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On Epistemic Consequentialism and the Virtue Conflation Problem

J. ADAM CARTER & IAN M. CHURCH

Abstract. Addressing the ‘virtue conflation’ problem requires the preservation of intuitive distinctions between virtue types, i.e., between intellectual and moral virtues. According to one influential attempt to avoid this problem proposed by Julia Driver (2003), moral virtues produce benefits to others—in particular, they promote the well-being of others—while the intellectual virtues, as such, produce epistemic good for the *agent*. We show that Driver’s demarcation of intellectual virtue, by adverting to the self/other distinction, leads to a reductio, and ultimately, that the prospects for resolving the virtue conflation problem look dim within an epistemic consequentialist approach to the epistemic right and the epistemic good.

0. Introduction

According to David Hume, the project of demarcating distinguishing features of moral and intellectual virtues was of exaggerated importance¹. At most, working out how “virtue” is used, was a project for grammarians².

Nowadays, there’s less cause for being blasé here. With the advent of virtue epistemology in the 1990s as mainstream³, a working account of intellectual virtues, as such, is crucial to getting (for instance), contemporary virtue-theoretic analyses of knowledge (e.g., Greco (2010; 2012); Sosa (2009; 2011; 2015)) off the ground⁴.

¹ Hume (1975[1751], §262.) Cf., Aristotle *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book VI.

² Driver (2003, 369), *op. cit.*

³ See Axtell (2000, Introduction) and Greco & Turri (2011) for overviews. See also Brady & Prichard (2003) and DePaul & Zagzebski (2003) for representative work.

⁴ Such a demarcation is important as well for the kind of virtue-theoretic project which Baehr (2011) calls *autonomous* virtue epistemology—viz., projects in epistemology which aim to illuminate

According to Julia Driver (2003), if an account that discerns moral virtues from intellectual virtues is to be an adequate one, then it must pick out what is distinctively valuable about the traits in question (viz., the account must pick out the respective value-conferring properties of these virtue types). Put another way, an account must draw the distinction between moral and intellectual virtues in a principled way at the ‘level of value-conferring properties’ (2003, 367). Driver’s key contention is that the only account which can successfully satisfy this condition of adequacy is an account that distinguishes moral from intellectual virtues on the basis of what goods are produced by the respective virtues⁵, and so the only available account is a *consequentialist* account⁶.

However, not just any consequentialist account will do. As Driver (2003) remarks:

[...] [I]ntellectual virtues have—as their source of primary value—truth or, more weakly, justified belief *for the person possessing the quality in question*, and this is what ‘getting it right’ means for the intellectual virtues, whereas for the moral virtues the source of value is the benefit to others, the well-being of others, and for the moral virtues this is what ‘getting it right’ means. Further, no appeal to motive is needed to make the distinction at the level of value-conferring property. It is not the motive that makes the trait a given type of virtue (2003, 374, our italics).

Later in her paper, Driver clarifies her claim about the relationship between moral virtues and *others*, and intellectual virtues, and *oneself*.

the nature of intellectual virtues independent of any theoretical role these virtues might play in the service of analyzing knowledge.

⁵ The primary kind of rival account Driver has in mind are motivationalist accounts (e.g., Zagzebski 1996), according to which ‘moral and intellectual virtue can only plausibly be distinguished in terms of the differing motivational structures characteristic of each’ (Driver 2003, 367). Driver’s objection is that such accounts fail to distinguish moral and intellectual virtues at the level of value-conferring property. Driver also critiques a related proposal by Montmarquet, though the details won’t concern us here, as the critical focus is Driver’s own proposal.

⁶ See also Driver (2001). Cf., Jenkins (2007) for an example of an epistemic consequentialist account of epistemic rationality. More generally, for a seminal discussion of the distinction between instrumental and intrinsic epistemic merit, see Firth (1981).

“Moral virtues produce benefits to others—in particular, they promote the well-being of others—while the intellectual virtues produce epistemic good for the agent” (*Ibid.*, 381).

Driver’s proposal accordingly demarcates intellectual virtues along lines which are both (i) *self-regarding* rather than others-regarding; and (ii) *consequentialist* rather than motivationalist⁷. It is beyond our present scope to assess whether competing motivationalist accounts of intellectual virtue fail in the ways she suggests⁸.

Rather, we want to highlight what we think is an serious problem for the strategy-type which Driver has herself proposed, and then to show how the problem (and the intractability of the associated escape routes) reflects badly on the prospects of epistemic consequentialism, more generally, as an approach to epistemic rightness and goodness.⁹

The problem for Driver’s strategy for distinguishing intellectual from moral virtues can be appreciated as a kind of trilemma¹⁰. Here is the plan: In §1, we show—by way of a short vignette—that the ‘self-regarding’ feature of Driver’s consequentialist solution to the problem leads to a reductio. In §2, we show (also

⁷ Driver anticipates an obvious objection to this view, which is that moral virtues also produce benefits to oneself, and epistemic virtues can promote the well-being of others. Her response is that something can lead to valuable x , while its value-conferring property is nevertheless y (114). And so, it isn’t damaging to her position that some moral virtues benefit the agent, and some epistemic virtues benefit others. What would damage her view, though, is if some paragon moral virtue happens to not benefit others, or correlatively, if some paragon epistemic virtue failed to promote epistemic good for the agent. I think it’s safe to say that Driver is aware that such cases would be troublesome. This is evidenced in the final lines of her essay, when she writes:

“But note that on the account I offer, if it turns out that [for example, in the moral case] honesty does not have the good effects we think it has, then it may well be that it is not a moral virtue. This seems highly unlikely, but it is possible. Some may find this result problematic for a consequentialist account. However, it should be noted that this problem occurs for any account that weighs consequences at all” (382).

⁸ Motivationalist accounts, generally speaking, attempt to distinguish intellectual virtues on the basis of their characteristic aims, rather than in virtue of the epistemic goods they characteristically produce. This approach fits closely with virtue responsibilist accounts of the nature of epistemic virtues. See, for example, Montmarquet (1993), Fairweather (2001), Battaly (2015; *forthcoming*).

⁹ While others have raised questions regarding Driver’s consequentialist strategy for demarcating intellectual and moral virtues—see, for example, Baehr (2012) and Battaly (2013)—focused critiques along these lines have not yet been developed.

¹⁰ Thanks to an anonymous referee at *Thought* for suggesting that we state the problem this way.

by way of *reductio*) that an epistemic consequentialist strategy would fare no better than Driver's preferred version *vis-à-vis* the virtue conflation problem if the view is to be cashed out as 'others-regarding' rather than 'self-regarding'. In §3, the salient remaining consequentialist strategy type is canvassed, one which purports to demarcate intellectual and moral virtues without any kind of self/other proviso. This strategy, we argue, is also not equipped to resolve the virtue conflation problem either, and this is in part due to reasons Driver had herself already anticipated. Let's now consider what Driver's own view is committed to countenancing.

1. The Truth Scrooge

Veriticus T. Scrooge (also known as the 'Truth Scrooge') is the cousin of Ebenezer Scrooge. Ebenezer and Veriticus constantly argued. Whereas Ebenezer thought that money was power, and so he was a notorious miser with money, Veriticus thought Ebenezer was woefully shortsighted. *Knowledge* is power, so Veriticus was convinced, and he was a notorious miser with the truth. As the Truth Scrooge would tell himself: true beliefs are very valuable, and the more for *him*, the better. And so it happened that while Ebenezer acquired more money than anyone else in all of London, so Veriticus acquired in equal measure more *true beliefs*.

Each Christmas, the situation for the two cousins was unsurprisingly similar. Ebenezer was approached by hordes of folk who would beg him for his money, which he would exploitatively lend, never giving a scrap of his wealth to charity. And with knowledge that Veriticus was the richest in the city with truths, Londoners (eager to be better informed, so as to improve their lives) would approach Veriticus, begging for truths, which he was hardly prepared to give away for nothing¹¹.

Veriticus, though he looked down on Ebenezer, admired his cousin's shrewd lending policies and incorporated them into his own 'truth-lending' business. Just as Ebenezer would lend money at outlandish interest, so Veriticus

¹¹ Whenever asked to make a Christmas exception, Veriticus's standard reply is that that's a poor excuse for picking a man's brain every 25th of December.

would give a single truth requested only if paid back threefold in epistemic value: one truth lent required repayment of three truths which Veriticus himself sought. Anyone unwilling to do the intellectual legwork necessary to repay the epistemic interest on the loan was welcome, he said, to boil in their own ignorance¹².

While Veriticus, by his own doing, had no one with whom to share his massive stockpile of truths, he nonetheless took solace each Christmas eve in a moment of reflection: for he had succeeded in achieving what he regarded as his own best epistemic outcome, one that involves maximizing truth for himself whilst keeping others epistemically disadvantaged in a comparative truth-deficit¹³. The epistemic state of nature, was---as he often barked at those poor fools begging for his truths---a Hobbesian state of *epistemic war*.

The Truth Scrooge described in the foregoing is, in many ways, an epistemic abomination. But if epistemic traits qualify as epistemic virtues by way of producing epistemic goods for the agent, then a consequence is that the kind of intellectual character exhibited by the Truth Scrooge is beyond reproach. Even more, Driver's account is compatible with the suggestion that the Truth Scrooge is a *paragon* of intellectual virtue.

The Truth Scrooge is however *not* an intellectual paragon, and this point needn't rely on intuition that the Truth Scrooge is epistemically bad in all respects. (For, the Truth Scrooge does have *some* praiseworthy epistemic qualities¹⁴). For we can simply construct a comparison case. Imagine an agent just as effective at acquiring truth *for herself* as Veriticus—call this other individual Veriticus*—who

¹² “Are there no articles? Are there no books?”

¹³ Assume, for the purposes of this example, that the true beliefs in question are also justified.

¹⁴ Might it be that Veriticus is *merely* morally defective, but not epistemically defective? In short, we think not. We grant that Veriticus is in many ways morally criticisable. However, Veriticus's intellectual stinginess remains an epistemically criticisable feature of Veriticus's character (at least, it remains incompatible with his being an intellectual paragon) even if we shift the details of the case so that Veriticus' moral stock is raised significantly (e.g., even if we were to suppose Veriticus used the information he hordes in the service of famine relief). Put another way, Veriticus remains criticisable from what William Alston (1985) calls an ‘epistemic point of view’; the point of view from which what matters is just epistemic goods. We can evaluate Veriticus from this point of view just as (for example) we can evaluate a house from multiple points of view: aesthetic, practical, etc. Thanks to a referee at *Thought* for requesting clarification on this point.

differs from Veriticus in that Veriticus* manifests what Roberts & Wood call *epistemic generosity*, a disposition to give intellectual goods ‘freely, gladly, and without calculation of repayment’ (Roberts & Wood 2007, 287¹⁵). The point can now be restated: to the extent that Veriticus* is *more* intellectually virtuous than Veriticus, it is implausible that, as Driver tells us, the intellectual virtues, as such, produce epistemic good for the agent. For if they did, there would be no way to account for why Veriticus*'s intellectual character is comparatively more praiseworthy.

Roberts & Wood (2007, 292-93) contrast epistemic generosity, as a virtue, with the corresponding vices of ‘intellectual stinginess’ and ‘intellectual greed’. They write:

The intellectually stingy person reserves for himself what intellectual goods he has acquired, and is disinclined to share them with others. The intellectually greedy person has an inordinate concern to acquire the intellectual goods, in disregard for others’ acquisition of them (2007, 293).

The primary example Roberts & Wood discuss when characterising the kind of deficit in intellectual character that is betrayed by the intellectually stingy involves the lead-up to the discovery of the double helix structure of DNA by James Watson and Francis Crick. Just prior to Watson & Crick’s famous discovery, they were anxious that Linus Pauling, working on the same project, might get his hands on X-Ray crystallographic photos of DNA (taken by Rosalind Franklin), photos which would aid Pauling’s research. Watson and Crick explicitly regarded Pauling as a ‘threat’ and were ‘greatly relieved’ when they learned that Pauling’s own sketch of the double helix contained a mistake¹⁶.

¹⁵ See Roberts & Wood (2007, Ch 11), which borrows from their earlier paper, ‘Generosity as an Intellectual Virtue’, *The Cresset* 67 (2003), 10–22.

¹⁶ See Roberts & Wood (2007, 294-95). Cf., Strevens (2003), however, for a qualified defence of the epistemic value of science’s ‘priority rule’, which whereby the first to make a discovery is rewarded. We note that even if the priority rule has positive epistemic consequences in science, this is compatible with the internalisation of the rule, by individuals, to involve the manifesting of individual epistemic vices.

It should be relatively uncontroversial that Watson & Crick would have been more intellectually praiseworthy (i.e., they would not be Roberts' and Wood's first case of an *exemplar* of a form of epistemic vice) had they instead exhibited a greater level of epistemic generosity than they actually did in their intellectual pursuits, and an adequate account of intellectual virtue will need to have the resources to explain why this is so. And, even more, an adequate account must not rule more extreme instances of intellectual selfishness and greed—i.e., as in the case of the Truth Scrooge—as compatible with the intellectually virtuous paragon.

2. From Scrooge to Mr. Fezziwig: self-regarding vs. others-regarding

Given the 'self-regarding' nature of Driver's consequentialist account of intellectual virtue—where intellectual virtue is aimed solely at acquiring the epistemic good (e.g., true belief) for the given agent—it seems to lack any resources for avoiding the conclusion that the Truth Scrooge is an unimpeachable paragon of intellectual virtue. Such a conclusion is (at best) counterintuitive. Accordingly, Driver's consequentialist demarcation of intellectual virtues seems to be in trouble. But perhaps it would seem natural to embrace a modified version of Driver's proposal, where, instead of being *self-regarding*, intellectual virtues are *others regarding*, though from within Driver's wider consequentialist program.¹⁷

Such a modification could embrace the intuition that what Roberts and Wood call 'intellectual greed' and 'intellectual stinginess' are *bona fide* epistemic vices (just as more generally, stinginess and greed are moral vices), and as such allow Driver's proposal to maintain a consequentialist framework while avoiding the kind of counterexample canvassed in §1. What is more, such a modification would distinguish moral and intellectual virtues with respect to the kinds of goods

¹⁷ Of course, we might wonder if some paradigmatic examples of intellectual virtues can really be best understood in consequentialist terms of maximizing epistemic goods for others. It is difficult to see, for example, how intellectual virtues like open-mindedness and intellectual courage could be sufficiently others-regarding to still count as intellectual virtues on such a view. But given Driver's willingness to disavow moral virtues that don't fit into her framework of moral virtues promoting well-being in others (see Driver 2003, 382), perhaps a defender of this proposed modification could do the same thing for *self-regarding* intellectual virtues. Perhaps a defender of this modification could argue that self-regarding intellectual virtues like open-mindedness or intellectual courage are not really intellectual virtues after all.

they produce, but *align* moral and epistemic virtues along the dimension of whether they are self/others regarding.

Unfortunately, such a modification seems to also run into problems. To see how, let's continue with our story. Ebenezer Scrooge can be easily contrasted with Mr. Fezziwig, Ebenezer's former employer and mentor. When it comes to money, Mr. Fezziwig is the polar opposite of Ebenezer. Whereas Ebenezer is a terrible hoarder of money, Mr. Fezziwig is kind and generous. Whereas Ebenezer would never be parted with a single penny without guaranteeing outlandish interest, Mr. Fezziwig was quick to give freely and generously to those in need and was full of fiscal grace—arguably to a fault. But, in addition to being Ebenezer's former employer and financial mentor, he was a part-time *administrator* at the local university, Truth Scrooge's *alma mater*. Through his business and financial generosity, Mr. Fezziwig became a pillar of the community and a great connector of people and ideas. During the day Mr. Fezziwig worked with Ebenezer in Mr. Fezziwig's business, but in the evenings and weekends he worked as the Associate Dean of Information Distribution at the local university to connect people to epistemic goods. And just as Ebenezer eventually became Mr. Fezziwig's polar opposite when it comes to money, Truth Scrooge is Mr. Fezziwig's polar opposite when it comes to epistemic goods.

Whereas Truth Scrooge is a notorious miser with the truth, Mr. Fezziwig lives to maximize the epistemic goods enjoyed by as many people as possible. Whereas Truth Scrooge would never share a single truth without guaranteeing outlandish epistemic interest, Mr. Fezziwig is quick to freely and generously connect anyone languishing in the poverty of ignorance to a wealth of epistemic goods. In fact, Mr. Fezziwig is focused on the epistemic well-being of others to such an extent that he neglects *his own* epistemic well-being. Just as Mr. Fezziwig's generosity with money eventually costs him his own financial well-being—forcing him to sell his business—Mr. Fezziwig's *others*-regarding concern for epistemic goods compromises his personal epistemic well-being.

Mr. Fezziwig personally enjoys few epistemic goods. He is so focused on fostering true belief, justification, and knowledge in others that he rarely takes any

time to process or otherwise maintain epistemic goods for himself¹⁸. And recognizing that if he were to spend time making sure that his own epistemic house was in order that the net total of epistemic goods enjoyed in the world might be diminished, Mr. Fezziwig is all too happy to play the epistemic martyr for the greater good. In the end, Mr. Fezziwig is epistemically impoverished. While the number of true and justified beliefs he was integral in fostering in others is legion, he *himself* enjoyed few justified beliefs and even fewer true beliefs. While as a university administrator he facilitated the development of discernment and critical thinking in a host of students—helping to create a generation of life-long learners—he never took the time to cultivate such skills in himself. In the end, Mr. Fezziwig’s epistemic life was governed by nasty bouts of ignorance, brutish gullibility, and intellectual short-sightedness.

When Driver’s consequentialist account of intellectual virtues is *self*-regarding—where intellectual virtue is aimed solely at acquiring the epistemic good (e.g. true belief) for the agent who possesses them—it leads to the repugnant conclusion that Truth Scrooge is a paragon of intellectual virtue. Given that intellectual greed and stinginess are *bona fide* epistemic vices, Truth Scrooge seems profoundly intellectually *vicious* and not virtuous. But, as we’re now seeing, if we take this point on board and modify Driver’s consequentialist account of intellectual virtues to be *others*-regarding—where intellectual virtue is aimed at maximizing the epistemic goods enjoyed by as many people as possible—we end up with the conclusion that *Mr. Fezziwig* must be a paragon of intellectual virtue. But given Mr. Fezziwig’s ignorance, brutish gullibility, and intellectual short-

¹⁸ This is not to say that Mr. Fezziwig is intellectually bankrupt. As Kornblith (1993) has noted, some epistemic success is a precondition for any successful achieving of one's ends, including the end of skillfully facilitating the dissemination of information. We can stipulate that Fezziwig has intellectual competences which are very specific in the service of facilitating the dissemination of information. The crux of the defect, for Mr. Fezziwig, is that he does not *cultivate* his own intellectual life, beyond what is required to service the intellectual needs of others. Thanks to an anonymous referee for requesting clarification here.

sightedness, this is every bit as repugnant as the conclusion that Truth Scrooge is a paragon of intellectual virtue¹⁹.

3. A Wider Problem for Epistemic Consequentialism?

Perhaps the epistemic consequentialist could, at this juncture, strategically retreat ²⁰. The self/other distinction, incorporated within an epistemic consequentialist approach to the virtue conflation problem, was, after all, partially (and, indeed, saliently) responsible for generating the reductios considered in §1 and §2. One natural thought is that the consequentialist might fare better with a more flatfooted consequentialist approach, one which attempts to reconcile the virtue conflation problem by insisting that moral virtues, as such, promote well-being and intellectual virtues, as such, produce epistemic goods.

This retreat however runs into two problems. Firstly, by Driver's own recognition, the self/other distinction is needed for any plausible consequentialist solution to the virtue conflation problem because, as Driver puts it, the self/other distinction "helps to explain why honesty is a moral virtue rather than an intellectual virtue, though honesty is conducive to justified belief in other persons." This appears to be an intractable problem for the consequentialist who responds

¹⁹ Note that we grant that the Truth Scrooge can count as having some, perhaps many, intellectual virtues. What we deny is that he is a candidate for a paragon of intellectual virtue. Cf., fn. 16, for a similar discussion regarding Fezziwig.

²⁰ One reply we can envision on behalf of some versions of consequentialists (e.g., Pettigrew 2013; Levi 1967) is undercutting. The line would be that a virtue conflation problem arises in the first place only for consequentialist views which, like Driver's own view, give the notion of an intellectual virtue a theoretically interesting role. In this respect, as this envisioned undercutting reply continues, it is theoretically uninteresting for at least some varieties of consequentialism, whether the conflation problem can be adequately resolved. To the extent that this line is right, then our argument might be claimed to have a rather limited scope. We have two central responses to this line. Firstly, it is important to note that it can be problematic for a philosophical thesis that it has, as a consequence, some result which is *independently* problematic. It is not the job of the consequentialist, *per se*, to tell us what an intellectual virtue is. But if, given consequentialism, it turns out that we cannot preserve intuitive distinctions about virtue types, then this is a *prima facie* problematic result for the standard consequentialist. Our second response is connected: a variant of worry can be resituated in non-virtue theoretic language. Consequentialists, more generally, are committed to regarding Veriticus as a closer approximation to the cognitive ideal than many individuals whom, intuitively, are to be evaluated more positively from an epistemic point of view. This variant on the objection faces standard consequentialists. Though, our central focus, to be clear, is consequentialist approaches to delineating the virtues. Thanks to an anonymous referee for suggesting clarification on this point.

to the reductio by abandoning the self/other distinction. But even if it could be overcome, it's not obvious that doing so would effectively avoid the reductio. Let 'T' be the total number of true beliefs acquired by Truth Scrooge, in light of his exercising a set of virtues V, and T₋₁ be the number of true beliefs acquired by 'Reformed' Truth Scrooge, in light of exercising a set of virtues V*. Say that 'Reformed' Truth Scrooge is reformed in that he becomes (after a long night of tribulations) a more epistemically generous individual. Flatfooted epistemic consequentialism (i.e., Driver's proposal, without the self/others distinction) rules Truth Scrooge as more epistemically virtuous, in light of V, than Reformed Truth Scrooge is in light of V*, given that (by a single truth) V has produced more true beliefs (i.e., a single additional true belief) than V*. However, this result is counterintuitive; Reformed Truth Scrooge, replete with his newly acquired epistemic generosity, surely betrays an improvement in epistemic character.

Epistemic consequentialism, more generally, is a controversial thesis²¹. It's beyond the present scope to suggest that the epistemic consequentialist's difficulty with the virtue conflation problem as canvassed here is a *pro tanto* reason to embrace the rival *characteristic motivation* approach²² to distinguishing between moral and intellectual virtues. However, to the extent that it the account purports to account for why a given trait is an intellectual, rather than a moral virtue, it looks as though consequentialism is in no position to claim any advantage²³.

²¹ See Ahlstrom-Vij & Dunn (2014) for a recent defence of this general position; Cf., Littlejohn (Forthcoming) for criticism. For an overview of recent work, see Dunn (2015).

²² See for example, Montmarquet (1987; 1993), and Zagzebski (1996). Cf., Baehr (2011).

²³ Thanks to Emma C. Gordon for comments on a previous version of this paper. Thanks also to three anonymous referees at *Thought*. Adam Carter would also like to thank an audience at the University of Stirling for feedback on a very early 'proto' version of this paper in 2007.

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