Achieving knowledge: a virtue-theoretic account of epistemic normativity. JOHN GRECO. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010. 202 pages.

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John Greco's latest book is an impressive achievement. It is an intelligent, rigorous, elegantly written, rewarding and in many respects persuasive account of the nature of knowledge and epistemic normativity. The book's central thesis is that knowledge is a kind of success through ability, or in other words, that knowledge is an achievement. The resulting view is a non-deontological, non-evidentialist, reliabilist and contextualist virtue epistemology that is sensitive to knowledge's social and practical dimensions, and which offers answers to a host of questions at the heart of contemporary epistemology — about the nature of knowledge, epistemic value, epistemic evaluation, luck and responsibility. Greco's views have rightly received considerable attention in recent years, and the publication of *Achieving Knowledge* will ensure that they continue doing so. Any philosopher working on knowledge, normativity, luck, responsibility or virtue would do well to study it carefully.

Greco fully embraces the value turn in epistemology, offering an account on which the nature and normativity of knowledge go hand in hand. His account tells us in one fell swoop what knowledge is and why it's valuable. Knowledge is success from ability: to know is to believe the truth because you believe from intellectual ability. The 'because' marks causal explanation. Knowledge is a specific instance of a familiar kind, namely, success from ability. 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 intellectual achievement. This is why knowledge is better than mere true belief.

Why think that to know is to believe the truth because you believe from intellectual ability? Because of its considerable fruits. As already mentioned, it provides a straightforward and compelling account of knowledge's value. It also provides a simple solution to the Gettier problem: in a standard Gettier case, such as the Nogot/Havit case, the subject believes the truth, and believes from intellectual ability, but does not believe the truth because of intellectual ability. Rather, some other peculiar feature of the situation explains why the subject believes the truth. Greco supplements this verdict with a partial account of the pragmatics of causal explanation.[1] As for fake barn cases, which differ from standard Gettier cases, Greco says that the subject doesn't know that he is looking at a barn because ability is relative to an environment, and the subject doesn't have an intellectual ability to detect barns in fake barn country. Greco supplements this with a general account of abilities.

Closely connected to this last point, Greco offers a solution to the generality problem for specifying, among other things, the relevant environment, conditions and rate of success needed to make a

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[1]   He provides a more complete account in "Knowledge as Credit for True Belief," in Michael DePaul and Linda Zagzebski, eds., *Intellectual Virtue: Perspectives from Ethics and Epistemology*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

knowledge ascription true, due to its role in making the required, implicit ability ascription true. Greco, following Edward Craig, contends that the reason we have the concept of knowledge is to "flag good information and sources of information for use in practical reasoning" (78). The relevant environment, etc., gets fixed by the "relevant practical reasoning context," which in turn gets fixed by the context of utterance for the knowledge ascription in question.

Closely connected again, Greco points out that his account of knowledge, when paired with his account of causal explanation, yields a different sort of semantic contextualism than the one most popular in the literature. Contextualists such as Keith DeRose and Stewart Cohen propose that something about the context of utterance serves to fix the strength of epistemic position or level of epistemic justification required for one to truly say 'S knows that Q'; and the semantic model for such accounts is either that of indexicals, demonstratives, or gradable adjectives. These semantic proposals have encountered sustained criticism. Greco's view provides us with a different model for the supposed semantic context-sensitivity of knowledge attributions, namely, that knowledge attributions are, or involve, a species of causal explanation, and causal explanation is in general context-sensitive: "knowledge attributions inherit the context-sensitivity of causal explanations" (106). Greco applies his contextualist model insightfully to *moral* credit attributions as well, arguing that the same basic idea applies to moral praise and blame, thus resulting in a distinctive relativist moral semantics, and underpinning an intriguing solution to the problem of moral luck (see

esp. pp. 132 ff.). Relatedly, Greco also compares his proposal to subject-sensitive invariantism — defended by Jeremy Fantl, Matthew McGrath, Jason Stanley and John Hawthorne — and argues that his own version of contextualism fares better.

Moving on now to the predominantly critical side of *Achieving Knowledge*, Greco rejects deontological accounts of epistemic normativity. Weak deontological accounts say that being in conformance to correct cognitive rules is necessary and sufficient for a true belief to count as knowledge. Greco persuasively rejects weak deontologism on the ground that it can't respect the importance of etiology to knowledge. Strong deontological accounts say that following (or "being governed by") correct cognitive rules is necessary and sufficient for a true belief to count as knowledge. Greco rejects strong deontologism on the ground that non-rule-governed knowledge acquisition is possible. Here he relies on one argument from Reid on the possibility of immediate, non-rule-governed perceptual knowledge, of which blindsight might be an actual example; and another argument inspired by connectionist models of cognition, according to which perceptual knowledge might involve lawful activation patterns of nodes in a network, without following any rules represented in the system. Greco's account of knowledge is consistent with, but does not require, rule-governed cognition, and so is preferable to strong deontologism. Moreover, it requires an appropriate etiology for knowledge, and so is preferable to weak deontologism.

Greco rejects internalism about epistemic normativity, under-

stood as the view that all factors relevant to a belief's normative epistemic status are accessible to the believer "from the armchair," i.e. directly through introspection, a priori intuition, or reasoning therefrom. Greco persuasively rejects internalism because it can't respect all the ways in which a belief's etiology affects its quality, and because it can't respect modal factors that needn't be accessible from the armchair, such as how reliably a belief was formed and sustained.

Greco rejects evidentialism, understood roughly as the view that epistemic normativity is entirely a function of the evidence a believer has at any given time, where evidence is understood as a state with representational content available to the believer for use in reasoning. Reliability is relevant to epistemic normativity, but reliability is not entirely a function of one's evidence, so evidentialism is false. Greco also poses a dilemma for evidentialists. Either evidentialism is a form or internalism or a form of externalism. If it is a form of internalism, then it is false for all the reasons that internalism is false. If it is a form of externalism, then it is unmotivated. It would be unmotivated because evidence would then be understood in terms of reliability, and if a belief could be reliably formed without being based on evidence, then "this would serve the relevant normative demands of knowledge just as well" (p. 65).

Greco defines an ability as a reliable disposition, which makes his account of version of reliabilism. Harkening back to his earlier work, he continues to call his view a form of "agent reliabilism." In the literature it is often referred to as a form of "virtue reliabilism,"

a genus which also includes Ernest Sosa's and Linda Zagzebski's views. And Greco devotes Part III of the book to solving "problems for reliabilism." This brings me to my main objection to Greco's view.

My main objection is that abilities needn't be reliable. The evidence for this is that being unreliable at producing a certain result doesn't entail an inability to produce the result. In short, unreliability is not the same as inability. An unreliable diagnostician might have an ability to correctly diagnose illness, say, twenty percent of the time. Derek Jeter has an ability to get base hits in Major League Baseball games, but he usually fails to get a hit. A car starter might be unreliable without losing all ability to start an engine. Further examples readily suggest themselves.

A natural response to this objection is to claim that intellectual abilities must be reliable if Greco's basic approach to knowledge is to deliver the promised benefits. For example, it might be responded that we must suppose that knowledge requires reliable ability to get at the truth, not merely an ability, in order to accomplish one or more of the following: explain why knowledge is more valuable than true belief, or to solve the Gettier problem, or to place knowledge attributions into a familiar pattern of normative assessment.

This brings me to my second objection: none of those things requires that knowledge requires a reliable ability, but only that knowledge requires an ability. To get something through ability (reliable or not) is better than to get it through luck, so we don't need reliabilism to explain the added value of knowledge over mere true

belief; to solve the Gettier problem, it suffices to note the distinction between, on the one hand, an outcome manifesting an ability (reliable or not), and on the other, an outcome happening merely because of an ability, so we don't need reliabilism here either; and to place knowledge in a familiar pattern, it suffices to characterize it as a species of success from ability (reliable or not), so again we don't need reliabilism. In short, we can have the benefits of a virtue-theoretic or performance-based approach to epistemology without importing reliabilism.

But isn't a reliable ability just obviously better than an unreliable one? Yes. Other things equal, we prefer reliable abilities to unreliable ones, at least when we're comparing abilities to produce the same desirable outcome (e.g. true belief). But in that same sense we also prefer abilities to inabilities, and unerring omniscience to mere reliability, so this demonstrates nothing special about reliability. I remain unconvinced that we should include a reliability condition on knowledge.

Despite my disagreement with Greco on this last point, I'm convinced that the general approach to epistemology defended in *Achieving Knowledge* is basically correct. And I am certain that it constitutes an outstanding contribution to the contemporary literature, which will be the focus of well deserved attention for years to come.

Word count: 1725