

EDITORIAL

It's probably no secret to readers of this *Journal* that working in areas of frontier science can very easily test one's character and bring out the best and worst of human behavior. I mention this now because a few months ago the journal *Studies in History and Philosophy of the Biological and Biomedical Sciences* published a significant new issue (Volume 48, Part A). It contains a lengthy special section on psychical research, guest-edited by Andreas Sommer. I'll probably comment again about this journal issue in later Editorials, but this time I want to focus on the first paper to catch my attention. Not surprisingly, I suppose, it was written by a philosopher, Ian James Kidd from Durham University, and it boasted the intriguing title, "Was Sir William Crookes epistemically virtuous?" (Kidd 2014).

One reason this caught my eye is that I've written quite a bit about Crookes's work in parapsychology (see, e.g., Braude 1985, 1997, 2007) and have indicated why I consider that work to be important. But Kidd's essay also interested me because I had only recently become aware that a growing number of philosophers had picked up an old philosophical thread (arguably started by Aristotle) and were creating a new—and I'd say worthwhile—philosophical specialty called *virtue epistemology*, which roughly parallels developments in an area of moral theory called *virtue ethics*. Virtue epistemologists quite plausibly maintain that traditional forms of epistemology—perhaps especially those practiced by my colleagues in analytic philosophy—miss something crucial by failing to account for the normative dimensions not just of knowledge specifically but also of rationality in general.

I'd long been impressed by the view of one of my philosophical heroes, C. S. Peirce, who considered logic in its most general sense to be the ethics of belief. So I was naturally pleased to see the authors of one recent book in virtue epistemology (Roberts & Wood 2007) begin their book with the following passage from Peirce:

... in induction a habit of probity is needed for success. ... And in addition to probity, industry is essential. In the presumptive choice of hypotheses, still higher virtues are needed—a true elevation of soul. At the very lowest, a man must prefer the truth to his own interest and well-being and not merely to his bread and butter, and to his own vanity, too, if he is to do much in science. This ... is thoroughly borne out by examining the characters of scientific men and of great heuristic students of all kinds. ... we can perceive that good reasoning and good morals are closely allied; and I suspect that

with the further development of ethics this relation will be found to be even more intimate than we can, as yet, prove it to be. (*Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce* CP 1.576)

Recent works in virtue epistemology typically progress along two main paths. First, some authors address and try to solve (or dissolve) traditional issues in epistemology, such as the intractability of the so-called “Gettier problem” (concerning the analysis of knowledge as justified true belief). Their alternative approach aims instead for a virtue-based analysis of knowledge, competing with the more traditional analyses found in analytic philosophy. A prominent example of this approach is Zagzebski (1996). Second, some authors focus almost exclusively on the epistemic virtues themselves, whether or not this study illuminates the problems considered in more traditional epistemology. Roberts and Wood call this “regulative epistemology.” So they focus on providing accounts of “the habits of mind of the epistemically rational person” (Roberts & Wood 2007:22)—for example, love of knowledge, firmness, courage, and caution.

For those intrigued by these recent philosophical developments, I can recommend the books already mentioned, and also Baehr (2011), DePaul and Zagzebski (2003), Fairweather (2014), Fairweather and Zagzebski (2001), and Sosa (1992, 2007).

And I’d like to think that many *JSE* readers would want to consider the relevance of virtue epistemology to their own interests. Indeed, to me it seems obvious that rationality—both generally and certainly in areas of frontier science—is not simply a matter of making decisions in an allegedly objective, disinterested way, as many philosophers and others try to describe it. That’s why game-theoretic accounts of rationality, say, miss something crucial. I think a deeper account of rationality would have to have a kind of virtue ethics as a component. Rationality is about decisions, of course. But it’s also about making decisions in the face of real-life challenges. For example, being able to weigh alternative scientific hypotheses is not something that happens in an emotional or psychological vacuum. Often enough, we make those choices under pressure—for example, the pressure of challenges to positions on which we’ve staked our careers, or simply challenges to beliefs with which we’re comfortable or familiar.¹ Our ability to confront those tests successfully requires industry, honesty, dedication to the truth, and sometimes intellectual courage. Scientists who lack these virtues are not simply exhibiting moral failures such as indolence or cowardice; they’re also exhibiting fundamental failures in rationality. Baehr makes the point very nicely.

. . . inquiry has a robustly active dimension. It involves observing, imagining, reading, interpreting, reflecting, analyzing, assessing, formulating, and articulating. Success in these activities . . . requires an exercise of certain intellectual character traits. It can require, for instance, that one engage in *attentive* observation, *thoughtful* or *open-minded* imagination, *patient* reflection, *careful* and *thorough* analysis, or *fair-minded* interpretation and assessment. As this suggests, inquiry makes substantial personal demands on inquirers. It demands an exercise of a range of "intellectual character virtues." (Baehr 2011:1)

. . . personal character is not exhausted by moral character. It also has an epistemic or intellectual dimension: a fully or broadly virtuous person can also be counted on to care deeply about ends such as truth, knowledge, evidence, rationality, and understanding; and out of this fundamental concern will emerge other traits such as inquisitiveness, attentiveness, carefulness, and thoroughness in inquiry, fair-mindedness, open-mindedness, and *intellectual* patience, honesty, courage, humility, and rigor. (Baehr 2011:2)

I'm personally very pleased to see virtue epistemology develop as a philosophical area of specialization. For one thing, it makes me feel less lonely about expressing my contempt (as I often do) for the intellectual dishonesty and cowardice I so often see in the many attempts to thwart or denigrate research in the empirical domains discussed in the pages of this *Journal*. I've been chided by some of my colleagues for speaking out forcefully against the individuals I've targeted. But I consider my criticisms to be a form of justifiable moral outrage, and I see nothing wrong in strongly condemning bad behavior, whether it's that of a serial rapist or someone merely posturing as a scientific authority. After all, it's clearly intellectually dishonest to pontificate confidently about matters about which you *know* you're ignorant, or to knowingly ignore evidence opposing the position you favor, as career skeptics often do. And it's cowardly to reflexively condemn or avoid research into subjects that challenge familiar, comfortable views.

I've addressed this issue in the past, before I realized that my concerns could be buttressed by developments in virtue epistemology. For example, I noted the following (Braude 2008).²

It continues to amaze me how carelessly and unscrupulously otherwise smart and honest people argue against the existence of psi generally and its more dramatic manifestations in particular. There are, of course, careful, courageous, and reflective critics of the field. But too often critics resort easily to lines of argument they would be quick to detect as sleazy or indefensible in other contexts—for example, if those arguments had been directed at *them*. In fact, it's almost as if a veil of idiocy suddenly descends on those who are otherwise penetrating and intelligent. In my view, it's unlikely that in most other contexts skeptics would resort so easily to *ad hominem* and straw man arguments. But that's precisely what dominates the skeptical literature. (Braude 2008:109–110)

It's obvious that many skeptics are intelligent people, and I suggest that it's highly unlikely that these shabby criticisms of the parapsychological evidence are simply the sorts of occasional and more or less random spasms of stupidity that all persons experience sometimes. Indeed, if that's all the criticisms were, then presumably those lapses wouldn't occur so exclusively and so transparently in connection with parapsychology. It's much more plausible that many skeptics are simply in a kind of conceptual panic, [and] that in the grip of this panic their reason and integrity go by the wayside. (Braude 2008:111)

Of course as I've noted in previous Editorials, researchers in areas of frontier science also sometimes engage in shoddy (if not disgraceful) intellectual practices. For example, I've criticized certain parapsychologists who (on the one hand) know there's an abundance of serious evidence for psychokinesis from both spontaneous cases and semi-experimental studies of physical mediumship (Braude 1997), and (on the other hand) deny the reality of PK primarily on the transparently lame grounds that they (or others) can't elicit evidence for the phenomenon reliably or clearly under strict laboratory conditions. Although I understand the frustration and resistance of scientists who can't get PK to behave experimentally the way they'd like, why assume from the outset that it's a process that should have been brought into the lab in the first place? The point here is not difficult to grasp. As I've often noted, although many speculate with varying degrees of competence and sophistication about the role of psi in life, in fact we know so little about ESP and PK and their role (if any) in a natural setting outside the lab, for all we know it may be as difficult or inappropriate to study psi experimentally (and expect consistent behavior) as it would be to study sexual arousal, wittiness, or athletic proficiency in the lab. If PK fails under strict experimental protocols to behave like a paradigmatic, non-intentional, purely mechanical process, the obvious conclusion, to me at any rate, would be not that it may not exist but that we're applying the wrong tools to examine it.

Analogously, it would be equally and obviously foolish to conclude that penile erections are illusory—or simply that their existence is unconfirmed—because (some porn stars possibly notwithstanding) they can't be produced reliably under the cold scrutiny of experimenters and strict laboratory controls and conditions. The same holds, clearly, for the ability to produce witty remarks and the ability to return tennis serves (among many other abilities—see Braude, 2014, Chapter 6 for more on this). And needless to say, we know indisputably that erections, witty remarks, and returned tennis serves occur, and that this knowledge can't be undermined by familiar and inexcusably glib appeals to the fallibility of

eyewitness testimony, especially under conditions relevantly different from those which encourage or facilitate eyewitness errors.³ So maybe PK won't be amenable to the sort of analysis and experimental investigation some scientists would like to give it. But so what? It's both arrogant and shallow to think that Nature should conform to our preferred methods of description or inquiry, or yield its secrets only in those forms we're prepared to accept, and I believe it's appropriate to denounce that methodological pretentiousness for what it is. The more admirable epistemological stance, I believe, is to be open to the wisdom of Aristotle's ancient claim that different domains demand (or at least may demand) different modes of investigation and explanation, and thus to be alert for, and more prepared to deal with, the cards we've been handed.

Oh, and in case you were wondering, Kidd concludes that Crookes was indeed epistemically virtuous. I urge you to consider his arguments for that conclusion—and in fact to read Crookes's splendid and admirable *Researches in the Phenomena of Spiritualism*, which may now be accessed for free, along with some other parapsychological classics, on the Esalen Center for Theory and Research website. For Crookes's book, the link is <http://www.esalen.org/ctr-archive/crookes-researches.html>. Moreover, the book may be downloaded for free at archive.org: <https://archive.org/details/researchesinphe02croogooq>. Those who read this work will understand clearly why Kidd takes the position he does.⁴

Notes

- ¹ There's seductive security in familiarity, of course, and not just with respect to one's empirical and theoretical commitments. Probably it's also one reason people remain in toxic intimate relationships—a significant obstacle to risking the unknown in the hope of finding a more compatible partner. In any case, familiar scientific theories offer an analogous comfort, despite what may be their obvious and even fatal flaws or limitations. My favorite example is memory trace theory (see Braude 2014).
- ² These comments were made in connection with parapsychology, but (as far as I can tell) at least some of them could apply equally to other domains of frontier science—e.g., Ufology, LENR, homeopathy, and cryptozoology.
- ³ For details about the reliance on eyewitness testimony in connection with psi phenomena, see my extended treatment (Braude 1997), or the more compact treatments (Braude 2007), and my Editorial to *JSE* Volume 28, Number 2, Summer 2014.
- ⁴ I'm grateful to Stan McDaniel and Ed Kelly for helpful comments on early versions of this Editorial.

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