

# Basic Justification

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## Abstract

On a traditional virtue theory-based explanation of knowledge, knowledge is a competence to believe truly. In “Competence to Know”, Lisa Miracchi argues against traditional virtue epistemologies on the basis that knowledge is more basic in essence than belief.[@mira15a] On her account, knowledge is a *competence to know* rather than a *competence to believe*. I will argue that one who accepts her account will be forced to attribute knowledge on the basis of the religious experiences of religious individuals.

## Introduction

Internalists in general epistemology often argue that those factors which differentiate knowledge from merely true belief are entirely internal to the believing agent. However, many epistemologists no longer accept internalism. Those who do not accept internalism would argue that not only are there internal factors of present in knowledge attribution, but there are external factors which are salient as well.

Consequently, many religious epistemologists have begun to argue that externalism justifies attributing knowledge in cases of religious experiences because other more general experiences are justified in the same manner. Assuming that these kinds of experiences can be the natural result of cognitive faculties designed for such purposes, one holding an opposite view would have to specify why religious beliefs etymologizing from an agent’s cognitive faculties do not hold just as much warrant or justification as general beliefs with the same entymology.

As such, it is fair to say that externalist accounts in religious epistemology are motivated by trends in general epistemology where knowledge is attributed to individuals based on versatile factors. Possible salient factors are those that are external to the agent as well as internal. Some important considerations for knowledge attribution in cases of religious belief then are those which justify the attribution of knowledge in general cases of belief.

In section 1, I will first explain the motivation for externalism in religious epistemology, section 1.1, and show how the virtue account of knowledge is the intuitive consequence of the externalist move in general epistemology, section

1.2., I will then go on to explain how Alvin Plantinga's *proper function argument* and William Alston's *perception of God argument* cohere with the traditional virtue theoretical account of knowledge, hereafter referred to as IDE.

In Section 2, I will present Miracchi's properly basic account of knowledge. I will develop this account by expressing concerns with IDE explored by some epistemologists, section 2.1. I will then defend virtue epistemology against these objections using the Direct Virtue Epistemology approach developed by Lisa Miracchi.

In Section 3, I will argue that someone who accepts Miracchi's DVE will have to accept the justification of religious beliefs given DVE's justification of more general beliefs. In section 4, I conclude by voicing potential concerns arising from a DV in religious epistemology (DVRE).

## Section 1 Externalism in Religious Epistemology

On externalist accounts of knowledge, knowledge is attributable by factors which are not just internal to the attributed, the individual whom knowledge is attributed to, but external as well. On virtue theories of knowledge, the epistemic properties of knowledge are explained in terms of the epistemic properties of persons.[@grec12d]

### Section 1.1 Externalism and Virtue Epistemology

Externalists argue that the factors salient in knowledge attribution are varied. On virtue theories of knowledge for instance, knowledge is attributed given the epistemic competences of the agent. However, as we well see, these competences manifest given many other factors as well.

Similar to actions, virtue epistemologists believe that beliefs can also be thought of as performances. When attributing competence of an action to an agent, care is taken to ensure that the agent does deserve credit and not luck or some other factor.

When we attribute some particular accomplishment to some agent, we do so on the fact that the activities of the agent are responsible for the accomplishment in question. The activities and competences of the agent are important because we want to know that the accomplishment, obtaining knowledge, was done in such a way as to preclude lucky occurrences of that accomplishment.

Consider the following case:

When a man takes there to be a sheep in the field and does so under conditions which are such that, when a man does thus take there to be a sheep in the field, then it is evident to him that there is a sheep

in the field. The man, however, has mistaken a dog for a sheep and so what he sees is not a sheep at all. Nevertheless, unsuspected by the man, there is a sheep in another part of the field. [chis89a]

In this case, though the agent does hold a true belief ‘that there is a sheep in the field’, his belief is not a manifestation of his intellectual competence. Therefore, in this case, the belief was not achieved in the right way. This is because the agent does not believe ‘because’ of an intellectual ability.[grec10a, p. 75]

## Section 1.2

While the above case might account for a wide range of Gettier cases, it will not account for all Gettier cases. As externalists have shown, there are many possible sources of knowledge. Therefore, considerations of the agent’s competence are not sufficient to ground attributions of knowledge. In the above case, the agent’s true belief was not a manifestation of his intellectual ability. But what about cases where the agent’s true belief *is* a manifestation of his true belief and yet the agent still does not *know*?

Henry is driving in the countryside and sees a barn ahead in clear view. On this basis he believes that the object he sees is a barn. Unknown to Henry however, the area is dotted with barn facades that are indistinguishable from real barns from the road. However, Henry happens to be looking at the one real barn in the area.[grec10a, p. 76]

Here, even though Henry’s belief *is* a manifestation of his intellectual ability, he could just as easily have been wrong about his belief. This is because there is no reason for us to expect that Henry’s intellectual capacities are suitable for his current environment in the current context.

Therefore, a sufficient virtue account will make 3 considerations. The first, shown above, (a) is its context sensitivity. What we care about, is whether the agent’s epistemic faculties are suited to function in the given environment. As we saw in the barn case, the context of the agent’s belief is an important in knowledge attribution.

The second consideration that we make is the motive the attributor has in attributing knowledge to the knower. We care about whether the knowledge is important to the individual giving the attribution. This will be true if it can be said that the attributed is a good source of information for the attributor.

Finally, this leads us to (c), good sources of information. This has to do with a particular virtue that the agent has. In this case, we want to know whether the attributed can be said to be a good source of information. In the following case, we are looking for good sources of home-runs and not information.

Sammy Sosa is really good at hitting home-runs during a baseball game. However,

Mr. Sosa is probably not so good at hitting home-runs in a war. As such, Sammy’s competence is an explanatorily salient factor in his ability to hit home-runs during a baseball game. But I would not expect it to be an explanatorily salient factor in hitting home-runs during a war. Although it is perfectly conceivable that Mr. Sosa might hit a homerun or two during a war, we might not attribute his ability to do so to competence. I would not sign Mr. Sosa to my fantasy baseball roster because of his ability to hit home-runs during a war, but because of his ability to do so during a baseball game.

Therefore, knowledge attribution is context sensitive, meaning that it takes into account conditions (shifting circumstances within an environment) and the environment (sets of relatively stable circumstances) in which the belief is held. A knowing agent then, “believes the truth because [the agent] believes from intellectual ability.”[@grec12e, p. 101] Lastly, attribution takes into consideration the motivations of the attributor.

## Section 1.3 IVE and Religious Epistemology

As shown in the previous subsection, when we attribute knowledge to individuals, we not only care about the item known, but we also care about the way in which the item came to be known. We care about the individual who knows, the environment in which the individual came to know, and the cognitive faculties which are involved in the individual’s knowing. We also care about the intents and purposes of the one attributing knowledge in a particular case.

For an analogous treatment in religious epistemology, we will look at Alvin Plantinga’s Proper Function Argument and William Alston’s Perception of God.

### Section 1.3.1 William Alston’s Defence of Basic Religious Perception

In “Perceiving God”, Alston argues that the perception of God, with respect to religious belief, plays a role similar to that played by sense perception, with respect to general beliefs.[@alst86a] Further, these perceptual experiences can justify an agent’s belief, which in turn translates the agent’s belief into knowledge for that agent. When attempting to explain Mr. Sosa’s competence at hitting home-runs, we point not only to his environment, the baseball game, but also to unique faculties that he might possess. We care about the keenness of his eyesight, the operations of his motor cortex etc.

Human beings engage in a number of basic doxastic practices. For Alston, what qualifies an agent’s practices as basically doxastic, is that “each of these involve a distinctive sort of input to belief-forming” mechanisms. Each practice has its own range of contents and set of functions that determine the belief contents as a “function of input features.”

Given Alston's treatment, we can classify a religious belief as arising when there is a distinctive range of contents (subject matter and ways of conceiving it), a set of functions that determine belief contents as a function of input features; and experiential practices which are (a) socially established, (b) socially shared, (c) inculcated, (d) reinforced and (e) propagated.<sup>1</sup>

### Subsection 1.3.2 Plantinga's Proper Function

Epistemologists have often argued that knowledge entails that a belief is true; and that it has some other special factor associated with it to rule out occurrences of luck. In many virtue theories, this other factor is justification. For instance, on IVEs, the competence of the agent is what justifies the beliefs of the agent.

Alvin Plantinga has famously offered a proper functionalist account of knowledge, PFK, wherein he offers warrant as the factor which is appended onto true belief. According to Plantinga, a true belief is warranted when the following 4 considerations can be said to be true of the belief in question. Plantinga's account is cognate to general virtue theories about knowledge.

#### PFK

1. S knows p only if
  - (a) \*p is true,
  - (b) S's belief is the result of properly functioning cognitive faculties, (c) S's faculties are operating in an appropriate environment, and
  - (c) when functioning properly in an appropriate environment, S's faculties reliably produce true beliefs rather than false beliefs.

How might we know that our cognitive capacities are functioning properly? Even assuming that our knowledge is to be explained in terms of reliable doxastic practices, what makes us think that these practices are reliable unless we already know that our cognitive faculties are functioning properly, assuming that you cannot show that you know?

The fact is that someone who proposes that we need to answer this question in regards to religious beliefs but not general ones is setting a double standard. Further, this objection does not show that we do not have knowledge of the world, because as we have seen, we regularly attribute knowledge to persons based on perceptual and other cognitive faculties. Therefore, the response given by religious epistemologists such as Plantinga and Alston hold that explanations

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<sup>1</sup>Many of the features in Alston's treatment above involve communities in which knowledge is shared. These features are also present in general knowledge attribution as shown in the Sosa case above. As such, there is a question in general epistemology which concerns questions about knowledge in a communal context. However, in this paper I will not have the appropriate space to explain knowledge further in this context.

of religious belief tend to focus on the intuitions that we do not require similar type accounts for basic and perceptual knowledge.

Neither should we expect to do so on the assumption that God exists. There is a difference between understanding and knowledge. When someone asks us to explain our beliefs, they are asking to help understand those beliefs. But understanding is not needed for knowledge.

## Section 2 - The Miracchi's Problem with IVE

Lisa Zagzebski argues that to create a Gettier style counter example, we first need to establish an accident involving otherwise reliable faculties which become unreliable as a result of this accident. Further, we need to entail some further-consequent situation wherein by some further disconnected accident, the agent hits on the truth anyway. [Zagzebski 1996a]

Consider Josh, a 1st century pagan in France. After a freak accident involving a herd of pigs, Josh (who is extremely precocious) develops a series of phobias which manifest as a highly restrictive set of dietary and sanitary habits. Luckily for Josh, when his village contracts plague, Josh is spared on account of his unique dietary and sanitary habits. Mary, an unrepentant pagan servant girl from the neighboring convent, sees Josh feverishly washing his hands one day and mistakenly thinks that Josh is praying and repenting of his sins. Previously unconvinced by the nun's repeated attempts to convert her, Mary attributes Josh's luck in avoiding the plague (she knows that everyone in his village died) to God's providence on account of her misperception of Josh. She subsequently forms the belief that God exists.

Mary has been Gettiered. This is because her otherwise reliable cognitive faculties (her *sensus divinitatis*) are not reliable for her. Further, we can attribute this case of bad luck to an accident. It is an accident that Josh developed the life saving habits that he did. Further, it is an accident that she thinks Josh is repenting of his sins, he's as much of a pagan as he has ever been. If Plantinga is correct, then God would have created Mary's cognitive faculties in such a way as to produce true beliefs for her. Her *sensus divinitatis* then would also have been created in such a way as to produce true beliefs for Mary. However, in this case, what would have triggered a true religious belief, the witnessing of a miracle, produces an unreliable belief, 'Josh believes in God'. However, Mary, because of luck, forms the true belief that "God exists". That is what has happened in this case. It is unlucky for Mary that she is unable to form the true belief given the effort of the nuns in her convent, however it is a case of good luck that witnessing and misunderstanding Josh's actions, she forms the correct true belief anyway. There are two options available for someone defending a

view of religious knowledge. Given indirect virtue epistemology, ‘knowledge is an achievement which is explained by a knower’s competence to believe truly’@greco2011. However, under this view, knowledge can still be attributed to a case of bad luck.

## Section 2.3 - Bad Luck

Indirect virtue epistemology, with regard to Gettier cases, will always fail. Theories which place the object of performance on something short of knowledge, will fail to explain the way in which knowledge is an achievement of that performance. IDE fails because indirect virtue epistemology defines knowledge as an achievement that is explained by the knower’s competence to do something other than know. Therefore, this account is belief-first because it articulates knowledge in terms of true belief. As such, knowledge is not characteristic of competence that explain knowledge.

Miracchi then gives a procedure which is supposed to show why the indirect view will always fail in response to Gettier problems. She argues that one starts with a Gettier case. Then specify some additional fact such that it is separate from whatever fact it is that justifies the belief. What Miracchi’s counter example adds is some additional feature such that when the agent encounters that which justifies the belief, and a bit of bad luck such that the belief is not knowledge, she will encounter some good luck such that her true belief is a result of a characteristic manifestation of her competence. Yet the subject still does not have knowledge.

Miracchi’s own virtue epistemology however, explains knowledge in terms of knowledge. While this might initially sound circular, it is not because knowledge and basic justification are thought of as justifying belief. The relationship between belief and knowledge then is a disjunctive one. If one disjunct turns out false, then the belief would not be justified. Yet the agent still possesses knowledge.

Defend reason why DVE better than IVE. Difference between DVE and IVE. What justifies belief given DVE. Show why this is useful in Gettier cases.

Section 3.1 Explain DVE given RE

Section 3.2 Justified beliefs given DVE

Section 3.3 Show why this is good for Gettier cases

Conclusion

Some additional areas of possible research might be the connection between the objects of general epistemic faculties and of religious epistemic faculties.

References