

# From Epistemic Anti-Individualism to Epistemic Humility

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## I. Robust Virtue Epistemology and Epistemic Individualism

According to Sosa's RVE (2007; 2009), knowledge is a cognitive achievement, i.e. an apt performance, where a performance (belief) is apt when accurate (true) because adroit (cognitive ability). The 'because' relation is understood in terms of the *manifestation* of a *disposition/competence*. In more recent work, Sosa (2013) supplements this *triple-A* analysis of aptness with a *triple-S* analysis of a complete competence comprising an innermost S-competence, which is the seat, an inner SS-competence, which is the combination of seat and shape, and a complete SSS-competence, which is the conjunction of seat, shape and situation.

Here's Sosa's (2007: 29) *individualistic* conception of the seat (skill):

[A] competence is a disposition, one with its basis resident in the competent agent, one that would in appropriately normal conditions ensure (or make highly likely) the success of any relevant performance issued by it.

When *S* knows the truth of her belief is *primarily creditable* to her cognitive ability, i.e. the *most salient factor* in *S*'s cognitive success is the exercise of her ability, when understood as having a physical basis within *S*'s bodily boundaries.

Take an *individualistic feature* to be any mental or physical feature located inside the bodily boundaries of an individual. Consider then:

(I-RVE) Necessarily, if individual *S* forms a belief which is true through manifesting cognitive disposition *D*, then *S* has individualistic feature *I* under local conditions *L* such that any individualistic duplicate *S\** who also forms that belief under *L* does so in such a way that its truth is through manifesting *D*.

Sosa's view can handle Gettier cases involving *intervening epistemic luck*, e.g. the fake-sheep case, but these are consistent with (I-RVE). However, Gettier cases involving *environmental epistemic luck* present a difficulty for (I-RVE).

## II. Two Arguments for Epistemic Anti-Individualism

Goldberg (2010; 2011) distinguishes between direct and diffuse epistemic dependence. Think of communicative exchanges between speaker *S* and hearer *H* giving rise to testimonial knowledge only when communal parties other than *S* and *H* are involved in remotely monitoring and policing the exchanges.

First Argument.

Take an ordinary case of *H* acquiring knowledge on the basis of *S*'s testimony. According to (I-RVE), *H*'s knowledge consists in the truth of her belief being *primarily* through the manifestation of *her own* cognitive ability. But the truth of her belief is *primarily* through *S*'s cognitive ability. In response, a friend of (I-RVE) might concede that *H* knows as long as the truth of her belief is *partially*

through her own cognitive ability, e.g. to receive, assess and discriminate between good and bad testimony. However, such retreat robs the view of a response to Gettier cases involving intervening epistemic luck.

Second Argument.

Let  $H$  be a competent agent embedded in an epistemic community GOOD in which most other speakers are reliable. Not only does  $H$  possess an ability to discriminate between reliable and unreliable informants,  $H$  also regularly exercises that ability in the process of acquiring testimonial knowledge. Moreover, in GOOD the testimonial exchanges between  $H$  and various speakers are monitored and policed in a properly and timely fashion. Assume that  $H$  acquires knowledge upon accepting reliable speaker  $S$ 's testimony. Following (I-RVE),  $H$  acquires knowledge through her discriminatory ability.

Now imagine that  $H$  is unwittingly transported to epistemic community BAD, in which third party epistemic agents reliably ensure that  $H$  is mostly exposed to unreliable speakers.  $H$  has no inkling of the systematic way in which reliable informants are being screened-off from the testimonial processes. Most of the competent-looking speakers with which  $H$  comes into contact are in fact not trustworthy. Assume that  $H$  forms a true belief on the basis of hearing reliable speaker  $S$ 's testimony. The proposition in question is an ordinary one which every reliable speaker will know.

$H$  fails to acquire knowledge in BAD, because the basis for her belief is unsafe. But the epistemic difference in GOOD and BAD isn't down to a difference in cognitive ability when understood individualistically. So, our epistemic twin scenario involving *environmental epistemic luck* falsifies (I-RVE).

### III. Epistemic Humility

Epistemic humility is a *character trait*, i.e. a complex disposition to behave and cognize in a particular way in a range of social and non-social situations. Such a trait depends on, but is irreducible to, characteristic mental states and behaviors.

*Confidence humility* concerns proper cognizing of the limitations and deficiencies of cognitive abilities vis-à-vis knowledge. Deliberate failure to do so betrays an epistemic arrogance that contradicts epistemic humility. So, one should recognize the existence of one's flaws as well as the boundaries of one's merits. Underestimating one's flaws or overestimating one's merits reveals an *inflated* conception of oneself. But acknowledgement of the effectiveness and extensiveness of cognitive abilities vis-à-vis knowledge is equally important. So, one should recognize the breadth and depth of one's abilities. Overestimating one's flaws or underestimating one's merits betrays a *deflated* sense of self-worth, but being humble is incompatible with such a deep-seated sense of distrust of one's own cognitive abilities. In short, humility requires enough confidence, but not too much confidence.

*Credit humility* concerns proper behavior in response to accurate cognizance of epistemic finitude. Humble individuals do not take *more* credit for their cognitive success than they are entitled to by the contribution of others' cognitive abilities

towards that success. They do not brag about knowledge they possess largely as a result of others' cognitive abilities, let alone boasting about knowledge they lack. Rather, they assign credit to others' abilities accordingly, while seeking to draw more efficiently or extensively on them so as to further their own epistemic pursuits. Nor do humble individuals refuse to take credit, if externally prompted, or take *less* credit, for cognitive success to which they are entitled by the contribution of their cognitive abilities. To systematically downplay one's own cognitive contribution induces irrational doubt about one's cognitive abilities, which engenders a sense of inferiority or self-depreciation. To belittle or disparage oneself in this way is to deprive one of a praiseworthy feature, characteristic of humility.

#### **IV. An Argument from Epistemic Anti-Individualism to Epistemic Humility**

(1) In the case of testimonial knowledge, *H*'s cognitive abilities, when interpreted in accordance with (I-RVE), play a minor role in comparison to the much more prominent role that others' cognitive abilities play in accounting for the truth of *H*'s belief.

(2) The extent to which an individual should be confident in, and assign credit to, her own cognitive abilities, when interpreted in accordance with (I-RVE), should be proportionate to the role those abilities play in accounting for the truth of the pertinent belief.

(3) So, in the context of testimonial knowledge, the extent to which *H* should be confident in, and assign credit to, her own cognitive abilities, when interpreted in accordance with (I-RVE), is very small in comparison to the extent to which she is dependent on others' cognitive abilities.

(4) But if *H* acquires testimonial knowledge by largely depending on the cognitive abilities of others, and therefore should adjust her confidence in, and her assignment of credit to, her own cognitive abilities accordingly, when interpreted in accordance with (I-RVE), then *H* ought to display some humility vis-à-vis her own abilities.

(5) So, a recipient of testimony should adopt a humble attitude in the pursuit of testimonial knowledge.