

Epistemic Alienation

Put very roughly, alienation occurs when there is a separation of a subject from an object or relation that properly belongs to it. As Jaeggi (2014: 25) puts it, “alienation denotes ... a detachment or separation from something that in fact belong together.” So described, discussions of alienation are as old as religion, with its emphasis on humanity’s problematic separation from God or the gods. But since at least Hegel and Marx, and perhaps even Rousseau, the concept of alienation has been used to capture a more specific kind of social ill or malady, and one philosophers have argued is distinctive of life in modern society.¹ Modern alienation is most often associated with forms of work, but the category is potentially applicable to all sorts of activities and forms of life. Examples of the distinctly modern form of alienation include artificiality, inauthenticity, depersonalization, reification, social isolation, rootlessness, dissociation, unfreedom, absurdity, deindividuation, and boredom.² To live in modern society—the idea goes—involves greater risk of falling into these categories, whether through modern work, anonymous city living, or some other alienating activity.

It is an open question whether modern alienation picks out a distinct social kind, or whether it is a useful concept for diagnosing social ills. Some worry that it is too diffuse a concept, capable of being applied to too many phenomena.³ As fair as these concerns are, I will assume, for the purposes of this paper, that the concept of modern alienation is at least a potentially useful concept and that it potentially picks out a distinctive social malady. My focus is on something more specific. I will defend the idea that there is a properly *epistemic* form of alienation present in, and distinctive of, modern society. Epistemic alienation is a subcategory of the kind of alienation outlined above, and one where the separation between subject and object involves some properly

¹ Leopold (2022) echoes this point in the SEP entry on alienation: “[t]he concept of alienation identifies a distinct kind of psychological or social ill; namely, one involving a problematic separation between a self and other that properly belong together.” This modern concept appears most famously in Marx (1844). See Brixel (forthcoming) for a recent analysis of Marxian alienation.

² These examples come from Jaeggi (2014: 4-5).

³ See Schacht (1970: 116), for instance.

epistemic properties. If epistemic alienation is a genuine social kind, then it likely comes in various forms. But I will focus on one specific form of epistemic alienation, which arises due to a conflict between the dynamics which allow groups to generate knowledge and the traditional requirements on the intellectual virtue of individuals. The kind of conflict in question, as well as its specifics, will be defended in detail in the coming sections. But, in rough outline, it is this: the production of knowledge is increasingly a group activity and yet the forces that make groups good at producing knowledge are, to a non-trivial degree, in conflict with what it takes for individuals to be intellectually virtuous. As a result, maximal group efficiency often requires that a non-negligible number of group members behave in ways that are, at the level of individual virtue, non-virtuous. As group-based knowledge becomes increasingly widespread in modern society—normal science, with its characteristic division of labor, being the paradigmatic example of such knowledge—the conflict with virtue becomes more pervasive, and the virtuous become alienated from fundamental epistemic goods. The paper therefore has two broad aims. First, to illustrate that the notion of epistemic alienation is fruitful ground for future research. Second, to highlight that the ‘social turn’ in epistemology is not without its costs: even if much—perhaps even most—of human knowledge is social in origin, its pursuit can nonetheless enable a form of alienation.

The paper will cover a lot of ground. Here is a brief preview. In section I, I specify the logical structure of the kind of conflict I have in mind when I say that individual virtue and group knowledge are in conflict. The conflict, I argue, lies *not* in a logical or general incompatibility between individual virtue and group knowledge, but instead in the fact that there is often a relatively low cap on how much individually virtuous activity groups can accommodate before they begin to lose their epistemic efficiency. In section II, I defend the existence of that conflict. In section III, I consider, and ultimately reject, three strategies for dissolving the conflict. In section IV, I present a challenge to the use of this conflict as a basis for alienation. Finally, in section V, I attempt to meet that challenge. I argue that the virtuous are alienated because they possess predictably self-

conflicting ideals. I end by highlighting what this alienation means for recent consequentialist trends in social epistemology.

I. The conflict specified

When philosophers hear that X and Y conflict with each other, there is a natural tendency to think that X and Y are logically incompatible: the presence or truth of X entails the absence or falsity of Y. When I say that the forces of group knowledge production and the requirements of individual virtue conflict, I do *not* mean that they are logically incompatible. What kind of conflict I have in mind is perhaps best introduced by way of example. In basketball, soccer, and other team sports, there is a clear, but defeasible, relationship between individual talent and team success. There is obviously some fairly strong and fairly stable relationship between a team's possession of individually talented players and their chances of succeeding as a team. If there weren't such a connection, then teams, outside of rare cases, would not try as hard as they do to acquire individually talented players. But this relationship between individual talent and team success is not perfectly stable. That is, there are a number of changes to background conditions that can mute, or even reverse, the relationship. This fact can be seen in two ways. First, the teams with the best collection of individual players often do not produce the most successful teams, even when the gap in individual talent between teams is large. For example, the 2023 U.S. men's basketball team failed to win the 2023 FIBA World Cup despite having by everyone's admission the most talented roster by far. This result did not require a miracle—the U.S. has failed to win the FIBA World Cup in a majority of World Cup competitions in the twenty-first century, despite having the most talented team in all of those tournaments. Second, the teams that do have the most success are not infrequently teams that do not rank very highly in terms of talent. For example, the 2004 Detroit Pistons and the 2004 Greek men's soccer team won the NBA championship and the European Championship, respectively, despite having rosters that were not among the elite teams in terms of individual talent. Whether a collection of individually very talented players maximizes the chances of team success depends on various background conditions: what positions/roles those players

occupy, whether their personalities mesh, etc. Individual talent and team success obviously do not *logically* conflict. But suppose that basketball and soccer were such that a) individual talent were a cause of machismo and b) there were a relatively low cap on how much machismo a team could handle before it impeded team success, i.e., before more talent begins to reduce the probability of team success. In this case, we could say that individual talent and team success conflict (*despite* individual talent being a major determinant of team success). This kind of conflict will be the kind at issue for the rest of the paper: two or more variables conflict in the relevant sense if, in a range of scenarios that are not uncommon even if they are not universal, they develop a negative relationship.

II. The conflict between virtue and group knowledge

I want to argue that a very similar kind of conflict exists between the forces of group production and the requirements of individual virtue. To make this claim plausible, we will need to articulate what the relevant forces of group knowledge production are, what the relevant requirements of virtue are, and how they conflict. The forces of group knowledge production are those forces that contribute to the ability of collectives to produce knowledge. For example, one rather trivial such force is the fact that groups have individuals with brains that can gather information from their environments. Though the actual forces of group knowledge production are too numerous to list, and many won't be so trivial, what matters for our purposes is that many of those forces enjoy a high degree of *autonomy*. A composite is *autonomous* to the extent that its behavior or characteristics are not straightforwardly reducible to the behavior or characteristic of its constituents. We just saw one such example with team sports: the quality of a team is not straightforwardly reducible to how good the individuals on that team are. The same is true of flavors: creating composite flavors pleasing to the palette is not simply a matter of adding together flavors that are each individually pleasing to the palette. To cite a more academic example, agent-centered models famously show that a city can become racially segregated even though every resident is willing, under a relatively wide range of conditions, to live near people of other races,

and none of those members desires segregation for its own sake.⁴ Though the autonomy of groups is generally old news for philosophers, it has really only been in the last few decades that philosophers have come to recognize that *epistemic* groups enjoy a similar degree of autonomy, i.e., that the epistemic qualities of groups are not always simply the sum of the epistemic qualities of their members. Sometimes good epistemic qualities of individuals even make for bad epistemic qualities of groups and vice versa. As Mayo-Wilson et al (2011) put this point, “epistemically rational individuals might form epistemically irrational groups and ...rational groups might be composed of irrational individuals” (653). Smart (2018) aptly calls such cases “Mandevillian intelligence,” after Mandeville’s *The Fables of the Bees*, which was instrumental in advancing the general notion of group autonomy in the eighteenth century. The bulk of evidence for epistemic autonomy comes from three sources: modeling of epistemic agents, laboratory studies, and case studies. I will review a few common examples, highlighting both key results and the mechanisms by which epistemically rational individuals can lead to epistemically irrational groups. The examples are far from exhaustive.

One example comes from Kofi-Bright’s (2017) modeling of scientific fraud in publication markets. It is often assumed that fraud is best explained by an insufficient concern for truth, and that an increase in concern for truth would result in lower rates of fraud. This view is often referred to as the “veritistic ideal.” But Kofi-Bright’s models reveal, among other things, that “converting a scholar into a mixed credit/truth seeker from a credit seeker can actually introduce incentives to lie where previously there were none” (303). That is, inducing a concern for truth can actually *raise* a person’s likelihood of committing fraud. It does so by a straightforward mechanism: if a person is sufficiently convinced that a given proposition is true, then they will be more willing to falsify results—tell a “noble lie”—when doing so will lead to that proposition becoming more widely

⁴ See Schelling’s aptly titled *Micromotives and Macrobehavior* (1978).

believed (ibid).⁵ Here a traditionally rational feature of an individual—concern for truth—can lead to an irrational result at the group level, viz. more fraud.

A second example concerns the importance of novelty seekers for epistemic groups. Novelty seekers—also known as “mavericks”—pick their research programs not on the basis of their past success, but instead on whether that program has been defended by someone already. In a series of articles, Weisberg and Muldoon model how scientists’ choice of program allows for the exploration of epistemic landscapes (which are roughly the logical space of research with unevenly distributed significance). These models show that groups composed solely of mavericks routinely outperform those who members pick their programs solely on the basis of past success, e.g., by following up on promising research programs.⁶ Mavericks are able to play a pivotal role in successful science for a straightforward reason: the success of a past research program is often based on limited evidence, and so mavericks prevent a group from putting all their program eggs in one evidential basket. A person whose sole concern is novelty is not making decisions based on evidence, and so is individually irrational. And yet groups that contain such individuals are among the most rational there are when judged by group performance (ibid.: 246).⁷

A third kind of example concerns the positive role of conformism, i.e., the exaggerated bias towards majorities or pluralities that humans routinely exhibit. For example, Efferson et al. (2008) describe an experiment where participants must decide, over a series of trials, between two kinds of technologies. Payoffs are random, but expected payoffs vary. Conformists who have access to others’ choices and yet no information about payoffs, whether their own or others’, routinely outperform individuals with no conformist tendencies and yet access to payoff data at regular

⁵ See Zollman (2018) for a nuanced account of the roles of credit incentives and truth ideals. See Heesen (2019) for recent work on the limits of credit incentives.

⁶ Weisberg and Muldoon (2009, 2011, 2015). See also Heesen (2019).

⁷ There is a scenario in which a person picks their research programs solely based on novelty *because* doing so has in the past yielded strong results. This person is not technically a maverick, but is instead using evidence about past methods’ success to influence their choice of research program.

intervals. Similarly, *groups* of conformists outperform non-conforming groups in a variety of settings, even when the latter are intrinsically much more talented.⁸ There are various mechanisms behind conformism's success—more than can be summarized here—but I will highlight two. First, though conformism obviously limits in-group diversity, it tends to generate cross-group diversity, allowing increased selection pressures to arise at the group level. Second, on the assumption that there is a baseline of success among individual learners in a group—e.g., strategies worth conforming to—conformism allows individuals to access others' success quickly, bypassing the need for individual learning. Understood as an exaggerated bias towards majorities or pluralities, conformism is individually irrational: it uses group-think rather than evidence as a means of forming epistemic attitudes. And yet it is often hugely productive in groups, and plays an important role in humans' evolutionary success.

A fourth example concerns groups with motivated reasoners. Motivating reasoning is the phenomenon whereby a person's assessment of information is biased in favor of desires they have.⁹ Motivated reasoning has well-known epistemic downsides, which I won't cover here. But, unexpectedly, motivated reasoning seems to *increase* group performance in various settings. For example, groups which contain a higher level of disagreement among members regularly outperform groups without disagreement, e.g., in logic activities where groups must evaluate logical inferences in the form of Wason selection tasks.¹⁰ Disagreement is not itself a sign of motivated reasoning, but motivated reasoning offers a clear explanation for the discrepancy in group performance: motivated reasoners are more willing to devote time and energy to disconfirming challenges to prior beliefs that they are motivated to keep than they are to devote time and energy

⁸ See Henrich (2017: ch. 12) for a discussion of some of the evidence. Levy and Alfano (2020) discuss at length the importance of conformism for social epistemology.

⁹ See Kunda (1990) for a classic overview.

¹⁰ See Moshman and Geil (1998) and Trouche et al (2014, 2016).

to confirming supporting evidence.¹¹ What results, as Hallsson and Kappel (2020) argue, is an efficient division of epistemic labor: as each reasoner is more disposed to dedicate time to refuting rival views than they are to refuting their own views, groups with disagreement and motivating reasoners function more efficiently (2826).¹² And since motivated reasoners' bias against disconfirming evidence is usually not insurmountable¹³, consensus can still develop in groups with such reasoners. Motivated reasoning is a paradigmatic case of individual irrationality. And yet it often contributes to group rationality.¹⁴

A fifth example concerns the positive role of dogmatism in groups. Zollman (2010) uses models of epistemic agents to show that dogmatic agents—defined as Bayesian reasoners with very strong priors—are often a force for good in epistemic groups. When looking at groups with equally high rates of information exchange among their respective members, the groups with more dogmatic members tend to outperform those with less dogmatic members. And the rationale is straightforward. Evidence is often unrepresentative at any given time, and so groups with non-dogmatic members are at risk of settling on views earlier than is ideal. Dogmatism in groups allows for diversity of opinion to persist until the evidence justifies consensus. Overly strong priors are often seen as epistemically irrational, but they promote group rationality in a variety of contexts, including when communication rates are high.

The last example I'll mention is inspired by the history of plate tectonics. Prior to the 1960s, the dominant view of the Earth's surface movement was that it moved only vertically, via

¹¹ See Mercier and Sperber (2011: sec. 4.1). In this kind of case, myside bias and motivated reasoning overlap, given the assumption that there is a desire on the part of participants to maintain prior beliefs.

¹² One might wonder why non-motivated reasoners couldn't opt, perhaps out of a concern for efficiency and its benefits, to form an efficient division of labor. One potential reason is that group members would need to know what others are dedicating their efforts to in order to avoid redundancy. But groups with disagreeing motivated reasoners do not need to know others' efforts. They instead only need to be presented with disconfirming evidence.

¹³ Mercier and Sperber (2011: 63).

¹⁴ Mercier and Sperber (2011, 2017) are responsible for popularizing the idea that motivated reasoning and other traditional irrational thought processes are actually beneficial when considered in argumentative group contexts.

contraction. The German scientist Alfred Wegener had proposed as early as 1912 that the Earth's surface moves laterally as well vertically, on "plates." Without a clear mechanism for how something as massive as the Earth's surface could move laterally, the theory was relegated to the margins of geology. But the theory did not disappear completely and when the mid-Atlantic ridge and seafloor spreading were discovered in the 1950s, it fit the data near perfectly, allowing geology to shift to the theory of plate tectonics almost immediately.¹⁵ Examples like this lead Kitcher (1990) to argue, not implausibly, that science's progress depends on there being a significant minority of scientists pursuing projects that do not enjoy strongest evidence. A diversification of views, many of which are relatively baseless, allows science to hedge its bets in case new evidence comes in, as it often does. What helps enable this diversification of views is the credit incentive: the possibility of receiving professional credit for views one defends first (*ibid.*: 21).¹⁶ The credit incentive is not generally seen as a rational driver of individual epistemic choices. And yet it often produces very rational groups.

What these and other examples illustrate is that it sometimes characteristics that are traditionally conceived of as individually irrational—e.g., dogmatism, motivated reasoning, evidence insensitivity, and excessive concern for novelty—nonetheless contribute to group epistemic success. Likewise, sometimes characteristics traditionally associated with individual rationality—e.g., a concern for truth, evidence sensitivity, and objectivity—nonetheless detract from group epistemic success. As Kitcher puts it:

Is it possible that there should be a mismatch between the demands of individual rationality and those of collective (or community) rationality? Could it turn out that highminded inquirers, following principles of individual rationality, should do a poor job of promoting the epistemic projects of the community that they constitute? Might those with baser motives actually do more to advance their community's epistemic endeavors? (*ibid.*: 6)

¹⁵ Scientific theories, such as contractionism, do not give way in the face of damning evidence without a suitable replacement theory at the ready. See Kuhn (1962: 79).

¹⁶ See Strevens (2003) for an explanation of how being the first to defend a view produces ideal divisions of labor.

The answer to these questions, as is well known in social epistemology these days, is often ‘yes’: what makes for a rational group is not always what makes for a rational individual.¹⁷

Let’s turn now to the traditional requirements of virtue, or at least those with the potential to conflict with the forces of group knowledge production. There is limited agreement about what intellectual virtue requires, in part because there is limited agreement about the metaphysical class that virtue belongs to. The traditional division is between the so-called ‘reliabilist’ conception of the virtues, according to which virtues are powers or faculties of individuals, and the so-called ‘responsibilist’ conception, according to which virtues are akin to character traits.¹⁸ Despite this deep division, both sides agree that for a person to have a virtue they must stand in some appropriate relation to fundamental epistemic goods, such as true belief, knowledge, or understanding.¹⁹ On the reliabilist conception, the appropriate relation is cashed out in terms of reliable promotion: virtues are powers that are sufficiently reliable at promoting true belief (or knowledge, understanding, etc.). On the responsibilist conception, there is less agreement. But there is a large contingent of responsibilists that agree that reliable promotion is at least *one* of the appropriate relations that a state must have in order to qualify as a virtue, even if it’s not the only one.²⁰ For example, Zagzebski (1996: 137) writes of virtue in general that a “virtue, then, can be defined as a deep and enduring acquired excellence of a person, involving a characteristic motivation to produce a certain desired end *and reliable success in bringing about that end*” (emphasis added). Epistemic virtues, then, include both a motivational and promotional relation to epistemic goods. Though it is not a consensus position, for the purposes of articulating the conflict between

¹⁷ See Mayo-Wilson et al (2011) for a helpful overview of some of the major evidence for why epistemic groups are autonomous.

¹⁸ For classic examples of reliabilists, see Goldman (1999) and Sosa (1993). For classic examples of responsibilists, see Zagzebski (1996, 2003) and Montmarquet (1991). Battaly (2008) and Greco (2002) offer good overviews of the division.

¹⁹ See Carter and Gordon (2014) for a summary of the various ways this connection is cashed out.

²⁰ For a general denial of the truth-conduciveness of intellectual virtue, see Montmarquet (1993, 2000). For a discussion in the context of openmindedness, see Baehr (2011), Carter and Gordon (2014), and Kwong (2017). See Baehr (2006) for a general discussion of the role of truth-conduciveness in discussions of intellectual virtue.

virtue and the forces of group knowledge, I will assume that virtue is related to fundamental epistemic goods at least by reliably promoting those goods. That is, I will assume that to possess an intellectual virtue requires that the possessor be more likely, because of that virtue, to possess the fundamental epistemic good in question.

While this assumption of promotion is just an assumption at this point—I will consider a weaker relation in the next section—one can make an intuitive case that it is at least part of our commonsense view of what virtue involves. Suppose you knew of two people only that one was diligent (or intellectually honest, etc.) and the other was intellectually lazy (or intellectually dishonest, etc.), and yet you had to bet, of ten randomly chosen propositions that each has beliefs about, which of the two had more true beliefs. You would likely bet on the first. This intuition reflects the idea that, at least on our ordinary conception of virtue, there is some connection between having a virtue and having true beliefs.²¹ The connection is of course not a guaranteeing connection—open-minded people, diligent people, etc. are sometimes wrong. Similarly, the connection is not perfectly stable—it is compatible with a given virtue’s increasing one’s odds of forming *false* beliefs in certain contexts. For example, if an open-minded person travels for an extended stay with conspiratorial family members, it might lead to fewer true beliefs than had they stayed home.²² Nevertheless, it seems to be part of a common-sense view that virtue is connected to fundamental epistemic goods at least by promoting them, even if only probabilistically and defeasibly so.

We can now articulate the conflict between the forces of group knowledge production and the requirements of virtue. Groups sometimes produce knowledge more efficiently when there is a non-negligible level of activity among members which, *at the level of individuals*, operates independently of the truth. That is, the activities which promote group success are often activities

²¹ The same bet would likely be made, *mutandis mutatis*, for knowledge and understanding.

²² That virtue reliably promotes true belief is also compatible, as Zagzebski herself notes (1996: 182), with there being contexts in which the virtuous are not all-things-considered reliable.

which do not make it more likely that the *individual* gain true belief, knowledge, or understanding. Consider motivated reasoning. Motivated reasoning occurs when a person's evaluation of evidence is biased towards what they want to believe. At the level of individuals, motivated reasoning is not truth conducive: individuals who reason in a motivated way are no more likely to gain true beliefs, etc. This is because, in the vast majority of cases, reality is the way it is independently of how we wish/want/hope it to be, and so evaluating evidence in a way biased towards our desires is not likely to connect us to that reality. The mechanisms which enable motivated reasoning to sometimes be a force for good at the group level do not exist at the individual level, e.g., there is no division of labor among one individual, and so division-based forces for good don't occur at the individual level. The individual's motivated reasoning is, in other words, promote truth for the *group* but not for the *individual*. Other habits of mind from the earlier examples also fail to be truth conducive at the level of the individual, even though they can be truth conducive for the groups in which they occur. For instance, the existence of mavericks in groups often helps them produce knowledge more efficiently by allowing them to explore logical space more quickly. And yet on the individual level, there is no reliable connection between, say, a belief's being novel and its being true. This is why an excessive concern for novelty is often associated with a lack of virtue. For instance, Spinoza famously refused to share his real views with a student who he was tutoring because the student was, in his view, "more anxious for novelty than for truth" (G IV 39/C I 190). In these and other cases, the forces of group knowledge are maximally efficient only when a non-negligible number of group members act in ways that are, *at the individual level*, operating independently of truth. And yet intellectual virtue does *not* operate independently of the truth. It is a requirement of virtue, we are assuming, that virtue reliably promotes fundamental epistemic goods, such as true belief. It follows that groups often produce knowledge more efficiently when there is a non-negligible level of activity among members which, at the individual level, is not virtuous activity. This then is the conflict between group knowledge and virtue: the forces of knowledge production place a relatively low cap on the amount of individually virtuous activity a group can accommodate before it starts

to act as a drag on group success. This does *not* mean that efficient groups cannot accommodate any individually virtuous members or that those members cannot contribute to maximal efficiency on account of their virtue.²³ It does not even mean that some groups can't be both maximally efficient and maximally individually virtuous. Rather, it means that in more cases than one would otherwise think there can only be relatively few individually virtuous members in groups who are acting on the basis of their virtue. *When* there is a cap and *how* low that cap is remain empirical questions, and it no doubt varies from context to context. But the same is true of roster construction in team sports. There is no formula for when individual talent maximizes team success, or how much. Often it is only *afterwards* that such answers can be given, and even then they can be known only in rough outline. For example, the 2006 U.S. men's basketball team was clearly poorly constructed, given that it failed to win the World Cup despite the huge talent gap it enjoyed. But how much talent was too much, or how many talented players would have had to be swapped for other, less talented players in order for the team to have won remain questions without precise answers. The same is true with epistemic groups. That groups are epistemically autonomous is well established. But since the evidence is often based on mathematical models, laboratory experiments, and historical case studies, it is impossible to come up with precise answers—or sometimes any answers—to questions of exactly how much group success conflicts with virtue or how much it conflicts. This is partly due to questions about how to generalize models, experiments, and case studies, and partly due to the fact that many epistemic groups are complex systems, one of whose defining features is the emergence of unpredictable macro behavior on the basis of small changes among constituents.²⁴ It is possible to establish a general conflict of the sort described earlier in this paragraph without being in a position to answer autonomy-related questions about specific groups.

III. Three strategies for removing the conflict

²³ See Tanesini (2020) for the role that open-mindedness might play in keeping diversity transient.

²⁴ See Strevens (2016) for a philosophical overview of complex systems.

Some might want to fact of epistemic autonomy while denying that it generates the conflict between group efficiency and individual virtue just outlined. That is, despite the autonomy of epistemic groups, it is still possible for every group to be maximally efficient *and* for all their members to be individually virtuous. In this section I will outline three kinds of strategies for resolving the conflict laid out in section II and argue that each kind of strategy fails.

The first kind of strategy for reconciling group dynamics and the requirement of individual virtue is what I call the “two-hat strategy.” It claims that we wear one hat as virtuous individuals, and another hat as members of productive groups, where the “hats” refer to the kind of mental state involved in each activity. The “hat” of the individually virtuous is belief, in that individual virtue operates on what a person *believes* (and those activities which culminate in, or result from, belief).²⁵ Group activity, however, involves wearing a different hat because group activity operates on activities similar to but distinct from belief, such as pretense, acceptance, rational endorsement, or some other such belief-adjacent state. The idea here is that members of epistemic groups need not *believe* the propositions that guide their activity in those groups in order for the group to be epistemically successful. To sloganize the strategy, belief is neither required for nor always productive of healthy group inquiry.²⁶ It is enough, and often better, that group members have some other attitude to the propositions relevant to their activities, e.g., that they accept or rationally endorse them without believing them. If these two claims are right—that virtue involves belief but group activity need not and often does not—then the individually virtuous can, in effect, wear two hats—they can *believe* things that a virtuous person would believe, while merely *accepting* (etc.) what is required in order to contribute most efficiently to group inquiry. For example, they can *believe* propositions on the basis of sufficient examination of evidence, but *accept* (etc.) propositions on the

²⁵ That virtue involves activities related to belief is not a consensus view, even if it’s the default one. See Baumberger, Beisbart, and Brun (2017) for a discussion of attitudes involved in understanding, and whether understanding involves belief. See Duncan (2020) for a defense of a form of knowledge that does not involve belief.

²⁶ See, for example, Dang and Kofi Bright (2021) or Fleischer (2018, 2020, 2021). See van Fraassen (1980) for the classic defense of acceptance’s role in science.

basis of motivated reasoning. If it is possible for a person to be virtuous qua individual while essentially *simulating* non-virtue qua group member, then there is no cap on the virtuous in ideal divisions of labor. Rather, it would be possible for every member of a maximally efficient epistemic group to be virtuous, so long as not all their behavior in group settings reflects what they believe. The conflict between virtue and group knowledge is therefore only apparent. After all, it was precisely because of its connection to true *belief* that the full exercise of virtue was seen to be in conflict with maximal group efficiency. If group activity operates on states other than belief, then that conflict never gets off the ground.

As tempting as this “two-hat strategy” may be, it faces at least two potential problems. The first concerns the capacity for the forces of group knowledge production to operate on states adjacent to belief, such as acceptance. This is ultimately an empirical question. In some cases, the belief-adjacent attitude is plausibly sufficient. Consider the effect that credit incentives have on the choices of research programs. What receives credit is the publication and dissemination of results, not the *belief* in those results.²⁷ If belief-adjacent states suffice to motivate group members to pursue the activities that culminate in dissemination, then belief is not required as a vehicle for the credit incentive to do its good work. Similarly, states like conjecture and hypothesis are plausibly capable of allowing group members to take on “trial beliefs,” which enables them to play with or exploring various views without actually believing them. If so, these kinds of states could act as a plausible vehicle for maverickhood, allowing a group to access its benefits independently from belief. In other cases, however, it is harder to imagine the forces operating, at least as efficiently, on states other than belief. For example, motivated reasoning is a powerful force in groups, and yet it arguably depends on belief as a vehicle in a more intimate way than credit incentives do. At the very least, much the experimental work on motivated reasoning is framed in terms of responses to prior beliefs and the desires which subjects have to maintain them.²⁸ This suggests that motivated

²⁷ See Strevens (2003) and Dang and Kofi Bright (2021).

²⁸ See footnote 12.

reasoning is a psychological tendency that is tied specifically to belief, stably if not essentially.²⁹ So, motivated reasoning probably won't retain its force, including its force for good, if it operated on belief-adjacent states. This question is, as mentioned above, an empirical one. The point is that it's an open question and the two-hat strategy depends on one particular answer to it. If at least some forces of group knowledge production do not operate as efficiently on belief-adjacent states, then maximal group efficiency requires that group members actually *believe* at least some of the things that they base their activities on. If those activities operate, at the level of individuals, in a truth-independent way, then group efficiency is in conflict with virtue.

So, the two-hat strategy depends on the questionable empirical assumption that forces of group knowledge production are equally efficient with non-belief states as vehicles as they are with belief as a vehicle. But even if this assumption proves true, the two-hat strategy still leaves the essence of the original conflict in place, despite initial appearances to the contrary. The two-hat strategy retains the virtuous individuals' contribution to group knowledge by rendering much of their virtue *idle* in group contexts. That is, in the cases illustrative of group autonomy, it's possible for all members of a maximally efficient epistemic group to be virtuous only so long as enough of their contributions to that efficiency have a source independent of their virtue. For if all members let beliefs operate in the group, then states tied to truth would be driving group activity, thus undermining the mechanisms which promote group efficiency. To say that maximally efficient groups are consistent with individual virtue in the way described by the two-hat strategy is akin to saying that a person's honesty is consistent with their lying in a game of poker: it is only consistent because the rules of poker allow truth-telling to be set aside. As such, the second problem with the two-hat strategy is that it leaves in place the conflict between the dynamics of group knowledge and the *use* of virtue in group contexts: sometimes maximally efficient epistemic groups require that some members not *use* their virtue to guide their activity in those groups.

²⁹ At the very least, there are other biases that are sometimes productive in groups, such as myside bias and confirmation bias, which seem intimately connected to belief as a vehicle.

The second strategy for removing the conflict between virtue and group dynamics focuses on the assumption that virtue reliably promotes fundamental epistemic goods, such as true belief. It grants that virtue must be *appropriately related* to fundamental epistemic goods, but denies that this relation is one of reliable promotion. Rather, the virtuous person need only be appropriately *motivated* by those goods, e.g., by loving them or deeply desiring them.³⁰ It does not matter, so the objection goes, if the virtuous engage in motivated reasoning, credit incentive-seeking, maverickhood, etc., so long as these sorts of behaviors are themselves motivated by a love of truth. Whether this “motivational strategy” succeeds depends on the extent to which the love of truth is compatible with the dirtier forces of group knowledge, i.e., the extent to which one can love truth *and* still engage in motivated reasoning, seek novel views for novelty’s sake, be moved by credit incentives, and so forth. Let us grant that it’s possible to have multiple motivations. The question is whether those motivations in particular can co-exist in a way that allows for virtue while at the same time maintaining group performance.

The love of truth *does* seem compatible with at least some of those forces. For example, Kofi Bright (2017) and Zollman (2018) both provide evidence that groups composed of agents with mixed motives (those motivated by both truth and credit incentives) outperform groups whose members are motivated solely by credit incentives, at least across a range of conditions. But there is a serious worry about the extent to which love of truth is compatible with other forces of knowledge production. Consider maverickhood and motivated reasoning. The latter is *defined* as reasoning motivated by desires. As such, it is virtually a conceptual truth that motivated reasoning is incompatible with a love of truth, at least at the same time when the motivated reasoning occurs and with relation to the same evidence. Likewise, maverickhood occurs when a person guides their epistemic choices not based on prior success or evidence but solely on the basis of novelty. If a person’s choices are guided solely by novelty, then it seems there is no room left for them to be

³⁰ See, e.g., Montmarquet (1991) and Battaly (2004). See Baehr (2011) for an intermediate position.

guided by a love of truth, at least at the time under consideration. So, some forces of group knowledge production seem straightforwardly incompatible with a love of truth. For others, it is at least an open empirical question whether they are.

One might object that I have mislocated the love of truth in these cases. The virtuous person doesn't love truth solely when it is attained by them, the objection goes, as if they were knowledge egoists. Rather, they love truth independently of *who* has it. They are, or at least can be, altruists in their love of truth.³¹ So, even if engaging in motivated reasoning (etc.) is incompatible with a person's loving truth for themselves, it is compatible with their loving truth more impartially. For example, perhaps a person loves truth and knows that motivated reasoning plays a role in knowledge production in groups, and so they engage in motivated reasoning to play their role in boosting the amount of true belief that the group gives people access to down the line.³² The forces of group knowledge production are compatible with individual virtue insofar as the members of the group can all love truth (etc.) in an *impartial* manner without having to modify their behavior in a way that detracts from maximal epistemic efficiency.

This modification to the motivational strategy comes at the expense of a traditional conception of intellectual virtue, which is the conception relevant to the conflict. On the traditional conception, the virtuous person doesn't simply want epistemic goods to come into the world regardless of who has them—they also want to possess these goods *themselves*. That is, the virtuous person is *partially* related to these goods. There are of course routine cases where the intellectually virtuous person sacrifices their own possession of epistemic goods so that others can possess them, e.g., a parent might sacrifice their ability to read in the evenings to drive their child to after-school tutoring. But this sacrifice plausibly stems from moral virtue—their concern for the well-being of

³¹ See Zollman (2019) for a discussion of epistemic altruism in prisoner's dilemmas.

³² Fleischer (2018) motivates the belief-adjacent attitude of 'rational endorsement' in part because of its potential to produce future knowledge. Likewise, Hallsson and Kappel (2020) argue that motivated reasoning is rational in virtue of promoting future benefits.

their child—and not from a truly impartial love of knowledge. After all, if it were truly impartial, they would be equally willing to sacrifice their own knowledge so that someone else, potentially unknown to them, might have a little more knowledge. I am not claiming that an account of intellectual virtue which puts impartial love of truth at the center is a non-starter.³³ The point is rather that an impartial love of truth is not plausibly part of intellectual virtue traditionally conceived. As a result, the motivational strategy for resolving the conflict faces a dilemma. Either it claims—implausibly—that behaviors such as novelty seeking and motivated reasoning are compatible with love of truth for oneself, or it reconceives the love of truth in an impartial manner, departing from the traditional conception of virtue at issue here.

The third kind of strategy for resolving the conflict is motivated by the context-dependent nature of virtue. According to most conceptions of virtue, the specific requirements of virtue depend on the situation the agent finds themselves in. For example, Aristotle famously says that

both fear and confidence and appetite and anger and pity and in general pleasure and pain may be felt both too much and too little, and in both cases not well; but to feel them at the right times, with reference to the right objects, towards the right people, with the right motive, and in the right way, is what is both intermediate and best, and this is characteristic of virtue (Book II.6, trans. Ross)

The same context-sensitivity plausibly applies to epistemic virtue. For example, the epistemically virtuous agent must be very careful in an epistemically risky environment with lots of bad information floating around, but can afford to be more careless in an epistemically safe environment. Likewise, the virtuous can be quite dogmatic in situations that involve high levels of misleading evidence, whereas their virtue leads them to be more open-minded in situations with higher levels of trustworthy sources of information. The kind of strategy in question adds that the ideal virtuous agent adapts to these situations even when participating in group inquiry.³⁴ For

³³ A radical form of epistemic consequentialism might call for such an impartial love of truth.

³⁴ See Kallestrup (2020) for a discussion of the context-sensitivity of virtue in group contexts. They argue that the skills of the individually virtuous can still contribute to group knowledge even when those individuals do not gain knowledge. This solution, however, still admits that group dynamics conflict the individual attainment of epistemic goods.

example, in an individualized situation, it is not virtuous to engage in motivated reasoning, but this does not preclude motivated reasoning's being reflective of virtue in some group contexts because such reasoning promotes truth at the level of the group.

While this third strategy relies on the plausible claim that virtue is context-dependent, it too fails to dissolve the conflict. If we assume the truth conduciveness of virtue, then even if the agent whose motivated reasoning in group settings promotes *group* success and even if it *only* appears in such contexts, it nonetheless fails to promote epistemic goods *for the person themselves*. That is, motivated reasoners in groups are no more likely to gain true beliefs for themselves, even if their presence in groups promotes group success and even if they act that way only in groups. Their reasoning functions as *de facto* epistemic self-sacrifice: chasing beliefs on the basis of desire with the result that it promotes group ends. As mentioned in two paragraphs back, such sacrifices might well be justified—maybe it *is* worth it to epistemically lower oneself in order to promote sufficiently weighty group ends. But if such activity is virtuous, it is not virtuous on the traditional conception of virtue, according to which the virtuous person promotes fundamental epistemic goods for themselves. It is virtuous only on a radically revisionary and radically consequentialist conception of intellectual virtue.

IV. The separation of the virtuous from knowledge

The rest of the paper will focus on arguing that the conflict between virtue and group knowledge is a form of alienation. In order for it to constitute a form of alienation, it must be the case that the virtuous—or at least some of them—are *separated* from epistemic goods that *properly* belongs to them. I'll examine the issue of separation first. Intellectual virtue, traditionally conceived, is connected to fundamental epistemic goods. We have been cashing out that connection partly in terms of reliable promotion: the virtuous are better, individually, at producing goods like true belief and knowledge than are the non-virtuous. But, given the dynamics of group knowledge, there is often a limit on the amount of intellectually virtuous activity a group can accommodate before that activity begins to erode the efficiency of the group. When this limit has been met, the virtuous must

either refrain from contributing to group knowledge (so as not to limit its efficiency) or contribute to group knowledge on bases other than their virtue. Even when they do not *know* that their virtuous activity would detract from group efficiency, their choices are still constricted: either refrain from contributing or to contribute but act as a drag on efficiency in the process. In the first case, the link between virtue and the production of epistemic goods has been weakened, since the virtuous have sidelined themselves from what is no doubt the most impressive mode of epistemic production in human history. In the second case, the link is also weakened, since the virtuous can contribute to that production *well* only by setting aside their virtue. In either case, a separation of virtue and fundamental epistemic goods results. This separation between virtue and epistemic goods lies at the heart of my claim that the virtuous are epistemically alienated, since alienation involves a separation of a subject (in this case the virtuous) from an object (in this case fundamental epistemic goods).

Recall the list of terms from the beginning of this paper which have been used to connote forms of alienation: artificiality, inauthenticity, depersonalization, reification, social isolation, rootlessness, dissociation, unfreedom, absurdity, deindividualization, and boredom.³⁵ If the separation of the virtuous from epistemic goods constitutes a form of epistemic alienation, then we should expect to examples which can be aptly described in at least some of these terms. In the next section I will argue that *absurdity* is an appropriate description of many cases of separation, but various other terms on the list can be used to describe common reactions epistemic agents have in group settings. Consider, for example, the scientist who defends views that they don't believe, and which they perhaps recognize don't enjoy the best evidence of the available options. They are potentially common to scientific practice³⁶, and often quite important to the epistemic success of groups, for reasons discussed earlier. It is not unnatural to describe their activity, important as it is,

³⁵ Recall that I am assuming that alienation picks out a specific social malady. See Wood (2004: sec. 1) for a discussion of alienation consists in the *feelings* like these or objective states like these.

³⁶ See Dang and Kofi Bright (2021) and Fleischer (2018, 2020, 2021) for examples.

as inauthentic or artificial. Or consider an academic who feels the pressure to publish, and so writes only on those relatively narrow topics whose literatures they already know well. These academics are part and parcel of normal science, with its dependence on increasingly specialized divisions of labor. And yet one could describe their work as a form of unfreedom: publish *or* perish is an imperative that removes options. This is equally true in fields, such as most fields of science, where more and more grant funding is secured by a relatively small number of big-name scientists or groups who then delegate smaller tasks to other researchers.³⁷ Or consider the trope of a disillusioned academic, who realizes that the big ideas that led them into academic life do not form a regular part that life. They often recognize that the production of knowledge is not possible if everyone is working on big ideas, and that progress instead requires most people to act as Locke's underlaborers. They can be described as *dissociating* from their earlier hopes and dreams. These are but a few potential examples where alienation-specific terminology can aptly describe phenomena which are common in contexts of group knowledge.

But the *mere* separation of virtue from epistemic goods is not sufficient for alienation. If I sell you a couch, I have not become alienated from it, but merely separated from it. Separation must be improper or problematic to qualify as alienation. So, we must show that the virtuous are *improperly* or *problematically* separated from those goods. It is this impropriety which explains why alienation is a social malady and not just a descriptive fact.³⁸ And one might in fact *doubt* that the separation is problematic. Perhaps—one might proffer—the virtuous are properly connected to epistemic goods only as *individuals* in individualized contexts and not as group members. By analogy, the basketball players who are best in individual contexts—good one-on-one players—are not necessarily the best players in team contexts. But we wouldn't say that this is even a surprise, let alone an impropriety. It's just part of the fact that basketball has a degree of autonomy: the best

³⁷ See Milojević et al (2018) for examples.

³⁸ In addition, the problematic source plausibly must also not simply amount to injustice. A stolen couch might lead to problematic separation, but it is not alienation in the modern sense.

individual players do not always make for the best team-players. Likewise, from the fact that fundamental epistemic goods properly belong to the virtuous in individual contexts it does not follow that their separation from these goods in *other* contexts is problematic. For the separation to qualify as alienation, it must be the case that the virtuous are improperly separated *even* in group contexts, e.g., when the cap the on virtuous activity puts a virtuous agent at risk of undermining group efficiency.

A Marxian approach to alienation might help here. According to Marx, there are certain human powers that belong to our nature and it is a bad thing for a human not to actualize those powers. They become alienated when they do not. For example, Marx himself thinks human nature has certain distinctive powers and workers find themselves alienated when they are not utilizing and developing these powers in their work:

What, then, constitutes the alienation of labor? First, the fact that labor is external to the worker, i.e., it does not belong to his essential being; that in his work, therefore, he does not affirm himself but denies himself, does not feel content but unhappy, does not develop freely his physical and mental energy but mortifies his body and ruins his mind. 1844: 74

On this approach, human nature sets the normative standard for alienation: alienation is problematic precisely because, and when, people find themselves in conditions where manifesting or developing human powers is difficult or impossible. In our context, a similar explanation for impropriety would involve, first, positing a human nature some of whose powers are expressed in individually virtuous activity and, second, identifying conditions that make it difficult or impossible to express those powers (and which thereby render those conditions alienating). For example, if it is part of our nature to be openminded, diligent with evidence, or intellectually honest in the pursuit of knowledge, then any activity which precludes or makes difficult the development and use of these traits would qualify as alienating activity. Some philosophers do include individual intellectual activity as part of our nature. For example, Martha Nussbaum offers a broadly Marxian-Aristotelian view of the good life, whereby the development of capabilities making up human nature constitutes the good life. Among them are individual intellectual faculties, such as imagination, distinction-

making, and understanding (1992: 218). The proper development of these faculties is quite plausibly part and parcel of individual intellectual virtue, and so individual virtue lies in our nature.³⁹ These kinds of accounts have the potential to explain why the separation of the virtuous from fundamental epistemic goods, even in group contexts, is alienating: the forces of group knowledge make it difficult, in various circumstance, to use the capabilities of our natures.

But this approach to explaining alienation faces three challenges. First, it assumes that we *have* an essential human nature—a set of explanatory, uniquely human, and widespread traits. Many deny this, in part due to worries about its compatibility with the evolutionary origins of humans.⁴⁰ Second, it assumes that our natures also determine the good for humans. It is one thing to think that there is a human nature, and another to think that this nature sets the standard for the good life.⁴¹ Third, even if one grants that there is an essential human nature and that it determines the good for humans, it is unlikely to involve the traditional intellectual virtues at issue, e.g., open-mindedness, diligence, intellectual honesty, etc. There is increasing evidence that many of our intellectual tendencies likely evolved for their effects on groups, rather than for their effects on individuals.⁴² To use an oft-cited slogan, many of our reasoning habits, though a bug at the level of individuals, are features at group levels. If this evolutionary hypothesis about the origins of our intellectual habits is true, then our nature cannot be used to explain why the separation of virtue from knowledge in group contexts is problematic. If anything, this separation is proper to our nature, rather than in conflict with it. So, it remains to be seen how the separation at heart of the conflict constitutes a form of alienation.

V. Absurd Ideals

³⁹ Zagzebski (1996: 278-9) also grounds virtue in human nature. She argues that knowledge is belief that arises from intellectual virtue, and since intellectual virtue derives from capacities unique to humans, it derives from human nature.

⁴⁰ Hull (1986) is the classic presentation of this challenge.

⁴¹ See Kronfeldner (2018: part III) for an overview of worries about a normative human nature.

⁴² See Mercier and Sperber (2017).

Imagine a hypothetical world which contains a group known as the Blue Haters. They are a powerful group with a strange antipathy to blue things. The Haters are triggered by two things in particular: by blue things being looked at and by blue things being brought into the world. Whenever a blue thing is looked at, they make it harder to bring more blue things into the world. And whenever a blue thing is brought into the world, they make it harder to look at existing blue things. But the Haters did not always have such influence. Azul, a person in this world, was raised prior to the appearance of the Haters, and came to love and care about blue things. Because of this love, Azul has motivations both to look at blue things when there were opportunities and to help bring more blue things into the world when the chance arises. When the Haters came to power, she therefore finds herself in a bind. Azul's satisfaction of one of her desires comes at the expense of the other: satisfying one desire makes it more difficult to satisfy the other. Azul's bind is both mundane and interesting, depending on how it's framed. If it's framed as a case of merely incompatible desires, it's mundane. Almost everyone has desires that are difficult or impossible to jointly satisfy. Tradeoffs are often required. For example, consider a second person—Kaden—who has a desire to help his parents as they age and a desire to spend his life abroad. These desires are difficult to jointly satisfy. That some desires are difficult or impossible to jointly satisfy is just a fact of life, unfortunate as it is. But there's something more going on in Azul's case. Kaden's desires are in tension with each other, but they have distinct sources. His desire to care for his parents comes from some sense of obligation or familial love, whereas the desire to live abroad comes from some other source, such as a value for adventure and personal challenge, an interest in particular cultures, etc. There are a wide range of possibilities where Kaden has only one of these desires and there's no tension. Contrast this situation with that of Azul. The desires of Azul's that have, with the rise of the Haters, become difficult to jointly satisfy are desires that come from one and the same source, viz., they both have their source in her love of blue. The only reason she cares about looking at blue things is because she loves them, and yet her looking at blue things undermines her ability to satisfy another desire she has and which she has for the exact same reason, viz. that she loves blue

things. Given the presence of the Haters, the basis for Azul's wanting one thing is due to a love of blue and yet it is ultimately her love of blue that also prevents her from satisfying that desire, because that love also gives rise to second desire whose satisfaction makes satisfying the first more difficult. And this bind is not simply due to the necessity of tradeoffs. I want to argue that the conflict between virtue and group knowledge is similar in important ways to the conflict facing Azul, and that the conflict is a form of absurdity, because it involves an agent being separated from their own sources of agency simply because they act on that source of agency. The absurdity of their situation will be my basis for describing the virtuous' separation from epistemic goods as a form of alienation. Grounding alienation in absurdity allows me to side-step some of the worries outlined in the previous section about using human nature to ground alienation.⁴³

To make the analogy convincing, it's important to identify the analogue to Azul's love of blue, as well as the analogues to the specific desires that this love gives rise to. The first is easy enough. The virtuous, at least on the responsibilist conception, tend to have a love of, or concern for, truth. For example, Zagzebski (2013:18) takes this love to be the basic motivational aspect of virtuous agents: "love of truth is plausibly the primary motive underlying a wide range of individual virtues."⁴⁴ When we love or care deeply about something, this gives rise to a range of desires concerning that thing.⁴⁵ For example, when I care about a porcelain elephant left to me by my grandmother, I desire its continued existence (among other things). Azul cares about blue things, and this results in a desire to look at them and to bring them into the world. The virtuous' love of truth similarly gives rise to a number of desires. For example, the virtuous tend to desire to know more about the world and to have fewer mistaken beliefs about the world. They also tend to desire that their beliefs come about in some ways rather than others, e.g., that they believe based on

⁴³ Absurdity is generally considered to be a form of meaninglessness and feelings of meaninglessness is often cited as a sign of alienation. See Camus (1942) and Nagel (1971) for classic statements on the connection between absurdity and meaninglessness. See Jaegi (2014) and Marx (1844) for discussions of meaninglessness and alienation..

⁴⁴ See work by Montmarquet, Battaly, Baehr, and Zagzebski, among others, for examples.

⁴⁵ See Frankfurt (1982) for a seminal account of caring and how it relates to other attitudes.

evidence and not as a result of hope. They also tend to have desires pertaining to epistemic goods that go beyond *their* own possession of them. For example, they desire that *others* also come to know more about the world. Furthermore, many virtuous individuals do not simply want others to come to possess epistemic goods, but also have desires about their own *participation* in the spread of knowledge. For example, they often desire that they themselves play a role in disseminating and creating knowledge, e.g., by contributing to science. The virtuous therefore tend to have two kinds of desires, viz., those pertaining to their own possession of epistemic goods and those pertaining to their role in producing and sustaining those goods for others. It is rare for a virtuous person to desire knowledge for themselves but to have no desire to help produce knowledge on a grander scale and no desire that others also come to have knowledge. The inverse is also true. It is rare for someone to want to help produce and sustain knowledge on a grand scale and to want others to have it, but to have no desire to gain it for themselves. That these two kinds of desires tend to come together is not a surprise. They likely arise from a single source—a concern or love for truth or other fundamental epistemic goods—and are reinforced by various ideals that role models and the education system try to instill in young people. The virtuous want to know more themselves precisely because they care about knowledge and want more of it in their lives.⁴⁶ In the same way, they tend to want to others to come to have more knowledge, and even to help produce knowledge for others, not simply because doing so can help the virtuous themselves gain knowledge, but because they care about knowledge and want to help produce it.

Both Azul and the virtuous have various desires that have a single, more primary source. Furthermore, the desires of each are in tension with themselves. Azul's desires are put in conflict by the Blue Haters, because the satisfaction of one of Azul's desires leads the Haters to make the other more difficult to satisfy. For the virtuous, the tension arises in group contexts where there is a cap on virtuous activity and that cap has been reached. In such cases, the virtuous can contribute

⁴⁶ This is compatible with not wanting just any knowledge. See Battaly (2010) for a virtue-theoretic example.

to group knowledge production only by setting aside their virtue (making it non-operative in group settings) or only by acting as a drag on group efficiency (when their virtue is operative).⁴⁷ There are of course differences between Azul's and the virtuous' cases. First, in Azul's case, the tension is universal. Whenever Azul satisfies one of her desires, the other becomes more difficult to satisfy. This is not true of the virtuous. Sometimes it is perfectly possible for virtuous individuals to contribute to efficient group knowledge production on the basis of their virtuous activity in those groups. Perhaps every group has room for some such virtuous individuals (this is an empirical question). But the point of sections II and II was to show that these situations are rarer than we think, i.e., that often what drives epistemic groups is that enough individuals in the group are engaging in behaviors that, considered from the perspective of individual virtue, are non-virtuous. The second difference is that the tension in Azul's case is external to her desires. It lies in the existence of the Blue Haters and their specific triggers and abilities. But in the case of the virtuous, the tension is *internal* to their concerns, because it is internal to the dynamics of group knowledge and the requirements of individual virtue.⁴⁸ So, the virtuous' situation is both better, and worse, than Azul's. It is better because the tension is not as widespread, even if it still exists. But it is worse because the tension is internal to the content of the virtuous' concern, namely the nature of knowledge and virtue. In caring about epistemic goods like knowledge, truth, and understanding, the virtuous develop desires that have a certain inevitable tension to them. There is a tension because it's often more difficult than one would think to jointly satisfy those desires. The tension is inevitable because it's not just a bit of bad luck that there's this tension, but is instead baked into the content of the desires themselves.

Why is this absurd? Answering this question is crucial to explaining why the virtuous are alienated. When people care about something, it leads to their wanting certain things in their lives. Azul's love of blue leads her to want to look at blue and to want to play a role in creating blue

⁴⁷ Again, they might not know when this tension occurs. But ignorance of a choice does not remove the choice.

⁴⁸ See Marino (2009) for a discussion of essentially conflicting desires.

things. Azul's love of blue provides both a basis for action and basis for at least a partial evaluation of her life. It provides a basis for action by providing her with desires that she might act on (this isn't to suggest that the only basis for action is the pursuit of a desire). It provides at least a partial basis for evaluation because it allows one to see whether Azul's desires are being met (again, this isn't to suggest that the satisfaction of desire is the sole basis for evaluation). The appearance of the Blue Haters has hampered Azul's agency because satisfying a desire she cares about leads to the frustration of a desire she cares about, or at least an increased likelihood of its frustration. Given the presence of the Blue Haters, Azul's situation is akin in ways to that of the agent from Williams' (1973) critique of utilitarianism.⁴⁹ Williams' agent finds himself alienated because the utilitarian requirement to impartially maximize well-being conflicts with his commitments, i.e., with those projects of his which constitutes his most basic source of agency:

It is absurd to demand ...that he should just step aside from his own project and decision and acknowledge the decision which utilitarian calculation requires. It is to alienate him in a real sense from his actions and the source of his action in his own convictions. *ibid.* 116

We can be agnostic about whether Williams is right that utilitarian requirements do in fact separate agents from themselves, while nonetheless granting that being separated from a basic source of agency *is* a form of absurdity, and hence a form of alienation. The Blue Haters separate Azul from a basic source of agency by hampering her ability to use her concerns as a gateway to satisfying desires which those concerns give rise to. She is plausibly alienated as a result. A similar sort of separation occurs in the conflict at issue in this paper. There is one single source of concern that explains why the virtuous desire what they desire, whether for themselves or for others. And yet the ability that the virtuous have to satisfy some of those desires is in tension with their ability to satisfy others. For example, when the cap within a group has been reached, satisfying the desire to contribute to group knowledge makes it harder to satisfy desires pertaining to their own virtue,

⁴⁹ See Venkatesh (2022) for a clear account of Williams' notion of alienation in this context.

such as the desire to pursue activities on the basis of evidence. The conflict that holds between the desires of the virtuous amounts to alienation—rather than simply tough luck—because a basic source of concern, and hence of agency, is in competition with itself.

Allow me to conclude this section by returning to the issue of modernity. At the outset of the paper, I said that the alienation of the virtuous is a modern form of alienation, because it arises from a distinctly modern feature of society. The reason is straightforward. One of the most distinctive features of modern society is its division of labor. Of course, virtually every society in human history has involved *some* division of labor, with some individuals dedicating their time to one kind of labor and others to another kind. But it is a particularly extreme form of division that distinguishes modern societies.⁵⁰ For example, modern capitalist economies flourish in part because labor is divided to the point where each individual laborer fails to produce anything whole, while pre-capitalist laborers, though specialized, still produced whole goods with a stable use value, e.g., a carpenter would still produce tables while a table-factory worker only produces one part of the table.⁵¹ Importantly, much of the autonomy of epistemic groups derives from the division of epistemic labor. The priority rule, the credit incentive, maverickhood, motivated reasoning, dogmatism—all these can contribute to group epistemic success despite their vicious connotations because they either incentivize or help to maintain ideal divisions of epistemic labor. It is no coincidence that normal science, with its increasingly specific problems and methods, is marked by an increased division of labor, and one that stands in sharp contrast to the large-scale projects that individuals of the past are famous for.⁵² Since the mark of modernity in economic systems—divisions of labor—is also the driving force behind the autonomy of epistemic groups, those groups plausibly amount to a distinctly modern form of knowledge production. In addition, the merging

⁵⁰ It does not matter for our purposes whether this difference is a difference of degree or one in kind.

⁵¹ Smith (1776) famously considers the division of labor to be the turning point for modern, capitalist economics. See Murphy (2009: ch. 8) for discussion. According to Marx and Engels, an economic system's stage of advancement—including its currently most advanced stage, capitalism—is a function of its division of labor (1846).

⁵² Kuhn (1962: ch. 3).

of group knowledge dynamics with capitalistic economic forces—e.g., through the literal professionalization of intellectual disciplines—renders the forces of group knowledge doubly modern. The alienation of the virtuous therefore amounts to a distinctly modern form of alienation because the forces that give rise to it are distinctively modern.⁵³

VI. Conclusion

I've argued that there is a form of properly epistemic alienation that arises when the requirements of virtue conflict with the forces of knowledge production. As a form of alienation, it is a social ill or malady. That malady can be stated as follows: we have reached a time in human history where it is impossible to maintain all of our epistemic ideals simultaneously. The ideal of individual virtue and the ideal of knowledge production, though sometimes compatible, are not always so. And since it is common for us to treat both ideals as compatible—e.g., by inculcating both in our children and students—we end up setting ourselves up for absurd situations. A society prone to absurdities is a society that suffers from a social malady.

Where does one go from here? As the autonomy of epistemic groups comes to be better known and appreciated, there has been an increased push to set aside more individualistic concerns about knowledge formation and virtue and focus on the extreme potential for groups to produce knowledge. For example, Levy and Alfano (2020) argue that “this overlooked feature of human social life [that knowledge is produced in many cases by individual vice] means that epistemology must become more deeply and pervasively social” (887) and that “epistemology ignores the irreducibly collective and the non-agential at the peril of neglecting some of our most significant cognitive achievements” (910).⁵⁴ Likewise, Dang and Kofi Bright (2021) argue that the “primacy of the social...requires that we allow people to be more lax in certain contexts than we normally

⁵³ Millgram (2015) argues that the hyperspecialization which can be found in many forms of modern knowledge production presents a unique philosophical problem. This paper can be read as arguing in a similar spirit.

⁵⁴ Levy and Alfano (2020) deny that we should *advocate* for changes at the individual level, since doing so might make group members *too* individually non-virtuous (909).

require of individuals” (8200). Similarly, Hallsson and Kappel (2020) claim that “insofar as epistemic rationality serves [group] inquiry, it seems odd to say that rationality requires responding to this evidence, even when doing so means hindering [group] inquiry.” The idea behind these kinds of rallying cries is that groups are capable of producing so much more knowledge than individuals—whether in the contexts of science, cultural transmission, or democracy—and so in cases of conflict between individual and collective rationality, the latter deserves precedence. One aim of this paper has been to point out that, as much in the epistemic realm as in the moral, prioritizing the maximal production of ends is but one potential response to a conflict in values.

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