ARTICLE

Doing Good with Words: The Virtue of Benevolent Persuasiveness

Veronica Campos ⬤

Jesuit Faculty of Philosophy and Theology – FAJE, Belo Horizonte, Minas Gerais CEP: 31720 300, Brazil
Email: 182vkai@gmail.com

Abstract
Contemporary virtue epistemology has been progressing remarkably in the activity of virtue profiling, yet a lot remains to be discussed about the many ways and extents to which some virtues and vices of the intellect impact our lives. This paper is an attempt at sketching a preliminary profile to an epistemic virtue that hasn't received a lot of attention to this date: the virtue of being a good convincer, aka persuasiveness. I submit that there is a particular way of using speech in which persuasiveness is allied with benevolence as a means of conveying a distinctive type of epistemic good, the good of understanding.

> *Those who know, do. Those that understand, teach.*
> **– Aristotle**

A growing area within contemporary virtue epistemology is virtue profiling: identifying and characterizing individual intellectual virtues and vices.[1] In this paper, I aim at establishing a preliminary profile to one of the intellectual virtues I believe has received the least attention to this date: the virtue of being a good convincer, or persuasiveness.[2] I'll focus on one particular variety of persuasiveness. I call it benevolent persuasiveness. Roughly, its the virtue of using persuasiveness as a tool to promote the common good in a certain way: by transmitting understanding.[3]

---

[1]Some intellectual virtues have received significant attention to date, e.g., intellectual courage (Alfano 2013a; Baehr 2011; Roberts and Wood 2007) and humility (Carter and Pritchard 2016; Hazlett 2012; Roberts and Wood 2007; Samuelson and Church 2015). Others have received less, not because they are less important, but because this field of study is still growing. These include e.g. intellectual perseverance (King 2014) and originality (Zagzebski 1996).

[2]I'll deploy the terms 'convince' and 'persuade' as synonyms. For a different approach, see Burks (1970).

[3]Not a lot has been written on persuasiveness. In two of the most substantial works in contemporary virtue epistemology, Zagzebski (1996) and Baehr (2011), the topic is nearly absent. Exceptions include Wood (1998) and Maciejewski (2009).

In section 1.1, I'll contextualize the idea that there are many ways of being persuasive. One of those ways is through using speech in a benevolent manner that aims at the transmission of understanding. I'll explain what this is. In section 1.2, I'll present and discuss examples that will clarify the difference between being a benevolent persuader and simply being a persuader, as well as simply using speech while having (some) good motivation at heart. In section 1.3 I'll introduce the key notions of epistemic citizenship and perceived ignorance, which I take to be crucial for an account of what it is to be a benevolent persuader. In section 1.4 I'll discuss the ways in which a person can either lack this virtue or possess some of its opposite vices. I'll conclude, in section 1.5, by pointing at the way in which the ideas presented in the paper have a bearing upon a discussion that has been undertaken by social epistemologists in recent years concerning whether or not understanding can be transmitted *through* testimony, that is, through speech.

1. Preliminary remarks

I'll start by stating that benevolent persuasiveness is a transmission virtue: it plays a role in one's conveying certain epistemic goods to others. The paradigmatic epistemic good in virtue-based epistemological discussions is knowledge, but other things, such as understanding, wisdom and solutions to problems are epistemic goods too. Epistemic goods, as Cassam (2019) remarks, are things that we can acquire, retain, and transmit. Accordingly, epistemic virtues, as well as vices, can be of three basic types, depending on the type of the impact they cause. They can impact either the acquisition, the retention or the transmission of an epistemic good.

Acquisition virtues help you move from a point in time in which you don't have a particular epistemic good (a piece of knowledge, for instance) to a point in which you do have it. For example curiosity, good vision, open-mindedness. *Retention virtues*, in turn, increase the likelihood of you preserving epistemic goods attained. For example thoroughness, attentiveness, good memory. Last, *transmission virtues* increase the likelihood of epistemic goods being shared among the members of a community and being profitable for them. For example epistemic justice, perspicuity, eloquence. Conversely, certain vices impact acquisition, retention and transmission of epistemic goods. Those are called acquisition, retention and transmission vices, respectively.

As persuasion, in general, is a matter of conveying ideas, many of the persuasive agent's 'assets', so to speak, might be epistemic transmission virtues in their own right. For instance, being a good listener, being an enthusiastic speaker, being able to modulate speech (e.g. by converting information from a technical vocabulary to a more accessible one, while discussing with an interlocutor who does not navigate well the technicalities) – all those things render it more likely that the other person will understand what you mean and assimilate the knowledge or whatever other epistemic good you're bringing to them. Speaking arrogantly, being too eager to initiate conversation when it is not a good time, using irony and sarcasm – those might be low-level examples of transmission vices tied to persuasion. They decrease the likelihood of one's attaining the end of persuasion.

My basic idea here is that there is an intellectual transmission virtue that is a matter of using persuasiveness' assets in a way that promotes the common good. This virtue has to do with being able to speak well and use words in a way that allows for an effective transmission of certain epistemic goods, but that differs from simple persuasiveness by exceeding it in scope. Benevolent persuasiveness goes beyond simple persuasiveness,

in that the latter is a matter of successfully inducing another person to want something, or to accept some idea, whereas the former is a matter of doing the common good by using speech, or by exercising persuasiveness.

To do the common good is to do good to a community; and to do a community some good involves of course doing good to some of its members. Now, while persuasion can be accomplished in many ways, if you are a benevolent persuader, you are primarily concerned not with producing in the other person a change of mind, but rather with helping them *grow*. You don't want simply to make the person agree with you as to some practical or theoretical matter. You also want to help them become a better person, intellectually, through attaining a deeper understanding of some issue. With this, they are pushed into becoming a better person from a practical perspective as well, for with greater understanding one becomes more willing and able to do good to others; so the entire community gains.

The relevant epistemic good at stake here is *understanding*. A benevolent persuader conveys understanding, as opposed to mere propositional knowledge. Understanding was largely neglected by modern epistemologists in favour of theorizing about knowledge and related epistemic notions, such as belief, justification and rationality (Grimm 2021, §1.2); but it reappeared as a central object of concern in the last few decades. Indeed, some have argued that 'higher grade' cognitive accomplishments, such as understanding or wisdom, are more valuable than knowledge, from an epistemic viewpoint (Riggs 2003; cf. Baehr 2014). That's because one who possesses understanding has an ability to articulate reasons, while one who merely possesses knowledge doesn't (Zagzebski 2001). Thus, to say a chicken-sexer *knows* the sex of a particular chicken without being able to cite his or her grounds seems fine, but to say that someone *understands* some subject matter – say, the U.S. Civil War – without being able to explain it or to describe how the subject's various elements relate to one another seems implausible (cf. Pritchard 2010). Understanding is, thus, a more complete, or more wholesome epistemic good than knowledge.

My claim that there is an intellectual virtue of conveying understanding is loosely inspired by eastern (Confucian) virtue ethics. One of Confucius' most interesting insights pertains the notion of 'ren' (仁), which translates as 'humaneness' or 'benevolence'.[4] Roughly, 'ren' is the ability to help others advance to the degree that one has advanced oneself. Confucius defined it in the following way: [he who possesses it,] in wishing to be established himself, seeks also to establish others; in wishing to be enlarged himself, seeks also to enlarge others (*The Analects* VI, 30; see also Legge 1960: 194). He who has this virtue has the ability to help others move forward as he moves forward himself, so that they can move together, towards attaining their fullest potential. If this virtue has an intellectual dimension, this dimension can be thought about in terms of one's benevolence being exercised through his or her ability to do (the) good with words, or using words; in a way that promotes the common good.

This will become clearer by means of the examples provided in the next section. I'll try and portray benevolent persuasiveness using anecdotes starring historical figures

---

[4]Some eastern philosophy scholars deny that Confucian ren is a virtue in its own right (e.g. Rudebusch 2013); or that it is a specific virtue (e.g. Chan 1955); although the interpretation according to which it is a virtue is very traditional, reaching as far back as the Song Dynasty. I don't intend to present or to favour any particular line of interpretation of Confucian ideas, and I'll restrict myself to borrowing the general insight that there is a virtue (in the contemporary Anglo-American sense) that has to do with being disposed towards helping others grow as one grows him or herself.

and their position regarding the abolition of slavery in the United States. In discussing intellectual virtue and vice, I am keen on concrete, real-life and/or historical examples, mostly because I follow Cassam (2021) in thinking that this minimizes the dangers of oversimplification that is inherent in overreliance on fictional examples.

2. Doing good with words

First, consider John Woolman (1720–1772). A simple shopkeeper of New Jersey, he was among the first to positively oppose the practice of human slavery in the eighteenth century; and a member of the so-called Society of Friends, aka the Quakers' community, a religious group whose followers sought to live in accordance with men's direct inward apprehension of God. Upon going on a trip to attend a Society's meeting in the states of Maryland, Virginia, and Carolina in 1757, Woolman saw the miseries of slavery practised in the South with his own eyes for the first time. He became greatly alarmed at how big the system was: slaves were literally everywhere, even in the homes of his fellow Friends, the very people who vowed to live their lives in accordance with God's mandate. Weren't we supposed to be loving all God's creatures and treating them with equal respect? Stunned, Woolman decided to do something about it.[5]

The way he found to intervene was through conversation. On one occasion, a slaveholder presented the wretchedness of black folks in Africa as a justification for slave-trading. Woolman, then, replied to him that if compassion for the Africans on account of their domestic troubles was the real motive of bringing them to America, then the Friends should treat them kindly, as guests, not slaves. On another time, a Friend claimed that Africans' skin colour qualified them for slavery, inasmuch as they were descendants of Cain, who was marked with the colour black because he slew his brother Abel. To this Woolman replied that many years after Cain and Abel the flood came, and that Noah and his family were the only ones who survived the flood, according to the Scripture. The whole lineage of Cain disappeared long ago, so black people from these days could not be the descendants of Cain.

Many other pro-slavery arguments were adduced by southern Friends of the Society, and a big part of Woolman's journey in the South was given over to answering them; and then pretty much the rest of Woolman's life became a reenaction of that. He made a profound impression, for 'his remarks were simple, but impressive' (Houston 1917: 134). In fact, by the end of 1758, one year after the beginning of his journey, Woolman had persuaded a significant number of Quakers, many of whom agreed to pass a rule treating as offenders those members of the Society who insisted in slave-trading.

Now contrast Woolman to two other prominent figures connected with the early anti-slavery movement who happened to be more or less his contemporaries: Benjamin Lay (1682–1759), a comrade of Woolman in the Society of Friends; and John Adams (1735–1826), one of the Founding Fathers and second president of the U.S.

Lay was the revolutionary type of reformer. He had a taste for the 'guerrilla theatre' (Rediker 2018), i.e. for staging satirical protests against the Quackers' complicity with slavery. One of his most spectacular performances occurred in 1738, when he abruptly entered a meeting clothed as a soldier, carrying a sword and a Bible. He gave a long inflamed speech, and then drew his sword and pierced the Bible with it. Concealed inside of the Bible was a bladder filled with red fruit juice that splattered onto those

---

[5]The story is recounted in detail in Woolman's posthumously published journal, Woolman (1998).

sitting next to him. He then proclaimed that this symbolized the blood on the Quakers' hands for not standing firmly against slavery. On another episode, Lay stood barefoot at a gateway in the midst of a snowfall, knowing all Friends would pass him by on their way to the Quaker meetinghouse. When one Friend after another urged him not to expose himself to the freezing cold, he replied: 'Aha! So you pretend compassion for me, but you do not feel for the poor slaves in your fields, who go all winter half clad…' (Rediker 2018: 87–88). As Houston remarks (1917: 133), Lay usually succeeded in being heard, but he was detested by the slaveholders, those fellows of his within the Society of Friends included.

Now John Adams, on the other hand, is what one might term a quietist reformer, for he cultivated a withdrawn, almost avoidant attitude towards the topic of slavery. He sincerely opposed slavery, but he wouldn't normally engage in conversation with those who thought otherwise. His way of dealing with it was basically by pulling his own weight and, perhaps, wishing for his fellows to see him as an example to be followed. On 24 January 1801 – at the White House – Adams wrote a letter in response to two abolitionists who had sent him an anti-slavery pamphlet. In the letter, Adams expresses his views on slavery, writing: 'my opinion against it has always been known, (…) I've always employed freemen both as Domisticks and Labourers, and never in my Life did I own a Slave' (Adams 1801).

That is to say, Adams indeed believed slavery was repugnant (Howe 1964: 205), and in this he differed from many of his comrades, such as Thomas Jefferson, for instance, who owned slaves. But Adams wouldn't try to talk to people like Jefferson out of their convictions, even though they were friends. As McCullough remarks, Jefferson and Adams avoided any discussion of the subject between themselves (2002: 422). In other words, despite being opposed to slavery, he did not *support* abolitionism in full, or at least not as far as speech is concerned. The matter drew from him only passing and incidental comment (Howe 1964: 201), and he would refrain from talking about it unless asked to.

If we examine the intellectual conducts of these three individuals regarding the topic of slavery, we might see that Woolman's conduct displays a virtuous aspect that is absent from the others'. To be sure, all three of them can be credited with certain epistemic goods, say, knowledge of a certain kind (knowledge that slavery is wrong, for instance). In the midst of the eighteenth century, simply by holding on to the view that slavery is wrong and by acting on this belief, whatever the form this action might have taken, one is already displaying virtue, to a considerable degree. So, all three of them can be credited with intellectual virtues of a certain kind, e.g. intellectual courage and intellectual honesty.

It takes courage to hold on to a steadfast position about a contentious matter amongst majority of people who will be adamant in disagreeing. Intellectual courage means publicly announcing what one knows or believes in the face of social and institutional pressure to conform or be silent (Alfano 2013*b*). All three of these historical figures took these chances, in one way or another; they stood by their word, and they wouldn't refrain from freely speaking their mind when approached by others, so it seems due to credit all three of them with intellectual courage of some sort.

It also takes honesty to respond to objections that will be presented in a way that does justice to the position held, instead of distorting it in order to make it look more attractive to the interlocutor. Honest people have what is called forthrightness: they give an accurate presentation of the facts, as opposed to distorting them or concealing parts (Miller 2017: 240–1). None of those men tried to talk to their interlocutors

into giving up slavery on the promise that only thus would they be granted a place in paradise, for instance. So crediting all three of them with intellectual honesty is fine too. And I'll also grant that all three of them possess the intellectual virtue of persuasiveness, to some extent. That's because shocking people into awareness and presenting oneself as an example to be followed sometimes do work, for the purposes of convincing. So all three of them are able to exert some persuasive effect on others, to make them change their minds and, eventually, agree to stop trading slaves.

But even if we concede that all three of them succeed in the goal of persuasion and possess other virtues to some degree, it is clear that Woolman's approach to persuasion has a special aspect that both Lay and Adams' lack. He wholeheartedly wishes for his fellows not just to stop trading slaves, but mainly to understand the core reasons underneath. And he is concerned with acting in a way that will contemplate this wish: he is willing to 'take' the other person through a conversational path that will lead to that understanding. In other words, he is concerned with speaking in a way that is benevolent to the interlocutor to the extent that will directly contribute to their acquiring a higher-grade epistemic good. Intellectual benevolence is 'a refined motivation to promote others' goods as such for its own sake' (Byerly 2021: 84), where the goods at stake are distinctively epistemic goods (Byerly 2021: 35). That's exactly how Woolman's persuasiveness is: it is motivated to bring about, in the other person, the distinctively epistemic good of understanding.[6]

Conveying understanding to one's interlocutor contrasts with simply dropping a 'hint' or a 'clue', and then expecting the person to be able to pick it and interpret it, and then draw his or her own conclusions. Both Lay and Adams' approaches to persuasion are more akin to this hint-dropping style, though in almost opposite manners. Lay dropped his hints by shocking his contemporaries into awareness, and if they resisted or felt offended, he was only willing to give them more shock. Adams, on the other, dropped his hints by means of his own actions, that is, by being an example of non-slaveholding himself; and if his fellows for some reason did not get him, he was only up to carry on and let them be.

Woolman, on the contrary, is almost willing to take his interlocutor by the hand and guide them in the path that goes all the way from their current position (one that entails a form of ignorance, or a lack of understanding), throughout the set of false premises that they hold, opening them up to a new conclusion; one that, contrasting with their current position, delivers understanding and turns them into better people, from an intellectual standpoint. That is, more knowledgeable individuals, and, therefore, individuals that are in a better position to further disseminate the good. His demeanour resembles a sort of reverse Socratic method, in a sense: he is responsive

---

[6]Here I would like to draw a brief distinction between providing the interlocutor with reasons for or against a given proposition and generating actual understanding. To engage in the former is to provide a rational pathway to understanding, whereas the latter amounts to the causal pathway, the one that will elicit an actual change of mind. Under many circumstances, those two paths will come apart, and they are in fact independent, to a great extent. One can be given a step-by-step rational pathway and yet resist actually changing his or her mind; as much as one can change his or her mind as a result of an interaction that wasn't argument-based, i.e. without actually having been given reasons (this is what happens many times with climate change denialists, as found by, for instance, Bolsen and Druckman 2018). The virtue of benevolent persuasiveness, I submit, is the virtue of bringing about actual understanding by using speech. Therefore, it is, above all, the virtue of using speech as a means to successfully walk the latter path, regardless of whether or not in so doing the agent also transmits epistemic reasons (even though in many cases, I believe, the latter does happen as well).

to the interlocutor's remarks, instead of inquisitive; and he responds in a way that is informative (rather than doubt-casting); in addition to being both kind and assertive.

Another way of seeing the contrast is to observe that neither Lay nor Adams are genuinely trying to make their interlocutors grasp why slavery is wrong. To them, what matters is that people get the 'final' line of the chain, which is: don't enslave the blacks. Woolman, on the contrary, is primarily concerned with getting them to understand why. To him, his interlocutor coming to realize that one should stop enslaving the blacks is a consequence of their understanding *why* it is inexcusable. He operates by assuming that getting the person to understand why p is preponderant relatively to conveying the very fact that p, or getting them to accept p. With this the first key feature of benevolent persuasiveness becomes salient[7]:

> I. Benevolent persuasiveness is the other-oriented disposition towards transmitting understanding through speech.

Now let's find a quick example which is more epistemic in essence, in the conducts of two important minds behind the so-called chemical revolution: Joseph Priestley (1733–1804) and Antoine Lavoisier (1743–1794). This will disclose two further features of benevolent persuasiveness.

3. Epistemic citizenship and perceived ignorance

Priestley is credited as the man who first discovered oxygen (O_2). It was Priestley who conducted, in 1774, a series of experiments that produced oxygen and led to the discovery of its properties; but it was his contemporary, Lavoisier, who actually gave a detailed description of the nature of this gas and named it. That's because Priestley never fully understood his own discovery, much because he remained wedded to the erroneous phlogiston theory, the mainstream theory about the nature of combustion at the time.

Very soon after his first experiments, Priestley met with members of the Académie des Sciences in Paris and had dinner with Lavoisier, who was then a freshman chemist. At this dinner, Priestley told Lavoisier about the design of the 1774 experiments and its extraordinary and somewhat puzzling results. As a result of this conversation, Lavoisier rushed to his lab and replicated Priestley's experiments, to conclude that breathable air was not a simple substance, as it was thought at the time, but rather a combination of gases, among which was O_2. By 1777 he coined the term 'oxygen' and proposed a new theory of combustion, one that didn't resort to phlogiston.

As John West remarks, 'in retrospect it was perhaps strange that Priestley would reveal these [results] to one of his potential competitors before he had published them' (West 2014: 113). Priestley, however, seemed to care more about the scientific findings themselves than about being the one to whom they were to be credited. Regarding his discovery, he later wrote, 'As I never make the least secret of any thing that I observe, I mentioned this experiment (…) to all my philosophical acquaintances in Paris (…), having no idea at that time, to what these remarkable facts would lead'. Lavoisier, on the contrary, placed a great deal of importance on secrecy and precedence. He was vain and self-proud, to some degree (West 2014: 113–44).

---

[7]Traits listed from I to V are meant as prototypical traits of the virtue (i.e. features that will be there in most of the cases and that allow us to recognize the virtue or its lack thereof); rather than as a set of principles or necessary and sufficient conditions for the virtue.

What is more remarkable about this story for the sake of my clarifying the extent to which these men's conducts can be seen as displaying benevolent persuasiveness and its lack thereof, however, is not the fact that Lavoisier never credited Priestley, but rather the fact that Priestley saw in Lavoisier someone with whom it was worth sharing ideas and discussing their meaning, but the converse is not true. By the time they met in Paris, both of them underwrote the phlogiston theory (like pretty much everyone else at the time); and what Priestley shared with Lavoisier happened to be decisive reasons to call the theory into doubt, though he himself failed to realize that at that time. So even though he was not trying to persuade Lavoisier that the phlogiston theory was false, he was concerned with having Lavoisier understand the meaning of the 1774 experiment that he himself hadn't, and the meaning of that seemingly 'new' gas that the experiment revealed.

Lavoisier, in turn, quickly realized what the new gas amounted to, what it meant. But he didn't bother trying to show it to Priestley. On the contrary, Lavoisier began a full-scale attack on the phlogiston theory supporters, claiming that phlogiston was a gratuitous supposition, that chemical phenomena were easier to explain without phlogiston than with it, and that it wasn't but a 'bad style of philosophizing' (Best 2015: 139–140). Apparently, he never considered encouraging his fellow colleague to improve; to embrace and practice this stricter way of thinking which he himself held so dear. In sum, Lavoisier never considered helping Priestley advance to the same level of understanding he had attained himself.

As it turns out, Priestley never freed himself from the erroneous phlogiston theory and continued to espouse it until his death. Not, it seems, out of dogmatism, but simply because he concentrated his efforts into the investigation of other phenomena. Lavoisier, the main responsible for overturning the theory and enabling subsequent advancements in the science of chemistry, could have talked him out of it, i.e. could have assisted him in reaching a deeper understanding of the true nature of combustion, but wouldn't be bothered.[8]

Now this tale of the eighteenth century chemists make two further remarkable traits of benevolent persuasiveness salient for us:

II. Benevolent persuasiveness involves the individual seeing himself as a member of an epistemic community and being concerned with the common good within that community.
III. Benevolent persuasiveness is an attitude you undertake towards what you perceive as being other people's ignorance of a particular kind: their lack of understanding.

Seeing oneself as a member of an epistemic community is essentially a matter of viewing oneself as possessing epistemic peers. As Matheson (2015) points out, while there are numerous distinct conceptions of epistemic peerhood in the literature, the central feature underlying all of these many accounts is that epistemic peers are a kind of epistemic equals. Two people can be equals regarding a variety of things, such as, for

---

[8]Yes, it is true that Lavoisier's findings were made public in 1789 in his *Elementary Treatise on Chemistry*, so that, if Priestley wanted to better understand the true nature of combustion all he had to do was get a copy of this book and read it. Yet, we are left to wonder how much it would have cost Lavoisier to write a letter to his British pal, friendly initiating a conversation that could lead to the transmission of this understanding.

instance, their familiarity with evidence and the arguments which bear on some question (Kelly 2005: 174; see also Christensen 2007); the epistemic virtues they possess (Gutting 1982: 83); their possession of equally good epistemic credentials (Simpson 2013: 563), and their likelihood of making a mistake (Elga 2007: 499). I submit that two people can also be seen as equals with regard to a more basic notion of e*pistemic citizenship*. Roughly, two people can be seen as equals to the extent that they share the same fundamental rights and duties within a community.

This way of seeing epistemic equality is very different from the abovementioned, which are useful for discussions on the epistemology of disagreement (when two equally well-informed agents have different opinions on a matter), though they need not be inconsistent. Epistemic equality understood in terms of epistemic citizenship is more useful for a discussion of problems of inequality and distribution, as I shall explain next.

In a political community, citizens acknowledge one another as equals by sharing with one another certain fundamental rights and duties (however these might vary across time and context). I acknowledge you as being my fellow citizen in this country because I acknowledge that you have the same basic rights and duties as me: both you and I have the right to vote, to own property, to marry, etc.; and both you and I have the duty to educate and protect our minor children, to obey the law, and so forth. It doesn't mean, of course, that you and I will have the same citizenship *de facto*, because in virtually every community there will be inequality. For instance, you might not be able to enjoy your right to own property to the same extent that I do, because public policies, socio-economical disparity, and bureaucracies might make it so much more difficult for you to ever be able to buy land than it is for me. Nevertheless, we have the same citizenship *de jure*, which means, roughly, that we are both bonded to that particular community and bound to partake in it, and that our membership is acknowledged both by one another and by the other members of the community.

The same goes for epistemic communities. Epistemic citizens mutually recognize one another as fellows to the extent that they share the same basic rights and duties. Basic epistemic rights might include, for example, the right to epistemic justice (right to be heard by a court or an audience free from prejudice, for instance); and the right to inquiry (to go after solutions for problems, for example). Basic duties, in turn, might include the duty to provide justification for one's own claims within a debate, and the duty to reconsider one's own beliefs in light of new evidence. Again, this doesn't mean there will be epistemic citizenship de facto for everyone – one scientist could find herself not being able to enjoy her right to epistemic justice, say, because a prejudiced audience fails to pay attention to her sayings on account of her colour, or gender. Nevertheless, once her initial credentials have not been questioned, her membership is not terminated by virtue of her having had that particular right disrespected at a time. She remains a member and keeps being acknowledged as a member. So this notion of epistemic citizenship is the basic idea that people are equals (and, therefore, peers) to the extent that they have the same fundamental epistemic rights and duties; although the specific ways each of them is expected to exercise those fundamental rights and duties might of course vary.

The crucial fact here is that in any epistemic community, just like in any political community, there always is some level of inequality in terms of the way the epistemic goods are distributed, at any given time. At any moment in the history of any epistemic community, for virtually any given topic or matter of concern, there will be heterogeneity – some members within that community will have attained superior knowledge, or superior understanding, that others lack.

This is true about scientists and experts (some research labs may have come across findings that others haven't; that's why they publish the results of their work and present them in field conferences). This is true about students in any class (some will have better performance than others, which means some will have learnt more than others). And this is also true about society understood in a broader way: some people may have come across important findings that others haven't, either because they've spent more time working the relevant matter out, such as Woolman and Lay on the matter of slavery; or because they've learnt it in some other way, more or less like Lavoisier, who, as we saw, learnt it from Priestley about the mysterious gas that turned out to be O_2. What this means, at the end of the day, is not only that in every community there will always be differences of opinion, but, more crucially, that differences of opinion will be, in many cases, a reflex of differences in levels of understanding.

Now, the benevolent persuader is first and foremost one who plainly understands this dynamics. She knows that every community is epistemically equal to some extent (namely, when it comes to epistemic citizenship); and epistemically unequal to another extent (namely, in terms of the distribution of epistemic goods among its members). So she knows that for the community to exist, and especially for it to evolve, there must be a permanent movement of knowledge and other epistemic goods, a continuous flow, from those individuals who have attained the surplus, as to each particular topic of interest, to their peers who are in deficit.

The benevolent persuader is one who has attained some surplus in terms of understanding of some particular matter (she has understood something that others haven't); and who believes that the community would be better off if more people attained that too. She has a benevolent attitude towards what she perceives as being her peers' ignorance, that is, their lack of that very understanding that she has already attained, and she wants to help them overcome it. So the benevolent persuader both sees herself as fellow epistemic citizen of those that she intends to persuade, and has their common interest at heart. She sees them as deserving access to the surplus, and is willing to convey it to them through speech. Like Priestley (and very much unlike Lavoisier), the benevolent persuader does not attach special value to being the person who attained some surplus. She believes, rather, that being the only person within that community that can enjoy the surplus is less valuable than being one among others. And so she is willing to act precisely with the primary aim of accomplishing this.

This account of benevolent persuasiveness in tune with what Ryan Byerly (2021) calls 'epistemic dependability'. According to him, inquiry is not an activity that unfolds in isolation, but rather in a community with fellow inquirers. When any one of us tries to answer a question or solve a problem, we frequently rely upon the input of other people. 'We rely on them to share their perspectives with us, to teach us new skills, to challenge us with evidence we've overlooked, to model for us what excellent inquiry is. In these and other ways, we are ubiquitously dependent on our fellow inquirers' (Byerly 2021: 1).

Byerly is concerned with the question of what it takes for one to be the sort of person who functions excellently when depended upon in these ways, a question he answers by sketching and discussing a suit of *virtues of intellectual dependability*. Those include, for instance, communicative clarity (the ability to communicate clearly) and intellectual transparency (being willing and able to share your perspective with others, rather than keeping it private). Those virtues can be 'conceptualized (…) as intellectual benevolence specialized to a narrow domain — the domain of the manner in which one communicates' (Byerly 2021: 126–127). They are 'subordinate virtues to intellectual

benevolence, which is more cardinal' (Byerly 2021: 127). Benevolent persuasiveness, I submit, can be thought of as being a virtue of intellectual dependability alongside those. Contrary to the virtues discussed by Byerly, however, it extends itself beyond the domain of inquiry. It is to the benefit not only of those who are actually inquiring, but of any person that happens to lack certain piece of understanding that another person happens to possess, regardless of whether or not the former is actively seeking to gain that understanding.

Especially, benevolent persuasiveness is a virtue that takes place when one sees that his or her fellow does not know about his or her own ignorance. Ignorance can be, to use Cassam's (2015) terminology, stealthy; it can 'evade detection by those who possess it' (Cassam 2015: 20). Many times, ignorance is stealthy: we don't know what we don't know. Likewise, many times we don't know that we lack understanding on some matter, and therefore we are not actively seeking it. The Priestley–Lavoisier example shows us this, sometimes we depend on our fellows to simply come to know that we don't know or don't understand something. That's when benevolent persuasiveness exceeds the other virtues of intellectual dependability. By means of a benevolent persuasive interaction with another person, someone can start to understand something that she didn't know she didn't understand.

To sum up what we've discussed so far, benevolent persuasiveness is a matter of having a disposition towards transmitting surplus understanding through speech; it is an attitude towards what you perceive as being other people's deficit (their lack of the relevant understanding, that they might or might not acknowledge); and it involves the individual seeing himself as being an epistemic citizen alongside others, and being concerned with the common good within that community.

Now, these three features gives us access to the three main ways in which things can go wrong and one can either lack the virtue, or display an opposing vice, which I'll discuss next.

4. Lacking the virtue and displaying opposite vices

You can fail at having benevolent persuasiveness if you lack an adequate disposition to transmit understanding through speech; if you fail at perceiving other people's deficit (their lack of the relevant understanding) in a benevolent light, that is, as representing an opportunity for you to attempt that transmission; or if you fail at seeing yourself as an epistemic citizen alongside others. All three of those things can happen in different ways. These ways are deeply intertwined, and one's failing in some of these ways can vary in degree as well, verging from one's simply lacking the virtue of benevolent persuasiveness to one's possessing opposite vices.

For instance, one obvious way in which a person can fail at possessing an adequate disposition to transmit understanding through speech is exemplified by the patronizing behaviour seen in the so-called attitude of 'mansplaining'. Roughly, mansplaining happens 'when a man has explained to a woman, most often wrongly, things that they know little or nothing about, and in which the woman is an expert' (Williams *et al.* 2018: 218). The mansplainer fails because he misidentifies the surplus-deficit relation: his interlocutor does not lack understanding, he does. As a result, his disposition to transmit knowledge or understanding is inadequate.

You can also fail by not seeing your interlocutor's understanding deficit (when there is some) in a benevolent light. That is, when the other person indeed lacks a relevant piece of understanding that you possess, but you either don't see that person as

deserving to attain that understanding, or you don't see her as deserving to learn from you. You think that the person is not worth it, so to speak. This can verge from simply missing the opportunity to intervene by using speech to actually using speech in the wrong way – in a way that makes things worse.

You miss the opportunity to intervene when you refrain from engaging in conversation about given matter with someone you take as being more ignorant than you as to that very matter, or when you engage in conversation, but unconcerned about actively making it profitable for the other person on balance. You might for instance, engage in conversation while wishing for your interlocutor to come to understand something that for you is already clear, lulled by the wish or the expectation that they will listen to a couple of words of yours and instantly find meaning in them, or automatically figure things out 'by themselves'. That equals wishing that they understood something that you already do, but somehow wanting them to achieve this by their own efforts, for the most part. As you might have guessed, both Benjamin Lay and John Adams fail at being benevolent persuaders for this reason (they miss the opportunity, through not using speech in a benevolent way); and Lavoisier fails because he misses the opportunity through not using speech altogether, to approach the relevant issue with Priestley.

Being persuasive in a benevolent way requires using speech at the right time and in the right way, in a way that allows you to help the interlocutor walk the path to understanding, providing him with some sort of guidance within the chain of commitments and entailments that links a set of common-ground premises to the conclusion that you have already reached but they haven't. To be sure, this is not the same as explaining your line of reasoning, or making your reasons explicit, inasmuch as you might as well lecture someone, that is, explain your line of reasoning, without being mindful of whether or not what you're saying is actually resonating in a way that makes them truly understand the heart of the matter. It might eventually happen that that person doesn't quite get you.[9]

Now, although Benjamin Lay and John Adams' ways of using speech is not benevolent, we cannot say that they are malevolent either. Or, at least, they fall short of being epistemically evil in the worst, most remarkable way. Let's see a few examples where one fails at being a benevolent persuader by using speech in a way that is malevolent, i.e. in a way that makes things worse.

One way of being evil in the relevant sense (when one could have been a benevolent persuader instead) involves punishing people that you take as being more ignorant than you in something for not knowing or not understanding that thing. In displaying this vice, one acts in a way that looks a lot like a mix of superb, animosity and not caring, and which conveys a combination of negative feelings: being resentful at someone for not knowing something that you think they should know, or for not understanding

---

[9]When I say that the virtue of benevolent persuasiveness involves not only caring about the interlocutor getting to the destination of propositional belief, but also getting them to see for themselves the relevant reasons, this is actually very close to the core insight of the psychological literature on deep canvassing. According to this literature, individuals tend to resist persuasion on many occasions due to self-image concerns: when presented with arguments against their current views, they tend to see that as a threat to their sense of autonomy. They feel as though the interlocutor wants to decide what beliefs they should have. As a result, the attempted persuasion backfires. Presenting them with a *narrative* that gives them a different perspective, on the other hand, tends to be more effective, in terms of eliciting a change of mind. I'm thankful to an anonymous referee from Episteme for pointing that out to me. For more on deep canvassing, see Kalla and Broockman (2020) and Santoro and Broockman (2022).

something that you think they should understand; and at the same time feeling contempt towards the idea of helping them learn that thing.

You might for instance brag and mock people (typically by using irony and sarcasm) for not having yet grasped something that for you is so obvious. Or you might use catchphrases to refer to a topic that for you is almost beyond the possibility of debate, but for the other person is still open for discussion, precisely because of related issues that she just doesn't quite get, or hasn't figured out yet. For this last happening, Brazilians have recently popularized their own term: it's called 'sealing' (in Portuguese: *lacrar*). 'Sealing' is the ultimate form of 'closing', it refers to whichever mighty act of speech by means of which you give the final say as to a matter, or take what you intend to be the final turn in a conversation (Steinhauser 2021: 239). You 'seal' a discussion with a disagreeing interlocutor when you proclaim something aiming at the same time to shock them, to cast their position as utterly unreasonable and to deprive them from the possibility of replying.[10]

This vice is a variety of epistemic malevolence, which is broadly defined as 'opposition to another person's share in knowledge' (Baehr 2010: 203); and, thus, it is opposed to benevolence in general, or to benevolence as such. Also, this vice is opposed to the virtue of benevolent persuasiveness to the extent that, in displaying it, one dismisses the other person as a legitimate epistemic citizen, or a legitimate beneficiary of epistemic goods. As a result, the epistemic community to which both of them belong suffers. That's because a suit of epistemic goods tend to get confined in the hands of those who oppose sharing, whilst the targeted subjects (agents to whom the vice is aimed at) get further, not closer, to ever attaining those goods. That is to say, the vice favours concentration (rather than redistribution). In other words, it contributes to generate a situation in which those who are knowledgeable remain knowledgeable, whereas those who are ignorant remain ignorant. What is more, a cumulative effect of this vice is that the epistemic community as a whole becomes more and more fragile, insofar as creates an atmosphere of intolerance and weakens the norms of open debate.

Here is a practical example. Following the violent murder of George Floyd in May 2020 in the U.S., many international celebrities joined the Black Lives Matter Global Network, as a means to protest against police brutality and racially motivated violence. Within this wave of online manifestations, the singer Madonna twitted a video of her son dancing to 'honour' Floyd. In the video Madonna's son David, a black child, dances to Michael Jackson's song 'They Don't Really Care About Us'. The post triggered a plethora of criticisms implying that Madonna's post trivialized (and therefore weakened) the fight for raising awareness about racially motivated violence. As a result, Madonna was, to use the most up-to-date jargon, 'cancelled'. Her attitude was deemed by her detractors as completely out of order, a mix of offensive and laughable.

The distinctive display of intellectually malevolent persuasiveness in this case, however, lays in the actual tone of many of her followers' display of disapproval. 'I appreciate you allowing your son to dance away the racism for us', one person wrote, in response to the video. Another one posted a collage containing a chart where one

---

[10]To 'seal' conveys ideas of 'wrecking' or 'destroying'. The term originated in the LGBTQIA+ community, being used to refer to something absolutely different and ravishing, such as a very well executed performance on stage, or a strikingly fashionable makeup production, as Vanini (2019) remarks. However, the slang actually popularized and viralized between Portuguese speakers after being used in a video by the Brazilian Youtuber Romagaga, in 2013, with the meaning of closing interlocution in a spectacular and definitive way.

reads 'racism rate drops to 0%', followed by the comment 'Madonna's dancing son did that'.

What exactly is the problem with this sort of response, that is, why is it a response that displays intellectual malevolence, whilst aiming to persuade? It's because of the following: in the best-case scenario Madonna had good intentions but used an inadequate means, that is, it's a case of ignorance – she wrongfully believed that the video was a genuine contribution to the Black Lives Matter movement and didn't know it would resonate so badly. Also, in the best-case scenario, people who wrote the above quoted responses understood something that Madonna ignored at the time, namely, that dancing or posting a video of someone dancing simply isn't a legitimate way of supporting the fight against police brutality and racially motivated violence, and appears to prosify the happenings. That this is not what *to support* is. (In the worst-case scenario, Madonna knew that, but posted the video anyway; but let's set the worst-case scenario aside for now, for the sake of being charitable.)

The problem is that the sort of response that those people gave contributes nothing to Madonna's abandoning her current position or opinion and, upon reflection, adopting a *better* one. On the contrary, by getting such a response it is likely that Madonna would end up even further, not closer, to understanding the core issue that they wish she understood. She might get it that posting the video was a bad idea, but without having any clue on why, or on what would have been a better idea instead. For one thing, what could have been a nice opportunity for her to begin to understand that thing (and for that person to share that understanding) is lost. For what's more, because of the animosity that the response exudes, it is likely that both Madonna and those that empathize with her and are like-minded (who up to that point are still thinking that the dancing video offers legitimate support to the Black Lives Matter movement) will end up thinking that those people are ungrateful and arrogant. That they despise her sincere attempt at being supportive and, therefore, that it is not worth it to try and stand by them, or even listen to them. 'Why bother?', they will think. 'Those people don't really need support. If they did, they wouldn't despise it'.

I'm not suggesting, of course, that twitter is the ideal environment to practice intellectual benevolence, neither am I making the case that people have the responsibility or the duty of taking others by the hand and enlightening them. All I'm saying is that proceeding as Madonna's followers did only adds insult to injury. You can opt for not saying anything. But if you are going to say something, why not try to do it in a noble way, a way that communicates your message both effectively and kindly?

This example appears to imply that the Madonna followers thought that Madonna (as well as like-minded people) should know better. That is, those followers do not deny that Madonna is entitled to certain pieces of understanding, all they deny is an amicable transmission of that understanding, and this is why they fail at being benevolent persuaders. But you can also fail at being a benevolent persuader if you deploy speech as a tool for persuasion whilst implying that the other person doesn't understand something *and* never will. In those cases, you fail at seeing your interlocutor as an epistemic citizen alongside yourself; you deny their belonging to that epistemic community. That is, you fail to see them as having the potential to partake in the community as much as you do, and as being entitled to explore that potential (in spite of they not having, or not having yet, the same level of understanding that you possess).

Here is an example that illustrates this. Jean-Paul Marat (1743–1793), one of the men ahead of the French Revolution, was a political theorist, journalist, medical practitioner, and also pursued a career in science (though he cannot exactly be said to have

succeeded), having written essays on physics, chemistry, and philosophy. In his first publication in English, 'Philosophical Essay on Man' (1773), Marat tackled what is nowadays called 'the mind–body problem'. He endorsed a variant of substance dualism. According to him, the point of communication between body and soul is located not in the pineal gland, as Descartes maintained, and also not in the brain itself, but rather in 'a nervous fluid' that involves the brain: the meninges.

Also, in this paper, Marat called attention to 'the importance of science to a proper understanding and explanation of philosophy, maintaining that philosophy could not solve all problems unaided as most thinkers then held' (Hancock 1934: 656). For these opinions, Marat ended up being mocked by no less a person than Voltaire. As Gillispie (2009: 291–298) recounts, Voltaire 'annihilated' Marat's essay. In Voltaire's critique, the essay is literally held up to ridicule. Excerpts are quoted with the hint that they are nothing better than waffling. 'Voltaire is especially severe on Marat's supercilious treatment of the great lights of thought that came in his way, such as Locke, Malebranche, Condillac, and Helvétius. A certain piece of "fine writing" is the special object of Voltaire's sarcasm', as Bax points out (Bax 2018, Ch. III). In one of the most philosophical passages, Marat addresses the power of thought, saying: 'thought makes man to live in the past, the present, and the future (…), expands, so to say, his eyes to the limits of the universe, discovers for him new worlds, and makes him to enjoy nothingness itself'. Voltaire, then, greets the author on being able to 'enjoy nothingness'. 'Nothingness', he says, 'is a great empire. Reign there, but insult a little less those who are something' (Hancock 1934: 656).[11]

To be sure, Marat was not an epistemic peer of Voltaire according to any of the mainstream definitions of peerhood alluded or, at least, he never managed to be seen as such, on the contrary, he was viewed by many as a charlatan[12]. It's hard to tell the extent to which he was self-deceived and the extent to which he was trying to deceive others. However, what is interesting to discuss here is the way in which scientists and other high-hank intellectuals of that time responded to his claims and received his writings, because in this way we can see how these intellectuals treated those who they perceived as being ignorant, or inferior.

Why is Voltaire's response to Marat's essay problematic, in general, and why is it problematic in a way that stands in stark opposition relatively to the way a benevolent persuader would respond? That's first and foremost because, prima facie, Marat was trying to get it right. He was trying to attain understanding of the relationship between mind and body. He could be failing, but he was using legitimate means. He wasn't attacking science, but rather trying to be a part of it. That's made explicit by the fact that he followed, or at least tried to follow, for the most part, the formal and normative rules of the métier. For his allegations concerning the meninges, for instance, he articulated reasons, and he drew those allegations from empirical tests that were acceptable according to the science of the time.

So contrary to what we see in modern-day science denialism, where charlatans deserve criticism for rejecting scientific standards, and also contrary to what we see in the Madonna's example, where we feel that Madonna deserves criticism for making an inadequate choice that could be interpreted as offensive, Marat has made adequate

---

[11]Voltaire's critique was published in the 5 May issue of *La Harpe's Gazette de Politique et de Litterature*. In the Kehl edition of Voltaire's Oeuvres (70 vols., 1784–1789).

[12]He was generally considered as low-hank an intellectual as people who were publicly acknowledged as charlatans and pseudosciences' enthusiasts, cf. Gillispie (2009).

choices; the problem with him is that he couldn't live up to the standard. To use my terminology, he was trying to climb his way into de facto epistemic citizenship within the scientific community of the time; he was aiming to become a renowned scientist, but was failing due to ineptitude.

Now, even though Marat's attempted scientific work was not of the greatest quality, it is nevertheless capable of showing that he was not completely incompetent. It shows that he had *some* potential to improve, intellectually. So even though it is impossible for anyone at any time to tell for sure whether Marat was ill-motivated or simply unskilled, he gave at least some signs that he *could* progress, either by acknowledging the need to further inquiry into more solid reasons in support of his claims (and then taking such inquiry up), or by completely giving those claims up (and then going back to square one of the mind–body problem). Either way, he would be taking steps into becoming a more mature intellectual. Notwithstanding, Voltaire's attitude made it harder, not easier, for him to understand, first, that he had space to grow; and, secondly, which parts of his work were amendable and which were not, in which areas or which skills he still needed to develop more, and so forth. It disencouraged him to actually undertake either of the paths to improvement.

Another way of saying this is to point that, compared to Voltaire and others, Marat had certain intellectual deficiencies. His understanding of the phenomena he was interested in was limited, his attempts at explaining those phenomena were questionable and his academic writing was suboptimal. Voltaire, in turn, possibly enjoyed a surplus of those intellectual goods. But instead of being motivated towards transmitting some of them to Marat in order to help him level up, Voltaire has chosen to mock and belittle him. His response had a persuasive aspect (he tried to convince Marat that he was wrong), but it was also loaded with hostility and contempt, as if it gloated 'you will never be one of us'. He didn't see Marat as a fellow epistemic citizen, not even potentially. To use my terminology, by acting the way he did, Voltaire not only refuses to contribute to Marat one day attaining a de facto citizenship that equalled his own, he also denies Marat's citizenship de jure, that is, he excludes him beforehand, and once and for all.

This conduct discourages people who would otherwise be willing to put in the effort to level themselves up. But, most importantly, in the long run, it perpetuates inequality. That's because it contributes to keeping a suit of epistemic goods confined only to those who already possess them. It contributes to the formation and/or maintenance of an 'epistemic aristocracy' – a summit of people who possess privileged understanding and refuse to give it away. If those pieces of understanding amount to something an ignorant person could obtain by other means, the harm is made lesser. But, many times, the relevant pieces of understanding we are talking about are of such nature that their lack is stealthy. You need the other person in order to get them.

We can now update our profile of benevolent persuasiveness by adding two more traits.

IV. You fail at exercising benevolent persuasiveness if you fail to have the adequate attitude towards your fellow epistemic citizens.
V. You display one of benevolent persuasiveness' opposing vices if you have the wrong motivations when attempting at persuading your interlocutor.

You can fail to have an adequate disposition towards your fellow epistemic citizens in many ways. For instance, you can fail to see yourself and your interlocutor as fellow citizens of an epistemic community that have inequalities (surpluses and deficits). Or you can acknowledge the other person as a fellow epistemic citizen, but misidentify

the surplus-deficit relation. For instance, when you are not in the surplus quadrant, relative to some particular epistemic goods, but you approach your interlocutors as though you were, and they were in the deficit. Another way you can fail to have the virtue of benevolent persuasiveness is by being in fact in the surplus quadrant but lacking the sincere wish to use speech as a means of aiding the other person to partake in those goods. You might, for instance, not wish to have difficult conversations, ever. Lastly, it is possible to fail by having sincere wish of aiding the other person but not being able to speak to them in a way that is effective. Your might, for instance, speak in a way that elicits resistance, rather than understanding.

Not having the virtue of benevolent persuasiveness is a matter of lacking the right dispositions. In addition to not having the virtue, one can have one or more of its opposing vices. That will happen whenever one bears some sort of vile motivation, in addition to not having the right one. You can be in the surplus quadrant but have an ill motivation towards what you perceive as being your interlocutor's ignorance. For instance, you either resent them for being in the deficit quadrant and want to punish them, or you can have contempt towards the idea of aiding them to level-up; and then use speech in ways that reflect this. Those ways aim at convincing the interlocutor that they are wrong, but do not contribute to transmitting the relevant good to them, in addition to having the detrimental effect of perpetuating inequality, by further deepening the surplus-deficit gap among the members of the community.

5. Final remarks

I would like to conclude by highlighting how the ideas presented so far have a bearing upon a key issue being discussed in social epistemology in recent years, concerning whether or not understanding can be transmitted though testimony, i.e. through speech. As some scholars point out, it looks as though propositional knowledge can be very easily transmitted through speech – 'I can transmit my knowledge to you that the next train is arriving at 4:15, just by telling you. Transmitting understanding, however, does not seem to work so easily, if it is possible at all' (Grimm 2021 §3.2).

Recently, scholars writing on understanding and testimony have expressed different views on this, verging from the position that understanding cannot be transmitted at all to the claim that it can definitely be transmitted. In between, one find authors defending that understanding is very difficult to be transmitted through testimony, or that only certain varieties can.

Zagzebski (2008: 145–146), for instance, is in the first end of the spectrum. She thinks that 'Knowledge can be acquired by testimony, whereas understanding cannot (…) except in the indirect sense that a good teacher can sometimes recreate the conditions that produce understanding in hopes that the student will acquire it also'. Hills (2009: 19–20), in the same vein, says that when you are attempting to gain knowledge, testimony can serve as the justification for your beliefs, whereas when you're attempting to acquire understanding it cannot. Those scholars derive their view from the intuition that understanding is a more comprehensive and holistic notion than knowledge. If the mechanic who fixed your car tells you that the car wasn't functioning due to a defect in the crankshaft (*p*), and if *p* is true, then arguably you've acquired knowledge of that *p*. But, seemingly, unless you know a number of other facts in connection with *p* (facts regarding, for instance, how the crankshaft operates relatively to other parts of the engine) you haven't acquired any real understanding. You continue to not understand why your car wasn't functioning.

Boyd (2017), in turn, argued for a different thesis: that only one variety of understanding, that he calls 'easy understanding', can be transmitted through testimony. According to him, 'easy understanding' is that which can be acquired without requiring any specialized background knowledge or cognitive abilities; or that requires only specialized background knowledge and skills that the subject already possesses, because he or she is an expert on the relevant matter. If Boyd is right, when the mechanic tells you that your car wasn't functioning due to a defect in the crankshaft, you would understand why your car wasn't functioning, but only if you are a mechanic too.

Finally, Grimm (2019, 2021) has argued that transmitting understanding is 'sometimes easy and sometimes hard' (2019: 125), but not impossible. He believes that what is required for successful transmission of understanding is that 'the right conceptual scaffolding is in place, on the part of the recipient. But supposing the scaffolding is in place, understanding can plausibly be transmitted in much the way knowledge can' (Grimm 2021 §3.2). That is, the success of an attempt at transmitting understanding depends on the recipient being prepared (more so than on the transmitter doing a good job).

All those claims seemingly stem from the observation that understanding is something that is difficult to attain, and things that require substantial work on the part of the person often are of such nature that other people cannot do the job for them. That attempts to communicate understanding regularly fail, and that testimony is, therefore, a poor tool for transmitting understanding from one person to another, unless the receiver is especially positioned to absorb it.

I believe that the most important lesson that follows from these observations is not that other people cannot do the job for us (they obviously cannot); but rather that, precisely because understanding is so difficult to attain, we should pay more attention to those special cases of success, that is, cases in which a person is exceptionally good at transmitting it. What is it that makes them so good? Also, we should try and be more mindful of what is going wrong at those (not-so-special) cases of failure. What could be changed in those cases, or in the people involved, that would bring them closer to success? The idea of benevolent persuasiveness offers good insight to those questions.

Also, it offers interesting insight to the following issue. Precisely because understanding is so difficult, those who possess it must be mindful of hindering those who don't. When possible, those who possess some surplus understanding must be kind and generous towards those who don't. In other words, precisely because understanding is a complex and demanding cognitive accomplishment, we must cultivate virtues that facilitate it, both when we are the ones in the deficit quadrant (virtues such as open mindedness and curiosity are key) and when we are in the surplus (benevolent persuasiveness is crucial, alongside others such as honesty and humility, for example). Not that virtue in itself is an easy thing, on the contrary; but from the fact that attempts to communicate understanding usually fail, we shall conclude that it might be useful to seek the means to improve speech, as a tool for transmitting it. And one of the ways of doing this is by practising the excellences that make the speaker better. Those include, of course, the many factors that impact our way of using speech.

For one thing, some people do excel in the use of speech, in ways that are not just pragmatic (effective for the purposes of communication), but also ethically noble – they do (the) good using words. Like John Woolman, in the first example presented here. This is not to be credited to the possession of some special talent that is beyond reach. One can study those examples, imitate them, and aim at excelling in the same way. In fact, because conveying understanding is difficult, one *must* study those examples, imitate them, and aim at excelling in much the same way.

Think of some of the important things we've come to understand in the course of our lives – things that are crucial for our professional performances, e.g. the way the human eye functions (for medical doctors), how a bridge is built (for engineers), hegelianism (for philosophers), and so forth; as well as things that are important in our lives regardless of our professions (the way the state is organized; the basic norms of traffic; racism; how to have healthy relationships, and so forth). One who has achieved significant understanding of one or more of those things knows that, behind the cognitive effort taken to achieve them, there has always been somebody else's act of speech. This is the very nature of life within an epistemic community – very few cognitive products are attained by an individual alone. We depend on others, and on others' speech, for the most part. We get in touch with their speech through books, lectures, informal conversations, and in many other ways. Regardless of the specific means, others' testimony always plays a role in enlarging our understanding. And it can play a noble role, guiding and assisting us, as well as a negative role, casting us away and discouraging us.

In sum, it is true that no excellence on the part of the transmitter will ever make up for the lack of interest, for instance, on the part of the receiver, or to his unwillingness to listen; and it is also true that we cannot do the job of the recipient, we cannot understand things *for* him. But if we want to inhabit a community where epistemic goods such as understanding 'flow' more easily (rather than remaining stuck with those who have attained them), a community where cognitive products can be collectively enjoyed by its many members, what we can do is to work on our end. To try and become better in the art of assisting each other in our journeys into the acquisition of those goods. This involves cultivating not only the skill, but also the right motivations, the right frame of mind. Like Woolman, we must learn to see each other as fellows, and view the surplus-deficit as an opportunity for benevolent intervention. This is what benevolent persuasiveness is about.[13]

References

Adams J. (1801). *Letter to George Churchman and Jacob Lindley, 24 January 1801* (Gilder Lehrman Collection). https://www.gilderlehrman.org/history-resources/spotlight-primary-source/john-adams-abolition-slavery-1801.

Alfano M. (2013*a*). 'The Most Agreeable of All Vices: Nietzsche as Virtue Epistemo*logist*.' *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* **21**(4), 767–90.

Alfano M. (2013*b*). *Character as Moral Fiction*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Baehr J. (2010). 'Epistemic Malevolence.' *Metaphilosophy* **41**(1–2), 189–213.

Baehr J. (2011). *The Inquiring Mind: On Intellectual Virtues and Virtue Epistemology*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Baehr J. (2014). 'Sophia: Theoretical Wisdom and Contemporary Epistemology.' In K. Timpe and C.A. Boyd (eds), *Virtues and Their Vices*, pp. 303–23. New York: Oxford University Press.

Bax E. (2018). *Jean-Paul Marat the People's Friend: A Biographical Sketch*. Ann Arbor: Charles River Editors.

Best N. (2015). 'Lavoisier's "Reflections on Phlogiston": Against Phlogiston Theory.' *Foundations of Chemistry* **17**(2), 137–51.

---

[13]I'm specially thankful to my PhD supervisor, Professor André Abath, for commenting and discussing an earlier draft of this paper, as well as to Professors Quassim Cassam, Ernesto Perini, Arthur Lopes, Breno Guimarães, and Alexandre Luz, for valuable feedback on the ideas leading to the present paper.

Bolsen T. and Druckman J. (2018). 'Validating Conspiracy Beliefs and Effectively Communicating Scientific Consensus.' *Weather, Climate, and Society* **10**(3), 453–8.

Boyd K. (2017). 'Testifying Understanding.' *Episteme* **14**(1), 103–27.

Burks D. (1970). 'Persuasion, Self-Persuasion and Rhetorical Discourse.' *Philosophy & Rhetoric* **3**(2), 109–19.

Byerly R. (2021). *Intellectual Dependability: A Virtue Theory of the Epistemic and Educational Ideal.* New York: Routledge.

Carter A. and Pritchard D. (2016). 'Intellectual Humility, Knowledge-How, and Disagreement.' In C. Mi, M. Slote and E. Sosa (eds), *Moral and Intellectual Virtues in Western and Chinese Philosophy: The Turn Toward Virtue*, pp. 49–63. London: Routledge.

Cassam Q. (2015). 'Stealthy Vices.' *Social Epistemology Review and Reply Collective* **4**(10), 19–25.

Cassam Q. (2019). *Vices of the Mind: From the Intellectual to the Political.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Cassam Q. (2021). 'Misunderstanding Vaccine Hesitancy: A Case Study in Epistemic Injustice.' *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, **55**(3), 315–29.

Chan W.-T. (1955). 'The Evolution of the Confucian Concept Jên.' *Philosophy East and West* **4**(4), 295–19.

Christensen D. (2007). 'Epistemology of Disagreement: The Good News.' *Philosophical Review* **116**(1), 187–217.

Elga A. (2007). 'Reflection and Disagreement.' *Nous* **41**(1), 478–502.

Gillispie C. (2009). *Science and Polity in France at the End of the Old Regime.* Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Grimm S. (2019). 'Transmitting Understanding and Know-How.' In S. Hetherington and N. Smith (eds), *What the Ancients Offer to Contemporary Epistemology*, pp. 124–39. New York: Routledge.

Grimm S. (2021). *Understanding.* In: The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Summer 2021 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.). https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2021/entries/understanding/.

Gutting G. (1982). *Religious Belief and Religious Skepticism.* Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press.

Hancock D. (1934). 'Jean Paul Marat M.D.' *American Journal of Digestive Diseases and Nutrition* **1**(8), 653–66.

Hazlett A. (2012). 'Higher-Order Epistemic Attitudes and Intellectual Humility.' *Episteme* **9**(3), 205–23.

Hills A. (2009). 'Moral Testimony and Moral Epistemology.' *Ethics* **120**(1), 94–127.

Houston D. (1917). 'John Woolman's Efforts in Behalf of Freedom.' *The Journal of Negro History* **2**(2), 126–38.

Howe J. (1964). 'John Adams' Views of Slavery.' *The Journal of Negro History* **49**(3), 201–6.

Kalla J. and Broockman D. (2020). 'Reducing Exclusionary Attitudes through Interpersonal Conversation: Evidence from Three Field Experiments.' *American Political Science Review* **114**(2), 1–16.

Kelly T. (2005). 'The Epistemic Significance of Disagreement.' In J. Hawthorne and T. Gendler (eds), *Oxford Studies in Epistemology*, Vol. **1**, pp. 167–96. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

King N. (2014). 'Perseverance as an Intellectual Virtue.' *Synthese* **191**(15), 3501–23.

Legge J. (1960). *The Chinese Classics: Confucian Analects, The Great Learning, and The Doctrine of the Mean* 論語 大學 中庸. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press.

Maciejewski J. (2009). 'Persuasive Reasoning and the Praxis of Virtue.' *Vera Lex* **10**(1–2), 197–234.

Matheson J. (2015). *The Epistemic Significance of Disagreement.* London: Palgrave Macmillan.

McCullough D. (2002). *John Adams.* New York: Simon & Schuster.

Miller C. (2017). 'Honesty.' In W. Sinnott-Armstrong and C. Miller (eds), *Moral Psychology, Volume V: Virtue and Character*, pp. 237–73. Cambridge: MIT Press.

Pritchard D. (2010). 'Knowledge and Understanding.' In D. Pritchard, A. Millar and A. Haddock (eds), *The Nature and Value of Knowledge: Three Investigations*, pp. 1–88. New York: Oxford University Press.

Rediker M. (2018). *The Fearless Benjamin Lay: The Quaker Dwarf Who Became the First Revolutionary Abolitionist.* Boston: Beacon Press.

Riggs W. (2003). 'Understanding "Virtue" and the Virtue of Understanding.' In M. DePaul and L. Zagzebski (eds), *Intellectual Virtue: Perspectives From Ethics and Epistemology*, pp. 203–26. New York: Oxford University Press.

Roberts R. and Wood J. (2007). *Intellectual Virtues: An Essay in Regulative Epistemology.* Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Rudebusch G. (2013). 'Reconsidering Ren as a Virtue and Benevolence.' *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* **40**(3–4), 456–72.

Samuelson P. and Church I. (2015). 'When Cognition Turns Vicious: Heuristics and Biases in Light of Virtue Epistemology.' *Philosophical Psychology* **28**(8), 1095–113.

Santoro E. and Broockman D. (2022). 'The Promise and Pitfalls of Cross-Partisan Conversations for Reducing Affective Polarization: Evidence from Randomized Experiments.' *Science Advances* **8**(25), 1–16.

Simpson R. (2013). 'Epistemic Peerhood and the Epistemology of Disagreement.' *Philosophical Studies: An International Journal for Philosophy in the Analytic Tradition* **164**(2), 561–77.

Steinhauser V. (2021). 'A Panchronic Study on the Verb "Lacrar" from the Processes of Semanticization, Lexicalization, Grammaticization and Discursivization.' *Sintaxe Diacrônica* **22**(2), 239–65.

Vanini E. (2019). 'Nascido em ambientes LGBTs, termo "lacração" sofre apropriações e perde força nas redes.' *Jornal O GLOBO – Ela*. Rio de Janeiro, 24 nov. 2019. https://oglobo.globo.com/ela/nascido-em-ambientes-lgbts-termo-lacracao-sofre-apropriacoes-perde-forca-nas-redes-24092018.

West J. (2014). 'Joseph Priestley, Oxygen, and the Enlightenment.' *AJP: Lung Cellular and Molecular Physiology* **306**(2), L111–9.

Williams A., Maxwell E. and Tait A. (2018). 'The Power of Language: Moving Beyond Past Harms and Present Hurts.' In A. Williams, J. Robertson, D. Jones, L. Isbel and D. Loads(eds), *EqualBITE: Gender Equality in Higher Education*, pp. 216–9. Rotterdam: Sense Publishers.

Wood J. (1998). *Epistemology: Becoming Intellectually Virtuous*. Grand Rapids, MI: Intervarsity Press.

Woolman J. (1998). *The Journal of John Woolman*. With Introductions and Notes by William Penn. New York: P.F. Collier, c1909, Harvard Classics, ed. by C. W. Eliot. Vol 1.

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. (2001). 'Recovering Understanding.' In M. Steup (ed.), *Knowledge, Truth, and Duty: Essays on Epistemic Justification, Responsibility, and Virtue*, pp. 235–52. New York: Oxford University Press.

Zagzebski L. (2008). *On Epistemology*. Belmont: Wadsworth.

Veronica Campos is a postdoctoral research fellow at the Jesuit Faculty of Philosophy and Theology (FAJE), Brazil. Her primary research interests include epistemology, particularly virtue-based epistemology, virtue and vice profiling, social epistemology, and the epistemology of inquiry. Most recently, her research has focused on issues related to the epistemology of religion and religious experiences.