Katherine Dormandy
Humble Minds workshop
Munich, Schloß Fürstenried
27 March 2015

Are There Epistemic Virtues?

Virtue Epistemology

The Virtue Claim: S knows that *p* just in case her true belief that *p* is attributable in the right sort of way to an epistemic ability of S's.

The Descriptive-Adequacy Claim:
(i) Knowledge Possession: We have a good deal of knowledge (skepticism is false), hence:
(ii) Psychological Plausibility: We have knowledge-producing epistemic virtues.

Psychological Considerations

Experiential beliefs
attentional bias / inattentional blindness
cognitive penetration

Memory beliefs
memories are produced by reconstruction, with cognitive "narratives" filling in the gaps.

Beliefs based on other beliefs
evaluative biases: tendency toward higher confidence than our reasons merit.

The upshot: Our belief-forming processes are disposed to confirm beliefs we already hold, consolidating our pre-existing perspective. This occurs at the expense of reliable true-belief production. Two types of belief stand out for being particularly detrimentally affected:
(i) worldview beliefs (religion, ethics, politics…)
(ii) beliefs about our abilities and prospects for success

Objections: No Big Deal?

(a) The 1st "no-big-deal" objection (bottom-up feedback): Top-down influence is checked by bottom-up feedback.
Response: In the case of attention and cognitive penetration: yes, but the feedback mechanism isn't perfect. In the case of memory: there is no "bottom-up" feedback mechanism at all.

(b) The 2nd "no-big-deal" objection (practical success): We get around successfully most of the time. The best explanation is reliable belief formation.
Response: (i) Yes, in many cases our practical successes are explained by reliable belief formation. (ii) But in other cases they are best explained by *unreliable* belief formation: overoptimism about our abilities and prospects for success. (iii) In the case of worldview beliefs, there does not seem to be any success or failure to succeed that would help us gauge their accuracy.

Pragmatic Virtue Reliabilism

The Virtue Claim: S knows that *p* just in case her true belief that *p* is <u>attributable in the right sort of way</u> to an <u>epistemic ability</u> of S's.

The Attribution Relation

S's true belief that *p*, produced by S's ability, <u>serves an informational need for the sake of performing an action</u>.

The Notion of "Ability"

S has a knowledge-relevant ability A(R/C/D) relative to an environment E =
S has a disposition to believe truths in <u>range R</u> when in <u>circumstances C</u> and <u>environment E</u>, with <u>degree of reliability D</u>.

The parameters <u>range</u>, <u>circumstances</u>, <u>environment</u>, <u>degree of reliability</u> are determined by informational needs associated with practical tasks.

The <u>degree of reliability needed</u> for knowledge correlates with the practical importance of the subject matter.

Yet there are practically important subject matters – worldview matters, matters of our own competence – which we don't have highly reliable beliefs.

The Argument In Summary

1. Pragmatic virtue epistemology predicts that we will have highly reliably true beliefs about matters of practical importance.

2. There are some matters of practical importance (worldview beliefs, beliefs about our prospects for success) about which we don't have *highly* reliably true beliefs.

3. For those particular matters of practical importance (worldview beliefs, beliefs about our prospects for success), pragmatic virtue epistemology is disconfirmed.

A Way Forward?

Possibility 1:
    Reject the Virtue Claim. Keep the Descriptive Adequacy Claim.
    →Concede to our limitations. Find an epistemology that predicts lots of knowledge concerning worldview matters and our prospects for success, even though this "knowledge" will not be highly reliable.

Possibility 2:
    Keep the Virtue Claim. Reject the Descriptive-Adequacy Claim.
    →Hope for better. Construe knowledge and epistemic virtue as ideals we must strive for even though, for worldview beliefs and beliefs about our prospects for success, we will never achieve them perfectly.
    →Develop a robustly "regulative" epistemology to help us become epistemically virtuous.