

The Epistemic Virtue of Deference

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1. Introduction

The majority of virtue theorists have taken their cue from Aristotle. By contrast, I will be working with a *consequentialist* virtue theory, which defines virtues exclusively in terms of dispositions producing beneficial consequences. While consequentialist virtue theories are not altogether without proponents, they're also not the norm, which is why I will be outlining the relevant type of consequentialism, starting, in Section 2, with David Hume's virtue theory. I start with Hume, not because he is right about the relationship between virtue and consequences, but because the manner in which he is wrong points us towards a more plausible theory.

I'll argue that we find a more plausible theory in John Stuart Mill and Julia Driver's work—a theory I'll use, in Section 3, to outline a consequentialist account of *epistemic* virtue. That account will then be put to use in defining the virtue that will be our main object of study: the epistemic virtue of *deference*. We manifest an epistemic virtue of deference to the extent that we are disposed to defer to, and only to, people who speak the truth. In Section 4, I'll then look at what informed sources can do to bring about deference, and thereby *instill* virtues of deference, in light of social psychological evidence on deference and compliance. As it turns out, one way of doing this is by way of what I, in Section 5, will refer to as a complementary *epistemic virtue of lending an ear*, that in turn will be related to philosophical work on open-

mindedness. Finally, Section 6 will respond to two concerns about the present account to the effect that it sanctions gullibility and is manipulative.

2. Virtue and Consequence: Hume, Mill, and Driver

Hume (1975/1751: 270) defined virtue as “a quality of the mind agreeable or approved of by every one who considers or contemplates it” (261, fn. 1). There’s something quite attractive about this characterization. Most of us *want* to be virtuous, and Hume can account for this fact easily. Indeed, he *defines* virtue as a quality of mind we find agreeable. What we find agreeable about these qualities is, Hume proposes, often a matter of the *utility* that arises from their exercise. For example, in the case of *justice*, “reflections on the beneficial consequences of this virtue are the *sole* foundation of its merit” (183). In the case of *benevolence*, “a *part*, at least, of its merit arises from its tendency to promote the interests of our species, and bestow happiness on human society” (181).

Why take some virtues to only *partly* be a function of utility? Hume holds this position because he thinks we can exhibit virtues in *excess*, as in the case where someone “carries his attention for others beyond the proper bounds” and we “cannot forbear applying the epithet of blame, when we discover a sentiment, which rises to a degree, that is hurtful” (258). At the same time, the character’s “noble elevation” (258) will prevent us from withdrawing our approval altogether, with the result that it doesn’t cease to be a virtue, despite not being useful. So, in the final analysis, what matters for whether something qualifies as a virtue is whether we approve of the underlying mental dispositions. In the case of some virtues, such as justice, beneficial consequences are the only relevant factor to our patterns of approval; in other case, they’re not. And in all cases, virtue is to Hume a matter of what qualities of the mind we, as a matter of *psychological* fact, approve of (partly or wholly) on account of whether they take them to be useful, not what qualities *actually* are useful.

In fact, only if we read Hume in this manner are we able to make sense of how he thinks we come to *know* what the virtues are. He claims the philosopher “needs only enter into his own breast for a moment, and consider whether or not he should desire to have this or that quality ascribed to him, and whether such or such an imputation would proceed a friend or an enemy” (Hume 1975/1751: 174). Taking a method of looking *inwards* to be a reliable method of identifying the virtues only makes sense if virtue is to be defined psychologically, as opposed to with reference to external facts about what’s conducive to what. It’s all the more puzzling, then, that Hume also seems to believe that our judgments about virtue or vice can change in light of what we learn through experience about actual consequences:

[...] wherever disputes arise [...] concerning the bounds of duty, the question cannot, by any means, be decided with greater certainty, than by ascertaining, on any side, the true interests of mankind. If any false opinion, embraced from appearances, has been found to prevail; as soon as farther experience and sounder reasoning have given us juster notions of human affairs, we retract our first sentiment, and adjust anew the boundaries of good and evil (Hume 1975/1751: 180).

The only way to square this passage with Hume’s psychological account of virtue, is by reading the final part of it literally, as involving an actual adjustment of the boundaries of good and evil. That is, when our sentiments change, so do the boundaries between virtue and vice. But that seems implausible. When we through “farther experience or sounder reasoning” realize that some disposition is not useful, contrary to what we thought before, what we’re dealing with is not a situation where the boundary between virtue and vice actually shifts as a result, but one on which it has turned out that we were *mistaken* about where that boundary lies in the first place. But if we go that route, then we’re in effect rejecting Hume’s account of virtue, in

favor of one that takes virtue to be a matter, not of what we may or may not approve of as a matter of psychological fact, but what's *worthy* of approval—or what, as Hume puts it, is “*entitled* to the affection and regard of everyone” (169-170; emphasis added)—on account of being useful.

Along that route is, moreover, where we find consequentialists about virtue like John Stuart Mill and Julia Driver. Driver (2001) defines a virtue as “a character trait that systematically produces a preponderance of good” (*xvii*). Mill (2001/1861) suggests that “actions and dispositions are only virtuous because they promote another end than virtue” (36). For Mill, a hedonist, the end in question is happiness. Unlike in the case of Hume's theory, consequentialist virtue theory is clearly compatible with people being mistaken about virtue in a variety of ways without that changing the boundary between virtue and vice. For example, Mill notes that many people value virtues for their own sake, independently of their consequences. But, he maintains, utilitarians can account for that because they “not only place virtue at the very head of the things which are good as means to the ultimate end, but [...] also recognize as a *psychological* fact the possibility of its being, to the individual, a good in itself, without looking to any end beyond it” (36; emphasis added). As such, Mill makes a distinction between *valuing* something for its own sake, and something being *valuable* for its own sake—and, on Mill's utilitarianism, only happiness is valuable for its own sake.

Two more things should be noted about consequentialist virtue theory, as it compares to Aristotelian theories, and to virtue ethical theories more generally. As for the latter, in order to qualify as a virtue ethicist, one typically has to define what makes an action right in terms of virtue. For example, a virtue ethicist might hold that I should refrain from lying simply because lying is *dishonest* (see, e.g., Crisp and Slote 1997), or because refraining from lying is what the virtuous person would do or recommend (e.g., Hursthouse 1999; see Johnson 2003 for a criticism). By contrast, in operating on the consequentialist model of the good being prior to the

right, Mill reverses the order of definition, and defines virtue, and right action, in terms of good consequences. So, on Mill's view, it's right to refrain from lying if doing so has (maximally) good consequences, and honesty is a virtue to the extent that it has (maximally) good consequences—and similarly for other virtues.

Furthermore, unlike Aristotelians, a consequentialist about moral virtue sees no necessary connection between virtue and motivation. For Aristotle, virtue requires doing the virtuous thing for the sake of the noble. More generally, Aristotelians would require that the virtuous thing be done as a result of motivations that are somehow commendable. So, to borrow an example from Heather Battaly (2015), a venture capitalist donating large sums of money to charitable causes, and bringing a lot of good into the world as a result, wouldn't be virtuous on an Aristotelian conception if the only reason she did it was that she likes getting her name put on buildings. By contrast, a consequentialist about virtue doesn't care about motivations as such. Of course, she does not need to deny that virtues are often accompanied by certain motivations. What she denies is simply that such motivations are *necessary* for possessing virtue. As Driver (2001) puts the point, "good intentions, good inclinations, and so on are conducive to good action. [...] So, in looking at specific disposition clusters that make up a virtue, being disposed to have 'good' states of mind is helpful. It's just not necessary" (61).

3. Consequentialist Epistemic Virtue and Deference

In what follows, I will be working with an epistemological analogue of the type of consequentialist virtue theory we find in Mill and Driver, by taking it that *epistemic virtues* are belief-forming dispositions conducive to the formation of true belief. This account of epistemic virtue, while not without defenders (e.g., Greco 2010; Sosa 2007, 2009, 2011), is controversial. For one thing, it's controversial that true belief is the sole, fundamental epistemic goal, although I

have defended that view in Ahlstrom-Vij (2013). It's also controversial that truth-conduciveness is both necessary and sufficient for epistemic virtue, but see Ahlstrom-Vij (*forthcoming*) for a defense. While I won't be adding anything substantial to these defenses in the present chapter, a brief word on the arguments involved might be helpful, particularly as it relates to virtue and truth-conduciveness.

The first thing to note here is that the received view in debates over the nature of epistemic virtue is that there is *a* type of virtue for which truth-conduciveness is necessary and sufficient—it's just not the *only* type of virtue there is (e.g., Battaly 2012; Baehr 2011; Greco and Turri 2011). However, available attempts to describe the nature of some *other* type of virtue, for which truth-conduciveness is either unnecessary or insufficient, runs into what I've termed a *problem of compensation* (Ahlstrom-Vij *forthcoming*), on account of postulating some fundamental value in addition to true belief, and thereby having the counterintuitive implication that this value can compensate for any failure to attain true belief. For example, if a person's being motivated to attain truth is of such value (Zagzebski 2003, 1996), someone could reasonably suggest that their motivation to attain true belief makes up for any lack of success in actually attaining true belief, including in cases where their lack of success can be traced back to their motivation.¹ But such a suggestion would make little sense—and the same goes for other candidates for additional values, and counts against postulating any virtue in addition to the one offered by the consequentialist.

Now, as already noted, I won't be adding anything substantial to this line of argument in what follows. Instead, I'll be focusing on what a consequentialist account of epistemic virtue can do if put to work. For that purpose, I will consider a particular epistemic virtue, spelled out in aforementioned, consequentialist terms: *the epistemic virtue of deference*. To *defer* to someone is to listen to them and believe what they're saying because they're saying it. We manifest an epistemic *virtue* of deference to the extent that we are disposed to defer to, and only to,

people who speak the truth (Ahlstrom-Vij 2014). By way of example, consider Nancy and Burt. Nancy forms all of her beliefs about current events by reading the *New York Times*. Burt, by contrast, gets his news exclusively from *Breitbart*. As such, Nancy is a far better candidate for manifesting the virtue of deference than is Burt. And it's important to note that this may be so more or less exclusively on account of the reliability of the relevant news outlets, as manifesting such virtue doesn't require any *voluntary action* on the virtuous person's part. For example, Nancy manifesting a virtue of deference in no way requires that her particular news diet be a result of a conscious choice on her part. Perhaps her partner simply leaves a copy on the kitchen table every morning, and Nancy's efforts on the matter don't extend beyond flipping the pages and reading whatever catches her eye.

Along similar lines, and as in the case of Mill and Driver's virtue theories, the *motivations* underlying the relevant dispositions aren't directly relevant on a consequentialist picture. In particular, it doesn't matter whether people defer on account of some inherent motivation—say, a strong desire to find out the truth about current events—or on account of being brought to defer by external factors. Again, the only reason Nancy has such a healthy news diet is that her partner leaves the paper out for her. And let's assume that the only reason she defers to the *New York Times*—that is, not only pays attention to the relevant messages, but also takes them on board—is that doing so is easy and doesn't require any effort on her part.

These points about choices and motivations also highlight the fact that consequentialism doesn't put any emphasis on *agency* in virtue. Moreover, it helps explain why some would follow Wayne Riggs (2010) in maintaining that, “if hard-core reliabilism [i.e., roughly the type of consequentialism at work here] is correct, then the individual virtues are not particularly interesting in their own right” (176). A less partisan way to put the same point is to say that, *on a consequentialist picture, individual virtues are only interesting objects of study in relation*

to the empirical factors that render the relevant dispositions truth-conducive. And on that picture, we don't prejudge the extent to which those factors will pertain to the virtuous person's own choices or motivations, or to contingent features of her surroundings. In that spirit, the following section will be concerned with what will turn out to be one important factor, pertaining to what informed sources can do to bring about deference, and thereby *instill* virtues of deference, in light of research in empirical psychology on compliance.

4. Deference and the Social Psychology of Compliance

Given the extent of our dependency on the word of others, we're going to want to know how we can go about deferring in virtuous ways. Since statements don't wear their truth value on their sleeves, any attempt on the part of an individual hearer to decide to whom to defer will require reliance on *heuristics*, or rules of thumb. Such heuristics are good to the extent that they help us reliably identify those speaking the truth. But even if we assume that there are such reliable heuristics—consider, for example, Alvin Goldman's (2001) suggestions for how to (reliably) identify experts—this doesn't entail that people will be *successful* in deferring in virtuous ways. The reason is that success requires actually *relying* on reliable heuristics—if not, what good will it do to merely have reliable heuristics available? Unfortunately, there's ample psychological evidence to the effect that we tend *not* to rely on reliable heuristics.

The bulk of the relevant evidence comes from studies on so-called *statistical prediction rules*, or simple algorithms for generating predictive output in a wide variety of domains on the basis of statistical data (see Bishop and Trout 2005 for a helpful overview). While the accuracy of such rules is well-established in a wide variety of contexts, so is the tendency on the part of people *not* to use them and, on that account, perform worse than they otherwise would have (Dawes *et al.* 2002). So why do people not use them? Because people are *overconfident* about their abilities to outperform the relevant rules (Sieck and Arkes 2005). The fact

that the failure to use the rules is the a result of such a *general* tendency as overconfidence—indeed, depressed people aside (Taylor and Brown 1988), we tend to rate ourselves as above average on desirable traits (e.g., Alicke 1985; Brown 1986), including in our evaluations of how objective we are (Armor 1999), and how susceptible we are to cognitive bias (Pronin *et al.* 2002; Pronin 2007)—is crucial here, as it suggests that it applies to reliance on heuristics *generally*, and not just to statistical prediction rules.

Hence, even if we assume that there are in fact reliable heuristics for identifying speakers telling us the truth, a significant challenge remains on account of how people can be expected not to rely on those heuristics. This, moreover, suggests that it's worthwhile to focus less on how individuals can go about identifying proper targets of deference, and more on what such targets can do for purposes of bringing about deference. So, consider what speakers attempting to bring about deference are doing, namely offering a *request* to be listened to, together with some *content* that they wish to communicate. When a person heeds that request, they can be said to be *complying*. But, of course, since listening doesn't imply believing, compliance doesn't entail deference. Still, it seems a reasonable empirical assumption that listening to someone, as opposed to not listening, increases the chances of the relevant content being taken on board. If not, it would be hard to make sense of the variety of practices geared towards convincing us of things on the basis of getting our attention. And if so, promoting compliance would be part of what it takes to promote deference. The other aspect of promoting deference, would be getting people to believe what the speaker is saying.

Moreover, if that's so, we can for present purposes re-describe part of the question of how to bring about deference as one about how to bring about compliance, specifically compliance with informed speakers' requests to be listened to. As it happens, available social psychological evidence provides some helpful insights. Most relevant here is evidence regarding

when people comply with the law. In a series of studies, Tom Tyler (2006a) found that, contrary to the traditional view on which compliance is brought about through fear of sanctions, the most effective way to increase compliance is for the law giver to be perceived as *fair*. At the heart of this notion is the idea that fairness involves a willingness to *listen*. As Tyler (2006a) notes, “[p]eople have a tremendous desire to present their side of the story and value the opportunity in and of itself” (147). More specifically, for someone to be considered fair in the relevant sense, that someone has to be perceived to be making an effort to provide an opportunity for input and consider that input in a manner sensitive only to the facts, not to prejudice or (irrelevant) personal preferences.

Tyler’s results generalize beyond the case of law-following, and apply to rule-following generally, including compliance with policies in corporate (Tyler 2011; Tyler and Blader 2005) and non-corporate settings (Tyler *et al.* 2007). Moreover, perceived fairness not only has implications for people’s tendency to comply, but also for *whether* to consult and with *whom* to consult (Tyler 2006b). For example, students report being more likely to seek advice from their professors on academic as well as on personal matters, when they take the professors to be such that they would treat them in a just manner. And, people report being more prone to consult professionals regarding retirement saving and investment strategies who they perceive to be just than professionals who they do not perceive to be just, even when aware that the cost of receiving a just treatment would be a decreased likelihood of financial gain.

This suggests that the relevant notion of fairness can be invoked to promote compliance generally, and not merely in legal contexts. That, moreover, is exactly what I’m proposing here (and in Ahlstrom-Vij 2014): one thing that informed sources can do for purposes of promoting deference is to communicate their content in a context where they are making clear that they are willing to listen in turn, and as such are likely to be perceived as fair.

5. The Epistemic Virtue of Lending an Ear

Let's take stock. I started by outlining a consequentialist notion of epistemic virtue, on which epistemic virtues are dispositions conducive to epistemic goods, and to true belief in particular, and then defined an epistemic virtue of deference possessed to the extent that one's disposed to listen to and believe those, and only those, speaking the truth. A challenge was identified for any attempt on the part of individuals to rely on heuristics for purposes of deciding to whom to defer. More specifically, it was suggested that, whether or not there are reliable heuristics to rely on, what we know about our tendencies to defect, even from reliable heuristics, suggests that a more promising strategy for the inculcation of virtue focus on what sources speaking the truth can do to help ensure that people will defer to them.

In the previous section, it was suggested that one thing that such sources can do is communicate their content in a manner that makes clear that they're willing to listen in turn, and as such are likely to be perceived as fair. If that's correct, we can moreover talk about two interlocking virtues. We've already characterized one of them: the epistemic virtue of deference. The second virtue applies, not to hearers, but to speakers who are disposed to listen in a way that promotes compliance and—under the empirical assumption that to promote compliance is to promote deference—thereby also deference. When they are not only so disposed, but also are speaking the truth, such speakers manifest *the virtue of lending an ear*, and in turn contribute to others manifesting the virtue of deference.²

This also makes for an interesting connection between the virtue of lending an ear and *open-mindedness*. In particular, consider Jason Baehr's (2011) suggestion that, "where open-mindedness involves assessing one or more competing views, it necessarily involves doing so with the aim of giving these views a 'serious' (i.e. fair, honest, objective) hearing or assessment" (151-2). To assess competing views in this manner, and to do so in a fair, honest, and objective manner, comes quite close to engaging in the type of listening outlined in the previous section.

As such, the relevant trait of open-mindedness can be expected to promote compliance and thereby also deference. When manifested by agents speaking the truth, we have an instance of the virtue of lending an ear.

In the above quote, Baehr is concerned with the *trait* of open-mindedness, not the *virtue* thereof. An important difference between Baehr's account of the virtue of open-mindedness, and my account of the virtue of lending an ear, is that Baehr, who embraces an Aristotelian account of virtue, takes it that a necessary condition on all virtues is a certain motivation on the part of the agent, and specifically "a compelling or overriding desire to get to the truth" (143). As noted earlier, there's no such condition on the present account of consequentialist virtue. What motivates the agent in question isn't directly relevant to virtue possession; the only thing that matters is whether the disposition manifested is truth-conducive. So, someone might qualify as manifesting a virtue of lending an ear on account of having the *trait* of open-mindedness, without manifesting a *virtue* of open-mindedness, as understood by Baehr.

Of course, we need to say something about that with respect to which the virtue of lending an ear is supposed to be truth-conducive. On a consequentialist account, epistemic virtues are dispositions conducive to true belief, but there's no need to restrict those beliefs to beliefs of the agent possessing the relevant virtue. After all, many non-epistemic virtues are virtues primarily, if not exclusively, on account of the good that they bring to others. Just think of generosity. Generosity arguably qualifies as virtue because it's beneficial to others, whether or not it's beneficial to the virtuous person herself. Unlike the virtue of deference—where the true beliefs involved are indeed held by the agent herself—the epistemic virtue of lending an ear would be more akin to the virtue generosity, where the bulk of the benefits resulting from the virtue's exercise typically are realized in others, as opposed to in the virtuous person.

This is, of course, not to suggest that manifesting a virtue of lending an ear cannot possibly be epistemically beneficial to the agent herself. We can see this point clearly by returning

to the connection between listening and open-mindedness. According to Baehr (2011), where open-mindedness “involves a rational assessment or evaluation, it also necessarily involves adjusting one’s beliefs or confidence levels according to the outcome of this assessment” (154). Why? Because we acknowledge that we might be wrong. As noted by Riggs (2010), being open-minded involves being “aware of one’s fallibility as a believer, and to be willing to acknowledge the possibility that anytime one believes something, *it is possible that one is wrong*” (180). Such an awareness might in many cases be epistemically beneficial, although on the present account only when one stands to gain epistemically from it.

That said, we shouldn’t read too much into any belief-revision requirement on open-mindedness. It’s helpful to consider an example here. When we teach introductory classes, we give students a serious hearing, by evaluating their questions and viewpoints in a fair and objective manner. And we do this because we want to understand where the students’ questions are coming from, for purposes of being able to respond in a manner that hopefully maximizes the chances that they’ll understand and incorporate the relevant material. In other words, we’re listening primarily to be listened to and, thereby, manifest the virtue of lending an ear, in so far as we’re disposed to do as much, and moreover speak the truth. Differently put, we listen in ways that will help students arrive at true beliefs. But are we thereby committed to adjusting our beliefs and confidence levels about the matters at hand as a result? To *some* degree, I take it, but not to any particularly *great* degree. And while Riggs (2010) is clearly right that “one can reject a challenge to one’s views *open-mindedly*” (186), the question is whether the degree involved is great enough to satisfy people like Baehr that we’re still manifesting a type of open-mindedness. If not, one can manifest a virtue of lending an ear without being open-minded, let alone manifesting a virtue of open-mindedness.

To recapitulate, we introduced the virtue of lending an ear, manifested to the extent that we’re disposed not only to speak the truth but also to listen in a way that promotes compliance

and thereby also deference. We also made a connection between that virtue and open-mindedness, although we noted that, (a) since no particular motivation needs to accompany virtues of lending an ear, the relevant disposition might fail to qualify as a *virtue* of open-mindedness on some accounts of the latter; and, (b) if the requirement that an open-minded person needs to be prepared to change their views in their interactions with others is sufficiently demanding, then someone manifesting a virtue of lending an ear need not necessarily even be *open-minded*. So, while interesting connections can be drawn between agents manifesting the virtue of lending an ear and agents being open-minded, they should be kept conceptually distinct.

6. On Blind Deference

Previous sections introduced the epistemic virtue of deference, and discussed how to inculcate that virtue through an accompanying virtue of lending an ear, in turn related to philosophical work on open-mindedness. However, what has been argued so far is likely to raise a number of worries. To see why, return to our characterization of deference above, in terms of believing what someone is saying because they're saying it. The relevant notion of 'because' is purely causal, and doesn't entail the presence of any *reasons* on the part of the hearer to take the speaker to be trustworthy. To start with, doesn't that sanction *gullibility*?

6.1. *Gullibility*

According to Elizabeth Fricker (1994), "the hearer should always engage in some assessment of the speaker for trustworthiness.³ To believe without doing so is to believe blindly, uncritically. This is gullibility" (145). When pressed, Fricker (2006a) clarifies matters further by saying that someone is gullible "if she has a disposition or policy for doxastic response to testimony which fails to screen out false testimony" (620), and that this moreover corresponds to an interpretation suggested by Goldberg and Henderson (2006) on which someone is gullible

if she, “in circumstances *C*, is disposed to acquire a good deal of unreliable (unsafe; insensitive; etc.) testimony-based belief” (602).

But if that’s so, then whether or not someone is gullible is only partly a function of whatever assessments the agent involved makes. Fundamentally, what matters is whether her belief-forming dispositions are unreliable (or unsafe or insensitive). Return to Nancy, our *New York Times* reader from earlier. She’s not engaging in any assessment of the reliability of the paper’s claims, but she’s no less reliable for failing to do so. In fact, it’s quite possible that performing such an assessment would make her *less* reliable, on account of having to make judgments on complex matters about which she—like most of us—might not know very much, and on that account mistaking informed sources for misinformed ones, and *vice versa*.

Of course, it might be objected that Nancy simply has gotten lucky. Imagine that she would have been equally likely to defer had her partner taken to leaving *Breitbart* print-outs on the kitchen table. Assuming that there’s a relatively close possible world in which her partner does so, this counts against, not the *reliability* of the beliefs she forms in the actual world (where she reads the *New York Times*), but their *safety*. In short, if relying on the same belief-forming processes in nearby worlds, the beliefs formed could easily have been false. There are (at least) two responses we can make here. One is to say that modalities aren’t relevant to the epistemic merits of virtues, only reliability in the actual world is. As it happens, I find this response quite plausible. The second response involves taking virtue to require *modally robust reliability*, which entails, not just reliability in the actual world, but in *nearby* possible worlds as well. Such a requirement would entail that Nancy is not epistemically virtuous after all. But note that this still isn’t so—or at least isn’t *necessarily* so—on account of some failure of Nancy. We might equally put the blame on an epistemic surrounding that lets her down, and in particular on a partner that would under circumstances only slightly different from those in the actual world contaminate her news diet with *Breitbart*.

Indeed, it's important to stress the underlying point here: if the name of the game is reliability—or perhaps modally robust reliability—then it doesn't matter how that reliability comes about. In particular, it doesn't matter if it comes about on account of some effort of the virtuous agent, or of those in her surroundings, or indeed as a result of the effort of none. Circumstances of context determine whether it's wiser to attempt to bring about reliability by focusing on individuals or on their surroundings. If we worry about people being deceived in testimonial interactions, we *could* encourage people to become better at detecting deception. But that might not be the wisest strategy. After all, as Timothy Levine and colleagues point out, “that deception detection accuracy rates are only slightly better than fifty-fifty is among the most well documented and commonly held conclusions in deception research” (1999, p. 126). In light of that, we could instead focus on people's epistemic environments, and attempt to ensure that they won't need to employ their less than impressive deception-detection skills. And this is, of course, something we often do. Consider education. Not only do we strive to ensure that teachers are competent and teaching material is accurate, but we also make sure that, were a teacher to get sick, the substitute teacher would be competent, too; and were the primary textbooks to go missing, the other books available in the school library would also be accurate and informative; and so forth. And when we do so, we are protecting the safety of the students' beliefs, by making sure that they would be reliably formed, not only in this world, but also in nearby possible worlds.

6.2. *Manipulation*

The idea of taking steps to improve people's epistemic environments, as opposed to boosting their individual epistemic capabilities, raises a separate worry from the one just considered. In particular, there might be taken to be something *manipulative* about so doing. What's the problem supposed to be? It can't be that the people involved are being made epistemically worse

off, in the specific sense of becoming less reliable (or safe). If they are, the problem isn't that they're being 'manipulated,' but that the relevant form of manipulation is badly executed and should be reconsidered on purely consequentialist grounds. So, that can't be it.

Perhaps the worry is that people being manipulated in the relevant ways will be prevented from becoming mature, epistemic subjects, by never learning on their own how to go about conducting successful inquiry. But if that's the worry, then there's not really an objection here—again, the context determines whether it's wiser to attempt to bring about reliability by focusing on individuals or on their surroundings. In some cases, it might very well be that, unless you let people make some mistakes now, they'll never become competent enough not to make mistakes later on. This is relevant in cases where the best strategy for epistemic improvement is one that focuses on the individual as opposed to her environment. But as noted earlier, there are going to be plenty of cases where letting people make mistakes now will simply lead to further mistakes later on as well, simply because the prospects for individuals attaining the relevant competencies are too dim.

But maybe the worry is that the relevant form of intervention infringes on people's *epistemic autonomy*. Fricker (2006b) suggests that an epistemically autonomous person "takes no one else's word for anything but accepts only what she has found out for herself, relying only on her own cognitive faculties and investigative inferential powers" (p. 225). Along similar lines, Linda Zagzebski (2007) proposes that an epistemically autonomous person that finds out that someone else believes p "will demand proof of p that she can determine by the use of her own faculties, given her own previous beliefs, but she will never believe anything on testimony" (p. 252). But as John Hardwig (1985) notes, "if I were to pursue epistemic autonomy across the board, I would succeed only in holding uninformed, unreliable, crude, untested, and therefore irrational beliefs" (p. 340). In light of that, it's not clear what's so bad about people being prevented from attempting to achieve epistemic autonomy.⁴

7. Conclusion

We depend to a substantial degree on the word of others, and manifest a virtue of deference to the extent that we are disposed to defer to those, and only those, speaking the truth. In the preceding sections, I started out by demarcating the broader category of consequentialist virtue, of which the virtue of deference is an instance, through the theories of Hume, Mill and Driver. I then turned to the question of what informed sources can do to promote deference, and thereby also instill virtues of deference, in light of social psychological research on compliance. What we found was that one way to promote deference was by having said sources manifest a virtue of their own: the virtue of lending an ear, which involves not only speaking the truth but also being disposed to offer the recipient a fair hearing in turn. Finally, I responded to two concerns about the present account to the effect that it sanctions gullibility and is manipulative.

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¹ This makes for an epistemic analogue of Sidgwick's (1981/1907) famous observation that happiness sometimes is more likely to be attained if not consciously pursued.

² Understood in this manner, a con-man could be disposed to listen in a way that brings about compliance and also deference, but could not possess the *virtue* of lending an ear.

³ The following is a condensed version of an argument spelled out in greater detail in Ahlstrom-Vij (2015).

⁴ For more on epistemic autonomy, see Ahlstrom-Vij (2016).