

RESPONSIBILIST VIRTUE EPISTEMOLOGY: A REPLY TO THE SITUATIONIST CHALLENGE

BY NATHAN L. KING

Some epistemologists—virtue responsibilists—model the intellectual virtues on Aristotelian moral virtues. According to responsibilists, intellectual virtues are stable, excellent dispositions of cognitive character like intellectual courage, open-mindedness, curiosity and creativity. Such virtues figure prominently in responsibilist accounts of knowledge, epistemic justification and proper inquiry. In a recent paper, Mark Alfano argues that because human subjects rarely possess responsibilist virtues, responsibilism skirts skepticism and empirical inadequacy. The present paper defends responsibilism against these charges.

I. INTRODUCTION

Some epistemologists—*virtue responsibilists*—model the intellectual virtues on Aristotelian moral virtues. According to responsibilists, intellectual virtues are stable, excellent dispositions of cognitive character such as intellectual courage, open-mindedness, curiosity, and creativity. Because responsibilists take the intellectual virtues to be structurally similar to their moral cousins, theorists might have expected that the much-discussed situationist critique of virtue ethics would be extended to responsibilist virtue epistemology. In a recent paper, Mark Alfano does just this (Alfano 2012). Citing several empirical studies, Alfano argues that human thinkers lack the character traits featured in responsibilist accounts of knowledge, justification and inquiry. The absence of such traits subjects responsibilism to charges of skepticism and empirical inadequacy. I will argue that the evidence marshaled on behalf of these charges fails to justify a ‘guilty’ verdict.

II. CLARIFYING THE TARGETS

Virtue responsibilists construe intellectual virtues as character traits like those described above. Recent work reveals two sub-species of responsibilism. First, *classical responsibilism* seeks to analyse epistemic properties like knowledge and justification in terms of intellectual virtue. Second, *inquiry responsibilism* refrains from analysing knowledge and justification, and instead examines such concepts as wisdom, understanding, and virtuous inquiry. Both versions of responsibilism, Alfano claims, are empirically committed—they are in trouble if human subjects lack responsibilist virtues. Thus, he develops two situationist arguments against responsibilism. The first argument targets classical responsibilism, while the second targets inquiry responsibilism.

III. SITUATIONIST PROBLEMS FOR RESPONSIBILISM

This section explains Alfano's arguments against virtue responsibilism. Further details will emerge in Sections IV and V, but the next two sub-sections make apparent the crucial dialectical pressure points.

III.I. The inconsistent triad argument: a problem for classical responsibilism

Alfano sets out his first argument in the form of an inconsistent triad:

(non-skepticism): Most people know quite a bit.

(classical responsibilism): Knowledge is true belief acquired and retained through responsibilist intellectual virtue.

(epistemic situationism): Most people's conative intellectual traits are not virtues because they are highly sensitive to seemingly trivial and epistemically irrelevant situational influences. (Alfano 2012: 234)

Alfano claims that we must give up at least one of these propositions. The cost of denying non-skepticism is too high. So, we're forced to give up either classical responsibilism or epistemic situationism. Alfano argues that, because there's substantial evidence for situationism, the best response is to abandon classical responsibilism. Given non-skepticism and situationism, classical responsibilism must go.

III.II. Situationism as a problem for inquiry responsibilism

One way out of the above puzzle is to abandon classical responsibilism in favor of inquiry responsibilism. If one jettisons analyses of knowledge which require responsibilist virtues, then evidence that most of us lack these traits poses no

skeptical threat. One might still conduct some kind of responsibilist research program. Alfano is well aware of this, and so develops a second argument—one aiming to show that a concessive move toward inquiry responsibilism is not enough to save responsibilism itself.

Alfano’s attack on inquiry responsibilism centres on an empirical examination of intellectually virtuous courage. Numerous studies, he argues, cast doubt on the claim that many human agents possess intellectual courage as a robust, ‘global trait’. [On the studies themselves see Section IV below and Alfano (2012: 242-6)]. Instead, most subjects have only ‘local’ traits such as *courage in the face of non-unanimous dissent*. If similar arguments apply to the other intellectual virtues, Alfano thinks, then ‘much of our epistemic conduct can be explained without reference to such dispositions’ (Alfano 2012: 241). Thus, inquiry responsibilism is not an empirically adequate theory.

IV. THE PSYCHOLOGICAL EVIDENCE FOR SITUATIONISM

Alfano’s arguments against responsibilism turn in part on the plausibility of epistemic situationism. His support for this view appeals to empirical research he takes to suggest that most people lack responsibilist virtues such as curiosity, creativity, mental flexibility and courage. Here I summarize only some of the more impressive studies (for full citations, see notes 18, 20, 22, 30 and 33 in Alfano’s essay).

IV.1. Creativity and mental flexibility

Alfano cites research by Alice Isen and colleagues as showing that many subjects fail to exhibit creativity and mental flexibility. In studies designed to test for creativity in certain problem solving tasks, many or most subjects in the control condition fail in their tasks—thus failing to exhibit creativity. By contrast, subjects in the ‘positive affect condition’ fare much better at the tasks after eating candy or watching a short comedy. Thus, when such subjects behave in characteristically creative ways, their epistemic conduct is best explained in terms of their exhibiting the local traits of *flexibility while in a good mood*, or *creativity while in a good mood*. This casts doubt on behavioral explanations that appeal to responsibilist virtues.

Consider Isen’s research on the Duncker candle task. Subjects are presented with a book of matches, a box full of thumbtacks and a candle. They are then asked to affix the candle to a cork board so that when the candle is lit, no wax drips on the floor. The only solution is to empty the box and use the tacks to pin the box to the board, using the box as a shelf. Isen and colleagues found that in the control condition, only 13% of subjects solved the task. By contrast,

75% of subjects who were given candy or who watched a brief comedy prior to the trial solved the problem.

Isen and colleagues obtained similar results in studies involving the remote association test (RAT). In this test, subjects are presented with three words—e.g. ‘sore’, ‘shoulder’ and ‘sweats’; or ‘room’, ‘blood’ and ‘salts’. They are then asked to supply a fourth word that naturally forms a phrase or compound word with each of the words in the triplet. (In the above examples, ‘cold’ and ‘bath’ are the solutions.) Creative, flexible subjects are better at supplying the right words than those who lack these traits. Isen’s team found that subjects in the positive affect condition solved 66% more of the moderately difficult triplets than did control subjects. Alfano concludes, ‘It appears that many of the subjects in this study who solved the candle task and the RAT were not creative or flexible as such, but that they acted in accordance with creativity and flexibility because of the seemingly trivial and epistemically irrelevant mood elevator’ (Alfano 2012: 236).

IV.II. Courage

Alfano cites numerous studies in arguing that most people lack intellectual courage as a global trait. These studies reveal that ‘seemingly trivial and epistemically irrelevant situational factors influence [courage relevant] epistemic and doxastic conduct’ (Alfano 2012: 240). Alfano thinks this suggests that most people have (at best) *courage in the face of non-unanimous dissent*.

Central to Alfano’s treatment of intellectual courage is the kind of courage needed to speak one’s mind in the face of dissent. Several relevant studies seek to measure the effects of social pressure on subjects’ willingness to report on the deliverances of their senses. For example, Mufazer Sherif has tested the effects of social pressure in experiments involving the ‘autokinetic effect’. Subjects are placed in a dark room in which there is a single point of light on the wall. Though the light remains stationary, when subjects’ eyes wander, the light appears to move, though it’s difficult to say by how much. Sherif placed subjects and confederates together in such a room. Confederates confidently affirmed an exact amount of light movement (say, three inches) and subjects always came to agree with this unanimous answer, whatever it was. Sherif infers that this social pressure affected subjects’ perception of reality. Alfano opts for the alternative conclusion that ‘apparent unanimity can generate consent when the object of judgment is highly ambiguous’ (Alfano 2012: 243).

As Alfano notes, one might think that it isn’t a failure of courage to account for others’ opinions in making a judgment about an ambiguous matter. What about cases in which the object of judgment *isn’t* ambiguous? In such cases, perhaps subjects will stick to their guns even in the face of unanimous dissent. Seeking to test this hypothesis, Solomon Asch designed an experiment in which

seven confederates and one subject judged (in order and aloud) which of two lines was longer. Though the correct answer was always clear, in some cases all of the confederates ‘judged’ the shorter line to be longer. As a result, many subjects concurred with the majority, despite expressing reservations about doing so. About a third accorded with the majority more often than not, and over the course of a typical trial, between 50% and 80% of subjects went along with the majority at least once. In follow-up studies, Asch found that this effect was absent in experiments involving just one confederate and a subject, and was weak when there were two confederates and one subject. With a group of three confederates, the social effect of majority opinion was very strong, though when just one confederate went against the group, more than 90% of subjects were willing to go against a majority of confederates. Alfano doubts that the relevant subjects possess intellectual courage as a global trait. Their actions, he thinks, reveal that they have only something like *courage in the face of a non-unanimous majority*—a trait that falls short of the excellence that virtue responsibilists extol.

V. OVERCOMING THE SITUATIONIST CHALLENGE

In this section, I’ll argue that: (1) even if the studies Alfano cites established situationism, this would not undermine virtue responsibilism; and (2) as a matter of fact, the studies fail to establish situationism. Sections V.1 and V.2 defend the first claim. Section V.3 defends the second.

V.1. *Dissolving a puzzle*

Alfano argues that classical responsibilism is incompatible with the conjunction of situationism and non-skepticism; responsibilism conjoined with situationism implies a costly kind of skepticism (though not *global* skepticism—the skepticism at issue is consistent with some people knowing many truths, and with most people knowing some truths).

In addressing this argument, it will help to set out Linda Zagzebski’s account of knowledge, which is Alfano’s primary target. On Zagzebski’s view,

Knowledge is a state of true belief arising out of acts of intellectual virtue (Zagzebski 1996: 271).

Does this definition, coupled with situationism, imply skepticism? It depends. This is because the definition can be read in two ways:

Version 1. Knowledge is a state of true belief arising out of acts of intellectual virtue, where such acts require that the agent who performs them possess the virtue in question.

Version 2. Knowledge is a state of true belief arising out of acts of intellectual virtue, where such acts *do not require* that the agent who performs them possess the virtue in question.

If we understand Zagzebski's account to express Version 1, responsibilism yields skepticism when combined with situationism: knowledge requires that we possess intellectual virtues, and situationism implies that we don't have them. However, if we understand her account to express Version 2, the inference from responsibilism and situationism to skepticism is invalid.

In several places, Alfano (2012: 223, 226, 228, 232, 236) characterizes responsibilist accounts of knowledge as claiming that knowledge arises through the 'exercise' of intellectual virtue. If we assume that what Alfano calls 'exercises' of intellectual virtue are what Zagzebski calls 'acts of intellectual virtue', and if we assume that any agent who performs an act of virtue *possesses* that virtue, then we may attribute Version 1 to Zagzebski. Admittedly, this is a natural way to understand her view. However, Zagzebski explicitly rejects this reading:

[O]n my definition of an act of virtue, it is not necessary that the agent actually possess the virtue. But she must be virtuously motivated, she must act the way a virtuous person would characteristically act in the same circumstances, and she must be successful because of these features of her act. What she may lack is the entrenched habit that allows her to be generally reliable in bringing about the virtuous end. This definition permits those persons who do not yet fully possess a virtue but are virtuous-in-training to perform acts of the virtue in question. (Zagzebski 1996: 279)

Zagzebski rejects what we've called Version 1 in favor of Version 2. But Alfano needs Version 1 for his inconsistent triad argument. So the version of responsibilism Alfano attacks is not the one Zagzebski holds; nor need other responsibilists accept Version 1. The kind of classical responsibilism Zagzebski *does* hold, Version 2, is perfectly consistent with the conjunction of situationism and non-skepticism. Her kind of classical responsibilism, which other responsibilists are free to embrace, is thereby insulated from the situationist challenge—at least as Alfano develops it.

Of course, there may be other ways to develop a similar challenge. Here I'll discuss just one.¹ In the remarks quoted above, Zagzebski claims that an act of intellectual virtue (and thus knowledge) requires motivation for epistemic goods. On her view, a motivation is a disposition to be moved by a motive—'an emotion or feeling that initiates and directs action toward an end', in this case, an epistemic end (Zagzebski 1996: 126–34; Zagzebski 2003: 135–54).

¹ Thanks to Mark Alfano and an anonymous referee for discussion on this point.

Zagzebski's view is empirically committed at least to this extent, and this might be thought problematic. Consider a modified inconsistent triad:

(non-skepticism): most people know quite a bit.

(classical responsibilism_{REQ}): knowledge requires motivation for intellectual goods.

(epistemic lethargism): it is not the case that most people have motivation for intellectual goods.

If empirical studies support epistemic lethargism, then Zagzebski's responsibilism may skirt skeptical trouble. When conjoined with lethargism, the classical responsibilist requirement on knowledge seems to imply skepticism.

By way of brief response, note that on Zagzebski's view, the relevant kind of motivation needn't be explicit or conscious. It may instead operate while epistemic agents are in default mode. As Zagzebski notes, 'many [motives] are almost continually operative and do most of their work at moderate or even weak levels of intensity' (Zagzebski 1996: 131, 132). Thus, for example, one might manifest a motive for truth while walking through the grocery store looking for milk, trying to remember a phone number, or doing arithmetic. It's plausible that most of us manifest at least a low-level motivation in those settings. And it's such contexts in which most of our alleged knowledge arises. So far as the objection goes, we may still have the motivation needed to acquire lots of knowledge—at least in everyday settings. What about laboratory environments? Does research undertaken there support lethargism? If we take the research at face value, some of it suggests the *negation* of this view. Importantly, some of this evidence comes from the very studies originally thought to support situationism. Subjects in the Duncker candle experiments and the RAT experiments did, after all, appear to *try* to solve the relevant problems. And that certainly *seems* like a manifestation of epistemic motivation. Such considerations should at least raise the yellow flag for those wishing to advance a motivation-based attack on classical responsibilism.

V.II. *Is the rarity of the virtues a problem for inquiry responsibilism?*

Alfano argues that inquiry responsibilism is not empirically adequate. He summarizes several studies on intellectual courage, and infers that few subjects in the studies possessed this trait. Alfano says, 'if similar arguments apply to the other global virtues, then much of our epistemic conduct can be explained without reference to such dispositions. If this is right, inquiry responsibilism cannot claim empirical adequacy' (Alfano 2012: 241). In clarifying the sort of empirical adequacy he has in mind, Alfano says that responsibilist virtues 'neither explain nor predict a sufficient portion of epistemic conduct'

(Alfano 2012: 232). In order for responsibilist virtues to do *that*, Alfano thinks, the following empirical claim must be true:

Many people possess responsibilist intellectual virtues.

Because he thinks the research shows that this claim is false, Alfano thinks that responsibilism is empirically inadequate. Does the charge stick?

The empirical adequacy of a theory must be measured by its actual empirical commitments, not by *our* expectations about (say) the distribution of traits in a population. On this score, note that on Alfano's characterization, inquiry responsibilism is simply a set of projects committed to examining such epistemic goods as wisdom, understanding, and being a praiseworthy epistemic agent (Alfano 2012: 224). Just given this, inquiry responsibilism gives us no reason to expect that the virtues will be common. Like other epistemological theories, inquiry responsibilism isn't primarily in the business of making empirical predictions.

Still, if we *force* inquiry responsibilism to make a prediction, it seems to predict that the virtues will be rare. Responsibilist virtues are, after all, *excellences*, not averages (see, e.g. Baehr 2012). On responsibilism, it shouldn't be surprising to find that such virtues do not manifest themselves in the majority of the subjects from the studies Alfano cites. Indeed, for 'virtuous behavior' to show up relatively rarely is what one might expect, given responsibilist accounts of the virtues. In short, responsibilists need not commit to the claim that the virtues are common. So, even if it's demonstrably false, their view is not thereby shown to be false, or even empirically inadequate.

Alfano finds this reply unconvincing. If the responsibilist admits that 'global' responsibilist virtues are rare, she may save her view as a purely normative theory—one that explicates a cognitive ideal but neither explains nor predicts the cognitive behavior of real-live agents. However, Alfano thinks, if the responsibilist makes this move, she unwisely reduces her account to specifying a cognitive ideal that humans rarely if ever achieve. He cites Lorraine Code approvingly on this point. Code deems it necessary 'to keep [virtue's] requirements near enough within the reach of the ordinary human being that there can be many virtuous persons, if perhaps none *perfectly* virtuous' (Code 1984). Alfano says, 'The question is not whether the studies. . . tell against ecumenical perfect virtue. The real question is whether these studies tell against "near enough" virtue for "ordinary human beings"' (Alfano 2012: 246). And he takes the studies to tell against just that.

The upshot of this rejoinder isn't altogether clear. Suppose responsibilist virtues really are rare. Code's comments notwithstanding, it's difficult to see why responsibilists must take such news as damaging to their view. The rarity of the virtues might show that responsibilism does not explain the epistemic

behavior of typical epistemic agents. Responsibilism might nevertheless perform useful empirical and regulative functions. For instance, it might predict and explain the epistemic conduct of the most successful epistemic agents—the cognitively privileged ‘1%’. With such explanations and predictions in hand, we might be better prepared to study and explain how excellent epistemic agents think. Such information might thereby guide those of us who want to be more like them.

It would in any case be premature to dismiss responsibilist virtues as unattainable. That most of us *don't* currently have the virtues doesn't imply that we *can't* have them. Conceptually and empirically informed attempts to inculcate intellectual virtues are still in their early stages; perhaps progress is on the horizon. Further, even if we can't actually acquire such virtues, provided we can more often behave in ways characteristic of them, inquiry responsibilism might *still* provide a helpful regulative function. It might, together with empirical psychology, enable us to perform more acts characteristic of virtue than we in fact do. And this would be valuable. (Compare: even if I can't become a *good* golfer, I'll find my instructor's advice worthwhile if it helps me hit more shots of the sort good golfers hit. Likewise, even if I can't acquire responsibilist virtues, I should welcome advice that helps me improve some of my cognitive performances.) Plausibly, inquiry responsibilism can remain a viable research program provided that either (i) humans are capable of acquiring responsibilist virtues; or (ii) humans are capable of performing a greater proportion of acts characteristic of such virtues; or both. That we in fact lack responsibilist virtues does not imply that either (i) or (ii) is false. Thus, even if situationism is true, this does not automatically undermine responsibilism's potential as an empirically informed and regulative research program.

V.III. *What do the studies show?*

Alfano takes the empirical research to show that responsibilist virtues ‘are not the sorts of traits that many people possess’ (Alfano 2012: 245). Do the studies show this?

Start with the subjects who failed to exhibit ‘virtuous behavior’ in the experiments. That is, consider those who fared poorly on the Duncker candle task, the RAT, and in the Sherif and Asch studies on courage. Have these subjects hereby been shown to lack virtue? This is so only if it is very likely that virtuous subjects would exhibit the relevant ‘virtuous behavior’ under the experimental conditions.

There's room for doubt about this assumption. Factors such as native intelligence, values, training, interests, goals, and temperament can, in principle, make for behavioral differences in subjects all of whom possess (say) creativity. These factors are all distinct from the virtues themselves. Virtues are not

mere native abilities, temperaments, or skills. Nor do the virtues require some single set of interests (e.g. an interest in solving the tasks set for subjects in an experiment). Unless studies control for such factors, they may not isolate conditions under which a failure to exhibit ‘virtuous behavior’ reliably indicates a lack of virtue. The studies may fail to measure virtue, and may instead measure (say) IQ, degree of interest, or degree of extroversion. Perhaps, for instance, some subjects failed the Duncker candle test not because they lacked creativity as such, but rather because they simply lacked the cognitive power to complete the task. Or perhaps they simply weren’t interested in the task (this needn’t by itself bespeak a lack of virtue). Perhaps some subjects failed to exhibit ‘courageous’ behavior in some of Isen’s experiments not because they lacked courage, but rather due to introversion. Such explanations have at least some plausibility. An empirical case for situationism must account for them.

There’s more to say on these points. But suppose that all the relevant studies did control for the factors just mentioned. Even if they were widely replicated, they would still fail to show that few subjects display responsibilist virtues. For according to the explicit results of the studies, a percentage of subjects always display the behavior that is touted as virtuous. Even in some of the most ‘situationist friendly’ studies, 13% to 20% of subjects were reported to exhibit the relevant behavior. If we take the studies at face value, and their results as representative of the population at large, there may still be *hundreds of millions* of people who exhibit responsibilist virtues. This is hardly an empirically irrelevant remnant. In light of this, it seems implausible that the situationist critique, as it stands, threatens to force responsibilists into the realm of the purely normative.

VI. CONCLUSION

If the above remarks are on target, epistemic situationism has yet to be vindicated. And even if it were vindicated, it remains unclear how this would make trouble for responsibilism. Virtue responsibilist views are not committed to the empirical claims required for Alfano’s attack.

This is not to say that responsibilists should ignore social psychology. On the contrary, if responsibilism is to provide us with cognitive guidance, ordinary subjects who lack responsibilist virtues must be capable of displaying characteristically virtuous behavior more often than they do. Happily, the situationist research itself suggests that they can. It points toward influences that can help us behave in characteristically virtuous ways. Responsibilists should be glad to learn of such influences, and should put them to good use. They should hope that virtue epistemology and empirical psychology can work together to help

us improve our cognitive conduct. If this hope is met, Alfano is among those they'll have to thank.²

REFERENCES

- Alfano, M. (2012) 'Expanding the Situationist Challenge to Responsibilist Virtue Epistemology', *The Philosophical Quarterly*, 62: 223–49.
- Baehr, J. (2012) *The Inquiring Mind: On Intellectual Virtues and Virtue Epistemology*. New York: OUP
- Code, L. (1984) 'Toward a "Responsibilist" Epistemology', *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 45: 29–50.
- Zagzebski, L. (1996) *Virtues of the Mind*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Zagzebski, L. (2003) 'Intellectual Motivation and the Good of Truth', in M. DePaul and L. Zagzebski (eds), *Intellectual Virtue: Perspectives from Ethics and Epistemology*. New York: OUP.

Whitworth University, USA

² Thanks to Mark Alfano, Guy Axtell, Jason Baehr, Nathan Ballantyne, Anne Baril, John Doris, Tom Kelly, Dan McKaughan, Christian Miller, Phil Reed, Josh Orozco, Linda Zagzebski, and an anonymous referee from *The Philosophical Quarterly*. This publication was made possible through a course release from Whitworth University, and through support of a grant from The Character Project at Wake Forest University and the John Templeton Foundation. The opinions expressed in this publication are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of The Character Project, Wake Forest University, or the John Templeton Foundation.