

On Mr Truetemp's Lack of Virtue

I.

Consider the following passage from Keith Lehrer's *Theory of Knowledge*:

Suppose a person, whom we shall name Mr Truetemp, undergoes brain surgery by an experimental surgeon who invents a small device which is both a very accurate thermometer and a computational device capable of generating thoughts. The device, call it a tempucomp, is implanted in Truetemp's head so that the very tip of the device, no larger than the head of a pin, sits unnoticed on his scalp and acts as a sensor to transmit information about the temperature to the computational system in his brain. This device, in turn, sends a message to his brain causing him to think of the temperature recorded by the external sensor. Assume that the tempucomp is very reliable, and so his thoughts are correct temperature thoughts. All told, this is a reliable belief-forming process. Now imagine, finally, that he has no idea that the tempucomp has been inserted in his brain, is only slightly puzzled about why he thinks so obsessively about the temperature, but never checks a thermometer to determine whether these thoughts about the temperature are correct. He accepts them unreflectively, another effect of the tempucomp. Thus, he thinks and accepts that the temperature is 104 degrees. It is. Does he know that it is? Surely not. He has no idea whether he or his thoughts about the temperature are reliable. What he accepts, that the temperature is 104 degrees, is correct, but he does not know that this thought is correct. His thought that the temperature is 104 degrees is correct information, but he does not know this. (Lehrer 1990, pp. 163-4)

The case of Mr Truetemp is designed to raise doubts about process reliabilism (e.g., Goldman 1992). For the process reliabilist, a belief is justified if it is produced by a reliable belief-forming process. A reliable process is one that produces true beliefs most of the time. The temperature beliefs that the tempucomp produces in Truetemp's mind are true. Hence, the process whereby the tempucomp interacts with Truetemp's brain constitutes a reliable belief-forming process. The beliefs are reliably formed true beliefs. For the process reliabilist, such beliefs must be knowledge.

Lehrer takes it to be clear that Truetemp's reliably formed true beliefs about the temperature are not knowledge. Being unaware of the existence of the tempucomp and failing to reflect upon the source or correctness of his temperature beliefs, Truetemp does not know the temperature by way of those beliefs. A committed process reliabilist may bite the bullet and insist that Truetemp's temperature beliefs constitute knowledge. But many share the

intuition that something important is lacking from Truetemp's beliefs about the temperature which undermines any claim to knowledge that might be made on behalf of those beliefs.

What I seek to explore in this paper is that the something important that is lacking from Truetemp's beliefs is virtue.

II.

Critical scrutiny of process reliabilism has given rise to various forms of virtue epistemology. Some virtue epistemologists argue that reliabilism fails to account for the greater value that knowledge has over true belief (e.g., Zagzebski 2003). Some suggest that virtue-theoretic approaches resolve the Gettier problem (cf. Greco 1999, p. 293).

I make no attempt to systematically explore virtue epistemology here. I simply distinguish between its two main forms: virtue reliabilism and virtue responsibilism. My purpose in doing so is to consider the potential for a virtue-theoretic response to the Truetemp case in relation to each of the two main kinds of virtue distinguished by the two forms of the approach.

According to virtue reliabilism, epistemic agents typically possess a range of natural or inbuilt capacities employed in the formation and maintenance of belief. Such capacities include perception via various sensory modalities, reasoning by deductive or inductive inference, introspection, and memory. There may be variation between individuals. Indeed, some individuals may lack one or another capacity altogether. But, for the most part, epistemic agents share these capacities. These are capacities with which humans typically are naturally endowed.

According to virtue responsibilism, epistemic agents deploy a range of character traits in arriving at and maintaining knowledge. Such agents may be open-minded or conscientious. They may display intellectual humility or exercise caution in the formation of belief. In the

exercise of such virtues, the agent displays their intellectual character. The exercise of the virtues is a manifestation of agency since the epistemic agent is responsible for the way in which they form and maintain their beliefs. Unlike the reliabilist virtues, responsibilist virtues are not necessarily the natural endowment of a person. They may be acquired and developed in the process of social interaction, for example, by way of education or parental guidance.

In the literature, there is discussion of the relationship between these two branches of virtue epistemology. For example, Baehr (2006) argues that the standards employed by virtue reliabilists should lead them to recognize the responsibilist character virtues. LePock (2011) argues for a unified approach on which both reliabilist and responsibilist virtues promote the common cognitive goal of significant truth. Alfano (2012) argues that empirical evidence of the influence of situational factors on the exercise of character traits tells against both responsibilist and unified approaches but may leave reliabilist approaches unscathed. I set aside such matters for present purposes. My aim here is to explore the Truetemp case in light of the distinction between reliabilist and responsibilist virtues.

III.

As has been noted in the first section, the process whereby the tempucomp interacts with Truetemp's brain to produce temperature beliefs is a reliable one. As such, it constitutes a reliable capacity to produce true belief. Arguably, the virtue reliabilist, like the process reliabilist, must count the process a reliable one. Beliefs resulting from the exercise of the process are therefore warranted beliefs. But two comments are in order.

First, unlike natural capacities such as visual perception the process that leads to Truetemp's beliefs about the temperature involves an artificial element. The tempucomp is a device implanted in Truetemp's skull. No doubt, its computational interaction with Truetemp's brain involves natural processes. But the tempucomp itself is not a feature of Truetemp's native

endowment qua human being. Still, the fact that Truetemp's sensory capacities have been subjected to artificial enhancement of this kind seems insufficient to exclude the process as a candidate for a reliable process.¹

Second, the capacity to form accurate beliefs about the temperature may well give rise to a reliable process. But the process is not well-described as a virtue. This is where it is important for the virtue reliabilist to characterize the reliabilist virtues in a way that distinguishes their approach from that of the process reliabilist. Considered merely as a reliable process, the way the tempucomp interacts with Truetemp's brain must constitute a reliable process that gives rise to warranted beliefs.

But the virtue reliabilist sometimes describes the reliabilist capacities not as processes but as skills or competences. The difference may be brought out by reflecting upon Ernest Sosa's example of the archer (e.g., 2007, p. 21). To acquire skill in archery, the archer must engage in sustained practice. Not only must they painstakingly practice with bow and arrow, but they may well require instruction by an archery teacher. Only after sustained practice and the attentive following of instructions from the teacher does the archer acquire skill in archery.

But it is precisely such an attempt to acquire a skill that is lacking in the case of Mr Truetemp. Truetemp has not received instruction on how to detect the temperature using the tempucomp. Nor has he engaged in careful and sustained practice in the art of detecting the temperature by means of the tempucomp. It is simply not the case that the ability to detect the temperature accurately and reliably is a skill that Truetemp has painstakingly acquired.

Given the latter, there is no need for the virtue reliabilist to count the process whereby Truetemp forms beliefs about the temperature as a reliabilist virtue. It may be a reliable

¹ For a careful discussion of "new perceptual faculties" in relation to reliabilism and the Truetemp case, see Beebe (2004), who argues that the negative implications of the Truetemp case for reliabilism are reduced once one recognizes the extent of neural and cognitive adjustment Truetemp must have undergone.

process. But, by failing to be a skill, the process fails to be a virtue in the sense that the virtue reliabilist requires for the exercise of the virtue to be able to convey epistemic warrant. We may therefore conclude that the virtue reliabilist need not treat Truetemp's temperature beliefs as warranted beliefs or indeed as knowledge.

IV.

Let us now consider the case of Mr Truetemp from the perspective of virtue responsibilism. It is evident that Truetemp's temperature beliefs do not arise from his own cognitive agency. He expends no effort in relation to these beliefs. So, he plays no agential role in the production or maintenance of the beliefs.

Still, is there any way in which Truetemp exercises responsibilist virtues regarding his temperature beliefs?

Truetemp is unaware of the tempucomp. He makes no attempt to find out why he has beliefs about the temperature. He is, as Lehrer writes, "only slightly puzzled as to why he thinks so obsessively about the temperature". He does not seek to determine whether his temperature beliefs are correct by, for example, checking his beliefs against a thermometer. Nor does he attempt to determine whether there is a reliable process that generates his beliefs about the temperature.

One responsibilist virtue that Truetemp might exemplify, but does not, is the virtue of intellectual curiosity. To be curious is to wonder why something is the case and then to seek an explanation for it. Being "only slightly puzzled" about his temperature beliefs, Truetemp fails to inquire into their accuracy or provenance. His failure to investigate the beliefs further is strongly indicative of a lack of curiosity in relation to the matter.

Another responsibilist virtue that Truetemp might exemplify, but does not, is the virtue of conscientiousness. To be conscientious is to reflect thoughtfully on one's beliefs and to

withhold judgement from ungrounded beliefs. Being “only slightly puzzled”, Truetemp does not reflect upon the grounds for his beliefs about the temperature. Nor does he inquire into the source or reliability of those beliefs. The manner in which Truetemp holds his beliefs about the temperature can hardly be regarded as conscientious.

Yet, despite failing to be either curious or conscientious in relation to his temperature beliefs, Truetemp is not to blame. It is a side effect of the surgery that he expends so little effort in thinking about his temperature beliefs. The fact that he neither wonders about the temperature beliefs nor reflects on whether he is right to hold such beliefs is not something for which Truetemp bears responsibility. His failure of virtue in this regard is not his fault. It is an effect of the surgery. If anyone is at fault, it is the surgeon rather than Truetemp. But, despite being blameless, it remains the case that Truetemp’s failure to reflect upon the source or accuracy of his temperature beliefs is decidedly lacking in virtue in the sense of the responsibilist.

V.

What I hope to have shown in this short note is that virtue-theoretic considerations lead to the rejection of the Truetemp case as a case of warranted belief or knowledge. While this does not remove the case as a counterexample for the process reliabilist, it does indicate that virtue epistemology has the resources to handle the case. I make no claim as to whether a reliabilist or responsibilist form of the approach is to be preferred, or, indeed, whether the distinction between the two approaches is ultimately defensible. What I suggest is merely that virtue-theoretic considerations of the kind explored here enable us to deal with the case in an effective manner.

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