PHI 1100: Ethics & Critical Thinking

Sessions 9, 10, & 11
February 25th, 27th, & March 3rd, 2020

Normative Epistemology:
Epistemic Responsibility, Intellectual Virtues, Doxastic Voluntarism
Today we begin a new unit in the course, all about **normative epistemology**:

- the study of *how we should think & what we should believe*

  - (We’ll also cover some classic topics belonging to **descriptive epistemology**, which aims to describe what beliefs & knowledge are (rather than how they ought to be)

This field of philosophy provides a foundation for many **concepts & principles of informal reasoning** that are considered integral to “critical thinking”, e.g.

- epistemic responsibility
- intellectual virtues
- the “total evidence requirement” & the problem of induction
- updating & revising beliefs in response to new evidence
- automatic vs. deliberate reasoning
- understanding our cognitive biases & dependence upon mental heuristics
When we studied normative ethics, we became aware of a distinction between two approaches to being a good person:

- **duty / rule-based approaches** to good behavior (deontology)
  say that being a good person is a matter of fulfilling one’s duty to obey rules which specify the right thing to do

- **virtue / character-based approaches** to good behavior
  say that being a good person is a matter of developing good character, which leads to doing the right thing

• These two approaches also appear in normative epistemology, as different ways of understanding what it is to be a good thinker.
  - Throughout the course we’ll learn plenty of rules that have been proposed as the foundation of good reasoning & argumentation,
    • …but we’ll start out by adopting the approach to critical thinking based upon building good intellectual character, known as virtue epistemology.
intellectual virtues = desirable, admirable mental traits & attributes

- (In contrast, intellectual vices = undesirable, reprehensible mental traits & attributes)

Two main types of intellectual virtues:

1. faculty virtues reliably lead to true beliefs and/or other admirable intellectual goals
   - (so-called because they amount to excellence in the operation of mental faculties (subcomponents of the mind like perception, memory, etc.))
   - e.g., highly accurate perception, quick & reliable memory recall, good introspection, freedom from delusions or hallucinations

Because these virtues aren’t necessarily something we can control, they are all very good to have, but we wouldn’t blame someone for a failure of reasoning that resulted from a lack of this kind of virtue:

- e.g., we wouldn’t shame someone who arrives at a false belief about where they are because they misread a sign due to poor vision
intellectual virtues = desirable, admirable mental traits & attributes

Two main types of intellectual virtues:

2. **character virtues** represent the kind of person one is (judging by one’s intellectual actions), **for which we are epistemically responsible**

   - **epistemic responsibility** = deserving praise for good reasoning or deserving blame for poor reasoning; being held accountable for one’s intellectual activities (and their consequences)

   – We could blame someone for a failure of reasoning resulting from a lack of character virtue (or possession of a character vice).

     » E.g., a driver with poor vision who neglects to wear glasses arrives at a false belief about what a road sign says and causes an accident:

        • they aren’t blameworthy for their poor vision (a faculty vice, which they cannot control)

        • but they are blameworthy for the character vice of *pride* (not owning up to their limitations)
2. **character virtues** represent the kind of person one is (judging by one’s intellectual actions), **for which we are epistemically responsible**

Linda Zagzebski (1996) identifies some fundamental features of intellectual character virtues:

» We aren’t born with them; instead, we gradually acquire them through repeated practice.
  
  • This means that intellectual virtues can be attained by anyone who is willing to work for them.

» They all **involve being motivated to achieve some kind of intellectual good** (e.g. true beliefs, creative ideas, breadth of knowledge),
  
  • which is based upon the virtuous person’s “desire to be in cognitive contact with reality”.

» **They reliably lead to success in achieving one’s intellectual objectives**
  
  • ...e.g. finding smart solutions to problems, developing true beliefs, avoiding deception.
character virtues represent the kind of person one is (judging by one’s intellectual actions), for which we are epistemically responsible.

There is no single, authoritative list of intellectual character virtues (and their corresponding vices).

- Moreover, particular character virtues (and vices) are subject to debate, regarding whether or not they’re always good to have (or bad to have).

Let’s go through a list of popular candidates for character virtues (and their corresponding vices).

» Since these virtues are invented categories for complex forms of intellectual behavior,
  • some virtues will share common features, as will some vices.

» Some virtues may come into conflict with each other,
  • suggesting that finding a balance between them might be ideal.

» Some virtues may have downsides, or may be bad in excess.
• **intellectual curiosity** = interest in gaining new knowledge, willingness to seek out information, a commitment to expanding one’s mind

  e.g., Frederick Douglass, born a slave, was denied education by his master, but sought out knowledge despite the risk of getting caught:

  – “The plan which I adopted . . . was that of making friends of all the little white boys whom I met in the street. As many of these as I could, I converted into teachers. With their kindly aid, obtained at different times and in different places, I finally succeeded in learning to read. When I was sent on errands, I always took my book with me, and by going on part of my errand quickly, I found time to get a lesson before my return. I used also to carry bread with me . . . [to exchange for] that more valuable bread of knowledge.” (34)

    » “A Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass”: at.virginia.edu/2RqSNd8

**corresponding vice:**

– **intellectual idleness** = avoiding intellectual activity altogether, complacency about one’s knowledge, remaining content in one’s ignorance
• **intellectual courage** = willingness to defend a view one believes to be true, regardless of its unpopularity; willingness to take risks in exploring new ideas; willingness to consider an issue from a different perspective; willingness to confront topics & tasks that intimidate us

  » e.g., **Galileo Galilei** showed intellectual courage in defending his heliocentric theory of the solar system (backed by scientific evidence) against the orthodox geocentric theory held by the Catholic Church, even though it got him convicted for heresy (video: bit.ly/2u7pPHc)

• **corresponding vice:**
  – **intellectual cowardice** = “playing it safe” with one’s intellectual activities, sticking with popular & conventional ideas, shying away from intimidating topics & tasks

  » (…though perhaps sometimes we have ethical reasons *not* to explore certain topics or perspectives, due to their conduciveness to terrible social consequences)
• **diligence, perseverance, tenacity, “grit”** = maintaining good work ethic in the face of a challenge, not getting discouraged when you encounter difficulty, staying on task until a task is done right

• e.g., studying a new concept until you *really* understand it, even if it doesn’t “click” right away;

• continuing to practice a new skill until it becomes second nature;

• editing and proofreading a paper before submitting it, to make sure it reflects your absolute best work

• corresponding vice:

  – **intellectual laziness** = unwillingness to put one’s best efforts into one’s mental activities, willingness to give up early instead of pushing through an intellectual challenge
• **intellectual carefulness** =
deliberate avoidance of known pitfalls of reasoning,
double-checking one’s thought process,
being precise with language in communicating one’s thoughts
  – e.g., checking your work on a math problem;
  – correcting yourself when you catch yourself
drawing a conclusion that’s not well-supported;
  – re-reading a passage to make sure
  you caught all the details and comprehend its meaning;
  – not exaggerating or overstating what you know
  (e.g., not saying “All X are Y”
  when you only know that some X are Y)

• **corresponding vice:**
  – **negligence/carelessness** = taking shortcuts
    instead of doing things how they ought to be done
    » (like plagiarizing text from Wikipedia
    instead of finding & citing
    a proper peer-reviewed source)
• **skepticism** = withholding belief in the absence of clear evidence, checking the reliability & credibility of a source before accepting information as fact
  
  • corresponding vice:
    – **gullibility/naivety** = believing everything you read/hear as fact

• **tolerating ambiguity** = accepting the notion of “gray area”, recognizing that some topics don’t have single, definite, correct answers/solutions/interpretations; resisting the urge to settle on one particular viewpoint on a complicated topic or situation
  
  – (awesome gif of how the same data can be interpreted multiple ways: bit.ly/38iQ3W0)

  • corresponding vice:
    – **needing cognitive closure** = gravitating to a particular view/interpretation right away to settle one’s mind
      » (a quiz measuring your need for closure: bit.ly/30xvSkD)
• **ingenuity** = interest in generating new ideas & perspectives, commitment to originality in one’s intellectual pursuits

• **corresponding vice:**
  – **conformity** = adopting whichever ideas are most popular, following other people’s lead regarding what or how to think

• **intellectual flexibility** = “thinking outside the box”, switching strategies when one’s initial approach isn’t working, adapting one’s thinking to new demands
  – **video:** bit.ly/2uf1YoU

• **corresponding vice:**
  – **rigidity** = inability to adopt new methods or tactics in pursuit of an intellectual goal, being stuck in one’s ways
• **being grounded in reality** = commitment to basing one’s beliefs upon tangible evidence; resisting fanciful or unrealistic ideas

(This **might be** the kind of virtue that can be **in tension with other virtues:**

– namely, **someone who is fully committed to this virtue might be pulled away from the exercise of intellectual courage** (exploring unusual or unpopular ideas) or **ingenuity** (seeing things in a completely new way).)

• **corresponding vices:**

  – **intellectual insouciance** = “indifference to whether [one’s] claims have any basis in reality or any genuine evidential backing” (coined & defined by Quassim Cassam)

  » According to Cassam, this vice is exhibited by many “conspiracy entrepreneurs…who literally make a living by peddling conspiracy theories”:

    • they allow their financial self-interest to override any concern they would otherwise have about popularizing & spreading false beliefs.
• **intellectual integrity** = following evidence where it leads, changing one’s mind in light of relevant information, committing oneself to the pursuit of truth (even when the truth hurts)

• **corresponding vices:**
  – **confirmation bias** = avoiding information that conflicts with the view you already hold
    » This is a vice that all humans are prone to:
      • even when we try our best to seek out all of the evidence available to us,
      • it’s much easier for us to accept the evidence that agrees with our current view (and reject the evidence that challenges our view)

  – **motivated reasoning** = reasoning to confirm one’s emotional responses or existing biases

  – **wishful thinking** = believing whatever is most comforting rather than what is best supported by the evidence
    » (…though next week we’ll encounter William James’ view that defends wishful thinking as normal & necessary)
• **intellectual humility** = knowing one’s intellectual limits (& taking actions to address your limitations so they don’t get in your way), being able to admit that you’re wrong or you don’t know, willingness to seek or accept help from others

– e.g., instead of keeping quiet out of fear of “looking stupid”, raising your hand to ask a question during class (other students are probably grateful that you asked!)

– coming to Office Hours to make sure you really understood something, instead of assuming you have a hang of it

  » take a quick intellectual humility **assessment**: bit.ly/2sEkbMr

**corresponding vice:**

– **pride** = unwillingness to admit when you’re wrong / don’t know, (and that other people might be right), overestimating one’s intellectual abilities, overconfidence in the correctness of one’s beliefs or methods, insistence on doing everything yourself instead of accepting help
• **intellectual humility**

**corresponding vice:**

– **pride** = unwillingness to admit when you’re wrong / don’t know, (and that other people might be right), overestimating one’s intellectual abilities, overconfidence in the correctness of one’s beliefs or methods, insistence on doing everything yourself instead of accepting help

» e.g., people who, instead of admitting they were wrong, make up excuses to assert that they were right after all, likely in an effort to protect their self-esteem

» scientists who aren’t willing to admit they made mistakes after their findings fail to replicate (bit.ly/2G3N1ZO);

» entrepreneurs who were overconfident in their ability to solve major problems with their business models

• e.g. Billy McFarland (Fyre Festival), Elizabeth Holmes (Theranos);
  • **videos:** bit.ly/2D05k0C, bit.ly/2R4ZX7Y
• **intellectual humility**

**corresponding vice:**

– **pride** = unwillingness to admit when you’re wrong / don’t know, (and that other people might be right),

*overestimating one’s intellectual abilities,*

overconfidence in the correctness of one’s beliefs or methods, insistence on doing everything yourself instead of accepting help

Nearly all of us are susceptible to this vice, suggesting that it reflects a widespread tendency toward “illusory superiority”

(article: bit.ly/2ua8SvM)

• “65% of Americans believe they’re more intelligent than average” (Resnick)
• ~75% of adults claim to be more open-minded than average;
• ~90% of people think they’re more intellectually humble than the average person (bit.ly/3akBXoS)
– the Dunning-Kruger effect: people who don’t know much about a subject overestimate their knowledge & competence, because they don’t know enough to recognize their ignorance

» video: bit.ly/2szh3Bg
• **communicative clarity** = explaining oneself thoroughly & transparently, knowing one’s audience & adapting one’s speech to enable comprehension

  corresponding vice:
  – **obfuscation** = deliberately obscuring one’s meaning behind overly complex vocabulary or phrasing

• **communicative respectfulness** = showing goodwill to one’s interlocutors (conversation partners), striving for mutual understanding

  corresponding vices:
  – pretension, condescension
  – rudeness
• **open-mindedness** = interest in considering alternative perspectives, willingness to hear new evidence (including counterevidence to one’s existing views)

**corresponding vice:**

– **closed-mindedness** = being overly confident in the correctness of one’s existing views, unwillingness to consider new evidence (including counterevidence to one’s views)

» “. . . in a study of the failure of Israeli intelligence to anticipate the 1973 Yom Kippur attacks by Egypt & Syria, intelligence analyst Uri Bar-Joseph attributes this failure in large part to the dogmatism & extreme closed-mindedness of named individuals in Israeli intelligence.

• These individuals were committed to the doctrine that there would be no attack and this led them to dismiss all evidence — even highly compelling evidence — to the contrary.” (Cassam)
• open-mindedness = interest in considering alternative perspectives, willingness to hear new evidence (including counterevidence to one’s existing views)

• corresponding vice (maybe?):
  – closed-mindedness = being overly confident in the correctness of one’s existing views, unwillingness to consider new evidence (including counterevidence to one’s views)

  » Heather Battaly counters that closed-mindedness can be a virtue in some circumstances,
  • specifically, in “epistemically hostile environments” where adopting the prevailing beliefs would compromise your pursuit of true beliefs.

  » She relates her view to CUNY philosopher Saul Kripke’s dogmatism paradox =
  • if one really knows something, one can be very justified in dismissing challenges to their knowledge, in order to protect their true beliefs (more on this next week)
Being familiar with intellectual character virtues can give you a general target to aim at in your intellectual conduct.

...however, this *virtue epistemological* approach to capturing the distinction between good/bad reasoning assumes that people have enough control over their beliefs to be held responsible for their intellectual character...
When we discussed moral responsibility (sessions 5-6), we examined whether free will is necessary for moral responsibility.
  – (incompatibilists say yes, compatibilists say no)

• In epistemology, there are similar concerns regarding

   ➢ **epistemic responsibility** = deserving praise for good reasoning or deserving blame for poor reasoning; being held accountable for one’s intellectual activities (and their consequences)

• **Do we have to have control over which beliefs we develop in order to be epistemically responsible for them?**

  – We’ll consider a view from CUNY philosophers Eric Mandelbaum & Jake Quilty-Dunn, according to which
    » we do not have direct control over the process of belief formation,
    • but we do have some control over our information intake, and **we can be responsible for our choices regarding what we trust as reliable sources of information.**
Mandelbaum & Quilty-Dunn introduce doxastic voluntarism & involuntarism:
– competing perspectives on whether or not belief formation is under our control ("doxastic" = pertaining to belief)

**doxastic voluntarism** = the view that people can voluntarily choose what to believe & what not to believe

» e.g., Rene Descartes (1596-1650) suggested that we have the ability to refrain from believing information that comes to us via our senses:

  • after realizing that our senses can deceive us, he claimed to have abandoned his belief that his senses are a reliable source of knowledge.

**The Cartesian model of belief formation:**

• people can consider a proposition (any claim that can be expressed in the form of a sentence),

• and then choose whether to accept it or reject it.
doxastic voluntarism & involuntarism:
- competing perspectives on whether or not belief formation is under our control

**doxastic involuntarism** = the view that people *cannot* voluntarily choose what to believe & what not to believe

» e.g., **Baruch Spinoza** (1632-77) believed that “all information that a…mind encounters is…initially believed, regardless of the evidence for…the information’s validity.

  - Only after the initial acquisition (of a belief) can mental processes dedicated to rejecting information take hold” (Mandelbaum & Q-D 43)

The Spinozan model of belief formation:
- entertaining a proposition leads automatically to its acceptance,
- unless we follow up this process with additional consideration that could allow us to reject it
**doxastic involuntarism** = the view that people *cannot* voluntarily choose what to believe & what not to believe

According to Spinoza’s involuntarist model of belief acquisition, “propositions cannot be entertained without being believed.

– When a proposition (e.g., ‘Jimmy Carter is an ancient Hindu goddess’) is understood,
   • that proposition immediately believed to be true, no matter what its contents are, or what else the hearer believes.
   – One cannot simply consider the proposition without holding it to be true.
   » Only after a proposition is initially accepted can it then be rejected.” (44)

If doxastic involuntarism is true,
• believing is “automatic & effortless”,
• rejecting as false is “controlled & effortful”
Empirical support for **doxastic involuntarism**:  

- **Experimental subjects under cognitive load** (heavy demands upon our cognitive capacity to manage information, a.k.a. working memory) **have more trouble rejecting information that they know is false** compared to subjects who aren’t under cognitive load  

  - which **suggests that rejecting beliefs requires mental effort**

  In fact, when under load, subjects tend to display implicit acceptance, exactly in line with the Spinozan model. In Gilbert et al. 1993, for example, subjects viewed (fictional) crime reports concerning two separate crimes, which slowly advanced across a computer screen. The reports contained both “true” and “false” information, with the true sentences in black typeface and false sentences in red. The experimental group was told to keep an eye on a parallel scrolling text (a ‘crawl’) of numbers and look out for instances of the number ‘5’, while the control group was told to ignore the numbers. The subjects were then tested in various ways to see which information they held to be true. For instance, they were asked to recommend prison terms and rate their feelings toward the perpetrators. For the experimental group, the prison terms recommended were significantly influenced by the nature of the false statements. These subjects “recommended that perpetrators serve nearly twice as much time when the false statements contained in the police reports exacerbated (rather than extenuated) the severity of the crimes” [Gilbert et al. (1993), 223]. The rating tests showed similar results. “In short,” write Gilbert et al., being under cognitive load will “cause subjects to act as though false statements were true” [Ibid., 225].

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Gilbert et al.’s experiment suggests that  
- **people not only believe automatically,**  
- **but they also reason to further conclusions** (like how much jail time someone should get)  
**on the basis of these automatically-acquired beliefs.**
Mandelbaum & Quilty-Dunn hypothesize that belief is an automatic process because
– our minds evolved under circumstances where there was no need to waste mental energy verifying the truth of incoming information before believing it.

• E.g., if you are out hunting or gathering food and you see something snakelike out of the corner of your eye,
  – it’s beneficial for your mind to jump to the conclusion that the snakelike thing is a snake (and prompt you to run to safety);
    » in this context, exercising skepticism & withholding belief could cost you your life (whereas wasting time running away from a snakelike branch is a small price to pay for survival).

• “It is with the rise of culture, communication, and testimony that receiving false information becomes a serious problem…
  – …the ability to reject information is only a late-stage adaptation” to the dangers of acquiring false beliefs from other people,
    » so the mental process of rejecting beliefs is tacked onto the end of the mental chain-of-events as a kind of stop-gap measure (45-6)
Consequences of doxastic involuntarism, if it turns out to be true:

- We may be susceptible to believing information simply because we are exposed to it
  - e.g., in subway ads, on Twitter, in a joke...

» CUNY philosopher Jennifer Ware argues that jokes which invoke stereotypes about marginalized groups aren’t just harmless fun,
  - because those who hear these jokes passively accept these stereotypes as true

» Philosopher Regina Rini argues that because of the invention of deepfake technology, we need to guard ourselves against deception:
  - Instead of automatically believing what you see, “you should only trust a recording if you would trust the word of the person producing it.”
Returning to the question,

- **Do we have to have control over which beliefs we develop in order to be epistemically responsible for them?**

  - Mandelbaum & Quilty-Dunn say *no*:
    - Even if belief formation is an automatic & involuntary process,
      - we can set ourselves up for more likely success
        in forming true beliefs and avoiding false beliefs
        by making responsible choices regarding
        who to trust as a reliable source of accurate information.

        - We can be held epistemically responsible for
          allowing ourselves to consume an information “diet”
          involving sources with questionable credibility.

To apply the language of intellectual virtues & vices,

- If we make good choices regarding our sources of information,
  - we could be praised for displaying virtues like
    skepticism, intellectual integrity, being grounded in reality;

- If we make poor choices,
  - we could be criticized for exercising vices like
    gullibility, insouciance, and so on.