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Non-Idealised Virtue Epistemology as Particularist Virtue Theory

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ABSTRACT

Is traditional virtue epistemology a kind of idealised epistemology? Is that a bad thing? Some supporters of the virtue epistemology of liberatory virtues seem to answer these questions affirmatively. H. Battaly also argues that to avoid idealization virtue epistemologists should adopt a kind of normative contextualism according to which one and the same character trait is a virtue in some contexts, and a vice (or at least not a virtue) in other contexts. In this paper, I defend traditional virtue epistemology against some, but not all, of these charges. I argue that the examples that motivate its critics are best explained by invoking particularism about actions rather than normative contextualism about character traits. I also show that a particularist virtue epistemology of inquiry provides an account of the difference that social circumstances and power relations make to epistemically virtuous (and vicious) conduct that is superior to those that can be offered by resorting to normative contextualism.

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Is traditional virtue epistemology a kind of idealised epistemology? Is that a bad thing? Some supporters of the virtue epistemology of liberatory virtues seem to answer these questions affirmatively (H. Battaly 2021; Daukas 2019; Dillon 2021b). H. Battaly (2021, 2023) also argues that to avoid idealization virtue epistemologists should adopt a kind of normative contextualism according to which one and the same character trait is a virtue in some contexts, and a vice (or at least not a virtue) in other contexts (cf., Kidd 2021). In this paper, I defend traditional virtue epistemology against some, but not all, of these charges. I argue that the examples that motivate its critics can be explained within a traditional Aristotelian framework by invoking particularism about actions rather than normative contextualism about character traits (cf., Sandis 2021). I also show that a particularist virtue epistemology of inquiry can provide an account of the difference that social circumstances and power relations make to epistemically virtuous (and

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vicious) conduct. These arguments show that the phenomena of concern to supporters of normative contextualism can be explained without radically departing from traditional aretaic frameworks. I assume that avoiding such a departure is desirable given that it is possible. These arguments also give strong reasons to conclude that the accounts offered invoking particularism are superior to those provided by contextualists in that they supply more faithful accounts of the moral contours of the phenomena at issue.

This paper consists of four sections. In the first I present two arguments that have been adduced to argue that traditional virtue epistemology is, in essence, an idealised epistemology. In the second section, I introduce some putative examples of liberatory epistemic virtues. In the third section I consider whether liberatory virtue epistemology must be committed to normative contextualism about virtue. I argue that no such commitment is required since the phenomena which this position has been invoked to explain can be accounted for by particularism about reasons for action. In the fourth section, I articulate a particularist version of liberatory virtue epistemology as an extension of traditional virtue epistemology.

I

In his recent *Non-Ideal Epistemology* (McKenna 2023), Robin McKenna argues that at least for some purposes traditional idealised epistemological theories should be replaced by theories which are suitably non-idealised. McKenna identifies liberatory virtue epistemology as a form of non-idealised epistemology that he contrasts with the more idealised theories developed within the confines of traditional versions of virtue epistemology. In this section, first I explain what it takes for an epistemological theory to be non-idealised. Second, I present two criticisms of traditional virtue epistemology offered by H. Battaly (2021) and by Nancy Daukas (2019) which may be interpreted as suggesting that virtue epistemology as traditionally conceived is a kind of idealised theory.

McKenna draws on Mills (2004) account of ideal theory as ideology to explain the difference between idealised and non-idealised theories in epistemology. For McKenna, an epistemological theory is idealised when it makes some idealizations about epistemic agents and their interactions, about human psychology, social institutions and the environment within which agents operate (McKenna 2023, 31). A description of idealised epistemology as an epistemic theory that engages in idealizations is not, as McKenna acknowledges, especially illuminating. One might be able to make progress on the issue by relying on two of the several non-equivalent ways in which Mills draws the distinction between ideal and non-ideal theory. First, whilst ideal theories rely on idealizations as false assumptions, non-ideal theories only rely on

abstractions. Second, ideal theories fail to offer sound recommendations or prescriptions for amelioration; non-ideal theories supply such action-guiding principles.¹ In what follows I explain these two differences between ideal and non-ideal theory before presenting arguments that virtue epistemology as traditionally conceived displays the hallmarks of ideal theory.

To get a grip on the first distinction between abstraction and idealization, we can think of theories as models of some portion of reality. Abstract models exclude in their representations some properties of the phenomena to be modelled since these are judged to be irrelevant to the model's explanatory (and predictive) purposes. For example, a model of the collision of two billiard balls might abstract away from the colours of the balls when trying to predict and explain the speed and direction of the balls after the collision. Idealizations, instead, rely on false assumptions. For instance, they portray a causally simpler mechanism rather than the real phenomenon. Even though distorting, these models have explanatory power. For instance, a model of the collision of two billiard balls might idealise the collision as perfectly elastic so that it involves no loss in momentum or kinetic energy. This model will be able to explain some of the mechanisms of the collision but cannot be directly used to predict the speed of the balls after the collision during which some kinetic energy is lost.²

If this distinction is applied to epistemology, idealised epistemological theories are cast as models of epistemic phenomena that make false assumptions about human psychology and the social environment to explain rational belief acquisition and responsible and effective inquiry. These models might for instance presume that human beings have no cognitive limitations.³ So understood, the best candidate for an idealised theory in epistemology is Bayesian epistemology that idealizes away susceptibilities to motivated cognition, and that presumes that human agents are idealised Bayesian updaters. Unsurprisingly Bayesian accounts have been extensively criticised precisely on these grounds.⁴

The second distinction between idealised and non-idealised theories to be found in Mills concerns action guidance. In his view, idealised models do not offer guidance on how to make things better, or when they are used to formulate such principles, they issue recommendations that often worsen the situation rather than improve it (Mills 2004). Idealised models would be prone to this shortcoming because they do not provide any positive description of current less than ideal circumstances. Instead, they only characterise the actual situation negatively in terms of its distance from the ideal. Hence, at best they might prescribe actions that would bring the present closer to the ideal. However, the addition to an imperfect system of norms that would figure in a perfect one, can worsen rather than improve the situation. This phenomenon is known as the fallacy of the second-best (Morton 2012).

In political theory, for instance, one might hold that marriage as an institution in its current form is unfair to single people and to others whose caring networks do not take traditional forms. Hence, one may wish to weaken the privileges conferred by marriage and replace them with other lesser protections that track all caring relationships. However, as supporters of this minimal form of marriage are aware, these recommendations would worsen the position of many already vulnerable women who rely on the privileges conferred by marriage to avoid poverty after separation (Brake 2010). Thus, prescriptions intended to bring the actual closer to the ideal could have overall negative, rather than positive, effects.

Examples where the addition of an ideal norm to an imperfect system makes matters worse are not hard to find in epistemology either. For example, we might think that the prescription that one should follow arguments wherever they may lead is a good zetetic norm. Whilst this norm might be good for a thinker whose cognitive capacities are unconstrained, when adopted by epistemic agents whose ability to process information is limited, this norm would cause epistemic performance to worsen rather than improve (Friedman 2020).⁵

In recent years several feminist thinkers including Daukas (2019), Dillon (2021b) and H. Battaly (2021, 2023) have argued that virtue epistemology as traditionally formulated displays some shortcomings that are characteristic of idealised theories. They have argued that these theories offer idealised models and provide inadequate action guidance. The remainder of this section is dedicated to explaining some of these criticisms.⁶

Daukas initially defines epistemic virtues as ‘capacities and character traits that constitute excellent epistemic agency’ (2019, 379). However, she subsequently articulates this definition in more consequentialist terms. In her view, virtues are capacities, habits and traits of epistemic agents that enable them to ‘successfully arrive at truths and understandings’ (381).⁷ In this paper, for the sake of argument, I adopt this consequentialist view of virtues as stable dispositions that reliably have good effects that contribute to achieving the agent’s goals such as maximising true belief, ending oppression, promoting justice and so forth (H. D. Battaly 2015; Tessman 2005).⁸ Elsewhere I have offered arguments why such a consequentialist account is to be rejected.⁹

Even though Daukas already criticises traditional virtue epistemological theories such as those offered by R. C. Roberts and Wood (2007) for abstracting from the social positioning of epistemic agents, perhaps the clearest formulation of an argument that purports to show that traditional virtue epistemology offers an idealised model can be found in H. Battaly (2021). Battaly indicts traditional virtue epistemology for providing ‘analyses of virtue with *ideal* conditions in mind’ (2021, 171). I interpret Battaly as claiming that traditional virtue epistemology defines virtues as traits which

in politically and epistemically ideal circumstances (where there is no injustice, misinformation, malice and so forth) would contribute to the intellectual flourishing of epistemic agents by reliably producing good effects. These analyses of virtues are idealizations because they postulate that the operating conditions within which virtues are conducive to maximising the agent's epistemic goals are perfect circumstances. However, in reality circumstances are far from perfect. Thus, it is wholly possible that in the current situation, these same dispositions are not conducive to maximising the subject's aims.

In short, the identification as epistemic virtues of some traits which in ideal conditions would reliably produce good epistemic effects is an idealization that results in distortions. If these models are used to identify virtues in the real world, they issue the wrong verdicts since they might, for example, promote open-mindedness in epistemically hostile environments, where some agents would be epistemically better off if they were closed-minded to the epistemic pollution that surrounds them (H. Battaly 2018).¹⁰ That said, it is also possible that some traits are virtuous both in ideal and oppressive circumstances, so that there would be an overlap between liberatory and traditional virtues. Battaly singles out justice as a candidate (2021, 174).

Daukas' criticisms of traditional virtue epistemology are consistent with those advanced by Battaly. However, they are also usefully interpreted as an indictment of traditional virtue epistemology for providing action guiding recommendations that are likely to make matters worse rather than better.

In essence, Daukas criticises traditional virtue epistemologists for centring their analyses on the predicament of epistemic subjects who occupy dominant or privileged positions. They would do this in at least three ways. First, they would mischaracterise some virtues -intellectual autonomy, for instance - because they reproduce misunderstandings of what these virtues would require. These are misconceptions that would also preserve an unfair hierarchical status quo. Thus, for instance, they flesh out accounts of intellectual autonomy as self-reliance. Self-reliance is only an option for individuals who possess social and economic privileges, since those who are poor or sick, must often rely on others' help in many practical and intellectual activities. Accounts of the virtue of autonomy as self-reliance thus favour allocating praise in ways that contribute to the preservation of existing social hierarchies. They also mischaracterise the nature of autonomy because they overestimate the value of independence whilst underestimating that of interdependence among agent (2019, 382).

Second, traditional virtue epistemological accounts of the behavioural and motivational expressions of virtue and vice focus exclusively on the case of dominant individuals. For example, Daukas notes that Roberts and Wood define vanity as 'an excessive concern to be well-regarded by other people, and thus a hypersensitivity to the view that others take of oneself' (R. C. Roberts and Wood 2007, 237). In her view, whilst the account might

fit members of dominant groups, ‘it is implausible with respect to members of oppressed groups’ (Daukas 2019, 381). For their own safety, these individuals must be especially vigilant and thus pay close attention to how they are regarded by other people. In addition, these individuals must also engage in extensive self-monitoring to ensure that they present the right image to people who are already prejudiced about them.

Third, traditional virtue epistemologists discuss the kind of virtues that might assist individuals who occupy dominant positions, but neglect to examine those virtues that are particularly effective when resisting subordination and trying to repair the character damage caused by internalised oppression. These virtues would include intellectual self-confidence and certain forms of intellectual courage (2019, 389).

These three criticisms put together indicate that traditional virtue epistemological theories are likely to issue wrongheaded recommendations for amelioration. First, they promote as virtues traits that are more easily within the reach of privileged individuals and which would preserve their privilege. Second, they proscribe behaviour as manifestation of vice, and recommend conduct as expressive of virtue, even though those behaviours are best thought of as manifesting these vices or virtues only in individuals who occupy privileged social positions. Third, these theories neglect the kind of virtuous traits that are most helpful to subordinated individuals and thus are silent on those matters where recommendations would be most helpful to subordinated agents.

II

In this section I give a flavour of what liberatory alternatives to traditional virtue epistemological theories might be like by offering thumbnail sketches of three putative liberatory virtues as described by Daukas (2019), by H. Battaly (2023), and by Dillon (2021b). Whilst one of these (social intelligence) is an example of a previously neglected virtue, the other two (fanaticism and arrogance) are character traits that are traditionally thought to be vices, but which are meant to be virtues when embodied by people who fight against oppression.¹¹

Daukas defines liberatory virtues as capacities and traits that constitute excellent epistemic agency where what constitutes excellence is indexed to agents’ social circumstances and to political liberatory goals (2019, 380). That is, in her view liberatory virtue is a trait or capacity which, relative to the agent’s social circumstances, reliably produces liberatory effects. Liberatory virtues are epistemic virtues when they include truth and understanding among the good effects that they reliably produce.

Daukas identifies social intelligence as an example of a liberatory virtue. She borrows the idea of this capacity as an epistemic virtue

from Jane Braaten who defines it as the ‘ability to understand how we affect and are affected by each other individually and in groups’ (1990, 13). Daukas notes that this capacity is often associated with women’s traditional caring responsibilities. Social intelligence would involve the ability to see things from the other person’s point of view so as to be able to better appreciate, and manage, sources of social conflict. It is a capacity that helps to better assess the trustworthiness of other agents, and thus it is an invaluable element of a testimonially just sensibility that allocates to speakers the credibility that they deserve. In addition, social intelligence can be useful to acquire the kind of knowledge and understanding that promotes liberatory goals (Daukas 2019, 383–384).

Social intelligence, so understood, is an intellectual virtue that is missing from traditional accounts. Further, traditional virtues such as humility and open-mindedness are not its equivalents (Daukas 2019, 389). Social intelligence is valuable in promoting community building and testimonial justice in ways that differ from the contributions that open mindedness and humility can make. Neither of these more traditional virtues, at least in some common accounts, are especially relational since they are both directed at producing individual rather than communal flourishing. In this regard, social intelligence might be closer to empathy understood as the affectively inflected ability to take other people’s perspective (Bailey 2022).

Even this brief characterisation of one candidate for a liberatory epistemic virtue is sufficient to show some of the significant features of liberatory virtue epistemology. It indicates that centring attention on the activities of members of subordinated groups helps to notice traits and capacities that are clearly epistemically virtuous because they produce truth and understanding. Often these traits are also instrumental to liberatory goals by being empowering, and by focusing on communal flourishing. In short, adopting the framework of liberatory virtue epistemology reveals the existence of virtuous traits that have been unjustly neglected. It also promotes thinking of virtues as constitutive elements of the flourishing of communities rather than of individual agents.

Battaly’s articulation of the liberatory approach to virtue epistemology is importantly different from Daukas’, whom she credits as her inspiration. Battaly initially defines liberatory virtues as ‘traits that contribute to resisting social oppression, achieving liberation, and making flourishing more possible for all people’ (2021, 175). But in later work she qualifies this definition. She notes that liberatory virtues require that agents be motivated to resist oppression and achieve liberation and to promote flourishing for all people (2023, 19). She also acknowledges that virtuous individuals can fail to reliably produce

a preponderance of good effects. That is, it is possible that in extreme circumstances a virtuous trait is one that produces the least bad effects (20).

H. Battaly (2023) proposes that fanaticism can be an effect, and liberatory, virtue.¹² It is an effect virtue if it produces a preponderance of good (or least bad) effects in the existing circumstances. It is a liberatory virtue when individuals with these traits also have liberatory aims and motivations. Battaly broadly defines fanaticism as a disposition to care, seek opportunities to pursue, and to act in pursuit of an object to the detriment of other cares, opportunities and pursuits, and to do so to such an extent that qualifies as an obsession (2023, 13). Battaly's example of virtuous fanatics are 'Garrisonian' Abolitionists who fought by non-violent means to bring about the abolition of slavery in the USA. Contemporaries labelled these individuals zealots and fanatics because of their uncompromising commitment to bring about the immediate end of slavery. In her view, this kind of fanaticism is an effect virtue since it brought about 'a preponderance of much-needed good effects (some of which were epistemic)' (2023, 22). It is also a liberatory virtue since these fanatics were motivated to resist oppression, achieve liberation, and promote as much flourishing as possible for all agents (2023, 21).

Battaly contrasts her view with Katsafanas (2019) and Cassam's (2021) for whom fanaticism (and extremism) are always vicious. She notes that their disagreement can be traced to her commitment to normative contextualism. In her view we should treat terms such 'extremism', 'fanaticism' or 'closed-mindedness' as being normatively neutral.¹³ They are to be defined as referring to stable dispositions to act in characteristic ways. One and the same disposition might predominantly lead to good epistemic effects in one set of circumstances, and to bad epistemic effects in another. In the first case, the disposition is an effect virtue, in the second case it is an effect vice. When it is virtuous, the disposition is a liberatory virtue if the agent has liberatory goals.

The idea that one and the same trait can be a good thing when exhibited by some individuals but a vice when exhibited by others can also be found in Dillon's (2021a, 2021b) work on arrogance.¹⁴ In her view, oppressed individuals ought to cultivate unwarranted claims arrogance. That is, even though prevalent social norms deny them some entitlements, goods or statuses, they should nevertheless lay claim to, or arrogate, them for themselves. This disposition would deserve to be labelled 'arrogance' because it is predicated on presuming that one knows better than anybody else around one what is right and proper. One of Dillon's examples is the attitude of the character Sethe in Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved* (Morrison 2019). Sethe kills her infant daughter to save her from a life of slavery. Dillon claims that Sethe shows arrogance when implying that her moral assessment that death for her daughter is the least of two evils is superior to the judgment of her society

including her community (2021b, 223). Nevertheless, such arrogance would be morally good because it would be a pre-requisite of self-respect.

To summarise, starting from the point of view of the oppressed whilst considering what might be required to understand oppression and to fight to end it, offers new lenses through which to evaluate which character traits are epistemic virtues, and how these traits are manifested in different circumstances. This approach helps us to highlight virtues that have been unfairly neglected in traditional virtue epistemological theories. Arguably, it also indicates that some character traits that are traditionally thought of as vices are, in some oppressive circumstances, virtuous or at least good traits to have.

III

My focus in this section is Ian James Kidd's (2021) and H. Battaly (2021, 2023) commitment to normative contextualism as a meta-epistemological position. I argue that this view should be rejected. My argument proceeds in three steps. First, I argue that this approach is highly revisionary of ordinary concepts of individual virtues and vices. These latter are thick evaluative concepts. That is, for example, in common parlance to call a person courageous is to evaluate them as good in some special way, to label them closed-minded is to assess them as bad in a specific manner. The departure from ordinary parlance that normative contextualism requires would be warranted only if there were important phenomena that could not be explained using the ordinary concepts. Second, I show that Kidd's and Battaly's revisionary framework instead involves a significant explanatory loss compared to standard virtue epistemological accounts. The latter admit of thick evaluations of people based on their character traits. Kidd and Battaly abandon this layer of evaluation. In their view, to call someone closed-minded is to offer a normatively neutral description of their character. I argue that the loss of thick evaluations of people for their character is tantamount to jettisoning one of the most distinctive features of virtue epistemology. Third, I show that standard neo-Aristotelian accounts of virtue can explain the kind of cases that have motivated Kidd and Battaly to adopt their revisionary framework. I conclude that to the extent to which the standard virtue epistemological account can explain all the relevant cases it is to be preferred to normative contextualism.

There is a pattern to the kind of examples that motivate Kidd (2021), Dillon (2021b), and H. Battaly (2018, 2021, 2022, 2023) to adopt normative contextualism. These are either cases where the seemingly arrogant thing to do, the apparently closed-minded course of action, or the seemingly fanatical behaviour, and so forth are the right thing to do or where the seemingly intellectually courageous thing to do, the apparently humble action, and so

forth are not the right action. This pattern has not gone unnoticed in moral philosophy, where it is often remarked as a feature of evaluations using thick moral concepts. Thus, for instance, there would be cases where the seemingly courageous thing to do is not the right action. There are even cases in which something being the apparently courageous or daring course of action speaks against embarking upon it, since for instance a courageous robbery is worse than a timid one. Thus, there appear to be circumstances when the virtuous thing to do is not the right thing to do. In addition, in some cases the same features that generally make a course of action virtuous are wrong-making since they make the action worse (Dancy 2004; Swanton 2003). The converse can also be true so that there are seemingly vicious actions which are nonetheless the right thing to do.

All of these examples involve thick evaluative concepts such as: courageous, arrogant or closed-minded (Williams 1993). In ethics thick evaluative concepts are contrasted with thin evaluative concepts. Concepts of the first kind have both descriptive and evaluative elements which cannot be easily disentangled.¹⁵ Concepts of the second kind include: good, bad, right and wrong. They are purely evaluative with no descriptive component. Although not all thick evaluative concepts are aretaic concepts, since for instance shrewdness or scruffiness are neither virtues nor vices, it is generally agreed that all concepts of character virtues and vices are thick evaluative concepts. These same thick evaluative concepts are also used to characterise actions and deeds.

Thick evaluative concepts supply a vocabulary for richly informative assessments. For instance, to evaluate a business decision as shrewd is to supply an assessment of it that is much more informative than merely evaluating it as the right decision. Although the idea that there also exist thick epistemic concepts is not uncontroversial, the best candidates for such concepts are virtue epistemological terms such as: open-minded, dogmatic, intellectually courageous, intellectually humble, intellectually arrogant, sloppy and so forth (D. Roberts 2018).

Kidd and Battaly propose a radical reform of these terms. They suggest that they should be used to express normatively neutral descriptions of traits of character conceived as dispositions to reliably bring about a specific range of effects. For example, Battaly defines closed-mindedness as ‘unwillingness or inability to engage seriously with relevant intellectual options’ (H. Battaly 2018, 26). She further spells out what makes an intellectual option relevant either in terms of its probability or in terms of its pervasiveness in a person’s epistemic environment. Hence, she arrives at an account of closed-mindedness as a reliable disposition not to engage with intellectual options that are either likely to be true or widely held in one’s surroundings. This is a purely descriptive characterisation of a trait of character. It is not wholly clear whether Battaly

advances her definition as an account of our ordinary conception of closed-mindedness or as an ameliorative proposal. In what follow I presume that hers is intended as an ameliorative proposal since the ordinary concept of closed-mindedness is the concept of a vice. That is, it is a thick evaluative concept used to assess a person negatively because of some aspect of their character. The main reason for Kidd's and Battaly's conceptual revisions would lie in the inability of the traditional framework to explain cases where, for instance, the seemingly closed-minded thing to do is the epistemically right thing to do.

However, and this is the second step in my argument, the revisionary account adopted by Kidd and Battaly entails a significant explanatory loss compared with the traditional virtue epistemological approach. For Kidd and for Battaly, to call a person closed-minded is not to offer a negative assessment of their character. It is instead to attribute to that person a normatively neutral reliable disposition to bring about a range of specific effects. These dispositions that are components of agents' characters are themselves subject to context-dependent assessments. These are thin evaluations of the motivations associated with the disposition, and of the disposition's effects as being good or bad from an epistemic point of view. Thus, Kidd and Battaly dispense with thick evaluations of agents for their character in favour of thin evaluations of traits for their reliability in context and for the goodness of their motivations.

In my view this replacement of thick evaluations of character by thin evaluations of traits and motivations leads to an explanatory loss. I shall, however, not defend this claim. Instead, I argue for the conditional claim that if one is committed to the explanatory value of responsibilist virtue epistemological approaches (in both their motivationalist and consequentialist varieties) then one must take Battaly's and Kidd's normative contextualism to involve explanatory losses.

Arguably, a distinctive contribution of virtue epistemology to epistemology is precisely its introduction of richer, and fine-grained, epistemic evaluations of agents' characters, of their doxastic states, and epistemic activities. Other epistemological theories instead restrict epistemic assessments to statuses such as being justified, warranted, knowledge or perhaps being blameless. Responsibilist virtue epistemology adds further dimensions of epistemic evaluation. For instance, we say something important about a belief when we describe it as sloppy. This assessment warrants the conclusion that the belief lacks epistemic justification.¹⁶ In addition, it conveys information about the kind of defect that characterises it and that explains why it is not justified. Moreover, classifying a belief as sloppy helps to single out some properties that this belief has in common with other beliefs on other topics, held by other people in different circumstances. It would be difficult, or perhaps impossible, to explain what these beliefs in their

heterogeneity have in common if we did not describe them using thick evaluative words (Little 2001).

I hasten to add to avoid misunderstandings that I do not take this ability to supply finer grained evaluations to be definitional of virtue epistemology. Instead, I subscribe to the widely held view that what is distinctive about virtue epistemology in both its reliabilist and responsibilist incarnations is that it gives primacy in its accounts to evaluations of features of epistemic agents over attributions of epistemic statuses to doxastic states and epistemic activities (Turri, Alfano, and Greco 2021). However, since, for instance, attempts to define knowledge in responsibilist virtue epistemological terms have largely proved unsuccessful (e.g. Zagzebski 1996), it has become increasingly common for responsibilist virtue epistemologists to pursue questions that are autonomous from traditional concerns with definitions of knowledge and justification (Baehr 2011). It is within this context that the ability to make fine-grained thick evaluations of agents' epistemic states and activities and of their characters, deserves to be singled out as a distinctive contribution of virtue epistemology to epistemology. Insofar as Kidd and Battaly replace these assessments with thin evaluations of normatively neutral character traits and of motivations, they endorse a position that commits them to denying that thick evaluations of character play an irreplaceable role in epistemology.

Before proceeding to the third and final step of my argument against normative contextualism I wish to clarify briefly two possible sources of misunderstanding. I am not claiming that Kidd or Battaly endorse some form of reliabilism. On the contrary, for Battaly, at least, liberatory virtues require both reliability and appropriate motivation (2023, 21). I am also not rejecting consequentialist accounts of virtue according to which what constitutes a trait as a virtue is its reliable production of good effects. On the contrary, in this article I have assumed for the sake of argument that good effects are a necessary condition for a trait to be a virtue.

The nature of my criticism is different. I have argued that Kidd and Battaly replace traditional aretaic concepts, which are thick evaluative concepts used to assess character, with descriptive concepts used to characterise traits. They also thinly evaluate these traits as being, epistemically speaking and in a given context, good or bad. Thus, the nature of my objection is orthogonal to a consequentialist analysis of what makes a trait in context good (or bad) in light of epistemic goals such as maximising true belief.

The task for the third step of my argument is to account for the pattern of phenomena highlighted by Kidd and Battaly without giving up on ordinary aretaic evaluative concepts. If this can be achieved, there will not be any need for the kind of conceptual reform advanced by Kidd and Battaly. Here, I argue, that this task can be accomplished if we bear in mind with Constantine Sandis (2021) that thick concepts can be used to

evaluate agents, their actions (doings), and deeds (the thing done). For instance, we can evaluate a person, a doing or a deed as being courageous. Imagine an individual who rescues another person who is drowning at sea. We might say that what they did (the deed) was courageous; we might claim that they acted courageously (or from courage); finally, we might assert that they are courageous. These three assessments can easily come apart. A person might do a courageous thing whilst being perfectly unaware of the dangers they are running in doing it. In such cases, the person does not act from courage or courageously, even though what they did was a courageous thing. Further, a person might act courageously out of character. Thus, it is possible for someone who is not courageous occasionally to act courageously.

These same distinctions apply to epistemic aretaic evaluation of agents, of their epistemic activities that contribute to inquiry such as questioning, observing, listening, thinking or reasoning, and of the outputs of these activities which include beliefs, doubts, and other doxastic states. Thus, we might evaluate a person as being intellectually humble, we might describe an activity as humbly listening, and we might assess a belief content as being the humble thing to believe. As in the moral case, these assessments can come apart. A person might end up believing what is, in that instance, the humble thing to believe without believing it from intellectual humility. They might instead end up with that belief (e.g. by taking someone's claim at face value) because they are trying to please a powerful individual. Moreover, a person can form a belief in an intellectually humble manner but do so out of character. That is, it is possible that even a person who lacks humility might on occasion act in an intellectually humble manner. These distinctions make space for accounts of the normative contours of the cases that prompt Kidd and Battaly to adopt normative contextualism whilst holding on to the thought that virtues are excellent traits of character regardless of individual circumstances. The converse holds of vices since they are failings irrespective of the specifics of the situation.

To see this, imagine a person, Sanjay, who finds themselves in an environment where many individuals attempt to persuade them to change their mind on various topics. Let us postulate that Sanjay's views are correct and in agreement with experts' opinions. Let us also imagine that those who attempt to persuade them have arguments for their false claims. These are arguments that Sanjay lacks the resources to rebut. In these circumstances, doubt might be the open-minded doxastic state for Sanjay to be in. Sanjay might also come to doubt their prior views out of open-mindedness. Moreover, Sanjay might be an open-minded person. However, in this situation, the open-minded state to be in (that is, doubt) might not be the epistemically good state to be in, given that Sanjay would have believed what is true and in agreement with experts' opinion,

had they not open-mindedly come to doubt their prior opinions.¹⁷ These considerations do not entail that being open-minded as a person is not always a good thing to be. Instead, they suggest that the open-minded person is the one who has the wisdom to know when the circumstances call for open-mindedness and when they do not.

A comparison with honesty as a moral virtue helps to see the point more clearly. A lie is a dishonest deed. However, there appear to be cases where lying is the right thing to do.¹⁸ That is, there are situations in which what is often a dishonest thing to do is intuitively the right thing to do. There is no compulsion to infer from these cases that honesty is not always a character virtue. Rather, an attractive explanation is that these are situations in which honesty is not called for. That is, these are cases where honest people should not act out of honesty. Instead, honest individuals should have the discernment to identify the moral properties of the situation as one to which considerations from honesty do not apply. Lying in this case, is the right thing to do, even though it often is a mark of dishonesty.¹⁹ If these considerations are along the right lines, virtues require practical wisdom since not all situations, are circumstances which call for (or trigger) the manifestation of any given virtue.

We are now in a better position to appreciate what to say about Sanjay's predicament. Depending on the specifics of the case, Sanjay might find himself in circumstances that do not call for an open mind. If they are virtuously open-minded, they should have the wisdom to understand that they should not act open-mindedly in their situation. If that is right, the open-minded person is the one that in Sanjay's situation might not act from open-mindedness.

The same distinctions between character, doing and deed can be put to work to offer satisfactory accounts of other examples advanced by Battaly and by Dillon. Assume that fanaticism is a vicious character trait.²⁰ If that is right, fanaticism is never a good way to be. Nevertheless, what is sometimes a fanatical thing to do might in some circumstances be the right thing to do. If that is correct, even if being fanatical is a bad-making feature of some people's character, there might be situations in which what can be described as fanatical deeds are what is called for. In these situations, some people who are not fanatics should do the same things that fanatics would do in those circumstances.

The same considerations apply to arrogant deeds. There are several circumstances in which the right thing to do is what the arrogant person would do, whilst the humble thing is not what is called for. Examples include cases of members of stigmatised groups acting arrogantly or at least in seemingly arrogant ways to be listened to rather than being dismissed. We can evaluate this conduct positively and praise some people who act in this manner without needing to conclude that arrogance is occasionally

a character virtue. Instead, we might wish to say that there are circumstances in which humility is not called for but where arrogant deeds are a good thing.

What these considerations show is that there is an alternative explanation for the phenomena highlighted by Kidd and by Battaly which, being a position that preserves some of the distinctive features of virtue epistemology, is, for this reason, to be preferred to normative contextualism.

I conclude this section by offering an additional reason why we should prefer accounts that rely on distinctions between the thick evaluations of character, doings and deeds to normative contextualist views that do not explicitly rely on these distinctions to account for the examples at issue here.²¹ In all the cases where the evaluation of doings and deeds are at variance with the evaluation of agents' character, individuals find themselves in bad circumstances. These are circumstances where actions that would in other situations be expressive of virtue are the wrong thing to do, or where conversely the right thing to do is something that vicious people would do. If we understand these examples along these lines, we have the explanatory tools to understand more precisely where, and how, things have gone awry morally and epistemically.

The disconnect between the aretaic and the deontic evaluations of character, conduct and its outputs can offer illuminating cues to the moral and epistemic contours of situations. For example, it can explain why people might experience discomfort when doing the right thing. Sanjay, for instance, might feel regret when choosing to act as the closed-minded person would despite knowing that that is what the circumstances require. The negative valence of closed-mindedness provides an explanation for the discomfort. This regret would seem mysterious if closed-mindedness is a normatively neutral character trait.²² Normative contextualism lacks equivalent explanatory power.

IV

In the previous section I have argued against normative contextualism showing that it is a highly revisionary account. I have claimed that this approach could only be justified on ameliorative grounds. I have also begun to articulate a view about virtue theory drawn from Sandis (2021), but which is in essence a plausible interpretation of Aristotle's account of the moral virtues (Pearson 2006). If this is right, the most traditional of virtue theories has the conceptual apparatus to account for the examples that motivated Kidd and Battaly. Hence, there is no good reason to abandon ordinary conceptions of virtues and vices in favour of descriptions of traits which would only be susceptible to context-dependent evaluations.

In this section I first clarify the sense in which the view proposed here is a kind of particularism. Subsequently I return to Daukas' criticisms of

traditional virtue epistemology that I have interpreted as criticisms about action-guidance. I argue that Daukas is right that decentring dominant positions reveals the existence of virtues that have been unjustly neglected. For this reason, traditional virtue epistemology needs supplementation. I conclude the section by noting that virtue theory (including epistemology) offers only limited guidance about conduct. It supplies, instead, recommendations about what kinds of person diverse people should aspire to become.

There is no algorithm for ethical conduct. The thought that there are no general rules that can codify how one should behave has been a trademark of virtue ethics since Aristotle (Anscombe 1958). Hence, Aristotelian virtue ethics is always particularist in this minimal sense of claiming that there is no set of exceptionless generalisations about reasons for action that can codify for any situation what is the right thing to do everything considered. It is possible to accept this point whilst claiming, for example, that some defeasible generalisations might hold (Lance and Little 2004). Alternatively, one might think that reasons for actions are not inferred from generalisations but instead grasped by means of moral perception (McDowell 1998, ch. 3). In this article, I do not wish to enter these debates. Instead, I simply wish to point out that particularism in the most minimal sense of being the view according to which ethics cannot be codified by means of exceptionless rules is a distinctive characteristic of virtue ethics in several of its traditional incarnations.

One might concede this much, but object that epistemology is not ethics and that particularism in epistemology is a deeply implausible point of view.²³ Whilst I am unable to address fully this objection here, some of the worries animating it can be tempered by making two observations. First, the intentional activities which agents perform when carrying out inquiries are one important target of aretaic evaluation.²⁴ For example, an agent's evidence-gathering activities could be evaluated as sloppy or as lazy. Further, it is not implausible to think that epistemic excellence in inquiry is an art that is refined by practice and that does not admit of algorithmic codification.

Second, one might argue that zetetic evaluations are distinct from epistemic evaluations of doxastic states. According to this view, the assessment of beliefs in accordance with some epistemic standards (warrant, for example) are not reducible to rational evaluations of inquiry (Thorstad 2023). That is, warranted belief is not to be identified with being a belief that is the outcome of rational and responsible inquiry. If that is right, one might also think that there are exceptionless generalisations about warrant or knowledge, but that no such general principles exist for rational and responsible inquiry. Instead, one might propose that zetetic reasons are derived from defeasible generalisations or perhaps that they are best appreciated by holistically grasping what one's current stage in inquiry is calling for.

The argument so far has led to the conclusion that we can address the concerns that animate liberatory virtue epistemology without a complete overhaul of traditional virtue epistemology. We can retain the traditional approach because it is not an idealised epistemic theory that is only suitable to evaluate character and conduct within the context of an epistemically and politically ideal society. Nevertheless, traditional accounts of specific epistemic virtues and vices such as open-mindedness, intellectual humility, arrogance and vanity are undoubtedly both incomplete and problematic for the reasons articulated by Daukas (2019), which I have summarised in the first section of this article.

They are incomplete because they have failed to pay attention to circumstances that call for the virtues that are exemplified by some individuals who find themselves subjected to oppression, or who have suffered significant epistemic harms by being ignored or dismissed.²⁵ Had they paid attention they would have noticed numerous character traits which are plausible candidates for epistemic virtues including social intelligence (Braaten 1990) and righteous anger or rage (Cherry 2021). These accounts are also incomplete because they have largely focused on the character traits that one is most likely to encounter among dominant individuals. They have paid less attention to the character damage caused by oppression. Thus, traditional virtue epistemology would have done well to learn from Card (1996) and Bartky (1990) and to investigate how oppression, when internalised, can give rise to intellectual servility and to some forms of vanity.

Traditional accounts of epistemic virtues and vices are also problematic because they include distorted articulations of the characteristic emotional and behavioural profiles of virtues such as epistemic autonomy, for instance. These distortions are caused by a near exclusive focus on the perspective of powerful individuals. They result in mistaken accounts of the circumstances in which specific virtues are called for, and of the responses that are called for by these virtues especially in cases of oppression. Hence, as Daukas (2019) remarks, traditional accounts of epistemic autonomy have given undue weight to self-reliance and have paid insufficient attention to critical self-reflection or to the ability to question received wisdom.

Finally, I wish to return to the question of action-guidance. Because of its commitment to particularism about the reasons for action, virtue theories of any stripe do not offer exceptionless principles to which one can appeal when deciding what to do. However, we also should not expect agent-centric theories to offer answers about how to end oppression or to eliminate widespread ignorance. There are reasons to believe that these are problems that require the kind of structural and societal interventions that are the concern of political science and political theory.

It does not follow, however, that virtue theory offers no guidance whatsoever. Rather virtue theories have instructive things to say about the kinds of

person that agents should aspire to be, given their social positionings. These theories can also alert subjects to the risks of character damage that people in their circumstances (depending on what those happen to be) are particularly vulnerable to. These recommendations are helpful to individual agents who struggle to be heard, or who attempt to be less ignorant and prejudiced.

To summarise, I have defended traditional virtue epistemology against some charges that it is an idealised theory. I have argued that the Aristotelian framework has illuminating things to say about virtuous character, actions, and deeds in conditions of oppression. I have shown that this traditional framework can explain the problematic cases that have prompted Kidd and Battaly to subscribe to normative contextualism. I have also argued that there are reasons to prefer the traditional account since it preserves a distinctive contribution of virtue epistemology to epistemic evaluation and can explain why agents might feel regret when doing the right thing. That said, liberatory virtue epistemologists have correctly pointed out that traditional accounts that centre their attention on the predicament of dominant agents have neglected to examine those virtues and vices that are of most pressing concern to oppressed individuals. Further, some traditional accounts of some important epistemic virtues have provided distorted characterisations of the circumstances that call for these virtues, and of what the virtues call for in these circumstances.²⁶

Notes

1. I think of action-guiding epistemology as the enterprise that has been labelled ‘ameliorative’ or ‘regulative’ epistemology (R. C. Roberts and Wood 2007).
2. Although the distinction between mere abstraction and idealisation is in principle clear cut, in practice it can be vague since it will not always be obvious which features of the phenomenon are not relevant and can be abstracted away without distortion (cf., Levy 2024).
3. On the boundedness of human cognition see Adam Morton (2012).
4. See most recently Terry Horgan (2017). For an interesting argument that Bayesian accounts need not be interpreted as discounting the boundedness of human rationality see David Thorstad (2023).
5. It is worth noting that there is a debate about whether or not traditional epistemology issues action-guiding principles (Bishop and Trout 2005), and also about whether it should (Fantl 2023; Hughes 2021). I avoid entering this debate here.
6. I shall not discuss José Medina’s work on virtue and vices under conditions of oppression because he does not argue that oppression can turn virtue into vices and vice-versa (2013). My focus here is on how best to explain these apparent reversals of positive and negative valences.
7. Daukas makes this claim about liberatory virtue epistemology specifically, but it is clear from the context that she means it to apply to all forms of virtue epistemology. On the same page, however, she also offers a different account of

virtuous agents as seeking truth and understanding. I interpret this second claim as referring to the motivations of epistemically virtuous agents.

8. This is a necessary condition. For Battaly, at least, virtue often also requires good motivations (2021).
9. For my position see Tanesini (2018) and Tanesini (2021).
10. Jeremy Fantl (2018) also argues in favour of the epistemically beneficial effects of some forms of closed-mindedness.
11. I consider these examples because fanaticism and arrogance might seem clear-cut examples of vices rather than virtues, whilst social intelligence has not figured in traditional lists of either virtues or vices. These however are not the only traits that have been discussed within the liberatory framework. Other examples include testimonial justice (Fricker 2007) and humility (H. Battaly 2021; Dalmiya 2016). I do not address these here because testimonial justice appears to be a virtue in both ideal and non-ideal circumstances whilst the status of humility as a virtue is contested (Bloomfield 2021; Dillon 2021a).
12. She argues this is also true of extremism. I only discuss fanaticism here.
13. Ian James Kidd distinguishes a weaker and a stronger reading of the neutrality claim (2021). In the weak sense a trait might have a default positive or negative valence, even though it might acquire the opposite valence in some circumstances. In the stronger sense a trait has no default positive or negative status. My argument is intended to target both senses of normative neutrality about character virtues and vices.
14. Dillon explicitly refrains from calling arrogance a virtue, but she claims that it is a trait that one ought to cultivate in the fight against oppression. Dillon is here concerned with a moral rather than epistemic trait. However, the trait has important epistemic effects since it is important to deepen one's understanding of oppression as oppression.
15. This claim is controversial since it is sometimes argued that these concepts have descriptive semantic content but also pragmatically implicate evaluations. In this paper I remain neutral as to whether the descriptive and evaluative components of thick concepts can be pried apart and also about whether both components figure in the semantic content of the concepts themselves (Väyrynen 2013, 2021).
16. However, these inferences from aretaic to thin epistemic evaluations of belief might not always hold. This is especially true of thin epistemic concepts that have a truth-conducive dimension such as being reliable, for instance.
17. Notice that in this instance Sanjay might have higher-order evidence for their views if they know that they are in agreement with experts' opinion. Nevertheless, if this is a situation that calls for open-mindedness than they would have to engage with arguments attempting to persuade them otherwise. The rational response to the inability to rebut these arguments is doubt, which would thus be the open-minded state for Sanjay to be in.
18. The famous example here is one concerning a criminal at the door asking for the whereabouts of a vulnerable victim one is sheltering.
19. Battaly has also argued in favour of a normative contextualist interpretation of the virtue of honesty, acknowledging that this interpretation yields somewhat counterintuitive results (H. Battaly 2024, 421). The position presented in this paper is preferable since it avoids being counterintuitive whilst explaining the phenomena.

20. Definitions vary, partly because the ordinary concept is itself unclear, so it is hard to reach a conclusion. I have argued elsewhere that fanaticism is not a vice (Tanesini [forthcoming](#)).
21. I should add that I do not wish to imply that normative contextualists cannot distinguish traits, doings and deeds. These distinctions are clearly available to them. My point is rather than when these distinctions are firmly into view, we can rely on them to articulate a position that does not index the valence of character traits to contexts.
22. Normative contextualists can of course explain other moral features of the situation such as it being oppressive and thus calling for anger, frustration, disappointment. One cannot regret being placed in oppressive circumstances. However, one can regret one's tainted actions even when the circumstances require them. The taint in this case is the indirect connection between the right deed and the vicious trait.
23. The position in meta-epistemology known as 'epistemic particularism' concerns an unrelated methodological position according to which general theoretical principles about epistemic statuses such as knowledge and justification are derived from intuitions about particular cases (Greco 2021).
24. One might worry that these evaluations are practical rather than epistemic. See Flores and Woodard (2023) for an argument to the contrary.
25. It might also be guilty of underestimating the rarity of virtue in conditions of oppression due to the character damage caused by these conditions. This damage affects in different guises individuals who occupy dominant positions as well as those who are oppressed. Medina (2013) offers a penetrating analysis of the damages to members of the first group. Card (1996) of those caused to members of the second group.
26. I would like to thank the referees for this journal for their comments that have greatly helped me to clarify the position defended in this paper.

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