The Virtues of the Intellectually Dependable Person

T. Ryan Byerly

Dependence, including dependence on other people, is a pervasive feature of the life of inquiry. When we are trying to find something out or improve our understanding or hone our investigative techniques, we are frequently at the mercy of a variety of factors not under our direct control, including the cooperation of our fellow human beings. In light of this pervasive dependence on others, it is of paramount importance for the life of inquiry that there are intellectually dependable people—roughly, people on whom others can depend in their inquiries. Without such people, the quality of our inquiries would often be put in jeopardy. It is this ideal of the intellectually dependable person that is the subject of this paper. The paper's point of departure is the question: What does it take to be an intellectually dependable person?

I begin in Section One by developing an account of the intellectually dependable person. This is a person on whom others can depend as a fellow member of the community of inquiry. They are the sort of person on whom others can depend in those myriad ways in which we distinctively depend upon fellow inquirers when conducting our inquiries. In Section Two, I contrast this ideal with the related but different ideal of the expert, and argue that unlike the ideal of the expert this ideal is centrally constituted by the possession of intellectual virtues. I contend, moreover, that there is a subset of distinctively other-regarding intellectual virtues that I call the "virtues of intellectual dependability" which contribute uniquely toward the achievement of this ideal. In Section Three, I identify four of reasons for thinking that educating for these virtues of intellectual dependability is justified within formal education systems of the sort common in today's democracies.

1. The Intellectually Dependable Person

As a first pass, the intellectually dependable person is the sort of person on whom others can depend in their inquiries. More specifically, they can be depended upon by others to aid them in achieving their *aims* in inquiry.

Inquiry is typically conceived by philosophers as activity aimed at achieving epistemic goods. Most paradigmatically, perhaps, it is concerned with "finding something out" or with answering a question (Hookway 2003: 194). The inquirer engages in activity oriented toward determining whether something is the case. So understood, their aim is naturally understood as the aim of attaining true belief.

Yet, additional aims of inquiry can also be recognized. Inquirers may aim at avoiding false beliefs (Riggs 2003), obtaining justified attitudes (Kvanvig 2014), acquiring understanding (Grimm 2012), conducting inquiries in accordance with responsibilist intellectual virtues (Baehr 2011), and obtaining epistemic achievements (Sosa 2007), for instance. Even if these aims may

not all be appropriate as non-instrumental aims of inquiry, they are at least appropriate instrumental aims. The intellectually dependable person, then, is the sort of person on whom others can depend for aid in their pursuit of fulfilling these varied aims of inquiry.

More specifically still, the intellectually dependable person can be depended upon by fellow inquirers to fulfill a range of specific functions that aid them in achieving these aims in inquiry. The functions are all functions that we distinctively depend upon our fellow inquirers to fulfill. Perhaps the paradigmatic function, and certainly the one which has received the most attention from social epistemologists, is the function of supplying testimony to target propositions of others' inquiries (Goldman and Blanchard 2015, Sect. 3). In this case, the one depended upon asserts that p, and the dependent inquirer comes to believe p on this basis. Yet there are many other functions we depend upon our fellow inquirers to fulfill that contribute toward our pursuit of fulfilling our aims of inquiry. We depend on them also to "cover" propositions, so that we can infer from their lack of testifying against these that the propositions are likely true (Goldberg 2010). We depend on them, more broadly, to represent their epistemic state regarding a proposition to us even without explicitly testifying to it or against it—sharing their perspective with us. We depend on them to examine and critique our arguments and our investigative methods. We depend on them to point us toward relevant evidence. We depend on them to help us gain new skills and abilities for inquiry. We depend on them to support our educations. We depend on them to model excellent inquiry for us. Etc. The intellectually dependable person is the sort of person who can be depended upon to discharge these varied functions with excellence.

Depending in our inquiries on intellectually dependable people is good for us—better than depending on people who aren't intellectually dependable. It tends to be that our inquiries are better off if we depend in these inquiries on intellectually dependable people than on otherwise similar but not-intellectually dependable people.

2. The Virtues of Intellectual Dependability

A natural next question is: what does it take to tend to fulfill the relevant functions well? If we could answer this question, we would understand better what it takes to be intellectually dependable. By contrasting the ideal of the intellectually dependable person with the ideal of the expert as understood in accordance with a common approach to expertise, I will argue that being intellectually dependable centrally involves possessing the responsibilist intellectual virtues, and a unique subset of these virtues that I call the "virtues of intellectual dependability".

According to a leading conception of expertise with which I will operate, being an expert is about individual epistemic achievements within the domain of expertise. It's about knowing a lot in a domain and having the domain-relevant skills and abilities to further knowledge within it (cf. Goldman 2018).

Being an expert so understood can enhance one's intellectual dependability within the domain of one's expertise. A person with expertise regarding p is better positioned to provide accurate testimony regarding p, for example. And, a person with the skills and abilities to enhance their

own epistemic position within a domain is a person from whom an aspiring contributor to that domain may gain valuable know-how about learning in the domain.

Yet, such expertise only gets us so far toward intellectual dependability—even within the domain of expertise. For, being knowledgeable and skilled within a domain does not by itself make an expert disposed to communicate the propositional or procedural knowledge one possesses in that domain to others who depend on them. Nor does such knowledge by itself dispose one to communicate this knowledge in a way that is accessible to others and susceptible to their forming beliefs on its basis. As Goldman notes, "expertise alone does not guarantee the ability to teach others. The latter is, arguably, a separate skill" (2018: 4, fn.1).

Even more obviously, expertise is not relevant to a person's intellectual dependability outside of the domain of their expertise. It is not relevant, for example, for the extent to which one can be depended upon as a source of testimony for topics outside of one's area of expertise. Nor is it relevant for the extent to which one can be depended upon to faithfully and accurately share one's perspective, to identify relevant arguments and evidence, and to guide others' inquiries in domains outside the domain of expertise.

On the other hand, intellectual virtues are highly relevant for intellectual dependability whether or not one is an expert. In order for dependent learners to gain epistemic goods from experts, these experts need to be disposed to communicate what they know, and to do so in ways that are clear and sensitive to their audiences. These same dispositions of intellectual character are relevant for one's intellectual dependability in domains in which one is not an expert. The person who is disposed to faithfully share their perspective with us in a way that is clear and sensitive to our intellectual concerns, aims, and abilities is precisely the sort of non-expert we want to depend on.

The foregoing observations about the ways in which expertise and intellectual virtue can each contribute to a person's intellectual dependability reveal a sense in which the intellectual virtues are more fundamental to this ideal than is expertise. The intellectual virtues, and not expertise, can contribute all by themselves to the extent to which a person is intellectually dependable. On the other hand, while expertise does have a contribution to make toward the ideal of intellectual dependability, it is a contribution that must be unlocked by the intellectual virtues.

While all intellectual virtues can enhance a person's intellectual dependability, and while the intellectual virtues on a whole are more central to the ideal of intellectual dependability than is expertise, there is a particular subset of intellectual virtues that is of special relevance to the ideal of intellectual dependability. This subset of intellectual virtues I call "the virtues of intellectual dependability."

The virtues of intellectual dependability include the dispositions of intellectual character obliquely referenced in the preceding discussion. For example, *intellectual benevolence* is a refined motivation to promote others' epistemic goods for its own sake. The intellectually benevolent person cares about others' intellectual well-being and wants to help them achieve the aims of inquiry. They distinguish between more and less valuable intellectual goods, and have a comparatively stronger motivation to help others achieve the more valuable intellectual goods.

Intellectual transparency is a tendency to share one's perspective on topics of others' inquiries out of a motivation to promote others' epistemic goods. The intellectually transparent person is good at representing their own perspective and at helping others enter into it in order to be more fully informed. *Communicative clarity* is a tendency to resolve ambiguities in one's communications to others out of a motivation to promote their epistemic goods. The clear communicator tries to ensure that others do not misunderstand them, by doing such things as defining their key terms, organizing their communications in a way that is easy for their recipients to follow, and distinguishing their views from other views with which they might be conflated. *Audience sensitivity* is a tendency to regulate one's communications with sensitivity to the distinctive features of one's audience out of a motivation promote their epistemic goods. The person who is sensitive to their audience is concerned to know about the intellectual interests, needs, abilities, perspectives, and dispositions of their audience, and alters their communications to this audience so as to best advance the audience's epistemic goods in light of these features. *Epistemic guidance* is a tendency to help others manage epistemic risks so as to promote their epistemic goods. The epistemic guide helps others to distinguish between good and bad processes of inquiry, good and bad traits of inquirers, and vulnerabilities and strengths of views or arguments they are considering.

Notably, these intellectual virtues have received virtually no attention from virtue epistemologists. While there has been tremendous growth in scholarship on individual intellectual virtues and vices, this scholarship has largely overlooked good candidates for virtues of intellectual dependability such as these (cf. Kawall 2002).

I propose that what unites these intellectual virtues as a group is that they must be possessed out of the motivation to promote others' epistemic goods. This is not a requirement for possessing intellectual virtues that are not virtues of intellectual dependability. For example, one can possess the virtue of intellectual thoroughness or intellectual humility or open-mindedness out of the motivation to attain epistemic goods for oneself alone. It may be that all intellectual virtues can only be possessed *in their fullness* only if they are possessed in part out of a motivation to promote others' epistemic goods (cf. Baehr 2011). But the virtues of intellectual dependability remain distinct. Possessing them *simpliciter* requires possessing them out of this motivation.

If the virtues of intellectual dependability are uniquely other-regarding in this way, then this accounts for their special relevance to the ideal of intellectual dependability. For, that with which they are distinctively concerned—promoting others' epistemic goods—is also that with which this ideal is distinctively concerned.

3. Educating for the Virtues of Intellectual Dependability

My final task is to argue that educating for these virtues of intellectual dependability is justified within formal education systems of the kind we find in today's democracies. The structure of my

argument will be to identify four aims that are commonly adopted with reason within these educational systems, and to argue that educating for intellectual dependability is conducive toward securing these aims, without being in some other way objectionable.

The first three aims we might call "epistemic" aims of education. First, and most obviously, some have contended that intellectual virtue is itself a justified aim of education (e.g., Baehr 2019). If intellectual virtuousness is a justified aim of education, then this would provide support for thinking that educating for the virtues of intellectual dependability is justified, since educating for these is clearly conducive toward educating for intellectual virtuousness.

Second, perhaps the most widely endorsed aim of education is critical thinking (e.g., Siegel 2017). But I propose that educating students for the virtues of intellectual dependability is conducive toward educating them toward critical thinking. The basic idea here is one I borrow from Deweyan and feminist epistemologists (e.g., Westlund 2012). Roughly, we best learn how to think well for ourselves by learning to think well with others. If we wish to aid learners to become critical thinkers, it will be conducive toward this purpose if we populate their learning environments with interlocutors who are intellectually dependable. Students will learn better how to represent for themselves diverse perspectives on topics of importance if they experience those who hold such diverse perspectives representing their perspectives well, aiming to promote the epistemic goods of their hearers, sharing their perspectives transparently, communicating their ideas clearly and with sensitivity to their audiences, and so on. It is these intellectual behaviors exhibited in the thought that is done together that they will learn to repeat in their thought that occurs in isolation.

Third, it is widely recognized that there are justified apprenticeship aims of education (Robertson 2009: 12). It is appropriate to aim for learners to become sufficiently competent in their subjects that they may contribute well to teaching those subjects and furthering research in them. Yet, here again, educating for intellectual dependability is conducive toward these ends. With respect to teaching, it seems clear enough that the virtues of intellectual dependability might be thought of as "character traits of the good teacher" in much the same way that the intellectual virtues that have received the lion's share of attention from virtue epistemologists have been described as "character traits of the good thinker or learner" (Baehr 2016: 117). We expect teachers to be concerned to promote the intellectual well-being of students; to discriminate between the value of students coming to hold true beliefs on a subject of instruction and their coming to hold true and justified beliefs on that subject, preferring the latter (Roberts 2009: 18); to have a sensitive understanding of students' abilities and interests, modifying their teaching in order to accommodate these features of learners (Noddings 2007: 50-51); and to guide students in the ways of inquiry (Curren 2017: 21). In all these respects, educating them to be intellectually dependable will aid in achieving the teaching-oriented apprenticeship aims of education.

Similarly, educating students to be intellectually dependable will enable them to make the kinds of contributions to research that we want them to make, and that they are accountable to the research community to make. Elgin has recently stressed this kind of accountability in the domain of the sciences. She writes, "In publishing her research, a scientist issues an open invitation to the scientific community to accept her results. She gives its members her assurance

that they can count on her; anyone is welcome to depend on her findings and, she intimates, can do so with confidence" (2011: 253). Because of this, "learning to do scientific research" she says, must be "learning to do honest, truthful, careful research" (259). Similarly, learning to further research in any academic area well must be learning to do this research in such a way that one exhibits intellectual dependability toward one's fellow academics and toward the human community of inquiry more generally.

The final aim of education I will discuss is a civic aim: preparing students for competent participation in democratic processes (Gutmann 1987). Democratic processes, as collective processes, are susceptible to process losses and process gains. Roughly, process losses are deficiencies in performance due to a task being completed by a group working together rather than by its members working individually, whereas process gains are improvements in performance due to a task being completed by a group working together rather than by its members working individually. There is a powerful conceptual argument that populating a democracy with intellectually dependable people will increase process gains and mitigate process losses in many democratic tasks. For, many of these tasks require deliberating, forming judgments, and making decisions on the basis of these judgments. But the whole idea of the intellectually dependable person is the idea of a person who tends to help others perform better in the intellectual aspects of such tasks. The intellectually dependable person, in other words, should be expected to improve the epistemic quality of the collective democratic deliberative processes in which they participate—making them better than they would be if a not-intellectually dependable person were participating instead.

4. Conclusion

The intellectually dependable person is the sort of person on whom others can depend to fulfill the functions that we distinctively depend upon fellow inquirers to fulfill in aiding us to achieve the aims of inquiry. Being intellectually dependable so understood is centrally constituted by possessing the responsibilist intellectual virtues and a unique suite of them I've called the virtues of intellectual dependability. Educating for these virtues is justified by its conduciveness toward securing epistemic and civic aims of education.

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