Basic Justification

Knowledge Justified Belief

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On a traditional virtue theoretic account of knowledge, knowledge is a competence to believe truly. In “Competence to Know”, Lisa Miracchi argues against a traditional virtue epistemologies on the basis that knowledge is more fundamentally basic than belief.[[1]](#footnote-20) On her account, knowledge is a competence to know. 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 internal factors of knowledge attribution, but there are external factors which are salient as well.

In consequence, religious epistemologists have also begun to adopt externalism in religious epistemology. Many religious epistemologists have begun to argue that on the basis of the externalist move in general epistemology, one is justified in attributing knowledge given religious experiences such as religious perception among other external factors. Assuming that these kinds of experiences can be the natural outcome of cognitive faculties designed for such purposes, one holding an opposite view would have to specify why religious beliefs deriving from cognitive faculties do not hold just as much warrant or justification as general beliefs deriving from those same cognitive facutlies.

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 various factors. Possible salient factors are those that are external to the agent as well as internal. Some important considerations for knowledge attribution then are the cognitive faculties of the agent, the environment in which the agent operates, the purposes of the agent, and the success in which these purposes are achieved.

In section 1, I will first explain the motivation for externalism in religious epistemology religious epistemology and show how the virtue epistemological account of knowledge is the natural outcome of the externalist move. I will then go on to explain how Alvin Plantinga’s proper function argument and William Alston’s cohere with the traditional virtue theorectic 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. I will then defend virtue epistmology against these objections using a Direct Virtue Epistemology developed by Lisa Miracchi.

In Section 3, I will argue that someone who accepts Miracchi’s DVE would 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 given factors which are not just internal to the attributed, but external as well. On virtue theories of knowledge, the epistemic properties of knowledge are explained in terms of the epistemic properties of persons.[[2]](#footnote-23)

## Section 1.1 Externalism and Virtue Epistemology

On externalists accounts of knowledge, factors for knowledge attribution may include the environments in which the belief was formed, the cognitive faculties of the agent holding the belief, and the purposes for which these cognitive faculties were formed. On virtue theories, knowledge is attributed given the epistemic competences of the agent.

Similar to actions, virtue epistemologists believe that beliefs can also be thought of as performances wherein the aim of belief is knowledge but in the right way, through the competence of the agent performing the action. The correlation between belief and action occurs given that actions have an aim, and aims cannot be achieved by occurences of luck.

Virtue epistemologists hold that the activities of the agent are an important factor when determining whether knowledge attribution in a given case is appropriate or not. 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 competeces 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 occurences of the accomplishment.

Consider cases where we would not attribute knowledge to an individual. A case developed by Roderick Chisholm expresses this concern in a more clear light:

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.[[3]](#footnote-25)

In this case, though the agent does hold a true belief ‘that there is a sheep in the field’, his belief is not a manisfestation 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.[[4]](#footnote-26)

## Section 1.2

While the above case might account for a wide range of Gettier cases, it will not account for all Gettier cases. This is because as externalists have shown, there are many possible sources of knowledge; and knowledge then can not be attributed only on the basis of one or two of these factors. 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*? Consider the following case:

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.[[5]](#footnote-28)

Here, even though Henry’s belief *is* a manifestation of his intellectual ability, he could have just as easily been wrong about his belief. This is because there is no reason for us to expect that Henry’s intellectual capacities to operate in his current environment. As such, we expect that one’s abilities are specifically suited to particular environments. That means that we attribute knowledge given the relationship of the agent and the environment in which the was successful at obtaining knowledge.

Therefore, a sufficient VE will make 3 considerations. The first, shown above, (a) It is context sensitive. What we care about, is whether the agent’s epistemic faculties are suited to function in the given environment.

The second consideration that we make are the purposes for which the attributor has in attributing knowledge to the knower. If the knower is important to the individual giving the attribution, then there is some way in which the success of the attributed is important to the attributor. 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 the final consideration. With (c), when we say that knowledge attribution is a flag for good sources of information, we are saying that some agent is valuable in a particular way. This has to do with a particular virtue that the agent has. This is true in cases of knowledge attribution, but we can see a similar treatment with other cases of attribution as well.

Consider someone like Sammy Sosa who is really good at hitting home-runs during a baseball game. However, Sammy is not so good at home-runs in a war. As such, Sammy’s competence is an explanatorily salient factor in his home-runs during a baseball game. But I would not expect it to be an explanatorily salient factor in his hitting home-runs during a war. Although it is perfectly conceivable that Mr. Sosa might hit a homerun during a war, we might not attribute his ability to do so to competence. Furthermore, if I am attributing ability in hitting home-runs to Mr. Sosa, I will not make this consideration in the contexts of war, but in a ball game. I would not sign Mr. Sosa to my fantasy baseball roster because of his ability to hit home-runs during a war, but to 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.[[6]](#footnote-29) It is in these cases that we attribute knowledge to the agent.”

## 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. Further, given Alvin Plantinga’s Proper Function Argument and William Alston’s Perception of God, we will see how these factors are not only important in general beliefs, but religious beliefs as well.

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

In “Perceiving God”, William 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.[[7]](#footnote-32) Further, these perceptual experiences can justify an agent’s belief, which in turn translates the agent’s belief into knowledge for that agent. 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 contentsand set of functions that determine the belief contents as a “functionof input features.”

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.[[8]](#footnote-33)

### Subsection 1.3.2 Plantinga’s Proper Function

As we have seen, epistemologists seek to understand knowledge by classifying it as true belief plus some other factor. 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. The question then becomes what justifies a true belief?

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.

#### PFK

1. S knows p only if
   1. \*p is true,
   2. S’s belief is the result of properly functioning cognitivefaculties,(c) S’s faculties are operating in an appropriate environment, and
   3. 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 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 Zagebski argues that to create a Gettier style counter example, we first need to establish anaccident involving otherwise reliable faculties which become unreliableas a result of this accident. Further, we need to entail some furtherconsequent situation wherein by some further disconnected accident, theagent hits on the truth anyway.[[9]](#footnote-37)

Consider Josh, a 1st century pagan in France. After a freak accidentinvolving a herd of pigs, Josh (who is extremely precocious) developsa series of phobias which manifest as a highly restrictive set ofdietary and sanitary habits. Luckily for Josh, when his villagecontracts plague, Josh is spared on account of his unique dietary andsanitary habits. Mary, an unrepentant pagan servant girl from theneighboring convent, sees Josh feverishly washing his hands one dayand 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 thateveryone in his village died) to God’s providence on account of hermisperception of Josh. She subsequently forms the belief that Godexists.

Mary has been Gettiered. This is because her otherwise reliablecognitive faculties (her sensus divinitatis) are not reliable for her.Further, we can attribute this case of bad luck to an accident. It is anaccident that Josh developed the life saving habits that he did.Further, it is an accident that she thinks Josh is repenting of hissins, he’s as much of a pagan as he has ever been. If Plantinga iscorrect, then God would have created Mary’s cogntive faculties in such away as to produce true beliefs for her. Her sensus divinitatis thenwould also have been created in such a way as to produce true beliefsfor Mary. However, in this case, what would have triggered a truereligious belief, the witnessing of a miracle, produces an unreliablebelief, ‘Josh believes in God’. However, Mary, because of luck, formsthe true belief that “God exists”. That is what has happened in thiscase. It is unlucky for Mary that she is unable to form the true beliefgiven the effort of the nuns in her convent, however it is a case ofgood luck that witnessing and misunderstanding Josh’s actions, she formsthe 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’[[10]](#footnote-38). 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 somethingshort of knowledge, will fail to explain the way in which knowledge isan achievement of that performance. IDE fails because indirect virtue epistemology defines knowledge as an achievement that isexplained by the knower’s competence to do something other than know. Therefore, thisaccount is belief-first because it articulates knowledge in terms oftrue belief. As such, knowledge is not characteristic of competencesthat explain knowledge.

Miracchi then gives a procedure which is supposed to show why theindirect view will always fail in response to Gettier problems. Sheargues that one starts with a Gettier case. Then specify some additionalfact such that it is separate from whatever fact it is that justifiesthe belief.What Miracchi’s counter example adds is some additional feature suchthat when the agent encounters that which justifies the belief, and abit of bad luck such that the belief is not knowledge, she willencounter some good luck such that her true belief is a result of acharacteristic manifestation of her competence. Yet the subject stilldoes not have knowledge.

Miracchi’s own virtue epistemology however, explains knowledge in termsof knowledge. While this might initially sound circular, it is notbecause knowledge and basic justification are thought of as justifyingbelief. The relationship between belief and knowledge then is adisjunctive 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.

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1. Lisa Miracchi, “Competence to Know,” *Philosophical Studies* 172, no. 1 (2015): 29–56. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
2. John Greco and John Turri, “Virtue Epistemology: Contemporary Readings,” ed. John Greco and John Turri (Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2012), vii–xxi. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
3. Roderick M. Chisholm, *Theory of Knowledge* (Prentice-Hall Englewood Cliffs, NJ, 1989). [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
4. John Greco, *Achieving Knowledge: A Virtue-Theoretic Account of Epistemic Normativity* (Cambridge University Press, 2010), 75. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
5. Ibid., 76. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
6. John Greco and John Turri, “Virtue Epistemology: Contemporary Readings,” ed. John Greco and John Turri (Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2012), 101. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
7. William P Alston, “Perceiving God,” *The Journal of Philosophy* 83, no. 11 (1986): 655–65. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
8. Many of the features in Alston’s treatment above involve communities in which knowledge is shared. 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 in this context. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
9. Linda Trinkaus Zagzebski and Linda T Zagaebski, *Virtues of the Mind: An Inquiry into the Nature of Virtue and the Ethical Foundations of Knowledge* (Cambridge University Press, 1996). [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
10. **???** [↑](#footnote-ref-38)