

# WHY BE VIRTUOUS? TOWARDS A HEALTHY EPISTEMIC SOCIAL ENVIRONMENT

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**ABSTRACT:** The paper argues that, although the role of responsibilist epistemic virtues is unclear in the framework of traditional knowledge-centred individualist and idealised epistemology, it can be properly understood if one considers other epistemic goods and activities, adopts insights from social epistemology, and acknowledges the non-ideality of our epistemic world. It proposes to explain the value of epistemic virtues in terms of their contribution to a healthy epistemic social environment. Specifically, it is argued that responsibilist virtues are essential (1) for respecting listeners who commit to testimonial justice; (2) for distinguished epistemic agents in their roles of teachers, guides, and exemplars; and (3) both to create and properly recognise these roles and epistemic positions within social networks. In that way, responsibilist virtue epistemology finds its place among the newly emerging topics of social epistemology.

**KEYWORDS:** responsibilism, epistemic environment, virtue epistemology, epistemic authority, epistemic values, testimonial justice

Virtue epistemology originally emerged as a way out of the epistemological impasse triggered by the Gettier Problem that almost led to the death of epistemology (cf. Zagzebski 2001, 235-236). In the theory of justification, it promised a third way between foundationalism and coherentism (Sosa 1980); in the analysis of knowledge: between evidentialist deontology and reliabilist consequentialism (Zagzebski 1996); against naturalised epistemology, it proposed a promising account of normative epistemology; finally, it was offered as the ultimate solution to the Theaetetus Problem (Zagzebski 1996). Unfortunately, at least on the last point, the traditional programme of virtue epistemology has failed. Reliabilist virtue epistemology is subject to Gettier cases analogous to those of classical reliabilism (Zagzebski 1994). More importantly, it is not clear whether a condition on belief which results from an act of epistemic virtue is either sufficient or necessary for knowledge.<sup>1</sup> Thus, there was a general shift towards an expansionist virtue epistemology (Battaly 2008) in the

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<sup>1</sup> For a systematisation of possible directions responsibilist virtue epistemology could take in view of the classical programme of explaining knowledge and normative properties of beliefs, see Baehr (2008).

years which followed, and a decline in the popularity of epistemic virtues themselves in recent years in favour of research on epistemic vices and a more social approach to knowledge.

However, the broader changes that epistemology has undergone recently provide an opportunity to revisit the topic and to answer anew the question of the role of virtues in epistemic life. In the present paper, I want to explore this in reference to responsibilist virtue epistemology. To this end, in section 1, I argue that the contribution of the responsibilist virtues to epistemic goods can be better explained if—on the one hand, the social nature of epistemic life is acknowledged, and on the other, this epistemic life is not limited to the acquisition of knowledge, but includes a broader set of epistemic goods and a more extensive notion of epistemic activity, notably: the transmission and maintenance of epistemic goods. Then, in section 2, I introduce the framework of an epistemic social environment and propose to extend the activity of epistemic virtues that goes beyond a production of epistemic goods and covers comprehensively ways of enhancing this environment. In section 3, I illustrate this by a group of virtues required for testimonial justice, and in section 4 I propose a set of virtues corresponding to the tasks of distinguished epistemic agents within society. Finally, in section 5, I propose a general account of a healthy epistemic social environment and the contribution of responsibilist virtues to it. I argue that even if responsibilist epistemic virtues can be bypassed in the individualist, knowledge-centred epistemology, their role is key to dealing with these new challenges of epistemic social life.

## 1. Towards a Richer (Virtue) Epistemology

31 years after the publication of Montmarquet's *Epistemic Virtue and Doxastic Responsibility* (Montmarquet 1993), and 28 years after Zagzebski's *Virtues of the Mind* (Zagzebski 1996), two programmatic works by the two flagship representatives of virtue responsibilism, some would probably be tempted to bury this approach in analytical epistemology as a dead end. While virtue reliabilism, through successive reforms and developments, seems to offer a theory of knowledge that is as popular as it is successful in the face of new counter-examples (see, for example, Carter 2023), responsibilism appears to have lost its intellectual vigour. Zagzebski's idea of modelling intellectual virtues on moral ones, which combines Montmarquet's motivationalism with Sosa's and Greco's reliabilism, became, indeed, inspiring for vice epistemology (the title of Cassam's book, *Vices of the Mind* (2019), which refers to Zagzebski's work, is significant). However, responsibilist virtues themselves have lost the role intended for them in the analysis of knowledge. In this respect, the classic critiques in Battaly (2008) and Baehr (2011) seems to be widely accepted

among epistemologists. It is not clear in what sense responsibilist virtues are necessary for knowledge (especially: low-grade knowledge). Moreover, there is a more fundamental problem behind this. In the case of many epistemic virtues, such as honesty, epistemic generosity, and testimonial justice, however much we agree about their virtuous character, there is a serious problem about the sense in which they are epistemic rather than (simply) moral virtues. Even if we may classify them as epistemic by virtue of their domain of action (cognition), there is still a problem of whether their value can be expressed in purely epistemic terms.<sup>2</sup> Not surprisingly, they are often relegated to questions of intellectual ethics, or perhaps simply ethics. (Once more, the subtitle of the aforementioned Cassam's work, "From the intellectual to the political", is more than evocative.)

However, it is not only the approach to virtue responsibilism that has changed in the last 30 years. Epistemology in general has undergone a dramatic metamorphosis, both in terms of the scope of interests, the questions posed, and the ways in which they are answered. This transformation can be characterised, for the purposes of the present argument, as the lifting of five main limitations. Traditional epistemology was: (1) focused on knowledge as the principal epistemic good (cf. Zagzebski 2001); (2) concentrated on knowledge acquisition while ignoring or treating derivatively its transmission and maintenance (cf. Chrisman 2022; Mandelbaum 2014); (3) targeted at epistemic goods as states (objects) abstracted from the dynamics of inquiry (cf. Friedman 2019; Thorstad 2021), (4) individualist (cf. Goldberg 2010; 2018), and (5) idealised (cf. McKenna 2023). In each of these respects, it gave no account of real epistemic life, but presented a caricatured, dwarfed form of it, leading to disappointing conclusions and little relevance to practical issues.

The lifting of the above five limitations not only changes epistemology but, by expanding the scope of epistemic life (epistemic agency, goals, goods, agents, and evaluations), it opens up a new space for epistemic virtues—including responsibilist ones. The point is as follows. Classical virtue responsibilism was a normative epistemology built on a particular historical model of epistemology (including a specific concept of epistemic goods, values, norms and evaluation criteria). If it is criticised now, one must bear in mind that its flaws might be due to the very responsibilism, but they may equally well be due to the general epistemological framework in which it sits. When one rejects classical virtue responsibilism, the question arises: does one reject responsibilism in general, or only its classical form? In other words, does the problem lie with responsibilism itself, or is it only inherited

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<sup>2</sup> I address this issue more systematically in relation to the socialisation of virtue epistemology in (Jarczewski Forthcoming).

from the model of epistemology in which responsibilism was classically embedded? In what follows, I will argue that the responsibilist should embrace broader shifts in epistemology. The weaknesses of classical responsibilism (in particular: the problem of the value of responsibilist virtues) stemmed from a limited account of knowledge and epistemology. However, once the limitations are overcome, responsibilist virtue epistemology can get a new, attractive glow.

I propose framing this new model for virtue epistemology within the concept of the epistemic social environment.<sup>3</sup> In that, I want to honour the contribution of vice epistemology and propose an account of virtue epistemology that is not to be accused of a life in denial in the face of the non-ideal factors. In the same way as the notion of a demoniac world emerged earlier in the discussion of scepticism and reliabilism, with some features of that world undermining an otherwise correct epistemic effort, vice epistemology notes that we do not need Cartesian demons and mad scientists to make this world demoniac. We are enough on our own to put an epistemic hell on earth. Vice epistemology, through the notion of epistemic corruption (Kidd 2021), describes how this world can degrade our epistemic life. From this analysis, I borrow the thesis of the crucial (and hitherto overlooked) role of the epistemic social environment in the acquisition, maintenance, and transmission (AMT) of epistemic goods. I assume, however, that just as a bad environment undermines epistemic efforts, so a healthy one can help us epistemically flourish as well. And since the environment is not an external container inhabited by agents, but it is strictly a function of them and their relations, then just as agents' vices degrade the environment, their virtues can improve it.<sup>4</sup> In this way, I allow that particular virtues and vices not only act directly in specific epistemic acts (AMT), but also have indirect, long-term effects on AMT and agents themselves by constituting their environment. This seems to be a very promising space precisely for responsibilist virtues.

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<sup>3</sup> A similar idea is present in Ryan (2018). We share the diagnosis of the limitations of agent-centred epistemology, and we agree on the benefits of including environmental factors in epistemic evaluation. However, while Ryan focuses on institutional ways of ameliorating epistemic environment, I propose to start from agent-based solutions (i.e. virtues). At the end of the day, both perspectives are complementary, and I believe that a comprehensive account of epistemic environmentalism should include them both. The present paper concentrates on virtues.

<sup>4</sup> In many respects, I am also inspired by Grasswick's Individuals-in-Community model for social epistemology. I propose to supplement it with a relevant social virtue epistemology. Cf. Grasswick 2004.

## 2. Epistemic Social Environment

Epistemic life is much richer than the mere acquisition and even transmission of knowledge. It therefore imposes very different kinds of duties upon us. Each such individual challenge can explain the role of particular virtues in strictly epistemic terms. A definition can thus be proposed for the responsibilist virtues as follows. To get a good grasp of the proposed turn in virtue responsibilism, let us start from Zagzebski's classical responsibilist definition of virtue:

**VIRTUE 1** An epistemic virtue is a deep and enduring acquired excellence of a person, involving a characteristic motivation to produce a certain desired epistemic end and reliable success in bringing about that end. (Cf. Zagzebski 1996, 137)

And now let us express it in terms of epistemic social duties:

**VIRTUE 2** An epistemic virtue is a deep and enduring acquired excellence of a person, involving a characteristic motivation, that contributes to the compliance of epistemic duties of its bearer within her epistemic social environment.

Evidently, the very notion of epistemic duty is not unproblematic.<sup>5</sup> However, I do not enter into this discussion because, as we shall see shortly, I only need the concept of epistemic duty temporarily. In the final analysis, it will not appear at all.<sup>6</sup> I use it here, however, to relate the proposed discussion for those who prefer to think of normative epistemology in terms of duties. For balance, we can propose an analogous definition in terms of epistemic goods:

**VIRTUE 3** An epistemic virtue is a deep and enduring acquired excellence of a person, involving a characteristic motivation, that contributes to epistemic goods for her and/or her epistemic social environment.

The common image from both definitions is that epistemic virtues contribute to the social epistemic environment by either assuring the proper epistemic behaviour of agents within their social environment, or by assuring the epistemic goods belonging to that environment.

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<sup>5</sup> For an overview of the debate, see McCain and Stapleford 2021.

<sup>6</sup> Since the mainstream normative epistemology is focused on epistemic oughts or duties, I take it as a starting point for my defence of responsibilist virtues. My strategy is the following: 1) there are some epistemic duties that bind us; 2) in order to fulfil them, we should use every available means, and optimally, the best available ones; 3) epistemic virtues are personal excellences that contribute to success in certain epistemic goals; 4) among these goals are some relevant to epistemic duties in 1–2; thus 5) if not for other reasons, it is already worth having the virtues in question for the sake of the aforementioned duties. It does not mean, however, that the role of virtues is reduced to the particular duties. Rather, the bidding of duties is one of the reasons for having the virtues in question. I shall follow this strategy in the following sections.

Now, more has to be said about what this environment actually is:

**EPISTEMIC SOCIAL ENVIRONMENT (ESE)** is a system of persons, groups, and institutions linked by social (epistemic and non-epistemic) links in which epistemic goods are acquired, maintained, and transmitted.

ESE is a function of epistemic agents and their interactions that affect the ease and efficiency of epistemic endeavours. These endeavours concern the AMT of epistemic goods (they are not limited to knowledge itself, and they include maintenance and transmission on an equal footing with acquisition). They are inscribed in the diachronic process of inquiry, which takes place through the social division of epistemic labour. Because of the complex social nature of epistemic labour, the quality (health) of the environment itself (with all the contributions of the individual agents) is of utmost importance. And responsibilist virtues contribute to a healthy epistemic social environment.

Some of this can be easily explained by reference to hitherto overlooked new epistemic goods, epistemic activities, the challenges of inquiry, and the social nature of knowledge. Some of it, however, concerns the very complex interactions between these dimensions of epistemic life. In any case, it is safe to point out that the presence of virtues translates into the quality of the epistemic environment and, in this way, affects its various elements. Thus, it is reasonable to assume that epistemic virtue can contribute to the quality of ESE not necessarily by production of epistemic goods, but also addressing other epistemic needs. We can tentatively assume:

**VIRTUE 4** An epistemic virtue is a deep and enduring acquired excellence of a person, involving a characteristic motivation, that contributes to a healthy epistemic social environment.

In the next two sections, I shall explore how epistemic virtues can enhance ESE in alternative ways, that is without necessarily producing epistemic goods like knowledge, understanding, or true beliefs.

### **3. Virtues of the Respectful Listener**

Traditional epistemology focused on individual knowledge acquisition. Not only did it ignore the social nature of knowledge, other epistemic activities, and other epistemic goods, but, even if one included them, it would be still quite a limited picture of what constitutes our epistemic life. Above all, the epistemic normativity has been framed mainly in knowledge-related duties that translate in the agent's reliability as a knower. Whatever other duties and values were oriented towards other goals than the acquisition of knowledge, even if related to the epistemic sphere, they represented other types of normativity, in particular the moral one. For

example, even if lying takes place in a testimonial context, its object is judgment, and it compromises the value of truth, lying is the object of ethics rather than epistemology. This is quite obvious, since the agent's misconduct does not consist of an erroneous judgment (in which case we would be dealing with a violation of an epistemic norm), but in the intentional act of misleading someone. It turns out, however, that in addition to duties oriented explicitly towards knowledge (its conditions or components) and moral duties that only take place in an epistemic context, there are other duties, values, and examples of misconduct that plausibly fall under a purely epistemological evaluation.

This has been pointed out in particular by M. Fricker (2007) and Medina (2013). Epistemic injustice is not simply a moral wrongdoing. It affects the quality of epistemic life as a whole. Of course, it also has its moral consequences, but is not reduced to them. For example, if I commit testimonial injustice and disregard the testimony of a person due to my prejudice, I am inflicting moral harm on that person, at the very least for disrespect, harming her dignity and perhaps depriving her of particular goods. At the same time, however, by wrongly positioning her in an epistemic network, I am also inflicting epistemic harm.

I believe that it is only by fully adopting the framework of social epistemology that the distinction between moral and epistemic is made readily apparent. For epistemic wrongs do not just affect a person in question, although she is the victim here, nor do they just affect me, but if we immerse this seemingly two-person relationship of non-recognition in the wider context of the epistemic social environment, we can see that this has consequences for the quality of the entire network of epistemic social relations.<sup>7</sup> And the extent of these wrongdoings will only be greater when the bias both on the victim and wrongdoer side not only concern individuals but also groups.

The wrong of the injustice may, of course, be translated into consequentialist terms. For instance, it can be said that due to the exclusion of the testimony coming from a given (individual or collective) knower, the unjust agent and the community as a whole will be deprived of certain epistemic goods: true beliefs, evidence, counter-evidence, reasoning, concepts, etc. While this is true, it does not exhaust

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<sup>7</sup> See also Clifford (1901, 169): "No real belief, however trifling and fragmentary it may seem, is ever truly insignificant; it prepares us to receive more of its like, confirms those which resembled it before, and weakens others; and so gradually it lays a stealthy train in our inmost thoughts, which may someday explode into overt action, and leave its stamp upon our character for ever. And no one man's belief is in any case a private matter which concerns himself alone. Our lives are guided by that general conception of the course of things which has been created by society for social purposes."

the breadth of epistemic losses. Above all, this and other vices weaken each individual agent, but also the epistemic environment itself. As a result, it becomes hostile and corrupting. Thus, regardless of the best intentions, competences, and evidence of its individual members and groups, their efforts are undermined, just like in the classical demoniac scenarios.

However, this vice-centred picture is not the end of a story. At the very least, the possibility of the aforementioned wrongs informs us that there are other than knowledge acquisition-centred actions and commitments in the epistemic world. Just as vices contribute to particular harms and to the general deterioration of the epistemic environment, we are not limited to avoiding these vices, but the mentioned duties compel us to develop relevant virtues that may systematically help us perform well in response to these challenges.

The analyses of the feminist and liberatory epistemology draw attention to one such duty. As epistemic agents, not only are we responsible for the acquisition of knowledge and its transmission, but we incur certain duties as listeners.<sup>8</sup> Obviously, the value of being a good listener translates into a good track record in knowledge acquisition, but it is not limited to this. Being a good listener is part of forming mature and high-quality epistemic networks. It positively builds trust, and in this way, it lays a serious foundation for individual cooperative epistemic endeavours. We are never just listeners or speakers, but both roles influence each other. And they either reinforce or degrade each other. Finally, on the reparatory side, being a good listener not only prevents the perpetration of the vice of testimonial injustice, but also constitutes an element of convalescence for the victims of such injustice.

The virtues of a good listener have already appeared in the literature. For example, Kawall (2002) identifies three groups of other-regarding epistemic virtues and duties, the third of which includes skills of a good listener and critic. He makes a major effort to argue that these virtues and duties are actually epistemic rather than moral, pointing to the social nature of knowledge and interdependence in knowledge production. The current framework achieves the same result in a simpler and straightforward way: at the starting point, it identifies the primary action of virtue as the enhancement of ESE, only one way of which is knowledge production.

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<sup>8</sup> More recently, Lackey (2022) has interestingly applied the right to be known, originally present in the discussion of victims of racial and sexual violence, etc., to the social rehabilitation of the wrongly convicted under the label of epistemic reparations. While it is, of course, always problematic how such an individual right translates into a duty (who is actually bound by this duty, when it is fulfilled in society, etc.), it does provide an important premise as to the group of general duties of listeners.



We do not need to take the longer route by pointing out that other-regarding epistemic virtues ultimately also contribute to knowledge production albeit very indirectly.

In addition, Johnson (2023) proposes transplanting the notion of care from ethics to epistemology. She points out that alongside the productive work, no less important in epistemology is the reproductive work (education, preparation of the scientific background, etc.), which is not so spectacular and will not bring directly to the production of knowledge, but it is the one that actually sustains the life of the epistemic community (scientific, in particular) and without it the former would not be possible either. The commitments and approaches she describes in institutional terms correspond to what the virtues of a respectful listener could be. Importantly, while there is a growing consensus on the issue of duty, the topic of the virtues of a respectful listener still needs to be developed. I believe that linking these threads together would serve both.

Finally, observe that here we have a situation in which the problem has emerged from social epistemology and points to the place of potential epistemic virtues, not yet explored enough by virtue epistemology. In the next section, however, I will take the opposite direction and indicate the social place for responsibilist virtues that already exist in the literature. The conclusion of this section is that the very shape of the epistemic social environment, and the commitments that occur within it, require responsibilist virtues, irrespective of their previous catalogues and studies.

#### **4. Virtues of Distinguished Epistemic Agents**

We live and learn in a diverse social environment, and we benefit from this. The division of epistemic labour and the existence of properly recognised experts not only make up for our individual limits and deficiencies, but also ensure that our inquiries are more efficient and successful. However, that is not the end of the story. The social distribution of epistemic labour does not signify that less agile people are simply substituted by the better epistemic agents, and so their epistemic agency is clearly bypassed. This would undermine the autonomy of individuals and could justly be accused of epistemic paternalism. Moreover, even if an agent were to relegate epistemic competence in favour of an expert in a given field, in order to remain rational she should nevertheless possess certain criteria for such significant trust.<sup>9</sup> This seems to lead to a sort of vicious circle of competences required to

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<sup>9</sup> Note that even with an extremely strong position that Zagzebski confers to epistemic authority in arguing for preemptive reasons to accept her autonomy, she could save the autonomy of subjected agents only by making her responsible for a prior rational recognition of epistemic

recognise advanced epistemic agents (cf. Brennan 2020; Hinton 2020), and I shall return to it later. For the moment, it is important to acknowledge that simply having epistemic experts in society opens rather than closes the question of responsibilities of epistemic agents.

While thinking about the role of epistemic agents, both advanced and non-advanced, I believe we should not stop at the level of this distinction and pursue a correct classification. We should also consider the ameliorative dimension of social epistemology and possibly social virtue epistemology. The distinguished epistemic agents (DEA) would ideally have a role not just in supplementing our limitations, but also in helping individuals to overcome these limitations and become better epistemic agents. In this way, at least some of the objections to cognitive inequality would be dismissed. Thus, I would like to point to four demands concerning DEAs in the social environment, and argue for the role of responsibilist virtues in addressing them. Consequently, DEAs are not limited to epistemic experts, but they are also teachers, good inquirers, and epistemic guides.

Let's start with the first function of DEAs—the teachers. At the basic level, teachers are just competent testifiers. To teach means just to transmit some propositional knowledge. This role implies two series of epistemic duties: first, related to the acquisition of knowledge itself, and, second, related to the best possible transmission of that knowledge. Clearly, it is not enough to have knowledge to be a good testifier, let alone: a teacher. Because of the personal nature of the transmission of knowledge, we require of a good witness to (a) be trustworthy, and (b) transfer knowledge skilfully. Both the requirements suggest specific sets of epistemic virtues that might help an agent to be a systematically good testifier (teacher). Recently, Byerly has identified several groups of such virtues (which represent a subset of what he calls virtues of intellectual dependability) (Byerly 2021). These are: (1) sincerity, honesty, and transparency, (2) virtues of communicative clarity, and (3) virtues of audience sensitivity. What follows from this is that a good testifier (especially a teacher), needs not only the reliabilist virtues for knowledge acquisition, nor the analogous virtues related to knowledge transmission, but she also needs other-centred virtues, which secure that the testifier will not only assert the knowledge effectively, but that her assertion will be properly received—not by an abstract, anonymous hearer, but by a concrete person (the student).<sup>10</sup>

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authority: “The authority of another person’s belief for me is justified by my conscientious judgment that I am more likely to form a belief that survives my conscientious self-reflection if I believe what the authority believes than if I try to figure out what to believe myself.” (Zagzebski 2012: 110–1)

<sup>10</sup> A similar idea (although originally not related to virtue epistemology) was proposed by Kelp and

Interestingly, our considerations here also take us beyond the dichotomous view of knowledge transmission with a separate testifier and receiver. Indeed, a good teacher should be characterised by the virtues of a respectful listener mentioned in the previous section. Above all, she will never be a good teacher if she lacks empathy and social intelligence, as well as a certain intersubjective insightfulness. Note that most of these challenges and virtues found in knowledge transmission are new in relation to the requirements for knowledge acquisition. However, they represent an extremely important element of epistemic life within ESE. And indeed, in view of our reliance on DEAs in knowledge acquisition itself, the virtues we require from DEAs become crucial for our knowledge acquisition as well.

Second, DEA is an expert not only because of the epistemic goods possessed. More importantly, as a skillful inquirer (to what she owes her expertise), she is an expert on how to conduct a successful inquiry. Thanks to it, she may act as an epistemic guide for beginner (but also peer) inquirers. In that, she does not replace them in the acquisition of epistemic goods, but can help them become better inquirers, and in so doing she ameliorates the overall quality of the ESE. In that sense, she acts as a master training apprentices to be new masters. In the context of the dynamic history of a given community and succession of generations, this vocation of DEA cannot be emphasised enough. Consequently, there are two sets of requirements and relevant virtues (Byerly 2021, 165). First, the DEA has to be an expert in the inquiry herself. This includes many of the virtues connected to inquiry, but not related directly to knowledge acquisition, for example epistemic creativity, open-mindedness, the sense of coherence, epistemic persistence, patience, etc. But then, DEA also needs specific virtues to be a good guide for others. It need not be said that being an excellent performer does not entail being a guide in this for others (and often, it is just the opposite). Thus, she needs specific virtues and competences to properly recognise the position and needs of her apprentice; to find ways of improvement adjusted to her; also the empathetic and interpersonal skills in good guidance. To that, I would also add some specific virtues that protect the autonomy of the apprentice and prevent any kind of epistemic abuse of power or paternalism, such as epistemic humility and patience (cf. Zagzebski Forthcoming).

Third, as already mentioned, in order to act as a teacher and guide, DEA must be properly recognised in these roles. This places demands on the remaining epistemic agents. It seems to lead to the paradox that ignorance and incompetence

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Simion when they argue for the Function First Account of Assertion (FFAA). FFAA—unlike the standard Knowledge Rule of Assertion (KRA)—takes into account not only knowledge requirements on the testifier's side, but also requirements on the receiver's side which a testifier has to meet in order that her assertion be normatively correct. See Kelp and Simion (2021).

in the domain D push non-advanced epistemic agents to seek expert testimony, but to do so rationally they need certain criteria. How are they to judge the competence of experts in a field in which they themselves are by definition incompetent? This therefore risks the absolute irrationality of either relying on the authority of experts or relinquishing their autonomy to the institutional legitimacy of these experts. Without going into detail, which would require a separate paper, it seems that the key to solving the chicken or the egg problem is to adopt an intermediate solution. We may not have absolute and definitive warranties on the part of either the agents or the institutions. However, we can improve the position of the agent and the institution relatively so as to increase the chances of the expert being correctly identified. It seems, therefore, that on the agent's side, we can pay attention to her overall profile. While in many respects she may lack knowledge, competence, and virtue, yet the more epistemically virtuous she is, the greater her chances (without guarantees) to recognise correctly epistemic authority.

Furthermore, it might be argued that, irrespective of any other roles of responsibilist epistemic virtues (knowledge production, and diverse ways of enhancing ESE), a sufficient reason on which we can construct the value of these virtues would be their role as markers of DEAs. An aretaic profile of a candidate for DEA can help an agent S recognise and appropriately adjust her level of trust in that person, and by that enable proper transmission of knowledge. While taking aretaic indicators seems plausible for S to solve the problem of whom to trust, this also imposes some new responsibilities on DEA for making such recognition plausible. At this point, it is important to consider our main tool that evolution has equipped us with and that is the competences of an individual's social psychology (cf. Green 2016, 48–57; Mercier 2020). Although it is easy to inflict falsehood on this, we treat people as integral and coherent persons, and from here we transfer evaluations intercategory. A person characterised by epistemic virtues which may even not be directly related to the transmission of knowledge will look more plausible in our eyes as a good candidate for testifier. Hence, a DEA, in order to be recognised in her roles, should be concerned with the development of all epistemic virtues, in particular humility, honesty, epistemic justice, the virtues of a good listener, etc. It is not that epistemically arrogant or pretentious people cannot be good informants. However, it is highly unlikely that anyone would want them as teachers. In this sense, their competence is socially worthless. Some of their vices, which may in no way undermine knowledge, deprive them of the social role of knowers we are interested in.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> In this respect, compare Greco's account on obstacles of transmission of religious beliefs – Greco (2020, 182–83).

Finally, all this is relevant also to the fourth challenge: of having epistemic exemplars. In a way, everything we need from epistemic exemplars has already been mentioned. We need to recognise them, and they help us to become better inquirers. So what is the point of distinguishing this new challenge? I see two reasons for doing it. First, I distinguish being a good guide from being an exemplar. Ideally, the two should coincide. And of course, an agent would be more prone to follow DEA's guidance if she admired her. However, these are two different kinds of influence DEA can have in society. Being an exemplar gives rise to admiration, and it, in turn, gives a proper motivation to emulating the exemplar (cf. Zagzebski 2017, 35). In the case of a guide, the motivation is directly related to the goals of the inquiry. I follow my guide because I want to be a better inquirer. In the case of exemplars, this motivation does not go away, but a second one appears, which acts as an additional engine. Moreover, as Zagzebski (2017, 66) remarks, exemplars can influence us without any direct interaction (they can even be fictional). They may be physically inaccessible, they may be long dead. It could also be possible not to get any know-how from them. Still, they would be valuable in building our motivation and creating a positive strive to perfection.

The second reason for distinguishing exemplars is that they set standards for the epistemic community. They determine what it is to be an excellent inquirer, what behaviour is tolerable and what is desirable. In the context of a possible epistemic corruption, they act as an ameliorative factor in the epistemic social environment.

To sum up, distinguished epistemic agents (DEA) are not just individuals who possess some superior epistemic goods, but their epistemic position makes them good candidates to fulfil some important epistemic roles within the environment. In fulfilling them, they need specific epistemic virtues that include responsibilist ones. Though possibly negligible in knowledge acquisition, these virtues are important in the face of at least four challenges: being a good teacher, being a guide, being properly recognised as DEA, and being an epistemic exemplar. Meeting these challenges improves the overall quality of the epistemic environment, making it healthier and more hospitable for all the epistemic agents. The role of responsibilist virtues can thus be explained in these social terms.

## **5. Virtues of a Healthy Epistemic Society**

The two previous sections concerned two different cases with unequal positions of the epistemic agents involved. In section 3, the testifier was at the mercy of the hearer, who could very easily inflict testimonial injustice on her. To a certain extent, the testifier was held hostage by the listener. In section 4, the DEA occupied a

superior position towards other epistemic agents thanks to her excellent abilities and expert knowledge. I remarked that both cases impose new epistemic duties and challenges that go beyond the traditional, knowledge-acquisition centred models of virtue epistemology. Therefore, they give a place to new virtues and indeed require them. Now, we can add that analogous challenges also apply where the inequality of agents is not so marked. Perhaps we are able to highlight a whole spectrum of such relationships. The virtues of a respectful listener are important in essentially all interactions in the epistemic social environment. Similarly, as testifiers, we can easily find ourselves in situations of relative authority, that is when our (contingent) placement makes us better candidates for knowers with respect to a particular proposition  $p$  than other people, even if it is for a very simple reason that we are in place to find out that there is a vase on the table, and they are not, because they are in other rooms (E. Fricker 2006). Thus, the virtues of good testifying, inquiry guidance and counselling, recognising not only the DEA, but essentially the epistemic position of any other agent (and oneself!), or finally the proper emulation of epistemic exemplars apply to all members of the community.

I propose to go a step further and not stop at the mere analogical multiplication of the roles for epistemic virtues. For all these individual responsibilities and challenges are still built on the fundamental level of the general quality of the epistemic social networks. This has already appeared in places in earlier analyses, and here I would like to give it a proper focus. Our epistemic life takes place within social networks. Individual actions depend on the general quality of our interactions and, because we enter into them holistically, various, often explicitly unrelated virtues have an impact: both as to the evaluation of individual fellow inquirers and as to the quality of our collective actions. Our evaluations of each other are intercategorical in scope. Nor can current attitudes and behaviours be understood without their historical context. For example, once trust is eroded, it will undermine later work, even if there is no current rationale behind not cooperating or ignoring one's testimony. And I do not see this as some undesirable feature, but a very useful tool developed evolutionarily (cf. Begby 2021; Mercier 2020). So the necessary determinant of our shared epistemic life is epistemic trust.<sup>12</sup> As a consequence, we can look at epistemic virtues from this perspective and see how they contribute to the construction of rationally justified epistemic trust, how they allow this trust to be properly lowered, but also how they contribute to the

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<sup>12</sup> Once more, I cannot do justice to the whole discussion on epistemic trust here. For reference, see Cook, Hardin, and Levi 2005; Dormandy 2020; Faulkner 2011; Faulkner and Simpson 2017; Foley 2001; Hardin 2002; McMyler 2011; Simon 2021.

trustworthiness of epistemic agents and—extremely importantly in historical perspective—allow lost epistemic trust to be rebuilt.<sup>13</sup>

Finally, on this topic, I would like to mention one more possible challenge to which responsibilist virtues can respond. Chrisman argues that the epistemic norms determine the criteria of a good reputation within the society. And their recognition is necessary for being a legitimate member of such a society: “Since success in satisfying one’s own desires and interests so often depends on having such support from other people, individuals have a strong and ongoing reason to maintain their reputation as reasonable and reliable believers” (Chrisman 2022, 128).<sup>14</sup> I think that this approach could be applied to epistemic virtues as well. In a way, their value could also be explained in terms of assuring the reputation of their bearer and so secure her position within the epistemic social network, in a way that she could obtain access to supplementary epistemic goods. Thus, in the same way that the possession of virtues by others can be a useful marker for their position in the epistemic environment, it also allows us to mark our right position. Chrisman points out that we are selective not only as receivers of knowledge in choosing testifiers, but also in choosing those with whom we ourselves share knowledge, evidence, etc. He answers why we adhere to epistemic norms; I argue that if this schema is relevant to epistemic deontology, it is even more relevant to virtue epistemology. Both our virtues and those of others allow us to be epistemically positioned accordingly.

Thus, epistemic virtues contribute to the quality of epistemic social networks by increasing the excellence of its members, proper interactions within these networks, building social trust, flagging differentiated epistemic positions, and beyond that, of course, contributing to individual epistemic goods. Just as vice epistemology has described the corrupting elements of the cognitive environment, virtue epistemology can enumerate the elements of a healthy epistemic social environment:<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> On the value of epistemic forgiveness see Green (2021).

<sup>14</sup> This idea is already implicit in a passage from Clifford’s *Ethics of Belief*: “Men speak the truth to one another when each reveres the truth in his own mind and in the other’s mind; but how shall my friend revere the truth in my mind when I myself am careless about it, when I believe things because I want to believe them, and because they are comforting and pleasant?”. (Clifford 1901, 174)

<sup>15</sup> A similar way of thinking about social epistemology can be found in Greco: “In particular, social epistemology looks to describe the various ways in which the quality of a person’s epistemic position depends not just on their individual cognitive resources, but on the good health and proper functioning of a broader epistemic community. Relatedly, social epistemology looks to detail the features of a well-functioning epistemic community, and to thereby understand not only how things go well when they do, but also how things can go wrong. In light of this, a successful

**HEALTHY ENVIRONMENT:**

A healthy epistemic social environment is created among others by:

- (a) the individual epistemic goods present in that environment;
- (b) the faculties and intellectual traits of the individual members conducive to fruitful inquiry;
- (c) testimonial justice both on individual and institutional scales;
- (d) the presence of recognised DEAs as teachers, guides and exemplars;
- (e) more broadly: the fulfilment by their participants of their respective mutual epistemic duties;
- (f) justified high epistemic trust.

This last step permits specifying VIRTUE 4 that I tentatively assumed in section 2:

**VIRTUE 4** An epistemic virtue is a deep and enduring acquired excellence of a person, involving a characteristic motivation that contributes to a healthy epistemic social environment.

Now we see how, including their classical knowledge-production function, epistemic virtues, in particular responsibilist virtues, can enhance ESE.

The present account may raise at least two quite straightforward questions. I would like to treat them briefly so as to avoid the misinterpretation of my proposal. First, the question can be raised as to whether epistemic virtues understood in this way are necessary for a healthy epistemic environment, or, in other words, to what extent one needs to possess them for the environment to be healthy. In reply, the health of the environment is gradual. I find it difficult to imagine a state of absolute environmental health. On the other hand, in an ameliorative perspective (particularly, in relation to themes from non-ideal epistemology), it may be interesting to identify factors by which a given environment can get healthier. One of these is the virtues. With this approach, one would have to answer the above questions by kindly rephrasing them: virtues, any virtues, and in any degree of perfection, contribute to making this environment healthier. Consequently, an environment in which any virtue lacks perfection could not be considered perfectly healthy. Since these virtues enhance health, the environment would not be perfect without them. This, however, rather shows why such a hypothetical state of a

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social epistemology might be in a better position to diagnose the ills of our current social and political situation, and in a way that sees those whom we disagree with through a more complex and more charitable lens.” (2020, ix)



perfectly healthy epistemic environment is at best a regulative fiction. From the mortals' perspective, the interesting question is not about the absolute state, but the relative improvement of the current state.

Second, one might object that I focus on epistemic virtues and I leave out systemic, institutional ways of improving the environment. I would therefore like to emphasise that although the present paper focuses on responsibilist virtues, they are by no means exclusive to environmental health-making. There are many positive and negative factors. However, the current situation in social epistemology is rather such that, although the non-ideal diagnosis itself pays attention to both personal (vices) and institutional factors (cf. Cassam 2019), the ameliorative part mainly emphasises the latter. Moreover, for example Levy (2021) treats the non-ideality of our epistemic world as an argument against virtue epistemology. In a bad environment, the virtues are not strong enough to prevent bad beliefs, and, worse, they may even contribute to bad beliefs. In my account, I want to show that the picture is significantly more complex, and that when faced with the challenges of a non-ideal environment, we should be wary of either-or solutions, but rather adopt an 'all hands on deck' principle. Hence, I propose to adopt the perspective of a multifaceted epistemic social environment that is shaped by many factors, one of which are personal epistemic virtues. In the same vein, the present solution in no way excludes the relevance of collective virtues. But that is a matter that merits its own article.

## Conclusion

In the present paper, I argued that, although the role of responsibilist epistemic virtues is unclear in the framework of traditional knowledge-centred individualist and idealised epistemology, if we consider other epistemic goods and activities, take the inquiry and social perspective on that subject, and acknowledge the non-ideality of our epistemic world, this question can be fruitfully reconsidered. I proposed that the role and value of epistemic virtues can be explained in terms of their contribution to a healthy epistemic social environment. In particular, I highlighted that responsibilist virtues are essential (1) for respecting listeners who commit to testimonial justice; (2) for distinguished epistemic agents in their roles of teachers, guides, and exemplars; and (3) both to create and properly recognise the roles and positions within epistemic network of properly judged epistemic trust. In that way, responsibilist virtue epistemology finds its place among the newly emerging subjects of social epistemology.<sup>16</sup>

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