

# **Epistemic situationism and cognitive ability\***

John Turri

[john.turri@gmail.com](mailto:john.turri@gmail.com)

*Abstract:* Leading virtue epistemologists defend the view that knowledge must proceed from intellectual virtue and they understand virtues either as refined character traits cultivated by the agent over time through deliberate effort, or as reliable cognitive abilities. Philosophical situationists argue that results from empirical psychology should make us doubt that we have either sort of epistemic virtue, thereby discrediting virtue epistemology's empirical adequacy. I evaluate this situationist challenge and outline a successor to virtue epistemology: *abilism*. Abilism delivers all the main benefits of virtue epistemology and is as empirically adequate as any theory in philosophy or the social sciences could hope to be.

## *1. Situationism and ethics*

Decades of research in social psychology taught us counterintuitive but valuable lessons about the determinants of human behavior. Situational factors influence our behavior to an extent that commonsense wouldn't predict and which is shocking upon reflection (e.g. Hartshorne & May, 1928; Milgram, 1974; Darley & Batson, 1973). Although people's behavior is fairly consistent over time in very similar situations, it can be highly inconsistent across situations that differ in ways that we might ordinarily think are insignificant (Mischel & Peake, 1982). Moreover, the predictive value of situational variables can exceed the predictive value of (what we take to be) a person's traits such as honesty or generosity. Indeed, the predictive value of traits can be startlingly low (Ross & Nisbett, 1991, p. 95).

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It's been more than a decade now since philosophers began seriously coming to grips with the social psychological findings (Flanagan, 1991; Doris, 1998; Harman, 1999; Doris, 2002). Gilbert Harman and John Doris clarified the findings' dramatic importance for ethical theory, especially traditional forms of virtue ethics which presuppose that people have character traits underwriting long-term, stable, and robust dispositions to be motivated and act in particular ways. Do people have such character traits, such as honesty and compassion? Harman and Doris boldly suggested that decades of psychological science are relevant to answering this question, and they concluded that the science warrants a negative verdict.

I agree that a satisfactory ethical theory must comprise, or at least not rule out, an empirically adequate moral psychology. Philosophers following Hume (1739, 3.1.1) can insist on the is/ought gap — on the distinction between facts and values — and perhaps they are right to do so. But even those who think the gap can't be bridged should value getting the facts straight before we jump the chasm and start in with the oughts.

I want to emphasize two points about the “situationist challenge” to virtue ethics and characterological moral psychology more generally. First, abandoning “characterological” moral psychology doesn't entail abandoning moral psychology. An “acharacterological” ethics “need not be aspsychologistic” (Doris, 2002, p. 129). Our ethical evaluations can and should still consider the psychological basis of behavior, such as beliefs, desires, intentions, skills, abilities, and so on. Indeed our evaluations can and should rely on “trait attributions” when it is “motivated by evidence” (Doris, 2002: 65). Although the evidence suggests that people lack the sort of “firm and unchangeable character,” or “global” character traits, that Aristotle discussed (1941, 1105a32), the evidence allows that people have “local traits” (Doris, 1998, p. 507) or “narrow dispositions” (Harman, 1999, p. 318). Local traits reliably predict behavior in “extremely fine-grained” types of situation, but they don't “fund expectations of cross-situational consistency” (Doris, 2002, p. 64, ch. 4 *passim*).

Second, philosophical situationism comes packaged with a plausible positive epistemology of trait attribution. If we're to engage in trait attribution when motivated by evidence, as seems eminently reasonable, what evidential standard shall we apply? Doris proposes the following standard:

If a person possesses a trait, that person will engage in trait-relevant behaviors in trait-relevant eliciting conditions with markedly above chance probability  $p$ . (Doris, 2002, p. 19)

Local traits often pass this test. If a student behaves honestly when taking multiple-choice final exams, then that provides evidence that she is "multiple-choice-final-exam" honest. But it doesn't provide evidence that she is honest when taking any sort of exam, and it certainly doesn't provide evidence that she is honest on her taxes, honest to her neighbors, or, especially, honest "globally" or in general. If a co-worker is honest at office parties, then that provides evidence that he is "office-party-sociable." But it doesn't provide evidence that he is sociable in the marketplace, or when out for an evening walk, or globally sociable (Doris, 2002, p. 66). Similarly, if a person perseveres in the face of physical threats, then that provides evidence that she is "physical-threat-courageous." But it doesn't provide evidence that she is courageous when it comes to confronting mistreatment in personal relationships, or facing intemperate intellectual challenges, or globally courageous.

In the end, two things matter for ethically evaluating someone's behavior: the behavior's outcome and the person's attributes manifested in the outcome. Situationism supports the view that the relevant psychological attributes are not global character traits. This is neither radical, alarming nor counterintuitive. Situationists allow that the evidence might support trait-attributions that are, as it were, more global than local. But so far the evidence mostly supports only local trait-attributions.

Whatever the consequences for philosophical theories of ethics or moral psychology, our ordinary practices of ethical evaluation will be mostly

unaffected and will continue in much the same way they always have. If Shawn snubs me at the office party, then whether it's because he's reliably disrespectful in all situations, or because he's reliably disrespectful at office parties, or because he wanted to annoy me on this particular occasion, his behavior is rude and inappropriate all the same. If Darlene saves a child from a burning building, then whether it's because she's brave in general, or because she's brave-when-faced-with-reddish-orange-fire-in-the-evening, or because she thought saving the child was a good thing to do, her conduct is beneficial and praiseworthy all the same.

## 2. *Situationism and epistemology*

Philosophical situationists have recently extended the situationist challenge from virtue ethics to virtue epistemology (Alfano, 2011; Olin & Doris, 2012; Miller, 2014a). Virtue epistemology come in two main forms: responsibilism and reliabilism.

Virtue responsibilists prioritize the role of refined intellectual character traits in their account of knowledge and other cognitive goods, such as understanding and wisdom (Code, 1984; Montmarquet, 1993; Zagzebski, 1996; Roberts & Wood, 2007). These traits include conscientiousness, open-mindedness and intellectual courage and are conceived by analogy to the refined moral traits familiar from virtue ethics. The agent cultivates them over time through deliberate effort. Sometimes it's even said that the intellectual virtues are species of moral virtues.

Extending the situationist challenge to virtue responsibilism is straightforward: to the extent that virtue ethics rests on a mistaken characterological moral psychology, virtue responsibilism probably rests on a mistaken characterological epistemic psychology. If situationists are right about characterological moral psychology, then characterological epistemic psychology is probably inadequate too. Furthermore, this implies that if knowledge requires the formation of true belief through intellectual virtues

that we don't have, then we don't know anything.<sup>2</sup> In short, if situationists are right, then virtue responsibilism probably brings skepticism in its wake. In contemporary epistemology, keeping such company is typically viewed as a *reductio* of one's view.

Virtue reliabilists accept that if refined intellectual character traits exist, then they can play an important role in generating knowledge and other cognitive goods. But virtue reliabilists deny that character traits are required for knowledge, so the supposed demise of characterological epistemic psychology doesn't threaten their view. For virtue reliabilists allow that knowledge can proceed from an agent's reliable abilities, competences or dispositions (hereafter just 'abilities') (Sosa, 1991; Greco, 2000; Sosa, 2007; Greco, 2010). For instance, knowledge can proceed from a reliable faculty of vision or an excellent faculty of memory, even absent open-mindedness or intellectual courage (see also Baehr, 2006). If Shawn notices me at the office party, then whether it's because he's reliably open-minded and conscientious about scanning the environment for acquaintances in all situations, or because he's highly reliable at visually identifying me within twenty feet when sporting my Groucho Marx mustache and spectacles, he still knows I'm there all the same. If Darlene notices a child in a burning building, then whether it's because she's curious and generally motivated by the love of truth, or because she she's highly reliable at aurally detecting screaming children, she still knows that a child is inside all the same.

Virtue reliabilists have long accepted the possibility that the relevant abilities are in fact individuated narrowly and affected by factors discoverable only with the aid of empirical investigation (Sosa, 1991, ch. 13; Greco, 2010, ch. 5; see also Goldman, 1979; Goldman, 1992; and Alston, 1995). Writes Ernest Sosa, "Abilities correlate with accomplishments only relative to circumstances. There is for example our ability to tell (directly)

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<sup>2</sup> Note that although Zagzebski (1996) is typically cited as a leading virtue responsibilist, she denies that knowledge must be produced through responsibilist virtues.

the color and shape of a surface, so long as it is facing, ‘middle sized,’ not too far, unscreened, and in enough light, and so long as one looks at it while sober, and so on” (1991, p. 235). He acknowledges that “common sense is simply in no position to specify” the “substantive circumstances” that determine our abilities’ reliability (1991, p. 235). These are matters “which psychology and cognitive science are supposed in time to uncover” (1991, p. 236). John Greco handles proposed counterexamples to his view by individuating abilities narrowly “relative to an environment,” where such individuation can occur in virtue of facts that the cognizer herself isn’t even aware of (2010, ch. 5).

According to virtue reliabilism, two things ultimately matter for evaluating someone’s cognitive performance: the truth-value of the beliefs formed and the reliability of the ability responsible for the beliefs, in the specific context where the belief is formed.<sup>3</sup>

Thus it would seem that virtue reliabilism avoids any empirical-threat-by-analogy with virtue ethics. For virtue reliabilism neither presupposes a characterological epistemic psychology nor opposes the “fragmentation” of dispositions that philosophical situationists prefer. Instead, virtue reliabilists have long denied that responsibilist virtues are required for knowledge and have long embraced narrowly individuated and empirically informed attribution of reliable cognitive abilities.

Not so fast, situationists caution. For there is more here than just analogy. There is also *direct evidence* from cognitive psychology, they argue, that many of our belief-forming mechanisms are none too reliable (Olin & Doris, 2013). They point to several recent findings which suggest that

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<sup>3</sup> This is an oversimplification because (1) virtue epistemologists are also interested in the formation of disbeliefs and the suspension of judgment (e.g. Sosa, 2011; Turri, 2012a), and (2) knowledge might not require *belief*, ordinarily understood, but only some weaker form of *affirmative representation* or “thin belief” (see Myers-Shulz & Schwitzgebel, 2013; Murray, Sytma & Livengood, 2013; Buckwalter, Rose & Turri, in press; Turri & Buckwalter, under review; Rose, Buckwalter & Turri, in press).

human cognitive functioning is “enormously contextually variable” and susceptible to influences that almost certainly decrease reliability. We’re less likely to recognize someone’s face after working on difficult crossword puzzles than reading; we overestimate distances and upward angles when tired or carrying heavy equipment; we’re worse at judging distances in hallways than in a field; we’re more likely to accept a written claim as true when it’s easy to read; we’re more likely to judge someone credible who speaks quickly; we’re more likely to think that easy-to-pronounce stocks will outperform difficult-to-pronounce ones. Add to these the more familiar biases and foibles with names — the availability bias, the confirmation bias, the anchoring bias, the false consensus effect, base-rate neglect, the conjunction fallacy — enumerated in textbooks on judgment and decision making. Pressure begins to mount on the virtue reliabilist.

Suppose the virtue reliabilist responds by allowing empirical and contextual factors to more narrowly fix the range of circumstances in which we do in fact exercise reliable cognitive abilities. Some of this restriction seems harmless enough. It’s not unduly skeptical to allow that science might reveal that we don’t know all the things we thought we knew.

At this point, Lauren Olin and John Doris present virtue epistemologists with a dilemma (2013, esp. p. 15ff). Either specify the abilities broadly or specify them narrowly. If you specify them broadly, then your view is “normatively appeal[ing]” because it allows for “familiar epistemic virtues like good memory and good vision.” But your view is also “compromised by evidence of cognitive unreliability,” in which case the view has counterintuitive skeptical implications. If you specify the abilities narrowly, then although your view avoids the evidence of unreliability, it is “disappointing” and “normatively” inadequate. The disappointment and inadequacy comes from the “decomposition” of virtue, rendering virtue “slight,” “thin” and falling short of the sense in which “knowledge is an *achievement*” that redounds to the knower’s credit. Either way, then, virtue epistemology pays a cost.

Olin and Doris correctly anticipate that virtue reliabilists will likely grasp the dilemma's narrow horn. As I already mentioned, virtue reliabilists long ago claimed that abilities might end up being narrowly individuated and that cognitive science is our best guide to just how narrowly. Neither should we be alarmed if our knowledge mostly isn't admirable or inspiring. Knowledge is certainly important, largely because it sets a normative standard for appropriate assertion, belief and action (Locke, 1689, Bk. 4.9; James, 1879; Williamson, 2000; Hawthorne & Stanley, 2008; Fantl & McGrath, 2009; Turri, 2011a; Turri, 2013a; Turri, 2013b; Turri, 2013c; Buckwalter & Turri, 2014; Turri, in press a; Turri, under review). And it certainly is impressive for an entity to be capable of knowledge. But most individual bits of knowledge are, taken on their own, rather dull and uninspiring. A theory that respects this pays no cost for doing so.

To sum up, it appears that the very real situationist challenge to virtue ethics expands to afflict, at most, virtue responsibilism. Thus far it leaves virtue reliabilism mostly untouched. Philosophical situationists' command of the empirical literature is as impressive as it is laudable, and I take their hypotheses about virtue epistemology's potential empirical inadequacy very seriously. The close parallel between traditional virtue ethics and virtue responsibilism makes me suspect the latter as much as I do the former — and my suspicions here are due largely to Harman's and Doris's own excellent critiques, supplemented more recently by additional excellent work by Mark Alfano (2011, 2013) and Christian Miller (2013, 2014b). But I remain unconvinced that any of this reveals a genuine problem for virtue reliabilism.

### 3. *Abilism*

But now suppose that philosophical situationists dig deeper and convince us that the evidence strongly suggests that even on the most natural way of individuating and narrowing abilities, we're still not reliable. In short,



suppose that our best cognitive science shows that we're just not able to get things right more often than not. Certainly this is possible. In fact, I wouldn't be too surprised if it turned out to be true. Would we conclude that a wide-ranging skepticism is true? I wouldn't.

Recall Doris's eminently sensible evidential standard for trait-attribution: if a person possesses a trait, that person will engage in trait-relevant behaviors in trait-relevant eliciting conditions *with markedly above chance probability*  $p$ . I endorse a related *metaphysical* thesis about abilities or powers in general. Qualifications and minutiae aside, here is a basic statement of the view.

If a person possesses an ability/power to produce an outcome (of a certain type and in conditions of a certain sort), then when he exercises that ability/power (in those conditions), he produces the relevant outcome at a rate exceeding chance.

The basic intuition here is that abilities and powers are understood relative to the baseline of chance.<sup>4</sup> Being unreliable obviously differs from being unable and, on any plausible way of approximating the chance rate, there is going to be a margin between chance rates of success and succeeding most of the time. You are *enabled* or *empowered* to produce an outcome to the extent that your prospect of successfully producing it exceeds chance. If you succeed at a rate no better than chance, then it's tempting to say that you lack the relevant ability or power. And if you succeed at a rate worse than chance, then it's tempting to say that you are *disabled* or *enfeebled*: you're better off just trusting to luck than relying on your own efforts.

Approaching matters from a slightly different angle, when relying on luck is your best strategy, you are *helpless*. Empowerment is the antithesis of helplessness. To the extent that you are enabled or empowered, your helplessness diminishes.

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<sup>4</sup> One qualification worthy of notice: arguably, chance is only the default baseline and certain factors can change the default. I leave these details aside.

Applied to cognition, this theory of abilities yields the following view (again, abstracting away from qualifications and complications):

If a person possesses a cognitive ability to detect the truth (of a certain sort when in certain conditions), then when she exercises that ability and forms a belief (on relevant matters and in relevant conditions), she will form a *true belief* at a rate exceeding chance.<sup>5</sup>

Just as physical science is our best bet at discovering the powers and abilities of physical objects and systems, so too is cognitive science our best means of discovering the cognitive powers and abilities of intelligent entities, including ourselves.

Now consider a very simple theory of knowledge: knowledge is true belief manifesting cognitive ability.<sup>6</sup> Call this view *abilism*. Abilism delivers all three major benefits that virtue reliabilists claim for their view (Turri 2012b; Turri in press a). First, it places knowledge in a familiar pattern, namely, success through ability, which makes knowledge a proper object of scientific inquiry. Second, abilism provides a straightforward and compelling account of why knowledge is better than mere true belief. In general success from ability is a good thing and better than mere lucky success. This is true across the entire range of our activities: social, athletic, artistic, and intellectual. Knowledge fits right into this pattern as a central form of cognitive success through ability (Greco, 2003; Sosa, 2007; Zagzebski, 2009). This is why knowledge is better than mere true belief. Third, abilism solves the Gettier problem: in a standard Gettier case, the subject believes the truth, and believes from cognitive ability, but because of a deviant double-stroke of luck, the true belief doesn't manifest the cognitive ability (Turri, 2011b; Turri, 2013d). In this respect, Gettier cases fit into a more general pattern whereby we don't credit agents outcomes in light of deviant luck (Malle & Knobe, 1997; Knobe, 2003; Pizarro et al., 2003;

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5 By 'belief' I mean 'thin belief', in the terminology of Buckwalter, Rose & Turri, in press.

6 This approximates the view I currently hold, which is that knowledge is *approximately true thin belief manifesting cognitive power*.

Turri, Buckwalter & Blouw, 2014).

Not all abilities are reliable abilities, so abilism allows for unreliably produced knowledge (Turri, in press c). This is a good thing, for three reasons. First, lots of our knowledge is due to explanatory reasoning and explanatory reasoning seems to get it wrong at least as often as it gets it right. If knowledge required inferential processes that get it right more often than not, then much of the knowledge we thought we had is lost.<sup>7</sup> Second, many achievements much more impressive than knowledge don't require reliable abilities, so it stands to reason that knowledge doesn't require reliable abilities either. Third, the entire run of everyday experience and all of experimental psychology overwhelmingly confirm and re-confirm the empirical adequacy of the epistemic psychology presupposed by abilism. I will now expand on this last point.

Abilism's empirical commitments aren't guaranteed. It's no trivial feat for us to know that we have cognitive abilities. And it's an extremely impressive feat that we know as much as we do about our cognitive abilities, strengths and weaknesses. Human beings might have lacked the cognitive abilities that they in fact have. We might have been more or less well cognitively endowed. Given a meagre enough endowment, we might have been unable to know that we were cognitively endowed at all. Given a more generous endowment, we might have been much better at discovering our cognitive powers and limits. Due to an unfortunate accident tomorrow, any one of us might end up in a vegetative state, helpless in many ways, including cognitively. Indeed, it's even possible that a freak cosmic event exposes nearly all humans to massive amounts of harmful radiation tomorrow, leaving them utterly cognitively debilitated until death slowly

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<sup>7</sup> When it comes to getting the truth at a rate better than chance, by *chance* I do not mean a 50/50 chance (see Turri, in press c, section 4). As mentioned above, being unreliable obviously differs from being unable and there is going to be a margin between chance rates of success and succeeding most of the time. If "reliabilists" weaken "reliability" so that it just means "better than chance," then they have conceded the point.

overtakes them. In such a case, human cognitive abilities would be rare, a fact knowable by the fortunate — or, as it were, unfortunate — few who remained.

Even though abilism's empirical commitments aren't guaranteed, it's abundantly obvious that they are fulfilled. We're not infallible, and in many ways we might not even be reliable, but we certainly reach the truth *at rates far exceeding chance*. Kahneman and Tversky's subjects wouldn't even have arrived at the lab for testing if they were no better than chance at detecting and discovering relevant truths. Assuming they did arrive at the lab, they wouldn't have completed the tests if they were cognitively no better than chance. And assuming their subjects did complete the tests, Kahneman and Tversky would never have detected the response patterns that led to their famous and enormously valuable research program, unless they were better than chance at reaching the truth on such matters.

In sum, abilism presupposes an epistemic psychology that is undoubtedly empirically adequate, offers an elegant theory of knowledge, and delivers significant theoretical benefits.

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