

ARTICLE

# Education, A Thin Concept with A Thick Skin: What Do Supervillains and Antiheroes Teach Us About Virtuous Action-Guidedness?<sup>†</sup>

Shadi Heidarifar 

Roseman University of Health Sciences – Summerlin Campus, Las Vegas, USA  
Email: [Sheidarifar@roseman.edu](mailto:Sheidarifar@roseman.edu)

(Received 7 August 2024; revised 2 November 2024; accepted 31 December 2024)

## Abstract

Education as a thick epistemic concept (ETEC) is a thick epistemology project that highlights the role of education in both epistemic virtues acquisition and motivation. In this article, I argue that ETEC is not satisfactory because it relies on a version of virtue responsibilism (VR) that is also not plausible, in so far as it relies on the premise that both the motivation and the action-guidedness of epistemic and moral virtues are unified. By rejecting this unification premise, I show that an epistemically virtuous person is not necessarily a morally virtuous/caring person either. It might happen to be the case that an epistemically virtuous person is also a morally virtuous person. However, there is no necessary connection between the epistemic and moral virtues as VR and ETEC claim since there can be a sharp gap between their motivation and their action-guidedness. I also argue that there are bad forms of education that can further sharpen the gap between epistemic and moral virtues, further undermining ETEC. Thus, when it comes to education, a thick epistemology project should consider how different forms of education can sharpen the gap in the motivation and the action-guidedness of different types of virtues developed by learners.

**Keywords:** Epistemic virtues; moral virtues; thin concept; thick concept; thick epistemology; education

## 1. Introduction

Historically, analytic epistemology has focused on the nature of belief and evaluates the relationship between true beliefs and knowledge as epistemic states. In contrast with this belief-based approach, in virtue epistemology, the center of focus is on evaluating epistemic agents. As an agent-based approach, virtue epistemology is primarily concerned with how epistemic virtues can be acquired in order to be a good knower. Shifting the emphasis from how to know to how to be a good knower is a commonality between virtue epistemology and thick epistemology, a third approach that focuses on

<sup>†</sup>This article has been modified since original publication. A correction notice detailing the change has been published.

how to establish a justified way of distinguishing thin and thick epistemic concepts. The distinction between thick and thin originated in philosophical ethics and in a nutshell means we can distinguish concepts based on whether they encompass either world-guidedness or action-guidedness or both. Education as a thick epistemic concept (ETEC) is one of the projects in thick epistemology that provides an answer to the question of how to draw a distinction between thin and thick concepts based on a similar one in ethics. This view emphasizes the role of education in both epistemic virtue acquisition and motivation as it highlights the importance of the path toward being motivated by virtue and working toward acquiring it.

In this article, I argue that ETEC does not provide a satisfactory solution to the thickening project of epistemology. In particular, I argue that ETEC relies on a version of virtue responsibilism (VR) to explain the similarity of the distinctions between thin and thick concepts in ethics and epistemology. Based on VR, both the motivation and the action-guidedness of epistemic and moral virtues are unified. By rejecting this premise, I show that an epistemically virtuous person is not necessarily a morally virtuous/caring person. It might happen to be the case that an epistemically virtuous person is also a morally virtuous person. However, there is no necessary connection between the two since there can be a sharp gap between their motivation and their action-guidedness. I also argue that this gap can be further sharpened by bad forms of education to the extent of becoming epistemically virtuous at the cost of becoming morally vicious. Thus, despite ETEC's claim, when it comes to education, a thick epistemology project should consider how different forms of education can sharpen the gap in the motivation and the action-guidedness of different types of virtues developed by learners.

## 2. Thick epistemology

### 2.1. *Thin and thick concepts in ethics*

Is there a difference between articulating an action as good in comparison to articulating it as honest? If yes, how do we explain the difference between the two? According to the distinction between thin and thick concepts, they are irreducible to each other, different in kind, and come in a variety of degrees (Williams 2006: 129–30, 140, 143–5).<sup>1</sup> While a thin concept displays either world-guidedness or action-guidedness, a thick concept displays both (Williams 2006: 141, 150, 152). Here, world-guidedness encompasses applying a concept that is guided by the world. In other words, the application of the concept to describe a situation is not guided by any particular user's situatedness and perception of the state of affairs. Rather, it is controlled by the facts of the matter (Williams 2006: 141). It is also worth noting this definition does not imply that there cannot be a disagreement on how to apply a given concept in a given description. While

<sup>1</sup>Do not confuse Bernard Williams' view with Samuel Scheffler's or Timothy Chappell's. According to Scheffler's view, the difference between thin and thick concepts is merely a matter of degree within one unified continuum. Also, based on Chappell's view, there is no thin concept that is merely action-guided or world-guided and all concepts have a degree of both. For the purpose of simplicity, in this paper, I only use Williams' view on thick and thin concepts. Nonetheless, the main argument that I present here is applicable to both Scheffler's and Chappell's views, such as replacing 'a thin world-guided concept' with 'thin world-guided concept with a minimal level of action-guidedness.' Ultimately, the kind of view one holds on the sharpness or the continuation of the distinction between the thick and thin concepts does not make a difference in this paper because my argument can be reconstructed regardless the theoretical framework one chooses to make a distinction between thin and thick ethical concepts. See more in Scheffler S. (1987). 'Morality through Thick and Thin: A Critical Notice of Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy.' *Philosophical Review* 96, 411–34 and Chappell T. (2013). 'There Are No Thin Concepts.' In Simon Kirchin (ed), *Thick Concepts*. Oxford University Press.

there is room for an error of judgment, that does not imply the user-dependency of the concept. Action-guidedness also encompasses applying a concept that is guided by one's reason for an action. That is, the application of the concept is not solely about describing a situation based on the state of affairs. Rather, it is prescriptively tied to how a user reasons to take an action in a given scenario (Williams 2006: 140–1). This user-dependent type of concept then relies on the situatedness, perception, and context of a scenario, in which a user takes action.

For example, as a thin world-guided concept, when I am articulating that this strawberry on my table is red, I am only describing the strawberry being so, which does not contain any judgment about the color of the fruit. Similarly, as a thin action-guided concept, when I am articulating that telling the truth to a close friend is good, I am only evaluating the action of telling the truth as prescriptively so. In other words, in this scenario, I am evaluating this particular action in a certain way that prescribes taking the action of truth-telling. However, as a thick concept, when I am articulating that telling the truth to a close friend is honest, I am both describing the action in a certain way and prescribing it as well. That is, being honest is not merely a fact just as it is not merely an evaluation. Rather, it is both simultaneously. So, how do we explain the difference in articulating an action as good in comparison to articulating it as honest? Based on the distinction between thin and thick concepts in ethics, while goodness is a thin concept, honesty is a thick one. When I am articulating telling the truth to a close friend as good, I am only evaluating that action in a certain way. However, when I am articulating the same action as honest, I am not only evaluating it in a particular way but I am further describing the fact of the matter as well. Thus, the difference between the two cases is that thick ethical concepts, such as honesty, are related to both the way the world is, and if it applies to a situation in the world,<sup>2</sup> it further provides one with a reason to take action.

Historically speaking, thin ethical concepts, such as good, ought, right, and obligation, have been the focal point of the field of ethics. As Williams points out, ethics has been too preoccupied with thin ethical concepts. The problem with this approach is that these concepts are thin and merely action-guiding, which are not related to the way the world is (2006). If for a variety of good reasons, it is quite difficult to commit to the idea of a value-free world, then there should be a stronger tie between facts and broad human values, which calls for a shift from thin to thick concepts in ethics. Consequently, articulating the action of telling the truth to a close friend as honest rather than good not only provides a prescription, a reason to take such action but it is also connected to the world because it describes the world as being so as it expresses “a union of fact and value” (Williams 2006: 129). In fact, the shift from thin to thick concepts in ethics relies on a perspective change from highlighting an action's moral status rather than an agent's normative situatedness. Thus, the way thick ethical concepts, such as honesty, are applied is determined by both what the world is like and simultaneously, what the reasons to take such and such actions are within the agent's broader normative situatedness in the world.

## 2.2. *Thin and thick concepts in epistemology*

Now that the distinction between the thin and thick concepts in ethics is clear, can a similar distinction suggest itself in epistemology? According to the thick epistemology

<sup>2</sup>To take another example, generosity is a thick ethical concept. If sharing Oreo cookies with a friend is a generous act, then describing this act via generosity further provides one with a reason for sharing Oreo cookies with their friend.

camp, the answer to this question is yes (Kotzee and Wanderer 2008, Kotzee 2011, Axtell and Carter 2008, Battaly 2008, Elgin 2008, Siegel 2008, Väyrynen 2008). Regardless of how each vantage point in the camp makes sense of the distinction between thin and thick epistemic concepts, it is important to point out that they all have one crucial point in common: there should be a shift from thin concepts to thick ones in epistemology as well (Kotzee and Wanderer 2008, Kotzee 2011, Axtell and Carter 2008, Battaly 2008, Elgin 2008, Siegel 2008, Väyrynen 2008). In other words, the common thread of thick epistemology is “*veritism*” at its core, which implies that the focal point of the field of epistemology is the acquisition of true belief, which reduces one’s cognitive life to a mere matter of a “*true/false test*” (Kotzee and Wanderer 2008, Elgin 2008). Consequently, opening up a theoretical space for thick epistemology in the field also makes room for moving away from merely focusing on thin epistemic concepts, such as truth. Besides these thin epistemic concepts, it is then important to bring in thick epistemic concepts, such as truthfulness, which switches the focal point of the field from acquiring true belief to the ways an agent is epistemically situated in the world.

Now, how do we make sense of the distinction between thin and thick concepts in epistemology *similar* to the distinction between the two in ethics? According to one version of thick epistemology, historically considered important concepts in the field are predominantly thin world-guided concepts, such as justification, truth, belief, and warrant (Kotzee 2011). The problem with merely focusing on these thin world-guided concepts is that they are not related to broad human values. They are rather within the scope of what Williams, as mentioned above, calls a “*value-free*” world (2006: 129). However, if there are good reasons in ethics to suggest that it is difficult<sup>3</sup> to commit to the idea of a value-free world, then it can be the case in epistemology as well. Rather than limiting the field to value-free epistemic practices, by shifting the focus from thin to thick epistemic concepts, the field encompasses a broader understanding of how to make sense of agents’ epistemic situatedness. Going along with this line of reasoning, thick epistemic concepts, such as truthfulness, encompass a wider range of both world-guidedness and action-guidedness. In the example of telling the truth to a close friend, epistemically speaking, one might suggest what I told my friend is the truth about a given matter. This articulation is thus merely in the scope of describing one’s belief; if one suggests that my action to tell the truth to a close friend is truthful, then it both describes the world as being so and further provides a reason to take such action.

Consequently, based on this view, just as there is a distinction between good and honesty, there is a *similar* distinction between truth and truthfulness. As a thick epistemic concept, truthfulness goes beyond holding the truth. Truthfulness is not merely about telling the whole truth. It rather is about the ways one shares or withholds information with others, to what end, and how they achieve that goal, which encompasses both a description of the action as being so and further prescribing it in a given scenario. Based on this version of thick epistemology, truthfulness rather requires having a sense of responsibility toward others, including the process of sharing information with them when it is appropriate (Kotzee 2011: 554). Consider Leonard asking his friend Sheldon for his assessment of Leonard’s chances at an upcoming job interview in the field of applied physics. Sheldon believes, based on justified reasoning processes, that Leonard has a strong chance of success

<sup>3</sup>Note that here, being difficult does not mean to completely ruling out this option. However, since this alternative is out of the scope of Williams’ argument for the distinction between thin and thick concepts in ethics and so, as an extension of it, in epistemology, exploring the relationship between the two requires a careful analysis in a separate paper.

due to his competencies matching the job requirements. Although Sheldon cannot predict the outcome of the interview itself, he can be truthful to Leonard by providing supportive feedback that reflects his genuine belief in Leonard's capabilities without disclosing every detail of his reasoning. Here, Sheldon's selective sharing of information illustrates truthfulness; he communicates in a way that fosters Leonard's confidence while being mindful of how much information is necessary and helpful. In contrast, imagine a scenario where Sheldon thinks Leonard will succeed in the interview based solely on his enthusiasm for applied physics, which does not provide a justification for his belief. If Leonard asks Sheldon for his opinion, Sheldon might state that he believes anyone with Leonard's passion for the field will excel, presenting a truth that lacks depth. While his statement is factually correct, it is misleading because it omits the insufficient basis for his belief. Thus, even though Sheldon is technically telling the truth, his lack of transparency and contextual understanding renders his communication untruthful. This distinction emphasizes that truthfulness requires more than just stating true facts; it demands a conscientious approach to how we convey information to others.

### **2.3. Education as a thick epistemic concept**

This article is primarily concerned with one of the thick epistemology projects which holds ETEC as its focal point. According to ETEC, the shift from a belief-based epistemology to an agent-based field requires explaining how one can acquire epistemic virtues to be a good knower; however, without considering the crucial role of education in the process of acquisition of epistemic virtues, committing to the mentioned shift will be difficult because of the following reason. Based on a veritist or belief-based approach to epistemology, education might seem a helpful but ultimately inessential concept to explain the acquisition of justified true beliefs. Under that view, there is no problem with ignoring the essential role of education in the way one comes to believe that something is true because the focal point of the analysis is on the truth of the beliefs not necessarily the process one comes to have justification for them. In other words, although it is possible for a belief-based approach to include education in the acquisition of justified true beliefs, it does not make any substantial difference in explaining the provided justification itself for a true belief. In contrast with this picture, based on an agent-based approach to epistemology, neither truth nor justification is the mere focal point of the field; rather, epistemic virtues encompassing how one comes to believe that something is true implies that focusing on how to foster epistemic virtues become a crucial question to the field.

Now, I argue that the central role of education in ETEC is explainable by highlighting the responses this view could provide to the following questions: how does one acquire epistemic virtues? How does one become motivated to be epistemically virtuous? Lastly, how does a thick epistemology project justify grounding the distinction between thin and thick concepts in epistemology *similarly* to the one in ethics?<sup>4</sup> In response to the first question, how to acquire epistemic virtue, ETEC suggests that knowledge requires more than having a justified true belief, that something is true because knowledge is a thick epistemic concept. If we consider knowledge to be justified true belief and each of these composited concepts is indeed thin, then we have to accept that knowledge is also a thin concept (Kotzee 2011: 551) because neither of the concepts on their own encompasses a sense of action-guidedness, and so, together combined, there will not be anything

<sup>4</sup>If want wants to take a virtue approach to the nature of education, then the following questions matter.

that encompasses knowledge's action-orientedness. However, knowledge is not a thin epistemic concept because it encompasses both world-guidedness and action-guidedness. Let us recall the case of Leonard and Sheldon. Let us also assume that Sheldon derives the knowledge that Leonard gets the job from knowing that 1) Whoever is both competent and passionate in applied physics gets the job, 2) Leonard is both competent and passionate in applied physics, and 3) other candidates at their university are less competent and passionate in applied physics than Leonard. In this scenario, Sheldon's knowledge is not merely world-guided or descriptive. It is also action-guided or prescriptive because when Leonard asks for his help or support, it provides Sheldon with reasons to act based on what he knows and will help Leonard truthfully, which contributes to him being a better knower because he will be more accurately using the information at his disposal to reach his epistemic ends. In other words, what makes knowledge a thick epistemic concept is that it provides the agent with reasons to act based on it, which indicates it does not have to be used in a particular way, but if it is, then it is intertwined with taking an action as it provides one with reasons to do so. Thus, under ETEC, a normative analysis of knowledge focuses primarily on how one's epistemic character traits or virtues contribute to one's becoming a better knower, including aiming at attaining knowledge. Thus, under ETEC, to explain how knowledge is produced, shared, derived, and transferred requires providing an account of how to acquire epistemic virtues as it encompasses both the action-guidedness and the world-guidedness of knowledge as a thick epistemic concept adequately.

Additionally, ETEC has the following characteristics: (1) provides an account of why acquiring epistemic virtues is not always conscious; (2) provides a developmental account of acquiring epistemic virtues; (3) provides an account of assigning degrees of credit to epistemically virtuous acts (VAs) as one develops epistemic virtues. It is also important to note that the motivation behind the mentioned characteristics in ETEC is to have a more inclusive approach toward children. Although taking into account that acquiring knowledge is not always conscious is not an age-specific matter on its own, it impacts the way one approaches theorizing the acquisition of epistemic virtues in children disproportionately. Knowing is not always a conscious state (Pritchard 2005). In fact, there are different types of knowledge gained by employing tacit reasoning that might even challenge ETEC's proposal that knowledge requires acquiring epistemic virtues (Pritchard 2005). Suppose I am shown multiple photos and I have to pick one with the face of my close friend on. Let us also assume that once I pick one, I say I know this one is the photo because it has my friend's face on it. However, if one asks me how I knew this one had my friend's face on, it would be difficult for me to explain what exactly enabled me to do so (Johannessen 2022: 5). The disproportionate impact of this requirement in the case of children is that their (relative) acquisition of epistemic virtues can also be characterized more in the form of tacit knowledge, where they know that something is true without being able to fully explain it in a way that is possible for an adult, which is overlooked in the literature. However, ETEC's response to both this challenge and the question of how to acquire knowledge is that knowers – including children – do not necessarily gain knowledge because they are conscious of rightfully belief-forming processes at all times. It is rather because one gradually learns how to be a good knower that they acquire epistemic virtues. Thus, despite not being fully conscious of the process, it is crucial for children to have good teachers – broadly speaking, including schools, teachers, parents, etc. – to not only acquire epistemic virtues but also to gain knowledge and even receive credit for it.

According to ETEC, assigning credit for acquiring epistemic virtues is a matter of degree. In the case of children, specifically, their knowledge gets predominantly dismissed because they are not considered fully epistemically virtuous. However, under ETEC, if we move away from an all-or-nothing attitude toward acquiring epistemic virtues, it becomes possible to praise a child for learning how to be epistemically virtuous as if they were fully so (Kotzee 2011). This point further helps us understand that regardless of how complex one's cognitive apparatus is, how one becomes epistemically virtuous is directly related to a form of education that they broadly receive, whether in a formal sense or simply, one's upbringing because of the following reason. Based on ETEC, becoming epistemically virtuous matters and is of value, and so does the way one gets to that point because the path to acquiring epistemic virtues is to exceed in degree. Rightfully holding beliefs does not necessarily arise from an epistemically VA in the sense of being fully intentional about what one's motivation is, how to act so, and to what end. Rather, being conscious and intentional can still be meaningful simply in the sense of what one has chosen to learn as their path to acquire epistemic virtues (Kotzee 2011).

Now, with the characteristics laid out above, how does ETEC provide an answer to the first question, how to acquire an epistemic virtue? Suppose someone is in the process of acquiring trustworthiness. According to ETEC, this process is similar to having a driving license:

"In the real world . . . it is not good enough that I simply drive without hurting anyone. I am also under an obligation to keep on *demonstrating* that I drive safely by having a license, renewing it as necessary, certifying the roadworthiness of my car, and the like . . . One may say that trustworthiness is a good example of what (in virtue theory) is called an "other-regarding virtue" – a virtue not in how one leads one's own life, but that concerns the care one takes of other's interests. It is exactly this sort of "other-regarding" epistemic virtue that is left out of a too thin conception of knowledge but that comes into play once one considers one's epistemic responsibilities to others" (Kotzee 2011: 556).

Based on the passage above, in order to acquire a given epistemic virtue, i.e. trustworthiness, one is under an obligation to keep on demonstrating that they act in accordance with it in an other-regarding manner. More specifically, being trustworthy does not merely imply that one is trustworthy on their own. It is rather through navigating the other-regarding aspect of this epistemic virtue that one demonstrates acquiring it. It is important to note that this other-regarding orientation is the focal point of ETEC's response to the question of how to acquire an epistemic virtue because it encompasses the overlooked aspect of action-guidedness of epistemic virtues, namely trustworthiness, providing one with reasons to act. It is yet to be answered, however, what the role of education under this account is. The key to responding to this question is to highlight the role of epistemic responsibility in making the analogy between acquiring trustworthiness and having a driving license work since epistemic responsibility is not given. Rather epistemic responsibility is earned via receiving education on how to be so. The importance of fostering epistemic virtues through education then becomes clear as the path toward it goes through the learners becoming epistemically responsible.

The point above is also demonstrates why ETEC provides one unified response to both the question of how to acquire epistemic virtues and how to become motivated to be epistemically virtuous. It is through getting an education that one simultaneously acquires both an understanding of what it is to be epistemically virtuous and motivated



to be epistemically virtuous simultaneously (Kotzee 2011: 561). By ETEC's characterization, it encompasses 1) the world-guided and descriptive orientation, or a learner understanding what it is to be epistemically virtuous; and 2) the action-guided and prescriptive orientation, or a learner becoming motivated to be epistemically virtuous as education is crucial to provide one with reasons to act. In other words, ETEC fills an explanatory gap on how to acquire epistemic virtues and act in accordance with them by giving credits to the learners via education in a broad sense.

Now, what is it to consider education a thick epistemic concept? The focal point of ETEC is that education is not merely an abstract concept; it rather depends on both real-world descriptions and value, which pick on both world-guidedness and action-guidedness of the concept. On the one hand, education depends on real-world descriptions, which encompasses a variety of epistemic goods<sup>5</sup> toward the world such as one's "knowledge of local history," "ability to add and subtract numbers with facility," "curiosity about the world of things and ideas," "corresponding inclination to seek information and inquire," and "tendency to challenge the declarations of her teachers and political leaders" (Siegel 2008). In other words, education in the sense of world-guidedness depends upon "the detailed characterizations of the knowledge, ability, and inclinations in question, and of the educational practices of the local community" (Siegel 2008). On the other hand, education also depends on values and practices in that community, which is usually "culturally mediated in a way that knowledge is not" (Siegel 2008). That is, education in the sense of action-guidedness depends upon "what counts as an educational practice, and who counts as an educated person, is at least to some degree culturally specific" (Siegel 2008). Therefore, under ETEC, education is not merely a matter of either world-guidedness or action-guidedness as a thin concept; it rather encompasses both and is a thick concept in the epistemic sense.

### 3. Virtue responsibilism

#### 3.1. *Anatomy of a view*

So far, I have shown that ETEC – a thick epistemology project at its core – suggests that considering ETEC is key to explaining how one acquires epistemic virtues and becomes motivated to be epistemically virtuous. It remains unanswered though how this view justifies grounding the distinction between thin and thick concepts in epistemology *similarly* to the one in ethics. In response to this question, I argue that ETEC relies on the theoretical foundation of VR. My argument runs as follows: In order to explain how the thin and thick distinction in epistemology is similar to the one in ethics, ETEC holds the view that this similarity is due to a sense of unity in the action-guidedness of moral and epistemic virtues, which is articulated through a version of VR. ETEC, however, as I argue, goes one step further; not only is it grounded in VR but it also goes beyond it by appealing to education to respond to some of the objections that VR has faced. In other words, while it is possible to be a virtue responsibilist without committing to the theoretical framework of ETEC, a proponent of ETEC must commit to VR. Before getting into the details of each of these views and how they are related to one another, it is important to note that, in this article, by VR, I mean a very specific version of it, which is articulated and promoted by Linda Zagzebski. Moving forward in the article, whenever I discuss VR, I do not mean an umbrella term referring to a wide range of views on VR. Rather, I mean it in a narrow sense of addressing Zagzebski's view only.

<sup>5</sup>Brighouse et al. characterize abilities, attitudes, inclinations as epistemic goods (2018: 20).



The articulation and problems with VR that I discuss in the following parts of this article are also limited to the scope of Zagzebski's view, not any other virtue responsibility views.

According to Zagzebski's VR, virtue is "a deep and enduring acquired excellence of a person, involving a characteristic motivation to produce a certain desired end and reliable success in bringing about that end" (Zagzebski 1996: 137). That is, virtue is a disposition that shapes one's motivation to reliably produce an optimal end. Based on this definition, we can analyze a VA through what motivates one to take that act and how they take it. In other words, an action is VA iff the persuasion of the right motivation takes one to take VA in the right way, which may or may not achieve an optimal end.<sup>6</sup> Since VR takes a motivation-based approach to VA, it characterizes epistemic virtues "in terms of derivatives of the motivations for truth or cognitive contact with reality, where the motivation for understanding is assumed to be a form of the motivation for cognitive contact with reality" (Zagzebski 1996: 168). Let us recall the Sheldon and Leonard case. In that scenario, suppose Leonard asks Sheldon to tell him the truth about whether Sheldon believes that Leonard would get the job. Let us also assume that Sheldon tells Leonard the truth that he believes that Leonard would get the job but not because he believes that Leonard is competent but to cheer Leonard up. In that case, Sheldon's action does not count as truthful because he is not motivated by the virtue of truthfulness at all but rather, for Zagzebski, Sheldon's action counts as VA even if he is not only motivated by truthfulness. He could be motivated by both truthfulness and other factors, including cheering Leonard up. As long as, a degree of what motivates one includes a virtue, all other things being equal, that action counts as VA (Zagzebski 2003).

Now, I argue that VR stands on two main theses: the subset thesis (ST) and the motivation thesis (MT):

ST: an action (A) is motivated by a set of epistemic virtues (EV1, EV2, ...) iff A is motivated by a set of moral virtues (MV1, MV2, ...).<sup>7</sup>

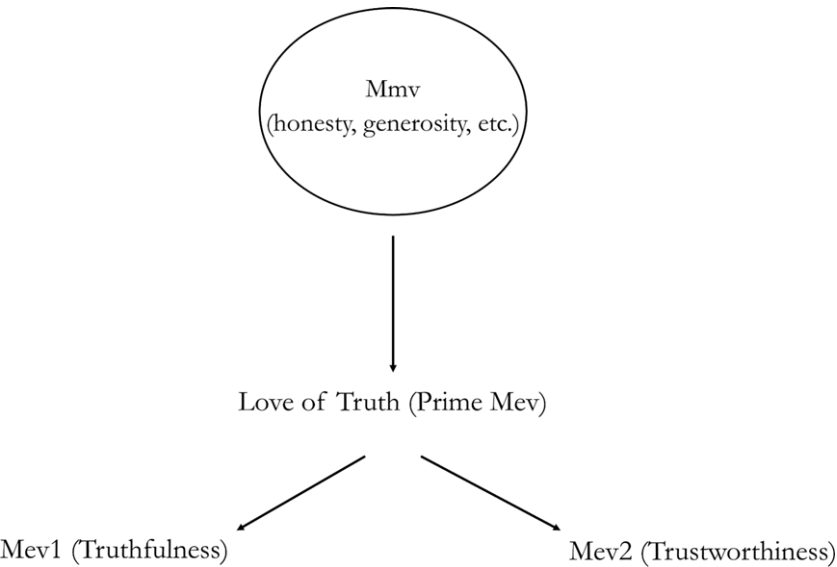
The explanation for ST is that under VR, the epistemically charged motivations derive from motivation for truth or knowledge in different forms – i.e. advancing knowledge for the sake of the human race – which is a form of good that motivates moral virtues in the first place (Zagzebski 1996). Notice that in ST, an action can be motivated by moral virtue without being motivated by epistemic virtue. For example, Sheldon can be honest with Leonard about his opinion on the job interview without considering his positive emotions toward Leonard clouding his judgment. This action of Sheldon can be morally virtuous without being epistemically virtuous. However, if Sheldon's action is motivated by truthfulness, such as taking his feelings for his close friend into consideration, then Sheldon is also motivated by the moral virtue of honesty to tell Leonard the truth about the job interview. Additionally:

<sup>6</sup>In *Virtues of the Mind*, Zagzebski distinguishes between a virtuous act and an act of virtue. Accordingly, a virtuous act does not have to be successful in achieving its aim motivated by a virtue. In contrast, an act of virtue is good in all important aspects: a motive, a path to take that action, and the end (1996). As a result, an act of any given virtue is a virtuous act (VA) plus achieving the optimal end. In the example of Leonard's job interview, for Sheldon's action to count as VA, a degree of virtuous motivation should be part of what motivates him to take VA. However, for that action to be an act of virtue, he should also attain the optimal goal of telling Leonard the truth.

<sup>7</sup>Many other virtue responsibility accounts reject ST. For more, for instance, see Baehr (2011).

MT: A motivation of an action (A) by a set of epistemic virtues (Mev) in ST is only derivatively different from a motivation of A by a set of moral virtues (Mmv).

The explanation for MT is that under VR, the value of Mevs is measured by the love of truth – as the primary Mev, which is also derived from Mmvs and is instrumentally valuable (Zagzebski 2003):



Going back to the example above, let us assume that to Sheldon, it is important to take his biases toward Leonard seriously because he is truthful and because he is honest. To answer Leonard’s question, although Sheldon’s response can be motivated by both truthfulness and honesty, based on VR, only the latter derives from the former. That is, Sheldon’s action can be motivated by honesty without truthfulness but not by open-mindedness without honesty as being motivated by open-mindedness is underlain by Sheldon’s love of truth, derivative from being motivated by honesty. For Sheldon’s response to be motivated by both open-mindedness and honesty, therefore under VR, he should be transparent about his positive biases toward his friend as well as tell Leonard the truth.

The combination of ST and MT explains how under VR, there is a zero to minimal difference between the action-guidedness of epistemic and moral virtues. Accordingly, motivation is an action-guiding emotion to achieve a given end (Zagzebski 1996); more specifically, Zagzebski writes

“What I mean by a motive is an affective state that initiates and directs action. In my theory of emotion, a motive is an emotion that is operating to produce action. The appreciation for a value is an emotion that can initiate and direct action. When it does, it is a motive in the sense I mean” (2003:17).

In light of the motivation-based approach to virtue, ST, and MT, the passage on the relationship between motivation and action-guidedness above shows that under VR, there is a zero to minimal difference between the action-guidedness of epistemic and

moral virtues. Accordingly, due to the action-guided nature of motivation, as the passage describes, if a character (C) is motivated by a virtue (V), then V is guiding C to take a certain course of action (A) to achieve a given end. Since, based on MT, Mev, and Mmv are just derivatively different, then the correspondent sets of epistemic and moral virtues uniformly guide C to do A, which keeps the action-guidedness of epistemic and moral virtues uniformly. In the case of Sheldon being motivated by truthfulness and honesty, what ultimately matters to whether his act is virtuous is that he takes the same course of action, telling Leonard the truth while acknowledging his biases. Indeed, Zagzebski herself points out that focusing on actions motivated by epistemic virtues beyond their epistemic use demonstrates that epistemic and moral virtues are so similar that it is implausible to suggest that they are fundamentally different (1996).<sup>8</sup>

### 3.2. Education meets VR

The point on the uniformity of the epistemic and moral virtues' action-guidedness further demonstrates that under VR, there is a higher threshold for gaining knowledge since knowing that P requires VA regarding P, which encompasses at least having the right motivation and taking the right action. That is, under VR, the possession of knowledge requires the acquisition of epistemic virtues. There are, however, multiple objections against this view. First, rightfully forming beliefs is not always and necessarily a conscious process. In fact, there are different forms of knowledge, that indicate VR sets the standard too high for knowledge possession.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, VR does not provide a full developmental picture of how one acquires epistemic virtues, which exclude children. Although children can still be good knowers in some limited capacities, there is no account of how one actualizes such capacities in different degrees as they develop epistemic virtues. For instance, a child knows that "the cat is on the mat" (Kotzee 2011: 559). However, under VR, it is not clear how the child knows that the cat is on the mat despite not being fully epistemically virtuous and how to further develop those virtues. Lastly, since under VR, knowledge possession requires epistemic virtue acquisition, it demands one to possess a complex cognitive apparatus, a complex cognitive apparatus, which fails to explain how children can become even motivated to be epistemically virtuous in the first place (Kotzee 2011).

In order to solve the problems above, ETEC works perfectly as a complementary theoretical framework to respond to the objections against VR. As discussed, ETEC introduces education to mediate between knowledge possession and epistemic virtue acquisition. Moreover, ETEC provides a developmental account of how children become motivated to acquire epistemic virtues without being either entirely conscious of the rightfully belief-forming process or fully gaining knowledge. It is rather through the instruction of other adults, such as a parent or a teacher, who teach a child how to be a good knower that they also learn how to become epistemically virtuous, which also leads to giving them credit not for being fully epistemically virtuous but as if they were because

<sup>8</sup>Note this analysis of Zagzebski's version of virtue epistemology does not entail there cannot be other models to consider moral and epistemic virtues distinct yet deeply interconnected. Aristotle, famously, believed moral and epistemic virtues are distinct yet they come together under practical wisdom as a union. Since Zagzebski's theory is the focal point of this paper, acknowledging the importance of having other approaches to the conflation problem does not pose any problem to the core argument presented here.

<sup>9</sup>However, as Sruthi Rothenfluch argues, it is possible to make a case that VR does not require an epistemic agent to have complete access to their beliefs to know that P and that the so-called "accessibility requirement" is much weaker than what the counterargument presumes. See more in Rothenfluch S. (2015). 'Virtue Epistemology and Tacit Cognitive Processes in High-Grade Knowledge.' *Philosophical Explorations* 18(3), 393–405.

education is key to develop the rightfully holding beliefs processes and learning how to choose this process in the first place. Consequently, it is important to note that while ETEC does not share the details of how to acquire epistemic virtues with VR, it can work as a complementary framework to VR to successfully respond to these objections.

The relationship between ETEC and VR, however, goes beyond working well together to respond to certain objections. I argue that in order to make ETEC work, namely to establish a distinction between thin and thick concepts in epistemology similar to the one in ethics, it has to commit to the way VR explains the unity of the motivation and the action-guidedness of epistemic and moral virtues. As I have shown before, under ETEC, education is key to fostering epistemic virtues as it highlights the role of learning how to be epistemically responsible. Basically, under ETEC, the importance of fostering epistemic virtues through education then becomes clear as the path toward it goes through the learners becoming epistemically responsible. However, I argue that under ETEC, teaching a sense of epistemic responsibility is impossible without contributing to cultivating a sense of moral responsibility in learners. Let us recall the analogy between acquiring trustworthiness and having a driving license work. I argue that ETEC also relies on both ST and MT due to the key role that responsibility – broadly speaking – plays in demonstrating why education is the focal point of this view. More specifically, under ETEC, trustworthiness does not merely mean acting on a belief but passing it on to others to act on as well. In other words, it is the epistemically responsible action of someone that demonstrates whether they are trustworthy or not, which, as I argue, falls into the broader category of moral responsibility.

The other-regarding aspect of epistemic virtues acquisition is key to explaining how, under ETEC, epistemic responsibility is to be a form of moral responsibility, which calls for unity in both the motivation and the action-guidedness of epistemic and moral virtues. Suppose there is an evil person living in my neighborhood who secretly has cameras everywhere to monitor everyone.<sup>10</sup> The evil neighbor does not acquire any moral virtues. However, suppose they are actually concerned with the greater good of the neighborhood and only pass on information for the purpose of making people happy. Let us also assume that the rest of us know that there is someone among us who has the information about everybody else in the area and will pass it on if we make a good case on how we would like to use the information. Though none of us know that this person is the evil neighbor, we regularly contact them to help us how to act in a given complicated scenario. Let us also assume that the evil neighbor only passes information when effective action on the information will enhance the greater good of the neighborhood. As they act in an epistemically responsible way, the evil neighbor passes information to other people that results in the greater good of the neighborhood despite his moral motivation to violate people's privacy. In other words, the evil neighbor is doing what ETEC takes as being epistemically responsible because of the way the evil neighbor is being careful with passing on the information that contributes to the greater good of the neighborhood. Now, the question is whether, under ETEC, the evil neighbor has all of the relevant epistemic virtues. Consider trustworthy. Based on ETEC, being epistemically responsible is a marker of being trustworthy. So, he must be trustworthy insofar as he is epistemically responsible. However, I argue that a proponent of ETEC could not hold the view that the evil neighbor is trustworthy because the evil neighbor's action is not other-regarding in the relevant sense. Consider again:

"In the real world . . . it is not good enough that I simply drive without hurting anyone. I am also under an obligation to keep on *demonstrating* that I drive safely

<sup>10</sup>I am thankful for Dr. Jim Gillespie's example which was used as the basis of this one.

by having a license, renewing it as necessary, certifying the roadworthiness of my car, and the like . . . One may say that trustworthiness is a good example of what (in virtue theory) is called an “other-regarding virtue” – a virtue not in how one leads one’s own life, but that concerns the care one takes of other’s interests. It is exactly this sort of “other-regarding” epistemic virtue that is left out of a too thin conception of knowledge but that comes into play once one considers one’s epistemic responsibilities to others” (Kotzee 2011: 556).

Based on the passage above, the evil neighbor is not trustworthy because they are not epistemically responsible as they are not morally responsible in the first place since they are not taking the right care with respect to people. Under ETEC, the acquisition of an epistemic virtue implies being epistemically responsible, which in itself stems from a sense of moral responsibility in the first place. This approach thus, put caring toward others in the right way prior to being able to have a sense of epistemic responsibility. If one – such as the evil neighbor – does not care about people, then they cannot act epistemically virtuous toward them and so, be epistemically responsible, such as passing on information to those people in a trustworthy manner. If we accept that under ETEC, epistemic responsibility stems from moral responsibility and cannot exist independently, then we must also accept that there cannot be a gap between both the motivation and the action-guidedness of epistemic and moral virtues, which is in agreement with the core premise of VR.

However, going back to the evil neighbor example, if we accept that they can be morally vicious but epistemically virtuous, particularly in the form of trustworthiness, then we have to accept that they are trustworthy because they are epistemically responsible but not morally, which is against ETEC. The evil neighbor is not a morally virtuous person, but that does not imply that they are not an epistemically virtuous person in a sense. The action of violating one’s privacy and passing on information in this case seems to be motivated by two independent virtue and vice, which indicate a difference in their action-guidedness as well. Motivated by a moral vice, the evil neighbor violates other people’s privacy but motivated by an epistemic virtue, the evil neighbor only passes on information to others that leads to the greater good.

Now, based on ST and MT under VR, both the motivation and the action-guidedness of epistemic and moral virtues are united. It is also impossible to hold to this view without accepting that epistemic responsibility – particularly in the form of caring for other epistemic agents – falls into a broader sense of moral responsibility because of the following reason: if we accept that the evil neighbor is morally vicious and so, morally irresponsible and there is a unity between the motivation and the action-guidedness of epistemic and moral virtues, then their action of passing information to other neighbors is also epistemically vicious, and so, epistemically irresponsible. In other words, without appealing to a broad sense of moral responsibility, it is impossible to explain why the evil neighbor is not trustworthy. Using VR’s conceptual framework, VR, ETEC explains the distinction between the thin and thick concepts in epistemology similar to the one in ethics as the similarity emerges from epistemic responsibility being a type of moral responsibility, which further explains the central role of education in the uniformity of both of the motivation and the action-guidedness of epistemic and moral virtues.

As discussed above, it is through getting an education that one acquires both an understanding of what it is to be epistemically virtuous and motivated to be epistemically virtuous simultaneously (Kotzee 2011: 561). Under ETEC, education necessarily betters someone at something as the bettering process is morally charged

with conveying something positive about someone because it is through education that learners understand what it is to be virtuous, the descriptive or world-guided orientation, and provides them with reasons to act, the prescriptive or action-guided orientation (Kotzee 2011: 557). Under ETEC then, it is education that fills an explanatory gap between how to acquire epistemic virtues and act on them and further closes another explanatory gap between the action-guidedness of epistemic and moral virtues. Without education, it would be difficult to explain the similarity between moral and epistemic virtues because it is education that 1) provides learners with reasons to VA; 2) promotes being epistemically responsible by contributing to cultivating a sense of moral responsibility in learners; and 3) unifies the motivation and the action-guidedness of moral and epistemic virtues through 1 and 2.

## 4. Objections

### 4.1. *Objections against VR*

So far, I have shown that ETEC – a thick epistemology project at its core – suggests that considering ETEC is key to explaining how one acquires epistemic virtues and becomes motivated to be epistemically virtuous. I have also shown that ETEC relies on VR to explain the distinction between thin and thick concepts in epistemology *similar* to the one in ethics. Now, the main objection that I present in this article is that VR ignores the substantial gap between the motivation and the action-guidedness of epistemic and moral virtues. Let us start with case (1), Lex Luthor is the CEO of LexCorp and the archenemy of Superman. He is ingenious, talented, and motivated to advance science and technology. He has also wronged Superman many times, such as using his technologies to clone and replace Superman. Even though a lot of developed equipment at LexCorp enables Lex to battle against Superman, the corporation is in the cutting-edge technology of war suits and advanced weapons due to Lex's passion for science, such as physics, and tech fields, such as weapons engineering.

Under VR, Lex Luthor is not epistemically virtuous because as a supervillain, by definition, he is morally vicious. According to ST, since Lex Luthor's actions are not motivated by moral virtues, his actions are not motivated by epistemic virtues either. However, it is not the case that Lex Luthor's works on advancing knowledge and technology are merely to kill Superman. He is a man of science, who also benefits from such advancement to kill Superman. Thus, it would be difficult to suggest that Lex Luthor's love of scientific truth does not make him epistemically virtuous at all merely because he is morally vicious. One way for VR to explain this case is to point out that Lex Luthor's desire to wipe out Superman is much more impactful to motivate and guide his actions than his love of science and technology and so, he is not epistemically virtuous because he is not morally virtuous. To make this claim work, VR has no other way but to abandon the current version of MT by holding that Lex Luthor's advancement of science and contribution to technology do not count even for a minimal level of being epistemically virtuous. In other words, as one of the main vicious motivations of Lex Luthor is to harm Superman, advancing scientific knowledge does not count as a motivation to make Lex Luthor even minimally epistemically virtuous. If epistemically virtuous motivations (Mev) are not necessarily derivable from morally virtuous motivations (Mmv) because they are grounded in the love of truth as in MT, love of truth is a mediator between Mmv and Mev. However, if we do not consider Lex Luthor's love of truth in this case, then the only option left for VR is to commit to a modified version of MT:



MT\*: Only those Mevs that are not connected to any morally vicious motivations (Mvm) are derivable from Mmvs due to love of truth.

Let us switch to case (2). Robert Oppenheimer was a well-known physicist, the director of the Los Alamos Laboratory, and responsible for doing research on designing an atomic bomb. As the father of the atomic bomb, he made a huge contribution to building nuclear weapons and bombing Hiroshima and Nagasaki, which killed thousands of civilians. He never regretted his role in building the bomb and even justified such persuasion. Besides the Manhattan Project, Oppenheimer has contributed to the field of theoretical physics with different influential equations and approximations. In contrast with Lex Luthor, Robert Oppenheimer did not pursue theoretical physics to design atomic bombs. In fact, his contribution to the field of theoretical physics was long known before becoming an important part of the Manhattan Project. As a result, it would be odd to suggest that Oppenheimer's love of scientific knowledge was motivated by moral vices. Based on ST, Oppenheimer's actions motivated by epistemic virtues are also motivated by moral virtues. However, as he never publicly displayed regrets for his contribution to building the atomic bomb, it is reasonable to suggest that he is not morally virtuous.

Based on ST, then his actions are not motivated by epistemic virtues either. Nonetheless, it would be odd to argue that as a highly achieved physicist, Oppenheimer was not an epistemically virtuous person at all just the same as Lex Luthor in case (1). In response to case (2), VR has no other way but to drop MT\* because it would be odd to suggest that the love of a world-known physicist for scientific knowledge does not provide an adequate explanation for his Mevs to derive from his Mmvs. Additionally, VR also has to modify ST to hold that loving some forms of knowledge does not count in showing that one's action of Mev is also of Mmv. That is, even if Oppenheimer is an open-minded physicist who loves advancing scientific knowledge because of the lack of appropriate moral knowledge, he is not epistemically virtuous. If Mev does not necessarily imply Mmv due to the type of knowledge in question, then the only option left for VR is to commit to a modified version of ST:

ST\*: only those actions of Mevs that stem from good (in the moral sense) knowledge, not necessarily scientific knowledge, are also of Mmv.

Let us shift to case (3), which alters the type of knowledge in question from scientific to moral. Professor X is a famous moral philosopher at a top university. He has been part of many funded projects in the field. Due to his passion for moral knowledge, his research and teaching are also successfully aligned with pushing the field of moral philosophy forward. Outside of academia, however, he treats people horribly and does not see any problem with going as far as yelling at people to get what he wants without being remorseful. Now, it would be hard to imagine VR coming up with a way to argue that moral knowledge is not good. Indeed, the case of Professor X highlights that changing the type of knowledge does not save ST\*. As a highly reputable moral philosopher, Professor X holds good classes, listens to his students, and does high-quality and groundbreaking research on moral philosophy. However, out of the philosophy department, such as when he goes shopping or driving, he has no problem taking advantage of other people. Based on ST\*, Professor X's actions of Mevs are of Mmvs due to his love for [advancing] moral knowledge. Nonetheless, as that is not the case, VR has no other choice but to completely drop ST\* too.

Even if one ignores cases (1) and (2), it is still odd to suggest that Professor X in case (3) is not epistemically virtuous at all because he is not morally virtuous. Indeed, if one of

his students who truly admires him, sees Professor X yelling at someone while shopping, rather than all of a sudden thinking Professor X did not do a good job at teaching them or giving them an opportunity to raise questions in the class, they probably think that the two images that they have of him are in contradiction with each other. These cases work by fixating on a specific type of knowledge and calling for at least a minimal level of being epistemically virtuous while highlighting the sharp gap between an action (A1) motivated and guided by epistemic virtues/vices and another action (A2) motivated and guided by moral virtues/vices and they, therefore, show that VR fails to consider the gap in the motivation and the action-guidedness of epistemic and moral virtues. What these cases pick on is the difference between how epistemic virtues/vices can motivate and guide someone to take a course of action (A1), while moral virtues/vices to a different one (A2). Advancing different forms of knowledge with passion (A1) while lacking moral virtues and wronging people (A2), for instance, demonstrates that there can be a sharp gap between the motivation and the action-guidedness of epistemic and moral virtues, which indicates that epistemic virtues, Mevs, and actions of Mevs do not necessarily rely on moral virtues, Mmvs, and actions of Mmvs as VR suggests.

#### **4.2. Objections against ETEC**

Given my objection against VR, now I argue that without at least considering the gap in the motivation and the action-guidedness of epistemic and moral virtues, it will be difficult to provide a response to the central question of thick epistemology, how to establish a justified way of distinguishing thin and thick epistemic concepts based on the similar distinction in ethics. Since ETEC relies on VR, it also overlooks the substantial gap between the motivation and the action-guidedness of epistemic and moral virtues. Under ETEC, epistemic and moral virtues are similar based on ST and MT implying that they are similar in terms of their motivation and their action-guidedness. Considering my objection against VR, there is no justification for ETEC to hold onto either. Now let us recall the analogy between trustworthiness and being a safe driver. To have a driving license and be a safe driver, one is under an obligation to keep demonstrating that they can drive safely. Based on the objection raised above, however, one might question whether the analogy genuinely holds. In fact, I argue that because of the substantial gap both in the motivation and the action-guidedness of epistemic and moral virtues, trustworthiness is analogous to excellent driving, not necessarily safe driving. It might be the case that an excellent driver is also a safe driver but in order to be an excellent driver, they do not have to be necessarily a safe driver. It might also be the case that a safe driver happens to be an excellent driver but to be a safe driver, they do not have to be necessarily an excellent driver.

Suppose a 75-year-old grandmother cautiously driving with no negative point on her driving license since she obtained it at the age of 18, which demonstrates that she is a safe driver. Does it imply that she is also an excellent driver? I argue that not necessarily; Consider someone like Michael Schumacher who was one of the best racing drivers in Formula One. He is an excellent driver but that does not necessarily make him a safe one either. He might happen to be a safe driver too. But that is not a necessary condition to be an excellent driver. In other words, what makes Schumacher an excellent driver is not the continuous demonstration of safe driving. It is rather by demonstrating his driving skills in racing that he demonstrates he is an excellent driver. Similarly, just as demonstrated by cases (1) to (3), an epistemically virtuous person is not necessarily a morally virtuous/caring one either. It might happen to be the case that an epistemically virtuous person is also a morally virtuous person. But there is no necessary connection

between epistemic and moral virtues, as VR and ETEC suggest, since there can be a sharp gap between their motivation and their action-guidedness.

Now, it is important to point out that my objection here does not imply that, indeed, there is no relationship between moral and epistemic virtues. All it, however, shows is that the relationship between the two is not in the way that VR and so, ETEC portray. It might be difficult to imagine if someone is not a safe driver in general, they could excel in a professional race or be safe while racing. However, there are different measures for safety in such races as well in VR and so, ETEC, being motivated by an epistemic virtue necessarily stamps from being motivated by a moral virtue, neither view adequately capture the complexity of the relationship between epistemic and moral virtues.

Building on this objection, I also argue that education does not necessarily and always better someone at something in the positive sense that ETEC holds. In fact, education can be used to further sharpen the gap in the motivation and the action-guidedness of epistemic and moral virtues and vices. There are good forms of education just as there are bad ones, which sharpen this gap. For example, Saul Goodman is the main character of the TV show *Better Call Saul*, which serves as both a prequel and sequel to *Breaking Bad* set in the early 2000s. The show portrays how Jimmy McGill becomes Saul Goodman, and eventually Gene Takavic as it pictures the moral downfall of this character leading to the events in *Breaking Bad* and its aftermath. Early on in the show, we see that all Jimmy wants from his brother, who is a successful and well-known lawyer, is to acknowledge his efforts to become a lawyer on his own and be a mentor to him. Even though they briefly work together on a class action lawsuit regarding elderly abuse, and he briefly receives the mentorship and acceptance of his own brother, he ultimately finds out that his brother does not even believe that Jimmy can become a successful lawyer describing him in legal practices as “a chimp with a machine gun.” Following the events of Jimmy’s clash with his brother, we see how he changes his course of action as a lawyer and little by little becomes “a friend of the cartel.” Ultimately, in the aftermath of the events in *Breaking Bad*, we see Gene Takavic who now goes as far as abusing an elder woman himself.

Now, in the show, there is a specific scene in which Jimmy wants to help his girlfriend who is also a lawyer to earn the case of an important client. However, as she is in competition with Jimmy’s brother for this case and he has lots of resources at his own law firm, she loses the case. Jimmy, however, finds a path to help her girlfriend win back the case and hits his brother where it hurts most, distorting his reputation as a respectable lawyer. The way that he comes up with this “solution” requires a highly complex level of legal knowledge. He knows that if he changes the address on a document – regarding the case – on his brother’s files and that is different from the address on a document submitted to the court, they have to defer the case for a resubmission for around six months. He also knows that if he completely changed the address, in their field, it would be difficult to frame his brother for this mistake. Consequently, he decides to change the two digits of the unit number in the address by taking a photocopy of the document, cutting off the two digits, putting them in reverse, and taking another copy, which is different from the original file to be soon submitted to the court.

Based on how informationally complex this process is, it would be difficult to hold that Jimmy is not epistemically virtuous in any sense. Arguably, without being epistemically virtuous, he would not be able to use his legal knowledge to come up with this plot in the first place. However, the reason that he is doing so is morally vicious, framing his own brother and manipulating the court to take the case back for his girlfriend and do a full revenge on his brother. The question, however, is how the gap between the motivation and also, the action-guidedness of Jimmy’s epistemic virtues and moral vices became so sharpened that the use of his epistemic virtues fell into a morally vicious action of his. In the show, one of the most important reasons for this revenge

stems from the type of education that he received from his own brother. Even though he initially wanted to be a good lawyer, when he finds out that receiving the mentorship of his brother was to make sure Jimmy will not become a successful lawyer, facing how his brother genuinely sees him, led to his moral downfall; from Jimmy McGill to Saul Goodman and eventually Gene Takavic. The main point of this case is that one of the ways bad education can lead to sharpening the motivation and the action-guidedness between epistemic and moral virtues is through how – broadly speaking – a teacher views a learner. This point becomes even more important in the case of education for children that ETEC focuses on. If a learner finds out that to their teacher, whether it is an actual teacher or a family member in that role, all they ever are is associated with negative connotations, negative connotations, even if the education that they receive conveys something positive in a sense, that can indeed sharpen the gap between the two types of virtues or even goes as far as the more epistemically virtuous one is, the more morally vicious they become.

The reason ETEC relies on this assumption about education is goes back to its reliance on VR. Based on ST and MT, the motivation and the action-guidedness of epistemic and moral virtues are unified. So, if there is anything that fills an explanatory gap on how to acquire epistemic virtues and how to act on them, it always has to convey something positive to make the account work. In ETEC, considering education a thick epistemic concept is in the explanatory role. It is indeed education that fills an explanatory gap on how to acquire epistemic virtues and how to act on them based on giving the credits due to the learners through education, which entails education always betters someone at something. Based on my objections, however, education does not always better someone at something. In fact, it can sharpen the gap between the motivation and the action-guidedness of epistemic and moral virtues in a learner to the point that there is a sense of uniformity between their epistemically virtuous and morally vicious motivation, such as in the case of Saul Goodman.

Lastly, rejecting ETEC does not imply that there is no other way to run a successful thick epistemology project. In this article, all my argument shows is that ETEC does not provide a satisfactory response to the central question of this project: how to draw a distinction between thin and thick epistemic concepts similar to the one in ethics. Thus, my argument does not entail that there are no other responses to this question. Similarly, my argument does not imply that all versions of VR do not work. Here, I only focused on one version that ETEC relies on. However, this article puts forward a question for the future of a thick epistemology project: how do we draw a line between good forms of education and bad forms of education to make sure it leads to closing the gap between the motivations and the action-guidedness of epistemic and moral virtues? Overall, while this article discussed the reasons ETEC is unsuccessful in responding to the questions and concerns above, they remain unanswered to be explored in future research projects on thick epistemology.

## 5. Conclusion

In this article, I have argued that argue that ETEC is not satisfactory because it relies on a version of VR that is not plausible as well. Based on VR, both the motivation and the action-guidedness of epistemic and moral virtues are unified. By rejecting this premise, I have shown that there is a sharp gap in the motivation and the action-guidedness of these two types of virtues. I have also argued that despite ETEC's claim that education always conveys a positive sense of bettering someone at something, and so, unifying the motivation and the action-guidedness of epistemic and moral virtues, there are bad

forms of education that can further sharpen the gap between them to the extent of becoming epistemically virtuous at the cost of becoming morally vicious. Thus, when it comes to education, a thick epistemology project should consider how different forms of education can fall into the gap in the motivation and the action-guidedness of different types of virtues developed by learners. Overall, while this article discussed the reasons ETEC is unsuccessful in responding to the questions and concerns above, they remain unanswered to be explored in future research projects on thick epistemology.

**Acknowledgements.** I would like to express my deepest appreciation to Dr. Jaime Ahlberg (University of Florida) for her unconditional support and valuable feedback since the first day that I started working on this article. I am also grateful to the editors and the anonymous reviewers of this journal for taking the time and effort crucial to review the manuscript. I sincerely appreciate all of the anonymous reviewers' valuable suggestions, which helped me in the process of preparing the final draft of this article.

## References

- Axtell G. and Carter J.A. (2008). 'Just the Right Thickness: A Defense of Second-Wave Virtue Epistemology.' *Philosophical Papers* 37(3), 413–34.
- Baehr J. (2011). *The Inquiring Mind: On Intellectual Virtues and Virtue Epistemology*. Online edn, Oxford Academic.
- Battaly H. (2008). 'Metaethics Meets Virtue Epistemology: Salvaging Disagreement about the Epistemically Thick.' *Philosophical Papers* 37(3), 435–54.
- Brighouse H., Ladd H., Leob S. and Swift A. (2018). *Educational Goods Values, Evidence, and Decision-Making*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Chappell T. (2013). 'There Are No Thin Concepts.' In S. Kirchin (ed), *Thick Concepts*. Online edn, Oxford Academic.
- Elgin C. Z. (2008). 'Trustworthiness.' *Philosophical Papers* 37(3), 371–87.
- Johannessen, J.-A. (2022). *The Philosophy of Tacit Knowledge: The Tacit Side of Knowledge Management in Organizations*. Norway: Kristiania University College, Emerald Publishing.
- Kotzee B. (2011). 'Education and "Thick" Epistemology.' *Educational Theory* 61, 549–64.
- Kotzee B. and Wanderer J. (2009). 'Introduction: A Thicker Epistemology?' *Philosophical Papers* 37(3), 337–43.
- Pritchard, D. (2005). Virtue epistemology and the acquisition of knowledge. *Philosophical Explorations, An International Journal for the Philosophy of Mind and Action: Competences: Educational and developmental perspectives on minded agency*, 8(3), 229–243. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13869790500219513>
- Rothenfuch S. (2015). 'Virtue Epistemology and Tacit Cognitive Processes in High-Grade Knowledge.' *Philosophical Explorations* 18(3), 393–405.
- Scheffler S. (1987). 'Morality through Thick and Thin: A Critical Notice of Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy.' *Philosophical Review* 96, 411–34.
- Siegel H. (2008). 'Is "Education" a Thick Epistemic Concept?' *Philosophical Papers* 37(3), 455–469.
- Väyrynen P. (2008). 'Slim Epistemology with a Thick Skin' *Philosophical Papers* 37(3), 389–412.
- Williams B. (2006). *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*. London, UK: Routledge.
- Zagzebski L. (1996). *Virtues of the Mind: An Inquiry into the Nature of Virtue and the Ethical Foundations of Knowledge*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Zagzebski L. (2003). 'The Search for the Source of Epistemic Good.' *Metaphilosophy* 34, 12–28.

**Shadi Heidarifar** is an assistant professor in the College of Medicine at Roseman University of Health Sciences. Her scholarly works primarily focus on the intersection of virtue ethics, virtue epistemology, philosophy of education, and feminist philosophy (esp. feminist bioethics and data feminism). Email: [Sheidarifar@roseman.edu](mailto:Sheidarifar@roseman.edu)

---

**Cite this article:** Heidarifar S. (2025). "Education, A Thin Concept with A Thick Skin: What Do Supervillains and Antiheroes Teach Us About Virtuous Action-Guidedness?." *Episteme* 1–19. <https://doi.org/10.1017/epi.2025.3>