*The Virtue of Epistemic Autonomy*

Jonathan Matheson

*0. Introduction*

People should think for themselves. Arguably one of the central goals of education is to equip students to think for themselves.[[1]](#footnote-1) However, like most cognitive projects, thinking for yourself can be done well and it can be done poorly. Consider two characters that demonstrate how thinking for yourself can go wrong. Consider first the Maverick. The Maverick is an independent thinker, but the Maverick is intellectually independent to a fault. The Maverick refuses to rely on the vast intellectual resources that are afforded to him by others. Instead, the Maverick insists on figuring everything out for himself, and refuses to take anyone’s word for anything. This is not an intellectually healthy life. In insisting on his intellectual independence, the Maverick comes to know very little and holds many mistaken beliefs. These mistakes would be more easily identified were the Maverick to get a little help from his friends, but alas this is not the Maverick’s way of conducting his intellectual business. Consider next the Codependent. The Codependent also lives an intellectually unhealthy life, but for different reasons. The Codependent has an unhealthy intellectual reliance on others. Perhaps fixated on their own intellectual shortcomings, the Codependent outsources nearly all of their intellectual projects. The Codependent nearly always defers to someone else in inquiry. They even defer about to whom they should defer. When asked what they think about a particular issue, they immediately turn to others for answers, not just assistance. Between these two extremes lies a mean. The intellectually healthy individual manages their intellectual life well. They rely on others, when appropriate, but they also strive for understanding things on their own and they do not shy away from doing the intellectual work themselves. Someone who manages their intellectual life well in these ways has the virtue of epistemic autonomy – they are a good epistemic executive who exhibits healthy intellectual interdependence.

In what follows I will both propose and motivate an account of the virtue of epistemic autonomy. In section one I clarify the concept of an intellectual virtue and character intellectual virtues in particular. In section two I clear away some misconceptions about epistemic autonomy to better focus on our target. In section three I examine and evaluate several extant accounts of the virtue of epistemic autonomy, noting problems with each. In section four I provide my positive account of the virtue of epistemic autonomy and explain how it meets the desiderata for such an account while avoiding the problems with extant accounts. Finally, in section five I fill the account out by digging into the factors that guide epistemically autonomous agents in having an appropriate reliance on their own thinking.

*1. What is an Intellectual Virtue?*

A great deal of work has been done in virtue epistemology to identify and analyze numerous intellectual virtues.[[2]](#footnote-2) While exhibiting epistemic autonomy seems to be foundational to one’s life as an epistemic agent, relatively little work has been done to understand epistemic autonomy as an intellectual virtue.[[3]](#footnote-3) Before proposing my own analysis of this virtue, it will be helpful to give some preliminary remarks about intellectual virtues in general.

Virtue epistemologists distinguish between two kinds of intellectual virtues: faculty virtues and character virtues. Faculty virtues are cognitive processes that reliably bring about good epistemic ends.[[4]](#footnote-4) Having good vision or a good memory are paradigm examples. The epistemic value of faculty virtues is instrumental; they are valuable in terms of what they bring about (true beliefs, knowledge, etc.). Faculty virtues need not be personal, acquired, or accompanied by any particular motivation. Character virtues, in contrast, are acquired cognitive character traits that are accompanied by particular motivations.[[5]](#footnote-5) Here, paradigm examples are intellectual humility and open-mindedness. The epistemic value of character virtues is at least partially intrinsic; they are valuable ways for an epistemic agent to be in themselves, though they may also bring about other things of value. A character virtue is a character trait of a good inquirer, traits that make an epistemic agent better epistemically. They are character traits that help agents acquire, maintain, and distribute epistemic goods like true beliefs, knowledge, and understanding. In addition, motives matter for character virtues. Good intellectual character traits are motivated by a love of the truth – by appropriately caring for what is epistemically valuable.[[6]](#footnote-6) So, following Jason Baehr, we can understand a character virtue is “a character trait that contributes to its possessor’s personal intellectual worth on account of its involving a positive psychological orientation toward epistemic goods.” (2011, 102) In what follows, I will be treating epistemic autonomy as a character virtue.

*2. Misconceptions*

Before advancing a positive account of the virtue of epistemic autonomy, it is important to clear away some common misconceptions about epistemic autonomy and what it entails and make an important clarification. There are two important misconceptions to clear away: that epistemic autonomy entails intellectual independence, and that epistemic autonomy is committed to some version of doxastic voluntarism. Let’s take each of these misconceptions in turn.

Some philosophers have identified epistemic autonomy with the independent intellectual life of the Maverick. For instance, John Hardwig (1985) claims, “If I were to pursue epistemic autonomy across the board, I would succeed only in holding uninformed, unreliable, crude, untested, and therefore irrational beliefs.”[[7]](#footnote-7) On this view, an individual is epistemically autonomous to the extent to which they are intellectually independent. While such an intellectual life is defective, we should resist seeing it as the epistemically autonomous life. Such a picture of epistemic autonomy is a relic of a Cartesian conception of epistemology with overly individualistc epistemic ideals.[[8]](#footnote-8) Such a picture of epistemology, and epistemic agents, ignores the insights of social epistemology.

To see that epistemic autonomy is not intellectual independence, let us first think about autonomy more generally. Autonomy has received much more attention within the realms of moral and political philosophy. According to Joseph Raz, the autonomous person determines the course of their own life. (1988, 407) Here too, autonomy is not to be equated with independence. The hermit is not the paradigm autonomous agent. While the hermit lives an independent life, there are ways of determining the course of your own life, while relying on others. In fact, a healthy reliance on others only seems to *increase* one’s autonomy. Autonomous citizens are afforded the benefits that come from an interdependent society while remaining free to live their lives as they see fit.[[9]](#footnote-9)

In the same way, intellectual independence is not the paradigm of epistemic autonomy. Epistemically autonomous agents manage their own intellectual lives, but not at the cost of forgoing the intellectual resources of others. Following Heidi Grasswick (2018), we can identify two central ways in which epistemically autonomous agents depend upon others to manage their intellectual lives. First, autonomous agents *developmentally depend* upon others. Without others, individuals would not develop the cognitive resources required for autonomous inquiry and deliberation. From the start, we rely on others to nurture our autonomous capacities. We acquire both the intellectual tools and the skills to use those tools in inquiry from others.[[10]](#footnote-10) The epistemic agent is not self-made. Second, our epistemic autonomy *constitutively depends* upon others. Exercising autonomous thinking often requires intellectually engaging with others, thinking about alternative perspectives (whether real or imagined), and seeing ourselves as answerable to others for our reasoning.[[11]](#footnote-11) So, not only is epistemic autonomy not committed to intellectual independence, agents actually become *more* epistemically autonomous when they rely on others in the right ways.

One might resist this account of interdependent autonomy as a mean between the Maverick and the Codependent by noting that there is something amiss with instructing the Maverick to “be more autonomous.” If epistemic autonomy really is a mean between the extremes of intellectual independence and intellectual codependence, however, then such a reprimand would be accurate. In being too intellectually independent, the Maverick must be more autonomous; being more autonomous would be a move toward the mean. The fact that something seems amiss with such instruction may be thought to indicate that epistemic autonomy really is more about intellectual independence than some mean between the extremes of independence and servility.

While there is admittedly something strange about telling the Maverick to be more autonomous, it is not without an explanation. It is worth noting that such an oddity is not unique to the virtue of epistemic autonomy. There is a similar oddity in encouraging someone who is rash to ‘be more courageous’ or someone who is servile to ‘be more humble’.[[12]](#footnote-12) While a similar oddity exists in such reactions, this is no reason to think that courage and humility are not themselves means between two extremes (rashness/cowardice and servility/pride respectively). What then explains what is amiss with such prescriptions? Plausibly, the oddity here is explained by the fact that in general we tend to err on the side of the other extreme in each of these cases. Regarding courage, people tend to err on the side of deficiency, not excess. Similarly, people tend to err on the side of pride, not servility. It also seems plausible that individuals tend to fail to think for themselves as they should. After all, as children we all begin our intellectual lives like the Codependent, taking on everything that we hear. It is only has we mature intellectually that we begin to take a more active role in our intellectual lives. Given these asymmetries, it makes sense that instructions to be ‘more humble’, ‘more courageous’, and ‘more autonomous’ tend to imply a move toward the side of excess on the relevant spectrums. What this shows is that it is important to distinguish between traits and virtues. The Maverick lacks the virtue of epistemic autonomy because he has the trait of epistemic autonomy to an excess – he excessively relies on his own intellectual efforts. The Maverick must have less of the trait of epistemic autonomy in order to have the virtue of epistemic autonomy. So, telling the Maverick to be ‘more autonomous’ sounds off since it is natural to read the kind of autonomy at issue there to be trait-autonomy, and the Maverick needs less of that in order to obtain the virtue of autonomy.

Having addressed the first misconception about epistemic autonomy, let us turn to the second. It is also a mistake to believe that epistemic autonomy requires exercising significant control over one’s beliefs. While epistemic autonomy requires having executive control over one’s intellectual life, and while beliefs are a central feature of one’s intellectual life, it is a mistake to maintain that epistemic autonomy requires having significant control over one’s beliefs.

Here too, we can gain insight by thinking about autonomy more generally. The concept of autonomy is closely connected to the concept of responsibility, and to be responsible, agents must exhibit significant control over their lives. However, while autonomous individuals determine the course of their own life, this does not entail that they control every aspect of their lives. Sometimes autonomous choices don’t turn out as the agent envisioned. This shows that we must be careful in determining what it is that an autonomous agent is autonomous *about*. Autonomous agents are autonomous in the choices that they make and the actions that they take. They are not autonomous in how those choices and actions work out in the world. For instance, Sam autonomously *applies* for a job, but Sam does not autonomously *get* the job. The fact that Sam is not in control of whether his application is successful does not indicate that the application was not autonomously made.

Returning to the intellectual realm, we must be careful here too in assessing what it is that epistemic agents are autonomous about. A natural candidate here is their beliefs; autonomous agents are in control of their beliefs. After all, the central business of epistemic agents is to acquire true beliefs while avoiding false ones. However, it is contentious, at best, that we exercise significant control over our beliefs, and it is implausible that we directly control our beliefs by will. To the extent that we do control our beliefs, we control them only indirectly by controlling the actions that lead us to those beliefs. For this reason, several philosophers have instead viewed epistemic agents as autonomous over what they accept, rather than what they believe.[[13]](#footnote-13) Following Cohen (1992), a subject *believes* p just in case they are disposed to feel that p is true (and that that not-p). In contrast, a subject *accepts* p (in a context) just in case they treat p as a given (in that context) as a matter of policy. To treat p as a given is to be willing and able to deploy p as a premise. For our purposes, the salient difference between what one believes and what one accepts is that the latter is under the control of the agent (at least in a much more straightforward way). An individual can directly will themselves to adopt certain policies, whereas the same is not true for taking on feelings of truth.

So, acceptance seems like a better candidate for the application of epistemic autonomy than belief. However, epistemic autonomy must extend beyond what a subject accepts. A subject who is unencumbered in what they accept can still be significantly lacking in epistemic autonomy. In managing their intellectual lives, epistemically autonomous individuals must have significant control over their inquiry. Autonomous agents control both the objects of their inquiry as well as their method inquiry. That is, autonomous agents control *how* they conduct their inquiry. In particular, they control their own level of involvement in the process of inquiry. They control when to think for themselves and when to defer to someone else.

Beliefs are best seen as the outputs of inquiry. Like a successful job application, individuals exercise a much greater degree of control over the actions leading up to the output (inquiry, filling out application), then they do over the output itself (belief, getting hired). While we may want to extend an individual’s accountability to the outputs as well, it should be clear at least that the *primary* target of our evaluation are the actions that are more directly under the agent’s control, and that at best agents only have derivative control over the outputs.

Having cleared away these two misconceptions about epistemic autonomy, it is important to make a clarifying distinction. Epistemic autonomy can properly be viewed as both a right, or freedom, as well as a character virtue. As a right, or freedom, epistemic autonomy consists of freedom from interference in inquiry. It is this sense of epistemic autonomy that is relevant to questions regarding epistemic paternalism, and whether it can be permissible to interfere with the inquiry of another without their consent.[[14]](#footnote-14) As a character virtue, epistemic autonomy is a nurtured character trait of epistemic agents, an epistemically good way to be, that also comes with proper motivation. It is important to see that ‘epistemic autonomy’ is picking out two different things with these distinct uses, even if both pick out some kind of epistemic ideal.

C.A.J. Coady sees epistemic autonomy (what he calls ‘intellectual autonomy’) as an epistemic ideal that blends elements of both senses of ‘epistemic autonomy’. On Coady’s account, epistemic autonomy has three core components: independence, self-creation, and integrity. According to Coady, independence is a kind of negative freedom – freedom from interference in one’s inquiry. This is a non-domination requirement for epistemic autonomy. Autonomous thinkers are not required to cognitively conform to the powers that be. Along these lines, Coady sees independence is a kind of freedom to develop mastery, or expertise, in the areas that one sees fit. Self-creation, the second component of epistemic autonomy, is a kind of positive freedom – freedom to create a distinctive intellectual life of their own. Autonomous thinkers order their intellectual lives in ways that they see fit. (266) This component of autonomy amounts to prioritizing one’s intellectual projects in way that aligns with one’s values and interests. Finally, integrity is the idea of standing up for truth, even in circumstances where this will result in negative outcomes. (363) Integrity amounts to not folding to external intellectual pressures.

So, Coady’s account of epistemic autonomy blends aspects of epistemic autonomy as a right, or freedom, with aspects of autonomy as a character virtue. Coady’s conditions of independence and self-creation are both conditions for a certain type of intellectual freedom, a kind of intellectual right that epistemic agents have (even if it can sometimes be outweighed). While freedom from interference in one’s inquiry is good, such a freedom has little to do with any character trait of the individual inquirer. Whether one is free to inquire as they see fit will depend upon their external environment and their intellectual community. This carries over to Coady’s comments on self-creation as well. Coady is focused on a freedom to create one’s own intellectual life. However, here too, such freedom has more to do with external circumstances than it does with any internal traits of the subject. In contrast, the condition Coady calls ‘integrity’ is something much more akin to an intellectual character virtue. This condition does concern the character of the subject, and is something that is cultivated. That said, intellectual integrity, while important and valuable, does seem to be separable from epistemic autonomy understood as a character trait. Autonomous thinkers may be lacking in intellectual courage or perseverance. While these other cognitive traits are related to epistemic autonomy, it is best to not think of them as *constitutive components* of epistemic autonomy.

Our focus in what follows is on epistemic autonomy understood as a character virtue. So, the rights or freedoms associated with epistemic autonomy are not at issue here. Here, we are concerned with intellectual dispositions that typify an epistemically autonomous agent. It is important to emphasize this distinction so as to focus our attention on the stated target and not the rights or freedoms that go by the same name.

*3. Alternative Accounts*

With these clarifications in hand, let us turn to evaluating some extant account of epistemic autonomy as an intellectual virtue. While there is reason to resist each of these accounts, our exploration can reveal important insights regarding this intellectual virtue and will help motivate my positive account.

Roberts and Wood (2007) have given perhaps the central account of epistemic autonomy as an intellectual virtue, and are thus a fitting place to start. On their account, epistemic autonomy consists in resisting ‘alien hetero-regulators’ and having a positive relationship with ‘proper’ hetero-regulators. (277, 285) Alien, or improper, hetero-regulators are intellectual principles or directives that the subject has no commitment to, that are extraneous to the subject’s purposes, and have not been internalized or ‘made one’s own’. (284) In contrast, an individual’s ‘proper’ hetero-regulators are intellectual principles or directives that have been internalized and ‘made one’s own’. Proper hetero-regulators are understood by the subject (278), and have been “actively and intelligently” appropriated into the subject’s noetic structure. (285) Roberts and Wood identify one’s intellectual tradition, teachers, peers, colleagues, critics, models, sanctioners, and authorities that one is happy to acknowledge as proper hetero-regulators. (285) So, which hetero-regulators are alien (improper) and which are not, are relative to an individual’s outlook and motivation. (284)

While Roberts and Wood’s account of epistemic autonomy does capture how epistemically autonomous individuals can depend upon others, it is insufficient both as an account of epistemic autonomy as well as an account of an intellectual virtue. The account fails as an account of epistemic autonomy because it fails to address how individuals have come to internalize and accept their (proper) hetero-regulators. The mere fact that one has internalized a principle or directive is insufficient for their following of it to be autonomously done. For instance, the internalization of the relevant principles and directives may have come by way of indoctrination. While the victim of indoctrination is committed to certain principles, has values and purposes in line with those principles, and has made those principles ‘their own’, such a person is not epistemically autonomous.

Mariana Oshana (2008) gives a helpful example here. She describes Harriet, who is a subservient spouse and homemaker, but prefers to be subservient. She finds her life gratifying and has no wish to change it. However, her desire to be subservient comes from a socially reinforced belief that she is inferior to her husband. Even if Harriet has internalized these principles and gender norms, ‘making them her own’, she is lacking in autonomy due to conditions under which she came to internalize these principles. We can add to the story that in addition to listening to the hetero-regulators that she endorses, Harriet resists alien hetero-regulators. Such alien heter-regulators may even be voices from the women’s liberation movement. After all, the reason these voices are alien to Harriet is due to socially reinforced beliefs about her inferiority as a woman. Despite meeting Roberts and Wood’s conditions for epistemic autonomy, however, Harriet is not epistemically autonomous. She is a victim of indoctrination.[[15]](#footnote-15)

Roberts and Wood’s account also fails as an account of an intellectual virtue, since the intellectual trait they describe is not itself an intellectual excellence. There are several problems here. First, on Roberts and Wood’s account of epistemic autonomy, all that matters, is whether the subject has (or has not) internalized some intellectual standard or norms. This ignores whether the subject *should* have internalized those standards or norms.[[16]](#footnote-16) Good epistemic agents are careful to listen to the right voices, not simply the voices that they happen to endorse or identified with. Having endorsed the voice of the Guru (without good reason) does not entail that it is epistemically good to follow it. This leads to the second problem with seeing the trait picked out by Roberts and Wood as an intellectual virtue. An epistemic agent who conducted their intellectual business by resisting ‘alien hetero-regulators’ and by being guided by ‘proper hetero-regulators’ would not lead an intellectually healthy life. By dismissing ‘alien’ voices and listening only to the voices that the subject has endorsed, such agents would create echo chambers, a kind of epistemic tribalism, and become even more susceptible to belief polarization. Such an intellectual life ignores important challenges that come from other perspectives; challenges that should be considered. Such an intellectual life is epistemically unhealthy, it is not intellectually virtuous.

Kyla Ebels-Duggan (2014) gives an alternative account of epistemic autonomy as a virtue. Ebel-Duggan is focused on determining whether and why educators should be facilitating epistemic autonomy in their students. She takes the problems exhibited in students that a focus on autonomy is meant to address to be (i) overconfidence and (ii) a lack of positive conviction. Ebels-Duggan finds a remedy for these vices in the intellectual virtues of charity and intellectual humility. As such, Ebels-Duggan advocates reinterpreting autonomy as simply charity and intellectual humility. So, on this view, aiming to foster autonomy in students simply amounts to aiming to foster charity and intellectual humility in them.

While this account does correctly classify epistemic autonomy as an intellectual virtue, it fails to capture anything that is unique about epistemic autonomy – anything that distinguishes it from other intellectual virtues. On this account, epistemic humility is simply a combination of charity and intellectual humility. While charity and intellectual humility are epistemically valuable, such an account fails to afford any *particular* epistemic value to epistemic autonomy. Ideally, an account of epistemic autonomy as an intellectual virtue ascribes it some unique epistemic value that is not fully subsumed by other intellectual virtues.

Finally, Linda Zagzebski (2013) gives an account of epistemic autonomy, what she terms ‘intellectual autonomy’, where it is foundational to intellectual virtues.[[17]](#footnote-17) On her account, epistemic autonomy is “the right or ideal of self-direction in the acquisition and maintenance of beliefs.” (259) This cognitive executive function is motivated by the desire for truth, and other intellectual goods, something that Zagzebski maintains that we desire naturally. On Zagzebski’s account, autonomous thinkers conscientiously attempt to resolve cognitive dissonance and produce cognitive harmony in its place. Epistemic autonomy can be impeded both externally and internally. It is externally impeded when there is outside interference in one’s intellectual pursuits. It is internally impeded when one’s cognitive states are not sufficiently controlled by conscientious self-reflection. Managing one’s cognitive life in this way, Zagzebski claims, is foundational to rationality itself. (259) Conscientious self-reflection, as Zagzebski argues elsewhere (Zagzebski 2015), can call for one to outsource their beliefs. If one determines that another epistemic agent is more likely to uncover the truth, conscientiousness calls for deference rather than independent inquiry.

Zagzebski’s account of epistemic autonomy captures the ideal of autonomy consisting of good executive management of one’s intellectual endeavors. Her account also builds in the proper motivation that guides such control – a love of truth and other intellectual goods. Such a motivation seems requisite for any intellectual (character) virtue. A problem for the account, however, is the central role that conscientiousness plays. In making conscientiousness the centerpiece of epistemic autonomy, Zagzebski has it that doing one’s best in intellectual executive management is sufficient for doing well. Conscientiousness, for Zagzebski, is using your cognitive faculties as best you can to get to truth. Unfortunately, sometimes people’s best efforts simply aren’t enough. The virtue of intellectual autonomy, the intellectual excellence, consists in managing one’s intellectual endeavors well, not simply doing one’s best.[[18]](#footnote-18) Since one can err in evaluating their reasons and making determinations based on their reasons, even one’s best efforts can fall short. The same holds for other virtues. Being honest requires more than trying your best to be honest. Being courageous requires more than trying your best to be courageous. So, while Zagzebski’s account has the right target, cognitive management motivated by a love of truth and other epistemic goods, it does not unpack this trait in the right way. Zagzebski’s account is too subjective.

This critical survey of extant accounts of the virtue of epistemic autonomy provide the foundation for a positive account. In the next section, we will lay out a novel account of epistemic autonomy and note its virtues.

*4. The Account & Its Virtues*

The above considerations reveal some desiderata for an account of the virtue of epistemic autonomy (EA):

D1. The account accommodates intellectual interdependence and is compatible with a social epistemology.

D2. The object of epistemic autonomy is something over which individuals exhibit significant control.

D3. The account meets the conditions of an intellectual character virtue.

D4. Epistemic autonomy is unique from other intellectual virtues and has distinctive value.

D5. Exercising epistemic autonomy requires making (objectively) good choices in one’s intellectual endeavors.

These desiderata lead to the following account of the character virtue of epistemic autonomy:

The character virtue of EA characteristically involves the following dispositions:

 (1) [cognitive] to make good judgments about how, and when, to rely on your own thinking, as well as how, and when, to rely on the thinking of others,

(2) [behavioral] to conduct inquiry in line with the judgments in (1), and

(3) [motivational] to do so because one loves the truth and appropriately cares about epistemic goods.[[19]](#footnote-19)

So construed, EA has cognitive, behavioral, and motivational components. Being epistemically autonomous requires making good judgments about how to balance a reliance on your own thinking with a reliance on the thinking of others, behaving in line with those judgments, and so doing because of one’s love of the truth and other epistemic goods. This characterization of epistemic autonomy meets each of our desiderata while avoiding the flaws in alternative accounts.

*D1. The account accommodates intellectual interdependence and is compatible with a social epistemology.*

According to EA, epistemically autonomous individuals manage the way that they conduct their intellectual projects, and they do so well. Part of what is involved in managing one’s intellectual projects well is determining when to think for oneself and when to more heavily rely on the intellectual efforts of others. So, exercising EA will involve a give and take with one’s epistemic community. Individuals who exhibit EA will exercise a healthy intellectual interdependence. Epistemically autonomous individuals are not intellectual free-riders. Rather, epistemically autonomous agents are contributing members in the intellectual division of labor. In addition, exercising EA involves utilizing, not ignoring, the vast intellectual resources afforded by others. EA thus fits nicely within a fully social epistemology that acknowledges our intellectual interdependence.

*D2. The object of epistemic autonomy is something over which individuals exhibit significant control.*

According to EA, epistemic autonomy is exercised with respect to how one conducts inquiry. It involves judgments about inquiry, as well as the behaviors undertaken in inquiry. Judgments, and the associated behaviors in inquiry, are things over which we exercise significant control. So, the objects of our autonomous control, according to EA, are things over which we exercise significant control. EA does not require that we have significant control over our beliefs and is not committed to any form of doxastic voluntarism.

*D3. The account meets the conditions of an intellectual character virtue.*

This desideratum is important to satisfy in order to distinguish epistemic autonomy as an intellectual character virtue from epistemic autonomy as an intellectual right, or freedom. EA clearly picks out characteristics of epistemic agents, and these characteristics meet the conditions for a character virtue. Recall Jason Baehr account of a character virtue is, “a character trait that contributes to its possessor’s personal intellectual worth on account of its involving a positive psychological orientation toward epistemic goods.” (2011, 102) The characteristics picked out in EA are character traits of an individual, and they are traits that contribute to their possessor’s personal intellectual worth. Someone who makes good judgments about how to rely on themselves, and others, in inquiry is intellectually better off for it. Further, such a character needs to be developed and nurtured, so it is also attributable to its possessor. Finally, proper motivation is explicitly built into the account itself. EA builds in that an epistemically appropriate motivation that is guiding the subject’s judgments and behaviors in inquiry. Agents who think for themselves out of intellectual pride, or defer to others out of intellectual cowardice do not exercise EA.

*D4.* *Epistemic autonomy is unique from other intellectual virtues and has distinctive value.*

While EA picks out a trait that is no doubt related to other intellectual virtues, it does pick out a unique epistemic excellence. Plausibly, EA is closely related to many intellectual virtues: intellectual humility, open-mindedness, intellectual perseverance, intellectual charity, and intellectual courage, among others. Some other intellectual virtues also concern executive decisions regarding inquiry. These managerial decisions regard which intellectual projects to pursue, as well as when, and how long to pursue them. Of relevance here are treatments of curiosity[[20]](#footnote-20), inquisitiveness[[21]](#footnote-21), intellectual perseverance[[22]](#footnote-22), and the love of knowledge[[23]](#footnote-23). However, the particular epistemic excellence picked out by EA is not fully captured by any of these other executive intellectual virtues. These other intellectual virtues do not concern an individual’s proper reliance on themselves, as well as others, in inquiry. Rather, these other executive intellectual virtues concern which questions to pursue in inquiry, as well as when to take them on, and how long to pursue them. The intellectual virtue of EA comes ‘downstream’ of the execution of these other executive virtues. Once it has been determined that I should now take on a particular inquiry, I then must exercise EA in determining whether, and how, I should rely on my own thinking (as well as the thinking of others) in conducting the inquiry in question. So, while many intellectual virtues concern how one manages their intellectual life, EA picks out a particular kind of intellectual management not covered by these other characteristics.

The unique function of EA comes with a unique epistemic value. In managing one’s reliance on oneself and others in their intellectual projects, individuals that exhibit EA get the most out of their intellectual efforts while contributing to the intellectual division of labor. We will explore this in more detail below, when we examine the different factors that go into determining the proper balance in any given inquiry.

*D5. Exercising epistemic autonomy requires making (objectively) good choices in one’s intellectual endeavors.*

To exhibit EA, one must make *good* choices in conducting their inquiry. Particular to EA, are good choices regarding one’s reliance on one’s own thinking and one’s reliance on the thinking of others. Exercising EA requires making good determinations regarding when to think for oneself, when to defer, and to whom to defer when deferring. Doing one’s best in these matters is not sufficient for doing well. Similarly, exercising EA is not simply listening to the voices that one happens to endorse, while ignoring the voices that one finds ‘alien’. Exercising EA requires making (objectively) good choices about when to defer as well as to whom to defer. Sometimes that will require a shift in which voices one listens to and which voices one ignores.

While the judgments and behaviors characteristic of EA must be objectively good, this does not entail that they ignore the subject’s situation. While these judgments and choices must be objectively good, what makes them objectively good can still be sensitive to the subject’s particular situation. For instance, evidentialism is a claim about when a doxastic attitude is objectively justified. Evidentialism gives an objective standard for epistemic justification. However, that standard is for individuals to believe in accordance with their evidence. Since individuals differ in terms of their total evidence, evidentialism can call for different responses from individuals with different bodies of evidence. So, regarding evidentialism, the objective standard is informed by the individual states of the subject. Similarly, while there are objectively better and worse judgments about how to rely on one’s own thinking, these objective standards can be sensitive to an individual’s particular epistemic position. What makes it an objectively good choice to defer to a particular individual may depend upon the subject’s body of evidence or some other subjective feature(s).

*5. Exercising EA – The Factors*

While we have seen how EA captures the desiderata of an account of epistemic autonomy while avoiding the pitfalls of alternative accounts, more is to be desired in terms of the details. EA is rather ‘hand-wavy’ with regard to the relevant judgments regarding inquiry. The judgments regarding how to rely on oneself and others in inquiry must be (objectively) good judgments, but what makes such judgments good judgments? What considerations guide an epistemic agent who exercises EA? Which factors are relevant in determining whether an epistemic agent should defer or deliberate?

Several factors are worth highlighting here, though this list should be seen as representative of the types of factors, not exhaustive. Let’s begin with considering the kinds of factors that would incline an epistemically autonomous agent to defer to someone else.

*Knowledge*

Knowledge is epistemically valuable, and a great deal of our knowledge has been acquired through deference. Given our limited time and resources, we would be able to know very little if we could only rely on our own inquiry.[[24]](#footnote-24) The minds of others are a great resource since collectively we are able to cognitively multi-task in ways that no single individual could. The intellectual division of labor opens up more knowledge to each of us. Further, some knowledge we would not be able to attain even without limitations. My prospects for figuring out astrophysics are dim, and it’s not just because I don’t have enough time to work on it. Some knowledge requires more skill and acumen then I could ever develop.

So, valuing knowledge can give us a reason to defer. For many questions that we pursue, others have already undergone the inquiry, are intellectually better suited to conduct the inquiry, or have better resources to conduct the inquiry. In such situations, we have reason to defer. Deferring is the better way to attain the desired knowledge.

*The Epistemically Best Available*

Deferring does not always promise us knowledge. Some questions are rather novel and so our evidential base is not good enough to give us knowledge, or the truth is yet to be uncovered. Other questions are sufficiently contentious, and the controversy precludes our coming to know the answer. However, even when knowledge isn’t on the table, in deferring to the experts we are relying on those who are in the best epistemic position on the matter. While even the best can be mistaken, or have insufficient evidence, they remain our best bet for navigating the world. The epistemic position of experts is much greater than that of novices. Experts have more, and better, evidence, and experts are better equipped to evaluate that evidence. Believing from a better epistemic position is an epistemic improvement. So, even when knowledge isn’t available, deferring to the experts can still be epistemically valuable – it can amount to relying on a better epistemic perspective.

*Epistemic Harm and Injustice*

In some cases, a failure to take someone at their word commits and epistemic harm or injustice. On plausible accounts of testimony, in telling a hearer something, speakers have invited the hearer to trust them.[[25]](#footnote-25) Such invitations offer the hearer assurance that the speaker is in a good epistemic position on the matter and that they vouch for the truth of what they say. So, to refuse such an invitation to trust, the hearer must have good reason to do so: they must have justified doubts about the sincerity or credibility of the speaker.[[26]](#footnote-26) In situations where the hearer is justified in believing that the speaker is both sincere and credible, yet refuses to take their word for it, they epistemically harm the speaker by refusing their invitation to trust them without good reason. In such situations, an insistence to think for oneself on the matter by obtaining and evaluating the evidence for oneself is epistemically harmful to the speaker. A special instance of such harm occurs in instances of epistemic injustice. Epistemic injustice occurs when an individual is harmed in their capacity as a knower owing to some identity prejudice.[[27]](#footnote-27) Since a hearer’s prejudice can be the reason why they want to evaluate the matter for themselves and not trust a speaker, autonomous deliberation can result in epistemic injustice.

We have seen some factors that would incline an epistemically autonomous individual to defer, but what considerations would incline such an individual to think for themselves? Here are some of the foremost reasons to think for oneself.

*Expertise*

While regarding many things that you think about, you are not an expert, sometimes you are. When a matter comes up that is within your area of expertise, there is good reason for you to think about it for yourself. Doing so, is doing your part in the epistemic division of labor. Novices rely on your expert opinion. Even if you are not the only expert capable of providing an answer, having experts independently evaluate a matter within their area of expertise is a valuable epistemic resource for the intellectual community.[[28]](#footnote-28) Independent expert assessment of the relevant evidence is a social epistemological good.[[29]](#footnote-29) Communities of truth-seeking agents benefit from experts autonomously deliberating about matters of their expertise. Consensus amongst expert autonomous inquirers is a more reliable guide to truth than an intellectual community where the experts defer on matters of their own expertise. Independently arrived agreement amongst the experts is powerful evidence that their shared conclusion. This is exhibited when multiple independent diagnoses all diagnose the symptoms as resulting from the same underlying condition. Such agreement, when independently arrived at, is more powerful evidence than if the doctors collaboratively made the diagnosis.

So, regarding matters within one’s area of expertise, there is reason to autonomously deliberate. Doing so brings about a valuable social (epistemological) good by providing a better epistemic resource for the community.[[30]](#footnote-30)

*Understanding*

Understanding is an epistemically valuable state, a state whose epistemic value outstrips the epistemic value of knowledge.[[31]](#footnote-31) Further, understanding requires thinking for oneself. Zagzebski puts the point this way:

understanding cannot be given to another person at all except in the indirect sense that a good teacher can sometimes recreate the conditions that produce understanding in hopes that the student will acquire it also. (Zagzebski 2009, 146)

Understanding requires more than taking someone else’s word for it, even when there are excellent reasons to believe them. Understanding requires possessing the relevant first-order evidence and seeing how it supports the proposition in question for oneself. So, when understanding is on the table, there is a good reason to think for oneself. In thinking for oneself and coming to understand, one has improved their epistemic position.

In addition to understanding *the answer* to one’s question, thinking for oneself can also lead to understanding *the debate* surrounding the issue. Even when one fails to understand the answer, they can come to appreciate the landscape of the debate, having become familiar with the types of considerations on different sides of the issue. This too is of epistemic value, and this value is not ascertained when one simply takes the answer from someone else.[[32]](#footnote-32)

*Managing New Evidence*

In thinking for oneself, and wrestling with the relevant first-order evidence, one can become better positioned to revise their belief (or level of confidence) in light of new evidence.[[33]](#footnote-33) When one is unaware of the first-order reasons that have been marshalled in support of a proposition (because they merely believe it on someone else’s say-so), they are unable to update their belief upon receiving new information. Since they are unaware of whether this new information has already been accounted for in the testimony they have received, they do not know how to accommodate this information.

Having thought about the issue for oneself, and having obtained the relevant evidence, individuals are in a better position to upkeep their beliefs in light of new evidence (whether it be confirming or disconfirming evidence). So, having autonomously deliberated about the issue, individuals are in a more resilient epistemic position and can better adapt to new evidence. This too is an epistemic improvement.

*Developing Intellectual Virtue*

Developing and nurturing intellectual virtue requires exercising the character traits in question. Many intellectual virtues cannot be exercised unless one is thinking for themselves. Since it is epistemically valuable to have intellectual virtues, doing the intellectual work to develop and nurture these character traits will also be important and valuable. The epistemically autonomous agent will develop intellectual virtues in themselves and will not let them atrophy due to a lack of exercise.

Several intellectual virtues plausibly require autonomous deliberation for their cultivation. Let’s look at just a couple. Consider the virtue of intellectual perseverance. According to Heather Battaly (2017), the trait of intellectual perseverance is “a disposition to overcome obstacles, so as to continue performing intellectual actions, in pursuit of one’s intellectual goals.” (670) On Battaly’s account, overcoming obstacles is characteristic of intellectual perseverance, and this can take place whether or not one successfully completes their intellectual project. (674) Without obstacles in inquiry, agents would not be able to exercise and cultivate intellectual perseverance.[[34]](#footnote-34) Obstacles get in the way of an epistemic agent from completing her intellectual goals, and inquirers can overcome obstacles even in unsuccessful inquiry. While Battaly maintains that intellectual perseverance is not always an intellectual virtue, she argues that when this trait is grounded in the agent’s commitment to, and love of, epistemic goods, it is a virtue. (680) As a virtue, intellectual perseverance is a mean between the extremes of excess (recalcitrance) and of deficiency (capitulation). (670) Agents with this virtue don’t give up on inquiry too soon, but they don’t stick with it too long either, and their efforts are guided by a love of truth (rather then their need to win an argument). On Battaly’s account, the intellectual virtue of intellectual perseverance consists of the following dispositions:

(1) to make good judgments about one’s intellectual goals; (2) to reliably perceive obstacles to one’s intellectual goals; (3) to respond to obstacles with the appropriate degree of confidence and calmness; (4) to overcome obstacles, or otherwise act as the context demands; and (5) to do so because one cares appropriately about epistemic goods.[[35]](#footnote-35) (688)

Unsuccessful autonomous deliberation is rife with obstacles. It presents plenty of opportunities to cultivate intellectual perseverance. Since intellectual perseverance can be cultivated even in cases where one’s intellectual projects are not completed, the fact that autonomous deliberation has failed does not prevent it from developing intellectual perseverance in the inquirer.[[36]](#footnote-36) So, thinking for yourself can help bring about intellectual perseverance.

Consider next intellectual humility. According to Whitcomb et al. (2017), intellectual humility consists in being appropriately attentive to, and owning, one’s intellectual limitations. According to this account,

owning one’s intellectual limitations *characteristically* involves dispositions to: (1) believe that one has them; and to believe that their negative outcomes are due to them; (2) to admit or acknowledge them; (3) to care about them and take them seriously; and (4) to feel regret or dismay, but not hostility, about them. (519)

When such appreciating and owning of one’s limitations is motivated by the subject’s desire for epistemic goods (e.g. truth, knowledge, understanding, etc.), intellectual humility is an intellectual virtue. (520)

This account of intellectual humility shows how thinking for yourself can foster intellectual humility. In particular, failed autonomous deliberations, can make one’s intellectual shortcomings evident. In thinking for yourself about some question and failing to find the answer, it becomes clear that you cannot figure this question out on your own. Such failures do not automatically make an individual intellectually humble, but they make the foundation of this intellectual virtue evident. If any time someone thought about an issue, they were able to uncover and understand the answer, it would be very hard for them to be intellectually humble. Failed inquiry can cultivate intellectual humility.

So, thinking for yourself can help cultivate intellectual virtues. Intellectual humility and intellectual perseverance can each be cultivated through autonomous deliberation. Further, unsuccessful inquiry seems essential to developing these intellectual virtues. What all of this shows is that there is epistemic value in the journey of autonomous deliberation, not simply in the destination. So, the epistemically autonomous agent will not only think for themselves when there is a good chance of success. Rather, we have reason to think for ourselves even when the prospect of successful inquiry is dim.

*6. Conclusion*

Building from previous accounts virtue of epistemic autonomy, we have seen a new account of this intellectual virtue. Epistemically autonomous thinkers exhibit healthy intellectual interdependence. They know when, and how, to rely on their own thinking, as well as when, and how, to rely on the thinking of others. We have also seen the types of reasons that should factor into an individual’s decisions in inquiry. How these factors weigh against each other will depend upon the details of any particular case.[[37]](#footnote-37)

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1. See Brighouse 2005, Ebels-Duggan (2014), Nussbaum (2017), and Seigel (1988) among others. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See Baehr (2011), Roberts and Wood (2007), and Zagzebski (1996) for some central examples. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. King (2020), Roberts and Wood (2007) and Zagzebski (2007; 2012) are notable exceptions. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. See Sosa (1991), (2007), (2009), and Greco (2010). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. See Code (1987), Montmarquet (1993), Zagzebski (1996), Roberts and Wood (2007), and Baehr (2011). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Character virtues admit of a further division pertaining to the possessor’s responsibility, or lack thereof, for possessing the character trait in question. Responsibilist character virtues are traits that the agent is praiseworthy for possessing. They are traits that the agent has exercised some significant degree of control in cultivating and is thereby accountable for. In contrast, personalist character virtues don’t require this same control or responsibility for the character trait in question. See Battaly and Slote (2015) for a helpful discussion. In what follows, I will be neutral on this further distinction among character virtues. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. See also Fricker (2006), McMyler (2011), and Zagzebski (2007). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. See Code (1991) and Goldberg (2013). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. See also Oshana (2008). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. See also Nedelsky (1989). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. See Code (1991) and Grasswick (2018). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. See Church and Barrett p. 71. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. See Dellsén (2020) and Elgin (forthcoming). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. For an extended defense of the permissibility of some forms of epistemic paternalism, see Ahlstrom-Vij (2013). [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Thanks to Chris Ranalli for pointing me to this example. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. We can be neutral here about under what conditions an agent should accept some norm or directive (whether it be following their evidence, proper function, etc.). [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. While Zagzebski does not explicitly categorize epistemic autonomy as a virtue, in seeing it as an epistemic ideal, her account of epistemic autonomy would be an intellectual virtue as we are understanding intellectual virtues. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. For a more detailed account of this criticism, see Jensen et al. (2018). [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. This follows Matheson (manuscript). [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. See King (2020) ch. 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. See Watson (2015). [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. See King (2014) and Battaly (2017). [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. See Roberts and Wood (2007) ch. 6. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Even here, we are setting aside our reliance on others to even be in a position to inquire in the first place. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. See Goldberg (2020), Hinchman (2005), and Moran (2006). [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. See Hazlett (2017). [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. See Fricker (2007). [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. See Dellsén (2020) for an extended argument for this conclusion. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. See Dellsén (2020). [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Expertise admits of degrees, though our discussion has proceeded as if it is an all-or-nothing matter. The greater one’s level of expertise, the stronger the reason they have to autonomously deliberate on the matter. This is because one’s level of expertise corresponds to credibility on the matter at hand. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. See de Regt (2009), Elgin (2017), Gardiner (2012), Grimm (2006; 2010), Kvanvig (2003), Pritchard (2009), and Pritchard, Millar, and Haddock (2010). [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. In addition, understanding the debate can help one to better identify who the relevant experts are, to ensure that they defer to the appropriate voices. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. See Nickel (2001) and Nguyen (2018). [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. See also King (2014). [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Compare with King (2014, 3517-3518) who understands intellectual perseverance “a disposition to continue with serious effort in one’s intellectual projects in the pursuit of intellectual goods, for an appropriate amount of time, despite having to overcome obstacles to the completion of these projects.” [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. In fact, King (2014, 3516) argues that intellectual perseverance can be cultivated and exercised even when no progress is made in inquiry. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. I am indebted to Heather Battaly, Kirk Lougheed, and Sarah Wright for helpful comments on an earlier draft. This publication was made possible through the support of a grant from the John Templeton Foundation (ID# 61802). The opinions expressed in this publication are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the John Templeton Foundation. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)