

VIRTUE EPISTEMOLOGY, TESTIMONY, AND TRUST

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ABSTRACT: In this paper, I respond to an objection raised by Duncan Pritchard and Jesper Kallestrup against virtue epistemology. In particular, they argue that the virtue epistemologist must either deny that *S* knows that *p* only if *S* believes that *p* because of *S*'s virtuous operation or deny intuitive cases of testimonial knowledge. Their dilemma has roots in the apparent ease by which we obtain testimonial knowledge and, thus, how the virtue epistemologist can explain such knowledge in a way that both preserves testimonial knowledge and grounds it in one's virtues. I argue that the virtue epistemologist has a way to accomplish both tasks if we take epistemic trust to be an intellectual virtue. I briefly discuss what such trust must look like and then apply it to the dilemma at hand: showing that a key intellectual virtue plausibly operates in cases of testimonial knowledge and/or belief.

KEYWORDS: testimony, trust, confidence, dependence, virtue epistemology

Recently, Jesper Kallestrup and Duncan Pritchard argue that a robust virtue epistemology finds itself at odds with mainstream social epistemology; in particular, with mainstream epistemology of testimony.¹ As they argue, robust virtue epistemology's commitment to knowledge as creditable to the believer runs into tension with social epistemology's view that placing trust in a speaker can give one testimonial knowledge. I shall argue that the robust virtue epistemologist has a natural way to solve this tension and thoroughly 'socialize' itself by accepting a widely-ignored but vital epistemic virtue: trust. In section 1, I shall develop in some detail the problem Kallestrup and Pritchard see for virtue epistemology. In section 2, I shall diagnose what exactly would serve as a solution to this problem from a virtue-theoretic perspective and develop such a solution using the notion of epistemic trust. Section 3 takes a closer look at trust itself, and finally, Section 4 examines trust as a solution to Kallestrup and Pritchard's objection and draws some implications for the epistemology of testimony and social epistemology in general.

¹ Jesper Kallestrup and Duncan Pritchard, "Robust Virtue Epistemology and Epistemic Anti-Individualism," *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 93 (2012): 84-103.

1. Kallestrup and Pritchard's dilemma for virtue epistemology

Kallestrup and Pritchard begin by distinguishing “modest” from “robust” virtue epistemology.² A ‘modest’ virtue epistemology defines knowledge using both virtue-theoretic and non-virtue-theoretic concepts.³ A modest virtue epistemology can, for instance, add a safety condition to virtue-theoretic content. In contrast, a ‘robust’ virtue epistemology defines knowledge solely in virtue-theoretic concepts. On this view, there is nothing more to knowledge than true belief plus some virtue-theoretic condition or set of conditions.

As a response to Gettier cases, robust virtue epistemologists insist that the true belief involved in knowledge must be a credit to the believer’s virtues or virtuous activity. Adherents to this sort of virtue epistemology argue that one’s success in holding a true belief must be *because of* or *due to* one’s exercise of virtue in coming to hold the belief in question – i.e. one deserves credit for the one’s beliefs that amount to knowledge. Call this the Credit Thesis

(CT): *S* knows that *p* only if *S* believes that *p* because of *S*’s virtuous operation.

According to the robust virtue epistemologist’s acceptance of CT, knowledge implies credit for the true beliefs that ultimately yield knowledge. Without CT, Kallestrup and Pritchard argue that the virtue epistemology lacks the conceptual and argumentative tools to respond to Gettier cases. So, let’s take it that a virtue theorist should be loathe to reject CT.

CT, on Kallestrup and Pritchard’s interpretation, commits the virtue epistemologist to epistemic individualism. An epistemic individualist claims that the warrant or justification converting a true belief into knowledge “supervenes on internal features of the agent.”⁴ It is important to note that the use of “internal features” refers to the belief-forming properties of an agent within his/her physical body. As Kallestrup and Pritchard use the term, a process-realist account of knowledge counts as proposing “internal” features for justification insofar as one’s cognitive faculties lie within one’s skull. So, the epistemic individualism thesis, even with its appeal to talk of internal features, does not commit one to either epistemic internalism or externalism.

² Kallestrup and Pritchard, “Robust Virtue Epistemology and Epistemic Anti-Individualism,” 85.

³ Excluding, of course, the conditions for truth and belief.

⁴ Kallestrup and Pritchard, “Robust Virtue Epistemology and Epistemic Anti-Individualism,” 86. Kallestrup and Pritchard distinguish ‘strong’ epistemic individualism from ‘weak’ epistemic individualism. The former takes *warrant*, or that which converts true belief into knowledge, to supervene on internal states and the latter takes “defeasible doxastic justification” to supervene on such internal features. While I find this distinction useful and enlightening, it plays no role in my argument and so I shall ignore for the purposes of this paper.

CT makes sense of epistemic individualism: if we have knowledge only for that which we deserve credit, it would seem that it's only those "internal features" about us that can determine a belief's credit-worthy warrant or justification. So, if we hold some belief on the basis of something (or, as we shall see in a bit, someone) *external* to us – i.e. outside of us – then that belief will lack warrant/justification (on epistemic individualism) and credit (given CT). Therefore such an externally-based belief can't amount to knowledge since it lacks both a warrant/justification dimension and the element of credit. Instead, only beliefs based on internal features can be creditable to us and, supposing a CT reading of epistemic individualism, such features are the only sort that can generate the warrant/justification required for knowledge. In short, externally-based beliefs can never yield knowledge since they run afoul of CT's internalist, credit-based analysis of epistemic warrant/justification.

This brings us to testimony. Kallestrup and Pritchard argue that instances of testimonial belief do not merit credit for the believer and yet count as pieces of knowledge. Consider their case of Morris* – based off a similar counterexample by Jennifer Lackey.⁵ Imagine a trusting fellow named Morris, who is an unfamiliar visitor to Chicago and wanting to visit the Sears Tower. Arriving in the train station, he finds a passerby and asks directions to his desired locale. We may suppose the passerby asserts truthfully and competently and, on the basis of this person's testimony, Morris forms a true belief regarding the location of the Sears Tower.

Whereas Lackey takes this to be a clear and obvious case of testimonial knowledge for Morris, Kallestrup and Pritchard argue that we must add a bit to the specification of Morris' interaction with the passerby. In particular, "we need to be reading the case such that Morris is displaying a reasonable degree of relevant cognitive skill" in weeding out unreliable looking testifiers and monitoring for signs of a competent, trustworthy assertor in asking directions.⁶ So, while Lackey sees nothing deserving credit in *her* case of Morris, Kallestrup and Pritchard modify the case to allow him something deserving of credit in his acceptance of the testimony.

But this will not save virtue epistemology from the case of Morris. It is still too easy for him to obtain his belief – we don't see much about Morris aside from vague monitoring talk that would seem to merit any epistemic credit for his belief. For all the world, it seems as though he blithely accepts whatever it is the passerby

⁵ Jennifer Lackey, "Why We Don't Deserve Credit for Everything We Know," *Synthese* 158 (2007): 345-361.

⁶ Kallestrup and Pritchard, "Robust Virtue Epistemology and Epistemic Anti-Individualism," 89.

would say. Thus, Kallestrup and Pritchard conclude that “Morris*’s trust in his informant’s word [plays] such a central role in his acquisition of knowledge his cognitive success is still not primarily creditable to his cognitive ability.”⁷ The credit for Morris*’s testimonial knowledge is due to the informant rather than Morris.

Taking stock of the Morris* case, it seems that we have a trouble for robust virtue epistemology and its commitment to CT. We have an instance of knowledge – our intuitions say – but where the believer lacks credit for the true belief in question. Thus, Kallestrup and Pritchard formulate a dilemma for the robust virtue epistemologist. Either:

- (A) Robust virtue epistemologist must “bite the bullet” and deny that Morris* has genuine testimonial knowledge, OR
- (B) Accept that Morris* knows; denying CT.

Neither horn is attractive – let’s see why.

If the virtue epistemologist accepts (A), then that requires biting an awfully large bullet. Lackey, Kallestrup, and Pritchard all find the pro-knowledge intuition clear and I’m inclined to agree. But more worrisome than this intuition is the larger philosophical implications. If one denies cases like Morris* amount to knowledge, then it seems we’re committed to a fairly wide and deep skepticism. A cursory glance at any of the growing literature of the epistemology of testimony gives one a sense of the significant and wide-ranging dependence we have on the testimony of others for most of what we think we know. Denying simple testimonial cases like Morris*, then, commits us to denying most simple cases of testimonial knowledge; threatening us with a dark and far-reaching cloud of skepticism.

But accepting (B) fares little better. CT looks appealing for its use in defeating Gettier worries about knowledge. Without CT and its notion of getting to the truth *because* of one’s virtues, we lack the tools to explain the legion of Gettier cases in the literature. In less theoretical terms, removing CT undercuts the ability of our theories to explain how luck can defeat knowledge. As many theorists claim – including Pritchard – the anti-luck lesson of Gettier cases has become an epistemological platitude. Without CT, we can’t make sense of this platitude. Again, the virtue theorist should do everything possible to avoid accepting (B).

Kallestrup and Pritchard provide us with a dilemma for robust virtue epistemology with horns no one should be willing to accept. Thus, the prospects

⁷ Kallestrup and Pritchard, “Robust Virtue Epistemology and Epistemic Anti-Individualism,” 90.

for such a theory look dim. What we need is a solution that avoids both (A) *and* (B) – maintaining credit for testimony based beliefs – showing that the dilemma in question is a false one.

2. The recipe to solve Kallestrup and Pritchard's dilemma

What *exactly*, though, will such a solution look like to the above dilemma? What is on our check list for plausible solutions? We need a recipe for the solution. Let me suggest the following.

- (1) The answer must be a plausible epistemic virtue or some other virtue-derived concept. A non-virtue-theoretic answer won't provide any help to Kallestrup and Pritchard's dilemma; whereby we need to retain CT in a *robustly* virtue-theoretic manner.
- (2) The answer must be able to explain or account for testimony-based belief or knowledge. Even if the virtue in question is not exhaustively testimonial in nature, it must be at least capable of accounting for how we come to obtain testimonial knowledge or belief.
- (3) The successful virtue (or virtuous operation) must be somewhat widespread. Since we believe that many people have justified or warranted testimonial beliefs and since we're deeply committed to a rejection of testimonial skepticism, the answer must apply to a large number of people.
- (4) The answer must be epistemically praiseworthy. That is, it must be something for which we (can) deserve epistemic credit. Alternatively, the answer must be something for which we are responsible.

What can satisfy (1)-(4)? The answer lies in what Kallestrup and Pritchard have already said about testimony. On their view, it is trust that does the epistemic heavy lifting cases of testimony; or at least, in cases of testimony like that of Morris*. That seems entirely right, but if we have the right view of how the trust in question operates, I suggest it has precisely the opposite conclusion that Kallestrup and Pritchard draw.

Trust is exactly the answer we need for the dilemma that they pose. In particular, I suggest that epistemic trust, or a kind of intellectual trust *in* some person, provides the solution to the dilemma at hand working as an epistemic virtue crucial to understanding testimony. But, we must say a little about what trust is to see how it works. Kallestrup and Pritchard, from their comments, seem to take trust to be something cognitively thin or shallow. Since they clearly think that such trust does *not* generate epistemic credit, it would seem that trust functions more like acceptance or belief. When Morris* trusts the passerby for

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directions, they mean simply that Morris* accepts or believes what this passerby says. Note that, on their usage, Morris* always places his trust in *the words* of another. However, a more robust account of trust in changes the object from the speaker's communication to the speaker directly. We move from trusting another's words to trusting that *person* him/herself.

3. The nature of trust

Consider a point from Elizabeth Anscombe: a friend tells you that Napoleon lost the battle of Waterloo.⁸ Now, you certainly accept or believe what your friend tells you, but this acceptance clearly doesn't imply that you trust your friend. Why not? Well, Anscombe's answer is that trust involves reliance.⁹ When I trust someone for some belief that *p*, I rely or depend on that person or that person's communication (that *p*) for my belief. But we can accept things that we already know. So, while trust involves reliance, acceptance does not: therefore, there must be more to trust than mere acceptance or belief.

So, once we've got reliance in the analysis, is there anything left to add? Plausibly, there's more to trust than just relying on someone. Consider the influential analyses of trust by Annette Baier and Karen Jones.¹⁰ Both include reliance in their account of trust but, in addition, they add a condition whereby the truster sees the trustee as competent in some way. Their concerns are a *moral* competency and good intentions of the trustee, but we can modify their second condition for an epistemological point. What they seem to be emphasizing in a moral way is a kind of confidence placed in the trusted person. So, if we can think about some kind of *epistemic* confidence, then that will provide an epistemic analogue to their moral trust. I suggest that an epistemic confidence in *S* is an attitude whereby one sees *S* as epistemically authoritative – the sort of person that is reliable or typically one who asserts with warrant.

Putting all of this together, we trust in *S* epistemically when we believe what *S* tells us, we rely on *S*'s communication, and we place our confidence in *S* (i.e. we see *S* as epistemically authoritative for us on this issue). This “thickened” account of trust in a person provides the propositional belief that Kallestrup and Pritchard seem to think exhausts trust while adding a reliance component and an

⁸ G. E. M. Anscombe, “What Is It to Believe Someone?” in *Rationality and Religious Belief*, ed. C. F. Delaney (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1979), 144-145.

⁹ Anscombe, “What Is It to Believe Someone,” 145.

¹⁰ See Annette Baier's “Trust and Anti-Trust,” and “Trusting People,” in her *Moral Prejudices: Essays on Ethics* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), and Karen Jones' “Trust as an Affective Attitude,” *Ethics* 107 (1996): 4-25.

attitude of confidence. Trusting successfully in this more robust sense – taking “success” in the vaguest possible way – will be more than a matter of just haphazardly believing the truth. Let’s see how this account of trust satisfies the recipe above.

4. Trust as the solution to Kallestrup and Pritchard’s dilemma

Answering (1) seems easy enough. Taking such trust as an epistemic virtue obviously provides a virtue-theoretic response to Kallestrup and Pritchard’s dilemma. And, just as easily, taking trust to be a virtue solves (2): given such trust, we can easily explain how someone comes by a testimony-based belief. When I place my trust *in S*, as we’ve described above, I rely on *S* and my confidence in *S* leads me to believe what *S* communicates – a clear case of belief by testimony. What’s more, (3) seems unproblematic. Much has been said on how pervasive our epistemic reliance is, and I think we can make similar cases for widespread confidence. Denying widespread confidence in others would be tantamount to seeing no one but one’s self as epistemically authoritative. Intuitively, it seems to me, we often see others as epistemically well placed and, thus, as the sort of reliable person in whom we can trust. Certainly there is such a thing as epistemic pride or arrogance, but it’s difficult to take seriously the claim that someone can *always* fail to see another as reliable, authoritative, or trust-worthy in a deep, pervasive way.

(4) is not quite as straightforward. To satisfy (4), the virtue-theoretic mechanism must be something whereby the belief formed must be due to or creditable to the agent doing the believing. Kallestrup and Pritchard hinge their argument on this very denial: epistemically proper testimonial based beliefs seem to be more creditable to the testifier than the person receiving the testimony. Yet, on the view proposed, the trust involved in testimony isn’t just a passive, intellectually bare acceptance by the believer. Rather, when placing trust in the testifier/speaker, the truster has robust attitudes of confidence and reliance directed towards the speaker. Certainly the role of the speaker insofar as s/he makes competent, undeceiving assertions is crucial in getting to the truth via testimony, but affirming the vital role of the speaker doesn’t necessarily denigrate the role of the hearer. On the account I’ve provided, trusting in that speaker involves seeing the speaker as authoritative – a kind of affective epistemic attitude – paired with an attitude whereby one relies/depends upon the speaker to perform his/her role as communicator well. Adding these attitudes to trust makes it more like a trait or cognitive disposition for which one can merit praise: the sort of thing that one can place well or poorly just as any putative epistemic virtue.

Thus, we can “thicken” or “beef up” the cognitive part played by the hearer in thinking about placing trust in a testifier. That more sophisticated approach to trust yields a disposition, ability or trait (depending on your favored flavor of epistemic virtue) that can account for testimony and do so in a way that is a credit to the hearer. Hence, with the tools to satisfy (1)-(4), we can grasp both horns of Kallestrup and Pritchard’s dilemma: accepting both CT and affirming that Morris* (and, by extension, many others) has genuine testimonial knowledge. Testimony appears to be too easy for credit attribution. However, on a more nuanced and robust account of trust, we see that it’s not simple acceptance/belief but a complex of attitudes that can be displayed well or poorly and, hence, something for which we can deserve praise (or blame, I suppose). When we rightly understand epistemic trust, it allows us to keep the intuition that knowledge implies credit and that we can easily acquire a good amount of testimonial knowledge (that only *seems* too easy) at the same time. Epistemic dependence, when combined with confidence adequately to yield proper epistemic trust, doesn’t undermine credit.