

# ALSTON, ARISTOTLE, AND EPISTEMIC NORMATIVITY

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ABSTRACT: Alston (2005) argues that there is no such thing as a single concept of epistemic justification. Instead, there is an irreducible plurality of epistemically valuable features of beliefs: 'epistemic desiderata.' I argue that this approach is problematic for meta-epistemological reasons. How, for instance, do we characterize epistemic evaluation and do we do we go about it if there's no theoretical unity to epistemology? Alston's response is to ground all epistemic desiderata, thereby unifying epistemology, in truth and truth-conduciveness. I argue that this move over-unifies epistemology, in effect, giving us a single criterion for epistemology on par with the epistemology-by-justification approach he rejects. Perhaps surprisingly, we find a similar theoretical worry in Aristotle's argument about the science of metaphysics. Aristotle's resolution in this problem by the 'analogy of being' provides a parallel framework to resolve the worries with Alston's approach. In particular, I argue that we can focus epistemic evaluation on the person of epistemic virtue: this category will be focal, unifying the disparate desiderata, without reducing to one thing all epistemic values or relations that desiderata must bear to the central value. A virtue-centric account of epistemic normativity follows: one that can remain genuinely pluralistic and yet unified as well.

KEYWORDS: Alston, Aristotle, justification, epistemic desiderata,  
virtue epistemology

William P. Alston's *Beyond "Justification": Dimensions of Epistemic Evaluation* attempts to reorient epistemology away from focus on the chimera of a univocal concept of epistemic justification towards a new pluralistic approach to epistemic normativity. In place of justification, Alston offers us his 'epistemic desiderata' approach wherein we should view the positive epistemic status of a belief deriving from any number of irreducible but epistemically valuable features. So, if we wish to analyze the positive epistemic status of some belief, we must look to a plurality of doxastic practices rather than analyze some singular, univocal notion of 'justification' that grounds that belief's status.

In this paper, I sketch an approach to epistemic normativity arising from Alston's theory of epistemic desiderata and problems with it. Namely, I shall suggest a virtue-theoretic account of epistemic normativity which solves problems with Alston's approach: an account inspired by Aristotle. Section One briefly details

Alston's theory of epistemic desiderata as an approach to normativity. From his pluralistic approach to epistemically desirable features, Section Two examines a meta-epistemological problem or worry arising from his pluralism. In particular, I suggest that an indefinite plurality of values undermines the very identity of epistemological inquiry and a lack of unity in terms of epistemic evaluation generates theoretical problems for such evaluation. Section Three turns to Alston's solution in giving truth-conducivity as the central role epistemic evaluation. Section Four argues that Alston's solution will not work. Alston insists that only truth-conducivity grounds epistemic desirability; making his theory ultimately as single-valued and non-pluralistic as the 'justification theory' he attacks. A framework to solve the meta-epistemological problem comes in Section Five. Inspiration comes from Aristotle's problem of the science of metaphysics and the solution in the analogy of being. I argue that a parallel in epistemology can preserve a pluralist approach to epistemic desiderata which avoids the worries Alston's view faces. Finally, in Section Six, I argue that the paradigmatic person of intellectual virtue can explain all of the ways that a belief may be epistemically desirable on Alston's own list. Thus, we can unify these disparate relations into one norm (=the person of virtue) without collapsing them all into each other. And, in the process, we can sketch and defend a virtue-theoretic approach to normativity.

### 1. Alston's Epistemic Desiderata

Drawing on his decades of work in epistemology, *Beyond "Justification"* crowns Alston's efforts in examining justification, reliabilism, internalism/externalism, and his later doxastic practice approach to epistemology. However, this work aims to remove 'justification' from pride of place in epistemic analysis. He begins with the state of justification theory: citing many examples proposed for the nature of justification over the past several decades of epistemological investigation. Listing the putative analyses of 'justification' gives one a feel for the depth and breadth of the philosophical quarrels over the concept. Alston gives the following on his list: to be justified in believing  $p$  means:

- One cannot be reproached for being confident that  $p$
- Believing that  $p$  violates no epistemic/doxastic/noetic obligations and/or duties
- Believing/Accepting that  $p$  when you have good reason to think it true
- Having a right to believe that  $p$
- Believing that  $p$  fulfills one's epistemic responsibility in seeking the truth (and/or avoiding error)
- Believing that  $p$  is permitted by adequate/correct norms, rules, and/or procedures
- Believing that  $p$  is evidentially probable
- Believing that  $p$  is based on something reliable with respect to truth

- Believing that *p* is based on adequate grounds
- Believing that *p* is produced by reliable faculties, properly functioning faculties, and/or epistemic virtues
- Believing that *p* fits one's evidence (2005, 12-15)

The point of Alston's catalogue is obvious: there is no single thread upon which one can tug to unite all of the various theories of evidentialism, reliabilism, coherentism, foundationalism, or any other 'ism' from the massive literature.

When looking at this list reflective of the history of 20<sup>th</sup> C. analyses of justification, we see no unity or agreement or overall at all. Alston thinks of this plurality as a datum to be explained; offering two sorts of explanations (2005, 21). First, one can accept that there *really is* some univocal concept of justification. In order to make good on this claim, one would need to show that all of the extant theories really converge or reduce to whatever univocal concept or that any theory diverging from this concept is false (regardless as to whether the correct account is extant or to be given). These other false theories are just symptoms of the depth of difficulty in epistemological evaluation. That so many gifted philosophers fail simply shows how hard the concept is to analyze—not that there is no such concept to be analyzed in the first place.

The second explanation denies the univocal nature of 'justification.' Adopting this explanation implies that we see epistemology differently. We shouldn't tilt after epistemological windmills: there just is no such 'thing' as justification that a theory can adequately analyze. Instead, there is an irreducible plurality of things that serve as justifiers—i.e. epistemic values—that no single analysis can capture. This to accept an epistemic desiderata approach to epistemic evaluation. Instead of one single theory of what makes a belief epistemically good, we have a legion of such value-conferrers. Thus:

[a]ll we have is the plurality of features of belief that are of positive value for the cognitive enterprise. They need no validation from a connection with a supposed master epistemic desideratum picked out by 'justified' (2005, 22).

Given a plurality of epistemic desiderata, a catalogue of failed or incomplete attempts to analyze 'justification' merely serves to show that the attempt is wrong-headed from the very beginning.

But, why should we go with Alston's explanation? That is, why think that the plurality of theories on the list shows that the list is wrong-headed rather than just wrong? How do we select which explanation to adopt? Alston's answer is to begin, if possible, from a theoretically neutral point. Justification-theory is a matter of epistemic normativity: which epistemic norm(s) give rise to justified belief. From normativity of belief, we can move to epistemic value. So, the place to begin in

deciding how to approach epistemology is that “[i]f I am justified in believing that *p*, my doxastic state is *one that is desirable from an epistemic point of view*” (2005, 23). It is this role played by epistemic value/desirability that gives us our theoretically neutral point. And that’s because we can (generally or by-and-large) agree on a major epistemic value: namely, truth. For Alston, *the* epistemic value that we desire is to believe the truth; to have our cognition track reality. How does this incline us towards the epistemic desiderata approach? Each theory catalogued and each analysis on the list belongs there because it picks out something epistemically valuable. Reliability, possession of adequate evidence, based in virtues, produced by proper functioning, doing nothing epistemically irresponsible or irrational, and so on seem to be ways that put one in a better position to believe the truth (or disbelieve what’s false). So, by valuing the truth, we can explain why there is an irreducible list in the first place: because there are many ways that something can relate to the truth. And, thus, there are many ways for some doxastic practice or belief forming mechanism to be epistemically valuable. Therefore, the epistemic desiderata approach—grounded in the primary value of truth—better explains the ‘irreducible list of justification accounts’ datum.

## 2. The Meta-Epistemological Problem

Alston’s argument and epistemic desiderata approach aims to turn epistemology on its ear. And, by attacking the central concept of justification, his position revises the aim of traditional epistemology. But there is a meta-epistemological worry here about just what implications follow from an Alstonian desiderata approach. What are we doing when we do epistemology? With a pluralistic list of irreducible epistemic desiderata, it’s unclear how we might go about analyzing knowledge or warrant or your preferred kind of positive epistemic status. In fact, Alston has to use that intentionally and necessarily vague phrase “positive epistemic status” throughout the book. And, further, how do we think about wisdom, understanding, rationality, etc. in ways consistent with Alston’s deep and abiding pluralism? We need not assume that there is a set of clear necessary and sufficient conditions for these concepts or anything so clear-cut as that but, rather, my question is higher order. Just what is epistemology or epistemological inquiry? It seems we can get no better than ‘investigation into epistemically valuable states/processes/etc.’ on Alston’s view.

My meta-epistemological worry concerns the twin notions of identity and unity. If we don’t investigate something or somethings, then what is epistemology? If all we can manage is an indeterminate list of objects of inquiry ending in only an ellipsis, how can we say what it is to do epistemology? This concern here focuses on

identity—what is epistemic evaluation—and I fear that Alston’s desiderata approach gives no possible answer or set of answers. In short, we can construe epistemology as devoted to epistemic evaluation but merely saying *that* tells us nothing substantive about just what we’re doing when we do epistemology. This facet of the meta-epistemological worry, then, is that without some determine concept or set of concepts or, better, field of study, it’s hard to see any disciplinary unity to the field and, thus, any identity when it comes to epistemologically distinctive philosophical inquiry. This threatens to dissolve epistemology from a theoretical standpoint.

Further, it seems difficult to see how one could reject any feature of a belief as epistemically desirable if we can’t manage some standard(s) arising out of our list of desiderata. Why reject wishful thinking, for example, in a principled way from our list of epistemically valuable doxastic features? Intuitively, such thinking lacks positive epistemic status—it just isn’t epistemically valuable. But why? If there is no thread (or threads) running through the pluralism of desiderata, how can we explain why we leave this sort of thinking off the list.

### 3. Alston’s Solution

Luckily enough, Alston isn’t so de(con)structive himself: he sees the force of his position and tries to clarify ‘epistemic evaluation’ in terms that will preserve epistemology as a genuine field of inquiry and/or examination. For him, we need to be clearer about the ‘epistemic’ modifier when we think about epistemology as ‘epistemic evaluation.’ After his negative, ‘there’s no such thing as justification’ arguments, we find Alston’s beginning of his positive epistemological program.

We evaluate something epistemically...when we judge it to be more or less good or bad from the epistemic point of view, that is, for the attainment of epistemic purposes. And what purposes are those?...I suggest that the primary function of cognition in human life is to acquire true rather than false beliefs about matters that are of interest or importance to us (2005, 30).

*Epistemic* evaluation (as opposed to moral, political, aesthetic, et al.) centers on the primary value of truth. On this approach, we have a path to give some kind of unity to epistemology as a field of study or philosophical inquiry. Instead of just ‘studying epistemically valuable states’ or ‘philosophical investigation into thinking,’ we have truth occupying the prominent role in reorienting epistemology. Though we still have an irreducibly pluralistic list of epistemic values, these desiderata are nevertheless *epistemic* and, therefore, necessarily bound up with evaluation eyed towards truth. Hence, we can avoid the meta-epistemological worries because of the unifying work done by truth: where we lose the sense of ‘justification’ in epistemology, truth takes up the central axiological role in grounding the set of

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desiderata. By looking at Alston's list of desiderata more closely, we can see just how crucial the value of truth becomes from his desiderata approach to epistemic normativity.

Alston's catalogue of epistemic values has five key sections with some subsections. Let's give the list straightaway and see how Alston discusses it. All of these figure as key features that can confer epistemic value on a belief (i.e. are epistemically value with respect to truth).

- I. Truth
- II. Truth-Conducive Desiderata
  1. Having adequate evidence, reasons, grounds, etc. for the belief in question
  2. Being based on adequate evidence, reasons, grounds, etc.
  3. Being produced by a reliable process
  4. Formed by properly functioning faculties
  5. Formed by epistemic virtue(s)
- III. Desiderata dealing with the formation and discrimination of true beliefs
  6. Having higher order access to the evidence (et al.) for the belief in question
  7. Having higher order knowledge or well-grounded belief counting for the belief in question
  8. Being able to defend the (probable) truth of the belief in question
- IV. Deontological desiderata
  9. The belief in question is held permissibly
  10. The belief is formed/held responsibly
  11. The formation of the belief includes no violations of intellectual obligations/duties
- V. Epistemically valuable features of belief systems
  12. Explanation
  13. Understanding
  14. Coherence
  15. Systematicity (2005, 39-57)

Given the catalogue and the role of truth for epistemic evaluation, we can see Alston's assessment of the list. Clearly, truth (I), must play a central role. But it confers a pride of place to (II) as well. If truth is the primary epistemic value, then those features of beliefs that require truth-conducivity are equally crucial for epistemic evaluation. But that's not the only way that (II) fits in the picture. And that's because both (III) and (V) play their roles as epistemic desiderata by connection to (II). For (III), Alston argues that "they earn the title of [epistemic desiderata] in an indirect way by contributing to S's being in a position to arrange things in a way that is favorable to acquiring truth beliefs rather than false beliefs" (2005, 50). In short, (III) occurs on the list because they, in some fashion, make one more likely to obtain the truth; that is, they are indirectly truth-conducive. Alston has a similar assessment for (V):

there is a clear connection of these desiderata to truth. It consists of their cognitive desirability depending on their being associated with a favorable balance of truth over falsity in the body of beliefs to which they apply... (2005, 51)

That is, we can see a role for (V) insofar as they, also indirectly, contribute to one's beliefs being generally truth-conducive.

The list of desiderata, when combined with a focus on the value of truth, therefore allows us to link the major sections of the list together.

What we have seen is that of the desiderata short of truth itself, the directly [truth-conducive] desiderata in Group II are clearly the most basic sense they are most clearly related to true belief itself, by virtue of being always rendering beliefs true or likely to be true. The items in Groups III and V have a more derivative status as desiderata through more indirect connections with true belief or the likelihood of such (2005, 51).

So, (I) is the core or foundational value that (II) directly picks up and, by their indirect relation to (II), Groups (III) and (V) find their place in the catalogue of epistemic desiderata. Alston eschews any *reductive* analysis here but, by linking to truth through (II), he can show how the catalogue displays a kind of unity through truth-conducivity. And that "kind-of" unity is the sort of answer we need to solve the meta-epistemological worry above. We have unity (in a way) without reducing epistemological evaluation to a single, univocal concept like 'justification.' We can have a pluralist, desiderata approach and a coherent epistemological methodology and aim in one theory.

Unfortunately, Alston's solution won't give us the answer we need, and that's because it moves us too close towards the non-pluralist approach against which he sets his desiderata theory. In the next section, I'll digress briefly from Alston to see how a similar problem and solution drives an important theory from Aristotle's metaphysics and turn in the section thereafter to my critique of Alston. In understanding the Aristotelian problem of the science of metaphysics, we have a parallel problem forces Aristotle to a similar solution as we see in Alston. And that will drive both my criticism and my own solution to the meta-epistemological problem that Alton's theory of desiderata threatens.

#### **4. Why Alston's Solution Won't Work**

Alston attempts to unify epistemic evaluation via a central focus on truth and truth-conducivity. The unity that grounding all desiderata in (II) provides allows us to make sense of what we do when we do epistemology. Alston praises his desiderata approach for its strikingly pluralist view of epistemic value. And it seems that way: we have a diverse list of epistemically desirable features that can't be reduced to

others. Recall that Section Two gives a list of *five* kinds of epistemic desiderata. And we've seen that (II) prompts (I) via reliability with (III) and (V) indirectly relating to (II). These interrelations with (II) at the center provides the unity we are seeking to solve the meta-epistemological worry from Section Two. But (IV)—deontological desiderata—has been conspicuously absent from our discussion so far. Where do they fit into Alston's theory? That's a bit of a trick question: they don't. The deontological elements of (IV), Alston argues, requires concepts like holding beliefs responsibly, permissibly, or in way that violate no epistemic obligations or duties. This seems to require, via the Kantian 'ought implies can' dictum, that we have control over our beliefs. If I *ought* to believe in certain ways (responsibly, permissibly, ...), then believing must be under my control. And yet our beliefs aren't really under our control; they arise in us or occur in us without our volition.

Thus none of the deontological candidates makes the grade. [Versions of 9] fail through the failure of the version of voluntary control of belief presupposed by each to be a real possibility for human beings. And [11] fails through not being connected with truth in the right way. Thus they will receive no further attention in the development of the [epistemic desiderata] approach to the epistemology of belief (2005, 80).

I skipped (IV) in my earlier discussion because Alston ultimately rejects this group as a genuine set of desiderata. Foley-ian considerations face a similar assessment. For Foley, epistemic rationality (=justification, more or less) connects with what can survive reflective, critical self-scrutiny. Thus, we have no requirement that rationality entail reliability (or truth-conducivity). And it's that final point to which Alston objects:

[s]ince I take a status of a belief to be an *epistemic* desideratum only if it is desirable from the point of view of the aim of having true rather than false beliefs on matters of importance and/or interest, I do not recognize being justified or epistemically rational in these senses as distinctively *epistemic* desiderata (2005, 93).

Since Foley-ian rationality implies no truth-conducivity, it fails to be a genuine *epistemic* desiderata on Alston's view.

I cite the rejection of (IV) and Foley-ian rationality/justification to make the following point: truth-conducivity is *the* necessary condition for genuine 'epistemic desiderata' status for Alston. If some epistemic feature of a belief (process, web of beliefs ...) doesn't directly or indirectly contribute to truth-conducivity or reliability, it has no place in Alston's theory. Thus, Alston's theory isn't all that pluralist or inclusive. This theory works on the notion that it's truth-*conducivity* that really does the epistemic heavy lifting when it comes to epistemic normativity and evaluation. This realization leads towards two points of criticism.



First, (II) seems to doing all of the really significant work in the theory. Alston's theory clearly makes (II) central but his view goes beyond making it central towards making it *the* criterion for status as an epistemic desiderata. Now, clearly the features in (III) and (V) do not *reduce* to truth-conducive features in (II) but those features are *epistemically* valuable (for Alston) only by virtue of their indirect truth-conducivity. Thus, they would seem to belong as subsections of (II). Indirect truth-conducivity is still truth-conducivity, after all.

Because of his insistence on truth-conducivity, it seems as though all genuine epistemic desiderata really fall under one group—Group (II). The result is that his epistemic desiderata theory isn't really pluralist. Given his arguments about non-truth-conducive features, we see that only *one* type of desiderata really counts; namely, those that reliably lead to the truth.

Alston only rejects 'justification' as the single conferrer of positive epistemic status while it provides another single category that plays the same role. Truth-conducivity functions the same in conferring such status as the 'justification' Alston attacks. A genuinely pluralistic approach cannot admit of higher-order unification. In short, Alston falls victim to the very same thing he criticizes of 'justification' theory. Though the properties are pluralist, the *relations* they must bear to one epistemic value (truth) or *what makes them epistemically valuable* admits of no real diversity. All the real work is done by truth and truth-conducivity.

Second, Alston seems to restrict genuine epistemic status to truth-conducivity without really arguing for it. He begins with the plausible claim that having true beliefs and avoiding false ones provides the primary epistemic value upon which to construe epistemic normativity. But the immediate response is not truth *simpliciter* but the reliable attainment of truth. That is, Alston moves from the claim that truth is epistemically valuable to the claim that *only features that successfully attain truth are epistemically desirable*. And that, it seems to me, doesn't follow without more argument. One can accept the value of X without insisting that the only thing desirable is the actual attainment of X. For instance, it seems possible to think that being properly motivated to obtain X can be desirably even if 'being motivated to obtain X' doesn't entail the actual obtainment. An instance of this sort of approach would be James Montmarquet (2000). He defends an 'internalist' approach to epistemic virtue. Like Alston, he thinks that truth is valuable and that epistemology should focus on it as the proper end or aim of our cognition. But what he denies is that we should construe this epistemic teleology in terms of success or reliability. Specifically, he says that 'trying' to get to the truth, in in the right way(s) presumably, is epistemically desirable—it's an *epistemically good* thing to try to get to believe truths (2000, 136).

And this is a crucial point: we can maintain some end as a value conferrer without requiring the *attainment* of that end. Let's return to Group (IV) and Foley-ian rationality. If we can make sense of believing permissibly or responsibly (solving Alston's doxastic involuntarism worries), then would we think of that as aimed at the truth? That seems quite plausible. To believe irresponsibly would usually lead one to believe in ways that would not promote true beliefs. For instance, I take it that wishful thinking/believing is irresponsible. And that would not promote believing the truth. But does responsible believing entail reliability? Probably not. As a matter of contingent fact, responsible believing is probably reliable or truth-conducive, but it would be overly strong to say that responsible believing *entails* that your beliefs are likely to be true. Similarly, would Foley-ian, surviving-self-scrutiny reasoning typically lead to the truth? As with responsible/permissible believing; probably. But does survival of self-scrutiny entail problem truth or reliability? Clearly not. Many scientific beliefs in the distant past, for example, survived self-scrutiny millennia ago and such beliefs turned out to be unreliable. But, nevertheless, self-scrutiny does *aim* at the truth and, to my lights, would be an epistemically good thing even without requiring that such scrutiny be truth-conducive, reliable, or successful.

Take the other side of the epistemological coin. We can't rule out, *a priori*, that intuitively non-valuable doxastic practices, such as wishful thinking, cannot find their way onto the list. The old epistemological standby of the evil demon world suffices here, but we might also appeal to considerations which suggest that certain cognitive heuristics can be both reliable and yet intuitively irrational.<sup>1</sup> Prizing truth-conducivity as *the only* epistemic value-conferrer won't only exclude plausibly valuable doxastic practices like those above but also possibly include irrational yet reliable features, too.

So, we have two sets of objections here. First, we see that Alston doesn't really give the epistemic pluralism he claims. Instead, he effectively replaces 'justification' with truth-conducivity rather than offering a revisionary or revolutionary pluralism about epistemic normativity. At the end of the analysis, there's only one kind of epistemic normativity or value: that of truth-conducivity. And that single category of desiderata is in deep conflict or tension with the avowed pluralism motivating the desiderata approach. Second, Alston unduly focuses on the *attainment* of truth as epistemically valuable. Granting the value of truth, we can maintain other relations besides success, reliability, or truth-conducivity as epistemically desirable: notably aiming at or trying to get to the truth.

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<sup>1</sup> See, e.g. Elgin (1988) and Bishop (2000).

## 5. A Better Solution

What Alston needs is a way to unify a genuine plurality without making all features' value collapse on the single value of truth. What is needed is a plurality, not only of epistemic desiderata, but of the relations that a doxastic practices may bear to the central, focal epistemic value to count as legitimate desiderata. I suggest looking to a source that may seem completely irrelevant to the topic at hand for help: namely, Aristotle's problem of the genus of being and the science of metaphysics.

Here the problem: in the *Metaphysics*, each science—i.e. theoretical field or discipline—must have a distinct species or category of thing that it investigates. Yet, metaphysics—the study of being *qua* being—lacks this: Aristotle argues in *Metaphysics* (B.3) that there is no genus of being. Famously, Aristotle maintains that “being is said in many ways” (Γ.2). But without the unity (univocity) of being and, thus, some discrete category as the subject for metaphysics, it's hard to see how metaphysics can be a genuine science. (This is parallel to my meta-epistemological worry about Alston's desiderata approach in Section 2.) What Aristotle needs is some way to unify 'being' without thinking of reality as one single *thing*.

The famed 'analogy of being' comes into play here. Aristotle accepts that there really is no category of 'being' or 'everything that exists.' But accepting the non-univocity of being doesn't imply that it's equivocal either. He carves out a space between purely synonymous and ambiguous meaning. The meanings of 'being,' he argues, are linked together but not in a way that reduces their meaning to one single thing. His example is health. We call a person, urine, and a diet—for instance—healthy. But is the health of a diet and the health of urine the same? Not at all: what it is for urine to be healthy is not at all what it means for a diet to be healthy. But thought their meanings are distinct, they are related. When urine is healthy it is a symptom of a healthy person and when a diet is healthy it is what promotes health in a person. So, while the health of a diet and urine aren't identical, they are connected by relation to the health of a person. Neither a diet nor urine could be healthy were it not for their relation to the health of a person. 'Healthy,' then is not univocal (because it is 'said in many ways') but it isn't entirely equivocal either (because the meanings are connected). We can call this *via media* between univocal and equivocal usage *analogical* or, following Owen (1960), *focal* meaning. The use is analogical (in the Greek sense of *analogia* as a relation or proportion) because the use of the analogical senses—while distinct—always converge in some sense that is primary.<sup>2</sup> For health, saying that urine and a diet are healthy necessarily focuses or converges on the primary use of 'healthy' as predicated of a person.

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<sup>2</sup> Hence the term “focal:” the analogical senses *focus* on some primary meaning.

The category of ‘substance’ or ‘thing’ plays the primary or focal role in metaphysics. Everything that exists by virtue of being a substance or a property of/in a substance. So, while the existence of a property (redness, say) is different from that of a substance (an apple, say), the property exists only because of the substance of which it is a property. The redness of the apple exists only because of the apple—not vice versa. So, while there are many senses of ‘being,’ they are all connected to and focused upon the being of substances.

We have unity—in the focal category of substance—with legitimate plurality—many different *kinds* of things exist as the subject of metaphysics and these different kinds of things bear different *relations* to that one central category (substance). Aristotle, then, defends a fully genuine (ontological) pluralism that’s also sufficiently unified. The unity, via the category of substance, gives metaphysics the theoretical underpinning needed to solve the ‘no genus of being’ problem.

As I see it, we have the framework for a solution for an epistemic desiderata approach paralleling Aristotle’s solution we sketched in the previous paragraph. First, we can agree with both Alston and Aristotle that some category, group, or what have you is primary. Focusing on one epistemic value in this way will make possible that group’s unifying role. And that’s what we need to solve the meta-epistemological problem. Second, we can avoid the non-pluralism with which Alston ends by accepting several ways that a belief can relate to the focal value as epistemically desirable. That is, we can accept the unifying potential of some central epistemic value but reject the narrow focus of reliable success that Alston insists by recognizing *only* conducivity.

However, this provides only a skeleton or a framework for a solution—not the solution itself. Which epistemic value/desideratum should be parallel to Aristotle’s substance—which is the focal value that can appropriately unify epistemology? And how can we go about specifying the pluralist relations to this value in a theoretically appealing way? That is, even given one value (=truth) with many different types of relations won’t go far enough in saying just how we think those different relations fit together. An indefinite list of relations ending in an ellipsis does us no better than the same for a list of desiderata.

## 6. Virtue Theory and Epistemic Desiderata

For the purposes of evaluating Alston’s theory, we have seen that a truth-conducive or reliabilist criterion of epistemic normativity is lacking. We find Foley-ian, deontological, responsibility, etc. based accounts of beliefs to be epistemically valuable and, therefore, a strictly reliabilist theory of normativity can’t explain the desirability of these features.

An evidentialist approach to epistemic normativity fails in precisely parallel ways. For instance, an evidentialist can't explain the value of Group II (3)-(5): reliable production, formed by properly functioning faculties, and grounded in epistemic virtues, respectively. If it's evidence that confers value, it's hard to see how reliability or proper functioning plays any substantial role. Of course, one may obtain evidence by one's faculties, but the quality of the evidence has to split from the reliability or proper functioning of those faculties lest that evidentialism slide into reliabilism or proper function theory itself.

I want to draw a general conclusion here. Neither reliabilism nor evidentialism can explain intuitive candidates for epistemic desiderata. And that's because they focus on relatively narrow properties of *beliefs* (i.e. being produced by reliable faculties and being based on evidence). However, if we consider Alston's Group (IV)—deontological desiderata—as genuinely epistemically valuable, we can draw more general implications. Group (IV) includes the following:

9. The belief in question is held permissibly
10. The belief is formed/held responsibly
11. The formation of the belief includes no violations of intellectual obligations/  
duties

I want to center on (9) and (11). It's hard to really think about these desiderata without considering the crucial role played by the believer in holding these beliefs. (9) says that a belief must be *held* permissibly. Presumably, a belief is held in a certain way only by consequence of the believer believing in a certain way. Regardless as to whether the believing is volitional, non-volitional, indirectly volitional, or what have you, the subject doing the believing in a particular way is absolutely essential to (9). Similarly, (11) makes free use of intellectual obligations or duties in specifying one kind of epistemic value a belief may have. But, as with (9), the duties don't apply to the beliefs themselves but rather to the person doing the believing. In particular, (11) states that the believer must believe in certain way for that belief to have epistemic value. Thus, for (9) and (11) *at least*, there must be some way to account for epistemic normativity capturing the believer's role in coming to her beliefs. A theory of epistemic desiderata must include grounds for epistemic normativity *not* based solely in the properties of beliefs. Instead, there must be some agent-central or belief-central values at work to really explain these desiderata.

Reliabilism and evidentialism, as well as any belief-based theory of epistemic normativity, cannot account for the full, pluralistic range of desiderata we want to consider. At the very minimum, we must include some *agent-centered* elements to the theory. This point is the first step in my own answer: to take the person or agent-

based approach as the basis. Instead of asking whether we can account for these agent-based elements in a belief-based theory, I suggest we should follow the virtue epistemologist's maneuver to ask the opposite question: can we account for the epistemically desirable belief-based features in an agent-based theory? I think the answer is 'yes' and it does so in a way that fits the framework for a solution to the meta-epistemological problem discussed in Section Six.

Virtue epistemology directs epistemology primarily towards the agential features of believing and defines/grounds key epistemological concepts in terms of the properties of the agent. Epistemic properties of beliefs—based on evidence, reliably produced, etc.—are then accounted in terms of the properties of agents. Turri, Alfano, and Greco (2019) call this the “direction of analysis” thesis; virtue epistemology moves from agent-based concepts to belief-based concepts (rather than the non-virtue, traditional movement from beliefs to agents). So, the question becomes: can we explain epistemic normativity—i.e. epistemic desiderata—in terms of properties of agents and, from there, move to the normativity of beliefs? The key to the 'yes' question is to avoid fixing primarily on the virtues of an agent themselves but rather on some paradigmatically intellectually virtuous person and what's true of *them*. Thus, my view takes a (paradigmatically virtuous) *person* as the primary norm and explains other desiderata by relation to that person's thinking, motives, properties, or what have you.<sup>3</sup>

I doubt one could take some set of intellectual virtues, defined either in terms of dispositions, abilities, traits, or whatever, and use them to account for the value of reliably produced beliefs. Evidence is straightforward, I presume, since standard accounts of epistemic virtues will include those that direct the proper obtaining, weighting, maintaining, and using of evidence. Thus, there's a clear role for evidence *qua* desideratum on a virtue theory. But reliabilism is harder to see. Here's where the focus on the person of virtue becomes crucial. And that's because the paradigmatically rational person will most likely have reliable and properly functioning faculties (leaving demon world scenarios aside). Now, we may not *define* virtues in ways that make them reliable or truth conducive,<sup>4</sup> but I take it that the intellectually ideal person of virtue will have such faculties even if those virtues aren't defined by reliabilist criteria.

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<sup>3</sup> Compare this to Aristotle's emphasis on the person of virtue (*phronimos*) as a standard for ethics. His definition of 'virtue' in Book II of the *Nicomachean Ethics* explicitly builds the judgment of the *phrominos* into the nature of moral virtue. Both his view and mine, therefore, emphasize the ideally virtuous person as crucial in understand moral and epistemic value, respectively.

<sup>4</sup> See, e.g. Montmarquet (2000), Wedgwood (2020), and Wright (2009; 2010).

Let's go through Alston's sets of desiderata and see what we can say about the paradigmatic person of virtue. Group (II) is Alston's hinge set of desiderata as the truth-conducive set. It includes:

1. Having adequate evidence, reasons, grounds, etc. for the belief in question
2. Being based on adequate evidence, reasons, grounds, etc.
3. Being produced by a reliable process
4. Formed by properly functioning faculties
5. Formed by epistemic virtue(s)

As mentioned above, we find a very plausible role that evidential concerns like (1) and (2) play in a virtue theory. Given the plausible assumption that evidence-based virtues will be among the person of virtue's store, these desiderata are easy to explain. And our previous discussion sets up (3) and (4): the person of virtue will typically have faculties that function reliably/properly. And (5)'s fit on a virtue approach is obvious.

Group (III) desiderata include:

9. Having higher order access to the evidence (et al.) for the belief in question
10. Having higher order knowledge or well-grounded belief counting for the belief in question
11. Being able to defend the (probable) truth of the belief in question

Will the person of (intellectual) virtue be in a position to defend her beliefs and have higher order access/knowledge/justification (when possible)? That strikes me as obvious if we are indeed talking about the *paradigmatically* virtuous agent. Certainly virtues of intellectual curiosity and determination will spur the person of virtue to put herself in the best epistemic position possible with respect to her beliefs. Groups (IV) and (V) provide no serious problem either. They pick out:

9. The belief in question is held permissibly
10. The belief is formed/held responsibly
11. The formation of the belief includes no violations of intellectual obligations/duties

And

12. Explanation
13. Understanding
14. Coherence
15. Systematicity

Now, granted the approach is aretaic rather than deontological,<sup>5</sup> will the person of virtue violate any epistemic obligations or do anything irresponsible or

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<sup>5</sup> *A fortiori*, Linda Zagzebski (1996, 241-242) has defined epistemic duties in terms of epistemic

impermissible? Presumably not. Even if there is an occasion where the virtuous agent doesn't follow some rule, some epistemic analogy of the 'do you steal a loaf of bread to feed a starving family' sort of scenario, this will be atypical. By and large, the person of virtue will act in perfectly permissible and responsible ways and, accordingly, the person of *intellectual* virtue will *believe* in perfectly permissible and responsible ways. Thus, (9)-(11) fit a virtue approach to epistemic normativity nicely.

What of (12)-(15)? Will they characterize the belief systems of the person of intellectual virtue? Again, I think the answer is obviously affirmative. If one has the ideal set of virtues, will one's beliefs explain and be explained; will that person understand a great deal; will that person's beliefs cohere with one another; and will that person's beliefs effect a systematic approach to a range of subjects? If we are considering, again, the paradigmatic person of virtue, I can't imagine answering 'no' to these questions. Of course, typical and fallible agents fail in all sorts of ways but we are considering the ideal virtuous agent.

What of the Foley-ian critical self-scrutiny rejected by Alston? Again, we must ask: does the ideal person of virtue reflect critically on her own beliefs, doxastic practices, commitments, and so forth? Yet again, the intuitive answer seems to be to be 'yes.' I doubt we could or would consider an unreflective, uncritical person as ideally intellectually virtuous. So, we can explain the value of Foley-ian features by their connection to the person of intellectual virtue.

Only one group remains: truth. For Alston, Group (I) hinges the set of desiderata because of its relation to (II). Truth-conducivity has value because it promotes the primary epistemic value of the truth itself. Where does a virtue approach to epistemic normativity place truth? Like Alston, truth plausibly has a central role in epistemic evaluation. We can see this by asking what drives the person of virtue. Following Linda Zagzebski, we can think of the overarching goal of an intellectual virtue as 'cognitive contact with reality'—i.e. truth (1996, 167). Now, I've argued that a truth-conductive approach restricts our desiderata inappropriately, but recall from Section Four that truth can be valuable in non-conductive or success-based ways. Appropriately trying to get the truth or aiming at the truth can be valuable as well. And it's this 'aiming for the truth' that makes an epistemic virtue a virtue and, thus, is the most fundamental characteristic of the person of virtue. Clearly, then, a virtue approach appreciates the value of Group (I) since it encodes the truth in its axiology of virtues (at least, from a Zagzebskian perspective).

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virtue, so the connection between aretaic and deontological concepts, in epistemology, may be even closer than on the account offered here.



How precisely does this help us solve the meta-epistemology problem from the outset? All of the groups Alston affirms and denies status as desiderata have a place in virtue theory. By using the paradigmatic person of virtue as some sort of standard or criterion, we can explain the epistemically desirable features of both agents and beliefs incorporated in the various desiderata mentioned. Thus, we can accept a pluralism about epistemic normativity deeper than Alston's and yet retain the primary value of truth he also emphasizes. There are many epistemically valuable relations to the truth on this view: reliable success in attaining it, responsible seeking of it, defending one's beliefs in light of it, reflecting on one's cognition with an eye towards it, cultivating traits aimed at it, obtaining evidence for it, and so on. All of these different relations mark out different features holding of the person of intellectual virtue; her function, character, etc. unifies these epistemically desirable relations in various ways. Where Alston slips is in thinking that only one of these relations *really* makes something epistemically valuable. My view accepts all of these relations as genuinely desirable and, at the same time, shows that they all hold for the person of virtue without requiring *one single way* they must relate to this focal value.

My solution, therefore, keeps with Aristotle's use of substance in the *Metaphysics*. I emphasize the crucial role of the person of virtue as a way to explain the value of a pluralistic set of relations that are mutually irreducible and not inter-definable. The person of virtue, thus, unifies the diverse epistemic desiderata but she does not do so in a way that makes all of these desiderata ultimately collapse into one category: we have a genuine pluralism that's also robustly unified. And that sort of theory fits exactly on the framework developed in Section Six.

## 7. Conclusion

Given my arguments and position in this paper, we can find an illuminating role for virtue theory on epistemic normativity. Leaving aside particular worries about Alston or uses of Aristotle, I think that that point as the major upswing of my theory. The hopelessly vague 'aiming at the truth' works through the more perspicuous person of intellectual virtue as a way to explain the seemingly disparate and unrelated sorts of epistemic values one might consider. However, these values do have a relation to each other insofar as they each relate to the person of virtue. Ultimately, then, the value of truth filters through the person of virtue as some sort of norm to ground epistemic value and theories of normativity. But the normativity of the ideally virtuous person doesn't collapse the other values into each other: truth-conducivity really is epistemically good just as evidence, critical self-reflection, responsible believing, and so on. Accordingly we have a view relating epistemic values to

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epistemic norms to epistemic desiderata in a way that allows for unity with a robust plurality. Alston had the right sort of view about where we should be heading even if his particular route won't get us to that destination.

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