

# **A Naturalized Bridge to (a Weak Conservative and Moderate Autonomous) Virtue Epistemology: Contributions of Experimentally Shifted Contexts of Justification to the Virtuous Self-Articulation of *de se* and *de re* Beliefs**

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Presidential Address

It is with great joy that I present my presidential address to the New Mexico-Texas Philosophical Society, to fellow colleagues, and friends. Thank you very much for giving me this opportunity to share my ongoing work on virtue epistemology with you.

In this address, I propose extending the dialogue on virtue epistemology research to modal contexts of self-knowledge. My proposal is to explore a weak conservative, moderate autonomous approach to virtue epistemology (Baehr, 2008), where intellectual virtues are taken to complement traditional epistemology, rather than attempt to substitute it, while also offering new paths to unfolding it. I would like to suggest that such complementary exploration allows for the reconsideration of the knower's epistemic competence and/or for tracking one's competence over time. That is the case, irrespective of shifting contexts, in a longitudinal virtuous self-regulatory integration of one's self-knowledge with new information, inclusive of *datum* from naturalist contexts of investigation.

## **I. VIRTUES, WISDOM & EPISTEMOLOGY**

What are virtues? According to Julia Annas' prominent account, we should think of virtues through the study of the 'skill analogy' as a type of practical expertise (Annas, 2011a, 2). Virtues are in part *like* skills, "educated developments of our unformed motivations" (2011a, 11)—but also, *unlike* skills, virtues include practical intelligence in the active, unifying development of an individual's expertise, aligned to a thoughtful background of aims and values, and changing or persisting through a hurdle of experiences. As she puts it:

Expertise is not static given; it is dynamic and always developing. It decays, is sustained, or is modified, depending on the conditions of its exercise.... (H)

abituations that result in a dynamic trait that expresses itself in intelligent and selective response. (2011b, 102)

By following Annas's account, one can interpret that the virtuous person, when involved in the crucial task of knowing oneself—a special type of expertise—needs to be very attentive to the dynamic character of this practice, and to the conditions of its habituation as an expertise *per se*.

Annas also suggests that a person's virtues are overall integrated. The tendency to make progress towards the unification of one's virtues has to do with the fact that, through sustained reflection, an agent introduces perspective and grounding of regulative values and aims to both thought and to action. Annas precisely suggests that integrated virtues as such by an individual are necessarily unified dispositionally "in a holistic structure" (Annas, 2011a, 3). In this unification, the flourishing of a virtuous individual is conceived as fundamental to complement the sense in which virtues, as intelligent practical skills, are unified in one's personal excellence. It is a plausible position that brings the understanding of practical expertise to the core of personhood.

Given Annas's account of virtue with a eudemonism condition, it is plausible to interpret that the virtuous epistemic subject is then necessarily truth-seeking, inclusive of pursuing epistemic inquiry on oneself as a condition of one's flourishing. If one's expertise is dynamic, then such virtuous epistemic agent should self-develop through the consideration of belief revision and updating in their proper critical contexts of justification. Particularly, integrating 'unknown unknowns' propositions about oneself requires a disposition to seek epistemic growth and improvement against non-flattering—or just flat-out non-recognized propositions about oneself. Finding ways to knowing oneself outside our regular stream of consciousness and/or realm of selective memories contributes to better unify and integrate dynamically one's overall flourishing, practically and intellectually. One may call such expert self-knowing person "wise."

For the sake of this work, I keep an epistemic focus on the self-knowing dimension of such wisdom. What does it mean to be a wise epistemic subject/agent, theoretically/practically? Baehr (2012) provides us, in particular, with a promising virtue epistemology analysis of the possible articulation of theoretical and practical wisdom as follows, that helps to illuminate a possible answer to these questions:

Theoretical wisdom is concerned with believing well or correctly, while practical wisdom is concerned with deliberating and acting well or correctly. (Baehr, 2012, 87)

The epistemically wise person is clearly intellectually wise. This person should correctly believe *as such*. Yet, while considering a more global perspective to expertise about oneself, we might be authorized to speculate further that practical wisdom is also necessarily involved. The particular type of epistemic integration of intellectual and practical wisdom is a good candidate for consideration. As Baehr suggests, the line between theoretical and practical wisdom blurs when epistemology is the case:

(E)pistemic goods are among the ends that a practically wise person might be concerned with—and presumably, concerned with *as such*. (Baehr, 2012, 89)

If a global expertise perspective is sponsored, then, intellectual wisdom is not “detachable” in practice. In knowing oneself, the practical wisdom of knowing is ultimately relevant. Baehr goes ahead and also furnishes a subtle competence conception of theoretical wisdom, where it is in fact, a “mode’ of practical reason.” Theoretical wisdom would then be

(A) personal intellectual ability or competence that is aimed at the sort of cognitive end... that enables its possessor, say, to reliably identify choiceworthy epistemic ends or subject matters and to quickly and efficiently arrive at a deep explanatory understanding of them. (Baehr, 2012, 89)

While a theoretically wise epistemic agent believes *correctly*, her choice of “epistemically significant” subject matters “worth knowing about for their own sake” can also be interpreted as also practically wise. Knowing oneself for its own sake is then, in a subtle way, practically wise. To be intellectually wise, competent to engage in such self-investigation against our own self-hurdles of selectivity, the choice of appropriate epistemic strategies is crucial. I would like to argue that a competent self-knower should pursue epistemic strategies that are beyond the traditional realm of self-recognition in a first person type of narrative. I would like to suggest that it is precisely the third person types of propositions, that may introduce the new evidence necessary for competently engaging in the task of self-knowing. I suggest that an extension to modal epistemology, while respectful of the competence model of virtue epistemology, may offer some special strategies that allow a clear distinction yet articulation of beliefs about oneself in first person and third person. As a result, one may expertly introduce unrecognized biased beliefs about oneself in a non-defensive, introspective and epistemic justified way.

## II

Odysseus meets David Lewis in this account I am pursuing. As the legend goes, the virtuous person, Odysseus, asks his sailor men to tie him to the master of his ship. He is afraid of the risk of throwing himself into the sea, mislead by his own original preferences towards the assumed pleasure of diving with the sirens. Analytic approaches to epistemology, in this analogy, provide the epistemic constraints that allow us to resist against our own original, pleasurable preferences regarding beliefs about oneself.

In particular, a venerable epistemological contextualist tradition brought by David Lewis, may be very helpful against the imminent risk of biasing one’s epistemic investigation from the start. Self-knowing requires first the recognition of an important epistemic distinction of two type of beliefs towards oneself, structured in a two-place relation between subject and propositions.

In the first case, I can hold beliefs about myself in the first person: that “I am a

philosopher,” and that “I am also a physician.” Such beliefs are *de se*. I am indexically referred in such propositions, and I am linguistically aware and justified by introspection and memory to believe the content of such propositions. They are apt, first person beliefs about oneself. Whether they are true or not in different, skeptical contexts, we shall consider later.

A different challenge is to process the second type of belief about oneself, yet, without a first person reference. This is the case of a third person proposition I may believe, unbeknownst to me as referring to myself—where I am not indexically recognized. Those are called ‘*de re*’ beliefs.

For instance, the proposition: “It is someone else’s turn to organize the symposium’s dinner this year.” Like when one attempts to softly raise the awareness of interlocutors with a hint, a third person proposition can be a pragmatic resource that makes eventually someone to integrate it to a *de se* belief about one’s propositional attitudes and make it a first person proposition, as a self-realization: “I will organize it then.”

More interestingly, a *de re* belief could be a rarer kind of third person proposition, acquired through my participation in a study, where I may discover unexpected information about myself I do not yet recognize. In focus is the Implicit Association Test (Harvard), which generates results that are reliably connected to the first person subject through one’s voluntary participation, yet generates new propositions about one’s biases that are a third person *de re* type of proposition. This is the most interesting case I will be focusing in this article, where beliefs *de se* and *de re* require solid evidential justification, vetting and introspective virtuous integration, with the wider contexts of experimental experience (Garbayo, 2012).

### III. KNOWING ONESELF IN MODAL CONTEXT

*De se* and *de re* beliefs belong to different contexts and, accordingly, have different justifications. Douven (2013) interestingly suggests that they are distinguished primarily in their different contexts of justification, implied in two different kinds of evidence—as follows. He defends that, while *de se* beliefs, expressed through propositions such as “I believe that p,” require introspection as source of justification, *de re* beliefs require instead a double path to justification. He suggests that *de re* beliefs should be justified either by simulation efforts on how does it feels like for “S believes that p”—where, he points out, “folk psychology is (taken to be) a capacity for practical reasoning” (a reference to Gordon, 1986, 171). Or, such third person beliefs should be justified with external sources of evidence.

The case of the justification of *de re* beliefs is particularly crucial for understanding the possibility of making progress by consulting external sources about oneself, in third person contexts. In this vein, one of the important lessons is learned from Bishop and Trout’s program of applied epistemology (2005). They suggest that one should guide our epistemological inquiry by using high standard scientific research on cognitive psychology, as to correct our own mistaken intuitions that play a role in setting up our epistemic positions. Other research programs, such as Haidt’s social intuitionism (2001), introduces to philosophy a new set of phenomena, such as moral dumbfounding, which show how we are unaware on how our judgment makes

reasoning becomes a *post hoc* justification for our previous judgment impulse. In this sense, it is in a naturalized account of justification that we seem to have an opportunity to make epistemic progress in self-knowing in contexts not yet experienced. Here it becomes clear that our beliefs *de se* (*et nunc*) “about ourselves and now” are to be contrasted with *de re* beliefs, in the contexts of both discovery and justification. It is thus this contrasting exercise of beliefs about oneself seem to be a first needed calibration strategy, so that the epistemic subject is, perhaps, we could say, “glocal,” “glocalized” in knowing simultaneously her limited *de se et nunc* perspective and its necessary *de re* correction.

Douven (2013) provides a couple of powerful examples of before and after discovery of a first person perspective in the context of a third person belief, that I take it may be helpful to consider how knowing *de se* and *de re* are integrated. He suggests the following situations. In the first example, imagine that he believes *de re* that the winner of the State lottery is a “lucky devil” (2013, 2). But, unbeknownst to him, he is in fact the winner, and yet he does not hold the *de se* belief that he is (a situation in which one may lose their opportunity to request the prize, say). If he does not know *de se*, then he can simulate in his mind what might feel for someone else being the winner, without ever being justified in cashing the prize. This is a prior to discovery context. After discovery, through external sources of justification, *de se* beliefs are formed, he self-identifies: “I am the Lotto winner,” and he can finally cash it.

The second example is further illuminating. If instead, Douven was amnesic—as in the Rudolf Lingens case, the amnesic academic in the Stanford library, Lingens could read his own biography without forming any *de se* beliefs—because, only by regaining memory he can appeal to introspection as epistemic warrant. Further, a needed integration of *de se* and *de re* beliefs can only be possible in recognizing such constraint.

When there is no memory and no biography to directly connect to new *de re* beliefs about oneself, we might be all like Lingens: we may feel “amnesic,” self-doubting (“did I forget my own beliefs or behavior?”; “My self-concept?”) or, not better, empty of meaningful associations to provide viable epistemic warrants to such *de re* beliefs, with *de se* ones. Yet, such types of *de re* beliefs emerge as the special product of specialized, validated scientific self-tests. A path for self-discovery is available. The aforementioned Implicit Association Test (IAT), in particular, provides a direct path into our biases, and possible *de re* beliefs that we might not—possibly—be aware to hold:

People don’t always say what’s on their minds. One reason is that they are unwilling. For example, someone might report smoking a pack of cigarettes per day because they are embarrassed to admit that they smoke two. Another reason is that they are unable. A smoker might truly believe that she smokes a pack a day, or might not keep track at all. The difference between being unwilling and unable is the difference between purposely hiding something from someone and unknowingly hiding something from yourself.

The Implicit Association Test (IAT) measures attitudes and beliefs that people

may be unwilling or unable to report. The IAT may be especially interesting if it shows that you have an implicit attitude that you did not know about. For example, you may believe that women and men should be equally associated with science, but your automatic associations could show that you (like many others) associate men with science more than you associate women with science. (Implicit Association Harvard Project Online/Education)

Let's say that one discovers, as a result of taking the Implicit Association Test, that it turns out, there is a new, incongruent *de re* belief produced about oneself. Say that this person—Robin—associates men with science more than women with science, according to IAT. Robin did not hold that belief *de se* before, but, in this special wider context of discovery, has pulled a broader relational and naturalized context of justification of self-knowledge, based on third person beliefs. If there is no memory of devaluing women's capacity to do scientific work, then Robin is lost in finding an introspective justification to warrant such belief. If Robin is virtuous, she does not have the disposition to conceal her memories based on a personal unwillingness, that she in fact, holds *de se* such belief. Virtuous Robin, then, has one option only—to consider a naturalized, external source of justification about herself. She can also challenge the validity of the test, and make progress in refining it. But, crucially, it is the naturalized, measure of her implicit attitude that is justified. She can, inverting Douven's proposal, produce a simulation of a third person, while knowing this person to be her, yet not have any introspective justification. Virtuous Robin seems to be a bit like Amnesic Lingers, but with different naturalized justifications for their lack of *de se* beliefs.

It is the virtuous purpose—the unified account to the pursuit of epistemic goods—that would make Robin consider the special route of experimental experience (Garbayo, 2012) an important yet intriguing way to a dissociated self-knowledge to be carefully revised. Experimental experience is, in fact, a controlled experience designed to function in the special context that is seldom experienced in ordinarily. For instance, the discovery of non-Euclidean geometry has to do with the Gaussian production of different experiential contexts for Euclidean geometry. The conceivability of such non-Euclidean concept took a long time to be accepted, deemed “counter-intuitive” and not real. New contexts—both philosophical and scientific—had to be produced. I argue, in analogy, that, in the case of *de re* beliefs, a new self-knowledge context has also to be produced for its overall vetting and integration. It takes a virtuous, personal effort to learn many times, against the grain, while willingly shifting contexts.

Another historical example, now to make a point against pure individualistic sources of belief in specially conceived personal cases. As in Durkheim's groundbreaking XIX century sociological work on Suicide (1897)—where he shows how the rate of killing oneself in the population varies with the level of social anomy—even the most intimate act is then, full of social determinations traditionally ignored. As one looks again one's validated ways to release third person beliefs about oneself, an opportunity to find social determinations unknown to us, about ourselves, is offered. At least in part, such kind of special experiential experiences provide a path of non-individualized knowledge about oneself, with a tough integration ahead.

Who takes this path? Virtuous Robin does. It requires from her a virtuous

commitment to self-knowledge that is not easily reducible to *de se* beliefs. An open-minded, truth-seeking epistemic subject will take upon herself to elicit such validated *de re* beliefs, and consider the lack of introspective justification, many times, as the opportunity to learn to create a wider context for integration of *de re* and *de se* beliefs. Between a skeptic challenge to oneself, and too much enthusiasm upon accepting *de re* beliefs as uncontested truths, a balanced, careful and precise examination of such *de re* beliefs as relevant alternatives to answering broader questions regarding virtuous standards of self-investigation, is required. Intellectual humility as a virtue, restrains too much enthusiasm and defensive reactions alike.

#### IV

So far, I proposed that virtue epistemology—a weak conservative, moderate version thereof—may benefit from a contextualist, modal epistemology contribution. I maintained that the *de re* and *de se* distinction for beliefs about oneself, within a 2-place subject-proposition relation helps to clarify some of the process of self-knowing. Further, I suggested that the inquiry toward wider contexts of self-knowledge takes seriously the experimental experience that produces *de re* beliefs, and therefore, may suffer a systematic limitation to provide introspective justification to *de se* beliefs, after discovery—only naturalized, external justification is warranted—a bit like the challenges for an amnesic person. It takes thus a commitment to one’s virtuous epistemic development in a unified way to face such challenges, looking for a balanced path to conceive a possible integration, while never abandoning a commitment to intellectual humility, nor the bridge to naturalized justification, in referring to oneself in a third person, wider, propositional context.

But, how much intellectually humble one may be? In his classic and highly influential article, *Elusive Epistemology* (1996), David Lewis suggested that epistemology, in fact, has the power to destroy knowledge, rather than to enhance it, if proper care is not taken in handling its threats. This is the case, he contended, because epistemology imposes for the knowledge-seeker the consideration of the special epistemic context of skeptical challenges that could be normally *properly* ignored, and that invariably makes false the claims of knowledge made in ordinary contexts. Lewis deals with such epistemology’s challenges and reverses the threat to ordinary knowledge by considering the possibility of infallible knowledge in ordinary context, in what was then a novel contribution to modal approaches to epistemology. *Elusive*, yet *Infallible knowledge* in ordinary context is here tied to the epistemic strategies of a competent knowledge-seeker, who understands her ordinary context for knowing, in its specificity and proper constraints.

Modality arguments revising epistemology matters are helpful to set straight the proper understanding of epistemic claims regarding the role of contexts of interpretation in knowledge attribution. By accepting the basic Moorean claim on knowing about one’s hands, *de se et nunc*, under closure, Lewis clearly distinguished between the ordinary context of the epistemic agent—who exists here and now, with her own circumstances (having or not hands)—let’s call, with Lewis, her S—and the global context of investigation of the epistemologist—let’s call, with Lewis as well,

her E. That the latter's context of inquiry should prevail over the former is a matter of concern for his epistemic project. Lewis further denounces the epistemological tradition for attempting to destroy S's knowledge, without recognizing the wealth of the layering of contexts and epistemic strategies—while carefully steering clear from E's skepticism and/or fallibilism (Lewis, 1996, 561).

Precisely, Lewis' modal epistemology aims at addressing the possibility of infallible knowledge in context over skeptic afflictions of E. It admits a full exploration of epistemic contexts in a possible world semantics approach, while allowing S to properly ignore alternative possible worlds to ordinary context. I paraphrase his simple example, interpreted in self-knowledge context: while searching for knowing about herself, S is allowed to *ignore* the alternative that an evil demon might have made her non-existent. S's ability to bracket and to *ignore* the right contexts—such as the evil demon's contexts—in the pursuit of self-knowledge became indeed the way out of E's skeptic *mad* whirlpool.

Yet, Lewis also makes the stronger point that the elimination of non-p alternatives is better than properly ignoring them. Here then, the cognitive improvement of the S's stance in seeking epistemic excellence comes from better articulating a dual epistemic strategy: the proper *bracketing* of ignored alternatives plus the proper *eliminating* of alternatives while knowledge-seeking, in contextual alignment. We can also say that the same process happens in expert-novice pursuit of epistemic excellence.

Now, let's consider instead E's higher standards of knowing and global epistemic standpoint. Lewis concedes that we are hardly able to do all proper elimination of alternatives to improve our knowledge stance up to such higher level. Mostly, we work on *properly* ignoring alternatives in context to be able to hold a *modicum* of bracketed infallible knowledge. E's global epistemic stance requires instead omniscience as a condition for defeating the skeptic. Yet Lewis sees a dynamic path of epistemic growth, without falling into the skeptic high demands. We are constantly facing our former and actual selves with more or less stable knowledge across our epistemic development, with what we knew under particular contexts being challenged in shifted contexts. By comparing E's global positioning, rather than S's local contextual stance, it becomes clear, he suggests, that the language of knowledge is a language for describing the pursuit of knowledge as a “satisficing” process in time, and that E's skepticism holds true in this broader, all-encompassing dimension of interpretation. Yet, it does not preclude the infallibility of knowledge—if understood strictly in context—and its updating by our future selves, in other shifted contexts.

Indeed, a non-monotonic process of knowing oneself requires expert strategies, in which one may be found to be rightfully wrong later, in a shifted context, before she is wrongfully right, as in her prior's position projected into the next. Lewis epistemic rules *in toto* offer a path for an agent to be skilled at erring rightfully, from “infallible” to “infallible” limited positions, under closure. There are many post-Gettier objections to knowledge under closure. Yet, in changing the set of premises to add or substitute further ones, if formal principles of reasoning hold as a normative standard for epistemic inference, then some minimal level of closure should be recognized as necessary for affirming, in a very restricted way, propositional “infallible” knowledge in every stage of shifted context. Indeed, the formal treatment allows for distinguishing stages



themselves in argumentative structure. Closure then, I contend, allows for the rigorous delimitation of the possibilities and necessities in modeling contextual knowledge, before rigorously jumping into shifted contexts and new information.

A much relevant virtue of intellectual humility becomes central for successfully considering it. Distinguished from the underestimation of self-worth, intellectual humility is required for one to be sensitive to one's intellectual limitations in knowing, particularly third person propositions about oneself, and against one's vanity, as "an excessive concern to be well regarded" and/or arrogance, as a disposition to infer "entitled superiority" in knowledge contexts (Howard-Snyder, Battaly, Baehr & Whitcomb, 2015). The aforementioned authors propose the following definition:

intellectual humility is an intellectual virtue just when one is appropriately attentive to, and owns, one's intellectual limitations because one is appropriately motivated to pursue epistemic goods, e.g. truth, knowledge and understanding (2015, 12).

The self-regulative power of intellectual humility also facilitates for other virtuous dispositions, such as open-mindedness, and for lowering defensiveness in the evaluation of third person propositions that may not be particularly expected.

### V

In this article I sought to bring into dialogue, and a little closer, two different epistemic traditions, with a focus on virtuous epistemic practices and the consideration of justification for *de se* and *de re* beliefs. I considered the need for the development of epistemic competence regarding the threat of understanding our implicit biases, in a cautious, intellectually humble and epistemically virtuous way, but also making use of the precision of Lewis' proposal on what we can properly ignore, and integrate contexts, without threat to one's ordinary knowledge, and skeptic wider contexts, considering virtuous explorations of oneself's beliefs in both epistemological and scientific context.

In order to engage in such considerations, I proposed to address in particular a possible complementary dialogue between Lewis' modal epistemology *de se (et nunc)*, and the consideration of a role for virtues in directing whether individual's beliefs are reliable. Finally, I defended and discussed whether the revision of biases could be wedded out by such integration, in cooperative grounds, and in the more remote yet wide contexts of experimental experience (Garbayo, 2012), open to future considerations on virtuous self-knowledge.

### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am grateful to Justin Bell, for his kind and precise editorial support; John Symons, for the encouragement to work my own philosophical take on implicit bias in epistemology; and, not least, to Dan Flores, for the leadership and vision over the years in the New Mexico Texas Philosophical Society, which allow us all to flourish together, in community. Thank you all.

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