

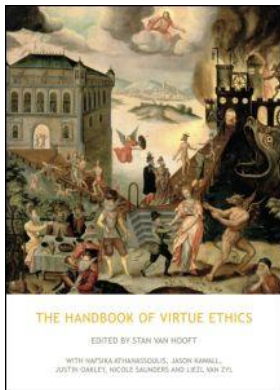
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Virtue, reason and wisdom

Lorraine Code

In this chapter I shall propose that the pivotal and overriding intellectual virtue is epistemic responsibility. This is at once a large and a minimal claim: large in suggesting that epistemic responsibility might encompass all other epistemic virtues; minimal in proposing that all putative cognitive-intellectual virtues can reduce to one. It is a difficult claim to advance and substantiate because, on the face of it, there seem to be no universally valid criteria for judging that an act of knowing qualifies as “epistemically responsible”, and few if any universally established exemplary cases against which to measure candidates for the designation. Nonetheless, working from a conviction that ethical and epistemological issues are reciprocally constitutive and informative, it is my view that epistemic responsibility occupies a central place in virtue epistemology, and that virtue epistemology is simultaneously an ethical and an epistemological position and practice, even though these claims are often better established and supported by example than by formal argument. Succinctly put, the guiding thought is that knowing well is a fundamental social, individual and political obligation for people who would live well both for themselves and with others, in most if not all circumstances. With Anglo-American epistemology’s “empirical simples” (i.e. basic propositional knowledge claims such as “Sue knows the cup is on the table”), fulfilling such obligations is usually so matter-of-course, and so trivial, as to require no argument, especially in materially replete societies where anyone – leaving the extension of the term intentionally vague – can know whether the cup is on the table. But there are circumstances in which even such knowledge cannot and indeed *should not* be taken for granted; and with just slightly more complex empirical examples it is an open possibility that assumptions about the ubiquitous accessibility of the stuff of which knowledge is made will be more presumptuous than realistic.

As I will show in the next section of this chapter, such convictions about uniform and ubiquitous accessibility of the stuff of which knowledge is made are seriously contested in feminist, postcolonial and antiracist enquiries where the taken-for-granted interchangeability of epistemic and moral subjects – of knowers – is radically contested. No longer can

it be presumed that an autonomous (white) man who is like every other in all cognitive circumstances and with equivalent access to the objects and practices that are to be known, can stand as the default moral-epistemic subject; nor can it be assumed that knowledge is an individual achievement or possession, once emphasis shifts to studying the effects and implications of epistemic community.

EPISTEMIC RESPONSIBILITY

In the years since I brought this concept into philosophical discourse in my eponymous 1987 book (Code 1987), initially drawing upon Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* for the animating sense of "virtue", epistemic responsibility has gone through numerous iterations and variations in my own work and elsewhere, and especially in recent work in social epistemology, which I will go on to discuss. Despite the idea's having been something of a "sleeper" in the mainstream virtue epistemology literature, I am suggesting here that the virtue of responsible and responsive epistemic conduct retains a central salience for virtue epistemology and, if often tacitly, for epistemology more widely conceived. Indeed, that salience is still greater than it was in 1987, in light of recent developments in Anglo-American social epistemology, where its responsive aspect figures centrally in the relationality often definitive of the quality of epistemic interactions.

For Aristotle, virtue *simpliciter* is "such a ... state as makes a man good and able to perform his proper function well" (*NE* II 4). It is a teleological attribute in that it predisposes its possessors and practitioners towards reasonably dependable realizations of certain valued ends. Thus practising kindness, trustworthiness or generosity can contribute to the well-being of a practitioner's community, be it close to home or wide-ranging, while producing or increasing that practitioner's own happiness and moral goodness. In proposing, then, that epistemic responsibility is central to a virtuous epistemic life I am contending – uncontroversially I believe – that epistemic activity (i.e. *knowing*) is fundamentally constitutive of viable ways of being in the world, to the extent that any assessment of human character and, latterly, of the epistemic climate of a society or community, must take account of the quality, not just the quantity, of such activity. Virtuous epistemic conduct is manifested less in *how much* would-be knowers know, and more in *how well* they know. So there is a difference between simply accumulating facts and knowing or understanding their significance and interconnections: a difference that catches something of what is involved in virtuous epistemic conduct as it contrasts, say, with mere cleverness or observational accuracy. In other words, a knower's or a society's intellectual goodness is not just about there being an aggregate of consistently good scores in knowledge-seeking or -constructing projects that "come out right": it is more about cultivating constant, reasonably dependable clusters of habits, capacities and qualities, apparent in larger virtue-orientated relations to the physical, material, social, political world. Recall John McDowell's early observation that concepts of virtue are enlisted "to mark similarities and dissimilarities among the manifestations of a single sensitivity which is what virtue, in general, is: an ability to recognize requirements which situations impose on one's behavior" (1979: 333). In a still more explicitly individualist analysis, Ernest Sosa characterizes intellectual virtue as "a quality found to maximize one's surplus of truth over error" – as a "subject-grounded ability to tell truth from error infallibly or

at least reliably in a correlated field” (1985: 227, 243). These definitions provide points of entry into my analysis here, which is intended to be as socially as it is individually pertinent.

For Aristotle, wisdom, intelligence and prudence are the primary intellectual virtues (*NE I 13*). They are significantly interdependent and even co-constitutive: in today’s parlance one might gloss them so as to understand wisdom, in its more practical aspect, as a settled and reasonably dependable capacity for substantiating beliefs and knowledge claims, which involves having a good, consistent sense of how far such efforts need to be extended before it is appropriate or responsible to claim (interim) knowledge or profess belief. Whether it has to be a fixed capacity remains open to discussion, but in my view virtue has constantly to be cultivated and is indeed partly evidenced in commitments to doing just that: individually, it is an ongoing and continually renewed project in a quasi-Sartrean existential sense, rather than a fixed attribute or characteristic that triggers automatic responses. Intelligence, then, is principally evident in commitments to perceive and know situations clearly and carefully enough to avoid being *unduly* swayed by affectivity. But the emphasis on “unduly” matters, because the implication is that, at least in twenty-first-century thought, intelligent knowers will rarely be judged virtuous for being, on principle, absolutely unmoved or unaffected by what they are seeking to know: indeed, apt feelings and appropriate responses are integral to virtuous, wise epistemic conduct.¹ Prudence is a rather different matter: both important and potentially troubling. Thinking of the risks often involved and the persistence required in many efforts to know well brings to mind Michel Foucault’s *aude sapere!*: “dare to know”, “have the courage, the audacity, to know” (1984: 35). Prudence would, then, involve having or cultivating a just sense of how much and how far it is possible, appropriate, or indeed wise, to dare. Excessive prudence could result merely in epistemic timidity, inertia and a cautious, excessively conservative epistemic life more concerned with avoiding error or not looking foolish than with the creativity required to explore untrodden paths of enquiry, experiment with bold new ideas, or support contentious yet worthy causes. Like the Socratic gadfly, courageous knowers can keep the epistemic community on its toes, and exhibit virtue in so doing.

Intellectual virtue, then, is a matter of a certain quality of epistemic character exhibited in a reasonably stable, but not ossified, manner of relating to the world, to other living beings, and to ourselves as knowledge-seekers in that world. In a non-technical sense, intellectual goodness manifests in a “realist” orientation, exhibited in a commitment to doing justice to the objects of knowledge, be they animate or inanimate, physical, personal, material, theoretical or ideational. Such a commitment is central to the responsiveness I have mentioned. It stretches from knowing people to knowing theories, places, histories, populations, literary works, toxic or non-toxic substances, and indeed any potential objects of knowledge. Rarely should the aim be to fulfil such commitments in individualistic isolation: commonly, with subject matters that indeed matter, coming to know responsibly and well will be the (perhaps interim) product of ongoing deliberation, consultation and debate. Virtuous knowing manifests in a critical-creative openness, and often a level of patience, both communal and individual, a willingness to grant a fair hearing, to develop and sustain good judgement, yet not in a commitment to tolerate any and every form of trivia, malice or nonsense. It is difficult to defend this last claim without reading it as a plea in favour of an austere earnestness, and against playfulness, comedy,

fabrication or folklore: difficult also to acquire and maintain a sensitivity to differences between prudence, consistency, integrity on the one hand, and dogmatic intransigence on the other. Something akin to an Aristotelian mean becomes a guiding principle here, and attributions of epistemic virtue will be made communally, often deliberately, and also situationally in a sense related, if not precisely equivalent, to Donna Haraway's "situated knowledges" (1991), where a certain regularity across disparate situations points towards the aptness of attributing epistemic responsibility to an enquirer, or a group, society or community.

Although this analysis may seem to remain caught in a residual presumption that intellectual virtue is a purely individual achievement and indeed to presuppose a version of epistemic individualism, such is emphatically not its intention. A move from "individual" to commonality, or community, in thinking about virtue may appear to be difficult, since virtues are usually conceived as attributes or practices of "individuals" in the sense that, in their specificity, my virtues cannot be yours, nor yours mine; and an assumption has prevailed that thinking should move in that direction: from individual to social, with "the social" conceived as an amalgam of discrete individuals. But there are good reasons to favour thinking in the opposite direction. If (following Miranda Fricker) the ethical and epistemic *sensibility* manifested in responsible conduct is conceived, as I think it must be, as inculcated in practices of social training, then moving from the communal to the individual is less difficult to conceive, and more plausible than moving in the opposite direction: from individual to community.

Fricker thus proposes:

that we think of the training of a sensibility as involving at least two distinct streams of input: social and individual – in that order. People develop an ethical sensibility from being embedded within a historically and culturally specific way of life – or as Alasdair MacIntyre puts it, an ethical "tradition" – where this process is to be conceived as a matter of ongoing ethical socialisation. (2003: 144)

With Fricker, then, I am contending that *epistemic* sensibility is likewise a product of socialization: "a social training of the interpretative and affective attitudes in play when we are told things by other people" (*ibid.*: 145). Indeed, such a position was eloquently articulated by Annette Baier, in the mid-1980s. She writes: "A person, perhaps, is best seen as one who was long enough dependent upon other persons to acquire the essential arts of personhood. Persons essentially are *second* persons" (1985: 82).² For educators, parents, activists, to mention only the most obvious few, assumptions prevail that there are more or less virtuous ways of engaging in such "arts", and that such learning can instil virtues, or trade upon their infectious properties, if not precisely in the direct way one would administer a medication or share a bar of chocolate.

Intellectual *virtue* requires much more than a minimal level of reliability, then. A still-pertinent way of understanding the interdependability that counts as a *sine qua non* requirement for its very possibility is adumbrated in Alasdair MacIntyre's concept of a *practice*, by which he means:

any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realized ... in those

standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity, with the result that human powers to achieve excellence, and human conceptions of the ends and goods involved, are systematically extended. (1981: 175)

Practices afford ways of defining the good for a certain way of life: they embody standards of performance and of the observance of rules and principles, and they point towards the achievement of certain goods (Code 1991: ch. 7). Yet they do not, simply as established practices, qualify as virtuous. MacIntyre is clearly not committed to the view that all established practices are *ipso facto* good, amenable only to internal criticism. In the epistemic realm, a plagiarist could be supremely accomplished in practising her/his craft, but excellence in performance would not confer virtue on the practitioner. Nor in the larger social-political realm could practices, as such, qualify as virtuous: there are too many glaring counter-examples. Thus the locus of judgement cannot be merely internal to a certain practice.

Nor can self-contained, undifferentiated, individual knowledge-gathering count as a MacIntyrean practice, in view of its randomness, its lack of structure and coherence. Thus, it would be implausible, for example, to suggest that Jean-Paul Sartre's "self-taught man" exemplifies intellectual virtue or epistemic responsibility, in consequence of his voraciously collecting items of information, which are related to one another only by being listed in alphabetical order in a single reference text. A misbegotten conviction informs his project to the effect that it is possible to know everything while understanding nothing. But attributions of intellectual virtue are rarely if ever plausible on the basis of isolated acts of knowing well: an inveterate prevaricator cannot wipe the slate clean with one impressive act of truth-telling. At the very least, some measure of wider understanding, some estimation of relative significance and implications must be an integral ingredient of a virtue-centred epistemology and a component of intellectually virtuous practice. Juli Eflin captures the point well: affirming the teleological character of a virtue-centred epistemology she advocates, for which understanding is an overall goal, she writes:

[I]t is not individual, unrelated facts that I want to pile up, especially not trivial facts – even if they do meet the necessary and sufficient conditions for knowledge ... I want important, interrelated facts ... skills that enable me to learn more ... a coherent framework into which new information can fit and cohere. ... I want understanding and the ability to increase my understanding in the areas I deem important. (2003: 49)

While the central figure in such an epistemology is "the enquirer", as indeed it must be, and likewise an enquirer who is specifically located and knows "from there", Eflin's enquirer seems to acquire intellectual virtue rather more individualistically than would the more explicitly socially-communally engaged enquirer on whom my picture of a responsible epistemic agent is centred.

In short, epistemic responsibility and intellectual virtue are not principally or exclusively about individual states of mind or cognitive activities: they derive from, and are attributable to, communities of enquiry, human institutions and communally created and enacted practices. These enactments can, of course, go awry, to issue in practices and instil

sensibilities that are more vicious than virtuous. Such violations often occur within a social-epistemic imaginary infused with and constituted out of biased, ethically-politically reprehensible beliefs and prejudices, also socially instilled: the sedimented racism, sexism, homophobia and multifaceted ignorance endemic to and upheld within certain social groups, in certain times and places, are glaring examples. Their stubborn intransigence highlights a further complexity of virtue-based epistemology and moral-political theory: namely, the seemingly impossible need for external evaluation or judgement of what seems in its presentation to be enclosed and internally justifying. Thus, as I claim in *Epistemic Responsibility*, in a well-functioning society, the majority of virtue-attesting epistemic interactions can and will be based in trust. Matter-of-course as such a claim may seem for members of benign and reasonably safe, affluent, smoothly functioning social “kinds”, societies, or parts thereof, in this possibility also resides the potential for the very opposite of epistemic virtue: for the epistemic injustice, the violations consequent upon widespread and condemnable socially-politically instilled beliefs, and abuses of trust. These too have urgently to be addressed. A knower’s, or a group’s, epistemically reprehensible conduct cannot be exonerated with the simplistic excuse of its being merely a product of her/his/their socialization. Thus, for virtue-derived theories, external evaluation poses a complex problem for it is not clear that even a process analogous to rebuilding Neurath’s raft would supply the vantage point from which judgements of the whole could be articulated and enacted.

WHOSE VIRTUE? WHOSE WISDOM?

So far, I have been referring to intellectual virtue in general, so to speak, as though it were alike in all men, all virtuous people were men, and all were alike in the attributes and practices for which they could be deemed virtuous. None of these assumptions are tenable in the twenty-first century, if indeed they ever were: historically, their putative universality derived from locally entrenched but rarely contested or justified beliefs about human sameness. Genevieve Lloyd attributes to Descartes the view that, “this natural light of Reason is supposedly equal in all” (1993: 44), but she amply demonstrates that neither reason – nor, I suggest, wisdom, intelligence or prudence – are concepts whose essence, derivation or significance are written in stone or in any other enduring, situationally neutral medium. Yet the purpose of raising and exploring the implications of this caveat, whether following Lloyd or for philosophical enquiry more widely conceived, is emphatically not to propose that there are certain virtues for men and other, usually lesser, virtues for women, even though such suppositions have been deeply entrenched in the quotidian practices and philosophical presuppositions of certain societies, classes and races throughout recorded (Western) history. The conceptual content of reason, and likewise of intellectual and moral virtue, as it has evolved through the history of Western philosophy derives, again as Lloyd shows, from locally and temporally contingent ideals of intellectual conduct deemed virtuous for men – where “men” too has an exceptionally, if often imperceptibly, narrow extension.

Yet in a fairly minimal sense, some version of epistemic interdependence is evidently a requirement for membership in a functioning epistemic and broader society or community. If people could not count on one another in everyday knowledge-as-information

exchanges, it is difficult to see how societies, institutions, and indeed human relationships of any viable sort could persist.³ Since, demographically, philosophers in earlier times (and to a disturbing extent, still now) seem to have lived, in the main, in those segments of society, and to have claimed membership in those classes, genders and races, where such assumptions and expectations held, epistemic interdependence could ordinarily be depicted as a simple matter of fact, whose violations were fairly straightforward wrongs. But the consciousness-raising practices of the 1960s and 1970s in Western/Northern societies that moved towards re-centring gender, class, race, ethnicity, and other multiple and intersecting aspects of diversity have disrupted the matter-of-course assumptions about human sameness that account for many of the injustices of omission and commission that sustain the putatively benign figure of “the man of reason” and the autonomous moral agent.

By way of further unsettling the sedimented assumptions that have accorded this figure pride of place in ethics and epistemology, consider Susan Babbitt’s apt observations, in an essay where she asks her readers to notice and wonder not just why philosophy is so consistently masculine, but equally urgently, “why Philosophy is so white” (2010: 169).⁴ The question of whiteness, Babbitt contends, is closely connected to “the nature of Philosophy as the pursuit of wisdom”. Yet, a carefully delineated contrast she draws between the constitutive presuppositions about autonomy, self-realization and freedom in North American societies, where “equality for women is defined in terms of what men have within the current society” (*ibid.*: 172) and the conception of social equality enacted by Igbo women of east Nigeria⁵ informs her exposure of the systemic injustices these Western assumptions enact in their pretensions to universality. The injustices, I suggest, attest to a perniciously irresponsible social-epistemic infrastructure, an instituted social imaginary⁶ manifested in a sustained failure to question and thence to know the exclusionary effects of the governing ontological assumptions, not just of Western philosophy, but of its trickle-down effects in people’s everyday lives. My earlier reference to the presumptuousness of assumptions about the ubiquitous accessibility of the stuff of which knowledge is made gestures towards a simpler version of this thought. Babbitt aptly maintains,

if professional philosophers, because of a commitment to certain views, are unable to raise the sorts of questions that critically identify deep-seated assumptions about who we are as human beings, we might wonder whether the dominant academic practice of Philosophy, at least in the English-speaking traditions, is really about wisdom after all. It might be ... about correctness. (*Ibid.*: 169–70)

If there were ever any doubt, Babbitt’s analysis makes clear that even the “essential arts of personhood” are socially-culturally-racially-gender specific. Her examples resonate, for example, with Sandra Bartky’s exploration of “psychological oppression”, where she addresses the psychic alienation Franz Fanon, living in a white society, experiences as “the estrangement of separating off a person from some of the essential attributes of personhood” (cited by Fricker 2003: 156–7). Hence Fricker reads Fanon’s situation as showing how even “functioning as an informant on everyday matters ... [entails] being accepted as a compatriot in the community of the rational” (2003: 157). It is impossibly difficult to claim recognition as a practitioner of the virtues, whether ethical or intellectual, when one’s very being falls beneath the radar of social-ontological acknowledgement. For untold

numbers of women and other “Others”, such acceptance has rarely been simply a matter of course: again, my earlier comments about ubiquitous accessibility adumbrate this point. It recurs forcefully in Alexis Shotwell’s analysis of “appropriate subjects”, where (with reference to Charles Mills’s *Blackness Visible*) she notes that for Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*, the basic Cartesian problem about the self – about the *sum* of the *cogito*, as she neatly puts it – originates not (as for Descartes) in doubting and then reaffirming his own existence, but in “being socially created as sub-human ... [being] ontologically subject to the power of a gaze that denies his existence while holding social power” (2010: 123). In the Aristotelian tradition, questions about power do not arise, but when social-ontological homogeneity can no longer be even tacitly presumed, it becomes clear that diversity is not just about “kinds”, but also about positioning in relation to structures of power and privilege.

Following Babbitt and taking her point, I am suggesting that now, *after virtue* in the established neo-Aristotelian Anglo-American Western sense has too long claimed a certain uncontested polite hegemony in just those Philosophical circles she refers to, the time has come to concur overwhelmingly with her proposal that “the pursuit of wisdom requires a kind of humility” (2010: 170). Indeed, intellectual humility, in a sense I will elaborate, is a central ingredient of responsible epistemic practice, while its opposite – epistemic arrogance – is plainly one of the principal ingredients at work in situations of epistemic oppression and injustice. Revisiting Aristotle’s definition of virtue, as “such a ... state as makes a man good and able to perform his proper function well”, it is vital to emphasize the extent to which such functions are historically, culturally, racially and gender-specifically defined, inculcated, praised or condemned, and not innocently so.

The virtual invisibility, the consistent failure on the part of present-day philosophers to expose and unsettle these “deep-seated assumptions about who we are as human beings” that, for Babbitt, require critical identification, prompted my suggestion, in 1989, that the impact of feminism in epistemology is to move the question “Whose knowledge are we talking about?” to a central place in epistemology (Code 1989). Then, the persistent and troubling assumptions that animated my thinking had principally to do with the inveterate maleness or masculinity of mainstream Anglo-American theories of knowledge; and these persist, albeit challenged and reconstructed, the best feminist efforts notwithstanding. The import and implications of that still-urgent question have undergone multiple transformations, many of which Babbitt addresses with sensitivity and sophistication, showing why the “whose knowledge?” question is still more pressing now, especially in social epistemology, where it requires more complex and urgently critical answers than I envisioned; when the fragility of feminism and critical race theory in philosophy is increasingly apparent, and questions about Philosophy’s whiteness and multiple other modalities of homogeneity and Othering call increasingly for radical contestation.

Social epistemology in Anglo-American philosophy claims its title in significant measure from the centrality it accords to testimony and knowledge-conveying exchanges between and among people in the real world (Code 2010). It is striking for the attention many social epistemologists accord to extended, situated examples of epistemic negotiation and deliberation, and likewise for the subtle, far-reaching effects of the linguistic shift from impersonal, third-person propositional claims that “S knows that *p*”, to the language of speakers and hearers notably evident in Edward Craig’s *Knowledge and the State of Nature* (1990) and Miranda Fricker’s *Epistemic Injustice* (2007). It is more striking

still for its late appearance in an epistemological landscape where a presumption in favour of analysing formal propositional examples has created and maintained a remarkable distance between people's epistemic lives and the kinds of example philosophy can legitimately address: a distance that contributes to the minimal attention epistemologists before social epistemology were conceptually equipped to accord to questions about responsible or virtuous epistemic conduct. Thus, where reliance on the *S*-knows-that-*p* rubric made it possible for formal Anglo-American theories of the twentieth century to transcend the vicissitudes of the world in specifying *a priori*, necessary and sufficient conditions for "knowledge in general", social epistemologists return to and reclaim the world, both human and other-than-human, with its incoherence and messiness, its contradictions and specificities, to engage with real epistemic interactions and negotiations. In consequence, the very idea of "knowledge in general" is drained of content.

As I have noted, many of the issues social epistemology generates have contributed to blurring the dividing lines that separated epistemology from ethical and political debate and influences, lines drawn to ensure that politics, ethics and other human interests could not block the route to objectivity. Descriptively and normatively, epistemology was to be a disinterested pursuit. Now, for many social epistemologists, ethical-political questions – about trust, power, advocacy, negotiation, epistemic community or the ethics of belief – inevitably enter the discourse, and not, as was previously feared, to the detriment of responsible enquiry. Acts of giving and receiving testimony commonly, if sometimes tacitly, involve many of these issues. They matter, in human lives, but their mattering need not, and indeed should not, obliterate possibilities of engaging responsibly or virtuously with them. Showing how such engagement can be achieved opens space for thicker, more wide-ranging analyses of responsible epistemic conduct than could be accommodated in the astringent versions of post-positivist epistemology. It is with such thoughts in mind that I conclude the introduction to my 2006 book *Ecological Thinking* with the following observation:

[E]cological thinking is not simply thinking *about* ecology or *about* "the environment:" it generates revisioned modes of engagement with knowledge, subjectivity, politics, ethics, science, citizenship and agency, which pervades and reconfigures theory and practice alike. First and foremost a thoughtful practice, thinking ecologically carries with it a large measure of responsibility – to know somehow more *carefully* than single surface readings can allow. It might seem difficult to imagine how it could translate into wider issues of citizenship and politics, but the answer, at once simple and profound, is that ecological thinking is about imagining, crafting, articulating, endeavouring to enact principles of ideal cohabitation. (*Ibid.*: 24)

This thought, in a nutshell, captures the project of virtue epistemology as I conceive it.

While in my initial characterization in this chapter I draw heavily on Aristotle for the defining principle of intellectual virtue, I want now to suggest that as epistemology has evolved, especially since the end of the twentieth century, with testimony accorded a more central place as a source of knowledge than it occupied in positivist and post-positivist philosophy, so epistemic responsibility has come more clearly into its own: it requires radical rethinking across a range of ideas and issues hitherto judged *hors de question* in thinking about knowledge. In the shift I have noted, especially in social epistemology,

from an epistemology of monological pronouncements and punctiform knowledge claims quintessentially exemplified in the “S knows that *p*” formula, and towards the language of speakers and hearers, the question “Whose knowledge is at issue?” takes on a new urgency and pertinence, and for two principal reasons. First, and with reference to an issue I discuss in *What Can She Know?* (1991) following this shift, even in philosophy, persons can no longer plausibly be regarded as discrete, self-contained, isolated “individuals”. From Annette Baier’s reminder that “persons are essentially second persons” it follows that epistemic responsibility must be an interactive-communicative virtue from the get-go, so to speak, even if it is sometimes practised and enacted solitarily and *vis-à-vis* certain singular objects of knowledge, events or states of affairs. But so long as knowers are represented merely as interchangeable place-holders whose knowing in ideal observation conditions is the basis of epistemic analysis, the very idea of epistemic responsibility can gain no intellectual purchase: once the products of their activity are awarded the honorific status “knowledge” there can be no sense of choices being involved, on the basis of which to make responsibility attributions. Second, situations that require epistemically responsible responses can no longer be approached before the fact as replicas or elaborations of one-off face-to-face encounters with an “object” of knowledge. At the very least, knowing responsibly becomes a complex and nuanced interaction which calls for responsiveness, humility and care. These too take up a prominent place in the list of intellectual virtues, and knowledge production shifts to becoming, paradigmatically, a collaborative, negotiated project reliant on the participation of many voices, not all of them speaking in unison.

DIVERSITY, HUMILITY, RESPONSIBILITY

Returning to Susan Babbitt’s apt observation that “the pursuit of wisdom requires a kind of humility” suggests a way forward in thinking about responsibility as it can shape epistemic conduct not only in interpersonal interactions, but in scientific and other modalities of engagement with the larger world. For some, undoubtedly, the very idea of humility will be repellent in its hitherto obsequious associations with such figures as Charles Dickens’s Uriah Heap,⁷ whose groveling, hypocritically self-effacing demeanour may have contributed to a widespread view that humility carries something of an unpleasant odour and seems thus to be a less than admirable characteristic. I will attempt to dispel such an impression by showing humility at work, so to speak, in the research practices of Rachel Carson and, in a somewhat different context, of Donna Haraway, before proposing how Babbitt’s observation might play an emblematic part in articulating the implications of wise – hence virtuous – critical engagement with Philosophy’s whiteness.

In *Ecological Thinking* I represent Carson as an exemplary figure for thinking about responsible epistemic practice in scientific enquiry and in interactions with the social-political environment of her time (Code 2006: 39–40). Carson advocates intellectual-moral humility in scientific enquiry and scientifically informed practice to displace what she perceives as the hubris that, for example, drives indiscriminate pesticide use: the arrogance, in her view, of human aspirations, without humility, to achieve “control of nature”. She argues, in effect, for a shift towards taking respectful account of nature’s putative integrity, and of creatures whose lives and habitats are irrevocably damaged by such

practices. Although Carson's account is directed specifically towards ecological practices, I am suggesting that intellectual humility, with variations in content according to the subject matters involved, is a widely salient virtue, especially when it is parsed to take cognizance of its alignment with respect and careful attention to diversity across even apparently identical situations and populations. In some ways her work anticipates Donna Haraway's figure of the modest witness whose engagement with "heterogeneous histories" introduces a kind of critical consciousness that is committed to unsettling deep-seated social preoccupations with preserving "the same" (1997: 51). Modesty thus conceived – which I am reading as contiguous with humility – entails a wariness of any rush to judgement, of too-swift attributions of homogeneity across situations, populations, feelings and attitudes, thoughtless applications of ready-made taxonomies: in its virtuous modalities it entails a respectful, yet neither cold nor uncaring, attentiveness to similarity and difference.

Like the Aristotelian virtues, humility and modesty are to be practised according to a mean. Too much modesty, too much humility indeed recall the cringing posture of Uriah Heap: epistemically they appear to tell against responding to Foucault's *aude sapere!* challenge. So, for example, Julia Driver rightly notes that "a moral virtue like modesty may involve epistemic vice, since the modest person underestimates self-worth (to some small degree), and is thus making a mistake" (2003: 106). This apt caution does not gainsay the value of modesty or humility as integral to epistemically responsible practice: indeed, it enhances their constitutive part in the thoughtful practice that comprises virtue approaches, broadly conceived.

CONCLUSION

As Babbitt's analysis implies, questions about the politics of knowledge – about intellectual virtue and the risks of doing epistemic injustice to people, places and practices – cannot adequately be addressed through a formal, abstract, impersonal rubric: they require a rich yet careful phenomenological engagement with the particularities of people, places and experiences, seasoned with a just estimation of the scope and limits of "our" understanding, and an openness to encountering the unfamiliar and the strange while resisting temptations to fit it into pre-set taxonomies and frames of reference. Such are the requirements of virtuous knowing. People as putative knowers cannot be presumed before the fact to be situated alike, or even comparably, in the social-political-geographical places where knowledge is made and circulated, and where its effects are unevenly distributed in and for human lives. Emulating the humility Carson practises, Haraway's "modest witness" would likely take cognizance of such considerations and justly gain a reputation for the wisdom integral to epistemic responsibility, in so doing.

NOTES

1. I allude to the title, if not the substance, of Gibbard (1990).
2. Citing Baier, I elaborate this idea in *What Can She Know? Feminist Theory and the Construction of Knowledge* (Code 1991: ch. 3). (Curiously, Stephen Darwall [2006], in an exhaustive list of citations in *The Second-Person Standpoint*, makes no reference to Baier's or my part in introducing and developing this innovative idea.)

3. To support an analogous claim, in *Epistemic Responsibility*, I cite Peter Winch: “The notion of a society in which there is a language but in which truth-telling is not regarded as the norm is a self-contradictory one” (1972: 61).
4. For Babbitt, Philosophy (capital “P”) refers to philosophy as it is taught in English-speaking universities in the USA, Canada and the UK (2010: 190 n. 1). Babbitt does not rest her case on just one reading, but even so a single telling exception undermines the pretensions to universality implicit in hegemonic Western conceptions of reason and wisdom.
5. Babbitt draws extensively on Nzegwu (2006) for her discussion of Igbo culture.
6. I owe the concept of a social imaginary to Cornelius Castoriadis. He writes: “the socialization of individuals – itself an instituted process, and in each case a different one – opens up these individuals, giving them access to a *world* of social imaginary significations whose instauration as well as incredible *coherence* goes unimaginably beyond everything that ‘one or many individuals’ could ever produce. These significations owe their actual (social-historical) existence to the fact that they are *instituted*.” See Castoriadis (1991: 62; 1994).
7. Uriah Heap is a memorable character in Dickens’s novel *David Copperfield*.