

RE-REDUCING RESPONSIBILITY: REPLY TO AXTELL

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ABSTRACT: In this brief reply to Axtell, I review some general considerations pertaining to the disagreement and then reply point-by-point to Axtell's critique of the dilemma I pose for responsibilists in virtue epistemology. Thus I re-affirm my reductionist identity thesis that every case of epistemic irresponsibility is either a case of ordinary moral irresponsibility or ordinary practical irrationality.

KEYWORDS: virtue epistemology, evidentialism, reductionism

Guy Axtell raises roadblocks for my reduction of responsibility.¹ In this short piece, I attempt to shore up my argument for my reduction of responsibility, which I encapsulated in the following identity thesis.

IT Each instance of [so-called] epistemic irresponsibility is just an instance of purely non-epistemic irresponsibility/irrationality (either moral or instrumental).
(RR, 4)

In this essay, I will defend *IT*, since *IT* still seems true to me. The emphasis is on the 'just' and it helps to consider this conditional which *IT* entails. If *X* is an instance of (so-called) epistemic irresponsibility, then *X* is just an instance of either (standard non-epistemic) moral irresponsibility or (standard non-epistemic) instrumental irrationality. That is, we have a standard category of moral ir/responsibility which applies to things like forgetting to mail an important check, drinking too much (non-addictively), and the like. And we have a standard category of practical ir/rationality which applies to things like buying lottery tickets, spending too much on a watch, and the like. Neither of these has anything particularly epistemic about it. My thesis is that every proposed example of so-called epistemic irresponsibility falls into one of these two categories. Furthermore, when the

¹ Guy Axtell, "Recovering Responsibility," *Logos & Episteme* II, 3 (2011): 429-454. I, in turn, was defending evidentialism as set forth by Earl Conee and Richard Feldman's *Evidentialism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004). See Trent Dougherty, "Reducing Responsibility: An Evidentialist Account of Epistemic Blame," *European Journal of Philosophy*, 2011, doi: 10.1111/j.1468-0378.2010.00422.x.

morally irresponsible action has to do with a belief the irresponsibility doesn't take on some *sui generis*, emergent 'epistemic' nature any more than forgetting to feed the cat takes on a *sui generis*, emergent 'feline irresponsibility.' And the same goes for practical irrationality. Being practically irrational with respect to some matter of belief does not result in some *sui generis*, emergent 'epistemic' irrationality any more than paying too much for a meal takes on some *sui generis*, emergent 'culinary irresponsibility.' In short, the subject matter of a morally irresponsible or practically irrational act does not result in the emergence of a new category or the blending of two other categories. There are *nothing but* moral irresponsibility or practical irrationality in cases of epistemic irresponsibility. That is the thesis I defended and that Axtell takes aim at.

One slogan under which I could march is the following: "The Ethic of Belief is Ethics." That is, it is a form of *applied ethics*. Some applied ethicist focus on such actions as killing in war or killing in the womb, but the ethicist of belief focuses on such actions as gathering evidence, spending time in reflection, and the like. This is a very important kind of applied ethics. It is one I'm deeply interested in. But it simply confuses matters to think it is a part of epistemology. And there is much more at stake here than a turf war over the term 'epistemology.' By failing to realize that the ethics of belief is just a kind of applied ethics, serious mistakes are made about the nature of epistemic justification, knowledge, and other forms of positive epistemic status.²

A general critique – which will inform my response to Axtell – of virtue responsibilism and 'regulative' epistemology more generally (even when it results in really great work³) is that it is surely a contingent matter what kinds of acts positively correlate with obtaining epistemic desiderata – truth among the foremost – and so properly the subject of empirical psychology. While this is acknowledged in the case of Roberts and Wood, I believe it can lead to confusion about the nature of epistemic concepts. For example, Axtell brings to bear against me Roger Pouivet's claim that "good intellectual habits ground our pretensions to warranted beliefs, and to knowledge. And habits are properties of persons, not of beliefs."⁴ His point is to argue for taking personal justification to be more basic than doxastic or propositional justification. In reply, note that for the claim not to

² For example, see Jason Baehr's "Evidentialism, Vice, and Virtue," in *Evidentialism and Its Discontents*, ed. Trent Dougherty (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011) (which appears next to Axtell's "From Internalist Evidentialism to Virtue Responsibilism"), along with replies by Coney and Feldman.

³ Like Robert Roberts and Jay Wood, *Intellectual Virtues: An Essay in Regulative Epistemology* (Oxford, 2007) and Jason Baehr, *The Inquiring Mind* (Oxford, 2011).

⁴ Axtell, "Recovering Responsibility," 432.

be a tautology ‘good’ can’t just mean ‘truth conducive.’ Rather, these habits must display some kind of ideality for which they are praiseworthy. But whether these idealistically praiseworthy features actually *are* truth conducive is a question for empirical psychologists. What it is *not* is an objection to any theory about the *nature* of any epistemic concept, be it evidence, justification, knowledge, or what have you. And that is what evidentialism is: it is a theory about the nature of evidence, justification, and, ultimately, knowledge.

Another quite broad disagreement is the following claim by Axtell. “Evaluation of persons (agents), as contrasted with the evaluation only of beliefs (cognitive states), is properly part of the theory of knowledge.”⁵ I think this is false. Persons can be evaluated for their actions or their properties. Beliefs are not actions.⁶ I can’t even locate a referent for an act-like thing we might call a ‘believing’ (which is a term Chisholm uses). Acts of inquiry are actions, such as walking to the library, checking out a book, reading it, interviewing witnesses, conducting experiments, and the like. And as I have suggested, such acts are just as easily evaluable morally and rationally when they are aimed at forming true beliefs as they are when aimed at finding a girlfriend.

But what properties of the person would we be evaluating as epistemic? Presumably not properties like *going to the library*, *checking out a book*, and the like, for those are just proxies for actions. Perhaps the relevant properties could be dispositions or habits. But when we assess an individual in this way we immediately run into a generality problem. Consider the following dispositions: *to inquire diligently*; *to inquire diligently on matters non-religious*; *to inquire diligently on matters horticultural*; *to inquire diligently on Tuesdays*; *to inquire diligently after having had coffee*; *to inquire diligently on matters caffeinated*. How finely do the norms go? And what of other kinds of dispositions, say, *to play games fairly*. Is there a *sui generis*, emergent kind of ludatory normativity which evaluates such dispositions? To evaluate an individual according to her dispositional properties may or may not make sense. But if it does, I see no reason to postulate any new fundamental normative categories besides the evidential, moral, and pragmatic.

Against the background of these broad conceptual disagreements, let us now turn to Axtell’s reply to my specific argument. Axtell agrees that I’ve presented just the right kind of challenge with my Case of Craig the Creationist,⁷ however, he thinks he can answer my challenge to come up with a non-reductionist, non-

⁵ Axtell, “Recovering Responsibility,” 434.

⁶ At least not all of them. See my “Knowledge Happens: Why Zagzebski Hasn’t Solved the Meno Problem,” *Southern Journal of Philosophy* 49, 1 (2011): 73-88.

⁷ Axtell, “Recovering Responsibility,” 434.

evidentialist explanation of the cases. He notes that I set up the following trilemma concerning any case of epistemic irresponsibility: Either there are interests at stake or there are not. If there are not, then there is no irresponsibility. If there are, then they are either the individual's interests – in which case it's a failing of practical rationality – or the interests of others – in which case it is a case of moral irresponsibility. I will look at Axtell's objections to the horns of the dilemma he treats.

1. Objections to the Moral Horn of the Dilemma

Axtell offers four objections to this horn of the dilemma. First, Axtell says that what I have done is offer an error theory and that the theory for which it is an error theory needs defense. I reply that this is the wrong way to think about my argument (certainly I never put it that way). Rather, I took it as a datum that in such cases we feel that *something* is amiss in the case, but it's unclear what (it's just not plausible that it's *obvious* that there is this particular kind of sui generis, emergent normativity that no one can seem to pin down). I then offer as a prima facie plausible hypothesis that such cases entangle multiple forms of ordinary normativity. This explains both the feeling that something is amiss and our inability to nail down one property as being at fault. So I was not advancing an error theory but rather a *theory*.

Second, Axtell says that "That every self-regarding consideration is a non-moral consideration, and every other-regarding consideration is a moral one, is not an assumption that I think many ethicists share."⁸ But I asserted no such thing, nor does my argument rely on any such assumption. Rather, I offered as the best explanation *of a certain kind of case* that it falls into these categories. Furthermore, I was explicit that these categories can overlap. In the idealized hypothesis I presented I only ever mentioned these categories as exclusive, but frankly I have no dog in the fight as to where to draw the line between the moral and the practically rational. In fact, my own view is that the moral is at best a heuristic notion within the broader class of the practically rational.

Third, Axtell says that I bias the question by casting responsibility as concerned with belief formation 'behavior' rather than intellectual dispositions and habits. The problem with casting it in terms of belief formation behavior, he says, is that it biases the discussion toward my interpretation that the failings are ethical failings because behavior is what gets ethically evaluated. In reply, I think this dog won't hunt, for it's too clearly true that such acts of inquiry are at the core

⁸ Axtell, "Recovering Responsibility," 445.

of intellectual responsibility. Axtell says my case is just the right kind of case and it is itself about a refusal to inquire, so the criticism seems odd. As very pertinent examples, both the Baehr piece mentioned above and the original criticisms of evidentialism addressed by Conee and Feldman in “Evidentialism”⁹ involve objections to evidentialism from cases which are based on inadequate inquiry.

Nevertheless, even setting that aside, everything I say can be applied to intellectual dispositions and habits, *mutatis mutandis*. The bad habit of over-feeding the cat does not imply the existence of some sui generis, emergent cat normativity. It’s just a bad habit that involves a cat. The habit of under-feeding a mind doesn’t imply the existence of some sui generis, emergent epistemic normativity. It’s just a bad habit that involves a mind. Some people are quite generally prudent, others quite generally imprudent, others spotty. But it would be profligate to posit an emergent form of normativity for every hole in someone’s prudence.

Fourth, Axtell says that my gambit ignores “intellectual standards involving consideration of whether the agent manifested normal intellectual motivations, utilized effective or ineffective cognitive strategies for problemsolving, avoided known cognitive biases and fallacious tendencies in reasoning, etc.”¹⁰ I’m puzzled by this response since these things seem paradigmatic issues of morality or practical rationality. Axtell glosses this claim thusly.

This latter evaluation will be clearly epistemic to the extent that what the presence (or absence) of normal desire for true belief and strategic efforts at inquiry is salient in explaining isn’t the agent’s blameworthiness in acting upon the belief, but simply why the agent in this instance was or wasn’t successful in achieving distinctively epistemic aims such as true belief, etc.¹¹

This will take a bit of unpacking. The base claim is that a certain kind of evaluation is clearly epistemic in nature. Let’s call the evaluation – which I’ve claimed are paradigmatically non-epistemic – V, so the key claim is as follows.

Key Claim: V is clearly epistemic.

The Key Claim is supported by appeal to an alleged fact – let’s call it F – with this structure: that X is salient in explaining not Y but, rather, Z. Let’s get the values clear.

X = the presence (or absence) of normal desire for true belief and strategic efforts at inquiry

⁹ The essay, originally appearing in *Philosophical Studies* in 1985 is anthologized in Conee and Feldman’s *Evidentialism*.

¹⁰ Axtell, “Recovering Responsibility,” 446.

¹¹ Axtell, “Recovering Responsibility,” 446.

Y = the agent's blameworthiness in acting upon the belief

Z = why the agent in this instance was or wasn't successful in achieving distinctively epistemic aims such as true belief

F = X is salient in explaining not Y but Z

I confess I do not see why F supports the Key Claim. In any evaluation of Z seems to me to be a matter of practical rationality for the reasons I've stated. That the aim of a venture is epistemic doesn't give rise to a new natural kind of normativity any more than in a case where the aim of the venture is distinctively automotive. In conversation, Robert Roberts has suggested that epistemic ventures are more core to what it is to be human than the matters to which I've compared it. This may well be, but then there are a number of other kinds of distinctively human activity which seem to be to be also at the core of the human: humor, gardening, play, and the like. It seems profligate to posit *sui generis* forms of normativity for each of these. And it seems a mere philosopher's bias to think that these truly humane matters are of secondary importance to intellectual activity.

2. Objections to the Practical Rationality Horn of the Dilemma

Axtell's objections to the practical rationality horn of the dilemma are less straightforward. I will deal with a number of points piecemeal. First, Axtell presumes "Evidential fit is presumably supposed to supply reflectively 'good reasons' that one can discursively offer as grounds for the belief."¹² The most basic error here is that evidential fit has any kind of purpose. It is a relation that holds among propositions. Perhaps Axtell means the purpose of *seeking beliefs which fit ones evidence* is to offer grounds for the belief. But of course that will vary from individual to individual and from case to case. Some individuals don't give a flying fig what others think. Some care but know too well they are surrounded only by those who don't. Yet others might both care and be surrounded by others who do but who already know what they know. One might seek evidential fit simply for self-enlightenment. It would make perfect sense for someone filled with wonder on a desert island to seek evidence for her hypotheses. I fail to see what any of this has to do with the theory of knowledge, epistemic justification, or rationality.

Even if the purpose of getting beliefs which fit the evidence *was* to answer challenges, it is not necessarily true that "if the agent hasn't been active in updating information when needed in order to maintain rational confidence, or put any effort into inquiring into counter-evidence to their belief once presented with it, then that agent's reasons aren't going to wash when someone asks them

¹² Axtell, "Recovering Responsibility," 447.

why they (still) believe it.”¹³ This just confuses dialectical considerations with epistemic considerations. Some people through good rhetoric or sheer cunning will be able to convince people on the basis of what they can think up on the moment. This is the standard route to a ‘B’ paper for undergrads. So I just don’t see what these sorts of considerations are going to do to undercut evidentialism, which is principally a theory of epistemic justification.

Next, Axtell asks “But why can’t it be both instrumentally and epistemologically evaluable, where true belief is valued intrinsically and true beliefs serve many a practical goal?”¹⁴ In keeping with my theme, just substitute ‘horticulturally’ for ‘epistemologically.’ There are ever so many things that have some intrinsic value and serve practical goals. My argument was about fundamental types of normativity. Does Axtell really want ever so many fundamental kinds of normativity?

In the same paragraph, Axtell claims “Efforts to be actively fair-minded are obviously intimately involved in the improvement of agent reliability in areas of contested belief.” This is far from clear to me. It has an appearance of common sense, but it is at best contingent. Furthermore, we know from the results of cognitive psychology that many such common sense sounding propositions are false. It may well be that – at least for some – concentrating too hard will actually induce more error. This is more than a mere theoretical possibility. One manifestation of this effort would be to read lots of philosophy. This is not known to be a reliable method of finding the truth.

Here is a claim I simply don’t understand.

[I]f the agent’s performance in gathering and weighing evidence is thought to be irresponsible for want of skills rather than sound intellectual motivation, then the sense of ‘instrumental’ irrationality that could be applied would clearly be consonant with epistemic evaluations rather than representing merely practical or pragmatic irrationality.¹⁵

It defies my conceptual resources to ascribe irresponsibility do to want of skill. What skill did Craig lack (Craig seems to have been lost somewhere along the way)? How could the story be told along the lines Axtell mentions? After all, that was the challenge: Tell a story of epistemic irresponsibility which is clearly not moral or prudential failing. Failures due to lack of skill might be sad or comical but they can’t be cases of any kind of irresponsibility as far as I can see unless the fact of the lack of skill came about via a moral or prudential shortcoming.

¹³ Axtell, “Recovering Responsibility,” 447.

¹⁴ Axtell, “Recovering Responsibility,” 448.

¹⁵ Axtell, “Recovering Responsibility,” 449.

3. Concluding Remarks

Finally, the phrase “due care and diligence” shows up repeatedly in Axtell’s reply. I want to focus on the word ‘due.’ How does one go about determining how much care and diligence are *due* to a matter. One can accept that all truths have some intrinsic value without endorsing that all matters are *due* one second of thought. So how do we sift them? The only way I know how is by *what’s at stake*. One way for much to be at stake in determining whether p for S is to *care deeply* about whether p. Another is for someone’s well-being to hang in the balance on whether p. But of course the all-things-considered judgment concerning how much care is due a question depends on an all-things-considered judgment about what’s at stake. So in the first case, we have no answer to the question how much care is due until we know what else is at stake for S. And the process of weighing S’s various interests and resources to determine just how much care is due the question whether p for S is just what practical rationality is all about. In the second case, depending on just what relation S bears to the individual whose well-being is at stake, S might have a duty to give considerable care to whether p, one that trumps other considerations. In his case, the failure to do due diligence is most simply explained by S’s being *morally* irresponsible. But in neither case do we find the need to posit another fundamental form of normativity, and that was the thesis I started out to defend.