

Should We Take Virtuous Acts as Evaluatively and Conceptually Primary?

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Abstract

Just as virtue ethics considers what a good *person* ought to look like, so responsibilist virtue epistemology investigates what a good *inquirer* should be. Central to both fields, though, is the role that character traits play. In this paper, I critically respond to Müller’s claim that we should instead give acts, and not character traits, this evaluative and conceptual primacy in virtue responsibilism.

Introduction

Contemporary virtue theories come in many different shapes and sizes. Some are *eudaimonistic*, which is to say that they attempt to forge a connection between virtue and human flourishing (Brown 2008; Brogaard 2014; Hursthouse 1999); others are *motivation-based*, in that they understand virtues in terms of an agent’s underlying motivations and dispositions (Slote 2001; Zagzebski 1996); further still, there are broadly *consequentialist* accounts that derive virtues from the good effects they produce in the world (Bradley, 2018; Driver 2001). Despite these differences, there is at least one point of consensus between these views: they all conceive of virtues as *character traits*. Put differently, they take character traits to be evaluatively and conceptually primary in their theorising.

Unsurprisingly, the primacy of character traits has also been an orthodox feature of *responsibilist* virtue epistemology (Baehr 2011; Battaly 2008; Zagzebski 1996). In her recent paper, ‘Taking Virtuous Acts, not Virtuous Traits, as Evaluatively and Conceptually Primary’ (2024), Natasia Müller attempts to challenge this orthodoxy by putting forward an innovative view she calls *Act First Responsibilism* (AFR, henceforth). On this view, it is the performance of virtuous acts, not virtuous traits, that takes centre-stage. ‘Instead of stating that an agent does and would perform a virtuous act *because* they possess a virtue’, Müller contends, AFR holds that ‘an agent possesses a virtue *because* they do and perform virtuous acts in the relevant type(s) of situation’ (2). The question that guides this commentary is whether Müller’s AFR ‘is as deserving of the responsibilist label as the traditional view’ (2). In other words, should we take virtuous acts as evaluatively and conceptually primary in responsibilist virtue epistemology?

Five Features of (Act First) Responsibilist Virtue

If we’re to answer this question, we need to see what Müller’s AFR amounts to. To do this, I’ll briefly consider how the view compares with the traditional, trait-first account of responsibilist epistemic virtue. There are four features of the traditional view against which Müller frames AFR.¹

¹ Strictly-speaking, Müller discusses *five* features of the traditional, responsibilist view. This missing feature is whether epistemic virtues must reliably lead agents to acquire epistemic goods like truth or knowledge. I omit this feature because, as Müller notes, AFR remains ‘indifferent to whether the performance of a virtuous act must lead to the attainment of true beliefs’ (11).

The first is that responsibilist virtues require agents to act in accordance with the end of that virtue. Different virtues will have different ends. For example, the end of intellectual humility could involve the identification and ‘owning’ of one’s cognitive limitations (Whitcomb et. al. 2017); the end of intellectual curiosity plausibly involves asking questions (Watson 2018); whilst the end of open-mindedness might involve considering alternative viewpoints or asking for others’ opinions (Baehr 2011). In short, responsibilist virtues require agents to engage in the intellectual activity characteristic of that virtue. AFR is no different in this respect; it considers an *act* to be virtuous only if it accords with the end of an epistemic virtue (4).

Second, responsibilist virtues require agents to have good epistemic motives. After all, somebody might act in accordance with the end of a given virtue with ulterior motives. For instance, a person might ask good questions (intellectual curiosity) or consider the views of others (open-mindedness) only to impress a colleague or friend. This person falls short of epistemic virtue because their conduct is not underpinned by a finally good epistemic motivation, *viz.*, a motivation to acquire or share true beliefs or knowledge for their own sake. Similarly, AFR holds that ‘an act that is in accordance with the epistemic end of the virtue in question and based on good epistemic motives is virtuous, full stop’ (5). These features of both the traditional view and AFR are what render epistemic virtues praiseworthy and valuable.

Third, responsibilist virtues must be actively acquired qualities of agents, the sort of thing that a person cultivates and for whose exercise or possession one is responsible—hence, the term *responsibilism*. This feature is straightforwardly accommodated by the traditional view because it understands epistemic virtues in terms of character traits, and character traits are qualities that are actively acquired by people. Müller claims that AFR is also able to accommodate this feature. For whilst it takes the performance of virtuous acts to be conceptually and evaluatively primary, it doesn’t entirely dispense with traits. Rather, the possession of a virtuous trait is just understood in terms of reliably performing virtuous acts in virtue-relevant situations (7). More fully:

Possessing the Virtuous Trait of ψ : *An agent S possesses the virtuous trait of ψ if and only if S performs a virtuous act of ψ in a sufficient proportion of the relevant possible type(s) of situation* (7).

The more reliably an agent performs virtuous acts, the higher the degree to which they possess the corresponding virtuous trait. In this way, AFR can make sense of the idea that epistemic virtues are actively acquired over time. Moreover, since virtuous traits arise from virtuous acts, there is a responsibility on agents to reliably perform virtuous acts when the relevant situation calls for it.

Finally, Müller claims that AFR is ‘built upon’ a *success* condition (6). This condition was famously defended by Linda Zagzebski (1996), who argued that it is insufficient for epistemic virtue that agents simply exhibit good epistemic motives. In addition, they must be *reliably successful* at bringing about the end of a given virtue because they are motivated by knowledge or the truth. In a similar vein, Müller claims that:

To possess a virtue—and this is the crucial insight I adopt from Zagzebski—it is not enough to succeed in acting in accordance with the epistemic end of the virtue in question, based on the motivation for truth. One must also do so

reliably. That is, to possess a virtue, one needs to *reliably* perform virtuous acts (6).

The four features above constitute the basic tenets of AFR. In this respect, Müller’s account joins the ranks of Hurka’s (2001) and Sylvan’s (2017) respective analyses of moral and epistemic virtue, both of which place the evaluative emphasis on virtuous acts over traits. However, Müller’s account goes further than these earlier views by also fleshing out the conceptual details of virtuous acts. For this reason, it is a highly valuable and welcome contribution to the literature on responsibilist virtue epistemology in particular, and virtue theory more generally.

The Problem of Fleeting Virtues

In spite of its merits, I have some worries about Müller’s AFR. To get a handle on these worries, consider what John Greco (2010) refers to as the ‘problem of strange and fleeting processes’. This is a problem that virtually any basic version of reliabilism will face, Greco says, because it requires the reliabilist to give a principled explanation of which kinds of reliable cognitive processes can give rise to knowledge. For my purposes, I will focus on the problem as it pertains to fleeting processes. Here is Greco’s example of one such process:

Suppose that *S* is taking a math test and adopts a correct algorithm for solving a problem. But suppose that *S* has no understanding that the algorithm is the correct one to use for this problem. Rather, *S* chooses it on a whim, but could just as well have chosen one that is incorrect. By hypothesis, the algorithm is the right one, and so using it to solve the problem constitutes a reliable process. It seems wrong to say that *S* thereby knows the answer to the problem, however (Greco 2010, 149).

Why does it seem wrong to attribute knowledge to *S* on the basis that they employed the correct algorithm, even if only fleetingly? Because there are close possible worlds in which *S* did not use this reliable process to arrive at the answer. In other words, it is largely a matter of *luck* that *S*’s belief turns out true. Since knowledge is incompatible with this kind of ‘veritic’ luck, the use of this fleeting process prevents *S* from knowing the answer to the problem.

I want to suggest that Müller’s AFR faces something analogous to the problem of fleeting processes, which we can call the *problem of fleeting virtues*. This problem arises because of AFR’s emphasis on virtuous acts being evaluatively and conceptually primary. As Müller writes, ‘an act that is in accordance with the epistemic end of the virtue in question and based on good epistemic motives is virtuous, full stop’ (5). All that is needed to manifest a virtuous act of intellectual curiosity, on her view, is to ask a good question and be motivated by epistemic goods. The problem is that such acts can be entirely fleeting.

For example, imagine a viciously lazy student, who is completely uninterested in doing their homework and solving problems. In a brief moment of inspiration, though, they find themselves motivated to find out the truth of a particular algebra problem for its own sake.

In light of this, they ask their teacher a good question about how to solve it. According to AFR, this student manifests an epistemically *virtuous* act of intellectual curiosity because they act in accordance with the end of intellectual curiosity (asking questions) and this act is underpinned by good epistemic motives.

But notice that the student's act of intellectual curiosity is largely out of character. After all, they are disposed to intellectual laziness. For this reason, they could very easily have *not* been inspired to act in the way above. Put differently, it's just a matter of *luck* that the student happened to ask a good question and find themselves motivated briefly by epistemic goods. This is important because we tend to think of virtues—and acts derived from them—as praiseworthy. Yet, the fleeting nature of the student's act looks like it's prevented from being worthy of praise. Just as it seems mistaken to attribute knowledge to the student in Greco's example above, then, so it seems mistaken to describe our student's act of intellectual curiosity as "virtuous". In one case, luck undermines the truth of the student's belief; in the other, it undermines the praiseworthiness of their act.

Nevertheless, if one is willing to describe the student's act as virtuous, then an implication of AFR is that it permits us to say two highly contrasting things about them. On the one hand, it holds that the student's act is epistemically virtuous. On the other hand, though, it allows us to maintain that the student is epistemically vicious. How can a person's act be at once virtuous whilst their broader character is vicious? Perhaps one explanation available to Müller is that the more the student performs virtuous acts of intellectual curiosity, the more they possess the "local" trait of intellectual curiosity (9).

Even if we suppose that an appeal to local traits could explain this state of affairs, though, it means that we end up problematically smuggling trait-language into AFR. Without this, it remains unclear how we can reconcile (i) the student being epistemically vicious with (ii) their single, fleeting act being "virtuous". At the least, AFR owes us some explanation as to how this is possible.

This brings me to a more general point, which we can draw out by comparing the case of the student above with that of skilful performances. Suppose our student is also unreliable at archery, such that they are disposed to miss the target whenever they shoot. Much to their surprise, however, they manage to successfully hit the target one afternoon. Is the student's shot skilful? Presumably not, because their success is too fleeting. Too easily could they have shot and missed the target. Now, if we're unwilling to regard the student's archery shot as skilful, why should we regard their act of intellectual curiosity as virtuous?

I'm not denying that their act or shot isn't good in some respect. However, terms like "virtue" and "virtuous" aren't simply meant to pick out "thin" concepts like whether an act is good or bad; they are supposed to reveal something "thick" or deeper about a person's values, commitments, etc. Indeed, this is part of what makes virtue theories different from consequentialist and deontological theories. Yet, our values and commitments are not the sorts of things that are fleeting. Rather, they tend to derive from stable dispositions. And those dispositions are *character traits*. By making acts evaluatively and conceptually primary, then, AFR must either explain why fleeting or lucky acts can be virtuous without appealing to the language of traits. Alternatively, it must jettison the very language that is so characteristic of responsibilist virtue epistemology. Since neither issue arises for the

traditional, trait-first view, it doesn't face the problem of fleeting virtues. Accordingly, we don't yet have a reason to think that AFR is as deserving of the responsibilist label as the traditional view.

The Success Condition on AFR

One of the main concerns to come out of the problem of fleeting virtues is that AFR seems to betray a tension between its commitment to making virtuous acts evaluatively and conceptually primary and the role of virtue-theoretic language. Insofar as it shifts the emphasis away from character traits and towards acts, it seems less able to evaluate people by reference to “thick” concepts, *viz.*, in terms of their underlying values and commitments. In this way, it's at risk of losing a distinctive feature of virtue theories—including responsibilist virtue epistemology.

However, this is not to say that AFR can't avoid this worry. That's because AFR doesn't entirely dispense with character traits. Recall from earlier what Müller calls **Possessing the Virtuous Trait of ψ** , which holds that a person possesses a virtuous trait if and only if they are '*reliably successful* in bringing about the epistemic end of the virtue in question because of the motivation for truth' (10). In short, the possession of an epistemically virtuous trait is a matter of being reliable at performing epistemically virtuous acts. Clearly, this view of virtuous traits is only possible because of the fourth feature of AFR from above, which is the incorporation of Zagzebski's (1996) 'success' condition on virtue.

An upshot of incorporating this success condition within AFR is that it goes some way towards addressing the worries raised by the problem of fleeting virtues. Consider our lazy student again. Although AFR counts their fleeting act of intellectual curiosity as epistemically virtuous, the success condition means that it importantly denies that the student possesses the trait of intellectual curiosity because their act is not performed reliably. In turn, AFR rules out the possibility that the student could possess the *virtue* of intellectual curiosity because their act is too fleeting. This helps to partially offset the worry concerning virtue and luck.

Furthermore, the success condition also allows AFR to provide some insight into peoples' commitments and values. This is because the need for reliable success introduces 'two levels' of virtue-theoretic language (11). On the local level, virtue-terms apply to acts that an agent performs based on good epistemic motives. On a global level, virtue-terms apply to the traits that agents possess. In order to possess a trait, one must reliably succeed at performing virtuous acts. As Müller quickly points out, though, AFR doesn't imply that an agent who possesses a virtuous trait at the global level is somehow worse and less praiseworthy than an agent who performs virtuous acts at the local level.

On the contrary, she writes that 'an agent who possesses a virtuous trait is better and more praiseworthy precisely because they do and would perform virtuous acts in the relevant type(s) of situation' (11). If a person reliably performs virtuous acts in the relevant kinds of situations, this usually tells us something about their values and commitments. As such, the success condition allows AFR to evaluate people using “thick” concepts.

With the help of Zagzebski's success condition, then, AFR is able to address some of the worries raised by the problem of fleeting virtues. Unfortunately, Zagzebski's success condition is not widely endorsed by responsibilist virtue epistemologists. One concern is that making reliable success a necessary requirement for epistemic virtue renders the quality of one's character too contingent on external factors (Baehr 2011; Montmarquet, 1987).

To borrow an example from James Montmarquet (1987, 482), suppose a Cartesian evil demon sees to it that every time a person attempts to act in accordance with the epistemic end of a given virtue, they reliably fail to bring about that end, despite their good epistemic motives. Since the possession of a virtuous trait on AFR requires one to have good epistemic motives *and* reliably succeed at acting in accordance with the epistemic end of that trait, and the evil demon makes one reliably fail, one lacks the trait. Whether a person possesses a character trait (or a virtue), according to AFR, thus depends not on their having good epistemic motives, but ultimately on how friendly their external environment is. In this way, AFR makes the possession of traits and virtues a matter of good luck.

A potential disadvantage of building AFR around Zagzebski's success condition, then, is that the view risks inheriting a similar kind of issue that has led contemporary virtue responsibilist to reject it. However, given that the success condition enables AFR to somewhat avoid the problems I raised above, it would seem to be a choice that Müller is happy to embrace.²

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