**EPISTEMIC COURAGE AND THE HARMS OF EPISTEMIC LIFE**

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Courage is a virtue of the mind because the life of the mind – inquiring, criticising, investigating – exposes us to a variety of harms: infringements on one’s interests. An important modern example is the distinguished climate scientist, Michael Mann, the originator of the famous ‘hockey stick’ graph, depicting temperature changes over the last thousand years. Since the graph proved a powerful symbol, Mann was soon under active, concerted attack from well-funded organisations that are hostile, on economic or ideological grounds, to acceptance of anthropogenic climate change. The *Wall Street* journal and *Fox News* castigated his work and questioned his character, the Commonwealth Foundation tried to pressure his employer, Penn State University, to fire him, an envelope containing white powder was posted to his house, and Joe Barton, the climate-denialist chair of the House Energy Committee, tried to subpoena the personal records of Mann and his co-authors.

To his enormous credit, Mann remained committed to his research, which is not in doubt by any epistemically serious person or group, and, moreover, worked to expose the insidious machinations of organised climate denialists. Mann explains why he continued with his research, and began public advocacy for climate science:

“In this poisonous environment, we are each faced with a choice. Should we avoid the fray? […] Arguably, I could have tried to ignore the attacks in the hope they would eventually go away. But retreating into my lab and simply focusing on my work did not feel like a responsible option. For one, it would … encourage similar behavior against other climate scientists. It would set a poor example for younger scientists just entering the field, showing them that it is unsafe to participate in public outreach about the implications of their scientific research” (Mann 2015: 39-40)

Given these motivations, Mann now devotes time to outreach and science education through public lecturing, science journalism, and campaigning, especially through his blog, RealClimate (<http://www.realclimate.org>) – alongside his teaching, research, and graduate supervisions.

Mann is an exemplar of virtuous epistemic courage – a disposition to respond appropriately to the harms that arise in the course of an agent’s activities in the epistemic domain, due to a motivating commitment to epistemic goods, such as truths or, in Mann’s case, informed understanding of climate change by the public and policymakers. Such harms may be epistemic or not; what matters is that the harms arise in the course of one’s epistemic activities (such as arguing, investigating, explaining) and that one’s motivation is primarily epistemic (such as a concern for truth, knowledge, or understanding). Mann, for instance, says his concerns were primarily epistemic – “nothing [is] more noble than striving to communicate … the implications of our scientific knowledge” (Mann 2012: 40) – but also moral and practical, such as promoting science as a career and enabling evidence-based environmental policy. If epistemic courage is often close to moral courage, then that is what one ought to expect, given the pervasiveness of epistemic concerns in life. In what follows, my focus is solely on epistemic courage.

Although epistemic courage may be more vivid in high-stakes cases like climate change research and its denialist enemies, it’s also pertinent to a wider array of more everyday epistemic activities and concerns. Virtue epistemologists tend to characterise courage in relation to some “opposition” or “threat” to, or “rebellion” against, one’s epistemic and other interests, where these threats can be isolated acts or sustained conditions of oppression.[[1]](#endnote-1)

Acting courageously, on these accounts, is an epistemic virtue because it manifests an admirable commitment to epistemic goods, in the face of one’s actual or anticipated subjection to harms. Since subjection to harm is an intrinsic feature of our social and epistemic lives, there is a perpetual need for individual and collective agents with the virtue of epistemic courage. In this chapter, I survey some of the main issues germane to this virtue, such as the nature of courage and of harm, the range of epistemic activities that can manifest courage, and the status of epistemic courage as a collective and as a professional virtue.

**1. Courage: Some Key Features**

A first task is to locate courage among other epistemic virtues, most obviously the closed related virtue of perseverance, with which it might be conflated. José Medina proposes that epistemic courage often requires “persevering in epistemic journeys despite all obstacles” (Medina 2012: 229), while James Montmarquet remarks that a courageous agent “perseveres in the face of opposition from others” (Montmarquet 1993: 23). Such actions may require engagement with obstacles, but not all of these will take the form of *harms*. Dullness, difficulty, and complexity are obstacles to our epistemic activities and projects, but are not, at least as they stand, harms – it’s odd to describe the tediousness of a logic exercise as a *harm*, even though it’s certainly an obstacle to its completion.

A harm must be an infringement of some interest. Since we have interests in maintaining bodily integrity, advancing professional interests, maintaining certain beliefs and certainties, and so on, we can be harmed if and when these interests are either violated or subjected to challenge, through subjection to physical violence, reputational damage, or disturbing epistemic critique – by learning facts that disrupt our vision of the world and our place within it, say. Central to Nietzsche’s claim that epistemic courage is a virtue is his conviction that many of the things we will learn about are, in fact, deeply disturbing, morally and existentially, not least deep truths about ourselves (see Alfano 2013). We might need courage to cope with the harms done to us when and if we come to know and understand certain things about ourselves, other people, or the world.

Reflecting on such cases, Jason Baehr proposes that “a willingness to persist or persevere” does not always require courage, although it might require other virtues, such as “determination, patience, diligence, or tenacity” (Baehr 2011: 21). Determination combats difficulty, patience combats slowness, diligence combats tedium, and courage combats harms. Crucially, though, the harms must be genuine, rather than imagined or merely apparent. Some things might seem harmful, when in fact they’re quite harmless. Sometimes, knowing this might require experience or understanding, of a sort typically unavailable to the novice or the naïve. Although an agent might genuinely struggle to persist with an activity they mistakenly regard as harmful, this is not an act of *virtuous* epistemic courage, since the virtue requires an excellent perceptual and evaluative component: a capacity to accurately perceive and judge what is or might be, and is not or is unlikely to be, harmful.

The status of harms as a sub-type of obstacle is captured by Heather Battaly’s (2017: 20) argument that courage is a sub-virtue of epistemic perseverance. She conceives of the latter as a disposition to make good judgments about one’s intellectual goals, to reliably perceive obstacles to those goals, to respond to those obstacles with the appropriate degree of confidence and calmness, to overcome those obstacles or otherwise act as the context demands, and to do all of this because one cares appropriately about epistemic goods. Since only some of the obstacles to our epistemic goals involve subjection to harms, courage is a sub-virtue of perseverance, focusing on responses to harms. It would be interesting to identify and describe the other sub-virtues of perseverance.[[2]](#endnote-2)

The status of courage as a sub-virtue does not entail that it has a second-class status among virtues of the mind. Quite the contrary, the centrality of courage as a virtue of the mind is partly reflective of the pervasiveness of subjection to harms in epistemic life. Some accounts of courage tend to occlude that centrality, by focusing on a narrow range of epistemic activities. Zagzebski (1996: 17-18) and Montmarquet (1993: 23) both characterise courage in terms of, roughly, dispositions to care about epistemic goods and to defend one’s putatively justified beliefs in the face of opposition, until one becomes reasonably persuaded of their falsity. But such accounts are too narrow for two reasons. First, they focus on doxastic commitments and practices, when in fact courage can be invited by or manifested in many other dimensions of epistemic life. Second, even within doxastic practice, courage is not confined to *defending* one’s beliefs, since it might involve *abandoning* or *critically reflecting* on them, too. Compare, for instance, Roberts and Wood’s broader conception of courage as “a power to resist or overcome fears that tend to disrupt one’s intellectual functioning” (Roberts and Wood 2007: 234). A distinction should be made, here, between a *feeling of* *fear* and the *object* of the fear. Mice may evoke a feeling of fear that disrupts a person’s functioning, by causing them to stop moving around in spaces containing mice, but of course mice are not legitimate objects of fear, unlike lions and tigers. To be virtuously epistemically courageous, a person will be excellent at perceiving and evaluating things that are legitimate sources of harm.

Staying with a broad conception of courage as an epistemic virtue manifested in responses to harms, as a specific type of obstacle, three further qualifying points are needed. First, what counts as a harm must be, to borrow a term from Nathan King (2013: 3975), *person-relative*. Although there are generic harms, the salience of a given harm will often depend on particular features of an agent’s material, social, and epistemic circumstances and identity. Reputational damage is a generic type of harm, but a senior professor, regarded and esteemed for her diligence and integrity, can be harmed reputationally in ways that a more junior researcher, fresh out of graduate school, cannot. The range and severity of harms to which an agent will be vulnerable is shaped by their social positionality, epistemic identity, and professional status. And, so, a situation may generate harms for, and thus demand courage from, some people and not others.

Second, subjection to harm may be a general feature of epistemic life, but some agents are particularly vulnerable to harm because they occupy situations of social and epistemic oppression. They will be subjected to more intensive and extensive harms. Courage will thus have a special significance for the oppressed, for two reasons noted by Medina. First, oppressed agents are, by definition, more likely to be subjected to harms, insofar as their ‘epistemic journeys’ are subject to active aggression by other, privileged agents. Second, courage may have a particular significance for members of oppressed groups, as “a crucial epistemic and political virtue” (Medina 2012: 229). Medina’s thought is that although epistemic courage has some role in all lives, it has a specific role for oppressed persons—if they can act with epistemic courage, their capacity for coping with or resisting oppression is enhanced. Such courage might be a feat of what he calls an *epistemic hero*, a person capable of outstanding epistemic acts and attainments, who “initiates and facilitates epistemic transformations for us all”, often through acts of profound epistemic courage (see Medina 2012: 233). But it can equally be a collective accomplishment, if and when individual acts of epistemic courage are “echoed by others … reverberating in a social chain” (Medina 2012: 231) – a form of collective epistemic courage I return to in Section 4. Ideally, of course, these forms of courage particular to the oppressed would cease to be necessary, since the subjections to harm implicated in systems of oppression would cease to be a feature of our societies. But that’s an ideal, for sure.

A third qualifier to the association of courage with harms concerns the ways that fear might feature in the psychology of courage. Intuitively, courage manifests in response to *fear*. Let’s assume for the sake of argument that these are fears of actual or potential harms. But Baehr (2011: 169) urges caution, proposing that experiencing fear is *not* a precondition for an exercise of courage. Some epistemic agents, like the grizzled investigative reporter or long-term detective, may no longer experience fear. Nor need fear play a role in the aetiology of an agent’s courage. Although some earn their courage through acts of confronting threats and harms, others seem naturally to possess it. We ought to distinguish, then, between forms of courage achieved through the efforts of agents, and what Aristotle called the natural forms of the virtues, acquired from ones’ environment (see *Nicomachean Ethics* VI.13).

To sum up, epistemic courage is, first, a sub-virtue of epistemic perseverance, a specific way of persevering in the face of actual or anticipated subjection to harms. Second, there is a generic range of harms – surveyed in the next section – but the types, range, and intensity of harms to which agents are vulnerable will be socially textured. Third, courage can manifest across the whole range of our epistemic activities, not just defensive doxastic practices. Holding to the courage of our convictions is not the only way this virtue can be manifested. Fourth, courage does not require fear in either its aetiology or its exercise.

Let’s start with harms and whether they must be epistemic

**2. Harms and Vulnerability**

A harm is an actual or potential threat to one’s interests, perceived by an agent, and courage is a virtue that enables an agent to respond positively to those harms. (Section 3 examines a range of such responses.) Harms can be thought about in terms of their *nature*, *type*, and *distribution*, each of which are relevant to courage.

Starting with the *nature of harm*, an obvious point is that many things are or could become harmful. Some necessarily (since we all have some of the same interests?), some inadvertently; some intentionally (deliberately), some accidentally; some able to be anticipated, others unpredictably; some intrinsically, others only contingently. The physically violent actions of a criminal gang are necessarily, intentionally, and predictably harmful. Roberts and Wood (2007: 230) give the example of a criminal psychologist becoming “empathetically acquainted” with the mind of a sadistic serial killer, an intrinsically emotionally harmful experience. By contrast, studying the social behaviour of ducklings isn’t at all harmful, at least as far as I know.

For courage to be virtuous, one must be *aware* of the pertinent harms and to be able to properly evaluate them. If not, the agent cannot make clear judgments about the appropriateness of the action relative to the harms, and thus risks the vice of recklessness: a failure to recognise, know, or understand the nature of the harms posed by an act, experience, or situation (see Roberts and Wood 2007: 223f). A virtuously courageous inquirer asks: are the harms necessary or only contingent features of the act or commitment? Are they accidental or intentional aspects—are they harms that other agents deliberately create? Alongside the anticipated harms, which one can prepare for, might there also be other, unexpected harms for which one cannot?

By the *type of harm*, I refer to different ways that a person might be harmed, across the various domains of a human life. *Practical harms* include bodily injury, subjection to violence, destruction of property, or erosion of one’s material or financial resources. *Social harms* include loss of reputation, respect, trust, and other social goods, through one’s being slurred, embarrassed, insulted, ridiculed, accused falsely of some misdemeanour, or in some other ways impaired in one’s capacity to act and flourish as a social being. *Professional harms* are infringements on one’s professional interests and capacities, such as loss of credibility, censure, decertification, or being demoted or fired. *Psychological harms* include damage to one’s self-esteem, mental health, or psychological wellbeing, while *epistemic harms* include radical doxastic disorientation, loss of epistemic self-trust, erosion of self-confidence, or corruption of one’s epistemic character.

These types of harm obviously interpenetrate, since the forms of interests and domains of life to which they refer are not sharply demarcated. Think of the attacks on Michael Mann’s research and reputation, which were tightly bound up with his personal and professional identity, and integrity. In the case of scientists, the professional and the epistemic cannot be teased apart, nor separated from one’s social and psychological security.

Given the range of types of harm, Baehr (2011: 190) asks if epistemic courage is confined to responses to *epistemic* harms. Asking questions, criticising claims, and so on can subject an agent to harms of a physical, social, professional, psychological, or epistemic sort. My suggestion is that what matters, to make an act one of epistemic courage, is that that the action be motivated by a concern for epistemic goods—asking questions *to get to the truth*, criticising claims *to advance understanding*, and so on. Given these definitively epistemic motivations, the harms that one is or may be subjected to may be of some or all of the types just listed. Some acts of courage may have both epistemic and practical motivations – to *gain knowledge* in order to *defeat the enemy*. (An interesting question is that of whether, in those cases, a person is exercising two virtues – those of practical courage and epistemic courage – or exercising a distinctively rich form of the virtue of courage.)

The complex ways that interests and harms of epistemic subjects converge is an important reason why reflection on epistemic courage must be sensitive to social positionality. Several generations of work by epistemologists in the fields of feminism and philosophy of race have taught us to beware of vague references to ‘the epistemic agent’, and instead to attend to the plurality of standpoints of situated agents with complexly textured identities. Social and positional identity affects the interests one does and can have, the harms to which one may be subjected, and one’s capacity to respond positively to them. As Medina puts it, though “everyone needs epistemic courage, there is a special kind of courage that the pursuit of knowledge requires for epistemically marginalised subjects” (Medina 2012: 231). Such contingent patternings of vulnerability to harms means that the virtue of epistemic courage takes different forms, depending on who one is and where one is located within the social world.

**3. Acts of Courage**

Most virtue epistemologists characterise epistemic courage with reference to a wide range of epistemic activities and commitments. Baehr refers to it as “a disposition to persist in or with a state or course of action aimed at an epistemic good end despite the fact that doing so involves an apparent threat to one’s own well-being” (Baehr 2011: 177). Medina locates courage in acts where an agent is “pursuing participation in epistemic practices … despite all obstacles” (Medina 2012: 229). Such references to ‘states’, ‘courses of action’, practices, and ‘journeys’ indicates that epistemic courage might manifest across the whole range of activities constitutive of an epistemic life.

Baehr (2011: 173) offers, as examples, observing threatening states of affairs, conceiving of undesirable possibilities, and starting or continuing inquiries – each of which can, at least under certain conditions, increase one’s subjection to harms. Imagine a lifelong theist who gradually comes to suspect that their faith isn’t as warranted as they supposed, a suspicion that threatens to destroy their entire sense of their life and worth. Listening to articulate atheist podcasts, conceiving of the possibility that their beliefs are false, and initiating critical reflection into their faith might all be acts of courage. Each, after all, can subject that theist to a complex array of psychological, social, and existential harms.

Crucially, epistemic courage is not confined to practices of *inquiry*, since not all of our epistemic activity and interest is directed to the acquisition of new epistemic goods. Epistemic courage might be manifested in critically reflecting on, or maintaining a belief – think of a North Korean maintaining the belief that Kim Jong-un is a poor leader – or it might mean suspending judgment or refraining from judging at all (see Baehr 2011: 175). It is a mistake to think of courage only in terms of positive actions – *taking* a stand, *defending* a belief. Consider the following illustrative list of epistemic actions, each of which can, for certain agents, under certain conditions, manifest the virtue of epistemic courage:

* initiating (or terminating) inquiry
* adopting (or abandoning) a belief
* challenging (or conforming to) an established understanding of an issue
* voicing interest (or disinterest) in a topic
* being open (or closed) to certain epistemic possibilities
* directing one’s imagination towards (or away) from certain possibilities
* sharing (or not sharing) certain results or findings
* engaging in (or disengaging from) practices of self-scrutiny
* placing (or withholding) epistemic trust in others
* asking (or not asking) certain questions

Since this list is non-exhaustive and includes both positive and negative actions, two important consequences follow.

First, we ought to resist Baehr’s (2011: 21) classification of courage solely as a virtue that corresponds to ‘demands of endurance’, one of six types of *inquiry-relevant demand* which virtues enable an agent to meet. The others are demands of initial motivation, proper focusing, consistent evaluation, of epistemic integrity. and of epistemic flexibility. Courage can play a role in enabling an agent to meet *all* six of these demands. Consider the distressing case of investigations of child sexual abuse within the Roman Catholic Church: courage played a role in motivating the inquiries, in focusing the investigations, in evaluating the evidence, and in acting with integrity and flexibility. Each of these activities can, and indeed did, subject those involved to a set of harms, including horrible emotional harms (see The Investigative Globe 2016). Classifying courage as a virtue of endurance occludes its broader roles across the whole range of epistemic activity.

Second, the range of activities that can manifest epistemic courage entails that exercises of this virtue will often be invisible. Epistemic courage can be bold and dramatic, in an epistemically high-stakes situation, as with the journalist Edward Murrow’s campaign against the epistemically and politically insidious nefariousness of Senator Joseph McCarthy (see Baehr 2011: § 9.2). But epistemic courage can also be found in smaller acts: imagine an agoraphobic student with chronically low self-esteem whose love of philosophy drives them to attend and participate in class every week. This is an act of true courage – a pursuit epistemic goods despite a tangible risk of harm, in this case, harm to one’s psychological wellbeing – but Slikely invisible to those without knowledge of the students’ circumstances. Such acts of courage may not be vivid, dramatic, or fire the imagination, but they still exemplify virtuous epistemic courage.

Considering the plurality of interests, the person-relativity of harms, and the complexity of context, the richness of virtuous epistemic courage should be clear. It is captured in Baehr’s account of the virtue:

“[A]n intellectually courageous person is one who engages in a certain sort of activity despite the appearance of a threat or harm, and more specifically, despite a judgment or belief to the effect that the activity in question is dangerous or threatening. This judgment amounts to a precondition for an exercise of intellectual courage—it comprises the background against which the positive “substance” of intellectual courage is manifested” (Baehr 2011: 170-171)

Such a person has a disposition integral to epistemic courage, but full possession of that virtue requires something further, namely, “a certain motivational … structure wherein a desire for epistemic goods is dominant *vis-à-vis* other motivations” (Baehr 2011: 178-179).

Two comments on Baehr’s remark. First, the relevant activity can be positive or negative, e.g., so *adopting* or *abandoning* a belief. Second, the harms may be actual or anticipated, since it won’t always be clear, in advance, whether an activity *will*be harmful. Indeed, the uncertainty of harms is one reason that courage has cooperative or sub-virtues, required for its effective exercise. Roberts and Wood nominate *epistemic caution*, a disposition to “cultivate, refine, and listen to one’s fears” by reflectively adapting to the harms of one’s environment (Roberts and Wood 2007: 217-220). We might also consider what Battaly (2017: 22) calls *epistemic self-control*, a capacity to resist the desire to forsake epistemically valuable projects for ones less valuable but more pleasurable. Study of the cluster of virtues related to epistemic courage should start with caution and self-control, alongside the relation of these to other virtues.

**4. Collective Epistemic Courage**

Many of the preceding examples of the virtue of epistemic courage have pertained to individual agents. Typical images of courage feature outstanding individuals, such as those Medina (2012: 225) calls *epistemic heroes*, persons characterized by a profound capacity for epistemic achievement. Such heroes speak out, stand up, fight back, ask the hard questions, defend the truth, in the process often risking increasingly intense and acute subjection to a variety of harms.

Although this might paint epistemic courage as a quality of outstanding individual agents, Medina emphasizes that such epistemic heroism is a “complex cultural artefact”, an accomplishment that is “possible and effective only within specific social contexts and thanks to the support of social networks and social movements” (Medina 2012: 225). Accordingly, one might ask if epistemic courage can be a virtue of collectives as well as of individual agents.

The literature on collective epistemic virtues is fairly modest, since most work in virtue epistemology focuses on the virtues of individual agents. Certainly the usual understanding of virtues as excellent traits of character, as virtues of the mind, leads naturally enough to a focus on those individuals, bearers of character and virtue. But several writers, including Miranda Fricker (2010) and Reza Lahroodi (2007), propose that collectives can also be bearers of virtues, ones not reducible to the virtues of their constituent individual members. They think that a collective can have a virtue that is possessed by few or none of its constituent members. Imagine a hiring committee composed of deeply prejudiced individuals, whose prejudices get cancelled out at the group level, such that the committee itself is impartial. Second, they think that a collective can lack a virtue that is possessed by many or all of its members. Imagine a church committee whose members are individually open-minded about LGBTQ issues, but who as a collective act closed-mindedly, perhaps out of a collective concern to be seen to conform to church teachings.

When considering the possibility of collective forms of the virtue of epistemic courage, we have two options. First, a collective could be courageous if it acts in ways that subject it to actual or anticipated harms, out of a sense of commitment to some set of epistemic goods, even if some or all of its members lack such courage. There is good reason to think this form of collective epistemic courage occurs. For one thing, certain harms are easier to respond to when one is a member of a group, since groups often have greater capacities and resources than individuals. After all, we often form and join collectives because doing so enhances our strength and security. Medina captures this when referring to the “chained actions” of multiple agents, who act courageously in ways that are then “echoed by others”, “reverberating in a social chain”, within which “a multiplicity of individuals, groups, and publics are implicated” (Medina 2012: 225, 229, 248). For another thing, epistemic courage might show itself in certain actions that can only be performed by collectives – for instance, acts too large, complex, or temporally extended for any individual agent to perform, no matter how energetic or skilled they may be. In such cases, collectives can legitimately be said to possess the virtue of epistemic courage, since certain forms of appropriate response to harms are only possible at the collective level.

A second option for thinking about collective epistemic courage is to consider the idea that only collectives can be subjected to certain types of harm. Individuals and collectives can be fired or assassinated or psychologically oppressed. By contrast, only collectives can be disbanded or defunded, since those sorts of harms only apply to collectives, such as institutions. If so, the existence of specifically collective forms of harm suggests that there could be distinctively collective forms of courage. Obviously, a courageous collective cannot have all of the features of courageous individuals, such as virtuous perceptual habits, but nor need they. A collective need only possess and manifest those fundamental components of the virtue of epistemic courage, namely, dispositions to act in ways intended to secure some set of epistemic goods, despite a judgment or belief that doing so will increase subjection to actual or anticipated harms, where a concern for epistemic goods is a primary motivation. Since collectives can arguably act, make judgements, have motivations, share beliefs, and suffer harms, there are good reasons to take seriously the idea of virtuously epistemically courageous collectives.

The study of courageous collectives needs at least two things. The first is case studies, ideally ones that detail the collectives’ actions and motives, the harms to which they were subjected, and their ways of responding appropriately to them. Luckily, many such cases exist, such as the *Boston Globe* investigation into child sexual abuse by Catholic priests, as depicted in the 2015 film *Spotlight*. It’s a sad fact of the world that there are powerful groups opposed to various forms of inquiry – for economic, practical, ideological, or other reasons – which are willing and able to subject those who pursue such epistemic goods to harms. By providing detailed case studies, virtue epistemologists may be able to identify conditions conducive to the cultivation and exercise of epistemic courage by collectives. Second, studying collective courage will require close contact with wider bodies of work on collective intentionality and group agency and perhaps with history and sociology (see, e.g., Gilbert 2000 and Schweikard and Schmid 2013).

**5. Professional Epistemic Courage**

Some epistemic virtues have a special significance for the members of particular professions: these are *professional epistemic virtues*. Over the last decade or so, the idea of professional virtues, ones whose cultivation and exercise is especially incumbent on the members of certain professions, has undergone a minor renaissance (see Oakley and Cocking 2001 and Walker and Ivanhoe 2009). Embracing the idea does not entail abandonment of a sense that there are generic excellences of character, but rather marks a sense that the salience of certain virtues is informed significantly by our professional roles, identities, and activities.

There is only a modest literature on professional epistemic virtues, although a growing number of studies explore the role of epistemic virtues in scientific inquiry (see Stump 2007; Ivanova 2010; Kidd 2011). Granted, the specific claim that these are *professional* virtues isn’t always made, but it is latent in the claim that such virtues have integral roles in professions with a special relation to epistemic goods. Teaching and archaeology, for instance, both involve authoritative transmission of epistemic goods, making *truthfulness* a distinctive virtue of those professions (see Cooper 2006 and 2008). Interestingly, the examples of epistemic courage in virtue epistemological literature often concern professional epistemic agents – an investigative journalist, a Supreme Court Justice, and a pair of astrophysicists for Baehr (2011: §9.2) and a scientist and psychical researcher for Kidd (2013).

Could epistemic courage be a professional epistemic virtue for the members of certain professions? If so, which ones, and why? Should professional communities and institutions explicitly recognise and facilitate the exercise of epistemic courage? How might the cultivation of epistemic courage be incorporated into professional training? Since it is early days in the study of professional epistemic virtues, the most one can do, for now, is to sketch some future lines of inquiry.

What might make epistemic courage a distinctive virtue of some profession? I focus on professions with a special relationship to, or concern with, epistemic goods, such as scientific inquiry, education, and the media. One line of thought is that the *activities* constitutive of a profession inevitably subject its practitioners to harms, so that a courageous willingness to perform those activities, in pursuit of those goods, despite those harms is required. (Compare how courage is a professional virtue of soldiers, because the activities definitive of soldiering – such as combat – are intrinsically harmful.)

Obvious examples of professions whose practices can be harmful include investigative journalism and forensic psychology – recall Roberts and Wood’s example of the emotional harms of an ‘empathetic acquaintance’ with the mind of a serial killer. The International Women’s Media Foundation awards an annual ‘Courage in Journalism Award’, for women journalists worldwide who “[o]vercom[e] threats, oppression, and a stubborn glass ceiling”, to “persevere in their pursuit of the truth” (http://www.iwmf.org/awards/courage-in-journalism-awards/).

Another line of thought is that the *epistemic goods* with which a profession is concerned may subject its practitioners to harms, even if the relevant activities are not, themselves, likely to be harmful. The practices of an academic historian, such as studying archival documents, are not particularly harmful, but the topics that a historian elects to produce and share knowledge of can certainly lead them to be subjected to harms. Here, epistemic courage is needed, not because of what one is doing, but because of what could or should be done with what one comes to discover, explain, or understand.

Consider, for instance, the recent experiences of the US historian of science and medicine, Robert Proctor, whose 2012 book, *Golden Holocaust*, offers an extensive study of the history of cigarette design, rhetoric, and science. Among other things, it documents the strategies developed by tobacco companies to create and deploy ignorance about the deleterious health and environmental effects of their products. Beyond his exposure of their strategies, Proctor also ‘names names’, by listing medical researchers, historians, statisticians, and others, who work – often non-transparently, by failing to disclose funding sources – for tobacco companies (Proctor 2012: Part III). Proctor also often testifies against the industry, and so was already on their radar as a threat. Consequently, it was unsurprising that, once they learned of his book project, they subjected him to a campaign of intimidation. They tried to subpoena his manuscript, private emails, and research notes, costing him fifty thousand dollars in legal fees, not to mention months of stress, and he was tailed at conferences (see Mechanic 2012 and Monaghan 2012).

As a candidate case study of epistemic courage, we have much to go on here. Proctor was motivated by epistemic goods, namely to share knowledge and truth about the tobacco industry, including its corruption of academia, which he judges to be ‘one of the most deadly abuses of scholarly integrity in modern history’ (Proctor 2012: 458). Moreover, he persisted with this research despite the fact that doing so subjected him to a variety of social and professional harms, though he was fortunate to have the institutional support of his employer, Stanford University. The harms here are not intrinsic to the practice of academic history of science, but are imposed on it from an external set of agents – the tobacco industry – whose interests are put in jeopardy by the epistemic goods that Proctor sought, successfully, to provide.

Unfortunately, contemporary science offers other, less encouraging studies for our exploration of epistemic courage. Climate scientists are also subjected to strategies of intimidation designed to deter investigations that would enhance public and political understanding of the reality, extent, and consequences of anthropogenic climate change (see Oreskes and Conway 2010 and Mann 2012). The main culprits here are groups and organizations with economic, political, or ideological investment in carbon intensive economies that have considerable power and resources. Many climate scientists report that the reasonable fear of being ‘attacked’ by climate contrarians leads them to understate their conclusions, abandon climate change for ‘safer’ topics, or even to leave the discipline and encourage graduate students to consider other fields – all of which reflects a justified *epistemic timidity* (see Biddle, Kidd, and Leuschner 2017).

It is important to study such cases, not to engage in blaming those under attack, but to identify the sorts of conditions that enable individuals and collectives to cultivate and exercise epistemic courage. Equally important are studies of the set of vices associated with epistemic courage, including those of excess, such as recklessness, and those of deficiency, such as scrupulosity and cowardice (see Roberts and Wood 2007: 221-234) and servility and timidity (Tanesini MS). Clearly there is scope for further study of the virtue of epistemic courage, and, alas, ample material and motivation for such work.[[3]](#endnote-3)

**Related Topics**

<Heather to add>

**Biographical Note**

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**Notes**

1. See, *inter* *alia*, Baehr 2011: 17; Fricker 2007: 168; Medina 2012: 229; Montmarquet 1993: 23. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Starting with Baehr’s’s list, one should start with determination, patience, diligence, and tenacity, perhaps by coupling these to specific *types* of obstacle. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. I am grateful to Heather Battaly for comments on this chapter, and for the invitation to contribute it. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)