Epistemic Subjectivism in the Theory of Character

Several contributors to the burgeoning literature on individual character traits have recently given their attention to a contrast between so-called “objective” and “subjective” accounts of salient features of these traits. In this paper, I will tease apart two different kinds of subjectivism which have not clearly been distinguished from one another thus far in the literature: doxastic subjectivism and epistemic subjectivism. I will then argue that epistemic subjectivism marks an attractive middle position between objectivism and doxastic subjectivism, as it is less vulnerable to some of the most significant objections facing each of these alternative approaches. On this basis I recommend that virtue theorists consider adopting epistemically subjective accounts of the features of character traits they theorize about.

1. Objectivism, Doxastic Subjectivism, and Epistemic Subjectivism

By far the most lengthy and detailed recent discussion of the target distinction between objective and subjective conceptions of features of character traits is to be found in Miller’s (2018) treatment of the virtue of generosity. Miller in fact identifies various conditions for both generous *acts* and the *virtue* of generosity that can be given an objective or a subjective reading. For example, among the conditions Miller proposes for possessing the virtue of generosity is that the possessor is disposed to perform actions that “are motivated by an ultimate desire that is altruistic” (2018: 232). Yet, this condition can be given an objective reading or a subjective reading. As Miller puts it in the form of a question, “would a generous person give only things that objectively benefit others, or is it enough that she merely thinks that they will benefit others?” (ibid). On the objective reading Miller has in mind, a generous person must be disposed to perform actions that objectively benefit others; while on the subjective reading he has in mind, a generous person must be disposed to perform actions that they think will benefit others.

This contrast between actions that have a certain objective feature and actions an agent thinks have this feature recurs over and over throughout Miller’s discussion of generous acts and the virtue of generosity. For example, performing acts that are in fact supererogatory is contrasted with performing acts that one thinks are supererogatory, while performing acts in which what is bestowed is objectively valuable for the actor is contrasted with performing acts in which the actor thinks what is bestowed is valuable for them. As these cases illustrate, the “objective” versus “subjective” distinction appears to apply primarily to features of the characteristic behaviors toward which a possessor of a relevant character trait is disposed by that trait. For any feature F that we might propose is required of the acts that a person with a character trait C is thereby characteristically disposed to (not) perform, we can offer an objective or a subjective reading of that feature. The way Miller characterizes this distinction, the objective reading is one according to which the feature is objectively possessed by the acts, and the subjective reading is one according to which the feature is thought by the subject to be possessed by the acts.

It is not only in his discussion of generosity that Miller avers to this kind of distinction. He makes a similar point in his discussion of honesty. Miller characterizes honesty as a disposition to not distort the facts. But here again he notes that there could be objective or subjective readings of what it is to “distort the facts”. On a subjective approach, which Miller appears to favor but doesn’t defend at length, honesty is “a character trait concerned with reliably not intentionally distorting the facts *as the agent sees them*” (2017, 246). A parallel objective reading would propose that honesty is a disposition to not intentionally distort the facts as they objectively are—or, the facts, for short.

Miller notes that other authors appear to be aware of this kind of distinction between objective and subjective accounts of the features of character traits, with some (e.g., Stout 2015: 157; Stangl 2016: 341-2) favoring objective accounts of various features of traits such as generosity and others (e.g., Hunt 1975) favoring subjective accounts. He notes that it is his suspicion that “the predominant approach, especially among contemporary Aristotelian philosophers, is to answer ‘objective’ across the board” (2018: 232) for the various features of acts characteristic of character traits. Miller argues, however, in favor of a subjective approach across the board in the case of generosity (and we will look at one of his arguments in the next section), though he notes that there may be room to go objective for some traits or some features and subjective for other traits or other features. He claims that “Clearly more work is needed here” (2017: 266, n.27).

I propose that part of the further work needed involves distinguishing between two different varieties of subjectivism: doxastic subjectivism and epistemic subjectivism. Miller’s version of subjectivism, as stated, appears to be of the doxastic variety. What matters for possessing a character trait is whether the agent is disposed to perform actions they *think*, *believe*, or *see* as having a relevant feature F. This is contrasted with an objective account according to which what matters is instead that the agent is disposed to perform acts that have feature F. But it can also be contrasted with an epistemic variety of subjectivism, according to which what matters is that the agent is disposed to perform actions they *have epistemic reason to believe* have feature F. Whereas what matters on the objective account is whether the relevant acts have the feature, what matters on doxastic subjectivism is whether the agent believes the acts have this feature, and what matters on epistemic subjectivism is whether the agent has reason to believe the acts have this feature.

The quartet of Whitcomb, Battaly, Baehr, and Howard-Snyder (2017) have also recently drawn attention to the distinction between objective and subjective accounts of the features of character traits in their discussion of intellectual humility. Illustrating the distinction with the example of the trait of kindness, they write that “some theorists regard kindness as a disposition to help people *in need* (‘objective’), others regard it as a disposition to help people who *seem to be in need* (‘subjective’)” (2017: 511). Unlike Miller (2018), these authors do not go into any detail arguing in favor of one of these approaches over the other, adopting an objective approach for pragmatic purposes. Yet, for this reason, their proposed approach to accounting for the distinction between objective and subjective accounts of character traits leaves certain questions unanswered that are salient for us here. In particular, given the ambiguous nature of “seemings”-talk between doxastic and evidential readings (cf. Byerly 2012), it is unclear whether they are to be understood as characterizing subjectivism in accordance with doxastic subjectivism or epistemic subjectivism. It is certainly true that seemings have been characterized by many recent epistemologists as sub-doxastic, evidential states (see, e.g., Tucker 2013). If this is how these authors are thinking of seemings, then they might be read as ever-so-briefly anticipating a version of the sort of epistemic subjectivism I wish to concentrate on here.

I conclude this section by identifying what I think is the basic distinction in orientation between objectivism, doxastic subjectivism, and epistemic subjectivism in the theory of character, and by highlighting the diversity within epistemic subjectivism. These approaches, I suggest, are all different ways of thinking about the triggering circumstances under which behaviors characteristic of character traits tend to be manifested (on triggering circumstances of dispositions more generally, see Audi 1994). For example, what makes someone a generous person, roughly, according to the objectivist, is that when opportunities arise in which someone else can benefit from the generous person’s giving something valuable of their own to this other, they tend to give. What makes someone a generous person for the doxastic subjectivist is that they tend to give when they *think* an opportunity has arisen in which someone else can benefit from their giving something valuable of their own to this other. And what makes someone a generous person according to the epistemic subjectivist is that they tend to give when they *have reason to believe* an opportunity has arisen in which someone else can benefit from their giving. The triggering circumstances of characteristically generous behavior for the (thorough) objectivist are objective states of affairs in the world, the triggering circumstances of characteristically generous behavior for the (thorough) doxastic subjectivist are doxastic states in the generous person, and the relevant triggering circumstances for the (thorough) epistemic subjectivist are epistemic states in the generous person. And so on for other character traits.

Conceptualizing the basic orientation of epistemic subjectivism in this way leaves a fair amount of flexibility as to how its details are filled in precisely in any given case. First, it leaves open just how strong a reason, or how strong an epistemic position, is required within the triggering circumstances of various character traits. One reason to leave this open is that there may be some character traits the triggering circumstances of which allow for a weaker epistemic position than others. For example, Ryan Preston-Roedder (2013) conceptualizes a virtue he calls “faith in humanity” which involves giving people the benefit of the doubt regarding the moral status of their behavior. The triggering circumstances of this virtue may arise, he stresses, when the agent’s evidence is not quite strong enough to on-balance support thinking that a person has behaved or will behave morally. On the other hand, we might imagine other virtues that require that the agent has a stronger epistemic position. Perhaps some sort of tendency to hold others accountable for their immoral conduct would be like this: the triggering circumstances of virtuous blame-placing may require that the agent’s evidence on balance strongly supports thinking that someone is blameworthy (cf. Coates 2016). In each of these cases, we have imagined an account of the triggering circumstances of a character trait that formulates these circumstances in terms of facts about the agent’s epistemic position, but the cases differ regarding how strong an epistemic position is invoked. I wish to conceptualize the family of epistemic subjectivist approaches to features of character in such a way as to leave room for this kind of diversity.

Second, flexibility is also retained regarding exactly how facts about a person’s epistemic position are determined in the first place. Some epistemologists who address this question stress explanatory facts: an agent’s epistemic position with respect to p is determined by the extent to which p coheres with the best available explanation for the agent’s evidence or is an explanatory consequence of this explanation (cf. Poston 2014). Others stress probabilistic facts: an agent’s epistemic position with respect to p is determined by how likely p is given the agent’s total evidence (cf. Swinburne 2001). Others stress facts about intellectual virtue: an agent’s epistemic position regarding p is determined by what attitude an intellectually virtuous person with this agent’s evidence would take toward p (cf. Zagzebski 1996). And so on. Each of these approaches can give rise to distinct epistemic subjectivist accounts of the features of character traits. And I will not try to adjudicate between these approaches here. However, I do wish to note two facts about these different approaches that are important for our purposes here. First, advocates of these different ways of thinking about the determinants of an agent’s epistemic position do not equate an agent’s epistemic position with their doxastic position or with objective states of affairs in the world of the kind that feature in objectivism. As such, despite their diversity, these approaches will continue to offer genuinely alternative approaches when compared with objectivism and doxastic subjectivism. Second, despite their diversity, these approaches are at least ostensibly all intended to account for the same phenomenon—strength of epistemic position—and as such it can be expected that they will agree about the strength of an agent’s epistemic position in a wide variety of cases. I will indeed rely on this broad agreement to some extent in the next section. There I will identify some advantages that epistemically subjective accounts of the features of character traits may have in certain cases. The cases I appeal to are cases which I suggest are among those where we would expect a good deal of agreement across versions of epistemic subjectivism which propose different accounts of the determinants of epistemic position. In this way, the proposed advantages are proposed as advantages of epistemic subjectivism as a family of approaches, or at least as advantages of many distinct versions of epistemic subjectivism, rather than as advantages of only highly specific, isolated versions thereof. They are reasons to “go” epistemically subjective rather than “going” objective or doxastically subjective.

1. Advantages of Epistemic Subjectivism

With the distinction between objectivism, doxastic subjectivism, and epistemic subjectivism now more clearly in view, I wish in the section to identify two potential advantages of epistemic subjectivism. In line with Miller’s remark that we might be subjectivists about some features or some traits while being objectivists about some features or some traits, I won’t aim to argue conclusively in favor of being a thoroughgoing epistemic subjectivist. Instead my arguments are intended to identify the kinds of advantages that adopting an epistemically subjective reading of features of character traits may have in at least some cases. As Miller notes, we may need to “go virtue by virtue” (2018: 236), and we may need to go feature by feature.

As we might expect, the attraction of epistemic subjectivism lies in its being neither too objective nor too subjective. Adopting an epistemically subjective account of a feature of a character trait can enable one to dodge, or at least mollify, some of the most powerful objections to corresponding objective or doxastically subjective readings. Or, put differently, epistemic subjectivism promises to capture some of the advantages of objectivism and doxastic subjectivism without their drawbacks.

For example, one objection to objective accounts of character traits is that they imply that individuals can be alike in all internal or subjective respects and yet differ in whether they possess relevant character traits, when there is intuitive pressure to say otherwise in at least some cases. Miller illustrates this kind of concern with objective accounts when he objects to an objective reading of the altruism condition for generosity using the following case:

Sam really wants to help with a food drive. So he buys a carload of fruits and vegetables from a local farmer and drops them off at the food pantry. Unbeknownst to him, the food is infected with a microscopic parasite that causes all the people who eat it the next day to get terribly sick. Sam had the best of intentions, his action was costly to him, and it was supererogatory. But he ended up not benefiting these people at all but rather making their lives worse off. (2018: 232)

Sam could here be internally or subjectively just like someone whose efforts for the food drive are not ruined by parasites. It is tempting to think on this basis that Sam’s failure to benefit the food pantry doesn’t count against his having acted generously—that it isn’t a failure *of generosity* that prevented his benefitting the food pantry—and this is precisely what Miller affirms. Indeed, Miller claims that Sam could be generous even if he were more broadly and systematically misinformed (234). For example, if unbeknownst to Sam, every time he acted with the intention of benefiting others microscopic parasites (or something analogous) ruined his efforts, this would not prevent him from being generous. Objective accounts imply otherwise, because they require that in order to be generous one has to be disposed to perform acts that objectively benefit others and not acts that harm them.

What I wish to draw attention to here is that this sort of objection, insofar as it motivates doxastic subjectivism, also motivates epistemic subjectivism. The epistemic subjectivist, just like the doxastic subjectivist, can maintain that Sam’s act needn’t objectively benefit the food pantry in order for it to be generous. And, indeed, the epistemic subjectivist, like the doxastic subjectivist, can maintain that Sam could be generous even if all of the acts he was disposed to perform by virtue of his generosity were acts that harmed rather than benefited others. What matters for the epistemic subjectivist isn’t whether the acts harm or benefit others, but whether the actor has reason to think that they will do so. It seems natural to suppose in this case as described by Miller that Sam has every reason for thinking that in donating the food he would benefit the food pantry. After all, the parasites infect the food only “unbeknownst” to him—their infecting it is not something he is well positioned epistemically to discern. As such, the case appears to be one in which a broad variety of epistemic subjectivists will be able to maintain that Sam acts generously. So epistemic subjectivism here promises to claim a benefit associated with doxastic subjectivism and avoid a cost associated with objectivism.

On the other hand, a powerful objection to doxastic subjectivism focuses on the way in which virtues involve not just a person’s patterns of overt action, but their patterns of perception. Being honest is in part a matter of being “particularly acute about occasions when honesty is at issue” (Hursthouse 1999: 12). Likewise, being generous is in part a matter of being sensitive to reasons regarding what or to whom or in what manner to give. Yet, it is tempting to think that on this account doxastic subjectivism comes up short, as it appears not to adequately reflect the way in which possessing virtues requires sensitivity to certain characteristic reasons.

Consider, for example, a revised version of the earlier food pantry case in which the carload of food that Sam picks up from the farmers bears all the obvious signs of rot. If Sam nonetheless doesn’t believe the food to have gone bad in this case, and so proceeds to donate it to the pantry, we might very well be tempted to judge his failure as a failure of generosity. Someone who was really generous would have been more sensitive to reasons for thinking that what he was giving would not benefit its recipients; they would have been highly alert to signs that their would-be gifts might harm rather than help their recipients. Sam here fails to be generous, despite believing his gifts will benefit their recipients, because he fails to adequately attend to information about his would-be gifts that is of special concern to the generous person. Doxastic subjectivism cannot uphold the verdict that Sam fails to be generous in such a case, while objectivism can.

Here again I want to suggest that the epistemic subjectivist gains at least a substantive part of the advantage that the objectivist gets over the doxastic subjectivist. It is tempting to interpret our revised food pantry case as one in which Sam has reason to believe that the farmer’s food has gone bad and thus will not benefit the pantry. Sam is aware of, or should be aware of, the signs of rot, which provide strong evidence for a person in his position to think that giving the food won’t benefit the pantry. Thus, the epistemic subjectivist can judge that if Sam gives this food to the pantry he fails to act in a characteristically generous way. He doesn’t give a gift that he has reason to believe will benefit the recipients, but a gift that he has reason to believe will not.

Of course, the epistemic subjectivist cannot go all the way with the objectivist. If we imagined that, despite what are clear signs of rot to the rest of us, *Sam* did not have reason to think the food had gone bad (perhaps he’s visiting from far away and unfamiliar with signs of rot for this particular sort of food), then the epistemic subjectivist could continue to allow that when he gives the rotten food to the pantry he acts generously. Yet here we seem to have found a case mid-way between cases like the original food pantry case that put pressure on objective accounts and cases like our revised one which put pressure on doxastic subjectivism. If we feel the pull of each of these other kinds of cases, we may not find the verdict of epistemic subjectivism in the present kind of case troubling.

Epistemic subjectivism is a distinctive version of subjectivism that it is worth clearly differentiating from doxastic subjectivism. It promises to allow us to maintain, with the doxastic subjectivist, that individuals who are alike subjectively are alike characterologically. And it promises to allow us to maintain, with the objectivist, that possessing a character trait involves being sensitive to reasons distinctive of that character trait. It is therefore worthwhile for virtue theorists to keep it in mind as a potentially attractive option for how they might understand the features of the character traits they theorize about.

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