

IN DEFENSE OF VIRTUE-RESPONSIBILISM

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ABSTRACT: Modest realism affirms that some of the *objects* of our beliefs exist independently of our beliefs. That is, there is a mind-independent world that we can epistemically access. The Cartesian skeptic claims that we can't offer any non-question-begging arguments in favor of modest realism and therefore we are not justified in believing that modest realism is true. Reliabilists argue that the skeptic assumes an evidentialist-internalist account of justification and that a proper account of justification jettisons this. Hence, our belief in modest realism can be justified. I argue in this paper that virtue-responsibilism offers an analogous response to the Cartesian skeptic. According to the virtue-responsibilist, my belief that *P* is an instance of knowledge iff it maps onto reality and is the result of an act of virtue. I show that the virtue-responsibilist theory excludes evidentialist-internalism, and allows for our belief in modest realism to be justified. However, it may be objected that the virtue-responsibilist can't offer non-question-begging reasons for thinking that the virtues are reliable. I argue that this objection fails and that we can know that the virtues are reliable by empirical study. Thus, virtue-responsibilism provides a satisfactory response to the Cartesian skeptic.

KEYWORDS: virtue-responsibilism, reliabilism, skepticism

Upon seeing a car in my driveway, I find myself with the belief *that the car is in my driveway*. As I reflect on this belief, I find myself convinced that the car's sitting in my driveway is a fact independent of my belief *that the car is in my driveway*. That is, I believe that the world isn't influenced or altered by my belief about the car. Furthermore, I believe that the world isn't influenced or altered by many, if not all, of my beliefs. Modest realism is the view that there is a mind-independent world that we can (sometimes) epistemically access. It is modest because it affirms that we *can* access the external world and it is realist because it affirms that there is an external world. Yet, historically, philosophers have pointed out that I can't offer non-question-begging support for my belief *that modest realism is true*. According to the Skeptic, this inability precludes me from being justified in holding that belief; that is, my belief *that modest realism is true* is unjustified. This historically prominent form of skepticism (which I shall hereafter refer to as Cartesian skepticism) is the topic of this paper.

Throughout the past quarter-century, reliabilists have been arguing that the Cartesian skeptic succeeds in undermining our *belief* in modest realism *only if* an evidentialist-internalist conception of justification, according to which justification requires the having of appropriate evidence, is assumed. Reliabilists

jettison that assumption and argue that for a belief to be justified is for it to be produced by belief-forming faculties that produce more true than false beliefs. Since they do not share the assumed conception of justification with the skeptic, they avoid Cartesian skepticism altogether. While much ink has been spilled over contemporary reliabilist responses to the Cartesian skeptic, few have stopped to think about whether or not virtue-responsibilism (the view held by Linda Zagzebski) offers a satisfactory response as well. According to virtue-responsibilism, a belief counts as knowledge if, and only if, it maps onto reality and was produced by an act of intellectual virtue.¹ While differing drastically over what it takes for a true belief to count as knowledge, I will argue that virtue-responsibilism offers a similar response to the Cartesian skeptic: that, in virtue of rejecting the evidentialist-internalist conception of justification, virtue-responsibilism can explain why our belief in modest realism can be or is justified and perhaps even count as knowledge. If I am right, then virtue-responsibilism and reliabilism are structurally closer than proponents of either view may have initially thought.

In section I, I clarify what belief in modest realism amounts to and the skeptical argument it faces. In section II, I argue that the skeptic assumes an evidentialist-internalist component of justification. In section III, I lay out the main contours of the virtue-responsibilist theory defended by Linda Zagzebski. I show that her theory has the resources to provide us with knowledge of and justification for our belief in modest realism. In other words, if her theory of justification and knowledge is correct, Cartesian skepticism does not arise. In section IV, I respond to a pressing objection to my argument, and then draw the final conclusions of this paper together in section V.

I

I shall start by clarifying what modest realism is and why the Cartesian skeptic threatens our belief regarding its truthfulness. In seeking beliefs that represent how the world *actually* is, human beings are seeking a kind of objectivity.² Modest realism is a view about the kind of objectivity available to human beings; it states that “at least some of [the objects of] our beliefs [are] objective, that is, logically

¹ Linda Zagzebski, “What is Knowledge?” in *The Blackwell Guide to Epistemology*, eds. John Greco and Ernest Sosa (Malden: Blackwell, 1999), 109; Linda Zagzebski, *Virtues of the Mind: An Inquiry into the Nature of Virtue and the Ethical Foundations of Knowledge* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 264-273.

² The view of modest realism and the skepticism that threatens is borrowed heavily from, Paul Moser, “Realism, Objectivity, and Skepticism,” in *The Blackwell Guide to Epistemology*, 70-92.

and causally independent of someone's conceiving of [those] thing[s]."³ I take this to mean, A is logically independent of B if B's obtaining doesn't logically entail or preclude A's obtaining, and A is causally independent of B if B's obtaining isn't brought about or influenced by A's obtaining. I shall not offer a precise meaning of 'brought about' or 'influenced' since they are sufficiently intuitive and an analysis of these concepts would take us too far afield.

An example may clarify. Take a fact in the world, say the Lakers winning last night. The fact that the Lakers won last night is logically and causally independent of my belief *that the Lakers won*. The Lakers winning last night is not entailed by my belief *that the Lakers won*. In fact the Lakers winning last night would still obtain even if I believed that they lost the game or that they didn't play at all. Moreover, my belief *that the Lakers won* didn't cause it to be the case that the Lakers won. The Lakers winning the game is 'radically' independent of my beliefs about the game. Modest realism correlates nicely with the following account of truth: my belief *that p* is true if and only if the world is as P says.⁴ My belief *that the Lakers won last night* is true if and only if the world is such that the Lakers won last night. Modest realism and this view of truth is intelligible and *prima facie* intuitive. Ask people if the results of Lakers games depend on what they believe and most likely they will offer a resounding *No*.

As with most views however, our belief that modest realism is true is open to skeptical doubts. It is common sense among philosophers that one shouldn't provide a question-begging argument or evidence in favor of a view. While philosophers disagree about what 'question-begging' amounts to, for the purposes of this essay a question-begging argument is one where the truth of the conclusion is viciously assumed in the premises. Let me clarify with an example: if I were to argue that the faculty of sight is reliable by pointing out how nicely my perceptual beliefs align with the world, I would beg the question, for the only reason my perceptual beliefs would align with the world is if my sight is reliable.⁵ Thus understood, it is obvious that question-begging arguments offer no argument at all. If we allow ourselves to beg the question in philosophy, we will be closer to affirming unsupported truths rather than reasoned positions. Given the reasonableness of rejecting question-begging arguments, the skeptical argument against our belief in modest realism arises once we ask ourselves whether or not

³ Moser, "Realism, Objectivity, and Skepticism," 71.

⁴ Moser, "Realism, Objectivity, and Skepticism," 72.

⁵ My argument does not hinge on the distinction between logical and epistemic circularity made by William Alston in "Epistemic Circularity," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 47 (1986): 1-30.

we can deliver non-question-begging reasons or evidence in favor of modest realism.⁶ How can someone who believes *that there is a mind-independent world that we can epistemically access* offer support for his or her belief that does not beg the question against someone who thinks that we are all being massively deceived by an evil demon?

Take a perceptual belief of mine. I currently see a book. I see it to be a certain color, shape and size. On the basis of my perceptual experience, I form the belief *that the book is on the table*. I (along with all non-philosophers) assume that this belief is justified on the basis of my perceptual experience alone. After all, I have no reason to believe that my perceptual experience yielded a false belief, and we can assume that my friends agree with me that the book is on the table. So how could my belief be anything other than justified? Enter the skeptic. She says, “Your belief *that the book is on the table* is based on perceptual experience. You believe it because you perceived it. Your friends agree with your belief because they too had a perceptual experience of the book. But you can’t take *that* to justify your belief. Your perceptual experience, lack of doubt, and communal support is compatible with your being a brain-in-a-vat, being deceived by a demon, or with the book disappearing into thin air the second you walk away. Your perceptual experience of a book and your perceptual experience of a book-hologram would be indistinguishable to you such that you couldn’t tell which one you were looking at. Therefore, you cannot assume that your perceptual experience of the book is evidence of the existence of the book (as opposed to the book-hologram). Thus, what grounds do you have for thinking that perception and other sensory experiences delivers true beliefs about objects cognitively independent of you?”⁷

What the Cartesian skeptic is doing is drawing our attention to the following fact: If our belief in the existence of a mind-independent world (modest realism) is true, its truthfulness has nothing to do with our reflectively available evidence or reasons.⁸ All of our supposed ‘evidence’ of sensory experience is compatible with the truthfulness of skeptical hypotheses. Our sensory experience would phenomenally appear to be the same regardless of whether modest realism or some skeptical hypothesis is true, and thus our sensory experiences do not privilege modest realism. Therefore, if our belief in modest realism is true, it is

⁶ Moser, “Realism, Objectivity, and Skepticism,” 73.

⁷ Hume, in *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (12.1.11), writes: “By what argument can it be proved, that the perceptions of the mind must be caused by external objects, entirely different from them, though resembling them... and could not arise either from the energy of the mind itself, or from the suggestion of some invisible and unknown spirit?”

⁸ This is what Duncan Pritchard calls “Reflective Epistemic Luck.” See his *Epistemic Luck* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), Chapters 5 and 6 (especially section 6.5).

only *luckily* true; its truthfulness would have nothing to do with our ‘evidence.’ It would just be a matter of luck that what we believe is true. Since luckily true beliefs are not justified nor count as knowledge, it follows that our belief in the truthfulness of modest realism is not justified nor does it count as knowledge. Therefore, our belief in modest realism lacks justification.

As if this isn’t devastating enough, the skeptic goes on to point out that if we are to be justified in believing that modest realism is true, we must have *some positive reason or evidence* for thinking that it is true;⁹ after all, arguing that *all* of the skeptical scenarios fail wouldn’t justify our belief in modest realism since it wouldn’t follow that modest realism is true. Putting the many skeptical scenarios aside, there are many different views about the kind of objectivity available to human beings. Even if the proponent of modest realism argued against all of those views too, it *still wouldn’t follow that modest realism is true*. Perhaps there is a view of objectivity we have yet to consider. Therefore, one should have reasons or evidence for believing that modest realism (as opposed to some other skeptical scenario) is true. The skeptic argues that we do not possess any such reason or evidence and are therefore not justified in believing that modest realism is true.

The skeptical inquiry results in the epistemic status of one’s belief in modest realism being undermined. Skepticism of this form disregards whether or not modest realism is true. Its focus is on the status of our belief in modest realism; its result is sobering.

II

There are two ways to respond to a skeptical argument. On the one hand, we can diagnose the argument and see what background assumptions are propelling it. On the other hand, we can meet the argument head on and argue that it fails. This skeptical argument is not new and there have been numerous responses to it along both lines; of particular concern to this paper, however, is that reliabilists attempt the former move. I shall follow in their footsteps and attempt to show that the skeptical argument assumes an evidentialist-internalist view of justification.¹⁰

The skeptic argues that if our belief in modest realism were true, it would only be luckily true. This is because there is no non-question-begging evidence that can be offered in its defense. Since luckily true beliefs are not justified, our belief in modest realism is unjustified. In arguing as she does, the skeptic is

⁹ Moser, “Realism, Objectivity, and Skepticism,” 74.

¹⁰ The skeptic obviously doesn’t have to assume a thoroughly ‘internalistic’ conception of justification. My argument goes through on any conception of justification that essentially includes an internalistic component such as this.

reasonably assuming that justified beliefs are not luckily true beliefs and that luckily true beliefs are not justified beliefs. This raises the more general question as to what it means for a belief to be lucky or justified? Or, put another way, what theory of justification is the skeptic assuming? It seems to me that the Cartesian skeptic is assuming an evidentialist-internalist account of justification. According to evidentialist-internalism, a belief's justificatory status depends on the evidence that the subject possesses. Following Richard Feldman and Earl Conee, we can state it more formally as follows:

Evidentialist-internalism (EI): S's belief *that p* is epistemically justified for S at t1 if and only if S's belief fits the evidence E that S has at t1.¹¹

EI nicely captures the intuition that what matters for justification is the possession of proper evidence and it is intended to rule out luck. Intuitively, if I have evidence for my belief *that p* then my belief is not lucky; if, however, I do not have evidence for my belief *that p* then it is not justified and its truthfulness will be a matter of luck.

The Cartesian skeptic assumes that EI is the rubric that draws the distinction between lucky and justified beliefs. The skeptic is arguing that our belief in modest realism lacks justification because it lacks evidential support. Let me be clear, however, that the skeptic is not arguing that since we cannot *offer* justifying evidence for our belief in modest realism, we are unjustified. Rather, the skeptic is arguing that there is *no* justifying evidence at all! What we originally thought was evidence in favor of modest realism turned out not to be evidence. Our sensory experiences of the world are compatible with a whole host of skeptical scenarios and therefore do not evidentially privilege modest realism. Once the skeptic argues that sensory experiences are not evidence in favor of modest realism, she goes on to ask what other non-question-begging evidence is there for that belief. She argues that there is none and that our belief *that modest realism is true* is unjustified. Therefore, since our belief in modest realism lacks evidence it is unjustified. This is to assume that EI is true.

Moreover, as reliabilists are apt to point out, EI is essential to the skeptic's argument. If the Cartesian skeptic does not assume EI, the conclusion of her argument does not follow; someone could be justified in believing *that modest realism is true* all the while lacking evidence. But if this were the case, this would not be a skeptical problem. The skeptic does not entertain the possibility of someone saying, "I cannot give non-question-begging evidence for my belief in

¹¹ Richard Feldman and Earl Conee, "Evidentialism," *Philosophical Studies* 48 (1985): 15-34.

modest realism, but I am nevertheless justified in believing it. Evidence is not necessary for justification.” Therefore, it is EI that propels the skeptical argument.

III

Having shown that the Cartesian skeptic presupposes an internalist component (EI) is one thing, arguing that EI is false is another. A cottage industry of responses to Cartesian skepticism along reliabilist lines have arisen since Alvin Goldman’s seminal paper “What is Justified Belief” appeared in 1979.¹² Reliabilists argue that a proper account of justification does not require an evidentialist-internalist component and that one can be justified in believing *that p* without possessing any evidence for *P*. (More on this below.) Whether or not the reliabilist diagnosis and response work is still hotly debated. What is of concern to us is whether or not virtue epistemology and virtue-responsibilism in particular offers an analogous response. Now, the field of virtue epistemology can be divided into two camps: virtue-reliabilists and virtue-responsibilists.¹³ The difference between the two camps concerns their conception of what an intellectual virtue is. Virtue-responsibilists think that the virtues are acquired over time, and require proper motivation and habituation; the intellectual virtues are more like acquired personality traits than innate cognitive powers or abilities.¹⁴ The paradigm virtues for virtue-responsibilists are intellectual courage, intellectual autonomy, and open-mindedness; they deny that the faculties of sight and hearing are intellectual virtues.¹⁵ Virtue-reliabilists disagree. For them, the intellectual virtues are natural or acquired cognitive powers and abilities that don’t necessarily require proper motivation and habituation. An intellectual virtue is any properly human faculty or habit that enables a person to arrive at the truth. Virtue-reliabilists think that the paradigm virtues are the natural faculties like sight and hearing.

Now virtue-reliabilists, just like their reliabilist predecessors, have a ready reply to Cartesian skepticism. According to reliabilism, “If *S*’s believing *p* at *t* results from a reliable cognitive belief-forming process (or set of processes), then *S*’s belief in *p* at *t* is justified.”¹⁶ A reliabilist argues that our lack of evidence for our belief in modest realism is irrelevant to its justificatory status. So long as a

¹² Alvin Goldman, “What is Justified Belief?” in *Justification and Knowledge*, ed. George Pappas (Dordrecht: D. Reidel, 1979), 1-23, reprinted in *Epistemology: An Anthology*, eds. Ernest Sosa and Jaegwon Kim (Malden: Blackwell, 2000), 340-353.

¹³ Heather Battaly, “Virtue Epistemology,” *Philosophy Compass* 3, 4 (2008): 639-663.

¹⁴ John Greco, “Virtues in Epistemology,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Epistemology*, ed. Paul K. Moser (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 287.

¹⁵ Greco, “Virtues in Epistemology,” 287.

¹⁶ Goldman, “What is Justified Belief,” 347.

reliable belief-forming process produced this belief, it is justified. Virtue-reliabilism is a successor to reliabilism. What distinguishes reliabilism and virtue-reliabilism can be brought to light by focusing on a problem that plagues reliabilism:

Imagine that Bob has a brain lesion that spontaneously fuses with Bob's cognitive faculties and causes him to form only one belief, the belief *that he has a brain lesion*. This belief is true, and since the brain lesion produces only true beliefs, it is a reliable belief-forming process. Therefore, Bob's belief is justified.¹⁷

The troubling intuition is that a brain lesion is not the sort of belief-forming process that ought to give rise to justified beliefs; yet, it satisfies the reliabilist account of justification. What this case shows is that the belief-forming processes that matter are *properly human* belief-forming processes, and brain lesions are not a *properly human* belief-forming process, even if they are reliable. The virtue-reliabilist hones in on this intuition and claims that intellectual virtues are *properly human* abilities and processes that reliably produce true beliefs. They go on to offer an account of justification in terms of the intellectual virtues: S's belief *p* is justified at *t*₁ if, and only if, S's belief *p* is produced by intellectual virtue(s) at *t*₁.¹⁸ This does not impose an EI account of justification. Insofar as our belief in modest realism is virtuously formed, we can be justified.

The virtue-reliabilist response is well known through the work of Ernest Sosa, John Greco and others.¹⁹ *But what is not as well known and what is especially interesting is, virtue-responsibilists have an equally strong reply.* In what follows, I will argue that the Cartesian skeptic is vitiated on a virtue-responsibilist account of knowledge. That is, assuming the truthfulness of virtue-responsibilism the skeptical argument does not arise. I will focus on the work of Linda Zagzebski who was the first to fully articulate and defend a virtue-responsibilist account of knowledge and justification. I will argue that her account offers a response to the skeptical argument along similar lines as the reliabilist and virtue-reliabilist. The upshot of this will be that Zagzebski's theory is structurally similar to reliabilism.

¹⁷ This common objection to reliabilism can be found in Alvin Plantinga, *Warrant: The Current Debate* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 197-207.

¹⁸ This is an oversimplified account; for much fuller detail, see John Greco's *Achieving Knowledge* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), Ernest Sosa's *Reflective Knowledge* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995) and "Reflective Knowledge in the Best Circles," in *Epistemology: An Anthology*, 274-295, among others.

¹⁹ Refer to note 18.

Zagzebski defines knowledge as “cognitive contact with reality arising out of acts of intellectual virtue.”²⁰ At once the skeptic will object that Zagzebski is assuming modest realism by defining knowledge as “contact with reality.” But this definition of knowledge is compatible with views of reality other than modest realism. This is because *reality* functions in her definition as that which knowledge is of. If idealism (roughly, the view that reality is mental) were true, then “reality” would be the mental images that we have knowledge of. Thus, “reality” in her definition doesn’t assume the truth of modest realism.

Central to her account of knowledge are acts of intellectual virtue. An act of intellectual virtue A does not require that one possess virtue A. It only requires that one act in accord with that virtue. (I can act open-mindedly even if I don’t possess that virtue.) An act of intellectual virtue A has three components.²¹ First, the act must arise from the motivational component of virtue A. Each intellectual virtue has a dual motivation component, a specific and a general one. Most intellectual virtues are generally motivated towards truth;²² they each have a specific motivational component that differentiates them from each other. For example, open-mindedness and intellectual courage are both motivated toward truth but have a specific motivational component. To act open-mindedly is to be motivated to entertain other viable alternatives to one’s view, while to be intellectually courageous is to be motivated to defend one’s belief against counter-evidence. Thus, an act of virtue A requires that the act be motivated by the general and specific motivational component of A.

Second, the act must be one that a person with virtue A would characteristically do in the situation. Whether we cash out this virtuous person as an ideal observer or a human being is irrelevant. All that matters is that the act is one an intellectually virtuous person with virtue A would do. The virtuous person may perform actions E, F, and G in situation X to arrive at belief *that p*; therefore, if I am to arrive at knowledge through an act of virtue A, I must perform those actions E, F, and G in situation X.

Third, the act of virtue must be successful in achieving knowledge due to the previous two features of the act. The motivational component of A, along with the fact that the act is what the virtuous person would do, *results in* a true belief. John Greco has labeled this “*resulting in*” relation a causal-responsible relation where: The agent’s acts and motivations are causally responsible for the resultant belief and the agent’s acts and motivations are the most salient features of the

²⁰ Zagzebski, “What is Knowledge,” 109.

²¹ Zagzebski, “What is Knowledge,” 108.

²² “Most” because some intellectual virtues, like creativity, are not aimed at truth.

resultant belief.²³ If I know *that P*, it is because my virtuous motivations and actions produced the belief and there are no other (Gettier-like) factors involved. An analysis of my knowledge of P will refer solely to my actions and motivations.

Zagzebski's account is straightforward. Knowledge is contact with reality arising out of an act of virtue. Acts of virtue require (1) proper motivation[s], (2) proper action(s) and (3) success because of those motivation[s] and action(s). Her account lends itself nicely to an analysis of other epistemic terms.²⁴ To be justified in believing P on her account, one must satisfy conditions (1) and (2) of an act of virtue. One must be properly motivated in believing P and act how the virtuous person would act. Justification, therefore, requires the first two conditions of an act of virtue but jettisons the success condition. This captures our intuitions that a justified belief is an epistemically blameless belief that may be false, and thus her account nicely accommodates our intuitions regarding justification.

What is important to notice about Zagzebski's account of knowledge and justification is that it excludes the evidentialist-internalist constraint found in the skeptic's argument. Recall the evidentialist-internalist constraint: S's belief *that p* is epistemically justified for S if and only if S's belief fits the evidence E that S has. The possession of evidence or reasons is a necessary condition for justification according to the Cartesian skeptic. *Zagzebski's account of knowledge and justification imposes no such restraint.* Acts of virtue do not require that one possess evidence or reasons. If I believe *that p* because of intellectually virtuous motivations and actions, I can be justified in believing *that p* despite my lack of evidence. An example may help: if I see a car down the road and form the belief *that there is a car*, I am justified in my belief. I am justified because I am motivated to believe perceptual beliefs (which are a source of knowledge) and act as a virtuous agent would (virtuous agents believe perceptual beliefs in absence of counter-evidence). It is not essential to the justificatory status of my belief that I have evidence for my belief *that there is a car*.

The skeptical argument presupposed an evidentialist-internalist account of justification. With that constraint, we cannot be justified in our belief in modest realism since we lack non-question-begging evidence. Zagzebski's account of knowledge jettisons the internalist constraint (EI) that is presupposed in the skeptical argument. On her account, we can *be justified in our belief in modest realism as well as have knowledge that moderate realism is true.* Belief in modest realism can be justified if it meets the first two conditions of an act of intellectual

²³ Greco, "Virtues in Epistemology," 309.

²⁴ It is not clear to me that Zagzebski would agree with my account of justification; hereafter, I will proceed assuming that she would. However, see her account on 241 of *Virtues of the Mind*.

virtue. Belief in modest realism (assuming it is true) can be knowledge for a person if it meets all three conditions of an act of virtue. Thus, the skeptical argument against our *belief* in modest realism fails on a virtue-responsibilist account of knowledge. This result is exciting.

IV

Discontent with how easy this response seems to be, the Cartesian skeptic may be tempted to reformulate the skeptical argument as follows. Assuming that knowledge is cognitive contact with reality arising out of acts of intellectual virtue, can we provide any non-question begging reasons for thinking that the virtues are reliable? Virtue-responsibilism posits that we can have knowledge and justification through acts of virtue. But this account of knowledge presupposes that the virtues are reliable conduits of truth. Yet how can we know that the virtues are reliable conduits of truth? One cannot use the virtues to determine whether or not the virtues are reliable because that would beg the question. Since all knowledge is arrived at through virtuous actions, we can never know that the virtues are reliable. So, it appears that a new skeptical challenge arises for the virtue-responsibilist.

The first thing to notice is that Zagzebski can respond by simply *denying* that we can't have knowledge that the virtues are reliable.²⁵ Recall that on her account, one doesn't have to provide reasons for a belief in order to have knowledge. Thus, one could have knowledge that the virtues are reliable without providing reasons for their reliability. All that is required is that the belief in their reliability be arrived at through an act of virtue. While I am partial to this response, I think there is a more satisfying response available.

To better understand this objection, it will be helpful to see how it functions against reliabilist theories of justification. Recall the reliabilist theory: If S's believing *p* results from a reliable belief-forming process (or set of processes), then S's belief in *p* is justified.²⁶ Perception, deduction and hearing are paradigm processes that yield true beliefs more often than false ones. My belief *that sight is reliable* is justified if and only if a reliable process produced that belief. The problem for reliabilism is that we can never be sure that our cognitive faculties are indeed reliable. How can we be sure that our faculty of sight is reliable without using sight? How can we be sure that our faculty of taste is reliable without using that very same faculty? It appears that we can never independently verify that reliabilism is true! All reliabilism gets us is the following conditional: *if* reliabilism

²⁵ This is the line Ernest Sosa appears to take in "Reflective Knowledge in the Best Circles."

²⁶ Goldman, "What is Justified Belief," 347.

is true *and* our cognitive faculties are reliable, *then* we have justified beliefs.²⁷ Reliabilists can respond in a number of ways, but for our purposes we shall overlook these. What is worth pointing out is the intuitive force of the objection: it is dissatisfying that this theory should not allow for verification of reliability.

The question before us is: Does virtue-responsibilism fare any better than reliabilism? We may initially think not since the virtue-responsibilist responded to the Cartesian skeptic in the same way as the reliabilist and virtue-reliabilist. All three jettison the EI. We may think that virtue-responsibilism gets us only the following conditional: *If* virtue-responsibilism is correct *and* the intellectual virtues are reliable, *then* we can have knowledge. I will argue that this is not correct and that virtue-responsibilism has the resources to provide non-question-begging evidence of the reliability of the intellectual virtues.

All virtue-epistemologists agree that the primary locus of epistemic evaluation is the intellectual virtues. Accounts of justification and knowledge are cashed out in terms of the intellectual virtues; recall Zagzebski's account of justification: a belief is justified if and only if it is produced by the proper motivations and proper actions. Likewise with the virtue-reliabilist: a belief is justified if and only if it is produced by intellectual virtues. For both the virtue-reliabilist and Zagzebski, a belief's justificatory status depends upon or supervenes upon the intellectual virtues that gave rise to the belief. This primacy of the intellectual virtues in accounts of justification and knowledge is a general feature specific to virtue-epistemology. Heather Battaly states:

[I]n *virtue epistemology*, agents rather than beliefs are the primary objects of epistemic evaluation, and intellectual virtues and vices, which are evaluations of agents, are the fundamental concepts and properties. Specifically, virtue epistemology takes intellectual virtues and vices – types of agent-evaluation- to be more fundamental than justification, knowledge, or any other type of belief-evaluation.²⁸

In a similar vein, Ernest Sosa says,

Virtue epistemology is distinguished by its emphasis on the subject as seat of justification ... [T]he subject and her cognitive virtues or aptitudes ... hold primary interest for virtue epistemology.²⁹

²⁷ This point is taken from Barry Stroud. See his "Scepticism, Externalism and the Goal of Epistemology," *Aristotelian Society Supplementary Volume* 68 (1994): 291-307. John McDowell makes a similar point in his "Knowledge and the Internal," in *Epistemology: An Anthology*, 413-423.

²⁸ Battaly, "Virtue Epistemology," 640.

²⁹ Sosa, "Reflective Knowledge in the Best Circles," 278

If a virtue epistemologist wants to criticize or commend a belief, they criticize or commend the intellectual traits of character that gave rise to that belief.

Two points are worth emphasizing regarding Zagzebski's conception of intellectual virtues. First, the intellectual virtues require time and habituation to *acquire*. She states, "Intellectual virtues... require training through the imitation of virtuous persons and practice in acting virtuously."³⁰ One isn't born intellectually courageous, rather one becomes intellectually courageous. (Remember that she does not countenance the faculty of sight, hearing and the like as intellectual virtues.) Second, according to Zagzebski, each intellectual virtue "has a characteristic motivation to produce a certain desired end and reliable success in bringing about that end."³¹ The intellectual virtues are differentiated by their *specific* motivations that reliably give rise to *particular* types of actions. For example, the open-minded individual is motivated to entertain competing hypotheses and regularly does so. The intellectually courageous individual is motivated to entertain possible objections and regularly does so. These two points lead to a third point – given that the intellectual virtues are constituted by a specific motivation that gives rise to a type of action, it follows that these motivations and actions are empirically verifiable. What do I mean by this? Simply that people can *see* that an open-minded person is motivated to entertain competing hypotheses and regularly does so. People can *see* that an intellectually courageous individual is motivated to entertain possible objections and regularly does so. That these motivations and actions are empirically verifiable is taken for granted on the virtue-responsibilist account of knowledge. After all, we *acquire* the intellectual virtues by acting and modeling after an intellectually virtuous person, and we can only do this if we can *see* that the person is virtuous and acting from virtue.

We are now in position to show how one can, on a virtue-responsibilist theory, arrive at knowledge of the reliability of each particular virtue in a non-question-begging manner. Given that the intellectual virtues are empirically verifiable character traits of people, we can establish their reliability by empirical examination. We can take open-minded people and examine how often they arrive at true beliefs. Moreover, in undertaking this empirical examination and arriving at the knowledge that open-mindedness reliably produces true beliefs, we (who are doing the testing) don't have to *assume the reliability of open-mindedness* nor *do we have to act open-mindedly ourselves*. To see why, recall

³⁰ Zagzebski, *Virtues of the Mind*, 157-158.

³¹ Zagzebski, *Virtues of the Mind*, 137.

that Zagzebski defines knowledge as “cognitive contact with reality arising out of acts of intellectual virtue,” and that acts of virtue require that one be motivated and act as a virtuous person would.³² Notice that this account does not stipulate, however, that acts of virtue require acting in accordance with *all* of the intellectual virtues. An act of virtue that results in knowledge may require only one or two of the intellectual virtues being acted in accordance with. Therefore, it may be that gathering empirical data and arriving at the knowledge that a particular virtue *X* is reliable does not require that one perform an act of virtue in which virtue *X* is acted in accordance with. In this case, one can arrive at the knowledge that virtue *X* is reliable *without utilizing virtue X*.

For example, take intellectual courage. We start by isolating the clearly distinguishable and specific motivations and actions that are found in someone with intellectual courage. We can do this because we can *see* that the person is motivated by courage and acts accordingly. The next step would be to discern how often he or she arrives true beliefs, or how often intellectual courage has assisted in the production of true beliefs.³³ In this way, we can determine whether or not intellectual courage reliably leads to true beliefs. But notice that in arriving at this knowledge of the reliability of intellectual courage, we who are doing the testing *do not necessarily have to act intellectually courageous ourselves*. An act of virtue that gives rise to the knowledge *that intellectual courage is reliable* may not depend upon the exercise of intellectual courage. In fact, the empirical results of isolating a courageous person and determining their likelihood of truth acquisition seems to be independent of whether or not I am intellectually courageous myself, and so it would seem that a person arriving at this knowledge via an act of virtue would not be acting courageously. Therefore, we can test the reliability of intellectual courage without being courageous ourselves.

It may be objected that the virtue-responsibilist is arguing in a circle. Assume that there are three intellectual virtues A, B and C. The virtue-responsibilist maintains that we can arrive at the knowledge that virtue A is reliable by utilizing virtues B and C in an act of virtue. It is true that we are not deploying virtue A in arriving at the knowledge of its reliability, but the objection continues, aren't we assuming that virtues B and C are reliable indicators of the

³² Zagzebski, “What is Knowledge,” 109.

³³ It may be objected that this ‘empirical examination’ would be next to impossible; how would we know that it is intellectual courage and not some other virtue that led to the subject’s true belief? Why assume that one virtue is responsible for arriving at true beliefs? Response: All I aim to show is that it is *possible*. But, its being possible does not entail that it is easy. An empirical investigation into the reliability of the virtues is going to be difficult, but not impossible!

truth? If we don't assume that they are reliable, then we have no reason to suppose that our considerations regarding A's reliability are reliable. So we must determine whether or not virtue B is reliable, but the only way to do so is to exercise virtues A and C! The same goes for virtue C. We are stuck in a precarious position: we cannot arrive at knowledge regarding the reliability of a specific intellectual virtue without *assuming* the reliability of the other intellectual virtues.

In response, virtue-responsibilism does not require that one *know* or *assume* that the intellectual virtues are reliable in order to have knowledge. All it requires is that one act in accordance with them. Thus, when one arrives at the knowledge that virtue A is reliable, all that is required is that one performs an act of virtue (according to virtues B and C) and arrives at the truth because of it. This is enough to answer the skeptical argument that challenged the virtue-responsibilist to provide non-question-begging evidence for the reliability of the specific virtues. It shows that one can have evidence for the reliability of virtue A without assuming the truthfulness of virtue A. To charge that the virtue-responsibilist is *assuming* the reliability of all of the virtues is irrelevant; what is relevant is only that the virtues are in fact reliable and not that we assume or believe that they are. If the skeptic is to insist that *this* assumption is problematic on the part of the virtue-responsibilist, then it is incumbent upon her to argue for this. How would such an argument go? Is it that the virtue-responsibilist is *unjustified* in assuming that the virtues are reliable? That is an unimpressive argument, for the virtue-responsibilist will merely respond that she can be justified in believing that the virtues are reliable on her account of justification and knowledge. Therefore, in the absence of further argument, the virtue-responsibilist can rest content in her response.

V

Showing that a philosophical theory has the resources to solve outstanding philosophical problems is an essential part of establishing the plausibility and acceptability of the theory. Thus, while I have not been arguing directly for the truth of the virtue-responsibilist account of knowledge, the thrust of this paper should make clear that it has attractive virtues. Let me conclude by recapping what they are. The prospects for a virtue-responsibilist reply to the Cartesian skeptic are quite promising. The skeptical argument against the epistemic status of our belief in modest realism is of no force for the virtue epistemologist. On all accounts of virtue epistemology (virtue-reliabilist and virtue-responsibilist) this skeptical argument does not arise, since virtue-epistemologists reject the

Christopher Bobier

presupposed evidentialist-internalist account of justification that is essential to it. In the course of evaluating the virtue-responsibilist reply we saw that it is structurally similar to reliabilism in, at least, two respects: both views have a reliability component (for Zagzebski, the virtues are reliable) and both reject evidentialism. Moreover, whereas reliabilists cannot establish the reliability of the belief-forming faculties that they take to be the source of justification, virtue-responsibilism can. The virtue-responsibilist can establish in a non-question-begging way the reliability of each specific intellectual virtue. Therefore, virtue-responsibilism proves to be all the more viable and epistemologists would be wise to take a closer look at it.