

Epistemic Competence and Agency in Sosa and Xúnzǐ

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Knowledge is an achievement manifesting a type of competence, akin in important respects to a skill. Accordingly, epistemic judgment is an exercise of agency. Ernest Sosa's work has elaborated these and related insights into a meticulous, persuasive version of a virtue epistemology. Given the framing assumptions of mid-twentieth century Anglo-American epistemology, developing a competence-centered explanation of judgment, knowledge, and justification required brilliant critical and creative thought. So it is intriguing and perhaps instructive to consider how some of Sosa's views relate to the outlook of early Chinese thinkers, for whom the idea of knowledge as a competent performance required no argument, being implicitly taken as an obvious, shared starting point. Here I will focus on Xúnzǐ 荀子, whose epistemological concerns in some respects dovetail with and in others complement Sosa's.¹ I will draw on concepts from Sosa's framework to elucidate features of Xúnzǐ's epistemology and in turn suggest how Xúnzǐ's theoretical orientation might cast light on Sosa's project. In particular, I will suggest that Sosa's conception of full aptness helps to elucidate the significance of Xúnzǐ's discussion of epistemic pitfalls, while Xúnzǐ's treatment of the epistemic agent's awareness of and commitment to norms of judgment helps to enrich Sosa's view of epistemic agency.

This comparative exploration has interesting implications for the long-standing divide between virtue reliabilism and virtue responsibilism in contemporary discussions of virtue epistemology.² A common way of characterizing the divide is that the reliabilist approach identifies intellectual virtues with truth-conducive faculties such as perception and memory, whereas the responsibilist approach identifies them with character traits such as epistemic conscientiousness, perseverance, and open-mindedness. Reliabilists focus more on the project of analyzing or explaining knowledge in terms of epistemic virtues, while responsibilists broaden the focus to explore what we might think of as the epistemic good life. On a Xunzian conception of epistemic agency, the ability to apply truth-conducive faculties in the 'full' manner Sosa associates with human knowledge, rather than mere 'animal' knowledge, is grounded in normative commitments characteristic of responsibilist virtues such as intellectual

¹ The 'Xún' in Xúnzǐ sounds roughly like the second syllable of the English 'friction' pronounced with a questioning tone ('-tion?'). The 'zǐ' sounds like 'dz'.

² Sosa's own (1991) is widely recognized as a groundbreaking account of a reliabilist approach. Code (1987), Montmarquet (1993), and Zagzebski (1996) are pioneering treatments of a responsibilist approach.

conscientiousness, diligence, or perseverance. Xúnzǐ's approach thus suggests that reliabilist and responsibilist virtues may be constitutively intertwined.

Sosa on Epistemic Competence and Agency

Judgment and knowledge are special cases of intentional action, suggests Sosa, and hence their nature can be clarified through a normative structure that applies generally to performances of all kinds. Epistemology is in effect a special case in which we apply this normative structure to a domain of epistemic performance.

Sosa proposes a framework in which any attempt to carry out a performance to attain some aim can be informatively evaluated along three dimensions. We can examine whether the attempt is successful, competent, and apt. A performance is successful iff it achieves its aim. It is competent iff it issues from the agent's competence in that type of activity. It is apt iff it is successful because competent.

Consider Sosa's canonical illustration of an archer attempting to hit a target. The archer's shot is successful iff it hits the target. It is competent iff performed in a way that usually would be successful.³ It is apt iff its success is due to the competence with which the shot was made—and not, for example, a lucky accident in which a sudden gust blows the arrow off course only for it to ricochet against a wall and hit the target anyway.

Sosa distinguishes between animal, reflective, and full aptness, allowing us to recognize different dimensions and levels of competence. Animal aptness refers to the first-order aptness manifested in performances that are successful because competent, as when a shot hits the target because of the archer's skill. Reflective aptness refers a further, reflective dimension of competence extending beyond animal aptness. Normally a competent archer not only attempts shots but while doing so attempts to assess the chance of making an apt shot given the conditions—the distance and size of the target, the light, the wind, whether the archer is fresh or fatigued, and so on. In making such assessments, the archer aims at an apt second-order awareness of the likelihood of achieving a first-order, animally apt shot.⁴ A reflectively apt shot, then, is one that is animally apt and is attempted while the archer is aptly aware that the shot will be animally apt.

Reflective aptness requires only the conjunction of first-order, animal aptness and apt second-order risk assessment. Full aptness is achieved through a causal connection between these. A performance is fully apt iff 'it is guided to aptness through the agent's reflectively apt risk assessment' that the performance

³ Sosa describes competence by saying that 'its speed and orientation would in normal conditions take it to the bull's-eye' (2016: 6). This description allows that a beginning archer with unreliable skills could nevertheless make a competent shot. I suggest that competence is probably better understood as referring to the agent's reliability in achieving the aim.

⁴ Sosa (2015: 68). Sosa speaks here of 'competent' rather 'apt' second-order awareness, but I take his point to extend to aptness.

would indeed be apt (Sosa 2015: 69). Sosa proposes that full aptness is a normatively desirable status for performances in general (2015: 85).

Sosa's notion of full aptness is in effect an attempt to explain how full-fledged competence requires not only that one's first-order performances be reliably successful but that this success reflect a second-order grasp of the extent of one's own first-order reliability. This higher-order understanding works to increase reliability by reducing or eliminating failed attempts. It also removes the element of luck from what Sosa calls a 'creditable' performance. For if our first-order performances are not guided by an apt second-order understanding of our own first-order competence, we could all too easily make inapt attempts (Sosa 2015: 72). In that case, even when our attempts do succeed, they might as easily not have, and so our successes are partly a matter of luck.

This framework for evaluating performances applies as well to judgment and belief, for these can be regarded as epistemic performances that constitutively aim at truth (Sosa 2016: 11). Judgment is an exercise of epistemic agency in which we voluntarily attempt to represent aptly how things are. To judge that *p* is to affirm that *p* in an endeavor to affirm aptly that *p* (Sosa 2015: 80). So judgment is fully apt when it produces an apt representation that is such partly because it was guided by the agent's apt self-assessment of competence. Human knowledge (as contrasted with 'animal' knowledge) is then fully apt belief or, as Sosa also calls it, 'knowing full well' (2015: 85).

Unlike judgments, beliefs are often not the result of voluntary attempts to represent how things are. Many beliefs seem to be states that simply occur in us as a result of the functioning of perceptual systems, for example. My belief that it is daytime right now is an attitude I just have, by virtue of being awake, not the result of an intentional performance. Acknowledging this point, Sosa suggests that we can explain such epistemic attitudes also as the result of performances, but implicit performances that are not intentional or voluntary. He draws an analogy to the functional teleology of an organ such as the heart. The heart's pumping can be regarded as a performance aimed at circulating blood (Sosa 2016: 5). Like intentional attempts, such non-intentional, functional aimings can succeed or fail. So functional capacities such as perception can be described as engaged in implicit performances that have a constitutive aim, such as true representation (Sosa 2015: 19, 51, and 87). Perception provides us with 'seemings', representational states that function as 'attractions' to represent that such and such (Sosa 2015: 93). These seemings occur below the level of agentive control but nevertheless aim at correct representation (Sosa 2015: 93). We can think of them as inclinations to believe. When the inclinations are relatively strong, they amount to implicit, functional belief (Sosa 2015: 51), a distinct type of belief from the explicit, intentional or judgmental beliefs that result from judgment.⁵ When the

⁵ Caution is needed here in handling the analogy to the teleological functioning of the heart. Even if the process of belief formation normally happens subconsciously, the agent can control or at least shape it through explicit training—by learning to apply a new set of concepts, for

strength of these inclinations passes a certain threshold, the agent acquires the disposition to affirm a judgment and thus comes to hold a judgmental belief (Sosa 2015: 92). Like judgmental beliefs, functional beliefs can be assessed as to their success, competence, and aptness.⁶ However, they are not subject to the same sort of deontic evaluation as judgmental beliefs concerning what one may or ought to believe, as such evaluation pertains only to intentional endeavors (Sosa 2015: 193). This is because functional beliefs are not ‘endeavors’, which derive from freely determined choices and judgments (Sosa 2015: 192).

Sosa’s account of the relation between functional and judgmental beliefs raises several issues that call into question aspects of his explanation of epistemic agency.

The crux of agency for Sosa seems to lie in the capacity to freely determine one’s aims or choices (2015: 192). It thus contrasts with events we suffer passively or movements we make purely by reflex. He recognizes two sorts of agency: agency *simpliciter*, in which we freely choose our endeavors, and an intermediate form of agency in which we do not freely determine our performances, which issue from implicit, passive functioning, but the outcome of these performances is nevertheless rationally derived from freely chosen endeavors and so also subject to a kind of rational evaluation (2015: 193–194).⁷

This characterization of the two varieties of agency makes it seem that epistemic agency for Sosa lies mainly in arriving at beliefs by explicit, voluntary affirmation through reflectively self-conscious judgment. He seems to see the crux of epistemic agency as our ‘free choice to judge affirmatively’ on some question ‘provided we are aiming to get it right’ (2015: 210). If this is indeed his stance, I suggest that this model is too intellectualist. Judgments that we make an explicit, free choice to affirm seem rare in practice and are probably implicated in only a small portion of our epistemic attitudes.⁸ Hence they do not seem especially central to understanding epistemic agency. Sosa recognizes that exercises of epistemic agency can be subconscious (2016: 10), and that performances can be apt, and agentive, when they spring from implicit, automatic reactions or involuntary operations that agents have trained themselves to perform, as when a tennis player automatically volleys a ball or we automatically remember a phone number we worked to memorize (Sosa 2015: 94–95). Beyond this, I suggest that even when we do explicitly consider evidence and form a belief through self-conscious deliberation, often we do not experience the process

instance—in ways that we cannot control involuntary physiological functioning such as the pumping of the heart.

⁶ Since functional beliefs are usually not guided by reflective aptness, however, they are unlikely to attain full aptness (2015: 94).

⁷ One example might that, having measured the length of a line as ten centimeters, we find ourselves ‘attracted’ to assent to the claim that another line, which looks longer, is more than ten centimeters long (cf. Sosa 2015: 193).

⁸ As Sosa notes, much of what we do freely and responsibly is not by conscious, deliberative choice or decision (2016: 10).

of reaching a judgment as free or voluntary.⁹ To be sure, sometimes we consider the evidence and self-consciously decide to change our belief or withhold judgment. But often, as we ponder the evidence, a judgment just comes to us through implicit functioning, much as the belief that it is day or night right now just comes to us.

I suggest that, especially for highly competent agents such as professional athletes and performing artists, the distinction between a voluntary endeavor and an automatic, functional response seems neither as sharp nor as significant in explaining agency as Sosa takes it to be. He contrasts ‘animal belief’, which he describes as a ‘constituted by a stored state that guides conduct subconsciously’, with ‘reflective, judgmental belief’, which he sees as ‘a disposition to judge affirmatively in answer to a question, in the endeavor to answer correctly, with truth, reliably enough or even aptly’ (2015: 209). But both descriptions seem to refer equally to dispositions that guide action in various ways, sometimes self-consciously, sometimes not. Moreover, as we saw, when functionally produced ‘seemings’ cross a certain strength threshold, the dispositions that constitute functional beliefs can instead be considered to constitute judgmental beliefs (Sosa 2015: 92), further blurring the line between the two.

Sosa’s approach as developed in *Judgment and Agency*, then, does not provide a sufficiently informative account of just what agency, and specifically epistemic agency, consists in. Elsewhere he provides hints of the direction in which he might develop such an account. He notes that beliefs sometimes seem not to be voluntary. For example, ‘I seem not now to be free at will not to believe that I am awake’ (Sosa 2016: 10). Nevertheless, he suggests, ‘what voluntary freedom requires is only the ability to override *improper* influences’ (2016: 10). That is, the sort of freedom required for epistemic agency need not entail that we be able to affirm or disaffirm any belief at all, but that we be free to correct and improve our beliefs ‘so as to align our action with the requirements of reason’ (2016: 10). (Such correction, I suggest, might occur either through explicit judgment or through guidance by implicit, functional dispositions.) Beyond this, Sosa proposes, epistemic agents are indeed free to believe that *p* or not insofar as they are free to decide ‘whether to address the relevant “whether-*p*” question at all’ (2016: 11). Having committed to some end, agents are not free to decide at will what is an effective means to that end. Analogously, having committed to aptly answering whether-*p*, we are not free to affirm that not-*p* when faced with strong evidence that *p*. But we do remain free to adopt or reject our ends, such as the end of answering whether-*p*.

⁹ Sosa makes a similar observation regarding beliefs arrived at through subconscious intentional acts (2016: 10), but I suggest the point also holds of many beliefs arrived at through self-conscious deliberation. Perhaps Sosa disagrees, as elsewhere he says that we often ‘freely conclude deliberation’ by deciding ‘whether to accept that the balance of reasons sufficiently favors either side’ (2015: 208). My experience as an epistemic agent is that such decisions do occur but infrequently.

Here Sosa's approach takes an intriguing turn toward Xúnzǐ's, for Xúnzǐ's implicit conception of epistemic agency emphasizes self-improvement and presents commitment to an appropriate set of ends or norms as the fundamental attitude of the conscientious epistemic agent.

Xúnzǐ

Like other early Chinese theorists, Xúnzǐ explains knowledge in terms of competence in discriminating and naming things, specifically for the purpose of guiding action and carrying out the *dào* 道 (way). The capacity for or faculty of knowledge he calls 'the knowing' (*zhī* 知) (Hung 1966: 22/5).¹⁰ Knowledge is demonstrated through the performance of discriminating correctly, with respect to some 'name', what is *shì* 是 (this, right) from what is *fēi* 非 (not-this, wrong) (2/12), such that the attitudes of 'the knowing' 'match' (*hé* 合) the distinctions between things (22/5). In Xúnzǐ's framework, the functional counterpart to belief is the attitude of deeming something the kind of thing designated by some name. The counterpart to judging is distinguishing or discriminating something as properly taking some name. The use of 'names'—mainly general terms referring to kinds—rests on our ability to distinguish *shì* from *fēi*, two terms referring what is or is not relevantly similar and thus falls within the extension of the same name. The purpose of names is to distinguish different social ranks and similar from different things, so that intentions can be conveyed and tasks carried out (22/14–15). Names can be used for this purpose because as creatures of the same kind, with the same sort of constitution, we have sense organs that detect things similarly. This enables us to establish conventions for the use of names by which to discriminate distinct kinds of relevantly similar things (22/16–17).

Similarities and differences between features of things are differentiated by means of the sense organs and recognized by the heart (*xīn* 心), 'heart/mind'—the organ of cognition—through a capacity called 'the verifying knowing' (*zhēng zhī* 徵知) (22/19). The sense organs 'record' the features of things—sounds, shapes, and so on—and the heart 'verifies', or recognizes, them (22/20). To qualify as having perceptual knowledge of something, an agent's sense organs must 'record' it, such that the agent is aware of it, and the heart must 'verify' it, such that the agent is able to 'explain' (*shuō* 說) it (22/20–21). Presumably, the point is that to count as knowing a thing, the agent must demonstrate competence by applying an appropriate name to it.¹¹

Xúnzǐ and other early Chinese theorists do not specify a justification requirement for knowing. Knowledge is simply success in getting the distinctions right. Lucky guesses are excluded because knowledge is implicitly associated with systematic competence across a variety of interrelated and contrasting cases. The knowing of a highly competent agent, for instance, is said to connect together a unified system of kind distinctions (8/122) or enable discourse on a myriad

¹⁰ References to the *Xúnzǐ* give chapter and line numbers in Hung, ed. (1966).

¹¹ For a more detailed discussion of Xúnzǐ's theory of perception, see Fraser (2016).

cases while demonstrating mastery of such a system of kinds (23/78–79). Arguably, Xúnzǐ’s conception of knowledge (*zhì* 智) here converges with what we might think of as understanding or wisdom. It involves competence not merely in recognizing things but in grasping the ‘patterns’ (*lǐ* 理) by which they are organized, including how they normally function and how they relate to each other. As we will see, Xúnzǐ’s concept of ‘patterns’ is pivotal to his conception of epistemic excellence.

A revealing feature of Xúnzǐ’s approach to knowledge is just how little he says about it. He takes it as obvious that knowledge is a competence in drawing distinctions between the kinds of similar things that take various names—so much so that the subject merits little discussion. His interest as an epistemologist is mainly not in the theoretical project of explaining knowledge but in the practical project of correcting and improving our distinction-drawing competence. The central topic of his most sustained epistemological discussion—‘Resolving Obscuration’ 解蔽—is not knowledge, *per se*, but error. In particular, it is how to use our cognitive and reflective capacities to avoid or mitigate what he calls *bì* 蔽 (obscuring, blinkering), his catch-all term for conditions that can obstruct correct distinction-drawing.

Xúnzǐ’s central claim here is that difficulties in attaining and applying knowledge arise from being fixated on and thus blinkered by only part of the relevant factors or circumstances, such that we are unclear about the broader patterns (*lǐ* 理) of how things work.

All troubles that people have are due to their being blinkered by one bend, putting them in the dark as to the greater patterns (*lǐ* 理). (21/1)

The major issues that capture Xúnzǐ’s attention are how to avoid ‘blinkering’ or falling victim to ‘obscuration’ by managing the operations of the heart (*xīn* 心)—the seat of cognitive, affective, and conative functioning—and how to seek clarity as to the broader patterns of things by committing to the right *dào* (way) and thus adopting appropriate norms of judgment.¹²

Although he does not use this nomenclature, Xúnzǐ’s discussion of blinkering presents what amounts to a distinctive view of conscientious, competent epistemic agency. He regards epistemic activity as a field of practical skill, which he calls ‘arts of the heart’ or ‘heart techniques’ (*xīn shù* 心術). He discusses the performance of the gentleman or the sage, an epistemic agent who is not merely competent but expert. Such an agent seeks to excel in the ‘arts of the heart’, much as expert athletes or performing artists do in their endeavors.

Here I want to call attention to three prominent features of Xúnzǐ’s epistemology that reflect his distinctive view of epistemic competence and agency and complement or contrast with Sosa’s approach.

¹² For a detailed interpretation of Xúnzǐ’s notion of ‘blinkering’ and his associated part-whole conception of knowledge and error, see Fraser (2011: 127–48).

1. The first feature converges with Sosa's notion of full aptness, and indeed Sosa's ideas help to elucidate the significance of Xúnzǐ's views.

Xúnzǐ contends that in unclear circumstances, when in observation there are grounds for doubt or one's heart is unsettled, the competent epistemic agent withholds judgment.

Whenever in observing things there is doubt or one's heart within is not settled, then external things are unclear. Our thinking being unclear, we can't yet fix 'so' or 'not-so'. (21/67–68)

His examples of unclear circumstances include perceptual illusion, intoxication, unreliable means, and incompetent testimony (21/68–73). Someone walking in the dark might mistake a horizontal boulder for a crouching tiger or a small tree for a person, for example, because 'the darkness obscures their vision'. A drunk will stoop while exiting the city gate, taking it to be a low doorway, because 'the alcohol disrupts his spirit' (21/70). We do not judge how attractive we look by our reflection in moving water, because 'the water's position is disturbed' (21/72). Nor do we determine whether there are stars in the sky by asking the blind, because their 'functional proficiency is confused' (21/73).

Xúnzǐ's key claim about these examples is that competent agents are not misled in such dubious circumstances, because they attend to the 'greater patterns' and so are not blinkered by the strictly partial resemblance between the objects they are observing and the reference objects they may seem similar to.

So from a mountaintop looking down at oxen, they are similar to sheep, but someone seeking sheep does not go down to lead them away; the distance obscures their size. From the foot of a mountain looking up at trees, ten-meter trees are similar to chopsticks, but someone seeking chopsticks does not go up to break them off; the height obscures their length. (21/71–72)

In settling whether things are 'so' or not, the competent agent takes the broader context into account and avoids 'using the doubtful to resolve the doubtful' (21/74), or relying on unreliable means to settle questions whose answer is unclear.

Xúnzǐ's treatment of these examples converges with Sosa's view that one dimension of an epistemic agent's competence is competence in assessing the reliability of one's own cognitive operations in various contexts and in guiding one's epistemic attitudes accordingly.¹³ When this self-reflexive competence guides the agent to competently adopt correct epistemic attitudes, the result will be an epistemic status corresponding to Sosa's notion of full aptness. Obviously, Xúnzǐ's theoretical apparatus is different from Sosa's, and he does not employ an

¹³ By 'epistemic attitudes', I mean beliefs and judgments in Sosa's framework and deemings and discriminations in Xunzi's.

explicit conception of aptness, let alone full aptness. He is not proposing an account of knowledge as fully apt belief. Nor does he explicitly conceptualize our grasp of our own reliability, given the conditions, as a second-order risk assessment concerning our own first-order performance. He frames it instead as an awareness of how performance must be adjusted to circumstances, in particular how awareness of the broader context and our own psycho-physiological states can prevent us from being blinkered, and thus misled, by a partial, limited view of our situation.¹⁴ Clearly, however, Xúnzǐ does share with Sosa the stance that the performance of a competent epistemic agent will be guided by a meta-awareness of how reliable the agent's normal means of generating epistemic attitudes will be in the situation at hand, and this meta-awareness includes a background competence in assessing and coping with difficult or abnormal conditions. Epistemic competence is not simply a matter of distinguishing things correctly in simple cases—just as competence in any field is not demonstrated by handling only trivial cases—because an agent who can manage only simple cases might easily become confused in more complex conditions. To demonstrate genuine competence, the agent must be able to avoid 'blinkering' or 'obscuration' even in challenging circumstances by drawing on a higher-order competence in assessing and avoiding problems. The outcome is an epistemic status corresponding to Sosa's notion of full aptness.

2. The second feature I want to underscore makes it clear that what Xúnzǐ is describing here is indeed a second-order meta-awareness of one's own cognitive operations and how they relate to circumstances and broader norms.

For Xunzi, a characteristic feature of agents with expert epistemic competence is a second-order concern to improve their competence. Arguably, this stance is a direct consequence of a performance approach to epistemology, which invites parallels between epistemic endeavors and, for example, athletic endeavors. Any athlete is concerned to play well, and agents who aim at success in sport typically devote attention to improving their performance. Analogously, on Xúnzǐ's view, an aspect of epistemic competence is that the agent actively manages the operations of the heart so as to perform well epistemically. The agent seeks to improve both explicit judgment (which for Xúnzǐ follows from deliberation, *lǜ* 慮) and immediate, implicit distinction-drawing.¹⁵

To improve their competence, agents employ second-order knowledge of the difficulties that can arise in epistemic performance. The sage—the expert agent—understands the problems that arise in the 'arts of the heart' (21/28). Such

¹⁴ As I explain in Fraser (2011), Xunzi here draws on a part-whole theory of error. Errors arise from attending to only part of the relevant circumstances rather than the whole.

¹⁵ Unlike Sosa, Xúnzǐ acknowledges purely functional, sub-agentive capacities only at the level of the 'differentiating' activity of the sense organs. All cognition, whether implicit and automatic or explicit and deliberative, falls within the scope of the 'arts of the heart' and thus epistemic agency. Indeed, some of Xúnzǐ's descriptions of expert epistemic agents imply that, as with expert performers in many fields, their expertise can be expected to render explicit, deliberative judgment largely unnecessary (5/60–61). Nearly all of their epistemic attitudes arise automatically, without explicitly self-reflective thought.

an agent prevents error by conscientiously employing the heart to recognize and avoid various sources of bias or misjudgment. This conscientiousness is the basis for the self-reflexive, critical awareness that enables competent agents to avoid epistemic pitfalls. Exemplary agents ‘take charge of their hearts and manage them carefully’ (21/11) so as to avoid blinkering and error. For ‘if the heart is not employed at it’, we can fail to recognize even the obvious: ‘though black and white be right in front of us, the eyes fail to see them; though thunder-drums be right beside us, the ears fail to hear them’ (21/4–5).

To perform properly, the heart must maintain a calm, attentive equilibrium, just as in sports or the performing arts. A key to proper performance is to prevent the heart from losing balance, leading to bias, blinkering, and one-sided, erroneous performance.

Thus the human heart can be compared to a pan of water. Place it upright and do not move it, and the sediment settles to the bottom and the clear water rises to the top. Then it is sufficient to see your beard and eyebrows and discern the fine patterns on your face. A breeze passing over it, the sediment moves below and the clear water is disturbed on top, and you cannot get even the general outline right. The heart too is like this. So guide it with proper patterns, cultivate it with clarity, and let nothing bias it. Then it will be sufficient to fix *shì-fēi* and settle doubts. If minor things pull it about, then externally one’s uprightness will be altered and internally the heart will be biased, and it will be insufficient to decide even gross patterns. (21/54–58)

As this passage indicates, Xúnzǐ holds that proper ‘guiding’ and ‘cultivating’ in the arts of the heart can train us to avoid error. To discriminate *shì-fēi* and resolve confusing circumstances reliably, we can train ourselves to maintain an impartial, upright stance and an undisturbed, unbiased heart.

For Xúnzǐ, then, fully competent epistemic agency requires that we actively take control of our epistemic performance and train ourselves to improve it. How exactly do we do so?

Xúnzǐ holds that differences between things are the basis for drawing distinctions and thus for cognition. At the same time, he explains, differences are a potential source of obscuration, disrupting our ability to ‘sort’ or ‘grade’ (*lún* 倫) things properly (21/7, 21/29). Things can be similar or different in various ways, with respect to various features. One-sidedly or injudiciously attending to any one feature may lead us to overlook or discount others that may also be pertinent. In attending to what is desirable about something, for example, we may overlook what is detestable about it, while in attending to what is beneficial about it, we may overlook what is harmful (3/45–49). More broadly, our recognition of ‘that one’—one side of a distinction—can interfere with our understanding of ‘this one’—whatever falls on the other side (21/38).

To avoid bias, then, we need neutral, reliable criteria. We need a set of norms that specify the relevant distinctions and guide us in drawing them and thus forming correct epistemic attitudes.

3. The question of criteria takes us to the heart of Xúnzǐ's approach to epistemic agency and the third main feature I want to highlight. For Xúnzǐ the most fundamental aspect of epistemic agency is our higher-order capacity to approve and commit to a system of norms by which we check, correct, and improve our epistemic attitudes.

Xúnzǐ contends that, acting from a second-order awareness of the sorts of problems that can arise in the 'arts of the heart', the expert agent guides epistemic attitudes by reference to norms the agent explicitly identifies, endorses, and seeks to maintain (21/29–34). Setting aside potential grounds for bias, the sagely agent 'all-inclusively lays out the myriad things and weighs them on the scale' (21/29). The 'scale', says Xúnzǐ, is the *dào* 道 (21/29, 22/74), a normative 'way' of conduct. An expert in the *dào* avoids the biases produced by attending to only one side of a distinction or one part of a scene by approaching things comprehensively, in terms of their relation to everything else, and thus grasping the 'greater patterns' (21/51–52). According to Xúnzǐ, since such an agent is focused fully on the *dào*, rather than on particular, partial interests or features, he is correct; since he uses the *dào* as a basis for examining things, he is discerning in how he discriminates them into kinds; and thus, since he uses correct intentions to proceed with discerning sorting of kinds, the myriad things find their proper place (21/52–53).

Before we can apply the *dào* in this way, however, our heart must recognize (*zhī* 知, 'know') and 'approve' (*kě* 可) it (21/32). 'Approval' is a normative attitude; to approve something is to deem it worthwhile and permissible. Elsewhere, in discussing moral development, Xunzi takes the heart's approving things to be the central attitude that drives human agency, what most fundamentally controls our conduct (22/55–63). His stance on epistemic agency is thus a special case of his more general view of agency. In both contexts, the pivotal capacity that marks us as agents is the capacity to form and act on normative, action-guiding attitudes of approval or endorsement, whether explicit or implicit. In the case of epistemic agency, the relevant attitude is one of approving the norms by which to evaluate epistemic attitudes as correct or not. These norms then serve as the basis for checking and improving our epistemic competence.

Reflections for Further Inquiry

For Xúnzǐ, agency—including epistemic agency—lies most fundamentally in our capacity to commit to a normative *dào* and apply it to correct and improve both our particular performances and our general competence. Xúnzǐ would thus agree with Sosa that the ability to override improper influences and to decide what 'whether-*p*' questions to address is crucial to epistemic agency. Even more crucial

for him, however, is the capacity to recognize, approve, and thereby aim to meet, norms of correctness.

Xúnzǐ's epistemology explicitly presents this latter capacity as pivotal to expert epistemic competence. Sosa does not, but arguably his framework incorporates a parallel idea. For Sosa, a constitutive aim of epistemic performances is truth, which provides standards of correct performance. Epistemic agency, then, entails a higher-order concern to aim at truth.

There are two key concepts here, truth and aiming. Might Xúnzǐ's epistemology enrich our understanding of them?

For Xúnzǐ, the norms that the epistemic agent approves and commits to are conceptualized not as truth but as *dào*—a way or path of competent conduct that we aim to follow. In his theoretical scheme, *dào* includes the norms that determine the correct use of words, thus fixing semantic content and in turn the content of epistemic attitudes. Hence whether some deeming or utterance is true—Xúnzǐ would say whether it is 'so' (*rán* 然)—is ultimately determined by *dào*. Truth is a byproduct of and explained by *dào*—specifically, the *dào* of distinguishing different kinds of things. The upshot is that epistemic norms ultimately rest on a subset of norms of conduct and indeed on a normative conception of the proper way of life.

Xúnzǐ's epistemology reminds us of the tacit background assumed by the idea of agentive performances that aim at truth. To aim at something, Xúnzǐ would contend, we must 'approve' it. The attitude of approval expresses endorsement of certain values or norms. So an implication of Xúnzǐ's stance is that ultimately epistemic agency, or at least competent epistemic agency, is a matter of our holding certain values—of our approving, and hence valuing and committing to, certain norms of performance. Our capacity to be epistemic agents rests on our capacity to value, endorse, and act on norms. Hence to the extent that knowledge requires epistemic competence, we can attain knowledge only through a commitment to certain values. An implication is that a key feature that distinguishes the competent epistemic agent from a mere reliable mechanism—a reliable temperature-reporting device, for instance—is the capacity for axiological commitment, including the capacity to grasp how a system of norms commits us to various epistemic and inferential relations between our epistemic attitudes and the circumstances we find ourselves in.

The sort of normative commitment Xúnzǐ depicts here, I suggest, is characteristic of responsibilist virtues such as epistemic conscientiousness, diligence, or perseverance. On a Xunzian approach, then, a responsibilist commitment to relevant norms seems a necessary condition for competence in applying the criteria that underwrite reliabilist virtues. To possess the sort of systematic competence and reliability Xúnzǐ associates with knowledge, one must be an epistemic agent who manifests at least some degree of responsibilist virtue. To reliably get things right, an agent must be conscientious about getting things right. An implication is that the reliabilist virtues needed for the advanced epistemic competence manifested in, for instance, fully apt belief are partly

constituted by and intelligible only against a background of responsibilist virtues. An adequate account of epistemic agency will need to weave together both responsibilist and reliabilist components.

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