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Intellectual virtues and the epistemic evaluation of disagreement

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**INTELLECTUAL VIRTUES AND THE EPISTEMIC EVALUATION OF
DISAGREEMENT**

**A Thesis Submitted
in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Designation
University Honors with Distinction**

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Entitled: Intellectual Virtues and the Epistemic Evaluation of Disagreement

has been approved as meeting the thesis or project requirements for the Designation
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Introduction:

What is required to accurately judge another's epistemic prowess in relation to one's own epistemic position, specifically in cases of disagreement? How do the requirements relate to the philosophical dialogue on epistemic peer disagreement? These questions stem from a gap in contemporary literature on epistemic disagreement; scholars have, in their writings on epistemic peer disagreement, largely overlooked the question of how one is able to accurately evaluate whether they are engaged in a certain kind of epistemic disagreement (peer or other).

This paper will argue that a proper evaluation of the epistemic status of another person in relation to oneself presupposes the possession of the relevant subset of intellectual virtues, referred to as "p-virtues" throughout the rest of the work. A summation of the claim I am making is as follows: If person S believes the claim P and S believes that another person, S1, believes the claim not- P, S knows (or has a justified belief about) the evidential value they have to accord to S1's disagreement "only if" S has p-virtues.

What, then, are these p-virtues? Further why are they essential to one's ability to know or be justified in forming a belief about one's epistemic disagreement with another? Testimonial justice (to borrow Fricker's term¹), and intellectual humility will be argued to be among such virtues. Section one will advance the introduction of intellectual virtues in the debate on the epistemology of disagreement. Sections two and three will explicate testimonial justice and humility as intellectual virtues which are also p-virtues. In section four, a common understanding of these p-virtues will be invoked to shed light on what precisely is occurring when a lack of p-virtues leads one to miscalculate an epistemic situation, and what harm is associated with this mistake. The concluding section will briefly reflect on the broader significance of the thesis of this paper.

¹ Fricker, 2007.

I. Peer Disagreement & Epistemic Evaluations:

The field of peer disagreement in epistemology is both fascinating and rapidly expanding. Before it can be explored, a working definition of epistemic peers is necessary. Individuals are considered epistemic peers when neither of them enjoys an advantage nor suffers from a disadvantage with regards to their knowledge of the evidence and arguments pertaining to a disagreement, nor stands on unequal footing with regards to cognitive ability or virtues/vices. If cognitive/evidential advantages, inequalities, or other relevant differences are present, then the parties involved are divided as epistemic inferiors and superiors.

The question at the heart of this field is this: what is the *rational* response to disagreement with an epistemic peer? This question looms over and, to a large degree, shapes the writing on peer disagreement. There are numerous other queries and directions, which have been or are being explored due to their relation to the primary question. There is, however, a distinct but related question: what qualities or characteristics allow one to accurately judge another as an epistemic inferior, peer, or superior? This question is of great import; since to reach a stage where the primary question becomes epistemically relevant to one's disagreement, one must first be able to establish if any particular disagreement is a case of disagreement with an epistemic inferior, peer, or superior.

This final question, which I will refer to as 'p-question,' is what sparked the thesis of this work: that there are certain virtues, p-virtues, that must be possessed in order to accurately assess any given disagreement and assign it to one of the three categories. The p-question seems to have been largely overlooked by the literature on peer disagreement, and the explanatory gap must be filled in order for the answers to broader questions to become useful. If one cannot reliably establish who is an epistemic inferior, peer, or superior, then one greatly reduces the probability that they will respond rationally to a disagreement, even if they

possesses the correct answer to the primary question. I will continue on now to establish two examples of p-virtues.

II. Testimonial Justice:

Testimonial justice will be defined as the negation of testimonial injustice, so it is with the latter concept that I will begin. First, the context of this particular kind of epistemic injustice (testimonial injustice is here thought to be a subset of epistemic injustice) is that there is a situation where a speaker and would be knower attempts to *tell* a hearer something, and thus transmit knowledge. “. . .the central case of testimonial injustice is identity-prejudicial credibility deficit”². The two primary components of this definition of testimonial injustice are that it stems from one’s prejudices against certain perceived identities, and that this prejudice is used by the hearer to justify giving the speaker lessened credibility as a knower. The hearer’s reliance on identity prejudices which result in affording the speaker a lowered credibility is an example of identity power. Using the example of race as a social identity, one can identify testimonial injustice occurring against (in one of many possible examples) certain racial minorities who are stereotyped as being poorly raised, less naturally intelligent, and therefore less credible as knowers³. This kind of persistent testimonial injustice degrades its subject due to the warped perspective of the hearer.

The result of testimonial injustice is that the would be knower suffers what Fricker calls a primary harm: a harm which damages “. . . a capacity essential to human value”.⁴ Fricker claims

² Fricker, pp. 28, 2007.

³ Stereotypes are defined by Fricker neutrally and simply as a widely held association between a given social group and one or more attribute. Further, neutrally defined stereotypes can be seen as unavoidable and often useful heuristics in everyday epistemic situations. However the focus of this work is on negative and prejudiced stereotypes which, as pre-judgements, harm the social group in question as knowers by reinforcing unreliable or unfounded empirical generalizations.

⁴ The distinction and details of primary versus secondary harms will not be discussed here; Fricker, pp.44, 2007.

that being a knower and capable of freely putting forth ideas into social discourse is a fundamental aspect of being a human, and I concur. Being harmed as a knower damages this essentially human aspect of a person. Framing the harm this way allows one to see testimonial injustice as not just an epistemic detriment, but a powerful tool of oppression which silences voices of those who are already forced into characteristically inaccurate and unfair social identities. As Fricker states, the primary harm of this injustice is to undermine the very humanity of the speaker by restricting a basic human freedom and treating them as *less than*.

Testimonial justice as a virtue is thought in this work to be the negation of testimonial injustice; it is the virtue of neutralizing the epistemically harmful prejudices and resulting credibility deficit that accompany testimonial injustice. The intellectual virtue of testimonial justice comes first from a habitual and conscientious recognition of the existence of negative and systematic prejudices, and then proceeding to counter the credibility deficits that stem from this epistemic injustice by giving additional weight and regard to a speaker whose perceived identity normally results in their being shackled with a credibility deficit. Possessing this virtue is crucial to accurately assessing one's epistemic position to another in the case of a disagreement, as without it (or if one possesses the vice of testimonial injustice) one will likely handout credibility deficits that are not related to the speaker's epistemic competence. The implications of testimonial justice with regards to disagreement will be further fleshed out in the section IV of this work. For now, an account of intellectual humility needs to be given.

III. Intellectual Humility:

The definition of the virtue of intellectual humility is contested by scholars, so it will serve this work to briefly outline a few competing views in order to reveal the relevant implications of

each. Robert and Wood, in their work *Intellectual Virtues*⁵, extract an idea of intellectual humility as it relates to corresponding vices like vanity and arrogance. Julia Driver⁶ gives an account of modesty, which is taken to be correlative to humility, in which one must purposely underestimate and undervalue their own worth. Contrastingly, Garcia⁷ offers a definition which concentrates on the moral as opposed to intellectual virtue of humility, so it must be translated into one which is intellectual for the purpose of this work. Finally, I will divide up these theories into two broad categories in order to distinguish how they relate to and support the thesis on the p-virtues needed by a person to properly assess disagreements.

When illuminated by the vice of intellectual vanity, Roberts and Wood take humility to be a virtue exhibited when a person is generally unconcerned or inattentive to their intellectual value or status. Crucially, this does not entail an ignorance or mistaken perception of the person's worth; they are not deluded about their worth, they are apathetic to it. The intellectually vain person would be overly concerned with how they appeared to others, and how their status and worth is perceived by others.

The vice of intellectual arrogance is said by Roberts and Wood to lay in a person's disposition to feel entitled to make extravagant intellectual claims due to the person's inflated view of themselves. An intellectually arrogant person sees themselves as superior or more excellent in terms of their thinking, and uses this self-perception as justification to overstep the proper intellectual bounds that are set by an accurate view of their intellectual prowess. Using arrogance as the background for a definition of the virtue of humility, Roberts and Wood say that the virtue is ". . .a disposition not to make unwarranted intellectual entitlement claims on the basis of one's (supposed) superiority or excellence. . ."⁸. Repeating the process of drawing

⁵ Roberts and Wood, 2007.

⁶ Driver, 1999.

⁷ Garcia, 2006.

⁸ Roberts and Wood, pp. 250, 2007.

humility's definition from a possible opposing vice, intellectual humility here concerns itself not with how others perceive the person in question, but with the self-perception of the individual. Further, it is this accurate self-perception and then making of *appropriate* intellectual claims that characterize humility when opposed to arrogance.

Roberts and Wood pull together their various accounts of intellectual humility to offer the following definition: “. . . it is an unusually low dispositional concern for the kind of self-importance that accrues to persons who are viewed by their intellectual communities as talented, accomplished, and skilled. . .”⁹. Intellectual humility is the habit of a person who has an accurate evaluation of their own intellectual skills and virtues to pay little attention or mind to their talents and the like, and not to overestimate the bounds or reach they are entitled to make in terms of intellectual claims upon the consideration of an accurate self-assessment.

Epistemic modesty, not intellectual humility, is the subject of Driver's writing. However this paper will use her account and discuss it as if it is interchangeable with one of intellectual humility, and examine it as such. The primary features of her definition of modesty are a kind of limited ignorance and an inaccurate view of oneself. Self-deception and controlled ignorance are valued by her as tools that lead one to have the intellectual virtue of modesty; she calls this theory an underestimation account. She discusses several versions of the above view, and settles on the following as being the most defensible and accurate: “Combination modesty (CM) is when an agent is modest if he is disposed to underestimate self-worth to some limited extent, even in spite of the available evidence”¹⁰. Emphasis on the “limited” and “controlled” degree of ignorance being purported by Driver shows her recognition of the oddity of supporting an account that involves not only self-deception, but the valuing of ignorance. She examines

⁹ Roberts and Wood, pp. 250, 2007.

¹⁰ Driver, pp.830, 1999.

several counter arguments and finds reason to maintain the view above; I will not delve into these here, but instead continue on to the final account of humility.

The title of Garcia's writing, *Being Unimpressed With Ourselves: Reconceiving Humility*¹¹, offers a highly condensed view of her theory of humility as a moral virtue. It most significantly involves, in an abbreviated sense, being duly unimpressed with oneself. Details arise as she goes on to prescribe a kind of humility where, "The humble are those who are unimpressed with their own admired or envied features (or admirable or enviable ones), those who assign little prominence to their possession of characteristics in which they instead might well take pride"¹². According to Garcia, one relevant distinction between her theory and others is the inward focus it contains; it is a view in which what is important is self-perception, self-evaluation, and one's reactions to these. This is said by her to oppose outwardly directed theories of humility that center on one's interactions and reactions to others' perceptions or assessments. She classifies Roberts and Wood's brand of humility as belonging to the latter category, and critiques their view as exhibiting possible but not necessary conditions for humility. It seems that if we amend her definition to focus on only characteristics which are strongly connected to garnering epistemic goods or traditional intellectual virtues or skills, then we can see her theory as one of intellectual instead of purely moral humility.

A useful division of the three theories of humility (or modesty) discussed is to label them as either promoting an accurate view or belief about one's epistemic capacity or an inaccurate one. Driver's underestimation account advocates for one to have inaccurate beliefs about themselves, where Garcia's and Roberts and Wood's promote accurate self-assessment. Categorizing these theories as such allows for clarification of humility's role as a p-virtue. Inaccurate theories of humility leave room for error in one's assessment of others in the context

¹¹ Garcia, 2006.

¹² Garcia, pp.417, 2006.

of disagreement. If one has inaccurate beliefs about their own intellectual worth or value, they will be more likely to misconstrue their epistemic position in contrast to the person they are disagreeing with. One may falsely take an epistemic inferior to be a peer, or a peer to be a superior; either way this misconstruing of the other because of inaccurate beliefs will impact one's reaction to the disagreement and cause them to engage improperly with the other. Theories of humility in which one does have accurate beliefs will negate these possible mistakes (or at least greatly decrease the chance of them being made), and so allow one to take the proper action in response to disagreement (whether it be an epistemic inferior, peer, or superior). Thus, accurate beliefs of oneself are essential to forming accurate beliefs about the nature of the disagreement and so facilitate an appropriate reaction to the disagreement.

V. Epistemic Trustworthiness & Harm:

What exactly is happening when one misjudges another on the basis of some vice or lack of corresponding virtue? If one misjudges another's epistemic prowess, they have essentially assigned a false value to their degree of epistemic trustworthiness. Borrowing from Fricker, I take this trustworthiness to consist of the dual elements of competence and sincerity¹³. Misjudging as the result of a lack of humility or the presence of testimonial injustice has a profound impact. A lack of humility, for instance, may allow one to consider themselves superior to another who is actually their peer; if this is the case, they may refuse to treat the other as a knower who is capable of transmitting knowledge to themselves or others, and so harm this fundamentally human aspect of other. This misjudging of the self further blocks one from reacting properly to the disagreement at hand.

¹³ Fricker, pp. 45, 2007.

Misjudgment may also come in the form of misjudging the other by exhibiting the vice of testimonial injustice. Here one would, using again an example of genuine peer disagreement, take the other to be inferior but this time because one's judgement is distorted with regards to the other's abilities and epistemic powers. An accessible and socially relevant example of this would be if one doles out a credibility deficit to the other on the basis of the other's dark skin color. Again a misjudgment has occurred, but this time with regards to one's underestimating the other. Such a mistake can dramatically impact the other, who may be discouraged or lose epistemic confidence due to one's judging them inferior, when in reality the basis for one's judgement is a character flaw and not reflective of the other's epistemic abilities.

In either case, one's inaccurate assessment of the other's epistemic trustworthiness causes one to do them wrong, on both an epistemic and human level. Further, these kinds of inaccurate judgements may reflect larger social issues and should be pointed out and corrected whenever possible.

Conclusion:

It can now be seen that possessing the relevant set of intellectual virtues is needed to combat the various kinds of harms that spring from epistemic miscalculations. The virtue of testimonial justice is needed to negate the kind of prejudicial credibility deficits that stem from its paralleling vice, testimonial injustice. Humility is needed to counteract the hubris that leads one to mistakenly have an inflated view of their own epistemic position.

Moving from epistemic evaluation of another person to the consideration of epistemic disagreements and the proper reaction of both parties in the face of varying kinds of disagreement, a fact becomes salient. Without the p-virtues which include humility, testimonial justice, and possibly others, one cannot know or have a justified belief regarding the evidential value they should afford another person's disagreement with them where they hold the belief

that P, and the other person (S1) holds that not-P is true. This is because the lack of p-virtues allows for the fact that one's response to a disagreement may be suffering from an over-rated self-evaluation or an identity-prejudicial credibility deficit, and one may be reacting inappropriately. It is only with the possession of p-virtues that one can be said to know what evidential value to attribute to a disagreement and react accordingly. The lack of p-virtues rules out one as knowing how to rationally react to disagreement because there is every chance that, whatever their reaction, they would be reacting to an illusion based on ego, harmful prejudices, or both.

Where does my thesis reside in the broader context of contemporary epistemology? It belongs to the burgeoning literature that seeks to establish theoretically illuminating connections between social epistemology and virtue epistemology. The cross fertilization of these sub-fields can be seen in other work by Fricker, where she develops arguments on institutional virtues¹⁴. Writing of this kind, which utilizes the explanatory ability of theories and terms in the discussed sub-fields, can reveal new ways of understanding relevant social, moral, and epistemic issues.

I do not imagine that humility and testimonial justice encompass all p-virtues, however, they seem to play a significant role in allowing us to accurately judge ourselves and others epistemically. One's ability to recognize how socially constructed and enforced prejudices form unjust power structures which manifest (at least in one way) as epistemic injustices is vital to breaking down said power structures. I look forward to further exploration of these p-virtues and examining other potential factors like intellectual courage and flexibility that shed light on the questions considered in this work.

¹⁴ Fricker, 2010.

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