



International Association of Transdisciplinary Psychology

Volume 3, Issue 1, September 2011

Hope as an Epistemic Virtue

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In what follows I intend to give an account, by no means exhaustive, of how it might be plausible to construe hope as an epistemic virtue. In this account, I will attempt to explain something of what I mean by hope and something of what I mean by epistemic virtue such that the two notions might conceivably complement one another. In other words, it is the hope of this inquiry that by examining hope as an epistemic virtue it may be possible to procure a better understanding of what is meant by hope and of what is meant by epistemic virtue. Before proceeding, it need also be said that I will not make a concerted attempt to disentangle the normative aspects of hope and epistemic virtue from the descriptive aspects of those concepts. Hope is at once an observable component of human experience and a guiding orientation for that experience; epistemic virtues play a role in the active direction of inquiry just as the question of how that role might be best performed is asked within the course of inquiry; I see no reason to separate these two concerns in this case, if they are even two and not in fact one.

Before proceeding to provide an account of what I believe to be the properly useful manner in which hope may be construed as an epistemic virtue let me first make a few cautionary remarks about ways of approaching the subject that I don't see as being particularly helpful. Many of the barriers that stand in the way of the profitable consideration of hope as an epistemic virtue stem from certain background assumptions regarding the theory of truth that are almost inevitably implicated in the word "epistemic." The mention of this word immediately calls to mind a host of problems associated with the possible correspondences, limits, and disjuncts that stand between mind and reality. While I accept that the problems of modern epistemology may be well-formed with respect to their proper domain of inquiry, I also would like to insist that there are clear and definite limits to the usefulness of these problems within inquiry. Concerning the limits of epistemology, I hold both of the following positions: 1, there are many forms of inquiry that proceed successfully without explicit recourse to, or even reconcilability with, the criteria of well-formed questions that are proper to

epistemology and 2, the problems of epistemology are non-essential to the theory of inquiry. I have no interest in explicitly justifying either of these claims here. The more modest point that I would like to argue is that anyone who accepts that epistemic virtues play a necessary or a useful role in inquiry is in fact already committed to these positions regarding the limits of epistemology.

As I see it, one of the essential functions performed by the examination of the role played by epistemic virtues within the process of inquiry is that of side-stepping the terrain of epistemology, as commonly construed. What epistemic virtues like courage, honesty, and indeed, hope all have in common is that they are primarily of interest for the role that they play in orienting an inquirer or a community of inquirers to the process of inquiry itself rather than to any given state of affairs that is supposedly prior to or external to that process. For instance, courage is an epistemic virtue to the extent that it is either requisite or useful in order to conduct inquiry successfully (i.e., truthfully).

Consider the following philosophical example, which is so well-worn that I apologize in advance for repeating it: you suspect your significant other is having an affair. Supposing that you decide to pursue such an inquiry, it is unlikely that you will get anywhere at all without somehow mustering the courage to face the hypothetical result that you fear. In such a context, i.e., when it is considered as an epistemic virtue, courage has nothing whatsoever to do with a subject's cognitive process of assimilating a given state of affairs into his or her sense of the world. In fact, the hypothetical result that courage encourages the inquirer to confront is of such a nature that there is by definition no guarantee that it will even be possible for the subject to integrate knowledge of such a state of affairs within his or her sense of the world; the reason that courage is required for such an inquiry is because it is recognized from the outset that the hypothetical result of inquiry carries with it the potential of fundamentally shattering the subject's world and the operations of sense-making that are a part of that world.

If we are committed to an epistemological account of inquiry, then we cannot embrace courage as an epistemic virtue in such a case because the process of inquiry that utilized courage could very well bring the subject's epistemological processes to an

end. However, if we do away with courage as an epistemic virtue in such a case, the result would be that of erecting a huge barrier between the process of inquiry and the truth. The subject who suspects his or her significant other of cheating but who lacks the courage to confront such a result is trapped within a vicious circle of the most serious and literal sort: evidence can be examined but only insofar as it does not interfere with the subject's ignorance of the very result that brought her to examine the evidence in the first place. This is why Lenny Bruce argued that the best strategy for an adulterer is always to deny any and all evidence of his or her adultery, no matter how insurmountable it might rationally appear to be. By utilizing such a strategy, the adulterer provides cover for the fact of the indiscretion by relying upon the complicity of his or her significant other's own epistemological defenses. In this case, both parties reinforce the ignorance of the truth (and the lack of courage) exhibited by the other; even the adulterer himself or herself is unable to face the fact of his or her own actions as this would entail the recognition that the world cannot go on as it had before. It is my contention that a process of inquiry worthy of the name ought to pursue the truth rather than to obscure it. Inquiry so construed requires something other than knowledge alone; this something is what we mean by epistemic virtue.

In this case, what must also be clear is that "the truth" as it stands within the process of inquiry is by no means reducible to simply a correct description of a state of affairs. In a trivial sense, the adulterer knows very well that he or she is an adulterer. However, the cognitive understanding of that state of affairs is neither necessary nor sufficient for confronting the *truth* of the adultery. This requires the courage to face the facts that: 1, by committing adultery, one is acting in a way that could possibly result in suffering for all parties involved and 2, the adultery is quite possibly a symptom of denial regarding something else that is wrong either with one's self and/or the relationship with one's significant other. This is not to say that it is impossible to have a healthy committed relationship in which one or both of the parties engage in adultery from time to time; rather, it is to say that having the courage to face the potentially world-shattering consequences of adultery (whether the hypothetical indiscretion is that of a significant other or of one's self) is necessary insofar as that relationship is not to fall into the vicious circle of paranoia and denial. In other words, in order to avoid this sort of vicious circle, it is necessary to accept the truth that the consequences of adultery are a part of one's relationship always already—regardless of whether or not such a state of affairs has actually transpired. Given that no amount of

evidence could either confirm or deny the existence of adultery unless one is somehow able to face the very result that one fears, such a result might as well be accepted in the first place. As bitter as such a truth may seem, it has the distinct advantage of needing to be neither feared nor ignored.¹ Accordingly, the courage that makes facing such a truth possible may be regarded as emblematic of healthy relationships, be they interpersonal or epistemic.

Hopefully, this account of the role of courage in a particular sort of inquiry has been somewhat persuasive regarding the usefulness and necessity of epistemic virtues for the process of inquiry generally. I believe that this method of specifying a domain of inquiry and then examining the specific mode of orientation toward the truth that is necessary for such an inquiry to take place provides an effective means of identifying and describing relevant epistemic virtues. That is to say, such a procedure should also work for the task of providing an account of the functioning of hope as an epistemic virtue. As we shall see, the domain of inquiry to which hope most directly pertains is that of the process of inquiring into the/a social good.

While the epistemic virtue of which I have spoken up to this point has been courage, much of this discussion is directly applicable to the role that hope plays in inquiry. Courage is in fact one of hope's most vital and necessary components. We may even draw an analogy between these two epistemic virtues: the function performed by courage within the realm of personal inquiry is similar to the function performed by hope within the realm of social inquiry. Courage helps us to see those facts of life that have been right in front of our faces—facts which we could not see previously simply because we were unable to deal with them truly. Hope cautions us against falling into the omnipresent temptation of cynicism; hope is the willingness to make demands upon oneself and others that may very well come to be disappointed by reality; and, like all legitimate forms of inquiry, hope requires the courage to be wrong.

Given the interrelationship between courage and hope, we can extend our example of the former in order to illustrate the latter. Personal infidelity is certainly not the only kind; while it may be very common, it is not the most pernicious sort of infidelity. Instead of the possible infidelity of one's lover, consider instead the possible infidelity to the community made by their representative or advocate. This suspicion receives its most fitting object in the figure of the politician. How do we know that when a

¹ This was one of the great lessons of the bluesman Blind Willie McTell.

politician tells us that he or she has our best interests at heart that he or she actually does? What real assurances do we have that our voice will prevail over those of the cronies? Finally, if we believe the politician's promises then are we anything other than mere dupes? The constant temptation will be to answer these questions preemptively on the basis of our past experience, in order to avoid renewed disappointment. Hope pushes us to suspend our judgment so that we can be disappointed all over again.

Cornel West always insists that we distinguish between hope and mere optimism. One means of making this distinction is by saying that hope requires the courage to see the world as it actually is rather than as you wish it to be. As such, hope is a condition of desperation. To hope means to face the fact that one's hopes are always radically in doubt and to go on pursuing them anyways; to hope is to admit that there is nothing that we know or could possibly know about the nature of the universe that would conceivably justify the belief that what we want to happen will actually happen. This desperate aspect of hope is clearly encountered with respect to its function in political inquiry: how can we consider the possibility that anything whatsoever said by a politician isn't a lie? Why isn't it justified to reach such a conclusion preemptively? If all the evidence turns us toward cynicism and away from hope, as the evidence often does, then why is hope an epistemic virtue and not an epistemic vice?

Cynicism does indeed often have a certain epistemological advantage over hope: a cynical approach agrees much more directly with our past experience, particularly with respect to the realm of politics. After all of the times of being lied to by politicians in the past, it becomes increasingly difficult to be surprised when such lies recur. When examining a past political disappointment, it is often both easy and accurate to blame that disappointment upon the malice, ignorance, and/or incompetence of a corrupt leader or another similarly untrustworthy figure. The assignment of blame is not inherently cynical; providing an explanation for past misfortunes may very well be the first step toward rectifying those misfortunes and/or preventing similar misfortunes from occurring in the future. The cynicism that is a possible consequence of the temptation to blame becomes actively manifest when it is indulged in to the point that anyone who holds a particular social role (e.g., politicians) is considered to be guilty simply by virtue of that role alone. If it is assumed from the outset that everyone is guilty—to continue with our example, that all politicians are liars—then the designation of guilt becomes meaningless as there is no real alternative. The role of cynicism as an

epistemic vice becomes solidified when it takes the form of a feedback loop: when the people lose all hope in the possible fidelity of their politicians, then the politicians have no reason to prove them wrong. By contrast, hope comprises a useful resource for inquiry in the following two respects: 1, it suspends the vicious circle of cynicism by preserving the belief that fidelity is possible against all odds; 2, it reframes the activity of inquiry from that of confirming one's worst fears towards that of realizing one's ideals.

To hope is never something that one does abstractly. It necessarily requires the recognition that one's own fate is indistinguishable from the object(s) hoped for. Even with respect to a state of affairs with no seemingly immediate implications for the terms of one's own life, one may nevertheless genuinely hope for such a state of affairs only insofar as one is invested in the fact that such a state of affairs *matters*. Accordingly, in the event that such a state of affairs does not become manifest, such a result is not one that is simply objectively recognized. The frustration of one's hopes is never a mere datum; rather, this frustration is *experienced* in and as the curtailing of the possibilities for one's own life. In other words, hoping for something necessarily entails the recognition that there are *consequences* which follow from its not happening. As these consequences obtain for the world in which one lives, and the possibilities for one's own life exist only in relation to the world in which these possibilities transpire, the stakes of hope are of a radically intersubjective nature.

Even when the object hoped for is some relatively trivial outcome in the course of one's own life (e.g., finding a good job, meeting a new love interest, etc.) one is always simultaneously hoping for the fact that the world is constituted in such a way that such outcomes are possible therein. Similarly, even when one hopes for something with respect to the world as a whole (such as, e.g., that it is possible to recognize the difference between truth and falsity) in that very affective relationship, the hope for the possibility of such a world is indistinguishable from the hope for one's own place within that world. My hope that it is possible to express truth in the world is synonymous with the hope that I will be able to find a legible place for myself in a moral universe.

Hope is not simply one epistemic virtue among others. Through the function that it performs within the process of inquiry, hope discloses the nature of inquiry itself. The following aspects of inquiry become explicit in hope: the necessary possibility of being wrong, the place of the inquirer in determining right and wrong, and the contingency upon which all processes are based. As a process, inquiry stands before any and all objects of

knowledge and/or statements of predication, which are its results. Hope is the name for inquiry as it is true to itself and its own process.
