Introduction: Why Only Agents Are Knowers

I.1 Aims and Motivations

The aim of this inquiry is to defend a theory of epistemic agency specifically suited for a virtue reliabilist theory of knowledge, but many of our conclusions will be significant for other areas of epistemic psychology. The fundamental motivations and commitments of this inquiry are presented below, putting our cards on the table at the outset. These will cluster around two main principles: the attentional turn and the continuity of agency. We will defend an epistemic psychology that takes attentional states and processes, rather than propositional attitudes, as the fundamental unit of analysis in epistemology. We thus call for an attentional turn in epistemology, particularly in accounts of the psychology of the subjects evaluated by epistemic norms. We also see epistemic agency as continuous with fundamental forms of cognitive (but not necessarily epistemic) agency. We examine many implications of both commitments throughout this work, but our primary dialectical aims can be stated clearly here. The broadest aim of this inquiry is to understand the phenomenon of epistemic agency in terms of selective attention and to identify current debates in epistemology that can be informed by an epistemic psychology grounded in attention from the outset.

A more specific and perhaps "chancy" claim we defend is that knowledge requires agency. Once we take the attentional turn, we see that cognitive agency is actually non-mysterious and rampant in our intellectual lives, suggesting that the main issue epistemologists should debate is "*which* form of epistemic agency is necessary for knowledge?" rather than "is *any* form of epistemic agency necessary for knowledge?" We affirm a continuity between the forms of cognitive agency that manifest in attention and the forms of agency that are under discussion in current debates in epistemology. In conjunction with the attentional turn, the continuity of agency thesis should provide an understanding of epistemic agency that is non-mysterious and particularly useful for virtue reliabilist theories of knowledge. Each chapter to follow will examine specific points of contact between the psychology of attention (and related issues in psychology) and a number of specific debates in epistemology impacted by an attentional turn.

The theory of epistemic agency defended here is intended equally for psychologists as for epistemologists and is inevitably a hybrid product. The primary subject of analysis in epistemology (processes of forming and revising belief) is a psychological phenomenon, so it is well understood that epistemologists have something to gain by consulting the best relevant theories in psychology. We continue this familiar tradition, but here with a clear and restricted focus on the psychology of attention. Psychologists also have an interest in developing more "theorized" accounts of the concepts and theories at work in fundamental research in their field, and philosophers are often very useful companions here. We aim to speak to the interests of theoretically minded psychologists as well as epistemologists working on the Gettier problem, lotteries, and fake barns in the theory defended here.

The resulting hybrid theory is presented as a form of naturalized virtue epistemology. Because we give a voice to psychology from the very start in the attentional turn, less time and interest will be given to famous thought experiments in epistemology and we will not aim to defend necessary and sufficient conditions for knowledge at any length. Instead, we extend work in the psychology of attention selectively to issues in analytic epistemology that are most usefully informed or impacted by this work.

The current work is fundamentally an endeavor in epistemic psychology. It's older and perhaps wiser cousin, moral psychology has long been recognized as an important area of philosophical inquiry (Anscombe, 1958; Flanagan, 1991; Sinnott-Armstrong, 2007). Moral psychology seeks to explain the underlying psychology of the subjects to which we apply norms of moral praise and blame in ways that facilitate improvements in these very norms. Likewise, epistemic psychology seeks to understand the underlying psychology of the subjects of *epistemic* praise and blame in ways that facilitate improvements in these very norms. This will be useful in part because any epistemic theory with a plausible and theoretically productive psychology will, *ceteris paribus*, have greater explanatory power than any equivalent theory lacking an adequate epistemic psychology. In virtue epistemology, epistemic psychology will often provide *constitutive* elements for theorizing about knowledge, justification, understanding, wisdom, and other epistemic achievements. At a minimum, we want *epistemic oughts to be constrained by psychological cans*,[1] and for this we need an epistemic psychology to determine whether any proposed theory of epistemic oughts can be psychologically realizable by realistic epistemic cans.

The principles of epistemic psychology defended throughout will often do more than constrain normative theory construction; they will provide constitutive

[1] For a very interesting discussion of epistemic oughts and epistemic cans, see Neta (2014). Neta argues that certain (functional and essential) epistemic cans actually entail certain epistemic oughts.

elements of epistemic normativity within the virtue theoretic model adopted here. Virtue theory, whether in ethics or epistemology, has a unique way of integrating descriptive psychology and normativity because the dispositions of an agent that constitute a virtue are, by that very fact, normatively significant; otherwise, these dispositions could not constitute a virtue properly speaking. Virtues are always good in some relevant sense, but they should also be psychologically real dispositions in actual human beings.

The specific feature of epistemic psychology of central interest throughout the current inquiry is *agency*. This is the most important, and perhaps most poorly understood, area of epistemic psychology. The perspective in current epistemology with perhaps most to gain from an adequate psychology of epistemic agency is perhaps reliabilist virtue epistemology. We argue that virtue reliabilism will prosper by incorporating the account of epistemic agency defended here. We will show how sufficient agent-level credit is due to an agent for manifesting a reliable *cognitive constitution*, and this in turn is understood as an integrated set of attentional (and thus agential) cognitive dispositions. Importantly, we argue that, with an attentional turn, even basic epistemic achievements like reliable perception or the deliverances of a capacious memory will be agential, and will thus underwrite the distinctive value virtue epistemologists associate with achievements that manifest agency. Returning to the older cousin of epistemic psychology, one important project in moral psychology is to determine which psychological models are presupposed by various ethical theories, and whether these models are empirically or explanatorily adequate. This will be a general aim of epistemic psychology as well, and we take on empirical adequacy directly in Section 1.3. Virtue epistemology (explained further below) has a special, constitutive role for psychological properties of agents, so the contribution psychology makes to epistemology is substantive here. Specifically, the cluster of dispositions that constitute an epistemic virtue in the agent are *sources of epistemic value* in virtue epistemology. We explain this cluster of dispositions in terms of attention, so it will be various forms of attention that function as sources of epistemic value on our account. Below, we introduce fundamental principles of virtue epistemology and begin constructing the epistemic psychology defended throughout.

Virtue epistemology has two distinct (and perhaps rival) forms: virtue reliabilism and virtue responsibilism. Responsibilist virtue epistemology focuses on traits like open-mindedness, conscientiousness, intellectual humility, and the like, and there is little doubt that virtues of this kind require appropriate motivational states of their possessors. Virtue reliabilism emphasizes the truth conduciveness of cognitive capacities and abilities such as vision, memory, basic communication, and basic forms of inductive and deductive reasoning ("hunchy" but reliably reasoning). While responsibilists have clear accounts of the necessary motivational states required to manifest

virtue, the demand for motivation appears too strong to capture basic epistemic achievements, precisely those of interest to virtue reliabilists. Virtue reliabilists have a harder time than responsibilists in pinning down just what a relevant motivational state will be, or if any is required for knowledge at all. Accurate vision, a capacious memory, and competence in basic forms of inductive and deductive reasoning are often successful with little or no conscious reflection or deliberate intent, so it is not surprising that properly locating the epistemic role of motivations poses a greater challenge to virtue reliabilism than it does in virtue responsibilism. Motivations of some sort are built into the very concept of any positive character trait in a way not required for the manifestation of our more basic and reliable psychological capacities and abilities. The most sustained account of epistemic agency for virtue reliabilism is Ernest Sosa's recent *Judgment & Agency* (2015). While there are many points of symmetry, we argue that our account of epistemic agency is more empirically plausible and better serves the normative needs of a psychologically informed virtue reliabilism than Sosa's account. This will be the focus of Chapter 4. While Sosa focuses on reflection and "second-order alethic affirmation," we explain person-level epistemic agency in terms of the *integration* of psychological processes rather than reflection upon them. Whether or not second-order affirmations are necessary for fully praiseworthy knowledge in Sosa's sense has important implications for the explanatory burden carried by any adequate epistemic psychology. We argue that agency (in the sense we defend here) is necessary for knowledge, but that agency can be shown through actions that involve little or no internal reflection at the time because attention is typically world directed. World-directed forms of attention will be essential to our argument against requiring that epistemic motivations be full-blown epistemic intentions. Both empirical and folk ways of understanding attention will agree that we typically attend to what lies outside the self, although there are times when human life affords or demands time for deliberate reflection of course.

In the chapters to follow, we introduce a number of new figures into current debates in virtue epistemology. These will include Frank Ramsey, Iris Murdoch, Philippa Foot, Christine Korsgaard, and Imogen Dickie, as well as philosophers working on the nature of attention including Wayne Wu, Chris Mole, and Declan Smithies. In different ways, each philosopher has useful contributions to offer to epistemic psychology. Injecting these new voices into virtue epistemology should be good for the field as a whole, even for a virtue epistemologist who does not ultimately accept the theory of epistemic agency defended here. Virtue epistemology has faced recent empirical challenges from "epistemic situationism" (Alfano, 2013; Olin and Doris, 2014; Fairweather and Alfano, 2017). Epistemic situationism is the view that research in social psychology calls into question the very existence, reliability, or praiseworthiness of any cognitive traits constitutive of any cognitive character we might be

said to possess. We examine this challenge directly in Chapter 1.3, where we will argue that our proposed epistemic psychology can clearly stand up to the challenge from epistemic situationism. In the process, we also introduce a number of relevant empirical sources regarding animal and human communication. Robust epistemic abilities can be found here. We utilize models of assertion and communication in Chapters 2, 3, and 5 to define fundamental forms of epistemic motivation and epistemic achievement. The resulting account is supported not only by philosophical work on assertion but also by important findings in psychology showing that attention is paradigmatically modulated for speech, communication, and action. These are the processes and systems that we are primed and disposed to manifest whenever we think about our environment, which is where we spend most of our waking time. The success of most of our actual cognition depends essentially on doing this well, and thus on being disposed to do it well. A proper psychology of assertion, communication, and attention will provide useful resources for epistemologists interested in theorizing about epistemic agency and the value of knowledge in terms of the kind of credit generated by success due to agential cognitive integration.

I.2 Dexterity, Attention, and Integration

In this section, we will briefly explain how our understanding of attention and intellectual ability constitutes a kind of dexterity, and how this, in turn, constitutes an epistemically important form of cognitive integration. We argue that epistemic agency is a matter of proper integration rather than conscious reflection and endorsement, as many perspectives from Descartes to Sosa would have it (see Chapter 4 in particular). This large shift implicated in the attentional turn might appear burdensome to epistemology rather than instructive. Fortunately, there is a considerable amount of research on attention in psychology that presents different forms of integration to work with. Psychologists working in the tradition of "activity theory" have always understood successful cognition as involving a dexterity of the mind that is analogous to the bodily dexterity necessary for successful action. This mental dexterity is also seen in contemporary research models on attention in psychology. Complex actions involve action-guiding attentional processes that must be fast, well integrated with motivational states, and sensitive to the immediate external environment. This is an essential form of integrated attention in human cognition. The Russian "activity theorists" (e.g., Dobrynin, 1966; Leontiev, 1978) developed a lineage of psychological research on forms of attention that involve coordinating complex skills whose operation does not require any exhausting voluntary demands or any form of reflectively endorsement. This ease is especially characteristic of skillful expertise.

Attention theorists call this highly skilled attention "*postvoluntary attention*," a notion based on the work of Bernstein (see Dormashev, 2010). *Dexterity and Its Development*, by Nicholai A. Bernstein (1950), presents a framework for the motor skills required for reliably satisfying needs, and finding complex and layered solutions to well-defined problems. For instance, riding a bike at a high speed or juggling several balls requires well-integrated adroitness, slight and very precise movements. Skillfully engaging in an activity that requires dexterity requires integrating and being efficiently directed by an ongoing understanding of the changing motion, speed, color, and shape of things in the environment.

Motor skills fundamentally require epistemic and attentional abilities in order to reliably keep track of and integrate relevant facts and *only* the relevant facts. This is the ability to successfully ignore irrelevant information. A moment's distraction by what is irrelevant to a given task may mean failure in some cases. More importantly, ignoring the right information prevents cognitive overload. Capacities that enable us to avoid cognitive overload have considerable epistemic value. Agency accomplishes this because the needs, interests, and motives that explain and rationalize an action will entail that vast amount of information an agent might otherwise consider is irrelevant, given the interests of the action now being taken. Many of the epistemic skills required for motor control, communication, and assertion are processed unconsciously or without explicit judgment, and this might appear to undermine any claim that knowledge requires epistemic agency. However, as we will show, the fact that many parts of these activities are unconsciously or automatically processed does not preclude their being agential, and in many cases *the automaticity of a process in an agent is actually an indication of success and creditworthiness*. Professional sports, instrument playing, rock climbing, among many other activities require a dexterity that happens automatically, and the experience reported by subjects when they perform these activities is one of selfless and effortless participation in the performance, not conscious reflection on rules, norms, or reasons.

In order to understand how epistemic agency actually works in the majority of regular life activities, it is essential to understand these kinds of goal-directed yet significantly automatic cognitive skills. Dexterity requires the coordination of different types of abilities: process-based abilities (modular), assessment-based abilities (reflective, inquisitive, speech-act like), and integration-based abilities (agential). We will argue that epistemic agency is constituted by the forms of goal-directed cognitive integration (and thus cognitive dexterity) required for reliably normative assertion. The forms of attention necessary for reliable assertion hold an important place in human psychology. This is quite different from emphasizing the kind of cognitive dexterity or skill required for reflective justification, which is an important form of cognitive dexterity as well.

The ability to integrate processes emphasized by the activity theorists does not require conscious, reflective introspection. In many cases, introspection actually reduces the success of an action, and the same is likely true for successful cognition. Even when the operation of a skill or capacity is sub-personal, sub-personal processes are typically caused by (and rationalized by) some conscious state (e.g., an occurrent or easily accessible belief about the point of one's current behavior). These sub-personal processes are parts of integrated larger processes that are both person level and largely automatic. One thing we aim to do with considerable care is to explain how this is the case and how this principle from epistemic psychology informs normative theorizing in epistemology. We examine the relation between automatic and non-automatic elements of person-level agential processes in detail in Chapter 4, challenging Sosa's account of epistemic agency in the process.

I.3 A Brief Summary of Chapters

We briefly explain each of the chapters in the current work below. The remainder of this introduction will go on to explain the distinction between responsibilist and reliabilist forms of virtue epistemology, present the "direction of analysis" thesis characteristic of virtue theories in general, and defend the necessity of an *agency-based* reading of this thesis. Now we offer a concise summary of each chapter before returning to these issues.

In Chapter 1, we defend a fundamental turn to attention in epistemic psychology, examining recent work in the philosophy and psychology of attention, and then respond to empirical and normative challenges to the attentional turn. Relevant work by Wayne Wu, Imogen Dickie, Mark Alfano, and Selim Berker is discussed. We present an initial account of the attention-based epistemic psychology to be defended and refined throughout this work, and we defend our account of cognitive constitutions that manifest cognitive agency against both empirical and normative challenges.

Giving a bit more detail, we will argue that the properties of agents that constitute sources of epistemic value in virtue epistemology must be seen as agential properties, the properties in virtue of which some process constitutes an exercise of agency. This argument is based on the current way attention is generally understood in psychology, in particular selective attention (where we actively attend to something for a reason or purpose). Selective attention is partly if not wholly constitutive of many important forms of epistemic agency and is one of the cornerstones of reliable human cognition. Attending to one object over time, tracking different objects at the same time, and tracking different objects at different times are all forms of active and integrated attentional achievements. We will call this *the argument from attention*. We then examine a number of issues in disposition theory, defending novel

accounts of "virtuous and vicious masking," and beginning to develop an account of an "agential cognitive constitution" (ACC) in terms of dispositions and their proper manifestations. In the last two sections, we examine the empirical challenge to virtue reliabilism from epistemic situationism, and the axiological challenge to consequentialist epistemic norms, respectively. Since we defend a form of virtue reliabilism, it will be important to show that neither of these challenges goes through. In both cases, the role we give to agency in attention enables an adequate defense.

In Chapter 2, we examine the nature and role of epistemic motivation, including both the affective and intentional content of such states, "self-directed" and "other directed" forms of normative attention, internal normative force in epistemology, and assertion as the prime epistemic aim. Relevant work by Iris Murdoch, Philippa Foot, and Christine Korsgaard is discussed. We argue that epistemic motivations aiming at normative assertion provide a psychologically plausible basis for internal epistemic normativity within a virtue reliabilist framework, and that epistemic motivations have additional epistemic value in the forms of ignorance and inattention they sustain.

Giving a bit more detail, we turn to meta-epistemic issues regarding the interpretation of motivational states in epistemology and connected issues regarding internal normativity and the ground of normative force for epistemic evaluations. In different contexts, Imogen Dickie and Iris Murdoch develop accounts of world-directed motivational states that do not involve introspective, conscious representation and are much closer to needs and desires than to intentions to act. We apply this thinner and world-directed account of normative attention to epistemic motivation, and this marks a fundamental difference in the way we understand epistemic motivation than Ernest Sosa does, although the most direct examination of this awaits until Chapter 4. We go on to show that many of the theoretical resources brought by accounts of internal reasons in ethics can be captured in epistemology by non-reflective motives of the sort favored by Dickie and Murdoch. We include discussions of Philippa Foot and Christine Korsgaard in an examination of the way epistemic norms get a normative grip or purchase on agents due to their interests in ways that interest-independent epistemic norms cannot account for.

Chapter 3 examines difficulties in explaining the "because of" relation that properly connects an agent to their achievements such that the achievement is due to the abilities of the agent and is thus a success credited to the agent. Relevant work by John Greco is the primary focus, but we introduce work from F. P. Ramsey and C. S. Peirce pointing in a different direction for understanding etiological requirements for knowledge. We argue against Greco's contextualist analysis of the "because of" relation and motivate a redirection of analysis toward F. P. Ramsey and C. S. Peirce, developed more completely in Chapter 4.

Giving a bit more detail, we examine the vexing "because of" relation throughout the chapter. This is the relation that connects an agent to their successes in a way that makes the success both sufficiently non-lucky and sufficiently creditable to them as an agent. In a tradition going back to Aristotle, an act of virtue (the act that the virtuous person would perform) which manifests the settled virtue in the agent is better than an act of virtue alone, without a source in the good character of the agent. In the former case, the success is due to or because of certain excellences in the agent and is thus creditable to them in a way that the external success alone is not. This etiology for success is also emphasized by most virtue epistemologists, but with complex issues in mental causation and action in play, it has proven difficult to say just what is required here. We critically examine John Greco's contextualist account and argue that it faces serious difficulties. In its place, we defend a modified version of Ramsey's "success semantics." Roughly, this tells us that a belief has positive epistemic standing if acting on it in conjunction with some desire would result in the satisfaction of that desire. There are many epistemically significant points brought together in our concept of an "epistemic Ramsey success," but one important aspect is that the relevant success (satisfaction of the desire) is due to *integrated* and world-involving abilities of the agent. This normative structure, the epistemic Ramsey success, is compatible with, and unifies, earlier points about attention, dispositions, world-directed motivation, and internal reasons.

Chapter 4 examines fundamental tensions between agency, credit, and automaticity, with specific emphasis on Sosa's recent *Judgment & Agency* (2015). Relevant work from Ernest Sosa, Imogen Dickie, and Wayne Wu is discussed. We argue that the attentional model of epistemic agency defended in Chapters 1–3 adequately resolves the tension above through forms of integration rather than second-order affirmation as in Sosa's account.

Giving a bit more detail, until recently, there has been no fully developed account of epistemic agency in contemporary virtue epistemology, but Ernest Sosa's *Judgment & Agency* (2015) certainly provides this. While there is far more common ground than disagreement with Sosa's account of judgment, we argue against the essential role played by "second-order alethic affirmations" on his account. Sosa's emphasis on "alethic affirmation" has much in common with our emphasis on assertion, so we are largely party to a common cause, but we are able to clearly capture the nature and value of epistemic agency by appeal to the forms of integration accomplished by attentional agency without appeal to second-order alethic affirmations. In order to defend our account against Sosa's, we rely on helpful points from G. E. M Anscombe who explains how practical knowledge does not require consciously reflective attention and we apply some of these helpful points to our disagreement with Sosa.

In Chapter 5 we argue that the epistemic capacities for opening and closing inquiry characteristic of attentional routines are also fundamental in linguistic communication, particularly with respect to the speech acts of assertion and retraction. Relevant work by Kent Bach & Robert Harnish, Sanford Goldberg, John MacFarlane, Friederike Moltmann, John Turri, Robert Stalnaker, and Seth Yalcin is discussed. An important goal of this chapter is to highlight the similar cognitive structure, based on the agent's cognitive constitution, between perceptual and communicative epistemic successes and to identify specific epistemic achievements involved in successful communication.

Giving a bit more detail, this chapter is devoted entirely to assertion and expands on our characterization of an epistemic Ramsey success. We focus on the effective motivations and recognitional capacities of speakers involved in conversation as a way of articulating some detailed functioning of the form of epistemic agency defended in Chapter 4. We emphasize the reliability and pervasiveness of communication skills, which are a paradigmatic example of epistemic capacities. The basic abilities and shared assumptions of speakers that make linguistic communication possible are world involving, predictive, and inferential. We use the account of basic motivations defended in Chapters 3 and 4 to explain communication as an epistemic achievement, one which integrates a number of cognitive skills in response to subtle cues in the environment. We then focus on the assertion and retraction of claims to illustrate detailed ways in which epistemic agency creates epistemically reliable forms of attention, as well as "virtuous insensitivity" to irrelevant information.

Chapter 6 is devoted to curiosity, an obviously important topic in epistemology, but one which has received surprisingly sparse treatment in mainstream academic literature. We present a theory of epistemic achievements based on the reliable and responsible satisfaction of curiosity. The process of virtuously sating a curiosity underwrites a unique and important epistemic standing that is important to account for in virtue epistemology. The work of Ilhan Inan is prominently discussed. Assertable contents are used to specify the normative epistemic thresholds for satisfying curiosity.

Giving a bit more detail, curiosity is a fundamental motivation in our intellectual life and is thus easily relevant to a proper understanding of epistemic agency. We develop an account of "virtuously satisfying a curiosity" and focus on three important abilities we call "reliable halting," "responsible halting," and "virtuous insensitivity." We typically think of curiosity as "spotlighting" some item of interest, and indeed it manages to do that, but largely by making us insensitive to a vast amount of information which, were we to be sensitive to it, would render us incapable of succeeding in the focused inquiries necessary to answer the questions we are most interested in. This is a vital psychological function of curiosity, and fulfilling this function involves a unique and important set of epistemic virtues.