

Alfano, Mark, Colin Klein and Jeroen de Ridder, eds, *Social Virtue Epistemology*, New York: Routledge, 2022, pp. xvi + 618, £108 (hardback)

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Here are some things we know about conflicts around the world in April 2024. On 7 October 2023 Hamas killed over 1200 people in Israel and took more than 240 hostage. In response Israel launched an assault on Gaza that has killed tens of thousands of Palestinian civilians and displaced millions. Russia's war crimes in Ukraine continue; since 2022 Russia has repeatedly ignored international humanitarian law, tortured and murdered civilians, and destroyed basic infrastructure in civilian areas. Civil war continues in Sudan, and the country faces imminent famine. Approximately 25 million people in Sudan need humanitarian assistance.

How do we know this? The sources are multiple and complex. For most of us, the immediate sources are likely to be online; newspaper websites, perhaps news circulated on social media. But these platforms are only the shop front at the end of long information supply chains. Our daily headlines depend on journalism networks that include frontline reporters, freelance writers, international press agencies, and human rights monitoring agencies on the ground. The organisations that populate this network themselves depend on a host of factors to operate. Press agencies need to be financed. Frontline reporters need visas, coordination with embassies, and meticulously planned safety protocols. Human rights observers need to operate freely and safely, without fear of being targeted by rogue-state militaries.

These are the social conditions that make it possible for us to learn about global events. Equally complex conditions make it possible for us to know about, for example, weather forecasting, or astronomical discoveries, or public statements made by politicians. Transport systems make it possible for me to know how to travel from, say, London to Mexico City. Multiple generations of cumulative knowledge in aeronautical engineering make it possible for Boeing to know how to construct the aeroplane I fly in. A great deal of what I know individually, and we know collectively, depends on dizzyingly complicated social structures.

Contemporary social epistemology has only scratched the surface of these complexities. This is no indictment of social epistemology, which is in relative infancy compared to other millennia-old epistemological traditions. It is thanks to social epistemology that the social production of knowledge is a recognisable topic for philosophers, and the individualism of old no longer monopolises. But how we choose to develop social epistemology will determine whether the subdiscipline takes the opportunity to dive deep into the complex social structures that generate and disseminate knowledge.

Social Virtue Epistemology suggests a way forward for social epistemology that is guided by virtue theory, and on the evidence provided in its chapters this path is likely to lead to many valuable insights. I nonetheless worry that the volume suggests an agenda that steers epistemology away from the deeply-social epistemic networks that explain how we know, how we learn, and, less happily, how we are held in ignorance.

At my count the book contains four approaches to social virtue epistemology (hereafter SVE). The first studies how individual traits can help us flourish as knowers in perilous epistemic environments. Meyer and Alfano present empirical findings that suggest that a person's level of intellectual virtue significantly correlates with their acceptance of conspiracy theories and fake news. Nguyen argues that the intellectual virtue of playfulness can ameliorate the corrupting effects of epistemic traps like echo chambers. Gardiner argues that the virtue of proper attention is needed to navigate modern information-saturated societies. And Cassam advocates self-doubt as a tonic against the extremist mindset.

These chapters might give readers the impression that SVE is a "virtue first" enterprise, in the sense that it gives individual traits privileged status when explaining how knowledgeable a society and its citizens are. Were this all there is to SVE, it would fall far short of tackling the complex social networks I cited above. But this is only part of the story.

The second approach to SVE asks how social environments can help or hinder the cultivation of epistemic virtue. Croce and Pritchard argue that one core goal of education is the development of intellectual character which, they maintain, can be aided through a socialisation process provided by exemplars. Tanesini focuses on non-institutionalised socialisation, and argues that the cultural evolution of mindshaping is likely to have selected specifically for practices that encourage intellectual virtue. Kidd advocates what he calls critical character epistemology, that is,

the study of social structures that shape our epistemic character. And we might see the format of the book's chapters – each chapter is followed by comments from two other authors and a reply to those comments – as a practice designed to amplify the (already ample!) intellectual virtue of the contributors.

Thus it seems that the study of social structure is, after all, a key component of SVE. Nonetheless one might worry that, since the goal of this second approach to SVE is to determine how society shapes our intellectual character, its way of evaluating epistemic outcomes (are we cultivating virtue or vice?) remains tethered to the individualism from which social epistemology was supposed to free us.

Other chapters in the volume indicate what social epistemology could be were we to cut those ties. Watson's genealogical account of the practice of questioning maintains that questioning facilitates the cohesion of an epistemic community. Devitt et al. pitch "Better Beliefs", an intra-organisational social-media platform designed to promote ideas that are well-supported by evidence. Goldberg argues that the mere existence of experts on a subject can act as a defeater for my beliefs about that subject, even if I do not know that these experts exist. This leaves us with the fascinating prospect that new forms of institutionalised expertise could threaten previously justified autonomous beliefs among non-experts. But none of these chapters seem all that concerned with how their focal social practices bear on intellectual virtues and vices. If they successfully rehabilitate the "social" in SVE, they do so by abandoning the "virtue".

Perhaps virtue epistemology could be social by locating virtues at a collective level. This is the book's third approach to SVE. De Ridder proposes three models for collective epistemic virtues: summative; interactive (collective-level analogues of individual-level virtues, generated through interactions between group members); and emergent (*sui generis* collective-epistemic-virtues). Battaly examines the collective trait of solidarity, arguing that it is not always a virtue. De Rooij and De Bruin apply a functionalist account of collective intellectual vice to the case of Boeing and the failings that led to two of their planes crashing. Carter argues that telic virtue epistemology is particularly well suited to understanding the nature of collective knowledge. Byerly outlines a methodology for measuring collective epistemic virtues that extends methods in self-reporting surveys to the collective level (cf. Meyer's very useful chapter on the challenges involved in measuring individual-level social epistemic virtue).

Certainly this is a step in the right direction. But the focus on virtues, even collective virtues, still imposes limits to social epistemology. Collective virtues presuppose a collective agent that must be stable and internally consistent enough to bear the attribution of a trait. But systems of knowledge transfer, such as those I outlined at the beginning of this review, often emerge from the cacophony of interactions of uncoordinated actors who are not evidently part of a coherent collective to which we could attribute a trait, let alone a virtue. We have reason to worry, then, that even collective SVE is likely to miss the deeper complexities of social epistemology.

Consider, finally, an approach to SVE that asks how individual intellectual virtues and vices generate epistemic goods in different social environments, crucially without presupposing that only virtues are beneficial. Bland argues that our best strategy to prevent the potential harms of responsibility vices is not to educate away those vices but to restructure epistemic environments to blunt or, in some circumstances, harness the productive capacity of individual bias. Levy argues that the epistemic vice of dogmatism can be valuable under the right social conditions. Morreau and Olsson present the results of a model that, they argue, suggest that an epistemic network is improved by the presence of ranters, that is, people who are dogmatically committed to a proposition and who broadcast that proposition repeatedly and often.

This approach is the closest SVE comes to deeply social epistemology. But it seems to me that it does so despite, rather than thanks to, the influence of virtue epistemology. For the concepts of virtue and vice are at best accidental to, at worst a distraction from, the insights of this approach. Bland's position turns out to be that the responsibility vices are not really vices at all unless they are in hostile epistemic environments (grist to the situationist mill). And the purpose of Levy's analysis of dogmatism is to encourage us to turn our attention away from virtue and vice and towards epistemic environments. (This is not surprising. Levy and Alfano have also elsewhere (Levy and Alfano 2020) advocated for deep epistemology, and I have borrowed the depth metaphor from them.)

Social epistemologists can learn much from virtue epistemology; this volume is proof of that. But the combination of social and virtue epistemology comes with the risk of skewing the attention of social epistemology away from the structures that make social knowledge production and transmission possible. It also risks distracting from current threats against these structures. We have heard a great deal about fake news, misinformation, and conspiracy theories. But what can social epistemology tell us about growing restrictions to free speech in democracies around

the world? About states hostile to human rights agencies operating in their territory? About the cultural norms that shape our economy of attention and determine, for instance, where and when it is appropriate to refer to the murder of tens of thousands of civilians in Israel and Gaza? Or, more abstractly, about the distribution of power across global epistemic networks, the social division of labour appropriate for scientific discovery, the economic conditions that allow for the production of epistemic goods, what exactly counts as an epistemic good, and how such goods should be distributed across society? Issues like these, I suggest, would be the subject matter for a deeply social epistemology.

References

Levy, Neil and Mark Alfano (2020) 'Knowledge from Vice: Deeply Social Epistemology' *Mind* 129 (515) pp.887-915

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