The Importance of Being Modest

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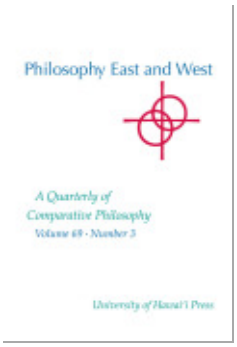

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The Importance of Being Modest

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Vrinda Dalmiya's *Caring to Know* is a rich and wide-ranging book. Its aim is to extend the insights of feminist care ethics to analytic virtue epistemology. According to the theory that Dalmiya defends, a *good knower* possesses certain intellectual virtues that are conductive to *caring* interpersonal encounters. Dalmiya argues that the Sanskrit epic *Mahābhārata* gives us the resources to construct this conception of a good knower.

At a number of places in the book Dalmiya claims that her approach to the *Mahābhārata* is an instance of comparative philosophy: she takes some concepts from contemporary care ethics and analytic virtue epistemology and uses them to make sense of certain portions of the *Mahābhārata*. But treating the book merely as a work of comparative philosophy would be doing it an injustice. Dalmiya argues that interpreting the *Mahābhārata* as an epistemological text can help us make progress in some live debates in contemporary epistemology. However, I worry that the project isn't entirely successful in this last respect. In what follows, I explain why this is so.

I. The Project

Let me begin by laying out the contours of Dalmiya's project. What distinguishes the care-theoretic approach to morality from traditional moral theories is that it presupposes a conception of persons as *relational entities*, i.e. constituted by a network of social relationships that shape how they think, feel, and act. Since, in the care-theoretic approach, persons are constituted by their relations with particular others, being a good person involves being good toward those particular others. According to this view, then, a morally good person is attentive in her practical deliberation to the needs of particular others who depend on her for their well-being and to whom she therefore is responsible. This is significant: it means that certain patterns of deliberation that are treated as suboptimal by impartialist moral theories turn out to be morally ideal in this view. For instance, the good person may often be guided by her emotional attachments to her loved ones in figuring out what to do. Similarly, she may not always be guided by general moral principles in her decision making; rather, she might carefully weigh the needs of affected persons on a case-by-case basis. The good person, even when she makes the right choice, may not be able to respond adequately to the needs of all those who depend on her. Thus, she will

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remain acutely aware of the responsibilities that go inevitably unfulfilled, and thus will be subject to moral uncertainty and feelings of guilt and regret. Dalmiya's aim is to extend this care-theoretic approach to epistemology.

In chapter 1, Dalmiya motivates this project. She distinguishes two different ways in which one could pursue a care-centered approach to epistemology. On both these views, care functions as an epistemic virtue, so both views give rise to a form of virtue epistemology.

1. *Care as a Virtue of Mechanism*. The first approach involves arguing that the practice of caring is itself conducive to gaining knowledge. For instance, a mother who cares for her child might thereby gain some knowledge of her child that she could not otherwise gain. According to this view, care is a *virtue of mechanism*, that is, a cognitive skill or process, like normal vision, and by this agent one can reliably acquire certain kinds of true beliefs.
2. *Care as a Virtue of Character*. The second approach involves using the conceptual resources of care ethics to offer a conception of a good knower. Just like a defender of care ethics, a care theorist in epistemology might argue that a good knower adopts caring attitudes toward others: she is attentive to the needs of particular others when she engages in projects of inquiry, and she can be fruitfully guided by her emotions, like anger or empathy, when she is trying to figure out certain truths about the world. Following this line of thinking, care functions not merely as a virtue of mechanism, but also as a virtue of character that guides inquiry in all domains.

In the same chapter, Dalmiya offers a number of arguments for this second variety of care-based virtue epistemology. I will just mention the one that is relevant to assessing the success of Dalmiya's project.

The Argument from Epistemic Harm. Dalmiya thinks that the second kind of care-based virtue epistemology can help us avoid certain kinds of *epistemic harms* that women and other marginal groups face. Take an instance of what Miranda Fricker calls *testimonial injustice*. The testimony of women and members of other marginal groups is often treated as less credible than that of members of socially dominant groups. Since a careful knower would engage in inquiry in a way that is sensitive to the epistemic needs of particular others (e.g., their need to be recognized as credible testifiers), such a knower would avoid such epistemic harms.

In the subsequent chapters, Dalmiya argues for three main claims:

Claim 1. The *Mahābhārata* endorses a care-theoretic approach to ethics.

Claim 2. The *Mahābhārata* defends a form of virtue epistemology within which a certain intellectual virtue—relational humility—plays a central role. This virtue of relational humility is arguably based on the ethics of care endorsed in the *Mahābhārata*.

Claim 3. A conception of a *good knower* based on this virtue of intellectual humility can be a useful tool for preventing epistemic harms.

In the next three sections, I discuss each of these claims. At the end, I argue that Dalmiya's defense of claims 1 and 2 prevents her from adequately defending claim 3.

II. Care Ethics in the Mahābhārata

In chapters 2 and 4, Dalmiya argues that certain chunks of the *Mahābhārata* are best understood as endorsing a care-theoretic approach to ethics. She does this by focusing on four central concepts: (1) non-cruelty *(anṛśaṃsya)*, (2) compassion *(anukrośa)*, (3) righteous conduct in situations of crisis *(āpaddharma)*, and (4) the doubleness *(dvaidha)* of practical reasoning. Interestingly, these concepts correspond to the four central features of a care-theoretic approach described above.

1. *The Salience of the Needs of Particular Others*. Dalmiya illustrates the notion of non-cruelty with two examples. The first is from the *Anuśāsana Parvan*: a parrot refuses to fly away from a decaying tree that has nourished it and made it what it is, even though flying away might be the only way for it to survive. The second example is from the *Mahāprasthānika Parvan*: King Yudhiṣṭhira, standing at the gates of heaven, refuses to enter without a dog that accompanied him during his journey. A non-cruel agent is thus someone who, in her practical deliberation, is attentive (and perhaps attaches special weight) to the needs of particular others, who depend on her or on whom she depends.
2. *The Epistemic Role of Emotions*. Focus now on the idea of compassion *(anukrośa)*. In the episode of the parrot, the parrot makes an interesting claim: "The compassion of the virtuous is the great mark of righteous conduct" *(anukrośaḥ hi sādhūnām mahad dharmasya lakṣaṇam)*. The implicit argument is that compassion, at least when it arises in people who are good, can be treated as evidence of what the morally best course of action is. Thus, as Dalmiya points out, the *Mahābhārata* seems to endorse a picture of practical deliberation, on which certain emotions, like compassion, play an important epistemic role in helping us figure out what to do.
3. *Moral Particularism*. It is well-known that the *Mahābhārata*—especially with respect to abnormal situations and moral dilemmas—rejects *action-guiding moral generalism*, that is, the view that we should be guided by general or simple moral principles in our practical deliberation. Dalmiya mentions two cases of this kind. The first is the widely discussed case of the sage Kauśika, who, in light of his commitment to a general norm of truth-telling, told a bunch of

murderous bandits where some travelers were. The second is the case of Arjuna, who, at the beginning of the battle of Kurukṣetra, was torn between his obligation as a warrior to fight for his king and his obligation as a member of his clan not to kill his cousins. The *Mahābhārata* seems to suggest that there is no general moral principle that can resolve the tension between conflicting demands that different parties could legitimately make of an agent in such scenarios.

4. *Moral Uncertainty*. Dalmiya devotes a large part of both chapters 2 and 4 to developing an account of practical reasoning in which moral uncertainty is assigned a central role. On this picture, even when an episode of deliberation has terminated in a decision, the agent does not thereby become certain that the relevant act is the morally right thing to do. This might be because an agent recognizes that none of her options allow her to meet the needs of all those people to whom she is responsible. In chapter 2, Dalmiya points out that Yudhiṣṭhira's lack of moral certainty is just an instance of this phenomenon: he is always torn between different kinds of moral considerations that speak in favor of incompatible courses of action. In chapter 4, Dalmiya uses some remarks made by Bhīṣma in the *Śāntiparvan* to develop a conception of practical wisdom *(prajñā)* on which a practically wise person is able to inquire into the question of what one ought to do from two or more perspectives, each favoring a different answer to the question. This *non-one-sidedness* or *doubleness (dvaidha)* of practical wisdom might create moral uncertainty rather than resolve it. An agent, while imagining moral considerations for decisions that she does not initially favor, might end up seeing what is attractive about moral views that are opposed to her own, and thereby lose her confidence in her own views.

All these examples seem to suggest that the *Mahābhārata* endorses a care-theoretic conception of a good moral agent: according to this view, a morally good person is someone who manifests through her thoughts and actions distinctively caring attitudes toward others. However, one might worry that all this is not really original; we knew all this from existing versions of care ethics. Why should we even look at the *Mahābhārata* for these lessons? Dalmiya does have an answer to this question: for her, what's interesting about the moral exemplars of care that the *Mahābhārata* holds up—e.g., the parrot and Yudhisthira—is that they are *self-reflective*. They are able to reflect critically on and articulate to others their reasons for caring about others. This form of self-reflectiveness is supposed to ensure that good moral agents are sufficiently responsive to facts about whether or not the objects of their care are worth caring for.

III. Care-Based Virtue Epistemology in the Mahābhārata

In chapter 3, Dalmiya argues that the *Mahabhārata* puts forward a form of virtue epistemology. She starts by distinguishing two notions of a good knower. On the first conception, the knower is a testifier. On the second conception, the knower is an inquirer or a seeker of truth. Dalmiya claims that, according to the *Mahābhārata*, the intellectual virtue required of the knower *qua* an inquirer is *relational humility*.

A relationally humble agent has two characteristics: (1) she engages in inquiry in full realization of her own ignorance, and (2) she acknowledges the epistemic authority of others, including those who occupy more marginal positions within their epistemic community. It is (2) that distinguishes relational humility from mere intellectual humility (which just involves self-ascription of ignorance). Dalmiya holds up the sage Kauśika, once again, as an instance of a relationally humble agent. In the Karṇa Parvan, overcome by anger at a bird that had defecated on his head, Kauśika kills it. Then, to his great shame, he realizes that, despite all his learning, he isn't a good person, and doesn't know how to live or act well. This motivates him to seek the advice of someone who could instruct him in matters of righteous conduct *(dharma)*. Finally, he (despite being a Brāhmaṇa) submits to two teachers—a housewife and a butcher—both of whom occupy less privileged positions in society than him. By ascribing ignorance to himself and acknowledging the epistemic authority of people at the margins of society, Kauśika emerges as a relationally humble agent.

In chapter 5, Dalmiya points out that this virtue of relational humility may be based ultimately on the ethics of care that the *Mahābhārata* endorses. Dalmiya argues for this point in two steps.

First of all, a number of passages in the *Mahābhārata* suggest that in order to seek truth well, an agent must become a good person. Dalmiya takes the Kauśika story to support this view. On one interpretation of the story, Kauśika's direct pursuit of the truth prevents him from discovering truths about righteous conduct, because he doesn't cultivate certain moral virtues, e.g., the virtues of non-violence and humility, which are important for the purposes of truth-seeking. The moral of the story, then, is that one should not just inquire while aiming solely at the truth; one should try to acquire other virtues that are conducive to cognitive success. On the second interpretation of the story, Kauśika does know many truths about righteous conduct, but his grasp of these truths is defective. He fails to see how they can actually guide action in concrete scenarios of choice. That is why he doesn't quite realize that being righteous requires him to be non-violent toward those who are powerless. On both interpretations of the story, a good knower must be a *careful* pursuer of truth: she cannot pursue the truth by completely ignoring her responsibilities toward other sentient beings around her.

In the second part of her argument, Dalmiya suggests that relational humility is an instructive example in this respect. A relationally humble agent recognizes that she can only carry out certain projects of inquiry by depending on others. For instance, when Kauśika realizes that he is ignorant in matters of righteous conduct, his immediate response is to seek teachers who could guide him to the truth. Thus, the *Mahābhārata* rejects the Cartesian picture of the good knower who constructs an accurate picture of the world all by herself. Since the relationally humble agent depends on others in her projects of inquiry, she might naturally attach special weight in her projects to the epistemic needs of particular others within her epistemic community, on whom she depends for successfully carrying out her projects of inquiry.

While Dalmiya doesn't quite bring out exactly how this connects up with the care-theoretic approach to ethics that the *Mahābhārata* defends, it is not hard for the reader to see how relational humility may be used to support a conception of the good knower that is exactly analogous to the care-theoretic conception of a morally good person (described in section II). Just like a good moral agent who cares about particular others, a relationally humble agent is attentive to the epistemic needs of particular others, e.g., their need to be recognized as credible testifiers. Her compassion for particular others—especially for those who are disadvantaged and powerless—plays a significant role in her theoretical deliberation. In cases where different parties make different demands on her, the relationally humble agent doesn't try to resolve the conflict by appealing to general principles. Since she is sensitive to different considerations for and against the views that she likes, she doesn't become certain of what she believes. Finally, she is self-reflective: she reflects critically on her reasons for attaching special weight to the epistemic needs of particular others in her inquiry.

IV. The Argument from Epistemic Harm Revisited

In chapter 1, Dalmiya claimed that a care-based conception of a good knower could be useful in counteracting certain kinds of epistemic harms. In chapters 4 and 6, she argues that the picture of the good knower that emerges from the *Mahābhārata* does this.

In chapter 4, Dalmiya defends the view that relational humility is not just an intellectual virtue; it is also an ethical and political virtue, a virtue of justice. She draws our attention to two important features of Kauśika as a relationally humble agent. The first is Kauśika's shame at his own lack of restraint, which he interprets as a mark of ignorance. As Dalmiya persuasively argues, according to the *Mahābhārata* the ability to feel this kind of shame *(hrī)* is an important prerequisite of cognitive success. A virtuous inquirer is someone whose shame at her own ignorance strikes the mean

between two extremes: on the one hand, she doesn't descend into despair that prevents her from seeking the truth, and on the other hand, she isn't so immodest about her own beliefs that she closes off any line of inquiry that might overturn them. The second feature of Kauśika as a relationally humble agent is his ability to treat people at the margins of society as his epistemic equals. This is connected to another practice of truth that the *Mahābhārata* mentions, namely equality *(samatā)*. Since relational humility manifests itself through practices of both shame and equality, it can counteract epistemic inequalities. Once we realize that our own epistemic success—our ability to form beliefs whose epistemic credentials are respected and whose contents are accepted by others—is partly explained by our social privilege, we will realize that there may be others who, due to their social disadvantages, are deprived of such epistemic goods. The shame that should arise from this realization must motivate us to treat these disadvantaged inquirers as our epistemic equals. Thus, relational humility—insofar as it essentially involves certain attitudes of care toward all members of one's epistemic community—can serve an important political aim: that of removing epistemic injustices. In chapter 6, Dalmiya explains how, in this respect, intellectual humility can be a useful tool for counteracting some of the injustices that traditional science perpetrates by excluding the insights of socially or culturally non-dominant groups from scientific research.

I find this part of Dalmiya's argument unconvincing.

Suppose a relationally humble agent is interested in a certain question, and learns of a number of views that answer that question. Some of these views conflict with each other. How should she go about deciding how much weight to assign to each view? Arguably, it would depend on how good the arguments for each view are. If that is so, how should the relationally humble agent assess these arguments? Well, one might say, that depends on what evidence the arguments are based on and the which epistemic standards are used to weigh that evidence. But in typical scenarios of testimonial injustice, the testimony of a person is typically given less credence because either (a) the audience thinks that the evidence that underlies the testimony is weak (perhaps in light of the conditions under which the information was gathered), or (b) the audience suspects that the testifier hasn't rationally assessed her evidence. An example of the first kind of case would be a scenario where the testimony of a victim of violence is ignored in light of the fact that they were emotionally distressed. An example of the second kind would be the kind of case that Dalmiya actually talks about, where the beliefs of a socially non-dominant group are based on certain standards of assessing evidence that are not recognized by traditional science. In either case, the audience questions the epistemic standing of the agent, i.e., her standing as a knower.

The problem is this. How can a relationally humble agent counteract such testimonial injustice? Presumably by treating these testifiers as knowers.

If she is to do that, she has two options. On the one hand, she could treat the evidence underlying the relevant bits of testimony as strong enough to warrant high credence in the testimony. On the other hand, she could part ways with the dominant members of her epistemic community and recognize certain epistemic standards of weighing evidence as legitimate. But nothing that Dalmiya has said about the relationally humble agent supports either of these moves.

Even if the relationally humble agent is willing to acknowledge her own ignorance while acknowledging the cognitive authority of other members of her epistemic community, she will only have reason to acknowledge the epistemic authority of a particular testifier if she thinks that the testifier is capable of assessing her evidence properly, and that the evidence underlying the relevant bits of testimony is not weak. Now, of course, the relationally humble agent may attentively listen to the testifier, or may be ashamed of her own ignorance in some matters, or may be unwilling to be guided by general principles, or may refrain from becoming certain about any particular view. But as long as she is sufficiently reflective (as Dalmiya wants her to be), she cannot rationally attach high credence to a piece of testimony unless she has good reason to think that the evidence underlying the relevant piece of testimony is strong enough, and that the testimony is not based on a fundamentally mistaken way of assessing her evidence. This can only happen if the relationally humble agent gives up socially dominant conceptions of evidence and rationality. For instance, a relationally humble agent might adopt a conception of evidence that makes it rational for one to believe (absent certain kinds of defeaters) that the evidence underlying the testimony of a victim of violence—no matter how emotionally distressed—is strong enough. Or, a relationally humble agent might adopt a conception of rationality that allows her to think that there are rationally permissible ways of assessing evidence other than those recognized by traditional science.

In either case, it seems that mere relational humility is not enough to counteract the kinds of epistemic harms that Dalmiya wants a care-based virtue epistemology to address. As long as a relationally humble agent works with a thoroughly biased conception of evidence or rationality, her humility will not stop her from being unjust to others. What we need, therefore, is a deeper revision of the conceptions of evidence and rationality that many of us ordinarily deploy.

To my mind, this suggests a more profound problem with Dalmiya's approach. Her focus in this book is on developing a care-theoretic conception of a good knower *qua* a successful truth-seeker rather than a reliable informant. While intellectual humility may be one of the virtues that a good truth-seeker must possess, it is far from clear whether developing a conception of a good knower *qua* a good truth-seeker is enough to prevent the kinds of epistemic harms that Dalmiya wants to address.

When we unjustly doubt the epistemic standing of a testifier, we do so because we are working with a biased conception of a good knower *qua* a reliable informant. Take a scenario where the evidence underlying the testimony of a victim of violence is deemed weak in light of their emotional distress. In that scenario, the audience may be working with a conception of evidence on which a piece of information cannot acquire the status of evidence when it is gathered in a situation of emotional turmoil. This may make the audience question the epistemic standing of the testifier as a reliable informant. Similarly, when a member of the dominant scientific community doubts the beliefs of a non-dominant culture on a subject matter like medicine, the doubt is based on a view about what kinds of epistemic standards a reliable informant should use for weighing her evidence. In each case, therefore, the relevant epistemic injustices are driven by a conception of the good knower as a *reliable informant* (i.e., a view about what kinds of evidence or epistemic standards should undergird the testimony of a reliable informant). So, epistemic harms of this kind can only be counteracted by revising the way we think of the good knower as a reliable informant. In this respect, Dalmiya's emphasis on revising the conception of the good knower *qua* a truth-seeker seems inadequate at best.

Before closing this section, it is worth reflecting on how Dalmiya might respond to this argument. She might accept my claim that relational humility is not sufficient for counteracting epistemic harms of the kind that she is interested in. But she might argue that relational humility is still a valuable epistemic virtue insofar as it blocks at least one of the factors that contribute to epistemic harms, namely our tendency to neglect the needs of those who occupy a position of social (and epistemic) disadvantage and whose epistemic credentials (for that reason) could easily be called into doubt. Thus, even after we have sufficiently revised the conceptions of evidence and rationality that we work with, the need for relational humility as an epistemic virtue might still persist. Without it, we could easily ignore the testimony of others, and therefore epistemic harms would not entirely be eradicated.

However, it is not clear to me that relational humility is needed even for this purpose. Why couldn't we say, for instance, that the requirements of epistemic rationality make it rationally impermissible for us to ignore evidence when getting that evidence and using it increases the expected accuracy of our beliefs about the world? Note that such a claim is quite plausible, especially if we think that the norms of epistemic rationality must cohere with the instrumentally rational pursuit of an epistemic value like accuracy. If such a view were true, we could explain why it makes sense to criticize an agent who ignores the testimony of people whose epistemic authority she has reason to acknowledge: on this view, such an agent is irrational, and therefore epistemically criticizable. This view, then, would

obviate the need for cultivating the virtue of relational humility over and above rationality itself.

V. Conclusion

Let me take stock. In this piece, I have summarized the contents of Dalmiya's book, and argued that the book fails to achieve at least one of the goals that it sets out to achieve. Lest this discourage anyone from reading the book, let me say why I think it is a significant achievement. First of all, it unifies a range of claims about morality that the *Mahābhārata* makes under a care-based approach to ethics. Second, it includes an innovative treatment of the *Mahābhārata* not just as a text of ethics, but also as a text of epistemology. In both these respects, the book makes significant progress in bringing to bear classical Indian texts on questions of contemporary ethics and epistemology. Thus, even if my argument is successful in revealing some defects, there remains a lot that is worth engaging with in this book.

Caring to Know: Response to Commentators

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It is a privilege to have such extensive engagement with one's work as in the responses of Linda Alcoff, Eva Kittay, Keya Maitra, and Nilanjan Das. I am sincerely thankful for the intellectual generosity and thoughtfulness of their critiques. Before responding to their specific concerns, however, I lay out the general argument of *Caring to Know* in broad strokes to serve as the common backdrop to their comments.

The central idea of *Caring to Know* is that notions of 'knowing well' are intertwined with ideas of 'living well,' and so epistemology is linked with ethics and politics, and epistemic normativity is reconfigured to involve goodness and justice. Of course, reference to moral concepts when delineating epistemic concepts is not new. Feminists like Naomi Scheman (2001), for instance, speak of objectivity in terms of trustworthiness; Sally Haslanger claims that an epistemically valuable cognitive disposition is one "that figures in a kind of (moral, autonomous) agency that is intrinsically good" (Haslanger 2012, p. 357), and of course Miranda Fricker's (2007) influential work on epistemic injustice alerts us to how power can distort the functioning of epistemic norms of credibility and meaningfulness. In the Sanskrit *Mahābhārata* also, we see thirteen ethical dispositions like non-violence,