little, did you really act out of reason, or were you trying to

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[3] To grant that acts of virtue may be performed in manners sensitive to the circumstances of the situation at hand is not to presuppose a variety of the situationist challenge concerning either epistemic or moral virtues (Alfano 2012), but only to consider the development of moral sensibility alongside our abilities to act and reflect in normatively shaped ways. For discussion of situation-sensitive moral salience and moral attunement, see Barbara Herman's early (1985).

[4] Throughout this text, I stay away from contributing to the protracted debate between reliabilism and responsibilism about virtues, be they moral or epistemic. However, notice that from the standpoint of sheer reliability (understood either probabilistically or as absence of counterfactual risk), we couldn't, at first blush, distinguish overt behaviors that merely conformed to duty from ones that were genuinely (*i.e.* responsibly) virtuous.

prove something to yourself? Say that you're an upright sort of individual? If so, virtue-signaling would here trade for genuine virtue.

So, you could be in the know that you were generous but in the dark as to whether you were brave or not. Or so the imagined scenario stipulates. Perhaps the very same worries could be marshaled against generosity as against courage. But a blanket scepticism about virtue self-attribution is not my target here. In order to unearth the problem I'm interested in, local scepticism[5] – about courage as opposed to generosity, in the case at hand – will be shown to be of better use below.

Up until now, things were physical. Giving a sandwich, stepping in to stop a bully. But all this applies, willy-nilly, to epistemic courage. Again, suppose epistemic Aristotle and epistemic Kant are right, and introspection is unreliable. You could be sceptical about self-attribution of epistemic courage. An example: in an epistemically impoverished environment, you trusted astrology because it was a tradition handed down from your parents and grandparents. But once having reached primary school, you learn that the Earth revolves around the Sun. And the penny drops: *those can't both be true*. You look some more and decide – a brave act – that your family tradition was based on misconception. Again – was this brave or did you just defeat traditional complacency with an unreflected endorsement of what you learned in school? It's true alright, and you did the right thing. What you now believe is true. But was your decision carefully justified? Do you have grounds sufficient to distinguish your intellectual courage from its close and vicious or value-neutral neighbors? If epistemic Kant (etc.) is right, you might not.

The Kantian sceptical scenario was one wherein one cannot know that one is or was epistemically brave – and not because that's false but because one lacks appropriate justification. How should we regard this: is it a bug or a feature of our epistemic condition, *i.e.* the limits of what we can know? We might be tempted to think that this is simply a feature for ordinary courage: the courage manifested in overt behavior. Whereas, asymetrically, you might be tempted to think that when it comes to intellectual or epistemic courage this is a bug. It would be an epistemic

[5] For local varieties of scepticism and their use, see Duncan Pritchard's work, especially his (2005), as well as discussion in Mărăşoiu (2020).

bug because of a meta-feature of epistemic courage. Namely, that epistemic courage is such that exhibiting it is opaque to our reflective self–attribution, opaque because self–attribution would be unjustified, even if denying it would equally be unjustified. If the opacity of our self–attribution of courage is a bug when the courage is epistemic but no bug when the courage is moral, asymmetry obtains. Whereas finding no epistemic bug is consistent with symmetry between cases of moral and epistemic courage. To explore whether there is an epistemic bug, I need a bit more stage-setting.

Intermezzo: Throw another virtue into the melting pot, if virtue it is – integrity. On an Aristotelian reading of virtues (granted from the outset), there is a unity of virtues. The unity is not organic and not physical and not mathematical. It is, rather, virtuous itself. Suppose, then, that virtues – or the character dispositions that underwrite them – coalesce into one whole. One's character – or the set of virtues one is possessed sufficiently of – guides one's overall behavior and moderates any excesses by the company of other counterbalancing virtues. For instance, mix bravery and prudence, generosity and foresight, or an uncompromising stance toned down by modesty, tolerance and open-mindedness. The supposition that such a character exists is, I argue, a consequence of the Aristotelian reading of virtues already granted. Similarly, the supposition that the unity of such a character is not a matter of physical or biological nature but a unity of virtue – a second–order virtue, integrity – is, I argue, another consequence of Aristotle's thinking about this. In truth, as is in goodness: epistemic integrity would, by parity, be the unity of epistemic virtues. It seems best to bracket Aristotle's metaphysics of dianoetic virtues and instead treat integrity wholesale: as a unity of virtues in overt behavior and mental acts alike. (Nothing changes in what follows if we indulge in this slight simplification.) If integrity includes (or balances out) the unity of epistemic virtues, it also includes (or balances out) virtues of reflection, such as: care, imaginativeness, drawing logical consequences with care, conscientiousness, open–mindedness, intellectual courage, or reflective sensitivity to relevant reasons.[6]

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[6] To envision how virtues embody principles is not to assume that either are codifiable in language, nor to deny that is possible; for discussion, see McDowell (1979).

The reason why I introduced integrity is to argue that the best way to flesh out this idea – that it is an epistemic bug that self-attribution of epistemic courage might, at least on occasion, be unjustified – is to consider a possible conflict between courage and integrity when both are construed epistemically. To wit, inability to justify one's self-attribution of epistemic courage in reflective awareness is detrimental not to epistemic courage itself but to the epistemic side of integrity: to how virtues coalesce, cohere and band together in epistemic character.

And the claim I defend is that thinking that there is an epistemic conflict between courage and integrity when both are epistemically construed betrays a perfectionist construal of integrity. If, on the other hand, we have a meliorist understanding of integrity,[7] on which an impoverished epistemic environment or shortcomings might simply be practically unavoidable, it is not an epistemic bug that self–attributions of epistemic courage are unjustified, it might just be a feature, a fact of one's epistemic life.

Again, meliorism can be qualified. Just as I explored local scepticism with respect to self–attributing epistemic courage, an epistemic shortcoming that doesn't taint the epistemic achievement of courage unabashed, so we can envision a local variety of meliorism, with respect to integrity alone rather than any (first-order) virtue such as (epistemic) courage. Indeed, on different grounds, we might expect that building a normative conception of our self-identity will be a project we might have stood to embark on only knowingly that the possibility of failure is near. This is not to say that meliorism about integrity depends on the metaphysics of self-constitution and self-identity, only to intimate that it naturally accommodates a wide array of such views[8] which, again, mix principles and virtues.

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[7] It might seem a commonplace to regard Aristotle as a perfectionist. I take issue with that description. If MacIntyre (1984) offers at least one among several attractive reconstructions of how to understand skills and virtues in Aristotle, and construes them as social practices cultivated throughout one's life and exercised in order to maintain them, the meliorist aspect is, while not entailed, strongly suggested. Natural goodness, on this view, is primarily second nature and requires constant training and practice. For debate, see McDowell (1979) and Foot (2005). For misgivings about carrying over descriptions of skills that are normatively laden to virtues where Aristotle is concerned, as well as any moral-to-epistemic carryover, see Watson (1996).

[8] Perhaps the most prominent among which is the view articulated by Christine Korsgaard (2011).

This is not to say that debugging is done, only to say that it might vary from case to case, reinforcing the suggestion that case scenarios are underdetermined. It is a methodological point, if any, not to conflate shortcomings of how cases are described with robust axiological characterizations of which virtues, vices, or characters might be instantiated in these cases.

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