CHAPTER FIVE

Intellectual Transparency

This chapter is concerned with a second candidate for a virtue of intellectual dependability—namely, intellectual transparency. As explained in Chapter Four, this virtue, along with all of the other remaining candidates for virtues of intellectual dependability I will discuss, is thought to be possessed out of the foundational motivation of intellectual benevolence that was the focus of that chapter. Possessing the motivation of intellectual benevolence is necessary for possessing the virtue of intellectual transparency, and the motivation of intellectual benevolence structures this latter virtue. Still, intellectual transparency is a virtue in its own right, with its own characteristic psychology, including characteristic affective, behavioral, motivational, and cognitive elements. It is this distinctive psychology of intellectual transparency that is the main focus of this chapter. Section 1 develops a conceptualization of intellectual transparency and addresses its relationship to similar virtues and opposing vices discussed in extant scholarship that have been or could be of interest to philosophers. Section 2 turns to the measurement of intellectual transparency. There I describe an approach to measuring intellectual transparency that Megan Haggard and I have recently developed, and I identify relationships between intellectual transparency and demographic, behavioral, and personality features we have observed in our research.

1. The Nature of Intellectual Transparency

Imagine an intellectually benevolent person, virtuously motivated to promote others’ epistemic goods. Such a person may notice that one of the primary ways in which they can promote others’ epistemic goods is by granting these others access to their own perspective on topics of these others’ inquiries. By enabling these others to gain access to their perspective, the intellectually benevolent person may enhance the value of these others’ inquiries. In developing a virtuous cognitive, affective, motivational, and behavioral orientation toward enhancing others’ inquiries via sharing one’s perspective with them, the intellectually benevolent person will have developed the virtue I am calling intellectual transparency. Intellectual transparency, then, can be defined summarily as a tendency to faithfully share one’s perspective on topics of others’ inquiries with these others out of a motivation to promote their epistemic goods.

The cognitive, affective, motivational, and behavioral features of intellectual transparency will overlap significantly with those of intellectual benevolence, given the way in which the latter structures the former. For example, both intellectual benevolence and intellectual transparency characteristically involve tendencies to judge that others’ attainment of various epistemic goods is good, and to judge that promoting others’ attainment of epistemic goods is good. Likewise, both intellectual benevolence and intellectual transparency characteristically involve tendencies to experience positive affect directed toward others’ achievements of epistemic goods and toward one’s having promoted others’ epistemic goods. And both incorporate a motivation to promote others’ epistemic goods for its own sake.

Yet, intellectual transparency, like the other virtues of intellectual dependability I will discuss, also has its own additional distinctive cognitive, affective, motivational, and behavioural features. For example, in addition to the cognitive tendencies highlighted in the previous paragraph, intellectual transparency includes the tendency to judge that it is good to promote others’ epistemic goods specifically via sharing one’s own perspective with them. A person cannot possess the virtue of intellectual transparency without having a cognitive tendency of this kind, though they might possess intellectual benevolence without possessing this specific kind of cognitive tendency. Likewise, in addition to the affective tendencies shared in common with intellectual benevolence, intellectual transparency also incorporates a tendency to experience positive affect directed toward one’s having promoted others’ epistemic goods by having shared one’s perspective with them. Again, one cannot possess the virtue of intellectual transparency without possessing an affective tendency of this kind, though one might possess intellectual benevolence without possessing such a tendency. And, similarly, intellectual transparency distinctively incorporates a motivation to promote others’ epistemic goods specifically via sharing one’s perspective with them, whereas intellectual benevolence does not require such a motivational tendency.

The preceding comments about the distinctive cognitive, affective, and motivational tendencies of intellectual transparency versus intellectual benevolence are illustrative of a general pattern. Intellectual transparency is, so to speak, intellectual benevolence specialized to the particular domain of promoting others’ epistemic goods via sharing one’s perspective with them. Indeed, the language of “specialization”, which I borrow from Dan Russell (2009), is quite appropriate here. Intellectual transparency stands in much the same relationship to intellectual benevolence as magnificence stands to generosity, according to Russell. Whereas magnificence is a specialization of the more cardinal virtue of generosity to the particular domain of giving large sums for public benefit, intellectual transparency is a specialization of the more cardinal virtue of intellectual benevolence to the particular domain of promoting others’ epistemic goods via sharing one’s perspective with them. As a specialization of intellectual benevolence, intellectual transparency incorporates cognitive and affective features similar to those of intellectual benevolence, but specialized to its own particular domain. These include the features identified above—the tendency to judge it good to promote others’ epistemic goods via sharing one’s perspective with them, the tendency to experience positive affect when promoting others’ epistemic goods via sharing one’s perspective with them, and the motivation to promote others’ epistemic goods via sharing one’s perspective with them. But they also include additional specialized features of this kind. For example, they include an aversion toward failing to promote others’ epistemic goods via sharing one’s perspective with them, a tendency to judge it bad to fail to promote others’ epistemic goods via sharing one’s perspective with them when one is able to do so, and a tendency to experience negative affect when failing to promote others’ epistemic goods via sharing one’s perspective with them.

A useful way of summarizing the comments offered thus far on the distinctive psychology of intellectual transparency involves making use of the distinction between the proximate and ultimate motivations of a virtue. The idea is that there are some intellectual virtues that are possessed out of an ultimate motivation that constitutes another intellectual virtue, yet they also have their own distinctive motivations, which are their proximate motivations. The proximate motivations are had out of the more ultimate motivation constitutive of the other intellectual virtue. For example, open-mindedness involves the proximate motivation to seriously and fairly engage with relevant alternative perspectives on topics of one’s inquiries, where this proximate motivation is rooted in the more ultimate motivation to achieve epistemic goods for its own sake. In the present case, the distinctive affective, cognitive, and motivational features I have thus far been describing can be thought of as together constituting the proximate motivation of intellectual transparency, where this proximate motivation is itself held out of the more ultimate motivation that is intellectual benevolence.

So, one of the major features of the distinctive psychology of intellectual transparency is its distinctive proximate motivation to promote others’ epistemic goods via sharing one’s perspective with them. I will also here highlight two additional features of the distinctive psychology of intellectual transparency. Both of these features can be thought of as distinctive skills that the intellectually transparent person tends to put to use in their efforts to achieve their proximate motivation. One set of skills is concerned with identifying what the transparent person’s own perspective is, and the other is concerned with enabling others to access this perspective. Since both sets of skills are concerned with how the intellectually transparent person engages with their perspective, and since I have also characterized the intellectually transparent person’s proximate motivation using the notion of their perspective, it is fitting for me to begin by commenting on what is here meant by the term “perspective”.

I intend to use the term “perspective” with a very wide berth. Suppose a fellow inquirer is attempting to discern whether p. If an intellectually transparent person knows p or knows ¬p, then—unsurprisingly—this knowledge is part of their perspective. As such, we could expect, defeasibly, that the intellectually transparent person would be willing to provide testimony to p or to ¬p consistent with their knowledge, as this would be a way of sharing this aspect of their perspective with their fellow inquirer that could enhance this inquirer’s inquiry. Indeed, a review of literature in social epistemology would suggest that this is the paradigmatic case of sharing one’s perspective with others in order to promote their inquiries. Yet, here I intend to include much more within the scope of the intellectually transparent person’s perspective than their knowledge of target propositions of fellow inquirer’s inquiries or their knowledge of the negations of these propositions. Indeed, I wish to include any accessible aspect of their own mental states that bears on their own attitude or lack thereof toward p and that is relevant for improving their fellow inquirer’s inquiry into whether p.

There are a great many such aspects. As we noted in Chapter One, sharing one’s ignorance with others can sometimes be as helpful to their inquiries as sharing one’s knowledge. If a fellow inquirer has good reason to think that if p were true, then you would know it, then their finding out that you are ignorant of whether p is the case can provide them with evidence that can improve their inquiry into whether p. The intellectually transparent person’s perspective on topics of others’ inquiries therefore may include their ignorance of the target propositions of these inquiries.

Likewise, the evidence the intellectually transparent person possesses regarding p or its negation may be relevant to improving their fellow inquirer’s inquiry into p. If they is aware, for example, of arguments for p or arguments for not-p, then sharing these with a fellow inquirer may improve their inquiry into whether p. They may likewise have objections to a fellow inquirer’s arguments for p or to their arguments for not-p that they can share with this fellow inquirer. Or they may have questions or reservations about the publicly available evidence concerning p. Or they may make distinctions in their thinking about the topic of inquiry that could help improve their fellow inquirer’s thinking on the topic. Or they may have private intuitions or experiences bearing on whether p. Or it may be that, in their own case, they have decided to adopt a particular standard of evidence to apply to the case of p which determines for them what level of evidence is required to assent to p, but which not all fellow inquirers will share. These varied features are all aspects of a person’s mental states that may bear on their own attitude or lack thereof toward p, the sharing of which may be relevant for improving a fellow inquirer’s inquiry into whether p. They may therefore all be part of what I intend to include within the intellectually transparent person’s perspective. The intellectually transparent person has a tendency to share these varied aspects of their perspective with fellow inquirers out of a motivation to promote the epistemic value of these fellow inquirers’ inquiries by so doing.

In order to share these varied aspects of their perspective with fellow inquirers in a way that will best enhance their inquiries, the intellectually transparent person needs skills that will enable them to identify these features of their perspective, and to distinguish between them. They need, for example, to be able to distinguish between cases when they are highly confident of a view, and cases when they are less confident. They need to be able to identify when they suspend judgment on a topic, and when they take a view. They need to be able to distinguish cases where they are aware of an argument in favor of a view from cases where they are aware of an argument against its negation. They need to be skilled at discerning when their views on a topic are based on shareable arguments and when they are based on something else. They need to be able to identify the questions, experiences, and intuitions they have that are relevant for others’ inquiries. They need, in a phrase, skill in acquiring self-knowledge of their perspective on topics of others’ inquiries.

This kind of skill in accessing the details of one’s own perspective does not come entirely automatically. It requires the exercise of sophisticated capacities for cognitively demanding self-reflection. It requires encountering one’s own perspective with self-honesty, being willing to accept what one finds within. It requires that one not hide or disguise aspects of one’s perspective from oneself. It requires a willingness to see one’s perspective for what it is so that one may communicate this perspective to others whose inquiries may thereby be enhanced.

But skill in achieving such self-knowledge is not enough. The intellectually transparent person also needs skill in communicating this self-knowledge to dependent inquirers. They need skill in enabling their fellow inquirers to access the relevant features of their perspective. This will include having facility with a vocabulary that will enable them to aid their fellow inquirers in making the same kinds of distinctions they themselves must make in gaining relevant self-knowledge. For example, whereas gaining the requisite self-knowledge requires the intellectually transparent person to be able to distinguish between cases where they suspend judgment and cases where they take a view, communicating this self-knowledge requires facility with a vocabulary that will enable the dependent inquirer to distinguish between cases where the intellectually transparent person suspends judgment and cases where they take a view. Likewise needed is facility with a vocabulary for presenting and distinguishing between different levels of confidence and different kinds of evidence.

Some aspects of one’s perspective are especially difficult to share and require communication via more demanding mechanisms. This is the case, for example, with aspects of one’s perspective such as one’s intuitions or experiences, or how one sees things. Arguably, part of what makes communicating these aspects of one’s perspective especially difficult is that their content is not purely propositional. There is something it is like to have them, and one cannot get others to experience what this is like merely by lodging a proposition in their head. One instead needs somehow to induce something of what the experience is like in the other, perhaps by sharing a narrative with the other that will enable them to have direct contact with what the experience is like (cf. Stump 2010). In its fullness, intellectual transparency will require skills for this kind of especially difficult communication of one’s perspective to others.

The intellectually transparent person, then, is someone with well-developed capacities for identifying their own perspective and for enabling others to access this perspective, whose exercise of these capacities is regulated by their proximate motivation to promote others’ epistemic goods by sharing their perspective with them, and who is ultimately motivated by others’ epistemic goods in a manner reflective of intellectual benevolence. They recognize that sharing their knowledge, ignorance, evidence, experiences, and so on with others can sometimes improve the quality of others’ inquiries. So they make these aspects of themselves open to these others, skilfully enabling others to access the varied aspects of their perspectives in order to enhance their inquiries. As the metaphor of transparency would suggest, they tend to make the relevant aspects of their inner life easily visible to others, out of a motivation to enhance these others’ inquiries.

* 1. Intellectual Transparency and Similar Virtues

We can further illuminate the nature of intellectual transparency and its place in the life of the intellectually dependable person by comparing it with similar virtues and opposing vices that have been or could be of interest to philosophers. In this section, I focus on two similar virtues: honesty and sincerity.

Contemporary philosophers have had little to say about honesty. As Wilson puts it, “honesty has been surprisingly neglected in the recent drive by virtue theorists to account for specific virtuous traits” (2018: 262). But this is beginning to change with a few recent works devoted to this virtue. Here I will focus my comments on recent papers by Christian Miller (2017) and Alan Wilson (2018).

Miller’s and Wilson’s accounts are very similar in that they conceive of honesty as an orientation toward deception or misrepresentation. What distinguishes the accounts is primarily that Miller defines honesty in behavioural terms, whereas Wilson defines honesty in motivational terms. On Miller’s account, honesty is “centrally, a character trait concerned with reliably not intentionally distorting the facts” (2017: 244). On Wilson’s account, “the trait of honesty centrally involves a deep motivation to avoid deception” (2018: 273).

There are several ways in which we may expect intellectual transparency to overlap with honesty so conceived. First, we should expect that the intellectually transparent person will be averse to misleading others—especially regarding their own perspective. It is of great importance to the intellectually transparent person that they share their perspective with others faithfully, particularly where doing so will enhance these others’ inquiries. As such, they will be averse to deceiving others about their perspective, especially where access to their perspective could enhance the value of others’ inquiries. In this way, we can expect overlap between intellectual transparency and the motivational tendency that Wilson takes to be constitutive of honesty.

Second, we should expect that intellectual transparency is conducive toward the kind of behavioural disposition that Miller has in mind, particularly if we take on board a potential amendment to Miller’s account toward which he himself seems favorable. The amendment I have in mind replaces “the facts” in the quotation above with “the facts as the agent sees them” (2017: 246). On this revised account, the behavioural manifestation characteristic of honesty is that the agent reliably refrains from intentionally distorting the facts as they see them. However, what I wish to highlight here is that an intellectually transparent person is more likely than their counterpart to manifest such behavior, other things being equal. As a person who is motivated to share their perspective with others in order to enhance the value of their inquiries, and who is skilled in discerning their perspective and communicating it to others, an intellectually transparent person is more likely than their counterpart to refrain from intentionally distorting the facts as they see them. For, if they were to intentionally distort the facts as they see them, this would miscommunicate their perspective, potentially doing harm to others’ inquiries. Thus, we can expect that intellectual transparency is conducive toward refraining from the kind of distortion Miller has in mind, especially where such distortion is liable to harm others in their inquiries.

Finally, we might also expect there to be overlap between intellectual transparency and honesty as Miller and Wilson conceive of it in terms of the introspective skills typical of the trait’s possessor. Arguably, to refrain from distorting the facts as one sees them, an agent will be well-served if they are skilled in developing a reasonably thorough grasp of how they in fact see things. Not having a thorough grasp of how they see things would make them liable to distorting how they see things. Or, to put the point slightly differently, we might expect that the person who is disposed to refrain from distorting the facts as they see them is disposed to refrain from distorting these facts *to themselves* just as much as they are to others. Likewise, we might expect that the person who is motivated to avoid deceiving others would, on account of this motivation, try to develop skills that will enable them to develop a thorough grasp of their own perspective. By developing these skills, they would be better able to tell whether what they communicate to others is liable to deceive them by their own lights. As such, it would seem that introspective skills enabling one to identify and distinguish between the varied features of one’s own perspective would be expected of the honest person. Perhaps these skills are required for possessing honesty, or perhaps they are conducive toward possessing it or enhancing it. Of course, part of the point of the foregoing sub-section was that these skills are constitutive of intellectual transparency. Thus, here again we have an anticipated area of overlap between honesty and intellectual transparency: these traits overlap in that it is to be expected that their possessors have strong skills for gaining relevant self-knowledge.

Nonetheless, despite overlapping in these ways, there are several potential ways to distinguish between honesty and intellectual benevolence. Not all philosophers will accept that all of these ways of distinguishing between these traits I propose are apt, but most will accept that at least some of them are. Identifying these potential points of difference between intellectual transparency and honesty will help to uncover ways the traits may be related conceptually.

One potential difference between honestly and intellectual transparency is that the former may not be, or may not always be, an intellectual virtue. Specifically, what I have in mind is that honesty may not always incorporate a concern for promoting epistemic goods as an ultimate motivation, whereas intellectual transparency does require an ultimate motivation to promote epistemic goods. Both Miller and Wilson appear attracted to the view that honesty may be compatible with multiple, distinct motivations, and needn’t be motivated ultimately by advancing others’ epistemic goods for its own sake. Wilson proposes, more specifically, that there may be a version of honesty that is an intellectual virtue and a version of honesty that is not an intellectual virtue. The latter, he suggests, might be characterized as a motivation to avoid deception out of “an underlying motivation to ensure fairness” (2018: 276)—to give to others what is due them.

These comments about the possible importance of fairness or of giving others their due for honesty suggest a second potential distinction between honesty and intellectual transparency. It may be that, even as an intellectual virtue, honesty is to be defined in terms of deontic concepts, whereas intellectual transparency is not. The idea here is that honesty, as an intellectual virtue, is ultimately concerned with avoiding doing epistemic wrongs to others by deceiving or misleading them. The honest person tends to avoid distorting the facts out of a concern to not wrong others in their capacities as inquirers in these ways—to not treat them unfairly. If this is how we are to understand the intellectual virtue of honesty, then it appears to regulate its possessor’s activity in a narrower range of cases involving misrepresenting one’s perspective than intellectual transparency does. Whereas honesty so conceived regulates its possessor’s activity only in cases where misrepresenting their perspective would wrong others or would involve failing to treat them fairly, intellectual transparency will regulate its possessor’s activity even in cases where misrepresenting their perspective wouldn’t rise to the level of wrongdoing. Intellectual transparency will incline its possessor away from doing any sort of epistemic harm to others through failure to faithfully represent one’s own perspective.

The last difference I will highlight between intellectual transparency and honesty focuses on the fact that honesty appears to have to do principally with avoiding certain kinds of activity, whereas intellectual transparency characteristically includes positive engagement in relevant activities in addition to this kind of avoidance. Even if we imagine that, as an intellectual virtue, honesty inclines its possessor to refrain from misrepresenting their perspective in any cases in which this would do others epistemic harm, and not only in cases in which it would wrong others as inquirers, honesty so conceived would only half-way overlap with intellectual transparency. For the intellectually transparent person is not only characteristically disposed not to misrepresent their perspective, and characteristically averse to misrepresenting their perspective; they are also characteristically positively disposed toward faithfully representing their perspective out of a motivation to thereby promote epistemic goods in others inquiries. The intellectually transparent person is characteristically motivated not only by avoiding doing others epistemic harm, but by doing others epistemic good via faithfully sharing their perspective.

These potential differences between honesty and intellectual transparency suggest that, while these virtues overlap in certain important ways, they are not the same trait. Some versions of honesty may not be intellectual virtues at all, while intellectual transparency is by definition an intellectual virtue. Moreover, versions of honesty that are intellectual virtues are plausibly viewed as subordinate to intellectual transparency in much the way that magnificence is plausibly viewed as subordinate to generosity. For, just as the reasons distinctive of magnificence ascend to the reasons distinctive of generosity, the reasons distinctive of intellectually virtuous honesty will ascend to the reasons distinctive of intellectual transparency. If we asked a person who was virtuously motivated not to wrong or harm others by misrepresenting their perspective why they were motivated in this way, it seems reasonable to anticipate that they may answer that they are motivated in this way because they regard it as good to promote others’ epistemic well-being via sharing their perspective with others faithfully. As such, while there is overlap between the virtue of honesty and the virtue of intellectual transparency, there is reason to think that intellectual transparency is the more cardinal virtue, at least if we are thinking of honesty as an intellectual virtue concerned with avoiding deception or misrepresentation.[[1]](#footnote-1)

A second virtue to which intellectual transparency is closely related is the virtue of sincerity. Bernard Williams develops an account of the virtue of sincerity in his book, *Truth and Truthfulness* (2002). Williams begins with the proposal that sincerity is “a disposition to make sure that one’s assertion expresses what one actually believes” (96). He argues, however, that this focus on assertion is too narrow, because sincerity must govern not only the contents of one’s assertions but also one’s implicatures. He writes, “the speaker has beliefs which are not expressed in his assertion, and also, very significantly, the hearer will come to believe more than the speaker said.” This observation leads Williams to raise the guiding question: “We have to ask what beliefs, and how much of one’s beliefs, one may be expected to express in a given situation” (97). As this guiding question would suggest, Williams’s conception of the virtue of sincerity is that of a disposition to communicate those of one’s beliefs that one can be expected by others to communicate to them.

The kind of expectation Williams has in mind is a normative expectation, rather than an epistemic expectation. The sincere person is the person who tends to communicate to others those of their beliefs that they are required to communicate to others, rather than those of their beliefs that others anticipate they will communicate. As such, both lying and misleading are commonly violations of sincerity, and they are often equally bad violations of it. Yet, there are also contexts in which neither lying nor misleading is a violation of sincerity because those who are relying upon the sincere person to express their beliefs do not have the normative standing to demand that they express the relevant beliefs. This is how Williams addresses the case of the Nazi at the door, for example. Because sincerity requires sensitivity to which beliefs the sincere person is required to communicate, it demands good judgment, and cannot be neatly captured using a rule. “What the disposition needs to be for us,” he writes, “involves a modern notion of what people deserve” (122)—specifically, what they deserve for us to communicate to them of our beliefs. The sincere person is someone who knows well that “Not everyone, certainly, equally deserves the truth” (117), but in varying contexts others deserve more or less of the truth about what one believes. The sincere person is the person who tends to communicate those of their beliefs to others that these others deserve to have access to.

Understood in this way, there is significant overlap between sincerity and intellectual transparency—even moreso than between intellectual transparency and honesty as defined above. Sincerity, like honesty and intellectual transparency, will tend to require that one not misrepresent one’s perspective on topics of others’ inquiries. Yet, moving beyond honesty as conceptualized above, sincerity also more positively will require, like intellectual transparency, that one reveals one’s relevant beliefs to others. Moreover, Williams nicely captures that part of the skill involved in communicating one’s beliefs to others is skill in recognizing and utilizing the broad repertoire of communicative capacities beyond the content of one’s assertions. Communicating one’s beliefs to others well requires having a handle of the many mechanisms of communication of ordinary conversations and using these to make one’s views plain. The intellectually transparent person, like the sincere person, will have a command of these mechanisms.

Still, there are at least two important ways in which intellectual transparency and sincerity so defined differ from one another. First, like honesty as defined above, sincerity as defined by Williams appears to be defined using deontic concepts in a way that intellectual transparency is not. Sincerity for Williams is about fulfilling one’s duties in communicating one’s beliefs to others. It is about giving to others the access they deserve to one’s beliefs. Intellectual transparency will involve giving others such access as well. Yet, it may go further. The intellectually transparent person is motivated to promote others’ epistemic goods by sharing their perspective with these others. This may lead them to grant others access to their perspective beyond what these others deserve. This isn’t to say that the virtuously intellectually transparent person will be led by their transparency to share aspects of their perspective with others that they shouldn’t share with them, as in the case of the Nazi at the door. But it is to say that we might expect the virtuously intellectually transparent person to sometimes do more than merely fulfilling their duties in revealing their beliefs to others. If sharing their beliefs will benefit others’ inquiries and there aren’t comparably strong reasons against sharing these beliefs, we might expect the intellectually transparent person to share them. In this way, intellectual transparency leads one to share one’s beliefs in a wider set of circumstances than sincerity does.

Intellectual transparency is also concerned with communicating a much broader range of features of one’s perspective than sincerity is. Sincerity, as conceptualized by Williams, is concerned exclusively with communicating one’s beliefs. Intellectual transparency also governs the communications of one’s beliefs, but it governs the communication of the many other varied features of one’s perspective as well. It governs the communications of one’s doubts, reasons, intuitions, questions, distinctions, evidence-thresholds, and so on. While some of these features may be explicable in terms of belief, so that we might stretch sincerity to apply to them, certainly not all are easily reducible to belief in this way. Thus, intellectual transparency is concerned with communicating more of a person’s perspective than sincerity is.

As with the case of honesty, these differences between intellectual transparency and sincerity suggest that intellectual transparency is a more cardinal virtue than sincerity. The reasons of sincerity ascend to the reasons of intellectual transparency. The virtuously sincere person is motivated to act by the fact that communicating their beliefs to others will give to these others something they deserve to know, thereby respecting their epistemic rights. If asked why they are motivated by this fact in the first place, they would plausibly answer that they are so motivated because they judge it to be good to promote others’ epistemic goods by sharing one’s perspective with them. So, sincerity, like intellectually virtuous honesty, is a virtue closely related to intellectual transparency which is less cardinal than the latter.

Finally, I wish to briefly compare intellectual transparency to a set of similar virtues concerned with self-knowledge. I emphasized above that intellectual transparency involves the exercise of skill in identifying and distinguishing the various aspects of one’s perspective. Several other virtues also incorporate such skills of self-knowledge.

One example is intellectual humility, as characterized by Whitcomb, Battaly, Baehr, and Howard-Snyder (2015). According to these authors, intellectual humility is a tendency to take “the right stance toward one’s *intellectual* limitations” (517). These limitations include “gaps in knowledge (e.g. ignorance of current affairs), cognitive mistakes (e.g. forgetting an appointment), unreliable processes (e.g. bad vision or memory), deficits in learnable skills (e.g. being bad at math), intellectual character flaws (e.g. a tendency to draw hasty inferences), and much more besides.” Taking the right stance to them involves being appropriately sensitive to them—aware of them—and owning them. In owning these limitations, the intellectually humble person characteristically exhibits “dispositions to: (1) believe that one has [these limitations]; and to believe that their negative outcomes are due to them; (2) to admit or acknowledge them; (3) to care about them and take them seriously; and (4) to feel regret or dismay, but not hostility, about them” (520).

Another closely related example is a virtue Roberts and West call “self-vigilance”. The self-vigilant person “appreciates her vulnerability to natural epistemic defects, is on the watch for cues to the working of these possible error-makers, and intelligently acts to correct for them” (2015: 2557). Roberts and West take their own cue from recent work in cognitive psychology which has illuminated the many biases and heuristics to which humans commonly fall prey to the detriment of their thinking. They suggest that the seemingly endless list of these problematic patterns of thought stems from a small cluster of basic error-prone tendencies, and the virtue of self-vigilance can help a person to overcome these tendencies in order to perform better as an epistemic agent.

Both these examples of virtues of self-knowledge overlap in an important way with intellectual transparency. Namely, they each involve skills in appreciating aspects of one’s perspective, like intellectual transparency does. Yet, they are more narrowly focused than intellectual transparency, in that they are concerned with limitations—or, in the case of self-vigilance, with natural epistemic defects more specifically. And, they are both conceptualized as motivated by the agent’s aim to achieve epistemic goods for themself.

While intellectual transparency differs from these virtues of self-knowledge in important ways, my suspicion is that these latter virtues will facilitate intellectual transparency. People who are highly intellectually humble or highly self-vigilant will be more likely to also be highly intellectually transparent. Their virtues in attending to their limits and susceptibilities to natural epistemic defects will better enable them to represent their perspective faithfully to others. Moreover, in a person who is both intellectually transparent and possesses these virtues of self-knowledge, these virtues of self-knowledge will likely be extended to include other-regarding motivations. Their possessor will not only tend to monitor their susceptibility to natural epistemic defects or to own their limitations in order to better advance their own epistemic goods, but will do so in order to better advance others’ epistemic goods by better sharing their perspective with these others.

Also deserving mention here is a broader disposition of self-knowledge that receives more attention from psychologists than from philosophers: the disposition of mindfulness. Dispositional mindfulness is conceptualized as a tendency with two main components:

The first component involves the self-regulation of attention so that it is maintained on immediate experience, thereby allowing for increased recognition of mental events in the present moment. The second component involves adopting a particular orientation toward one’s experiences in the present moment, an orientation that is characterized by curiosity, openness, and acceptance. (Bishop et al 2004: 232).

Thus, mindfulness is a disposition to focus one’s attention on the varied aspects of one’s present experience with curiosity, openness, and acceptance.

Recently, there has been a significant surge of interest in the relationship between such mindfulness and other character strengths. Evidence is growing that mindfulness enables the development of various strengths and virtues that are emphasized in positive psychology (Shogren et al 2017). The virtues to which mindfulness is conducive include the intellectual character strengths of wisdom as defined in the Values-in-Action inventory: creativity, curiosity, love of learning, and judgment. I would suggest here, in line with the remarks above about intellectual humility and self-vigilance, that mindfulness may also enable intellectual transparency. This is especially so given that the focus of mindfulness would appear to include a broader range of the elements of a person’s perspective than these other virtues include.

It is noteworthy that mindfulness is not typically treated as an intellectual virtue. What motivates mindful attention may be quite varied, though it often includes aims pertaining to equanimity or personal development of some kind. It would appear, however, that the kinds of skills involved in exercising mindfulness can be exercised with distinctively intellectual motivations. And, these intellectual motivations can include the motivation characteristic of intellectual transparency. A person may engage in mindful attention directed toward their perspective in order to better promote others’ epistemic goods via faithfully sharing their perspective with them. A tendency to do just this is part of what is involved in the virtue of intellectual transparency.

* 1. Vices Opposed to Intellectual Transparency

The nature of intellectual transparency and its place in the life of the intellectually dependable person can also be illuminated by contrasting it with some of the vices that are in tension with it. One way to get a handle on some of the vices that are in tension with intellectual transparency is by considering two broad and opposing ways in which one can fail to make one’s perspective transparent to others. One of these ways is by presenting one’s perspective as having a greater epistemic quality than it in fact has, and the other is by presenting one’s perspective as having a lesser epistemic quality than it in fact has.

Presenting oneself as knowing more than one does about topics of others’ inquiries is a paradigmatic way of presenting one’s perspective as having a greater epistemic quality than it in fact has. Yet, one can also oversell one’s perspective, so to speak, in other ways. One can present oneself has having understanding of a subject when in fact one only has isolated instances of propositional knowledge. One can present oneself as having multiple, independent sources of support for a view when in fact the sources of support are not independent. One can present oneself as more confident than one in fact is. One can present oneself as believing something one doesn’t in fact believe. One can act as if one is aware of a body of evidence bearing on a topic when one is not in fact aware of any such body of evidence. One can present oneself as having inquired more virtuously than one in fact has. And so on. Tending toward overselling one’s epistemic position in such ways across a wide variety of contexts is in significant tension with intellectual transparency.

Certain character vices are partially constituted by a tendency to oversell one’s perspective in ways such as these. For example, Roberts and Wood, in discussing the many vices opposed to humility, briefly identify the vices of grandiosity and pretentiousness. Grandiosity they define as “a disposition, in thought and self-presentation, to exaggerate one’s greatness” (2007: 236). Intellectual grandiosity would be a disposition toward exaggerating one’s intellectual greatness in particular. Such a disposition clearly involves a tendency to oversell one’s perspective in ways such as those identified above across a wide range of contexts. While Roberts and Wood don’t go into further detail about the nature of grandiosity, the focus on greatness suggests that intellectual accomplishments and intellectual character may be among the aspects of the grandiose person’s perspective they most frequently exaggerate. Intellectual transparency is in tension with this tendency to exaggerate one’s intellectual greatness.

It is also in tension with intellectual pretentiousness. Roberts and Wood define pretentiousness as “a disposition to claim, in action and demeanor, higher dignity or merit than one possesses” (ibid). As an intellectual vice, the focus of pretentiousness would be on claiming higher intellectual dignity or intellectual merit than one possesses. Again, this would seem to include a tendency to oversell the epistemic quality of one’s perspective, presenting it as having greater merit than it in fact has. It isn’t difficult to imagine a person claiming to know more than they do, or presenting themselves as being aware of bodies of evidence they aren’t aware of, and so on, out of the disposition to present themselves as having a more meritorious epistemic position than they in fact do.

Intellectually grandiose or intellectually pretentious people will likely be tempted to engage in what philosopher Harry Frankfurt (2005) calls “bullshitting”. What is essential to the bullshitter, according to Frankfurt, is that they engage in communicative activity under the pretence of contributing to truth-aimed activity, but with deficient motivation to contribute toward advancing these truth-aims. The bullshitter doesn’t care adequately whether what they say is true, or more generally about its epistemic status. Following Max Black, Frankfurt observes that this is often because the bullshitter is pretentious. In these cases, “the orator intends [his] statements to convey a certain impression of himself. . . . What he cares about is what people think of *him*” (2005: 20). Rather than aiming to present their perspective faithfully so as to advance others’ epistemic goods, the pretentious bullshitter is motivated to present their perspective in such a way as to convey to others a favorable impression of themselves—a high intellectual dignity or merit or greatness, to use Roberts and Wood’s language. Black’s account of “humbug,” which Frankfurt takes to be roughly equivalent to bullshit, brings out the contrast with intellectual transparency nicely. For Black, humbug is “deceptive misrepresentation, short of lying, especially by pretentious word or deed, of somebody’s own thoughts, feelings, or attitudes” (1983: 143). The intellectually transparent person will tend to avoid bullshitting and humbug, being more concerned to advance others’ epistemic goods by sharing their perspective faithfully than they are to artificially inflate others’ impressions of them by overselling their perspective.

The present point about the connection between bullshit and the motivation to inflate others’ impressions of oneself suggests another vice that can issue in overselling of one’s perspective: intellectual vanity. On Roberts and Wood’s account, vanity is “an excessive concern to be well regarded by other people, for the social importance their regard confers on oneself” (2007: 237). Intellectual vanity is such a “hypersensitivity” to others’ views of one’s intellectual qualities. A person who is hypersensitive to ensuring that others think well of their intellectual qualities may well be inclined to present the epistemic quality of their perspective as better than it in fact is. They may present themselves as knowing things they don’t know, as having inquired more virtuously than they in fact have, as being aware of evidence they aren’t aware of, in order to inflate others’ impressions of their epistemic excellence. In this way, the vice of vanity may give rise to the vices of intellectual grandiosity or intellectual pretentiousness that include tendencies to oversell one’s perspective to others.

Interestingly, however, intellectual vanity can also be a source of the opposite tendency in tension with intellectual transparency—the tendency to undersell one’s perspective on topics of others’ inquiries. This role for vanity may be less obvious than the role it can plan in fostering vices of overselling one’s perspective, but it too is a possibility. One way to deceptively create or maintain a positive intellectual reputation is to present oneself as getting things right that one might not in fact have right. To do this, one might misrepresent one’s perspective in the ways we’ve been concentrating on thus far, such as acting like one knows things one doesn’t know. But another way to deceptively create or maintain a positive intellectual reputation is to present oneself as not getting wrong things one might in fact have wrong. One might, for example, present oneself as not taking a stand on a controversial issue that one in fact does take a stand on; or one might present oneself as being less confident than one in fact is; or one might refrain from raising an objection one has to a view others are considering when given the opportunity. These ways of underselling one’s perspective can be motivated by the excessive concern with one’s intellectual reputation characteristic of intellectual vanity. Out of a concern not to be perceived as having made a mistake or in some other way possessing a faulty or deficient epistemic standing, a person may tend to present the epistemic quality of their perspective as being inferior to what it in fact is, rather than presenting it faithfully.

A tendency to undersell one’s perspective can arise from other motivations as well. In a recent paper, Alessandra Tanesini (2018) highlights how both the vices of intellectual servility and intellectual timidity can manifest in underselling of one’s perspective. For Tanesini, intellectual servility consists in a cluster of strong negative attitudes toward one’s intellectual features, based on comparing these features with relevant features of others, that serves the social-adjustive aim of securing one’s acceptance by an elective social group. As Tanesini notes, it is a regrettable fact that “portraying oneself as inferior to others is an effective strategy of gaining their social acceptance” (??). When gaining the acceptance of a group that regards one as inferior is an important aim, it can become a tempting strategy to put oneself down both publicly and in one’s own thinking and to conform to the group’s negative judgments of oneself as inferior. Tanesini writes that the person who succumbs to this temptation by becoming intellectually servile is typically “full of doubts about their intellectual abilities” (??). They “may tend to humiliate themselves and belittle their achievements. They tend to explain away any accomplishments that are truly theirs” (??). One of Tanesini’s interests is to explain why the temptation toward such servility may be especially prominent among people who have been subjected to repeated humiliation or oppression. For an oppressed person, becoming servile may be part of a “strategy of accepting one’s lower social status and seeking the approval of those who subordinate one by humiliating oneself, whilst praising, and parroting them” (??). The strategy “achieves its goal at a high psychological cost since it promotes the development of vicious traits of character” (??).

What I wish to point out here is that the tendency toward underselling one’s perspective partially constitutive of such servility is in tension with the tendency to represent one’s perspective faithfully that is partially constitutive of intellectual transparency. In representing their perspective, the intellectually transparent person is primarily motivated by enhancing others’ epistemic goods, and not by a desire to be accepted by others who regard them as inferior. As such, they tend to represent their perspective faithfully, rather than underselling it. One of the tragic truths brought out by Tanesini’s work is the important role that social conditions play in making it possible for intellectual virtue to be formed. Being in a good position to develop the virtue of intellectual transparency depends in part on not being in an environment that is hostile toward one’s representing one’s perspective faithfully. A person who is in an environment in which sharing their perspective faithfully would result in social exclusion and rejection and harsh treatment by others who regard them as inferior has their chances of developing the virtue of intellectual transparency injured, and they may be tempted instead to develop the opposing vice of intellectual servility.

Intellectual timidity is a different vice that can likewise result in underselling one’s perspective. Tanesini proposes that, like intellectual servility, intellectual timidity is a cluster of negative attitudes toward one’s intellectual features, and these negative attitudes are again based on comparisons of these features with relevant features of others. Yet, in the case of intellectual timidity, these attitudes are driven by the goal of preserving one’s self-esteem rather than by the goal of achieving social acceptance. Tanesini describes timid individuals as those

who are fearful of being exposed as less able or competent than others may initially presume. These people are risk averse; they accept the cost of being thought to have nothing to say to avoid any possibility of making fools of themselves. Their propensity is to shy away from the limelight and be quiet. These same individuals, if asked, may justify their approach by mentioning their (alleged) relative lack of ability, competence, or skill. (??)

Where the servile individual’s conformity to others’ negative judgments of them is aimed at winning these others’ acceptance, the timid individual’s “self-silencing” is aimed at preventing others’ explicit rejection, which the timid perceive as a threat to their self-esteem. Tanesini proposes that the timid will tend toward developing “fatalism about their inferiority which in turn causes them to lose any motivation they may have had to improve” (??). Such timidity will characteristically manifest in underselling one’s perspective: “The fear and anxiety about others’ opinions of oneself that is characteristic of those who are timid, when combined with their negative assessment of their own abilities, results in a disposition not to speak one’s mind, but to bite one’s tongue” (??).

Earlier, I proposed that a person may, out of vanity, undersell their perspective. They may present their perspective as epistemically weaker than it is in order to avoid being thought to have made a mistake or otherwise exhibited epistemic fault, leading to being thought of less well by others. That kind of case may seem initially quite like the present case in which timidity leads to self-silencing. In both cases, a person tends toward sharing less of their perspective out of a concern that doing so may lead to them being poorly regarded by others. But there are important differences between the cases. One difference is that in the case of timidity the explanation for the suppression of the person’s perspective appeals in part to their having negative attitudes about their intellectual features, whereas in the case of vanity this is not so. The timid person tends to evaluate their intellectual features negatively, and this partially explains why they demur from divulging these features to others. The vain, by contrast, will tend to evaluate their intellectual features positively. Yet, in circumstances in which they perceive that sharing these features with others may risk damaging their reputation, they may shy away from sharing what in their own estimation are positive features. In this way, the vain person’s own attitudes toward their intellectual features plays little role in regulating their representation of their perspective, and what regulates their presentation of their perspective is just what they anticipate regarding others’ attitudes toward it, whereas for the timid person their attitude toward their intellectual features is one of the aspects of their personality that drives their suppression of their perspective. This is one way in which suppression of one’s perspective is more characteristic of timidity than of vanity.

Intellectual transparency stands in tension with intellectual timidity so understood. The intellectually transparent person’s orientation toward sharing their perspective is regulated primarily by their motivation to promote others’ epistemic goods, rather than by their concern to avoid being regarded poorly by others. It is not part of intellectual transparency that the transparent person evaluates their own intellectual features negatively, nor is it part of intellectual transparency that a person tends toward fatalism about their prospects for improving themselves. Rather, as emphasized in the previous sub-section, intellectually transparent people tend to embrace themselves with the openness and acceptance characteristic of mindfulness, being willing to identify both their good and bad intellectual features as such and to share these faithfully with others so as to better enhance their epistemic goods. Developing this kind of orientation toward one’s intellectual features is not easy, and, as Tanesini highlights, an important support for its development is that one inhabits a hospitable environment—one relatively free from harsh judgments about one’s intellectual features and accompanying rejection. In this way, one person’s development of intellectual transparency will depend on others’ exhibition of the virtues of intellectual dependability more generally.

Contrasting intellectual transparency with these opposing vices reveals the myriad ways in which one’s tendency to communicate one’s perspective to others may be regulated by aims other than the aim definitive of intellectual transparency—to promote others’ epistemic goods. One’s communication of one’s perspective can be motivated by the aim of leading others to regard one as great or as possessing higher merit than one in fact possesses, by the aim of being well-regarded by others more generally, by the aim of conforming to others’ perceptions of one as inferior in order to gain their acceptance, or by the aim of avoiding others’ explicit rejection due to one’s inferior intellectual qualities. In all these cases, the varied motivations lead to patterns of communicating one’s perspective that are markedly different from the pattern of faithful communication characteristic of the intellectually transparent person. Moreover, we have learned that an important part of developing intellectual transparency is inhabiting a hospitable environment in which overselling or underselling one’s perspective are not incentivized through the humiliation or oppression of those who share their perspectives faithfully.

1. Measuring Intellectual Transparency

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1. It has been part of my thinking about virtues for several years that there may be multiple versions of virtues such as honesty (cf. Byerly 2014). Thus, I remain open to the idea that some versions of honesty might be conceptualized more expansively than honesty is conceptualized by Miller and Wilson. Indeed, I wouldn’t object strongly to the idea that intellectual transparency may be one such version of honesty. If it is, however, then it isn’t the version of honesty that has been receiving attention from virtue theorists thus far. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)