Robust Virtue Epistemology and Performance-Based Safety

Word Count: 2861 (excluding abstract, footnotes, and references)

Abstract: In this paper, I analyze John Greco’s new virtue reliabilist position (2012, 2016), and object the claim that his view surreptitiously incorporates a safety condition motivated not exclusively by the general normativity of performances. This is important since, if this objection holds, Greco’s position will not constitute an instance of the project of a robust virtue epistemology. In turn, it will not deliver the explanatory benefits associated with the account, regarding the nature and value of knowledge. The key to responding to such objection is to consider that some performances (not just knowledge-relevant ones) can be evaluated in terms of a degree of dependability associated with the fulfilment of practical tasks.

Introduction

In this paper, I analyze John Greco’s new virtue reliabilist position (2012, 2016), and object the claim that his view surreptitiously incorporates a safety condition motivated not exclusively by the general normativity of performances. This is important since, if this objection holds, Greco’s position will not constitute an instance of the project of a robust virtue epistemology. In turn, it will not deliver the explanatory benefits associated with the account, regarding the nature and value of knowledge. The key to responding to such objection is to consider that some performances (not just knowledge-relevant ones) can be evaluated in terms of a degree of dependability associated with the fulfilment of practical tasks.

This paper proceeds as follows. In section 1, I describe Greco’s view and explain the need to incorporate a safety condition in such account. In section 2, I present the grounds for thinking that such property is not entailed by the general normativity of performances. In section 3, I explain how the aforementioned objection can be successfully dismissed.
1 Greco's robust virtue epistemology and safety

John Greco’s virtue reliabilism is motivated by the idea that knowledge is a kind of success through ability, where abilities are understood in terms of reliable, truth-directed cognitive dispositions. Greco’s current view (2012, 2016) is a reformulation of his previous virtue-based account of knowledge (2007; 2010), and takes the following form:

_Knowledge as success from ability_ (KSA).

S knows that p if and only if:
1. S’s believing that p is produced by an intellectual ability of the relevant sort, i.e. of a sort defined by parameters that would serve relevant informational needs.
2. S is in conditions relevant for the exercise of that ability; and
3. S has a true belief _because_ S’s belief is produced by an ability of the relevant sort, while in relevant conditions.¹

There are two important features of this account that make it attractive as a general theory of knowledge. First, this theory offers a principled and elegant solution to the Gettier problem. Greco’s view allows for the following diagnosis of such problem: a true belief is formed, but such fact cannot be properly attributed to the exercise of the agent’s cognitive abilities. Second, and most importantly, Greco’s view provides a simple and strong account of the value of knowledge: since successes from ability (understood generally as performance achievements) can be deemed as intrinsically valuable, the value of knowledge is explained in terms of its being an instance of this familiar normative kind.² (2010, p. 99; 2012, pp. 2-3).

¹ Greco’s formulation of his account here is slightly different from the first exposition of his view, found in his (2012). In such work, he adds that the relevant needs for information can be both/either actual and/or typical for the task at hand. In addition, such needs have to be _regularly_ served by the relevant cognitive ability. See Greco, 2012, pp. 19-21.
² This is in line with what Fernández Vargas calls _performance-based epistemology_, which is defined as “the project of conceiving the normativity involved in epistemic evaluation as a special case of a pattern of evaluation that can be applied to any domain where there are agents that carry out performances with an aim” (2016, p. 1). Naturally, this approach is based on Ernest Sosa’s insights about the virtuous nature
To the extent that Greco’s KSA only appeals to virtue-theoretic conditions (i.e., conditions arising only from the general normativity of performances), his theory is a version of the view called robust virtue epistemology (henceforth RVE). The benefits mentioned above make Greco’s theory a good candidate for a correct specification of RVE. Naturally, RVE is contrasted with the project of a modest virtue epistemology, which acknowledges that virtue-theoretic conditions are necessary for knowledge, but not sufficient. In other words, additional, non-virtue-theoretic conditions should be included.

Among such modest virtue epistemologists is Duncan Pritchard (2012, 2016), who holds that, in addition to a virtue-theoretic condition, an additional anti-luck condition should be supplemented. Such condition is spelled out in terms of safe belief. More precisely, Pritchard’s proposal is the following:

**Anti-Luck Virtue Epistemology:**
S knows that p if and only if S’s safe true belief that p is the product of her relevant cognitive abilities (such that her safe cognitive success is to a significant degree creditable to her cognitive agency). (2012, p. 27)

**The Safety Principle:**
If S knows that p the S’s true belief that p could not have easily been false. (2012, p. 7)

There are several benefits of adding a safety condition on an account of knowledge. In particular, this condition successfully filters out Gettier cases, since in such cases, agents believe things that could easily have been false. In other words, Gettierized true beliefs are luckily true. As we saw above, this much is also achieved by Greco’s view. However, Pritchard also claims that this condition is necessary in addition to the virtue-theoretic insight. More precisely, virtue and
safety are two distinct knowledge-relevant conditions, in the sense that the satisfaction of one
does not guarantee the satisfaction of the other. Pritchard illustrate this fact with the now-
standard barn façade case,\(^4\) in which features of the agent’s environment preclude said agent
from forming true beliefs that constitute knowledge. Here is such case:

HENRY: Henry is driving in the countryside and sees a barn ahead in clear view. On
this basis he believes that the object ahead is a barn. Unknown to Henry, however, the
area is dotted with barn façades that are indistinguishable from real barns from the
road. However, Henry happens to be looking at the one real barn in the area (Greco,
2012; p. 22).

This type of case illustrates the fact that knowledge seems to be modally robust, in the sense
captured by the safety principle: if Henry believes that there is a barn in front of him, then his
belief should be true not just in the actual case, but also in typical instances similar to the actual.
Greco and Pritchard agree with this diagnosis. However, for Pritchard (2012), it is unclear
whether a virtue-theoretic condition would adequately capture this safety principle. After all,
Henry’s true belief is indeed attributable in a great extent to the exercise of his visual perception
of a genuine barn, so there seems to be no problem regarding Henry’s exercise of his cognitive
ability.

Crucially, this is Greco’s interpretation of why Henry does not obtain knowledge:

The following diagnosis is now available: Henry believes from a disposition that is
reliable relative to normal environments, but not relative to the environment he is in.
Accordingly, Henry does not know that the object he sees is a barn. (2012, p. 22)

Here Greco relies on the idea that cognitive, knowledge-relevant abilities should always be
thought as relativized to proper conditions and circumstances. Just as we cannot expect that a

\(^3\) This terminology is introduced by Jesper Kallestrup and Duncan Pritchard. See their (2012, 2016).
professional baseball batter would exhibit his ability in conditions of poor lightning, we cannot expect Henry to exercise the ability to perceive barns from barn façades in the environment he currently is in. In addition, since knowledge requires believing from abilities that regularly serve not only actual but also typical informational purposes, if Henry’s ability cannot adequately distinguish between barns from barn façades, we should not attribute knowledge to this exercise of ability.

If this explanation is in line with Greco’s own account, then it clearly entails a safety condition. Indeed, Greco (2016) holds that his view entails the following kind of safety:

A belief is \((\text{Ability} + \text{ProperConditions})\)-relative safe just in case: In close worlds where S believes \(p\) from ability A, and in conditions proper for the exercise of A, \(p\) is true. (2016, p. 54)

In other words, the right account of safety for Greco is restricted to counterfactual instances in which a true belief is produced by the relevant ability in appropriate circumstances. For Greco, such circumstances are specified by relevant practical tasks (and its informational needs) at issue in knowledge-ascriptions.

Up until this point, both Pritchard and Greco agree that at least some form of safety is required for knowledge. However, Greco’s position is more demanding, since, in order to be consistent with his commitment to RVE, he should also claim that the right kind of safety that knowledge requires is indeed motivated exclusively by virtue-theoretic considerations. In other words, if Greco’s view does not motivate his safety condition from the general normativity of performances, then his view would not count as a version of RVE.

---

4 This case was originally offered by Alvin Goldman (1976) who, in turn, attributes it to Carl Ginet.
5 This is Greco’s interpretation of the idea of service to relevant informational needs. See footnote n. 1 above.
2 Challenges to a performance-based safety

The idea that safety can be successfully motivated by the general normativity of performances is questioned by Pritchard (2012). His main claim is that Greco’s view entails a hardly desirable, revisionist understanding of the nature of abilities. This is supported by the fact that, ordinarily, we do not relativize abilities to environments in the way required by Greco’s view. He offers the following case to illustrate this problem.

MARÍA: María is playing piano in a situation in which, unbeknownst to her, she could so very easily be underwater right now (but is not). Indeed, she is in a room that is surrounded by water where the walls could completely give way and let the water in at any moment. (Slightly modified from Pritchard 2012, p. 22)

Pritchard contends that María’s case is analogous to Henry’s case, with respect to the environmental deficiency: just as Henry’s cognitive performance seems threatened by the presence of barn façades in the area, María’s performance seems threatened by water surrounding the concert venue. However, such environmental deficiency has nothing to do with Henry’s and María’s ability to exercise their corresponding abilities. Just as Maria can successfully perform the piano piece, Henry can successfully perceive a real barn.

This worry is also expressed by Ernest Sosa’s earlier work with respect to this issue (2010). Indeed, at least in some of his works, he seem to have adopted the view that Henry does acquire knowledge, since his performance is successful because of its adroitness. With respect to such case, Sosa claims:

Suppose we deny that [Henry] so much as aptly believes, alleging that he loses his full competence on entering fake barn county. (…) Note how awkward it would be to hold beliefs to that standard, however, without doing so for performances generally.

---

6 Most notably, this position is defended in Sosa’s volume 1 of A Virtue Epistemology (2007, chapter 5).
Yet we impose no such requirement on archers, pilot trainees, or athletes. A basketball player, for example, might be in an indoor venue where his shots are calmly apt, even though high winds would impair them in all nearby venues where he might easily have been shooting (Sosa, 2010, p. 469).

The basis for Sosa’s rejection is the fact that, generally, we do not think that agents lose their abilities by the closeness of unfavorable counterfactual scenarios. Indeed, it seems wrong to say that Henry loses his ability on entering fake barn county, and that he mysteriously recovers it when he leaves the area, and the basis for this result is the absence of a parallel case in the domain of general, non-knowledge-relevant performances.

Since Pritchard does not endorse RVE, he can successfully explain why environmental considerations are relevant for knowledge-ascriptions, without the need of motivating additional conditions on virtue-theoretic considerations. In particular, Pritchard claims that knowledge is incompatible with lucky successes, even when such successes arise from the exercise of cognitive abilities (2005, 2012). This insight, independent from any consideration regarding the relativity of abilities to environments, is what grounds the addition of the safety principle into his general account of knowledge.

The considerations provided above can be summarized in the following argument:

1. If KSA is a version of RVE, then it should incorporate a virtue-theoretic-motivated safety condition.

2. Safety is not a virtue-theoretic condition.

3. KSA is not a version of RVE.

If Greco’s view is a good candidate of a robust virtue epistemology, and if knowledge requires some kind of safety, then (1) should be the case. However, Sosa’s and Pritchard’s
considerations regarding the general nature of abilities provide support for the objection (2) above. It follows that KSA is not a proper account of the project of RVE. In other words, knowledge is not exclusively explained by the general normativity of performances. This is an unfortunate result for Greco, given the attractiveness promised by his view, especially concerning the nature and value of knowledge.

3 Safety as dependability of abilities

To object to the argument just outlined, Greco needs to show that safety is indeed a virtue-theoretic condition. I submit that this can be done in a principled, non-ad-hoc fashion. For this task, it will help to examine whether there are non-knowledge-relevant performances that require (for their proper assessment) success both in actual and typical circumstances. In other words, we need plausible cases in which a performance is not entirely appropriate, and this is due to a lack of modal robustness of the sort suggested by the safety principle. Following Greco’s formulation of the safety principle for knowledge, such cases will have to obey a general principle of safety, such as the following:

A performance $\phi$ is $(Ability + ProperConditions)$-relative safe just in case: In close worlds where S performs $\phi$ by exercising ability A, and in conditions proper for the exercise of A, $\phi$ is successful.

Consider Maria’s performance of playing the piano in a room surrounded by water. If we assume that María’s practical task is to masterfully interpret the piece she is playing, then the fact that the room is surrounded by water has nothing to do with such goal. Indeed, we have to agree that María’s performance is safe, relative to such circumstances, defined by said practical task.

Of course, this does not mean that any performance will be safe in the way envisaged. Consider the following case (modified from MARÍA):
José is playing the piano in an orchestra’s audition for admission. José knew that the judges typically ask pianists to perform one of 100 well-known piano pieces, and since he is a somewhat-mediocre pianist, he carefully prepared an interpretation of just one piece, which coincidentally, was, in fact, the one the judges asked him to perform. Of course, José performs it perfectly. After his performance, the judges were immensely moved by the quality of José’s interpretation, which resulted in José’s admittance to the orchestra.

I contend that, in this case, José’s performance is not entirely successful, even if he masterfully interpreted the piano piece requested by the judges. In this case, José’s practical task is different than María’s: his task is to perform a certain piano piece, and by performing it, to demonstrate his overall musical skills. In a sense, his performance is deceptive with respect to the objective of the orchestra audition and the practical task of the judges. Here we seem inclined to say that José’s performance is unsafe, relative to such circumstances, defined by said practical task.

Notice that José’s performance might still be successful even if unsafe in different conditions. This is because some practical tasks do not require safety in the way envisaged. Suppose that José wants to show off his piano skills to his friends. When walking down the street, they find a piano available for public use. Naturally, he proceeds to perform his most prepared piece. Even if in close possible words José and his friends do not encounter such piano, and José is unable to show off his piano skills, he can still be deemed successful in showing off his piano skills in the actual situation, since such practical task is not sensitive to counterfactual considerations.

---

7 This is an interesting case in which the practical tasks that matter for the purpose of attribution of successfulness do not necessarily match with the interest of performers. In this case, while José’s interest is to be admitted to the orchestra, the relevant task that determines the successfulness of his performance is of the judges, namely, to select the best candidate for the job. In the domain of knowledge-relevant performances, this flexibility will be captured by a attributor-contextualist view regarding the truth-
More generally, we can rightfully claim that at least for some performances, if they were to be considered successful, they would have to produce a similar result not only in the actual world, but also in typical circumstances. In other words, a certain class of performances (not just knowledge-relevant performances) require a sort of modal robustness of the kind that knowledge requires.

It’s natural to see that the kind of practical tasks that require this kind of modal robustness are the ones concerned with assessments of dependability regarding the fulfillment of relevant tasks. To entertain a musical audience one does not need to successfully perform in the actual and in close possible worlds; actual, successful performance is enough. But to be rightfully admitted to an orchestra one does need to successfully perform the piano in the actual and in close possible worlds; actual, successful performance is not enough. Similarly for knowledge, which, as barn-façade cases show, require that true beliefs are produced by abilities that serve informational needs in a dependable way. This parallel between knowledge and other types of performances suggest that the safety condition for knowledge is motivated by a need of modal robustness that arise in an important and non-trivial subset of successful performances. In other words, the safety principle entailed by Greco’s view is not motivated ad-hoc.

This also helps to explain away the strange consequence of relativizing abilities to environments, captured by the idea that an agent’s abilities are “lost” while entering said environments and suddenly “recovered” upon departure. Indeed, this phenomenon seem to occur when the successfullness of the ability in question is sensitive to considerations regarding dependability. Naturally, certain environments can make an otherwise appropriate ability unsuitable for dependency regarding the practical task at hand. While we can commonly depend conditions of knowledge attributions. However, Greco’s position is not committed in principle to such
on visual perception in order to acquire knowledge of our surroundings, if the environment is such that it can easily lead us astray, the ability in play is no longer a dependable one, for the purposes of getting an accurate acquaintance of our surroundings.  

In sum, a safety condition on knowledge can be naturally derived from the normativity of performances generally, since many performances are successful only if the abilities exerted are dependable for the fulfillment of certain practical tasks. Therefore, it is not the case that the safety condition of knowledge is not a virtue-theoretic condition, and Greco’s KSA 2012 can still be regarded as an attractive version of RVE.

References


position. See Greco (2012), especially pp. 19-20 and n. 28.  

8 With respect to the original barn façade case, Greco notices that the relevant practical task is left unspecified. Since, intuitively, we do arrive to the verdict that Henry does not know, we seem to implicitly assume a practical task, which presumably will demand an accurate identification of the kinds of buildings that Henry is encountering. See Greco, 2012, p. 23.


