

John Greco

Achieving Knowledge.

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The eleven chapters in this book form a series of self-contained essays. Nevertheless, they work jointly in defense of the book's central thesis, namely that 'knowledge is a kind of success from ability.' (3) More specifically, knowledge is a kind of success from virtue. This is both an account of knowledge and of epistemic normativity. The basic idea is not new. It has been argued for in its essentials by Ernest Sosa and builds on the neo-Aristotelian virtue epistemology defended by Linda Zagzebski and others. Greco, however, argues that the central thesis is a form of reliabilism and makes a helpful contribution to the debate by drawing on reliabilist resources. He also explicitly draws on debates in moral theory and philosophy of language, making the book attractively intradisciplinary. Greco's primary achievement, however, is to give the claim that knowledge is success from ability its fullest defense in the current literature while situating it clearly in relation to its competitors. He also offers interesting discussions of the relationship between knowledge and understanding, contextualist semantics, Pyrrhonian skepticism and the nature of defeating evidence. Overall, *Achieving Knowledge* is a very competent addition to the literature, clearly meriting the attention of the growing number of epistemologists concerned with questions of value, virtue and justification.

Knowledge is normative in the sense that being in a state of knowledge is *better* than, say, the possession of mere true belief and brings *credit* to its bearer. Knowledge is a *good thing*. Consequently, accounts of knowledge often begin with the thought that being in a state of knowledge is a matter of having true beliefs that meet certain justification conditions. While Gettier cases suggest that the project of *analyzing* the concept of knowledge along these lines may be forlorn, one needn't be in the business of providing necessary and sufficient conditions in order to recognize that there is something worth pursuing in the traditional tripartite account. (In fact, Greco is not consistent on the question of whether he is analyzing knowledge or just characterizing it. While he officially denies that he is offering sufficient conditions for knowledge (4), he later endorses the biconditional 'S knows that *p* if and only if S believes the truth (with respect to *p*) because S's belief that *p* is produced by intellectual ability.' (71) Greco's work is strewn with abstract schemata of this sort.)

We should like, then, to explain both why knowledge is a good thing and why having knowledge counts as the sort of success that reflects well on its possessor. Greco's view is that this can be achieved by considering the nature of intellectual virtues. According to the standard view, these are stable dispositions of thought, which are reliably and non-accidentally related to the acquisition of true beliefs. Framed in this way, it is clear why Greco describes his position as a form of reliabilism, i.e. the view that knowledge is the product of cognitive methods that are reliable with respect to the acquisition of true beliefs. Greco claims, however, that the idea of intellectual virtue fills what appears to be a worrying normative hole at the heart of reliabilism. For the fact that a belief is true and reliably formed comes apart from our idea of what it is for an

epistemic agent's beliefs to be justified. In particular, it seems unjust that an agent's epistemic standing should depend solely on reliability when the reliability of her cognitive methods depends on factors external to her agency, i.e., on environmental conditions beyond her control.

One way in which we might understand the normative dimension of knowledge is by reflecting on cases of epistemic luck. For instance, brains-in-vats, victims of Cartesian Demons and the like seem to be entitled to their maximally unreliable beliefs. At least, they are non-culpable. They do not lose epistemic credit because they have the misfortune to find themselves in circumstances, e.g. disembodied and in a vat, which prevent them from acquiring knowledge through normal channels. So, the fact that our methods of belief formation fail to deliver true beliefs in extraordinary circumstances does not affect our epistemic credit. Focusing on an epistemic agent's virtues attractively accounts for situations in which we lack knowledge but not credit. We have, in effect, the Stoic thought that we are responsible for our dispositions rather than the circumstances in which they are triggered or their consequences. A similar story applies to cases of epistemic good luck in which we do not deserve the sort of epistemic credit necessary for knowledge ascriptions despite having true beliefs. In these cases, the reason we have neither credit nor knowledge is that we do not have true beliefs *because* of our intellectual virtues. As Greco observes, it is not sufficient to have true beliefs and intellectual virtues – the former must be causally explained by the latter. The idea of true belief through virtue also gives a straightforward answer to the so-called 'value problem' of explaining why knowledge is more valuable than true belief even when mere true beliefs enable us to satisfy our practical goals. Epistemic virtue, Greco argues, has intrinsic value and is partly constitutive of human flourishing.

If intellectual virtues can be maximally unreliable with respect to truth, when for instance we are envatted, what we might wonder makes them *virtues*? Greco handles this question by observing that an intellectual virtue is a disposition to acquire true beliefs *in a range of environments*. A skillful baseball player, for instance, is not expected to be able to hit fastballs in a hurricane or with sand in his eyes. Similarly, poor epistemic track records in atypical environments do not reduce the credit due to epistemic agents. The trouble, of course, lies in specifying the environment in which dispositions of thought must function reliably if they are to count as virtues. Greco's proposal starts from the plausible thought that 'the concept of knowledge is used to flag good information and good sources of information for use in practical reasoning.' (78) He then argues that intellectual dispositions are virtues relative to environments and that the relevant environments are individuated by our practical interests. This of course makes appropriate ascriptions of knowledge context dependent and ultimately dependent upon our practical interests. Nevertheless, Greco claims that because our practical interests largely overlap with each other we can normally maintain stable attributions of virtue and knowledge between epistemic agents.

Despite what amounts to an attractive overall picture of knowledge and its normative aspect, I would like to conclude on a note of caution. *Achieving Knowledge* is fundamentally an attempt to integrate competing intuitions concerning epistemic normativity into a single unifying theory. On the one hand, it seems that epistemic justification must depend on the mental states of epistemic agents, for it is these that are under her control (questions of doxastic voluntarism aside). This answers to our sense that knowledge is a human achievement, *something done well*

and deserving of credit (in a way contrary to, say, dumb luck or non-rational, mechanistic belief formation). On the other hand, it seems that epistemic justification must depend on an epistemic agent's environment, for it depends on beliefs being *correct* or *getting things right*.

Greco attempts to resolve this tension by arguing that justification is a function of the interaction between a knower and her environment. Epistemic agents should be skillfully plugged into the world and this is what constitutes virtue. Thus, we can bring two types of justification together, internal and external, under the unifying concept of virtue. But if virtue is composite in this way, we might wonder whether it inherits tension from its parts. Greco claims that 'a "virtue-theoretic" account of epistemic normativity ... explains the normative dimension of knowledge in terms of person-level excellences.' (10) But, of course, these person-level excellences are individuated by their relationship to truth, which is a matter of how the world stands. Where, then, should we locate the ultimate ground of epistemic normativity? Is it a matter of getting things right or a matter of doing things well? According to Greco, it is the latter but only because this is conducive to the former. However, the matter is further complicated by the fact doing things well means doing things well in a particular environment specified by our practical interests. This means doing things well in a way that allows us to *get things done*. So, we have a third putative source of normativity, this time not distinctively epistemic in character. On the face of it, however, doing things well, getting things right and getting things done can pull in different directions. Perhaps these tensions can be resolved, but those of us who are attracted to the broad outlines of Greco's project will note that there is much careful philosophical work yet to be done.

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