

## Title “Virtue epistemology, self-cultivation and its underlying concept of self”

### Abstract

My paper will address the problem of how we should consider our environmental influences on our virtue cultivation in relation to the concept of self. In recent years, the view that virtues are traits cultivated merely by one's control has been criticized, but rather, more theorists are inclined to hold that being in a well-designed environment would be necessary for obtaining virtues. In her latest paper, Heather Battaly goes further, arguing such a friendly environment is not only necessary but sufficient for virtue cultivation. I will argue that such a view comes at a very high price, and contradicts with the important concept of self, embedded in the virtue epistemology. I believe a concept of self, now known as *narrative self*, would help us understand the proper relation between our virtues and environment.

Many responsibilist virtue epistemologists have a common thought that epistemic virtues are excellent epistemic character traits, such as open-mindedness, and intellectual courage; and that those traits show our values, purposes, and motivations, as Linda Zagzebski famously put: virtues are “deep and enduring acquired excellence that require dispositions of motivation and dispositions of internal and external success (1996, p.137)”. In other words, virtues were understood as self-cultivating traits, in contrast to traits obtained by other means.

In the face of the recent findings on human cognitive shortcomings, such as cognitive biases, and constraints, and the large number of social psychological data implying that our epistemic behaviors are heavily influenced by epistemically irrelevant trivial factors (Alfano 2013), virtue epistemologists are now fully aware of the importance of tailoring friendly environments in virtue cultivation. They concede now that without any help from our environment, it is unrealistic and elitist to pursue virtues. Thus, manipulations of our environment are understood as keys in this field, and, moreover, theorists believe them necessary. One way of doing this is

appealing to cognitive extensions (Pritchard 2013). A similar idea comes from a different angle: cognitive enhancement (Fröding 2011; 2013). Battaly, in her latest paper, adds to this view, claiming self-cultivation is not a necessary component of virtue acquisition; when agents are placed in a well-designed environment, it is sufficient for obtaining virtues (Battaly 2016).

Whilst acknowledging the importance of the role our environment plays in our virtue acquisition, I believe, contrary to Battaly's recent suggestion, that self-cultivation is a necessary component of virtue acquisition for the following reasons.

First, Battaly considers a case of vicious agents such as terrorists, and killers. She points out that we rightly blame their traits (e.g. cruelty) as vice while their traits in question might have been developed in such a way by their environment. She infers from such cases, and concludes that the same judgment applies to virtues. While here the structural parallelism between virtue and vice are presupposed, it is not as clear as theorists have imagined. For instance, there is a well known phenomena that our practice of praise and blame are not on par (Knobe 2003). Moreover, for rehabilitating vice, Battaly suggests transforming vicious people via emotional contagion, however, what we could infer from this at most is that we might be able to start cultivating virtue via similar resources. By noting that virtue comes in degrees, it is not clear if a friendly environment is sufficient for the full-blown virtues.

Second, by reconstructing Zagzebski's arguments on self-cultivation, Battaly identifies "self-cultivation" with control condition over the possession of traits. Having denied the requirement of control, she jumps into her conclusion that a friendly-environment is sufficient for virtue cultivation. I think there is a huge gap here. In her interpretation, provenance of our traits refers to control condition, however, it could mean something else more important. For example, if the traits are appropriated or reflecting on one's value have been also huge concerns among theorists (e.g. Baehr 2013). Related to this point, my biggest worry comes from the fact that one of the important underlying concepts of virtue framework, "self" is underdeveloped

among virtue epistemologists. Virtue is often described as a concept of praising and blaming person qua person (Baehr 2011), and in such a framework people are understood as not mere natural organisms, but as beings with certain values, abilities, and motivations. It is surprising that little attention has been paid to the concept of self in virtue epistemology. But what is self consisting of?

In the past few decades, a particular view of our self comes to the fore, now known as *narrative approach to self*. According to narrative self theorists, lives of our selves are inherently narrative, story-like. Schechtman, for instance, maintains that we constitute ourselves as selves by understanding our lives as narrative in form and living accordingly. Our lives are experienced as a part of an ongoing story rather than isolated moments (Schechtman 2011). Individual differences aside, narrative theorists have common assumptions that our action can only be intelligible when put into our own narrative, reflecting our values, and choices from the past and for the future. Two important points to note: Narratives are diachronic in nature. And second, among the constraints on what counts as self-constituting narratives, there is an “articulation constraint”, which indicates “the narrator should be able to explain why he does what he does, believes what he believes, and feels what he feels” (Schechtman 1996:114).

If the nature of our self is as such, it makes a big difference for agent if an action can fit into her narrative or not. Battaly seems to imply that, in principle, nothing prevents us from being virtuous by the Nozick’s transformation machine. However, based on the narrative self, self is inherently diachronic, depending on our past and the future. In such a framework, if virtues are obtained so cheaply, they will not take the same role in our narrative, thus holding a different meaning and significance in understanding our action. Such traits may not reflect our values, purposes and motivations in the same way as the virtue cultivated in a traditional way. They don’t seem to make our action intelligible because those traits are not incorporated into our narrative properly.

My aim is thus to show that, seen from the perspective of narrative self, something important is missing in the notion of virtue without

self-cultivation.