

***(Less Un-) Attainable Virtues: A Response to Alfano***  
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I am honored that Mark Alfano has replied to my paper, “There’s No (Testimonial) Justice: Why Pursuit of a Virtue is Not the Solution to Epistemic Injustice” (2015)—I have been impressed with the work he (2012, 2013, 2014) and other situationists (e.g. Doris 2002, Olin and Doris 2014) have done in challenging virtue theories in both ethics and epistemology. His suggestions about how to effectively fight epistemic injustice are promising and very welcome. And, as far as I can tell, we disagree about very little. This overall agreement is not very surprising; as my paper reveals, I do not find virtue theories in general especially promising, and my attitude is informed in part by Alfano’s work.

But there does seem to be one minor point of disagreement between us. While I am no proponent of virtue theories, I argue in my paper that there are problems with cultivating corrective testimonial justice that do not face cultivation of other virtues—or at least not all other virtues. In particular, I suggest that attempts to cultivate corrective testimonial justice are apt to undermine cultivation of epistemic humility and vigilance, and that trying to cultivate these virtues is likely to be more useful for combating epistemic injustice. Alfano raises worries about epistemic humility in particular, though, suggesting “epistemic humility may be even more difficult to cultivate than epistemic justice. Intentionally tracking how humble you are seems like a pretty bad way to become humble” (Alfano 2015, 60).

I agree that tracking one’s humility would be a bad way to cultivate humility. And I find situationist arguments convincing enough that I would not want to claim that anyone can achieve what traditional virtue theories would count as epistemic humility. But those who are willing to tweak tradition may be able to escape the situationist critique, and I think a certain kind of suitably tweaked notion of epistemic humility may be attainable—or at least a good thing to pursue.

**An Epistemically Humble Conception of Epistemic Humility**

As I discuss in section 3 (“Fricker’s commitments”), there are several features of Fricker’s conception of corrective testimonial justice that make it uniquely bad to pursue. Two are particularly relevant here. Firstly,

Testimonial injustice is a form of misjudgement, an intellectual mistake, not recognized by the agent at the time it occurs (cf. Fricker 2007, 43). So, unlike most of the familiar moral vices, someone cannot commit testimonial injustice knowingly. As a result, testimonial justice is constituted in part by the capacity to notice when we have made errors in credibility judgments (Sherman 2015, 7).

Secondly,

Rather than taking the virtue to be whatever set of faculties or strategies produce the right sort of judgments and corrections, Fricker proposes that

epistemic justice is guided by the following ideal: “to neutralize any negative impact of prejudice in one's credibility judgements by compensating upwards to reach the degree of credibility that would have been given were it not for the prejudice” (Fricker 2007, 91-92). Thus, she stipulates a particular way of combating testimonial injustice, involving at least two steps: Identify a particular unjust credibility judgement and reflate it by the right amount (ibid).

If epistemic humility shares these features, then it will be about as difficult to cultivate as epistemic justice, and in roughly the same ways.

It is certainly possible to imagine a conception of epistemic humility that would share these features. Suppose that, to be epistemically humble, we must (a) correctly evaluate our own credibility, and (b) must reach the correct estimate of our own credibility by considering whether our confidence in our beliefs reflects our actual degree of credibility. This conception of epistemic humility would face much the same problems Fricker's form of epistemic justice faces: In order to attempt to be humble, we would need to adjust our beliefs to fit with the correct assessment of our credibility—which would mean we would need to think we could self-assess correctly.

Happily, I do not think this is the only, or even the most intuitive, conception of epistemic humility.

The term “epistemic humility” does not have as long a history as many virtue terms, so I cannot appeal directly to classical sources. But I believe it has long been realized that thinking about one's *moral* humility is a terrible way to become humble. Humility seems more likely to arise as a consequence of recognizing that there is something much greater than oneself (e.g. God, the cosmos, the totality of human endeavor, something like that.)

Epistemic humility seems to be in some ways harder to attain than moral humility, and in some ways easier. It is harder insofar as we cannot recognize epistemic superiors in such a straightforward way. God would seem like a good candidate, except that, given the available evidence, epistemic humility seems to rule out having much confidence in the existence of any gods. We can certainly imagine individuals far more intelligent than we are, but realizing that (say) Stephen Hawking knows much more about physics than I ever could does very little to inspire me to be cautious when I estimate the credibility of my philosophical positions, or my assessments of other people's credibility. The totality of (current) human knowledge is too often wrong to inspire most people to be humble. And most of the cosmos, for all its vastness, does not seem to be particularly smart.

Epistemic humility may be easier to attain than moral humility, however, insofar as we can get a great deal of mileage out of certain kinds of learning. A bit of logic and epistemology can show us that any (or almost any) of our beliefs could be mistaken. A bit of psychology can show us that we have a great propensity for all sorts of biases and errors, and that introspection will not suffice to let us know whether we are being prejudiced or careless.

Merely knowing that we are error-prone is presumably not sufficient for being epistemically humble. Even a very modest conception of the virtue would demand that the knowledge influence our practice in some way. But different conceptions of epistemic humility might impose more or less demanding standards on our behavior. I would venture that, in the relatively small community where the term “epistemic humility” is familiar at all, the standards would be something like:

To be epistemically humble, we must recognize that our beliefs could be wrong, as they are (pretty much) all based on fallible sets of evidence and cognitive capacities. We must be prepared to revise our views if we encounter good enough evidence and arguments to the contrary. We should be open to good argument and evidence, whatever their sources.

There is, of course, much about this account that is open to interpretation (especially *how* prepared to revise, and *how* open to argument and evidence we must be.) But this seems to me on the right track. And it seems people can be (sufficiently) prepared to revise their views, and (sufficiently) open to good argument and evidence, without encountering the problems I argue arise for Fricker’s favored virtue. Their epistemic humility is not a credibility judgment, but a way of reacting to the possibility of new information.

By the same token, we might be able to devise a more modest version of corrective testimonial justice. But it would not be Fricker’s version.

### **A Morally Humble Conception of Epistemic Humility**

Although Fricker’s conception of epistemic justice is very ambitious in the ways I discuss above, there are other respects in which her notion of virtue may not be especially demanding. As I mention in section 3 (Sherman 2015, 6-7), she does not explicitly commit herself to the view that virtues are traits that will be consistent across contexts (or at least her commitments are tentative and open to interpretation; Fricker 2007, 96-8). As a result, situationism alone cannot show that her theory of virtue is wrong. Can epistemic humility also escape the situationist critique?

We should expect that people will be more prepared to revise their views in one situation than in another, and more open to considering new good evidence and arguments in some situations than others. Some of the situational factors are presumably the sort of trivial factors that undermine the traditional notion that virtues are consistent across contexts. But it seems quite possible that someone could fulfill the following two modest conditions:

- (1) She is epistemically humble in all of the situations she typically faces (e.g. home, work, socializing, social media interactions, etc.)
- (2) While she might encounter unfamiliar situations that throw off her usual humility, she has the skill and motivation to work on becoming epistemically humble in those situations, given the opportunity.

These conditions fall short of virtue in the traditional, Aristotelian sense, but I think many people who are not specifically taking a cue from Aristotle would consider these sufficient. Someone who is normally patient, but surprisingly loses her cool when jet-lagged, would still intuitively qualify as characteristically patient. If inter-continental travel became part of her regular routine, and she continued to be impatient-whenever-jet-lagged forever after, then maybe we would no longer say she is characteristically patient. But if, after an adjustment period, she learns to be patient in spite of jet lag, I at least would be willing to characterize her as patient. Likewise, I would say conditions (1) and (2) are sufficient for virtue in an intuitive, non-philosophical sense. According to this conception, virtue is not something we can relax after having attained; as long as there are new situations that might disrupt a given virtue, we must always be ready to develop and adapt it in the new circumstance (cf. Fricker 97-8).

Alfano suggests that this way of defending virtue ethics from the situationist critique “strips it of much of its appeal” (2013, 64). For Fricker—and perhaps also for others—the appeal of virtue ethics seems to be much slimmer. Fricker’s reason for adopting a virtue theory seems to largely turn on the idea that both morality and epistemic responsibility are uncodifiable (Fricker 2007, ch. 3.2-3.3). As I point out in a footnote (fn. 3), this would not (even if it were obviously true) be sufficient reason to adopt a *virtue* theory, as other kinds of theories (and anti-theories) can also accommodate the view that correct moral and epistemic judgment cannot be codified.

At any rate, we might agree this far: good moral and epistemic responses cannot be achieved by running through a checklist or decision procedure every time one faces a moral or epistemic decision. Even if there is a checklist or decision procedure that is fully adequate, there are too many theoretically possible decision-points to consult our guide for all of them; even if there were a manageably small numbers of decisions to make, we would need the moral and epistemic sensitivity to recognize when we faced such decisions.

In order to properly navigate our moral and epistemic landscape, we need to develop a variety of skills, habits, and sensitivities. While I think most consequentialist and deontological theories can accommodate this insight, it has been most aggressively championed by virtue ethicists in recent decades. If someone like Fricker finds virtue theories to best fit her core commitments, and need not make assumptions about trait consistency that run afoul of the situationist arguments, then I would argue the sort of epistemic humility I describe above should find a place in her pantheon of virtues—and that it would be a worthwhile virtue to cultivate.

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