CHAPTER EIGHT

Epistemic Guidance

We turn now to a final, fifth candidate for a virtue of intellectual dependability—epistemic guidance. Like the virtue of audience sensitivity examined in the previous chapter, epistemic guidance has a proximate focus on both features of dependent inquirers and features of its possessor. Yet, the features that are its primary focus in each case are different from those that are the focus with audience sensitivity. Whereas the virtuously audience sensitive attend to the features of others liable to influence how their communications are received, and on this basis attend to and fit their communications so as to promote others’ epistemic goods, virtuous epistemic guides attend primarily to the dynamics of others’ inquiries, and on this basis offer aid to others in making decisions in their inquiries that will advance their epistemic goods. While all of the virtues of intellectual dependability, and indeed virtues more generally, likely require a level of maturity typically only afforded to those with a broad relevant basis in life experience, this is especially true of epistemic guidance. For the epistemic guide must have a broad knowledge of the dynamics of inquiry and the kinds of aid suitable to dependent inquirers in various circumstances of inquiry and with various aims in inquiry, and this type of knowledge is typically only gained via sustained participation in communal inquiry. Indeed, as we will see further below, and as may already be anticipated by the reader, there is a close relationship between epistemic guidance and wisdom in both this respect and other respects.

I will again follow my established pattern from previous chapters in structuring the discussion of epistemic guidance here. The longer Section 1 focuses on developing a detailed conception of epistemic guidance and discussing its relationship to similar virtues and opposing vices that have been or could be of interest to philosophers. Section 2 explains an approach to measuring epistemic guidance that Megan Haggard and I have recently developed, and discusses the relationship between epistemic guidance so measured and demographic, personality, and behavioral features.

1. The Nature of Epistemic Guidance

As we observed in Chapter One, inquiry is a dynamic process that can involve decision-making. An inquirer may make decisions about which questions or topics to pursue in inquiry, about which evidence to take into account, and about how to evaluate this evidence. Even if final outputs of inquiry such as the beliefs the inquirer forms are not under the direct voluntary control of the inquirer,[[1]](#footnote-1) many of these other aspects of inquiry often are to one degree or another. And, even in some cases where conscious, voluntary decisions about these matters are not made by the inquirer in the moment, the inquirer may have developed patterns of inquiry exhibited in their current conduct through previous voluntary decisions, and they may be capable of exercising their agency in their current conduct even if they do not happen to do so in a particular case. In the space of inquiry, then, there is significant scope for decision-making.

The decisions one makes—or fails to make—in inquiry can make a difference for the epistemic goods one gains or foregoes in inquiry. The decisions of inquiry involve epistemic risks and rewards. By attending to this question, one may need to postpone attending to that other question. By attending to this body of evidence, one may gain a more thoroughly informed view and may be able to advance one’s understanding. Yet, doing so may come at the cost of postponing forming a firm judgment on the matter and launching further inquiry that depends on having settled the matter in this case. Inferences can be formed on the basis of different patterns of reasoning with distinct strengths and vulnerabilities. Even the way one weighs distinct aims of inquiry may be subject to deliberation and decision.

A person who is virtuously motivated to promote others’ epistemic goods in the way characteristic of intellectual benevolence may notice these features of inquiry. They may come to recognize that, given the significance of these potential decisions involved in others’ inquiries, one way to contribute toward advancing others’ epistemic goods is by influencing the dynamic conduct of their inquiries. If well-positioned to do so, a person may be able to advance others’ epistemic well-being by offering them aid in making decisions in inquiry. The virtue of epistemic guidance, as I am conceptualizing it here, is just such a tendency to offer others aid in making decisions in their inquiries out of a motivation to promote their epistemic goods.

Like the other virtues of intellectual dependability we have surveyed in the previous three chapters, epistemic guidance involves a distinctive proximate motivation and a distinctive set of skills. Epistemic guidance shares with intellectual benevolence an ultimate motivation to advance others’ epistemic goods, where this motivation involves not only overtly motivational but also complementary affective and cognitive features. The epistemic guide judges it good for others to gain epistemic goods and for themselves to aid others in gaining these; they tend to delight in others’ attainment of epistemic goods and in their own contributions toward helping others gain these; and they are motivated to promote others’ epistemic well-being. Yet, distinctively, epistemic guidance requires a proximate motivation to promote others’ epistemic goods specifically via aiding them in making decisions in inquiry that advance their epistemic well-being. Along with their overt motivation to promote others’ epistemic goods via aiding their decision-making in inquiry, the epistemic guide tends to judge it good to promote others’ epistemic well-being in this way, and they tend to experience positive affect when they aid others in making good decisions in inquiry and negative affect when they fail in doing so. As such, epistemic guidance is a subordinate virtue to intellectual benevolence, the characteristic reasons of which ascend to the reasons characteristic of intellectual benevolence. Epistemic guidance is intellectual benevolence specialized to the sphere of influencing the dynamic conduct of others’ inquiries.

The skills required by epistemic guidance are not trivial. In order to offer others excellent aid in making decisions in their inquiries, the epistemic guide must have a strong grasp of the characteristic aims and decision-points of inquiries in general, must have a strong grasp of the types of aid that can be offered to dependent inquirers to assist with this decision-making, must be attentive to the unfolding of the inquiries of their particular dependent inquirers and to the aims of these inquirers, and must tend to fit the aid they offer to the particularities of these others and their inquiries. I will comment briefly on each of these features.

First, the epistemic guide has a strong grasp of the dynamics of inquiry in general. They understand that there are various legitimate epistemic aims in inquiry, such as those of gaining true belief or understanding. They have a strong grasp of the comparative values of these aims where there are clear facts about these comparative values, and they also recognize that inquirers may reasonably differ in their weighting of some of these aims (cf. Riggs 2008, Kelley 2014). They understand that the conduct of inquiry involves distinguishable processes such as question generation, evidence gathering, and evidence evaluation. They understand, moreover, that these processes can be conducted in different ways, more or less self-consciously, in accordance with a variety of patterns. For example, they understand that questions can be formulated more or less precisely, evidenced can be gathered more or less thoroughly and more or less fairly, and it can be evaluated in accordance with various established patterns of reasoning with their own risks and vulnerabilities, including those characteristic of various biases, intellectual virtues, and intellectual vices. The epistemic guide not only has a grasp of these different decision-points in inquiry, but they grasp how different decisions made at these decision-points tend to influence the epistemic rewards or risks that inquiry affords. They have a thorough familiarity with the situations characteristically faced in inquiry. They know how to locate themselves in the dynamics of inquiry and they are astute at identifying and evaluating the various possible avenues available through decisions in inquiry.

The epistemic guide’s knowledge of the dynamics of inquiry is not merely an abstract knowledge. The epistemic guide also attends to the particularities of the unfolding inquiries of their particular dependent inquirers. They are attentive to the different aims their dependent inquirers may have in their inquiries and to how these inquirers weigh distinct aims in inquiry. They are attentive to the processes of inquiry these inquirers have engaged in and are engaging in. They are attentive to the patterns these inquirers have employed in conducting these processes of inquiry, the patterns they are employing in conducting these processes, and the patterns they could employ. They are astute at identifying the various possible avenues available to their dependent inquirers through the decisions they could make in their inquiries, and they are skilled in evaluating how these avenues may influence these inquirers’ attainment of their legitimate aims in inquiry.

The epistemic guide’s knowledge of the dynamics of inquiry in general and their tendency to attend to the unfolding of their dependent inquirers’ inquiries positions them well to offer these inquirers aid in making decisions in inquiry. Yet, there is still further skill required in offering this aid.[[2]](#footnote-2) The epistemic guide must be knowledgeable about the kinds of aid that can be given to inquirers in their decision-making in inquiry, and must know how to offer these different kinds of aid. They will know, for example, that dependent inquirers’ decisions may be advanced in some cases via highlighting for these inquirers the different possibilities that their different potential decisions would afford for their inquiries. They will know that these decisions may sometimes be advanced through encouraging or discouraging specific conduct, through offering praise or blame or through directing the attention of dependent inquirers to the exemplary or deficient conduct of other inquirers. They will know that in some cases it may be best to effectively make others’ decisions in inquiry for them, interfering with and even bypassing their epistemic agency in the manner characteristic of epistemic paternalism—for example, by withholding evidence from them.

Finally, in a similar way to how the epistemic guide must not only grasp inquiry in general but must grasp the particularity of the unfolding of their dependent inquirers’ inquiries, they must not only grasp the kinds of aid that can be offered to others in their decision-making in inquiry but they must fit the particular aid they offer to the particular others who depend on them. The epistemic guide, with their strong grasp of the dynamics of inquiry in general, of the types of aid that can be offered to others in their decision-making in inquiry, and with attentiveness to the particularity of their particular dependent inquirers’ inquiries, will tend to offer others aid in making decisions in their inquiries that advances their epistemic well-being. Where others are well-positioned to exercise their epistemic agency responsibly, this will typically take the form of helping others to grasp for themselves the various possibilities afforded to them by different decisions they may make in their inquiries, or of helping others to evaluate these possibilities in light of their own reasonable aims in inquiry, or of providing these others with encouragement or discouragement of various forms regarding particular decisions. Yet in some cases where others are not well-positioned to exercise their epistemic agency responsibly, the epistemic guide may interfere more paternalistically in their dependent inquirers’ decision-making in inquiry in order to advance their epistemic well-being.[[3]](#footnote-3) Which sort of aid they offer to their particular dependent inquirers will be selected on the basis of the guide’s informed judgment regarding how well it will advance this particular dependent inquirer’s epistemic goods in this particular situation.

The terminology of “guidance” seems apt for this virtue in a number of ways. One paradigm of a guide is that of a person with extensive knowledge of a territory less familiar to others who can aid these others in navigating the territory so as to achieve well their own reasonable aims. One might hire such a guide when visiting a new location in which one takes an interest. One may have an idea of landmarks one wishes to visit in this territory but be unsure of how best to go about finding their way to these, or in which order to visit them and at what time, and so forth. The guide here can offer “guidance” in the sense of counsel regarding what to do in order to achieve the traveler’s legitimate aims. They can also exercise a stronger influence in certain cases, “guiding” the traveler by removing certain possibilities from their route, bypassing their agency in making these decisions on their behalf. A similar kind of guidance can be a great benefit to us in conducting our inquiries. In this case too, the virtuous epistemic guide knows the lay of the land of inquiry and can offer both the counsel of guidance and a guiding influence that promote our attainment of our own reasonably selected aims in inquiry. The virtuous epistemic guide is someone who is excellent at showing us how to get where we legitimately want to go in our inquiries, or where we should want to go.

* 1. Epistemic Guidance and Similar Virtues

As already anticipated in the introduction to this chapter, one virtue that is similar to epistemic guidance, and the one on which I will concentrate here, is the virtue of wisdom. More exactly, my focus here will be primarily on a type of wisdom that some authors have called “intellectual practical wisdom”.

While there remains controversy among philosophers about the nature and value of practical wisdom in general, there is fairly broad agreement about some of its characteristic features (see Russell 2009, ch.1). Practical wisdom is practical in the sense that it concerns what to do. Indeed, following Aristotle, it is the excellence of deliberation, the aim of which is deciding what to do in accordance with reason. Practical wisdom, moreover, has been conceived as a central ingredient in both each other individual virtue and in the life of the overall virtuous person. It is a central ingredient in each other individual virtue, in part, because it involves knowledge of how to achieve the aims of each other individual virtue in particular contexts, and a tendency to decide what to do in accordance with this knowledge. It is a central ingredient in the life of the overall virtuous person, in part, because it performs an integrative function of balancing the various potentially competing aims of the other individual virtues, enabling its possessor to identify how best to achieve an adequate balance of these various aims in a given context. Practical wisdom is paradigmatically exercised in circumstances involving some uncertainty regarding what to do in which there are distinctive risks and benefits associated with various possible courses of action. Practical wisdom can thus be described as incorporating a tendency to engage in excellent deliberation and decision-making regarding how to achieve an adequate balance of good aims in one’s conduct.

Historically, following Aristotle, a rather sharp distinction has been drawn between practical wisdom so understood and a certain kind of theoretical wisdom. The latter has tended to be conceptualized as a complex epistemic state, rather than as a virtuous tendency. The relevant epistemic state might involve possessing detailed knowledge or thorough understanding, perhaps of foundational principles, and may be relative to particular domains of study (cf. Baehr 2012).

Yet, recently several virtue epistemologists have begun to draw attention to a variety of intellectual or theoretical wisdom that is much more similar to practical wisdom as previously described. A key ingredient for understanding their conception of intellectual practical wisdom has already been supplied in the previous section, and indeed in Chapter One of this book. This ingredient is the idea that inquiry involves dynamic conduct incorporating deliberation and decision-making. This deliberation and decision-making, moreover, as suggested in the previous section, aims at achieving an adequate balance of legitimate epistemic aims, reasonably weighted relative to one another. Because inquiry involves these features, it is an arena that falls within the purview of practical wisdom as conceptualized above. Just as there may be an excellence of deliberation and decision-making regarding how to achieve an adequate balance of good aims in one’s conduct generally, there may be an excellence of deliberation and decision-making regarding how to achieve an adequate balance of legitimate epistemic aims in one’s inquiries in particular. This excellence is intellectual practical wisdom.

It is in very much this vein that Robert Roberts and Jay Wood (2007) and Jason Baehr (2012) describe intellectual practical wisdom. Roberts and Wood claim that “Intellectual practical wisdom is just practical wisdom narrowed toward the intellectual goods” (310). Whereas practical wisdom in general is “a power of deliberation—of figuring out how to accomplish what is good” (310) and is “a power to judge of particulars” (306), intellectual practical wisdom is a power of deliberation in inquiry and is “good judgment in intellectual practices” (305). Practical wisdom has a home in the life of inquiry because inquiry involves investigations, and “investigations are obviously practices, richly various voluntary activities in which we make a difference, by our actions, in what we and others know” (307). On Roberts and Wood’s conception, intellectual practical wisdom is a component of each other intellectual virtue, enabling its possessor to discern how to achieve the aims of each individual virtue in particular contexts: “each of the virtues has its own department of practical wisdom” (311). Yet, intellectual practical wisdom also performs an integrative function. They write, “Practical wisdom consists in . . . the unification of all these patterns [characteristic of the individual intellectual virtues], a facility for switching from one to another as occasion requires, for blending the considerations characteristic of one virtue with those of others, and for adjudicating between the different appeals of virtues when they seem to conflict” (311).

In a similar way, Jason Baehr maintains that the person who possesses generic practical wisdom is “one who knows how to deliberate and act well; this person is good at balancing competing values and applying moral principles to challenging and novel situations . . . but is also *able and willing to conduct himself accordingly*” (92). Yet, Baehr also recognizes that this kind of tendency has a place in the life of inquiry: “practical wisdom extends into various aspects or dimensions of the cognitive life—[it] is sometimes deployed in deliberation about and the pursuit of distinctively epistemic goods or values” (87). He therefore proposes a “competence conception” of theoretical wisdom according to which the latter is thought of as “constituting one dimension or application of practical wisdom” (90). Theoretical wisdom, so understood, “would amount to a cognitive ability that enables its possessor, say, to reliably identify choiceworthy epistemic ends or subject matters, and to quickly and efficiently arrive at a deep explanatory understanding of them” (89).

It should already be clear that there are several dimensions of overlap between intellectual practical wisdom so conceptualized and epistemic guidance as described in the previous section. Both virtues have as their primary focus deliberation and decision-making in the processes of inquiry. They are concerned with exercising good judgment in the decisions involved in inquiry, and they require a broad knowledge of the dynamics of inquiry in general and attentiveness to the particularities of inquiries. Both likewise require knowing how to achieve aims of inquiry in specific circumstances. And both require an ability to weigh well and to balance competing aims in inquiry when they conflict.

The main difference between intellectual practical wisdom and epistemic guidance is that epistemic guidance, unsurprisingly, has as its focus decision-making in others’ inquiries, whereas intellectual practical wisdom appears to be concerned primarily with decision-making in one’s own inquiries. We can of course imagine a more expansive conception of intellectual practical wisdom which incorporates this distinctively other-regarding aspect of epistemic guidance. We might say that intellectual practical wisdom, when possessed in its fullness, requires epistemic guidance. Some of Roberts and Wood’s comments about intellectual practical wisdom suggest they may be sympathetic toward this view; it is less clear that Baehr is thinking in these terms. Yet, in much the way that, as argued in Chapter Four, it may be worthwhile to distinguish between the self-regarding love of epistemic goods and intellectual benevolence because these may arise out of different foundational motivations in human personality, it may likewise be worthwhile to distinguish between a self-oriented intellectual practical wisdom and epistemic guidance. In part because these traits may arise out of different basic motivations in human personality, it seems conceivable that a person may attain being a wise inquirer but not a wise guide of others’ inquiries, and perhaps vice versa.

Even if these traits are distinguished in this way, there remains a close connection between them. Wisdom tends to enable a person to offer excellent guidance—and this fact is often recognized. Linda Zagzebski (2017), for instance, in her work on exemplar sages, notes that “Wise persons are admired in the area of practical judgment; they are often consulted by other persons who want advice; and they may be asked to settle disputes” (91). Yet, Zagzebski distinguishes between features that make people wise and features that help us to identify people as wise. She suggests that the propensities to offer counsel of the sort just identified, and to settle disputes, “are simply features that we can use to find wise persons in advance of investigating them. The features that make them wise will presumably be deeper features that explain the easily observable features” (92). A similar suggestion in this vein that I think Zagzebski may be sympathetic with is that the features highlighted above in the area of overlap between intellectual practical wisdom and epistemic guidance are good candidates for the deep features that explain what makes a person intellectually practically wise, while the features distinctive of epistemic guidance may help us to identify people who are intellectually practically wise and they also help explain what makes a person a wise epistemic guide.

I want to conclude this section by briefly noting how the work that some philosophers and scientists have done to fill in the details of the know-how characteristic of practical wisdom can help us to further illuminate the nature of epistemic guidance. I have spoken somewhat generically throughout this chapter of knowing how to achieve one’s aims in inquiry. Yet, we might be able to achieve a more detailed articulation of what this know-how involves.

Stephen Grimm (2015) suggests that the know-how characteristic of wisdom involves at least three essential elements:

“(1) Knowledge of what is good or important for well-being.

(2) Knowledge of one’s standing, relative to what is good or important for well-being.

(3) Knowledge of a strategy for obtaining what is good or important for well-being.” (140)

Grimm suggests that when we have in mind practical wisdom in general, the well-being in view here is well-being in general. Yet, he allows that there may be analogous types of practical wisdom within different spheres or domains. One such domain, we might imagine, would be the domain of inquiry. Here his proposal would amount to the idea, quite in line with the thought of Roberts and Wood and Baehr surveyed above, that intellectual practical wisdom requires knowledge of what is good or important for epistemic well-being or well-being in inquiry, knowledge of one’s standing relative to this sort of well-being, and knowledge of a strategy for obtaining this sort of well-being. Grimm views these three essential elements of know-how as partly constituting what it takes to know how to live well, and as such the three domain-relative elements just identified could be thought of as partly constituting knowing how to inquire well. One thing that I think is helpful from Grimm’s discussion is that by identifying these elements of what is involved in knowing how to inquire well, he helps us gain a more detailed perspective regarding the complexity of the knowledge involved in intellectual practical wisdom. A similar complexity is involved in the know-how characteristic of epistemic guidance. The epistemic guide is a good judge of what is important for other inquirers’ epistemic well-being, how other inquirers stand relative to what is important for their epistemic well-being, and how they may achieve what is important for their epistemic well-being.

Jason Smartwood’s work also provides insight into the skills required for practical wisdom which can illuminate both intellectual practical wisdom and epistemic guidance. According to Smartwood (2013), the skills characteristic of practical wisdom are analogous to those of expert decision-makers such as firefighters or tactical decision-makers. This is because in each of these cases, the decision-making involved concerns domains of complex choice and challenging performance. Because there is substantial empirical literature on the nature of the skills exercised by expert decision-makers, Smartwood suggests we may draw on this work in understanding the skills characteristic of practical wisdom. With Valerie Tiberius, he summarizes these skills as comprising five component abilities:

“*Intuitive ability*: an expert is often able to identify what she ought to do quickly, effortlessly, and without conscious deliberation.

*Deliberative ability*: an expert is able to use slow, effortful, consciously accessible processes to search for and evaluate what she ought to do when an intuitive identification is lacking or inadequate.

*Meta-cognitive ability*: an expert is able to identify when and how to rely on intuition and deliberation.

*Self-regulative ability*: an expert is able to identify how to affect her environment, behavior, affect, and motivations so that she can successfully do what she has identified she ought to do.

*Self-cultivation ability*: an expert is able to identify how to tailor her practice and experience in order to make her intuitive, deliberative, and self-regulative abilities even more reliable over the long-run.” (2019: 34).

Where Grimm proposed that practical wisdom consists in knowing how to live well, we might take Smartwood’s suggestion to be that practical wisdom consists in being an expert at living well. And where Grimm helped us to appreciate some of the complexity of the know-how characteristic of practical wisdom, Smartwood likewise helps us appreciate the complexity of the expertise characteristic of practical wisdom. Moreover, as we applied Grimm’s ideas to intellectual practical wisdom and epistemic guidance, we can do the same in this case. Here the application is that both intellectual practical wisdom and epistemic guidance involve intuitive, deliberative, meta-cognitive, self-regulative, and self-cultivative abilities concerned with discerning what to do in one’s own or others’ inquiries, with doing what one has decided to do, and with developing one’s own capacities for further excellence in these areas. The epistemic guide, like the expert firefighter, will often know how to offer others aid in making decisions in inquiry without conscious deliberation, but will also be capable of engaging in deliberation about how to help them when an intuitive evaluation is lacking, will be a good judge of when and how to rely on intuitive or deliberative processes, and will be able to put into effective action their judgments regarding how to aid others’ decisions in inquiry.

Less than ten years ago, Jason Baehr could write that “The concept of wisdom is largely ignored by contemporary philosophers” (2012: 81)—and other authors around the same time or earlier could claim the same. Thankfully, this has become increasingly less so, and—allowing myself to be a bit optimistic here—it seems we are steadily learning a good deal about wisdom as this scholarship expands. Because epistemic guidance is a kind of distinctively other-regarding equivalent of a unique subspecies of wisdom—intellectual practical wisdom—I suggest there is much we may learn about the latter as we learn more about the former. Epistemic guidance is not the same thing as practical wisdom or intellectual practical wisdom, but there is substantial overlap between these in the kinds of skills they characteristically involve. Just as there is a kind of wisdom of inquiring, there is a wisdom of guiding others’ inquiries. The latter is the virtue of epistemic guidance.

* 1. Epistemic Guidance and Opposing Vices

The nature of epistemic guidance and its place in the life of the intellectually dependable person can likewise be illuminated through a consideration of opposing vices. Here as elsewhere in Part II my focus is on intellectual character vices that tend to lead their possessors to engage in patterns of behavior in significant tension with those patterns characteristic of the focal virtue in question—in this case epistemic guidance.

We can begin to identify some of the vices opposed to epistemic guidance by observing that epistemic guidance does seem to involve hitting a certain mean, like many other virtues do. Acting as an epistemic guide involves in a certain way being willing to get into others’ business—specifically, their business of making decisions in inquiry. Yet, in contrast to the virtuous epistemic guide whose involvement in others’ decisions in inquiry is motivated by their concern to promote others’ overall epistemic well-being, we may imagine other types of character that involve being either too eager to get into others’ business in inquiry or too averse toward doing so. These characters involve tendencies to exercise too strong an influence over others’ conduct in inquiry or too weak an influence. Epistemic guidance hits the mean.

On the extreme of exercising too strong an influence over others’ decisions in inquiry is the vicious epistemic paternalist. I suggested in my discussion of the nature of epistemic guidance that the epistemic guide may sometime guide others’ decisions in inquiry by interfering with their inquiries in a paternalistic manner. Yet, it is important to recognize that while this sort of action may sometimes be taken by a virtuous epistemic guide, it does come with costs pertaining to the dependent inquirer’s epistemic autonomy (Bullock 2016, Pritchard 2013). The epistemic guide is sensitive to these costs, valuing dependent inquirers’ development of epistemic autonomy among other elements of their epistemic well-being. Yet, some people may not share this value stance with the epistemic guide. They are too ready to interfere with others’ epistemic autonomy. They are too strongly motivated to make others’ decisions in inquiry for them out of a motivation to ensure that others attain certain other values in their inquiries. If well-positioned to help others attain these other values, they may help these others attain certain epistemic goods. But in doing so they cost their dependent inquirers a price that the epistemic guide would not be willing to pay that causes greater injury to their longer-term epistemic well-being. They are insufficiently patient with dependent inquirers.

Vicious epistemic paternalism, we should observe, is not the only sort of vice that may lead a person to exercise too strong an influence over others’ decisions in inquiry. At least the vicious paternalist is motivated by others’ epistemic goods—they just have an imbalance in their prioritizing of others’ epistemic goods. Yet, others may be motivated to exercise too strong an influence on others’ decisions in inquiry just because they enjoy exercising this influence—regardless of whether in so doing they promote any epistemic goods for these others. This sort of personality is similar to the social vigilante discussed in Chapter Four. It’s just that their focus is somewhat broader—they are interested in influencing others’ conduct in inquiry more broadly and not only the conclusions others end up making.

On the other extreme, that of tending to exercise too weak an influence over others’ decisions in inquiry, are those who are too strongly averse to involving themselves in others’ business—particularly their business in inquiry. A person may be excessively motivated to avoid any sort of potential conflict with fellow inquirers that their attempts to influence others’ decisions in inquiry could involve. Even if well-positioned to aid others in making good decisions in their inquiries, such a person may be overly hesitant to do so out of a concern that any such attempt may be perceived as meddlesome or condescending and may lead to relational conflict. They may fail to see legitimate opportunities to benefit others by guiding their decisions in inquiry when these arise, instead perceiving these as more tainted with risk than they in fact are.

While a person can miss the mark of virtuous epistemic guidance by exercising either too strong or too weak an influence over others’ decision-making in inquiry, they can also miss this mark by influencing others’ decisions in inquiry in particular patterned ways. We observed previously that part of what is involved in the virtue of epistemic guidance is appreciating how dependent inquirers weigh epistemic goods themselves, and tailoring one’s influence on others’ decisions in inquiry to how these others weigh these goods. A person may miss the mark of epistemic guidance by failing on this score. They may, for instance, be motivated to guide others to conduct their inquiries in the way they themselves would, given their own weighting of epistemic values. While the difference here is a subtle one, it is worth noting. Epistemic guidance is not a tendency to lead fellow inquirers to make the decisions in inquiry that one would make for oneself in their circumstances. It is instead a tendency to aid others to make decisions in inquiry that will promote these others’ achieving a good balance of their own legitimate aims as inquirers.

The foregoing vices all involve problematic motivations focused on others’ inquiries, and as such they are in a certain way the kinds of vices most distinctively opposed to epistemic guidance. Yet, the overlap between epistemic guidance and (intellectual) practical wisdom we observed in the previous subsection suggests that additional candidates for vices opposed to epistemic guidance will include vices also opposed to these latter virtues. Of special interest here are vices that oppose these traits because they oppose what these traits share in common.

We saw in the previous subsection that practical wisdom and epistemic guidance share in common a focus on excellent deliberation, particularly in circumstances in which legitimate aims may conflict or in which the pathways toward achieving legitimate aims are somewhat unclear. As Smartwood put it, practical wisdom involves excellence in making decisions under circumstances that are complex and demanding. Yet, some features of character focus problematically on precisely these features in such a way as to undermine wisdom in general or epistemic guidance in particular.

One construct focusing on these features that has received extensive attention from psychologists is the need for closure. The need for closure is characterized as “the desire of completing the epistemic process” (Roets 2018: 40) or “the individual’s desire for a firm answer to a question and an aversion toward ambiguity” (Kruglanski and Webster 1996: 264). People high in the need for closure have a strong motivation to quickly reach and stick with a decision. Their need for closure is facilitated by two tendencies called “seizing” and “freezing”. As Roets explains, the former tendency “denotes an inclination to seize quickly on information that promises to bring about closure”; it helps to explain why those with strong need for closure “may often leap to conclusions based on partial or inconclusive information sampling and hypothesis generation” (40). The latter tendency refers to “the inclination to maintain closure by holding on to, or freezing the acquired knowledge” through a process that “immunizes [acquired knowledge] against contradictory information” (ibid). Hundreds of empirical articles have revealed the basic behavioral outcomes of high need for closure. Roets summarizes these findings as follows: “high levels of NFC [need for closure] *generally* lead people to reach conclusions quickly and often prematurely (cf. seizing) based on cognitive heuristics, and to display heightened resistance to alter these conclusions once made (cf. freezing), often by neglecting contradictory information” (42-3).

Two of the five facets of the need for closure as commonly measured are especially interesting to compare with epistemic guidance and wisdom more generally. These are decisiveness and aversion to ambiguity. The decisiveness facet measures an individual’s motivation to reach a decision quickly. Sample representative items include “When I am confronted with a problem, I’m dying to reach a solution very quickly” and “I almost always feel hurried to reach a decision, even when there is no reason to do so” (Roets and Van Hiel 2007). This facet is interesting to compare with wisdom and epistemic guidance because of the way that it would presumably operate in the contexts highlighted above in which wisdom and epistemic guidance characteristically operate—contexts of complexity and challenge. A highly decisive person in these contexts would be strongly motivated to reach decisions—on their behalf or on others’ behalf—quickly. Yet this tendency is likely to conflict with wisdom and epistemic guidance. It’s not that the wise person or the epistemic guide never makes decisions quickly; we saw with Smartwood’s work that part of the wise person’s expertise is an intuitive ability to identify how to act quickly. The conflict is rather that the decisive person relies excessively on intuitive processing. They lack the patience and perhaps the ability necessary to engage in the deliberative reasoning that is also characteristic of expert decision-makers. They are motivated to avoid engaging in this kind of deliberative process. But by being motivated to avoid this sort of process, they are motivated to avoid behaving in a way that constitutes an important component of wisdom, and likewise epistemic guidance.

Similar remarks apply to the construct of aversion to ambiguity. Aversion to ambiguity is both a facet of need for closure, as well as a construct of independent interest. When it is conceptualized independently, it is conceptualized as what it sounds like—simply an aversion to ambiguity. Those who are highly averse to ambiguity are put off by finding themselves in ambiguous circumstances, seek to avoid these, or seek to exit from them as quickly as possible if found in them. By way of illustration, McLain’s (2009) widely used measure of ambiguity tolerance includes the sample items “I would rather avoid solving a problem that must be viewed from several different perspectives” and “I find it hard to make a choice when the outcome is uncertain”. As the reader will by now anticipate, this sort of intolerance or aversion to ambiguity will work to undermine wisdom and epistemic guidance, given the kinds of circumstances in which the latter characteristically operate. A person who strongly seeks to avoid ambiguous situations will thereby avoid the kinds of situations in which these virtues characteristically operate. And a person who is put off by and stunted by the ambiguity characteristic of these circumstances will not be able to act with the skill and equanimity characteristic of wisdom.

Considering these opposing vices helps to illuminate some of the preconditions for the virtue of epistemic guidance. To possess the virtue of epistemic guidance, a person cannot be too averse to ambiguous situations nor have too strong a motivation to reach and retain decisions. Specifically, they cannot be too averse to encountering situations of other inquirers in which there is ambiguity about best courses of action for these inquirers’ inquiries, and they cannot be too strongly motivated to quickly settle on a decision about which guidance to offer (if any) when considering such inquirers. Instead, the virtue of epistemic guidance will be supported by a tolerance for ambiguity, especially in others’ inquiries, and by a concern to offer wise counsel to others whether that counsel can be identified via intuitive processes or whether it requires slower deliberative processes. The epistemic guide must be at home with the challenging and complex nature of inquiry—especially others’ inquiries. This is where their virtue must do its most distinctive work.

1. Measuring Epistemic Guidance

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1. For more on this topic, see the literature on doxastic voluntarism, e.g., (Chignell 2018, Sect. 3.4). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. In this epistemic case, as in the case of giving aid more generally, not all aid is equal. For a review of recent research on different kinds of helping behavior, see (Nadler 2012). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. For further discussion of the conditions under which epistemic paternalism may be justified, see (Axtel and Bernal forthcoming). Michel Croce (2018) also offers a helpful discussion of epistemic paternalism that stresses the significance of other-regarding epistemic virtues for paternalistic interference. While I think he goes too far in claiming that possessing and exercising such virtues is necessary for paternalistic interference to be justified (I think it may be justified, for example, when the would-be-interferer has sufficient reason for thinking the interference is permissible and is the best available course of action), I am in hearty agreement with him about the way in which these virtues can play an important role in regulating the conduct of paternalistic interference. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)