*Epistemic Autonomy & Intellectual Humility: Mutually Supporting Virtues*

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1. *Introduction*

Recently, more attention has been paid to the nature and value of the intellectual virtue of epistemic autonomy.[[1]](#footnote-1) One underexplored issue concerns how epistemic autonomy is related to other intellectual virtues.[[2]](#footnote-2) Plausibly, epistemic autonomy is closely related to a number of intellectual virtues like curiosity, inquisitiveness, intellectual perseverance, and intellectual courage to name just a few. Here, however, I will examine the relation between epistemic autonomy and intellectual humility. I will argue that epistemic autonomy and intellectual humility bear an interesting relationship to one another in that they are interconnected and mutually supporting intellectual virtues. In sections 2 and 3 I will provide a brief overview of the predominant accounts of intellectual humility (section 2) and epistemic autonomy (section 3) in the literature. With an understanding of these intellectual virtues in hand, we will examine their relationship of mutual support in section 4. Section 5 will explore a challenge to this relationship coming from the epistemology of disagreement, and section 6 concludes.

1. *Intellectual Humility*

Intellectual humility has received a great deal of attention in the philosophical literature as of late. In what follows, I will briefly outline some of the more prominent views of the intellectual virtue of intellectual humility in this burgeoning literature. In particular, we will highlight three central views of intellectual humility.

Roberts and Wood characterize intellectual humility as follows:

…an unusually low dispositional concern for the kind of status that accrues to persons who are viewed by their intellectual communities as intellectually talented, accomplished, and skilled, especially where such concern is muted or sidelined by intrinsic intellectual concerns – in particular, the concern for knowledge with its various attributes of truth, justification, warrant, coherence, precision, and significance. (2003, p. 271)

Roberts and Wood contrast intellectual humility with fourteen intellectual vices, but they focus primarily on arrogance and vanity as contrasting vices. On this account, intellectually humble people are insensitive to their own status or social importance. As Roberts and Wood put it, intellectually humble people have “a striking or unusual unconcern for social importance, and thus a kind of emotional insensitivity to the issues of status.” (239) So understood, intellectually humble individuals exhibit a low concern for their intellectual status and achievements – they are not preoccupied with their own accomplishments. We can call this account ‘the low concern account’ of intellectual humility.[[3]](#footnote-3)

According to Whitcomb et al. (2017), intellectual humility consists in being appropriately attentive to, and owning, one’s intellectual limitations. On this view,

owning one’s intellectual limitations *characteristically* involves dispositions to: (1) believe that one has them; and to believe that their negative outcomes are due to them; (2) to admit or acknowledge them; (3) to care about them and take them seriously; and (4) to feel regret or dismay, but not hostility, about them. (519)

This account of intellectual humility encompasses cognitive, behavioral, motivational, and affective components. Cognitively, intellectual humility concerns the disposition to have certain beliefs: to believe that one has intellectual limitations and that those limitations come with negative epistemic consequences. Intellectually humble people do not tend to deny or ignore their intellectual shortcomings. Behaviorally, intellectual humility involves a disposition to both admit and acknowledgement those limitations. Intellectually humble people conduct their intellectual life with their intellectual limitations in mind. They do not pretend that their limitations do not exist, but are more likely to be more hesitant in their conclusions, seek more information, and rely more heavily on others in light of their intellectual limitations. Motivationally, intellectually humble people care about their intellectual limitations. They are not indifferent to their intellectual short-comings, but want to address them and improve their cognitive situation. Intellectually humble people also feel a certain way about their intellectual limitations. There is an affective component to intellectual humility. Intellectually humble people feel regret for their intellectual limitations. On this account, intellectual humility is an intellectual virtue, when this appreciating and owning of one’s limitations is motivated by the subject’s desire for epistemic goods (e.g. truth, knowledge, understanding, etc.). (520) We can call this account ‘the limitations owning account’ of intellectual humility.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Church and Barrett give an account of intellectual humility according to which it is the virtue of accurately tracking the positive epistemic status of one’s beliefs as they ought. According to Church and Barrett, intellectual humility is a mean between intellectual arrogance and intellectual diffidence. Intellectually humble individuals value their beliefs in accordance with the positive epistemic status that those beliefs possess. So, intellectually humble people have a level of confidence, and a degree of doxastic resilience, that matches the epistemic status of the belief in question. Strongly supported beliefs are held strongly and are not revised easily. Weakly supported beliefs are held tentatively and are very open to revision or relinquishment. Intellectually arrogant people tend to see their beliefs as enjoying *more* positive epistemic status then they actually have, whereas intellectually diffident people tend to see their beliefs as having *less* positive epistemic status they actually have. The intellectually humble person characteristically avoids both of these mistakes and accurately tracks the epistemic status of their beliefs. We can call this third account ‘the accurate tracking account’ of intellectual humility.[[5]](#footnote-5)

There is a noteworthy difference between Church and Barrett’s accurate tracking account and Whitcomb et. al.’s limitation owning account of intellectual humility. The limitations owning account is silent as to how one thinks, feels, and behaves regarding their intellectual strengths, whereas the accurate tracking account requires one to appropriately respond to the positive epistemic status of one’s beliefs across the entire spectrum. The limitations owning account has been rejected by some for this very reason. The limitations owning account leaves it open, as at least a conceptual possibility, that an individual have the virtue of intellectual humility while also being arrogant about their intellectual strengths. Whitcomb et al. anticipate this objection to their account, and have a great deal to say in response to it. Here it is important to note that they posit an additional intellectual virtue, proper pride, to cover one’s intellectual strengths. On their view, proper pride is having the right stance toward one’s intellectual strengths, while intellectual humility is having the right stance toward one’s intellectual limitations. (516) According to Whitcomb et al. individuals who are internally rational will not be both intellectually humble and intellectually arrogant (about their strengths), but this combination of traits is at least possible for someone who is not internally rational. In contrast, the accurate tracking view requires the intellectually humble person to neither undervalue nor overvalue their beliefs, with no distinction made between their relation to their intellectual strengths or weaknesses. So, whereas the limitations owning account posits two virtues (intellectual humility and proper pride), the accurate tracking account posits only one (intellectual humility) to cover the same terrain.

While these individual accounts of intellectual humility differ in the details, there is much that unites them. There is still a core concept that these distinct accounts are each trying to unpack in their unique ways. For instance, while there is a theoretical debate to be had here over the nature of intellectual humility, the rarity of individuals who own their limitations while being intellectually arrogant indicates that even if these traits are not two sides of the same coin, they are at least closely related to one another. For this reason, we can think of our focus here on what we might call ‘intellectual humility+’ which includes what Whitcomb et al. call ‘proper pride’, while staying neutral on whether proper pride is a constitutive part of intellectual humility itself. Henceforth, when I refer to intellectual humility, it will be intellectual humility+ that I am referring to.

Here are some core takeaways regarding the virtue of intellectual humility. Intellectual humility is best understood as a mean between two extremes. On the one hand, there is the extreme of deficiency, intellectual arrogance. Arrogant people are overconfident and unaware of their intellectual shortcomings. On the other hand, there is the extreme of excess, intellectual servility. Servile individuals are overly humble and are thus incapacitated by their focus on their intellectual limitations. The intellectually humble person avoids both types of intellectual failure.

 What intellectual humility is not:

* Overestimating one’s intellectual abilities/Thinking too highly of oneself
* Downplaying or denying one’s intellectual limitations
* Having an inflated sense of self-importance
* Being overly confident in one’s beliefs
* Setting unachievable intellectual goals
* Being overly concerned with how their intellect is perceived
* Overstating one’s intellectual contributions
* Seeking intellectual recognition and admiration

 What intellectual humility is:

* Acknowledging one’s intellectual limitations
* Showing concern for one’s intellectual limitations
* Being insensitive to one’s social status as an intellectual
* Having an appropriate level of confidence in one’s beliefs
* Being aware of what one knows and what one doesn’t know
* Being open to other points of view and to revising one’s beliefs
* Acknowledging the contributions of others in one’s intellectual projects

So much for the virtue of intellectual humility. Let’s turn now to our second intellectual virtue, epistemic autonomy.

1. *Epistemic Autonomy*

Epistemic autonomy has only recently begun to receive significant attention as an intellectual virtue. In what follows, I will briefly outline some of the emerging accounts of this intellectual virtue.

Roberts and Wood (2007) are again a fitting place to start. Roberts and Wood see epistemic autonomy as an intellectual virtue that reflects the social nature of our intellectual practices. (257) To be epistemically autonomous is to be both an integrated and independent thinker. On their account of epistemic autonomy, epistemic autonomy consists in resisting ‘alien hetero-regulators’ while having a positive relationship with ‘proper’ hetero-regulators. (277, 285) According to Roberts and Wood, hetero-regulators are alien, or improper, when they consist of intellectual principles or directives that the subject has no commitment to, that are extraneous to the subject’s purposes, and have not been internalized or ‘made one’s own’ by the subject. (284) In contrast to this, proper hetero-regulators consist of intellectual principles or directives that have been internalized and ‘made one’s own’ by the subject. Proper hetero-regulators are both understood by the subject (278), and have been “actively and intelligently” appropriated into the subject’s noetic structure. (285) According to Roberts and Wood, one’s intellectual tradition, teachers, peers, colleagues, critics, models, sanctioners, and authorities that one is happy to acknowledge all count as proper hetero-regulators. (285) In following proper hetero-regulators, one thinks appropriately for themselves and exhibits proper self-regulation in their intellectual affairs. We can call this ‘the integration account’ of epistemic autonomy.

According to Heather Battaly (2021), those who possess the trait of epistemic autonomy are disposed to think for themselves. Autonomous thinkers want to see things for themselves and rely on their own cognitive faculties and resources. This trait can be had to an excess or to a deficiency. When had to an excess, individuals will think for themselves at the wrong times (e.g. when they are not reliable), in the wrong ways (e.g. using methods that are unreliable), or with respect to the wrong objects (e.g. intellectual projects that are doomed to fail). (157) Individuals that exhibit a deficiency of epistemic autonomy fail to think for themselves when it is appropriate for them to do so. For instance, an individual may be reliable concerning a well-thought-out intellectual project, yet nevertheless defer to someone else less reliable instead.

According to Battaly, alongside the trait of epistemic autonomy is the trait of intellectual interdependence. The trait of intellectual interdependence concerns a disposition to think with others. Intellectually interdependent individuals consult others, collaborate with others, and rely on the intellectual resources of others. Intellectual interdependence too can be had to an excess or a deficiency. An excess of intellectual interdependence can result in uncritical deference and credulity. Individuals can also fail to think with others appropriately. Most notably, this happens when an individual exhibits an excess of epistemic autonomy.[[6]](#footnote-6)

On Battaly’s view, epistemic autonomy and intellectual interdependence can each be intellectual virtues when possessed to the appropriate degree and coupled with the appropriate motivation for epistemic goods. The virtue of epistemic autonomy consists in a disposition to think for oneself appropriately. For Battaly, this includes a disposition to think for oneself at the right times, in the right ways, and with respect to the right objects, as well as a motivational disposition to want to behave accordingly because of a desire for epistemic goods.[[7]](#footnote-7) (164) The virtue of intellectual interdependence consists in a disposition to think with others appropriately. This includes a disposition to consistently think with others at the right times, in the right ways, and concerning the right objects, as well as a disposition to want to behave in those ways because of a desire for epistemic goods. (165) We can call this account ‘the appropriate thinking’ account of epistemic autonomy.

Jonathan Matheson (2022a) gives the following account of the intellectual virtue of epistemic autonomy:

The character virtue of [epistemic autonomy] characteristically involves the following dispositions:

 (1) [cognitive] to make good judgments about how, and when, to rely on your own thinking, as well as how, and when, to rely on the thinking of others,

(2) [behavioral] to conduct inquiry in line with the judgments in (1), and

(3) [motivational] to do so because one loves the truth and appropriately cares about epistemic goods. (182-183)

On Matheson’s account, the virtue of epistemic autonomy has cognitive, behavioral, and motivational components. The cognitive component of epistemic autonomy consists of a disposition to make good judgments regarding when one should think for themself and when it would be better to rely more heavily on the thinking of others. Autonomous thinkers are discerning about how they should go about their inquiry, and they make good judgments about how to best manage their inquiry. The behavioral component of epistemic autonomy consists in conducting inquiry in accordance with those judgments. So, epistemically autonomous thinkers also go about their inquiry as they see fit, and they are discerning about how they should do so. Finally, the motivational component of epistemic autonomy has it that these judgments and activities are all fundamentally motivated by a love of truth and a desire for things of epistemic value. The reason why autonomous thinkers make the decisions they do in managing inquiry is to best secure epistemic goods. It is their desire for the truth, knowledge, and understanding that guides their choices in inquiry.

Just like with intellectual humility, we confront an issue of trait individuation with epistemic autonomy as well. Whereas Battaly distinguishes the trait of epistemic autonomy from the trait of intellectual interdependence, Matheson combines both of these features into a single virtue of epistemic autonomy. This distinction parallels the earlier debate regarding intellectual humility and its relation to proper pride. Battaly’s account leaves open the possibility that one is epistemically autonomous while not thinking well with others (or vice versa). Matheson’s account precludes these possibilities, requiring good intellectual management across the board for possessing the virtue of epistemic autonomy. While there is a theoretical issue to be resolved here as well, epistemic autonomy and intellectual interdependence are at least closely related traits. While Battaly makes the conceptual space for one to fail at intellectual interdependence without failing to be epistemically autonomous (e.g. by ceasing inquiry whenever thinking with others would be required), in the overwhelming majority of cases, failures of intellectual interdependence will come with failures of epistemic autonomy (and vice versa).

Here too, while the accounts on offer differ in the details, there is clearly a common core of a concept that unites them. Like with intellectual humility, we can stay neutral on the particular theoretical details concerning epistemic autonomy for the purposes of this paper, and think about what we might call ‘epistemic autonomy+’ as the intellectual virtue that would encompass both epistemic autonomy and intellectual interdependence, taking no stand on the precise nature of epistemic autonomy in itself. In what follows, I will use ‘epistemic autonomy’ to refer to epistemic autonomy+ for ease of expression.

Here are some takeaways regrading epistemic autonomy. Epistemic autonomy also lies as a mean between two extremes. On the one hand, there is the intellectual maverick who insists on conducting all of his own intellectual work. He ignores the cognitive resources of others. On the other hand, there is the intellectual co-dependent who fails to take a suitable role in their own inquiry. They outsource their intellectual projects and opt for mere deference over active deliberation, leaving epistemic goods on the table when they could be obtained through their own involvement in inquiry.[[8]](#footnote-8)

 What epistemic autonomy is not:

* Complete intellectual independence
* An unwillingness to think things through for oneself
* Playing no role in one’s inquiry
* Being completely isolated from intellectually guiding principles and evidence
* Finding one’s beliefs and principles ‘alien’

 What epistemic autonomy is:

- Thinking for oneself appropriately

- Wanting to see things for oneself and understand

- Intellectually relying on others appropriately

- Managing one’s inquiry well

- Making good determinations about the most epistemically fruitful ways to inquire.

1. *Interconnected and Mutually Supporting Virtues*

With this understanding of these two intellectual virtues in hand, let’s turn to examining their relationship. While all intellectual virtues are excellences of the mind, individual intellectual virtues can stand in different relations to one another.[[9]](#footnote-9) For instance, some intellectual virtues seem to be entirely independent of each other. Take curiosity and carefulness, for example. An individual being curious does not seem to make it any more likely that they are careful, and their being careful does not seem to make it any more likely that they are curious. So, while both carefulness and curiosity are intellectual virtues, they look to be entirely independent from one another. Other intellectual virtues enjoy a support relation, but in only one direction. While curious people may tend to be more open-minded, whether one is open-minded seemingly does not significantly affect how curious one is. Being open to other viewpoints does not come with desire to seek them out. So here we have a plausible case of one-way support between virtues. In addition, some intellectual virtues may even pull in opposite directions. It may be that possessing one intellectual virtue actually makes it more difficult to possess another. Take intellectual humility and intellectual courage for example. It seems that being intellectually humble might actually make it more difficult for an individual to be intellectually courageous (and vice versa). If an individual owns their intellectual limitations, they may be less likely to stand their intellectual ground, even when it is called for. There is also at least conceptual space for one intellectual virtue to oppose another, while the later has no real effect on the former. Finally, and relevant to our purposes here, intellectual virtues can be mutually supporting. Two intellectual virtues are mutually supporting when possessing either virtue individually makes it more likely that you possess the other – possessing either individual virtue facilitates the cultivation of the other.

Let’s turn to some theoretical reasons that indicate that epistemic autonomy and intellectual humility are mutually supporting intellectual virtues.

First, let’s see why epistemic autonomy promotes intellectual humility. Epistemically autonomous individuals prefer deliberation to mere deference – they would rather see things for themselves. They like to get their hands on the relevant evidence and to make their own assessment of it, even if they are prepared to defer to the experts in case their own evaluation differs from that of the experts (since in doing so they can improve their epistemic state).[[10]](#footnote-10) However, autonomous deliberation often fails, particularly when the inquiry is conducted outside of one’s field of expertise. Often, when we try to think through some issue for ourselves, we discover that we cannot determine the answer on our own. It might be that some of the relevant evidence is simply not available to us, or it might be that we are not sufficiently equipped to evaluate the relevant evidence appropriately. In such cases, failed autonomous deliberation helps us appreciate our intellectual limitations, it helps us see when determining the answer is beyond us. In fact, there is no better route to determining our intellectual limitations than in putting our own cognitive faculties to work and finding that they come up short. If one rarely thought through things for themselves, it would be much harder to appreciate their own intellectual limitations (and abilities). So, in this way autonomous thinking can help cultivate intellectual humility.

Autonomous deliberation also helps us accurately track what we understand and what we do not understand ourselves, but merely know or justifiably believe on the basis of testimony. In thinking through matters for ourselves, we don’t always fail. Sometimes we ‘get it’ and grasp the answer to our question. Understanding is one of the benefits of thinking for yourself.[[11]](#footnote-11) So, in thinking through things for oneself, one can come to appreciate what one understands (can figure out) and what one does not understand (cannot figure out). In thinking for yourself you can distinguish the good cases from the bad cases. This is relevant to intellectual humility, because in doing so one can better track the epistemic status of their beliefs. For instance, in thinking for yourself, you can sort what you understand, from what you merely know or justifiably believe. You may know a proposition on the basis of expert testimony, but if in thinking it through for yourself you do not grasp its truth, then you are aware that you do not understand it. So, autonomous thinking better helps one determine the epistemic status of their beliefs.

Autonomous deliberation can also help one to track the epistemic status of their beliefs by equipping one to better track and manage new information. When an individual thinks through a matter for themselves (acquires the relevant evidence and appreciates it for themselves), they are in a better position to modify their beliefs in light of new evidence. Someone who merely defers on some matter is not in as good of a position to manage new information on the matter since they are unaware of what information their belief is already indirectly based on (even if indirectly). This makes it harder for someone who has merely deferred to appropriately respond to new information.[[12]](#footnote-12) Given this, there is an addition way in which autonomous inquirers are better able to track the positive epistemic status of their beliefs, and makes adjustments as necessary. Autonomous thinkers can better manage new information and adjust their beliefs accordingly.

Finally, epistemically autonomous individuals manage their inquiry well. They know when to defer to someone who is better positioned to determine the answer to their question. In thinking well with others, epistemically autonomous individuals also exhibit a care for their intellectual limitations. Someone who was indifferent about their intellectual limitations would not allow for their intellectual limitations to guide their inquiry. So, autonomous individuals also exhibit concern for their intellectual limitations. In order to manage their inquiry well, autonomous thinkers must acknowledge their own intellectual limitations and adjust their inquiry in light of them. Autonomous thinkers cannot exist in a state of denial regarding their intellectual limitations.

In addition to these positive connections, failures regarding epistemic autonomy facilitate failures regarding intellectual humility. Let’s look at both an excess and a deficiency of the trait of epistemic autonomy. The intellectual maverick, who insists on figuring everything for himself and downplays his intellectual reliance on others, will also likely fail to hit the mark regarding intellectual humility. Such an intellectually unhealthy insistence to do it for oneself is likely to come with a failure to appreciate one’s own intellectual limitations and a tendency toward intellectual arrogance. Rather than being intellectually humble, such an individual is likely to be quite concerned with their perceived status and as a result will likely fail to accurately track the epistemic status of their beliefs, likely resulting in their being overly confident. Similarly, the intellectually co-dependent individual, who excessively outsources their intellectual projects, is also likely to have a skewed picture of their own intellectual limitations. Such an individual likely exaggerates their own intellectual shortcomings (or is perhaps even obsessed with them) and fails to appreciate their intellectual strengths. The intellectual co-dependent fails to see what epistemic gains there are to be had in autonomous inquiry, and this is tightly connected with a failure to appreciate their own intellectual strengths – what they can bring to the inquiry and what epistemic rewards await their participation.

So, we have good reason to believe that epistemic autonomy promotes intellectual humility. Let’s turn to see why intellectual humility also promotes epistemic autonomy.

Intellectually humble people know what they don’t know, and they don’t pretend otherwise. They acknowledge what they do not understand, and they recognize limitations in their evidence and their abilities to process it. Humble people do not let their ego get in the way of their inquiry.

Intellectually humble individuals are more concerned with figuring things out then in how they come off looking to others in their inquiry. Since they have a low concern for status, they are less likely to be self-centered in their inquiry, orienting themselves toward reality instead of the self.[[13]](#footnote-13) Such a low concern for status facilitates incorporating others into one’s inquiry and deferring when appropriate. Decisions in inquiry are motivated by the epistemic goods available, not by potential changes in social status. One of the predictions regarding intellectual humility that Whitcomb et al. consider is that “[intellectual humility] increases a person’s propensity to seek help from other sources about intellectual matters.” (524) They find this prediction plausible on their view of intellectual humility since,

limitation-owners are more likely to recognize the fallibility of their beliefs and the limitations of their capacities and so, in so far as they are motivated to gain epistemic goods, they are more likely to seek the help of other sources in their pursuit of those goods. (524)

Roberts and Wood touch on this same point when they claim,

even where an expert's knowledge is most extensive, she will often call on help (provided she does not have a character defect that makes her unwilling), and that autonomy involves knowing when to call on help, what kind of help to call on, and being humble enough to do so. Autonomy here is part expertise and part character trait.” (263)

Intellectual humility is here seen as a precondition for epistemic autonomy. Seeking help in inquiry, when appropriate, requires intellectual humility. It requires knowing what you don’t know and what you are unable to determine on your own.

Intellectually humble people are also not intellectual free-riders[[14]](#footnote-14). As Alfano et al. put it,

one naturally expects that intellectually humble people would promote the epistemic flourishing of their collaborators (perhaps even at an epistemic cost to themselves) in problem-solving social contexts.[[15]](#footnote-15)

So, intellectually humble individuals are still actively engaged in the process of inquiry, making contributions where possible, while keeping their limitations in mind. Here too, the goal of the intellectually humble individual is the epistemic betterment of all, rather than acquiring recognition and status for themselves. When they can play a role in achieving some epistemic end, the intellectually humble person does so. Such participation in inquiry mirrors the autonomous inquirer. The epistemically autonomous inquirer also manages their inquiry in line with what epistemic ends are available. When they can play a role in achieving such ends, they engage in inquiry. When the epistemic goods are more likely to come from the inquiry of others, they rely on the inquiry of others instead.

When we own our intellectual limitations, we can better determine which intellectual projects to take on for ourselves, and which projects we should outsource to more capable individuals.[[16]](#footnote-16) Successfully navigating what to inquire about, and how to conduct that inquiry, requires an appreciation of one’s weaknesses as well as one’s strengths. When one acknowledges their intellectual limitations, and conducts their inquiry with an eye towards them, they are more likely to make good determinations about when to think for themselves and when to seek more help from others. Intellectually humble individuals better appreciate their dependence on the broader intellectual community, and have a good sense regarding what they can figure out for themselves and what they can only know with the help of others.[[17]](#footnote-17) Autonomous inquirers conduct their inquiry in ways that fit this dependence and rely on these determinations.

It is also important to note that the epistemic benefits of inquiry go beyond determining the answer to one’s question. Another epistemically valuable consequence of inquiry is cultivating the intellectual character of the inquirer (cultivating their curiosity, perseverance, carefulness, etc.).[[18]](#footnote-18) The intellectually humble individual appreciates the aspects of their intellectual character that stand in need of further development. Recall that humble individuals care about their weaknesses and seek to address them. So, when an intellectually humble individual is lacking in a given intellectual virtue, they seek to address that. At the same time, the epistemic good of a better cultivated intellectual character will also motivate an epistemically autonomous individual to take on intellectual projects that will address the relevant need. Autonomous inquirers will make good choices in inquiry with an eye toward further developing those traits that stand in need of further cultivation. So, here too, intellectual humility and epistemic autonomy work hand in hand. Intellectual humility helps identify areas of weakness and seeks to address it. Epistemic autonomy, makes decisions in inquiry while paying attention to the potential epistemic gains, like a further developed intellectual character.

In addition to these positive connections between these virtues, we can also see that failures concerning intellectual humility lead to failures concerning epistemic autonomy. The intellectually servile individual over-owns their intellectual limitations while under-owning their strengths. Such an individual is likely to make poor judgments regarding when to think for themselves and when to defer to others. Intellectually servile individuals will miss opportunities to make their own intellectual discoveries and come to understand the answers to their questions since they have failed to appreciate their intellectual abilities by focusing too much on their weaknesses. On the other end of the spectrum, the intellectually arrogant individual over-owns their strengths while underappreciating their intellectual weaknesses. Such an individual is also likely to not manage their inquiry well. Intellectually arrogant people are blind to their shortcomings which will likely cause them to over-rely on their own intellectual abilities. They will often think for themselves (and stick with their own conclusions), when relying on the intellectual work of others would be more epistemically fruitful. So, failures regarding intellectual humility naturally lead to failures regarding epistemic autonomy.

1. *A Challenge from Disagreement*

While we have seen reason to think that epistemic autonomy and intellectual humility are mutually supporting intellectual virtues, one arena in which they may be thought to be incompatible regards the question of what we should do when we discover that we disagree. Debates about the epistemology of disagreement are debates about what it is rational to believe in the face of disagreement.[[19]](#footnote-19) In particular, the literature on the epistemology of disagreement has focused on disagreements between epistemic peers. Two individuals are epistemic peers regarding some claim when they are in an equally good epistemic position with regard to that claim. In other words, epistemic peers about a proposition are equally likely to get it right. This means that epistemic peers have equally good bodies of relevant evidence and are equally good at evaluating evidence of that type. Roughly speaking, views in the epistemology of disagreement are divided into two camps. Conciliatory views of disagreement claim that discovering that your peer disagrees with you calls for you to reduce your confidence in the matter, perhaps resulting in you giving up your belief entirely. In contrast, steadfast views of disagreement claim that it can be rational to ‘stick to your guns’ in cases of peer disagreement and to continue believing as before.

How does all of this relate to intellectual humility and epistemic autonomy? Considerations involving intellectual humility have often been used to motivate a conciliatory view of disagreement. In discussing his conciliatory view, Richard Feldman (2007) claims the following:

It calls for a kind of humility in response to the hard questions about which people so often find themselves in disagreement. It requires us to admit that we really do not know what the truth is in these cases. (213)

Similarly, David Christensen (2013) makes the following claim:

[T]he disagreement of others who have assessed the same evidence differently provides at least some reason to suspect that we have in fact made such a mistake; and that reason to suspect that we’ve made a mistake in assessing the evidence is often also reason to be less confident in the conclusion we initially came to. The rationale for revision, then, expresses a certain kind of epistemic modesty. (77)

The intellectually humble individual recognizes that they could be in error, and takes their disagreeing peer to a reason to believe that they have in fact made an error, calling for at least some reduction in confidence. In contrast, to remain steadfast in the face of disagreement seems to embody a kind of intellectual arrogance where one treats one’s own faculties as being more trustworthy than their peer’s.[[20]](#footnote-20)

In contrast, one of the central motivations that have been given in favor of a steadfast view concerns the importance of self-trust.[[21]](#footnote-21) According to this motivation for steadfast views, there is something important about the first-person perspective. For instance, your beliefs bear relations to your evidence and your faculties that they simply cannot bear toward the evidence or faculties of any other individual. Given this, it is claimed that it is rational to have a fundamental self-trust which permits you to rely on your evidence and evaluation of it even if the face of peer disagreement, and thus remain rationally steadfast in your belief. As Foley has put it,

I am entitled to make what I can of the conflict using the faculties, procedures, and opinions I have confidence in, even if these faculties, procedures, and opinions are the very ones being challenged by others. (2001, 79)

So, while cases of peer disagreements pose a kind of symmetry from a third-person perspective, according to a steadfast view motivated by self-trust, each party to the disagreement occupies a first-person perspective on the disagreement that can make it rational for them to stick to their belief.

Such a focus on self-trust can be seen to fit naturally with valuing epistemic autonomy. Recall that autonomous thinkers opt for deliberation over mere deference. They want to see the evidence and evaluate it for themselves. Autonomous thinkers think for themselves. Thus, it seems like one of our virtues, intellectual humility, recommends a conciliatory response to disagreement, while the other, epistemic autonomy, fits better with remaining steadfast. If these two virtues pull in different directions in the context of disagreement, then we have reason to believe that they are not mutually supporting virtues after all.

So, we have what appears to be an initial tension between epistemic autonomy and intellectual humility. In the context of disagreement these intellectual virtues may seem to recommend incompatible courses of action. What can be said about this apparent tension? There are several ways to show that this tension between these intellectual virtues is merely apparent. In what follows I will briefly explore how these virtues can be reconciled in the context of disagreement from a conciliatory perspective.[[22]](#footnote-22)

We briefly saw reasons to connect epistemic autonomy with an emphasis on self-trust. This was how epistemic autonomy was seen to support a steadfast view of disagreement. However, such an understanding of epistemic autonomy is focused on autonomy as a trait rather than as a virtue. While the intellectual maverick may be inclined toward self-trust, this is because they exhibit an excess of epistemic autonomy. As an intellectual virtue, epistemic autonomy is incompatible with placing greater weight on one’s evidence, or evaluation of it, simply in virtue of it being one’s own. As an intellectual virtue, epistemic autonomy is exercised by appropriately involving others in one’s inquiry. Since epistemic peers are in an equally good epistemic position on the matter at hand, a virtuously autonomous thinker would let the belief of their peer affect their own. For an virtuously autonomous thinker, it is unimportant that contribution to inquiry is their own, or that their conclusion was reached solely on the basis of their own efforts. Rather, the virtuously autonomous thinker is motivated to deliberate (over merely deferring) due to the epistemic goods that can be gained by so doing (understanding, resiliency, etc.). So, that an individual’s belief was the product of their own evidence and faculties is not a guiding feature for a thinker who has the virtue of epistemic autonomy. A virtuously autonomous thinker will want to hear their disagreeing peer’s evidence, and hear how they evaluated it in the way that they did. However, even before this can be done, the virtuously autonomous thinker’s belief will be affected by their disagreeing peer’s belief. Virtuously autonomous thinkers will see epistemic peers as useful allies in inquiry and thus conciliate in the face of disagreement.

So, even in the context of peer disagreement, the virtues of epistemic autonomy and intellectual humility go hand in hand. While there may be some initial reason to think that these two intellectual virtues pull in different directions in the context of peer disagreement, an appreciation of the virtue of epistemic autonomy removes any such tension. Rather, both intellectual virtues appear to motivate a conciliatory response to peer disagreement.

1. *Conclusion*

In this paper we have briefly surveyed the major extant accounts of the intellectual virtues of intellectual humility and epistemic autonomy, identifying a core concept for each of these two virtues. We then explored some theoretical reasons to believe that these two virtues are mutually supporting – reasons that being epistemically autonomous will help cultivate one’s intellectual humility, and vice versa. If these considerations are correct, then intellectual humility and epistemic autonomy have a tight interconnected relationship.[[23]](#footnote-23)

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1. See Ebels-Duggan (2014), Grasswick (2018), Matheson and Lougheed (2021), Roberts and Wood (2010), and Zagzebksi (2013; 2015) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. However, see Beebe (forthcoming) and Wright (forthcoming). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See also Roberts and Cleveland (2016) and Tangney (2000; 2009) for similar accounts. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. See also Porter and Schumann (2018). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Samuelson et al. (2015) have a similar view. They characterize intellectual humility as “holding a belief with the merited firmness” and as “believing in accordance with the evidence without claiming to know more (or less) than what the evidence merits.” A somewhat similar view is defended by Alan Hazlett (2012). Hazlett’s view concerns proper meta-beliefs. On his account, intellectual humility is “a disposition not to adopt epistemically improper higher-order epistemic attitudes, and to adopt (in the right way, in the right situations) epistemically proper higher-order attitudes.” (220) See also Gregg and Mahadevan (2014) who see intellectual humility as a realistic assessment of one’s epistemic capabilities and Lavelock et al. (2014) who claim that intellectual humility, “involves having an accurate view of self, evidenced by honest self-evaluation and willingness to accept one’s strengths and weaknesses.” [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Battaly notes that a deficiency of intellectual interdependence need not come with an excess of epistemic autonomy. Instead, subjects may simply give up on projects whenever it would be appropriate to think with others. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Nathan King (2021) also gives an account of the virtue of epistemic autonomy along these same lines. According to King, epistemic autonomy requires thinking for oneself while relying on others appropriately. (94) [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. This follows Matheson (2022a). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. This is not to assume that there is not some sense in which there is a unity of the intellectual virtues. For a helpful discussion of versions of the intellectual unity thesis, see Wilson (2021). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. See Matheson (2022a) and (forthcoming). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. See Hills (2009), Matheson (2022b). and Zagzebski (2007). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. For more on this point, see Fricker (2006), Goldberg (2021), Nickel (2001) and Nguyen (2018), and Matheson (2022a). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. See Ballantyne (2021, 5-6) and Leary & Terry (2012). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. For an extensive discussion of the relationship between epistemic autonomy, thinking for oneself, and free-riding, see Matheson (forthcoming). The sense of ‘free-riding’ relevant here comes with a desire to not be involved in inquiry even when one is capable of doing so well and has not less of a responsibility than others to put in the intellectual work. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Alfano et al. (2017, p. 25). [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. See Hannon (2021) and Whitcomb et al. (2017). [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. See Ballantyne (2021), Lockheart et al. (2016), and Sloman & Rabb (2016). [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. See Matheson (2022b) for more on this point. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. For a summary see Frances and Matheson (2018) and Matheson (2015). [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. See also Beebe and Matheson (2022). [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. See Enoch (2010), Foley (2001), and Wedgewood (2010). [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. While there are perhaps parallel moves that can be made from a steadfast perspective, my focus here will simply be on the conciliatory views. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
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