
Epistemic Normativity as Performance Normativity

TSUNG-HSING HO

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ABSTRACT

Virtue epistemology maintains that epistemic normativity is a kind of performance normativity, according to which evaluating a belief is like evaluating a sport or musical performance. I examine this thesis through the objection that a belief cannot be evaluated as a performance because it is not a performance but a state. I argue that virtue epistemology can be defended on the grounds that we often evaluate a performance through evaluating the result of the performance. The upshot of my account is that when a belief is evaluated under performance normativity, what we evaluate is not belief, but cognitive performance. My account of virtue epistemology offers a simple explanation of why knowledge is more valuable than true belief.

KEYWORDS: virtue epistemology, epistemic normativity, performance normativity, the value of knowledge, the Meno problem, the swamping problem, Ernest Sosa, John Greco

1. Introduction

Virtue epistemology has emerged as a central force in contemporary epistemology. Virtue epistemologists often claim that their accounts enjoy several advantages. First, virtue epistemology can solve the Gettier problem (Zagzebski 1996, 283-99; Sosa 2007; Greco 2010, ch.5). Second, virtue epistemology can solve the so-called value problems of knowledge (Riggs 2002; Zagzebski 2003; Sosa 2007, ch.4; Greco 2010, ch.6). Third, virtue epistemology (Greco 2010; Sosa 2007; 2011) offers a more unified, elegant account of normativity, because its proponents argue that epistemic normativity is merely a species of performance normativity (which I will explain later).¹

In this paper, I will examine the last supposed advantage virtue epistemologists claim to enjoy. The third advantage is crucial, because whether virtue epistemology can enjoy the first two advantages largely depends on the third one.² So we need to properly understand the claim that epistemic normativity is a species of performance normativity if we want to truly understand virtue epistemology.

Here are some clear statements by virtue epistemologists that epistemic normativity is a species of performance normativity:

Knowledge is a kind of *achievement*, or a kind of success for which the knower deserves credit. And in general, success from ability (i.e. achievement) has special value and deserves a special sort of credit. This is a ubiquitous and perfectly familiar sort of normativity. Thus we credit people for their athletic achievements, for their artistic achievements, and for their moral achievements. We also credit people for their intellectual achievements. Epistemic normativity is an instance of a more general, familiar kind. (Greco 2010, 7)

Belief is a kind of performance, which attains one level of success if it is true (or accurate), a second level if it is competent (or adroit), and a third if its truth manifests the believer's competence (i.e., if it is apt). Knowledge on one level (the animal level) is apt belief. The epistemic normativity constitutive of such knowledge is thus a kind of performance normativity. (Sosa 2011, 1)

Although the terminologies are different, their accounts of knowledge are basically the same, to the extent that they both hold that knowledge is a belief's being true because of the exercise of the believer's abilities (which should be competent enough) and that the evaluation of belief shares the structure of the evaluation of performance. Hence, epistemic normativity is a kind of performance normativity.

¹ Zagzebski (1996), instead, regards epistemic normativity as a species of ethical normativity and beliefs as a kind of action. Despite the difference, the structure of Zagzebski's account is similar to the account of epistemic normativity as a species of performance normativity by Sosa and Greco. However, I think Zagzebski's view is less plausible (see Battaly (2008) for a comparison of Zagzebski's view and the view of Sosa and Greco). So I choose to focus on Sosa and Greco's accounts here.

² This certainly does not mean that if virtue epistemology can have the third advantage, it can successfully solve the Gettier problem and the value problems about knowledge. For criticisms of virtue epistemology about the first two claims, see Kvanvig (2003) and Pritchard (2010). But that is not my concern here.

However, some philosophers (Chrisman 2012; Engel 2013; Setiya 2013) object that, since virtue epistemologists have not proved that belief (and knowledge) is a kind of performance, virtue epistemology may simply change the subject matter. Indeed, they argue that belief and knowledge are *states* rather than performances, so epistemic normativity cannot be modelled on performance normativity. They conclude that virtue epistemology should be rejected, despite its putative theoretical advantages.

To my mind, this objection has not been properly addressed by virtue epistemologists. In the next section, I discuss Matthew Chrisman's argument (2012) that belief and knowledge are states rather than performances. I single out Chrisman's argument because his is the most developed one and, in my opinion, successfully shows that belief and knowledge are states. So virtue epistemology faces a challenge to demonstrate how epistemic normativity is a kind of performance normativity.

From the above passages, we see that Sosa and Greco each give their own response. Sosa's response is that performance normativity is applicable to belief because belief is a performance. I argue that Sosa's argument that belief is a performance is wrong, so he fails to show how performance normativity is applicable to belief.

Nevertheless, I defend that performance normativity is applicable to belief, albeit not directly as Sosa suggests. My argument is based on the distinction between *performance per se* and *the result of the performance* and the ordinary fact that we often evaluate a performance through evaluating the result of the performance. Thus, a belief can be evaluated under the framework of performance normativity because it is a product of a cognitive performance. This means that when a belief is thus evaluated, what is really under epistemic evaluation is not the belief, but the cognitive performance that produces the belief. So virtue epistemology can maintain that belief (and knowledge) is a state and that epistemic normativity is a kind of performance normativity.

In other words, even if the critics are right that belief is a state rather than a performance, virtue epistemology cannot be rejected on such grounds. For virtue epistemologists, according to my interpretation, can agree with the critics on that point. But virtue epistemologists would argue that the fact that belief and knowledge are states does not mean that they cannot be assessed under performance normativity. The critical point is when an epistemic state is evaluated under performance normativity, our epistemic concern is not only about the state itself, but also about the person's epistemic manoeuvring into that state. What should be rejected is the idea that epistemic normativity is merely about beliefs or epistemic states. Hence, on the one hand, virtue epistemology does demand us to expand our focus of epistemic evaluation, but on the other hand, it does not require us to discard the orthodox view that belief and knowledge are states.

My account of virtue epistemology can be read as a reinterpretation of Greco's view that epistemic normativity is a kind of performance normativity because knowledge is an achievement (a success from ability). Indeed, I think that Greco's view is basically right. However, it is unclear how the idea of knowledge as a success from ability can meet the challenge how performance normativity is applicable to states. Those critics do not deny that we need to exercise a great amount of abilities to get into certain states, such as keeping oneself fit. Their challenge is to show how an epistemic state or the state of being fit can be evaluated as a performance. While my account here can be read as a response in Greco's behalf, it also modifies (or clarifies, depending on how Greco's view is understood) his account of virtue epistemology.

Although my modification of virtue epistemology may appear minimal, its implication on how virtue epistemology should explain the value of knowledge is significant. My account implies that when we assess the value of one's knowledge, what we assess is the value of one's cognitive performance. Therefore, the source of the value of knowledge lies in the value of cognitive

performance. In the final section, I explain how my account gives a straightforward solution to the Meno problem (Kvanvig 2003; Pritchard 2010): why is knowledge more valuable than mere true belief?

2. Is Performance Normativity Applicable to Belief?

Chrisman (2012) argues that epistemic normativity cannot be a kind of performance normativity because belief is a state rather than a performance. He argues that there is solid linguistic evidence showing that belief and knowledge should be classified as states rather than performances. English verb phrases can be categorised into *statives* and *non-statives*. Statives are verb phrases referring to *states*, such as ‘He wants a pie’. Non-statives are verb phrases referring to *occurrences* or *events*, such as ‘She is painting a portrait’. Some linguistic tests can reliably distinguish whether a verb phrase is a stative or non-stative. First, non-statives can have the progressive form of verbs, whereas statives cannot. Consider Sosa’s favourite analogy between archery and belief (Sosa 2003; 2007; 2011), by which Sosa attempts to indicate that epistemic normativity is a kind of performance normativity. However, the linguistic test clearly shows that the verb phrases used to describe archery are non-statives, because they can be used in the progressive form:

- (1a) Archie was shooting the arrow skilfully;
- (1b) The arrow is hitting the bull’s-eye;
- (2a) Stephen Hawking was believing that black holes exist;
- (2b) Stephen Hawking is knowing that black holes exist.

(1a) and (1b) are perfectly legitimate English sentences, but (2a) and (2b) are not. The result shows that while ‘shoot’ and ‘hit’ are non-statives, ‘believe’ and ‘know’ are statives. Another relevant test is that when non-statives are used in the simple present form, such as ‘Archie shoots the arrow’, it implies that the occurrences or events are repetitive, serial, or habitual, while statives so used, like (2a) and (2b), do not have the same implication. This test again shows that ‘shoot’ and ‘hit’ are non-statives, whereas ‘believe’ and ‘know’ are statives.³ Chrisman thus concludes that ‘believe’ and ‘know’ should be categorised as statives, whereas paradigmatic cases of performance, such as archery, are expressed by non-statives. Therefore, Sosa’s archery analogy cannot be used to support his claim that belief is a kind of performance. This calls into question whether epistemic normativity is a kind of performance normativity.

The linguistic evidence provided by Chrisman, to my mind, conclusively demonstrates that belief and knowledge are mental states. But Chrisman so far only shows that descriptions of paradigmatic performances, such as archery, are expressed by non-statives. He has not proved that states cannot be performances. Sosa may maintain that some states can be performances. Indeed, in his recent article, Sosa distinguishes two kinds of performance: ‘*functionings* (functionally assessable states) and ‘*endeavours* (with a freely determined aim)’ (2013, 585).

³ Chrisman also mentions that occasionally some statives can be used in the progressive form, such as ‘We are living in Spain’ and ‘LA Lakers is lying second in the league’. Chrisman explains that linguists usually explain this anomaly as expressing that the states are temporary, but admits that a deeper explanation may be required. However, he thinks that the linguistic data are enough to show that belief and knowledge are states.

Moreover, his reason why functioning and endeavour are performances is that both have certain *aims*.⁴ As Sosa explains:

One might alternatively opt for a broader notion of ‘endeavour’ according to which any pursuit of an aim, any teleology even if merely functional, would involve ‘endeavouring’ to attain that aim, as does the heart when it beats regularly, aiming to circulate the blood. (Sosa 2013, 585)

Presumably, belief is a functional state and aims at truth. So belief is a kind of performance, according to Sosa’s view. Therefore, Sosa would respond to Chrisman that, when determining whether something is a performance, ‘the distinction between the passive [statives] and the active [non-statives] is here negligible by comparison with the distinction between states that are and those that are not functionally assessable’ (Sosa 2013, 588).

Chrisman, however, foresees this sort of reply. Chrisman acknowledges that virtue epistemologists may use the notion of performance broadly. However, he argues that this move cannot demonstrate the applicability of performance normativity to belief:

[One might] argue that Sosa’s theoretical structure of ‘performance normativity’ applies more generally than just to performances. ... Perhaps anything with an aim could be said to admit of this distinction by analogical extension. Then, even if beliefs are states rather than performances, as the aspectual data seem to indicate, it may still be true that beliefs, because they ‘aim at the truth’, admit of the normative distinctions characteristic of performances. And when a belief successfully reaches its ‘aim’ because of the skill of the believer, it is knowledge. The problem I have with this response is that it strikes me as completely *ad hoc*. Unless there are other states that plausibly admit of the distinctions characteristic of performance normativity, it will be entirely theory-driven to think that the states of belief and knowledge fit into this normative structure. (Chrisman 2012, 605)

Chrisman argues that Sosa needs to offer more examples of state to which performance normativity is applicable; otherwise, Sosa’s reply is simply begging the question.

In Sosa’s earlier work, however, one can find the following example:

Some acts are performance, of course, but so are some sustained states. Think of those live motionless statues that one sees at tourist sites. ... Beliefs too might thus count as performances, long-sustained ones, with no more conscious or intentional an aim than that of a heartbeat. (Sosa 2007, 23)

The example is meant to support that a long-maintained state, of which belief is an example, is a performance. Unfortunately, this example does not work. To see this, we need to distinguish between *being* a live motionless statue and *maintaining* a live motionless statue. Those performances at tourist sites are, strictly speaking, maintaining live motionless statues, not just being live motionless statues. Being a live motionless statue is a state, not a performance. Consider one performer who dresses like a Statue of Liberty. After several hours of performance, he is exhausted and quickly falls asleep. He is in a state of being a live Statue of Liberty. But he does not give a performance. Thus, this example fails to show that performance normativity is applicable to states.

⁴ The idea that a state with an aim can be counted as a performance can be found in Sosa’s earlier works (Sosa 2007, 23; 2011, 15).

Without any further example from Sosa, let me just consider whether performance normativity is applicable to the state of being a live motionless statue. We have seen that Sosa suggests that a state *with an aim* is assessable in terms of performance normativity: i.e., success, competence, and aptness. Presumably, the state of being a live motionless statue of the Statue of Liberty *aims* at looking like the Statue of Liberty: hence, the state of being the live Statue of Liberty is *successful* if it looks like the Statue of Liberty. However, it does not seem assessable in terms of *competence*. What can be assessed as competent (and apt) is *maintaining the state of being the live Statue of Liberty*. The reason for this is simple. A state with an aim can be evaluated in terms of success: the state is successful when it satisfies its aim. Competence evaluation is about skilfulness, adroitness, or ability. But states cannot be skilful, adroit, or able. What is skilful or competent is *maintaining* the state. Maintaining the state of being the live Statue of Liberty requires skills or abilities and its aim is to be in the state. So maintaining the state can be evaluated under performance normativity: successful if being in the state, competent if skilful or adroit, and apt if being in the state because competent. Since Sosa maintains that a performance can be evaluated in terms of the three aspects of performance normativity, being in a state, even by Sosa's own standard, is *not* a performance. Instead, the performance is maintaining the state of being the live Statue of Liberty and being in the state is merely the *result* of the performance of maintaining the state.

Therefore, Sosa should not regard a belief as a performance, since a belief is also a state and is not assessable in terms of competence (or aptness). What can fall under performance normativity is a cognitive performance that aims at true beliefs.

So, a state is not assessable in terms of competence and aptness. A state is not a performance *per se*, but merely a result of a performance. To be sure, this point applies to other types of performance that do not aim at producing states. A painting is also a result of a performance of painting. A painting may also be said to have an aim and can be evaluated in terms of success (depending on what aim a painting has: similarity, beauty, originality, the painter's intention). But a painting itself is not competent and apt. Archery is the same. A shot is successful if it hits the target. But a shot itself is not competent and apt. What is competent and apt is *shooting*. The shot is merely the result of the shooting, not the performance of shooting *per se*. So a painting and a shot are not performances and not assessable under performance normativity.

However, Sosa may respond that a painting and a shot are still assessable in terms of performance normativity. For in ordinary speech, people do say that it is an adroit shot or it is a skilful painting. So it seems that a result of a performance could still be evaluated under performance normativity. That is no doubt true. I do not deny that when people appreciate Raphael's *The School of Athens*, they might say, 'How *skilful* the painting is!' But, surely, what is skilful is Raphael's painting skills, not the painting itself. Although the process of painting *The School of Athens* was completed several hundred years ago, we can still appreciate Raphael's skills by studying the painting itself. Even Sosa himself recognises this point; he says that a shot is adroit when 'it manifests skill on the part of the archer' (2007, 22). Therefore, when we say that a result of a performance is competent, what we really mean is that the performance that produces the result is competent. To be sure, I am not claiming that one should not say that a shot is adroit. The crucial point is this: when a result of a performance is evaluated under the framework of performance normativity—that is, when we evaluate whether a painting is skilful or a shot is adroit—what is really under evaluation is not just the result, but the performance that produces the result. Failing to appreciate this subtle difference leads Sosa to think that a belief and a shot *are* performances simply because they seem assessable in terms of competence and aptness. But they are not performances and not the primary objects that are evaluated under performance normativity. The difference is important because according to Sosa's account, the object of epistemic normativity is *belief*, but according to my account, the object of epistemic normativity is *cognitive performance*. I will explain the significance in the next section.

Hence, virtue epistemology can maintain the view that belief is a kind of mental state *and* still maintain the theses:

SUCCESS*: a belief is successful if and only if it is true;

COMPETENCE*: a belief is competent if and only if it is skilful or adroit;

APT*: a belief is apt if and only if it is true because adroit.

I put asterisks, because when a belief is evaluated *qua* performance—that is, when the belief is evaluated under performance normativity—what is really under evaluation is the cognitive performance:

SUCCESS: a cognitive performance is successful if and only if the belief it forms or maintains is true;

ADROIT: a cognitive performance is adroit if and only if it is skilful or competent;

APT: a cognitive performance is apt if and only if the belief it forms or maintains is true because of its being competent.

These are the theses that virtue epistemologists should maintain. Sosa is wrong to hold that since a state having an aim is assessable under performance normativity, it is a performance. Even granted that belief aims at truth, accordingly, a belief is successful *qua* belief if and only if true. But a belief *qua* belief, strictly speaking, is not competent or apt. Even by Sosa's own account, therefore, belief is not a performance. However, that does not mean that a belief cannot be evaluated *qua* performance, that is, evaluated under performance normativity. The reason is that we can evaluate a performance through evaluating the result of the performance. Belief is the result of cognitive performance. So we can evaluate a belief *qua* cognitive performance. The critical point is that when evaluating a belief *qua* performance, what is under evaluation is the cognitive performance itself. So Chrisman is wrong to reject virtue epistemology on the grounds that beliefs are states. He may still think that virtue epistemology is changing the subject matter because the object of epistemic evaluation is cognitive performance rather than belief. But there is nothing wrong about that. First, virtue epistemology does not change the nature of knowledge; it can still maintain that knowledge is a kind of belief or state. More importantly, the shift of the focus of epistemic evaluation from belief to cognitive performance helps us solve the problem about the value of knowledge, as I will explain in the next section.

3. A Remark on the Value of Knowledge

If I am right, then the primary object of epistemic normativity, according to the virtue epistemology, is not belief but cognitive performance. It has significant implications for how virtue epistemology explains the value of knowledge.

In Plato's *Meno*, Socrates asks why knowledge is more valuable than mere true belief. Recently, the *Meno* problem is repackaged as the so-called *swamping problem* (Kvanvig 2003; Pritchard 2010): How is the value of knowledge not swamped by the value of true belief? Linda Zagzebski (2003) draws a useful analogy to illustrate this problem. Suppose that there are two cups of coffee, one brewed by a good coffee machine and the other by a bad machine. Both cups of coffee taste equally good. If we value good coffee, we naturally value a good coffee machine rather than a bad coffee machine. However, it seems that, if the coffee tastes good, it does not matter whether it is brewed by a good machine or a bad machine, since how the coffee is brewed is only instrumental to the taste of the coffee. Similarly, a cognitive performance is merely

instrumental to belief. Once the belief is produced and is true, it no longer matters how the belief is produced. If the cognitive performance cannot confer additional values on true belief, it seems that the value of knowledge is swamped by the value of true belief.

From the coffee analogy, Zagzebski draws the following lesson: ‘truth plus an independently valuable source cannot explain the value of knowledge’.⁵ However, I think that Zagzebski draws the wrong lesson. What the coffee analogy shows is when we evaluate the value of coffee *qua* coffee, all that matters is the *taste* of the coffee. Hence, the value of brewing process cannot affect that value of coffee *qua* coffee. Similarly, when we evaluate the value of knowledge, what we evaluate is solely the value of belief *qua* belief. It seems that all that matters is the truth of the belief. Consequently, it is difficult to see which property of belief—the property of being justified or being reliably-produced—can make true belief more valuable *qua* belief. That is the reason, shown by the coffee analogy, why the value of knowledge seems to be swamped by the value of true belief, if knowledge is evaluated as a belief *qua* belief.

As my discussion of virtue epistemology has shown, however, when we assess the value of one’s knowledge, what we primarily assess is one’s cognitive performance rather than merely one’s belief. This means that the value of knowledge should be explained in terms of the value of cognitive performance *qua* cognitive performance rather than the value of belief *qua* belief. Since being successful and being competent make a performance good *qua* performance, the value of knowledge consists of the value of epistemic success (a true belief) and the value of epistemic competence (a competent cognitive performance). Both are finally valuable. This account of the value of knowledge offers a simple and straightforward solution to the Meno problem: knowledge is more valuable than true belief because knowledge has the additional value of epistemic competence. *Pave* Zagzebski, truth plus an independently valuable source *can* explain the value of knowledge.

But one may wonder: Isn’t knowledge belief? Why should the value of knowledge consist of the value of cognitive performance *qua* performance rather than the value of belief *qua* belief? The reason is this: according to virtue epistemology, knowledge is *apt* belief. This means that since a belief is assessed in terms of aptness, it is assessed *qua* performance rather than *qua* belief. Differently put, knowledge, according to my account of virtue epistemology, is *a kind of state (true belief) which one can be in only through competent cognitive performance(s)*. Call this kind of state *achievement*. An achievement is a state one can be in only through competently exercising the right kind(s) of ability. Such states are plenty. For example, being a chess master is an achievement that one can be in only through one’s chess skills. A chess master is one who can and does defeat most capable chess players through one’s own chess skills. A player who has not defeated an overwhelming majority of capable chess players cannot be granted the title of chess master. Thus, being a chess master is an achievement. The example of chess master demonstrates that a state can be evaluated *qua* performance, but when it is assessed as competent, what is really competent is the master’s chess skill rather than the state of being the chess master.

⁵ The common diagnosis of the swamping problem (Pritchard 2010) is that it is caused by the monist view that true belief is the only fundamental epistemic value. Zagzebski does not think that it is the case, however. As we see, Zagzebski rejects the monist view because she does not deny that a reliable process is valuable, independently of the value of true belief. What she rejects is the fact that a reliable process is also valuable can explain why knowledge is more valuable than mere true belief. As I will explain shortly, Zagzebski draws the wrong lesson from the coffee analogy, but her insight that the swamping problem is not merely caused by monism is important.

So since knowledge is an achievement, it means that knowledge is such a kind of state essentially evaluated under performance normativity. Hence, its value consists of the value of cognitive performance *qua* performance.

In conclusion, I have critically discussed the debate between Chrisman and Sosa on the claim that epistemic normativity is a kind of performance normativity. Chrisman is right that belief and knowledge are not performances. Contrary to Chrisman, however, one can still evaluate belief *qua* performance. But it means that what is really evaluated under performance normativity is cognitive performance rather than belief. It implies that the source of the value of knowledge lies in cognitive performance. This is the key to solve the swamping problem about the value of knowledge.⁶

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