**In What Sense is Understanding an Intellectual Virtue?**

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**Abstract:** In this paper, I distinguish between two senses of “understanding”: understanding as an epistemic good and understanding as a character trait or a distinctive power of the mind. I argue that understanding as a character trait or a distinctive power of the mind is an intellectual virtue, while understanding as an epistemic good is not. Finally, I show how the distinction can help us better appreciate Aristotle’s account of intellectual virtue.

**Key words**: understanding; grasp; intellectual virtue; epistemic value

Plato and Aristotle both claim that epistêmê is an intellectual virtue.[[1]](#footnote-1) The Greek word “epistêmê” used to be rendered as knowledge or scientific knowledge, but many scholars (e.g., Burnyeat 1981, Kosman 2014, Moss 2014, and Schwab 2015) argue that a better translation is understanding. However, few contemporary philosophers – except Grimm (2019) – echo the view that understanding is an intellectual virtue. Specifically, contemporary accounts of intellectual virtue fall into two groups: (a) Virtue reliabilists (e.g., Sosa 1991 and Goldman 2001) hold that intellectual virtues are reliable cognitive faculties or powers such as vision, memory, introspection, and the like; (b) Virtue responsibilists (e.g., Montmarquet 1993 and Zegzebski 1996) characterize intellectual virtues as cultivated intellectual character traits, traits like conscientiousness and open-mindedness. But as far as I know, neither virtue reliabilists nor responsibilists claim that understanding is an intellectual virtue. To be sure, many contemporary epistemologists hold that there is a close relationship between understanding and intellectual virtue. For example, some (e.g., Greco 2002 and Zegzebski 1996) contend that (i) one cannot obtain epistemic goods such as understanding and knowledge without exercising intellectual virtues,[[2]](#footnote-2) while others (e.g., Riggs 2003) argue that (ii) some intellectual virtues like curiosity are best defined in terms of aiming at understanding. But neither of (i) and (ii) entail that understanding itself is an intellectual virtue.

In this paper, I want to explore whether understanding is an intellectual virtue according to either virtue reliabilism or responsibilism. While Grimm suggests that understanding is an intellectual virtue, he does not address this issue at length. Nevertheless, I will show that approaching the question in this way can shed important light on the nature of understanding. My plan goes as follows. First, I will briefly introduce an influential account of understanding as an epistemic good. Then I will argue that understanding as an epistemic good is not an intellectual virtue. Next, I will show that there is another sense of “understanding,” which refers to a character trait or a distinctive power of the mind. I will argue that understanding in this sense is an intellectual virtue according to virtue reliabilism or responsibilism. Finally, I will conclude with a few remarks on how the distinction between the two senses of “understanding” can help us better appreciate Aristotle’s account of intellectual virtue.[[3]](#footnote-3)

# 1. What is understanding?

Many philosophers (e.g., Elgin 2017; Kvanvig 2003; Pritchard 2010; Zagzebski 2001) distinguish between two sorts of understanding: objectual understanding and understanding-why (or explanatory understanding). Objectual understanding is understanding of a topic, subject matter, or body of information: Mary understands the New York City subway system or Joe understands thermodynamics. Understanding-why takes why questions as its objects, such as “Peter understands why Ann quit college after one semester” and “Mary understands why her house burned down.” These philosophers argue that objectual understanding cannot be reduced to understanding-why, because, among other reasons, understanding-why is factive, but objectual understanding is not. Most philosophers take it that understanding-why is obviously factive. By contrast, many argue that objectual understanding is not factive. For example, Elgin (2007) and Zagzebski (2001) suggest that one can understand a subject matter even if none of one’s beliefs about that subject matter are true. They argue that acquiring truths can actually impede the chances of one’s attaining understanding. Kvanvig (2003; 2009) and Riggs (2003) offer a less radical view, arguing that understanding a subject matter does not require that all beliefs about that subject matter must be true, but cases where false beliefs run rampant do not count as understanding.

However, not all philosophers find the distinction between objectual understanding and understanding-why plausible. For example, Grimm (2011; 2016b) and Khalifa (2013) argue that objectual understanding can be reduced to understand-why, for both arise from a grasp of dependency relations. Although *more* of these relations are grasped in the cases of objectual understanding than in the cases of understanding-why, “this does not amount to a difference in kind but instead to a difference in degree”, says Grimm (2016b: 214).

In this paper, I will focus on understanding-why. I will leave open whether objectual understanding can be reduced to understanding-why. But I think it is plausible that understanding-why, in most cases, partially constitutes objectual understanding: if one does not have any understanding-why with regard to a certain subject matter, one does not achieve any objectual understanding of that subject matter.

Yet philosophers disagree on the nature of understanding-why. According to a traditional view, understanding-why can be reduced to understanding-that, which is synonymous with knowing-that.[[4]](#footnote-4) Thus, understanding why X happened is equivalent to understanding or knowing that X happened because of Y (cf. Kvanvig 2003; Hu 2019b). Yet many epistemologists (e.g., Grimm 2006; Hills 2015; Pritchard 2010; Riggs 2003) oppose this view. A popular objection is that knowledge can be easily transmitted via testimony, but understanding cannot, because, among other reasons, understanding involves a grasp of dependency relations, and this grasp is non-propositional.[[5]](#footnote-5)

In what follows, I will not take a stance on this issue. Instead, I will assume for the sake of argument that the idea that understanding-why involves a grasp of dependency relations is true. But following Grimm (2016a), I will distinguish between two kinds of understanding-why: understanding why a certain person did something (hereafter “understanding-why-in-people” for short) and understanding why a certain natural event happened (hereafter “understanding-why-in-nature” for short). These two kinds of understanding-why are different because, as Grimm argues, there is something about human action that makes it unamenable to the third‐person, objectivizing stance that is characteristic of the natural sciences.

According to an influential account (Grimm 2006, 2011; Kvanvig 2003; Riggs 2003; Woodward 2003), understanding-why involves a grasp of how the different elements of a system depend upon one another (or “hang together”). To grasp how things depend on each other, as Grimm (2011: 89) puts it, is to be able to “not just to register how things are, but also to anticipate how certain elements of the system would behave, were other elements different in one way or another.” Suppose a child tries to figure out why the balloon rose. Through careful observation, she discovers that it had nothing to do with the color of the balloon, or the time of day when it was released, or where it was released, or who released it. Instead, what made the difference is a mysterious gas called “helium.” When a balloon is filled with helium, it will rise. But when it is filled with ordinary air, it will not rise. When it is not filled with any gas, it will not rise, either. Thus, the child concludes that it is the presence of helium that caused the balloon to rise. In light of the influential account of understanding, she has *some* degree of understanding of why the balloon rose because she appreciates how changing the value of some variables will lead to changes in the focal event, while changing the value of other variables will not. Put differently, she understands because she is able to answer a range of “What if things had been different?” questions. The greater the range of such questions she is able to answer, the deeper the understanding she has.

However, understanding-why-in-people seems different from understanding-why-in-nature. Consider the following case (originally offered by Gordon 2000; cf. Grimm 2016a):

Suppose I observe various occasions on which my neighbor Sam goes running at night, and I begin to wonder why. By tracking his behavior carefully and by applying (if only implicitly) Mill’s methods, it eventually becomes clear to me that Sam only runs when there is a gibbous moon—that is, a moon that is more than half illuminated but not yet full. Thus, when I notice Sam running, I can explain why he is running: namely, because there is a gibbous moon.

In this case, I can grasp how Sam’s running depends on a gibbous moon. But there is a sense in which I do not understand why Sam is running: the behavior seems so odd to me.[[6]](#footnote-6) According to an influential view (e.g., Collingwood 1946/1994; Goldman 2006), in order to understand a person, we have to know her desires and beliefs, that is, we have to in some way simulate or reenact or “get inside the shoes” of her. Thus, if I do not know Sam’s relevant desires and beliefs, I do not understand why he is running when there is a gibbous moon. Now suppose I know that [Sam desires to exhaust himself when there is a gibbous moon and believes that running can help exhaust himself]. This does not help much, however. Still I do not feel like I have a good understanding of why Sam is running, for what he desires – his goal – does not make much sense to me: why would anyone desire to exhaust oneself when there is a gibbous moon? As Grimm (2016a: 127) notes, “part of what makes an action intelligible for us is to be able to see the goal of the action as not just desired but as desirable, as not just chosen but as choiceworthy.” Suppose I later know that Sam believes that when the moon is gibbous, the Goddess of the moon will kill some human beings who do not sleep after midnight. Sam desires to exhaust himself because he desires to fall asleep before midnight so that he can save his own life. Now Sam’s behavior makes more sense to me: he is running because he desires to save his life, which is a desirable goal.

Nevertheless, even though I am able to recognize the goal of Sam’s behavior as desirable, I still feel my understanding of why Sam is running is inadequate: his belief [that when the moon is gibbous, the Goddess of the moon will kill some human beings who do not sleep after midnight] seems insane to me. How did he acquire this belief? Is he delusional? But in order to understand why Sam is running, I should not simply assert that he is delusional. Instead, I must try to figure out how he is justified in holding the belief given his cultural background. As Grimm points out, if one understands others, then one is not judgmental but able to view other people with a sympathetic eye. Grimm (2019) argues that understanding why S did X involves a grasp of “What it is like to be S?”, i.e., an ability to “successfully ‘take up’ the person’s attitudes, and thus to be able to imagine what it would be like to care about things in the way the other person does, or to have the same sorts of worries, hopes, and concerns the agent does.” Thus, to grasp “What it is like to be S?” one must be able to not only mentally bracket one’s own beliefs and desires but also unearth the various deeply implicit cultural frameworks that structure S’s way of looking at the world.

So far, I have briefly introduced an influential account of understanding-why and the distinction between understanding-why-in-nature and understand-why-in-people. Here the thing we call “understanding” is a highly valuable epistemic state that we desire to have. Put differently, understanding is an epistemic good that we aim at.

# 2. Why understanding as an epistemic good is not an intellectual virtue

In this section, I will argue that understanding as an epistemic good is not an intellectual virtue. My arguments will rest on two assumptions: (A1) an intellectual virtue is a stable quality; (A2) an intellectual virtue aims at certain epistemic goods. These two assumptions are widely accepted. For example, one of the most influential accounts of intellectual virtue in recent literature, which is provided by Zagzebski (1996) and apparently endorsed by Grimm (2019), states that X is an intellectual virtue iff X is a stable and acquired quality that involves a characteristic motivation to obtain certain epistemic goods and reliable success in obtaining these epistemic goods.[[7]](#footnote-7) This account is highly controversial: philosophers debate on whether an intellectual virtue must be something acquired, whether it involves a motivation to obtain epistemic goods, and whether it involves a reliable success in bringing about epistemic goods. That said, philosophers generally agree with Zagzebski that intellectual virtues are stable qualities that aim at certain epistemic goods such as true belief, knowledge, and understanding (cf. Baehr 2017; Battaly 2008; Greco 2002; Riggs 2003).[[8]](#footnote-8) That is, philosophers generally accept A1 and A2.

In the following, I will raise two objections to the claim that understanding (as an epistemic good) is an intellectual virtue. Here is the first one:

1. An intellectual virtue is a stable quality.
2. Understanding is unstable.
3. Therefore, understanding is not an intellectual virtue.

As we have seen, Premise 1 is uncontroversial. Some even think the idea of fleeting virtue is incoherent, as Greco (2003: 355) puts it, “virtues cannot be strange or fleeting.”

A brief explanation of Premise 2 is in order. An intellectual virtue is stable in the sense that those who have it cannot easily lose it. But it is not difficult for those who have understanding to lose it. Specifically, understanding why X (be it a natural phenomenon or a human act) occurred entails believing the true proposition that X was caused by Y. But this belief can sometimes be easily shaken. Those who initially understood why X occurred, upon receiving misleading information or arguments, might easily give up the true belief that X was caused by Y. Reconsider the balloon case where the child enjoys some understanding why the balloon rose. Suppose the child has an elder brother who tries to trick him. His brother tells him that it is not the gas called “helium” but something on the skin of the balloon called “Fei” that caused the balloon to fly. Fei is not alive without helium. But when helium is present, Fei comes to life. That is why a balloon filled with helium will rise. Suppose the child believes what his brother says. Then he loses his understanding of why the balloon rose. This shows that his previous understanding is not stable.

Another way in which understanding is unstable is that one can easily lose one’s grasp of the relevant dependence relations required by understanding. Suppose the dependence relations in question are highly complicated. One grasps them only when one’s mind works at its best. But most of the time, one’s mind only works at the average level, not at its best. Thus one can easily lose the understanding one enjoys when one’s mind works at its best. It is a common phenomenon that students who know how to prove a mathematical theorem (i.e., see how the theorem depends on the axioms) often forget how to prove it after a few hours.

My second objection to the claim that understanding as an epistemic good is not an intellectual virtue goes as follows:

1. An intellectual virtue aims at some epistemic goods.
2. Understanding does not aim at any epistemic goods.
3. Therefore, understanding is not a virtue.

Premise 1 is uncontroversial, as I have noted.[[9]](#footnote-9) However, different philosophers understand the aiming-at relationship differently. There are two senses of “aiming at”: (a) X aims at Y in the sense that X is a reliable way of acquiring Y; (b) X aims at Y in the sense that those who have X necessarily have the intention to acquire Y (cf. Riggs 2003).

In the first sense, understanding does not aim at any epistemic goods. The common candidates for an epistemic good include true belief, justification, knowledge, understanding, and wisdom. It is unclear how understanding can be a reliable way of acquiring any of these things. Specifically, if X is a reliable way of acquiring Y, then Y is not a component of X. However, most philosophers think true belief, justification, and knowledge are all components of understanding (Recall that most philosophers agree that understanding-why is factive). That is, we cannot have understanding without having true belief, justification, and knowledge in the first place. Therefore, understanding is not a reliable way of acquiring true belief, justification, or knowledge. Moreover, if X is a reliable way of acquiring Y, then X is not the same as Y. Thus, understanding is not a reliable way of acquiring understanding. In addition, understanding is not a reliable way of acquiring wisdom. We may distinguish between two senses of “wise”: (a) wise in a certain domain and (b) wise all things considered. There is no reason to believe that those who understand why the balloon rose are likely to be wise in any domain (such as the domain of mechanics) or all things considered. Hence, understanding is not a reliable way of acquiring any epistemic goods.

Nor does understanding aim at any epistemic goods in the second sense. Those who have understanding do not necessarily have the intention to acquire either true belief, justification, knowledge, understanding, and wisdom. Suppose I pushed the door, and it is open. You saw me push the door and automatically understand (to a certain degree) why it is open. It is entirely possible that you have no intention to acquire the true belief that the door is open, or knowledge that the door is open because of my push, or wisdom in the domain of mechanics.

# 3. In what sense understanding is an intellectual virtue?

In explaining the nature of understanding people, Grimm (2019) notes that the notion of “understanding” is ambiguous. On the one hand, “understanding” might refer to an epistemic good—the good of actually understanding why S did X. On the other, it might refer to the character trait that an understanding person has—a disposition to charitably interpret the motives and circumstances of others, not to blame or deplore too hastily, etc. One might be an understanding person without actually understanding why S did X. This distinction is implicit in our everyday language, e.g., “Siyi is a very understanding person. If I talk to Siyi, she will understand why I did that.” We think the character trait that an understanding person has helps her to actually understand why others did certain things, that is, to achieve understanding as an epistemic good.

Grimm suggests that understanding as a character trait is an intellectual virtue. While he does not provide any arguments for this claim, I think there are good reasons for it. First, as a character trait, the quality of being understanding is stable. If one is understanding, one cannot easily lose this quality, just like if one is open-minded, one cannot easily lose this quality.[[10]](#footnote-10) One might object that the quality of being understanding is not stable because one may suffer mental decline or dementia. But according to this objection, none of the things that philosophers usually call intellectual virtues (such as reliable eyesight, memory, excellent reasoning abilities, intellectual responsibility, open-mindedness, and so on) are stable, because if one suffers mental decline or dementia, one would lose these things, too. When we say an intellectual virtue is stable, we surely do not mean one would not lose it even if one suffers mental decline or dementia. Rather, we mean something like it cannot be easily forgotten or easily changed because of seeing or hearing certain things.

Second, the quality of being understanding aims at some epistemic goods in both senses of “aiming at” as noted in the previous section: (a) an understanding person is more likely to get the psychological profiles and moral standing of others right and thus to understand why they did certain things; (b) an understanding person seems to necessarily have the motivation to acquire true beliefs about others. (a) is intuitively plausible. Here is an argument for (b): the character trait of being understanding is an acquired quality, not something that a person was born with. In order to be an understanding person, one has to overcome some obstacles such as the inclination to be judgmental. If one is not motivated to acquire true beliefs about others, one cannot overcome these obstacles. Thus, to be an understanding person, one must be (sometimes implicitly) motivated to acquire true beliefs about others or to understand others.

To wrap up, the character trait that an understanding person has is a stable and acquired quality that involves a characteristic motivation to acquire some epistemic goods and reliable success in bringing about these epistemic goods. Hence, on almost every account of intellectual virtue in recent literature, understanding as a character trait is an intellectual virtue.[[11]](#footnote-11)

With regard to understanding why a natural event occurred, we may make a similar distinction: understanding as a distinctive ability or power of the mind and understanding as an epistemic good (i.e., the good of actually understanding why X occurred). Consider the following case (inspired by Pritchard 2010):

Suppose your house burnt down and you wonder why. So you turn to a fire expert. Before the expert investigates the fire scene, she has no understanding of why your house burnt down. The reason why you turn to her for help is that you think she is able to figure out the cause of a fire in this kind of case: if she has the relevant information of the fire scene, she will understand why your house burnt down.

In this case, understanding as a distinctive power of the mind refers to the ability to figure out the cause of a fire in ordinary cases, while understanding as an epistemic good refers to the expert’s actual understanding of why your house burnt down.[[12]](#footnote-12)

It is worth noting that the above distinction is based on the ordinary use of “understanding.” People not only use “understanding” to refer to an epistemic good (like “She understands why your house burnt down” in the above case), but also use it to refer to a distinctive ability or power of the mind. For example, according to the Oxford English Dictionary, the primary sense of understanding is “the ability to understand something.” Here is an example sentence offered by the Oxford English Dictionary: “Some things, however, seemed destined to remain beyond my understanding.”[[13]](#footnote-13)

There are good reasons to think understanding as a distinctive ability or power of the mind in certain domains is an intellectual virtue according to some versions of virtue reliabilism. Most people have this power in the domain of simple systems. For example, when observing first that someone pushed a door and then that the door was open, most people are able to understand why the door was open: it is because someone pushed it. Without much effort, they not only know how things actually are but also grasp how things might be in this kind of simple system. Indeed, as far as simple systems are concerned, understanding as a distinctive power of the mind is like perception: it is unacquired (at least not deliberately acquired), stable, and generally reliable. It reliably helps us understand why some things happened in daily life, e.g., why the door is open, the finger is bleeding, the glass is broken, etc. Thus, understanding as a distinctive power is like a faculty, just as perception.[[14]](#footnote-14) Perception, on some accounts, is an intellectual virtue. For example, according to the simple reliabilist account (e.g., Goldman 2001; Sosa 1991; Greco 2002), X is an intellectual virtue iff X is a stable quality that reliably helps those who have X obtain certain epistemic goods. On this account, an intellectual virtue does not have to be acquired, nor does it involve a characteristic motivation to acquire epistemic goods. Hence, being stable and reliable, perception is an intellectual virtue. So is understanding as a distinctive power of the mind.

However, the same thing cannot be said with regard to the domain of highly complicated systems. Very few people can figure out the cause of a certain event in a highly complicated system. One must have the power of the mind at a very high level in order to be able to answer questions such as “What makes a planet like Venus spin faster?” This high-level power can only be acquired by long-term training: one needs to overcome formidable obstacles to acquire it.[[15]](#footnote-15) And it is either unstable or unreliable, for those who figure out the cause of a certain event in a certain highly complicated system often fail with regard to other equally highly complicated systems even in the same area. If unstable, then understanding as a distinctive power of the mind in the domain of highly complicated systems is not an intellectual virtue on any popular account of intellectual virtue, since an intellectual virtue must be stable. If unreliable, then understanding as a distinctive power of the mind in the domain of highly complicated systems is not an intellectual virtue on any reliabilist account, though it may count as an intellectual virtue according to some forms of virtue responsibilism.

There are systems that are neither simple nor highly complicated. Call them ordinarily complicated systems. It seems that understanding as a distinctive power of the mind can be an intellectual virtue in domain of ordinarily complicated systems. Consider ordinary fire scenes. The distinctive ability or power of the mind to analyze a fire scene and figure out the cause of the fire can only be acquired by training: one needs to overcome some serious obstacles to acquire it. To overcome these obstacles, one must be motivated to “get it right” (cf. Ahlstrom-Vij & Grimm 2013). In addition, once one has understanding as a distinctive power of the mind with regard to ordinarily complicated systems, one is unlikely to lose it. At least one can stabilize this power through practice. Moreover, this power of the mind can be reliable. While a new hand who just finished an apprenticeship might often give a false analysis of fire scenes, experienced fire investigators are usually trustworthy. Hence, on either virtue reliabilist account or responsibilist account, understanding as a distinctive power of the mind with regard to ordinarily complicated system *can* be an intellectual virtue.

# 4. Conclusion

To sum up, I have argued that the claim that understanding is an intellectual virtue is false if “understanding” refers to an epistemic good. However, there is another sense of “understanding”, which refers to a character trait or a distinctive power of the mind. I argue that in this sense, understanding can be an intellectual virtue on two popular accounts of intellectual virtue.

Before closing, I’d like to suggest that the distinction between understanding as an epistemic good and understanding as a character trait or a distinctive power of the mind can help us better appreciate Aristotle’s account of intellectual virtue. According to Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*, there are five virtues of thought or intellectual virtues: technê, epistêmê, phronêsis, sophia, and nous. Here let us focus on epistêmê. As I have noted in the beginning of this paper, epistêmê is generally rendered as knowledge or scientific knowledge, but some scholars argue that a better translation is understanding. Aristotle seems to use epistêmê in an ambiguous way. On the one hand, epistêmê refers to an epistemic good, i.e., the state of knowing how a specific scientific truth can be deduced from the first principles. On the other, epistêmê refers to an ability to deduce truths on science matters from the first principles. One might have epistêmê as an ability without actually knowing how a specific scientific truth can be deduced from the first principles, simply because one is unaware of this specific scientific truth. When Aristotle says that epistêmê is an intellectual virtue, he seems to mean an ability rather thanan epistemic good by “epistêmê.” This interpretation is coherent with Aristotle’s claim that an intellectual virtue is a way by which the soul arrives at truth. Given that the first principles are true, the ability to deduce propositions from the first principles is a reliable way of obtaining truths, because every proposition that is deduced from the first principles is true.

In fact, the distinction between an epistemic good and an ability also applies to technê, phronêsis, sophia, and nous. Take nous. On the one hand, Aristotle introduces *nous* as an intuitive ability or faculty that grasps the first principles as true. On the other, *nous* for Aristotle refers to an epistemic good, i.e., the state of actually grasping the first principles. When Aristotle says that nous is an intellectual virtue, he seems to mean an ability or faculty rather thanan epistemic good by “nous.” The same is true with regard to technê, phronêsis, and sophia.*[[16]](#footnote-16)*

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1. Kotsonis (forthcoming) argues that Plato considers epistêmê as the primary intellectual virtue. Aristotle discusses five intellectual virtues including epistêmê in the Book VI of *Nicomachean Ethics*. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. As Baehr (2017: 800) notes, virtue epistemologists generally endorse “some variation of the view that knowledge is true belief produced by (and true on account of) an exercise of one or more intellectual virtues.” Grimm (2019) argues forcefully that understanding sometimes requires the so-called character-level intellectual virtues such as the intellectual courage and open-mindedness. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Some of the arguments in this paper are based on the ideas in my Chinese article (Hu 2019a). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Many philosophers (e.g., Grimm 2011; Kvanvig 2009; Pritchard 2010) think that we can substitute “S knows that p” for “S understands that p” with little loss of meaning on most occasions. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. For a recent survey of this issue, see Grimm (forthcoming). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Grimm (2016a) thinks it is wrong to say that I have no understanding at all. According to the popular account of understanding, I still enjoy some understanding of why Sam is running since I can grasp how Sam’s running depends on a gibbous moon. Grimm notes that this understanding has the same basic shape as the everyday understanding we take ourselves to have of the world. Suppose you chopped some onions and your eyes started to water. Based on your years of experience in the kitchen, you surely have some understanding of why your eyes started to water: not because you chopped the celery or the carrots, but because you chopped the onions. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Zagzebski (1996: 137) offers the following general definition of a virtue: “A virtue then can be defined as a deep and enduring acquired excellence of a person, involving a characteristic motivation to produce a certain desired end and reliable success in bringing about that end.” [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. As I will show, there are two senses of “aiming at.” [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. In a previous footnote, I noted that Zagzebski defines virtue as something that involves “a characteristic motivation to produce a certain desired end.” The desired end of intellectual virtue is an epistemic good. Here I’d also like to note that in their article on virtue epistemology for *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Turri, Alfano, and Greco (2018) “start with an uncontroversial, but still informative, characterization of intellectual virtues: intellectual virtues are characteristics that promote intellectual flourishing, or which make for an excellent cognizer.” Put differently, they think it is an uncontroversial view that intellectual virtues aim at intellectual flourishing, which consist of possessing epistemic goods, whatever they are. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. I’d like to note that understanding as a character trait is different from open-mindedness. As many philosophers (e.g., Baehr 2011; Carter & Gordon 2014; Riggs 2010) note, open-mindedness consists in being prepared to take seriously the views of others that are in conflict with one’s own. By contrast, understanding as a character trait essentially involves a disposition to charitably interpret the motives and circumstances of others, not to blame or deplore too hastily, etc. They are different because, on the one hand, one might be open-minded even if one is not understanding. For example, one might be open-minded and thereby offer a fair and rational analysis of the opponent’s argument, but hastily and uncharitably conclude that the opponent presents her argument simply because she wants to impress people. On the other, one might be understanding even if one is not open-minded. Suppose I make an argument that motion is impossible. You believe that motion is obviously possible and refuse to take my argument seriously. Still you might be an understanding person and perfectly understand why I make the argument. That said, in many cases, these two virtues are intertwined: an understanding person is likely to be more open-minded, and an open-minded person is likely to be more understanding. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Some might think understanding as a character trait is also a moral virtue. According to a popular view (cf. Zagzebski 1996), one way intellectual virtues are different from moral virtues is that the former aim at epistemic goods while the latter aim at moral goods. If understanding as a character trait aims at both epistemic goods and moral goods, then it seems plausible to say that it is not only an epistemic virtue but also a moral virtue. Yet it is worth noting that Roberts and Woods (2007: 60), among other philosophers, “find it unhelpful to try to draw a strict line between the intellectual and the moral virtues.” [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. When Grimm (2019: 342) says that “Understanding ... brings a distinctive power of the mind to bear,” he means that understanding involves grasping specific dependence relations, which is a distinctive power of the mind. I think it makes more sense to say that the thing that enables the mind to grasp specific dependence relations is a distinctive power of the mind. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. <https://www.lexico.com/en/definition/understanding> [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. I’d like to note two things. First, a significant difference between understanding and perception is that understanding is somehow importantly linked to grasping truths about modality, while perception is usually not. Second, my claim that understanding as a distinctive power is like a faculty might remind readers of Kant’s concept of understanding as a faculty. Scholars differ on their interpretations of Kant. Here I endorse Karl Schafer’s interpretation. According to Schafer (forthcoming a), Kant distinguishes between the faculty of *Verstand* (often translated as “understanding”) and the faculty of *Vernunft* (often translated as “reason”). These two faculties are different because their ends or proper functions are different. Specifically, the end of the faculty of *Verstand* is to acquire *Erkenntnis* (often translated as “cognition”). For Kant, *Erkenntnis* or cognition is a kind of “knowledge” in the ordinary English sense of this word - namely, knowledge of an object, as opposed to knowledge of a proposition. When we cognize an object, we will know what it is and how it is different from other things. What is distinctive about having *Erkenntnis* of an object is not that one’s representation of this object is well-justified. Rather, what distinguishes Erkenntnis of something from a mere representation of it is that an *Erkenntnis* of something must represent this thing in a manner that makes us conscious of what it is, that is, the object of our representation (see Schafer forthcoming b). By contrast, the end or proper function of the faculty of *Vernunft* (reason) is to achieve *Begreifen* (comprehension) or *Wissenschaft* (systematic cognition from principles). Schafer (2019: 13) argues that *Begreifen* in Kant’s sense differs from mere *Erkenntnis* “precisely insofar as it involves a grasp of these sorts of explanatory relations. In this way, [*Begreifen*] in Kant’s sense involves the sort of cognitive achievement which contemporary epistemologists call ‘understanding’.” Thus, the idea I suggest here is similar to Kant’s idea of the faculty of *Vernunft* (reason) rather than the faculty of *Verstand* (understanding). [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. A friend suggests that while this high-level power needs to be cultivated, it is the perfecting or refining of a power that already exists, not the acquisition of a new power of the mind. I tend to agree. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. The view that Aristotle means an ability by “intellectual virtue” is surely not new. See Hughes (2013: 130). [↑](#footnote-ref-16)