CHAPTER SEVEN

Audience Sensitivity

We turn now to a fourth candidate for a virtue of intellectual dependability: audience sensitivity. We saw in the previous chapter that some of the virtues of intellectual dependability, such as intellectual transparency, have a certain focus on the dependable person’s own perspective, while others, such as communicative clarity, have a focus on the dependable person’s communications. We also saw that possessing and exercising the virtue of communicative clarity is in part a matter of attending to the perspectives of the recipients of one’s communications, because whether a communication is sufficiently clear depends upon features of the recipient. Thus, we might say that the virtue of communicative clarity involves a primary focus on the dependable person’s communications, but also some attention to the recipients of these. With the virtue of audience sensitivity, we move still further in the direction of a virtue that characteristically involves attending to the features of dependent others. As we will see, possessing and exercising this virtue involves careful attentiveness to intellectually dependent others, along with attentiveness to how one communicates with these others given one’s grasp of their distinctive features.

I will continue with my pattern of focusing in the longer first section of the chapter on developing an account of the nature of the target virtue of audience sensitivity and comparing this trait with similar virtues and opposing vices that have been or could be of interest to philosophers. I then move on in the second, shorter section to discuss an approach to measuring audience sensitivity recently developed with my colleague Megan Haggard, and examining the relationship between audience sensitivity and demographic, personality, and behavioral variables.

1. The Nature of Audience Sensitivity

Imagine an intellectually benevolent person, virtuously motivated to promote others’ epistemic goods, who is in a position to advance the epistemic goods of some particular other via communicating with them. Perhaps they have a question about the other’s views or methods of inquiry that if asked could lead the dependent other to gain deeper understanding or to revise their views or methods of inquiry in an epistemically fruitful way. Or perhaps they have some knowledge or evidence to share that could contribute to the other’s gaining important true beliefs. If they wish to benefit this particular other via their communications, they will need to attend to the particular features of this other as a recipient of their communications—as their audience. They will need to be sensitive to the distinctive features of their audience liable to make a difference for how their communications will be received, and they will need to regulate their communications in light of a grasp of these distinctive features. What I have in mind by the virtue of audience sensitivity is a tendency to do just this out of an intellectually benevolent motivation. In a sentence, audience sensitivity is a tendency, out of intellectual benevolence, to attend to the distinctive features of one’s audiences, and to fit one’s communications to these audiences in light of one’s grasp of these distinctive features.

The reason why it is important for an intellectually benevolent communicator to attend to the distinctive features of their audience and to fit their communications to their audience is straightforward. Whether or not, and to what extent, one’s communications will benefit one’s audience depends upon salient features of this audience. The relevant features include the audience’s epistemic needs, their intellectual interests, their perspective, their abilities, and their intellectual tendencies. While audiences do sometimes share such features in common, such that it is not necessary to alter what and how one communicates from one audience to the next, it is equally clear that many audiences do differ in these features in ways that make it important to alter what and how one communicates depending upon these features of the audience—important, anyway, if one aims to advance the epistemic goods of these audiences.

While brief, the preceding discussion already enables us to comment on the relationship between audience sensitivity and intellectual benevolence, and to identify the distinctive proximate motivation of audience sensitivity, in conformity with the pattern exhibited in the previous two chapters. While audience sensitivity shares with intellectual benevolence a motivation to promote others’ epistemic goods, it distinctively requires a motivation to promote others’ epistemic goods via fitting one’s communications to the distinctive features of one’s audiences. In common with intellectual benevolence, audience sensitivity involves valuing others’ epistemic goods for their own sake, being motivated to promote them, tending to experience positive affect when they are present and negative affect when they are absent, and tending to judge that it is good when they obtain and that it is good to promote them. Yet, distinctively, audience sensitivity involves being motivated to promote others’ epistemic goods via fitting one’s communications to one’s audiences, tending to experience positive affect when engaging in this activity and negative affect when failing to do so, and tending to judge that engaging in such activity is good and failing to do so is bad. Audience sensitivity, like intellectual transparency and communicative clarity, is a specialization of intellectual benevolence within a particular domain—the domain of regulating one’s communications in light of one’s grasp of relevant features of one’s audiences. Audience sensitivity, like intellectual transparency and communicative clarity, is a subordinate virtue to intellectual benevolence, which is more cardinal than audience sensitivity. The reasons for engaging in communication that is virtuously sensitive to one’s audience ascend to the reasons of intellectual benevolence.

Like the other virtues of intellectual dependability, audience sensitivity involves both distinctive motivations and distinctive skills. We have already seen that audience sensitivity requires the distinctive proximate motivation to fit one’s communications to one’s audiences. We should note, however, that this motivation to fit one’s communications to one’s audiences itself generates a motivation to attend to the particular features of one’s audiences liable to make a difference for how one’s communications are received. The virtuously audience sensitive person, then, has twin motivations to attend to relevant distinctive features of their audiences, and to fit their communications to their audiences in light of their grasp of these features. Talk of “motivation” here is, as in previous chapters, shorthand for a complex of complementary motivational, affective, and cognitive tendencies.

The twin motivations of audience sensitivity are complemented by twin skill sets. The virtuously audience sensitive person is not only motivated to attend to relevant features of their audiences, but they are skilled in doing so. They have a mature understanding of which features of their audiences are liable to make a difference for how their communications are received. More specifically, they have an understanding of which of these features are liable to influence the extent to which receipt of their communications will promote the recipients’ epistemic goods. They are also skilled in attending to these features, that is, paying attention to them. On the other side, they have skills in fitting their communications to their audiences in light of their grasp of their audiences’ features. These skills of fitting regulate both their selection of what to communicate and their selection of how to communicate what they communicate—both the content and manner of communication. They have a mature understanding and know-how as to what content and manner of communication will best promote their audiences’ epistemic goods, given the audience’s distinctive features.

It is not easy to state in a short and crisp way the content of the know-how or understanding involved in these skills of attending and fitting. But one way to shed light on the skills of attending and fitting involved in audience sensitivity is to identify some of the most common examples of the distinctive features of audiences that do influence the way in which communications are received, and to highlight ways in which a grasp of these features may lead a virtuously audience sensitive person to regulate their communications. This will be my approach here.

A first relevant feature of audiences are their epistemic needs. Audiences can differ with respect to what they most need to know, which evidence they most need to be exposed to, which questions they most need to consider, which skills for inquiry they most need to develop, and so on. The relevant needs are to be understood here as what is objectively strongly in the audience’s interest, rather than in terms of what is subjectively of interest to them. Audiences might be mistaken about what they most need. A virtuously audience sensitive person is sensitive to what really are the epistemic needs of their audiences, paying attention to what these needs are, and they select what and how they communicate in light of their grasp of their audiences’ needs. Generally speaking, the audience sensitive person will tend to prioritize communicating in such a way as to best fulfill their audiences’ needs. They will tend to favor fulfilling their audiences’ more significant needs over their less significant needs, if they are in a position to do so.

As an illustration, we might consider an instructor providing feedback to a pupil, whether in formal education or in vocational training. Instructors tasked with providing feedback have to make choices about what to provide feedback about and about how to provide this feedback. Instructors who display audience sensitivity toward their pupils will regulate the content and manner of their feedback in part in light of their grasp of their pupils’ epistemic needs. They will, for example, consider the areas of growth in knowledge and skills for inquiry most necessary for the pupil’s flourishing as an inquirer in the relevant field, and prioritize providing feedback related to these areas, communicating this feedback in such a way as to signal its importance to the pupil. Because pupils will differ with respect to their needs for growth in knowledge and skills for inquiry in the field, instructors who display audience sensitivity toward their pupils will provide different feedback to different pupils.

As another example, consider an audience’s intellectual interests. Here what I have in mind is the more subjective idea of what an audience finds to be of interest. While an audience sensitive person will be more concerned to promote the fulfillment of their audiences’ epistemic needs than to advance their pursuit of their intellectual interests, they will also exhibit concern for advancing their audiences’ pursuit of their intellectual interests. One reason for this is that an audience’s intellectual interests are liable to make a difference for whether and to what extent the communications they receive promote their epistemic goods. If an audience finds it difficult to relate a communication to their intellectual interests, they may be more likely to disregard the communication, thereby foregoing epistemic benefits it could have provided them if they had attended to it. Audience sensitive people are alert to this, and tend to favor communicating to their audiences in a way that advances their pursuit of their intellectual interests where they can. The virtuously audience sensitive tend to care about what their audiences care about. Because different audiences have different intellectual cares and concerns, this leads the virtuously audience sensitive to alter the content and manner of their communication when confronted with different audiences.

As an illustration, we might imagine a person who has some expertise on some topic, say, immigration. Such a person may be invited by multiple, distinct groups to provide an address to these groups on the topic of their expertise. But the groups may take an interest in this topic for very different reasons. Perhaps one group is a group of immigrants, another a group of policymakers, and another a group of urban planners. If the expert is virtuously sensitive to their audiences, attending to their audiences’ particular intellectual interests and fitting their communications to their audiences in light of their grasp of these interests, this may lead them to alter the content and manner of their communication to these different audiences.

Consider a third feature: an audience’s perspective. Here as elsewhere in this book I am intending to use the language of perspective in a broad manner, aiming to include within it such things as the audience’s beliefs, subdoxastic cognitive commitments, evidence, intuitions, and so forth. But let us just concentrate for the moment on the audience’s beliefs. Which beliefs an audience has can make a difference for the extent to which their receipt of a communication advances their epistemic goods. This is especially the case with communications that are argumentative in the sense that they aim to lead an audience to revise their beliefs. For, whether people will be inclined to revise their beliefs will depend in part on which other beliefs they have, and indeed on their perspective more broadly. The more strongly a proposed belief-revision appears to conflict with an audience’s perspective, the more they will resist this revision, thereby foregoing epistemic goods that might have come by it. Audience sensitive people are alert to this fact about audiences, and as such they pay attention to their audiences’ perspectives. Where possible, we may expect that an audience sensitive person, if they are engaged in argumentative communication, will seek to offer argumentative communications less strongly in conflict with their audiences’ beliefs or perspectives.

As an illustration, we might consider a phenomenon that is sometimes called the fallacy of “begging the question.” While there is a narrow sense of begging the question that involves employing a conclusion as a premise in an argument for that conclusion, there is a broader conception of begging the question that is my focus here. On this broader conception, begging the question involves employing a premise in an argument for a conclusion where one has strong evidence that one’s audience rejects that premise. This sort of begging the question may not always be avoidable. But, where it is avoidable, we might expect that a person who is virtuously sensitive to their audience would avoid it. Motivated to promote their audiences’ epistemic goods—in this case, by convincing them to revise their beliefs—they will prefer to offer arguments that favor belief-revision that employ premises their audience does not reject. More generally, where possible, if an audience sensitive person aims with their communications to lead their audience to adopt changes in their perspective, they will tend to try to do this in a way that makes good sense from within their audiences’ own perspective or one very near to it.

Move to a fourth feature: audiences’ abilities. Audiences differ in their abilities for inquiry, including their abilities to interpret and evaluate complex communications. These differences can make a difference for the extent to which a communication will yield epistemic benefits for an audience. Audiences with more limited abilities for interpretation and evaluation may need simpler presentations of content, or more assistance in interpretive and evaluative work than more advanced audiences, if they are to accurately understand what is being communicated and benefit from it epistemically. At the same time, it can be good for audiences to be challenged to develop their abilities, rather than having all interpretive and evaluative work done for them. A person who is virtuously audience sensitive will fit their communications to their audience’s abilities, not communicating in such a way as to make interpretation and evaluation out of reach for their audience, but also where appropriate challenging their audiences to develop intellectual autonomy.

One example that illustrates this kind of attentiveness to the abilities of one’s audience is attentiveness to differences in audiences’ abilities to concentrate on details for extended periods of time. Some audiences are more capable of concentrating on details for extended periods of time than others. If concentrating on details is necessary for an audience to receive an epistemic benefit, it may be important to treat audiences with different abilities for concentrating on details differently. Audiences highly capable of concentrating for extended periods of time may be able to consume larger portions of the required communication at once. Audiences less capable of concentrating for extended periods of time may need to proceed by processing smaller chunks of the communication, and may need content to be presented in an unusual or engaging manner to pique their attention. We should expect that virtuously audience sensitive individuals will attend to their audiences’ concentration abilities and modify their communications to fit these abilities of their audiences.

The final feature of audiences I will discuss are their intellectual tendencies. The tendencies I have in mind are tendencies to engage in various kinds of intellectual behaviors in response to different kinds of elements that may be contained in communications. There are many such tendencies with respect to which audiences can differ and which can make a difference for the extent to which a communication promotes epistemic goods for an audience. Audiences can differ, for example, with respect to how they tend to evaluate the claims of authorities, how they tend to respond to objections to their views, how they tend to make inferences about what the communicator believes or doesn’t believe, to what extent they tend to take others at their word, what level of evidence they tend to require in order to take on a belief, and so on. A virtuously audience sensitive person will be alert to the intellectual tendencies of their audience, and will fit their communications to their audience in light of their grasp of these tendencies so as best to promote the audience’s epistemic goods.

Take, for illustrative purposes, an example concerning audiences’ tendencies to trust expert opinion. Some audiences are more strongly inclined to trust expert opinion while others are more reluctant and tend only to do so when they have an adequate grasp of the reasons supporting this opinion. Being sensitive to these differences in their audiences, a virtuously audience sensitive person who is in a situation in which it is important for the epistemic well-being of their audience to believe the relevant expert opinion may employ different strategies with different audiences. With the more trusting audience, they may simply cite the relevant expert opinion, while with the more reluctant audience they may cite relevant reasons supporting this opinion as well, or attempt to convince their audience that in this particular case the audience’s typical reasons for hesitancy in trusting experts do not apply. In this way they will display an attentiveness to their audiences’ intellectual tendencies with respect to expert opinion, and will fit their communications to their audience so as best to promote their epistemic goods.

Virtuously audience sensitive people, then, will attend to their audiences’ epistemic needs, intellectual interests, perspectives, intellectual abilities, and intellectual tendencies, among other features, and will fit their communications to their audiences so as to best promote their epistemic goods given their grasp of these features. While I have sought to illustrate how this attending and fitting may be realized with some fairly straightforward examples, it is important to observe that in practice the work of attending to these features and fitting one’s communications to them can be extremely challenging. This is for a variety of reasons.

First, in practice, for each of the kinds of features identified above, there are multiple instances of the feature to attend to. Even in an individual person, epistemic needs are many, as are intellectual interests, the elements that make up their relevant perspective(s), and their relevant intellectual abilities and tendencies. Multiple needs, interests, beliefs, evidence bases, intellectual abilities and tendencies may be apt to make a difference for how a communication is received. Moreover, attempting to fit one’s communications to some of these features may sometimes frustrate fitting them to others of these features, as we saw when discussing securing epistemic needs versus fostering the pursuit of intellectual interests. The virtuously audience sensitive person will be inclined to attend to all these features and regulate their communications so as to best promote the audience’s epistemic goods given their total grasp of these features.

Second, in practice a communicator’s knowledge of their audience’s relevant features is often quite restricted. The relevant features of one’s audience are not immediately discernible to a communicator, and some of them are not even easily discerned by the audience members themselves. Identifying them requires a base of evidence regarding the audience’s own intellectual activities or regarding the audience’s similarity to other known audiences. Yet, in many cases, a communicator may have very limited evidence of either kind.

Third, one’s audience may be what rhetoricians call a “composite” audience—an audience of multiple individuals who differ from one another with respect to many of the relevant features. Communicating to a composite audience of this kind presents special challenges to the communicator who wishes to manifest sensitivity to their audience. Some rhetoricians have advocated a buck-shot approach in these cases, in which the communicator attempts to express their communication in multiple ways, some of which will fit some members of the audience and others of which will fit other members (Tindale 2013). Another (not mutually exclusive) strategy is to seek to identify relatively common ground across the diverse audience and to fit one’s communications to this relatively common ground.

And things can get even more difficult, because identifying who one’s audience is in the first place can be a difficult task, as recent work in rhetoric has emphasized (Tindale 2013). Consider Plato’s dialogues. Who was Plato’s audience? Perhaps there were some particular identifiable individuals, or a group such as a school, for whom he originally wrote. But certainly there is a straightforward sense of the term “audience” in which these recipients of the dialogues make up only a tiny minority of Plato’s audience. That audience includes the many thousands who read the dialogues year after year more than two millennia after their construction. We might wonder whether Plato would need to exhibit sensitivity to these audience members in order to possess and exercise the virtue of audience sensitivity.

The Plato example helpfully reveals that it is not always a straightforward matter to identify whom one’s audience is, much less what their distinctive features are that may influence the reception of one’s communications. While I make no pretentions to settle the issue of “audience identity” being debated among rhetoricians, for my own purposes I suggest that for our purposes the audience be thought of as those the communicator has reason to believe will be among the recipients of their communications. The virtuously audience sensitive person is someone who attends to the distinctive features of those they have reason to believe will be in receipt of their communications, and fits their communications to these audiences. Priority of attending and fitting goes to those the communicator has more reason to believe will be in receipt of their communications, rather than those they have less reason to believe will be, other things being equal.

Even identifying whom one’s audience is is not always easy. And once one’s audience has been identified, it is no simple matter to discern what the relevant distinctive features of this audience are. Audience sensitivity is a demanding virtue. It requires that its possessor is inclined to attend to and to fit their communications to the distinctive features of their audiences liable to make a difference for the receipt of their communications out of a motivation to promote their epistemic goods.

* 1. Audience Sensitivity and Similar Virtues

We can further illuminate the nature and role of audience sensitivity by comparing it with other intellectual virtues to which it is similar. As a virtue that has a significant proximate focus on attending to distinctive features of others, audience sensitivity overlaps with a number of other intellectual virtues which share this proximate focus. I will concentrate my discussion in this section on some of these virtues.

In recent epistemology, it has primarily been authors writing from a feminist or liberatory perspective who have stressed the epistemic significance of attending to epistemic others in their particularity. The paradigm for this attending is often based on the epistemic dimension of domestic labor historically performed by women. Stressing the way in which this labor involves attentiveness to others in their particularity, Daukas (2019) writes:

Domestic labor often involves touching, holding, smelling; it is bodily, located in a particular place and time in relation to particular situations and particular others. It involves sensitivity and attentiveness to particular individuals’ differing affective states and needs. It is cultivated through empathetic caring: it enables us to know others by imaginatively placing ourselves in their positions to see, feel, and care about things as they see, feel, and care about them. (383)

This perspective emphasizes that at least part of what is involved in being an ideal epistemic agent is to excel in the distinctive intellectual virtues exercised paradigmatically through domestic labor, which involve attentiveness to others in their particularity.

Sometimes the intellectual virtues stressed by feminist or liberatory epistemologists are narrowly focused on features pertaining specifically to social positioning, epistemic power, and so on. This is the case, for example, with the much-discussed virtue of hermeneutical justice proposed by Miranda Fricker (2007). On Fricker’s conception, hermeneutical justice is a sensitivity to the possibility that a communicator’s relative unintelligibility may be due to the communicator’s being comparatively disadvantaged in their possession of hermeneutical resources due to their social positioning. This virtue, then, involves an attentiveness specifically to the social positioning of others, and in particular to a way in which this social positioning may result in a disadvantage in their possession of resources for understanding and rendering intelligible to others their experiences and perspectives. It regulates how one receives testimony from such others, as those in possession of the virtue will, due to this sensitivity, be less prone to lower their credibility judgments of such others due to their perceived unintelligibility.

Nancy Daukas (2019) proposes that all feminist or liberatory intellectual virtues properly conceived have this sort of narrow focus. Contrasting liberatory virtues with conventional intellectual virtues, she writes:

Liberatory virtues enable us to recognize the injustice in [existing social] arrangements, subvert them, and replace them with arrangements that better serve the public goods. They enable agents to recognize the culturally inherited prejudices that undergird the existing unjust social hierarchy, counter-evidence to those prejudices, and circularity in attempts to defend them. They include capacities and traits that enable and motivate agents to envision and implement alternative social arrangements that prevent and counteract oppression. (387)

On this model, liberatory intellectual virtues do not merely involve attentiveness to the particularity of others, but they involve attentiveness to particular dimensions of others’ particularity—namely, those dimensions pertaining to others’ social identities and positionalities. Because of this, Daukas is unwilling to accept that the conceptualizations of intellectual virtues such as open-mindedness or humility offered by conventional virtue epistemologists adequately capture a liberatory conception of these virtues. The liberatory revisioning of these virtues involves reorienting them toward addressing liberatory concerns.

Not all writers in this area focus exclusively on these narrower virtues, however. Some also emphasize the importance of broader intellectual virtues, both for liberatory purposes and for more conventional purposes. For example, Jane Braaten (1990), in her development of a feminist conception of intelligence as virtuous social intelligence, describes six virtues that contribute to this ideal of virtuous social intelligence. The first two are good examples of virtues that involve attentiveness to the particularity of others, but not exclusively the distinctive particularities of special significance for advancing liberatory goals. The first virtue she describes as “an imaginative ability: the ability to represent alternative subjective points of view, not merely of a perceptual character, but also of an ideological character.” The second virtue is “an ability to reason hypothetically about the likely responses of others to given courses of events, given their various subjective points of view” (6). Likewise, José Medina (2013, ch.1) stresses the role of so-called conventional intellectual virtues such as intellectual humility and open-mindedness in the sort of epistemic resistance necessary for accomplishing liberatory epistemological purposes and ensuring the excellent function of democracies.

There are two broad intellectual virtues of this sort that I will focus on here for purposes of illuminating the nature and role of audience sensitivity in the life of the virtuous epistemic agent. The first we might call intellectual empathy. It is a tendency to imaginatively occupy the particular perspectives of the particular others one encounters, aimed at achieving better understanding of their perspectives. It is the tendency to employ the imaginative ability that constitutes Braaten’s first virtue in the effort to better understand those individuals one encounters in one’s daily life.

Virtue epistemologists have done surprisingly little work on intellectual empathy as an intellectual virtue. Jason Baehr (2011) briefly refers to intellectual empathy as an intellectual virtue in his discussion of open-mindedness, primarily in order to contrast the two. He writes that intellectual empathy “involves a willingness or ability to view things from the standpoint of another person, to ‘get inside another’s head’.” He describes “tak[ing] up the standpoint of the other” person as the distinctive activity “proper” to intellectual empathy (156). In a similar vein, Stephen Grimm (2019) writes approvingly of the suggestion that a certain kind of empathy that constitutes “the distinctive mental act of getting into the mindset of others” is central to what he calls the “virtue of being an understanding person” (345). He writes, moreover, that understanding other people is a distinct enterprise from trying to understand the natural world, and that the former requires being “able to successfully ‘take up’ the person’s attitudes, and thus to be able to imagine what it would be like to care about things in the way the other person does, or to have the same sorts of worries, hopes, and concerns the agent does” (348).

Intellectual empathy of the kind in view here is not merely an ability or an act, but a character trait. It is a character trait constituted by a tendency to employ empathic abilities, or to engage in empathic actions, across a wide range of situations. And it is a tendency to do so out of the motivation to attain better understanding of others. Thus, intellectual empathy as an intellectual virtue is a tendency to exercise skills in taking up the perspectives of others out of a motivation to understand others.

While virtue epistemologists have done little research on intellectual empathy of this sort, this sort of empathy does appear to be the focus of a significant strain of research in psychology. The research I have in mind focuses on empathy as a trait rather than a state, and it proposes that among the facets of such empathy is one called dispositional perspective taking. A widely used measure of dispositional perspective taking is the perspective taking subscale of the Davis’s Interpersonal Reactivity Index (1980). As Davis puts it, the items in this subscale “assess the respondent's tendency to try to understand people by imagining their perspectives” (1983: 5). Moreover, “the items comprising this scale refer not to fictitious situations or characters, but to ‘real-life’ instances of perspective-taking” (1980: 12). A sample item is “Before criticizing somebody, I try to imagine how I would feel if I were in their place”. Davis’s measure of empathy has been cited in over five thousand articles.

A second, closely related intellectual virtue is open-mindedness. Virtue epistemologists have had much more to say about this intellectual virtue. In fact, they have tended to characterize it in way that makes it quite similar to intellectual empathy, but without the narrow focus on understanding the perspectives of particular others one encounters in one’s daily life. Wayne Riggs’s (2019) account is illustrative. On his account, the open-minded person is characteristically “(a) willing and (within limits) able (b) to transcend a default cognitive standpoint (c) in order to take up or take seriously the merits of (d) a distinct cognitive standpoint, (e) and is sufficiently sensitive to cues indicating the existence of such alternative standpoints, (f) while having a well-calibrated propensity to exercise these abilities” (150). The distinct cognitive standpoints that the open-minded person is disposed to take seriously needn’t be those of particular others they encounter, though they might be. Put differently, the open-minded person isn’t merely open-minded about the perspectives of others they encounter, they are open-minded within limits regarding the logical space of possible views regarding the topics of their inquiries.

For Riggs, the intellectual virtue of open-mindedness clearly involves skills in identifying and understanding diverse perspectives on topics of its possessor’s inquiries. Regarding the distinctive abilities of the open-minded person, Riggs writes that “finding ways to make challenging ideas intelligible to oneself is a cognitive ability that is fundamental to being open-minded” (147). Riggs stresses, moreover, that open-mindedness, like intellectual empathy, often operates on entire perspectives. When it does operate on an entire perspective, Riggs proposes that its exercise requires seeing that perspective “all together—seeing how it hangs together and makes sense holistically, and seeing how it [would dispose one] to perceive the world in a particular way” (148). Perspectives, for Riggs, as for me, are complex, and understanding them in their complexity is a challenging task. The open-minded person is someone who will be skilled in identifying and grasping the relationships between the elements in diverse perspectives on topics of their inquiries, and they will be disposed to exercise these skills under appropriate circumstances.

The foregoing sketches of intellectual empathy and open-mindedness will allow us to compare and contrast these with one another and with our target virtue of audience sensitivity. When we do, we find that there is a central way in which these traits all overlap, and a central way in which they differ. The central way in which they overlap is that they each require skills for identifying and understanding perspectives. We should expect that the intellectually empathetic, the open-minded, and the audience sensitive will all have a strong understanding of the elements that constitute a perspective, the differences between these elements, and the ways in which they contribute to forming perspectives. We should expect, moreover, that they will also have abilities to get inside of diverse perspectives, different from those they in fact inhabit, to gain understanding of these. The intellectually empathetic, open-minded, and audience sensitive will therefore overlap in their understanding and know-how.

Where they chiefly differ is with respect to when and for what reasons they characteristically employ these shared skills. Intellectually empathetic people characteristically employ the skills of understanding perspectives in order to understand the other people they encounter in their daily lives. What characteristically triggers their use of these skills is a flesh-and-blood other, and their aim in employing the skills is to understand this other person. Open-minded people characteristically employ the skills of understanding perspectives in order to make epistemic progress on topics of inquiry—for example, in order to reach the truth about this topic or to attain a better understanding of it. What characteristically triggers their use of these skills is their motivation to make epistemic progress in an inquiry, and the availability of perspectives relevant to this inquiry that they have not yet adequately investigated. And audience sensitive people characteristically employ the skills of understanding perspectives in order to equip them to better fit their communications to particular others so as to advance their epistemic goods. What triggers their employment of these skills is the presence of a recipient of a potential communication of theirs whose receipt of this communication may be influenced by their distinctive perspective. In sum, the intellectually empathetic will tend to employ skills of understanding perspectives when doing so may help them better understand another person; the open-minded will tend to do so when doing so will help them make progress on an inquiry; and the audience-sensitive will tend to do so when doing so will help them advance the epistemic goods of the recipients of their communications.

Understanding these relationships between intellectual empathy, open-mindedness, and audience sensitivity in this way suggests that we should expect those who are more strongly characterized by one of these traits to be more strongly characterized by the others, other things being equal. This is because anyone who possesses one of these virtues possesses a set of skills that is an important prerequisite for possessing the other virtues. Yet, we should also expect a stronger association between intellectual empathy and audience sensitivity than between open-mindedness and audience sensitivity, because the former two share a focus on applying their common set of skills to the particular others encountered in their possessor’s daily life. Returning to the topic with which we began this subsection, these virtues are both good candidates for broad intellectual virtues involving sensitivity to others in their particularity that may be valuable for liberatory epistemic purposes. What is distinctive about audience sensitivity, however, is its focus on regulating its possessor’s communications as opposed to its possessor’s reception of others’ communications. Given that the lion’s share of attention from feminist virtue epistemologists has been given to virtues such as testimonial justice or hermeneutical justice that govern the reception of others’ communications, audience sensitivity may provide an interesting new candidate—albeit a broad one—for a feminist or liberatory intellectual virtue.

* 1. Audience Sensitivity and Opposing Vices

We can further illuminate the nature and role of audience sensitivity by contrasting it with opposing vices. Here my focus is on intellectual character vices that tend to disrupt the sound performance of the characteristic behaviors of audience sensitivity. We’ve seen that the characteristic behaviors of audience sensitivity involve, on the one hand, attending well to those distinctive features of one’s audiences likely to influence their reception of one’s communications and, on the other hand, deftly fitting one’s communications to one’s audiences in light of one’s grasp of these features so as to promote their epistemic goods. Thus, the vices that will be my focus here are intellectual character vices that disrupt sound attending and sound fitting.

Sound attentiveness to the features of one’s audiences likely to influence their reception of one’s communications can be disrupted through a variety of intellectual character vices. Perhaps the first candidate to come to mind is a vice of deficiency—a vice involving a deficient motivation to attend to the distinctive features of one’s audiences in order to facilitate fitting one’s communications to them. Yet, deficient motivation of this kind often co-occurs and is explained by the presence of some alternative positive motivation. And it is also more clearly vicious in many of these latter cases, where a vicious motivation tends to lead its possessor to attend poorly, if at all, to the distinctive features of their audiences liable to influence reception of their communications.

There are many different intellectual motivations that will tend to lead a person to attend poorly to the distinctive features of their audiences. Often these are motivations oriented toward the self and its features, or toward the self and its features in relation to others and their features. For example, a certain kind of preoccupation with one’s own features may prevent one from attending well to the distinctive features of one’s audiences. A significant strand of research in psychology has focused on self-preoccupation, with the Self-Consciousness Scale (Fenigstein, Scheir, and Buss 1975) being one of the most widely used measures. This measure assesses individual differences in private self-consciousness and public self-consciousness, where the former is “the tendency to think about and attend to the more covert, hidden aspects of the self” and the latter is “the tendency to think about those self-aspects that are matters of public display”. A sample item for the former is “I’m always trying to figure myself out”, while a sample item for the latter is “I’m concerned about the way I present myself”. If one is dominated by a concern to attend to one’s own private or public features in the way characteristic of those who score highly on the Self-Consciousness Scale, this will leave little room to attend well to the features of others in the way characteristic of audience sensitivity. By contrast, some authors have conceived of the virtue of humility as being partly or even fully constituted by a freedom from such self-preoccupation. Jonathan Kvanvig (2018), for example, writes that “a proper expression of humility involves putting the focus of attention elsewhere than on one’s successes or abilities” (196), and he suggests similarly that the humble person will tend to focus their attention away from their faults or limitations too—they will simply be free from self-preoccupation. It would appear that humility of this sort, a freedom from vicious self-preoccupation in one’s patterns of attention, is a prerequisite for the virtue of audience sensitivity.

Other similar intellectual vices conflicting with audience sensitivity involve motivations to view others, including one’s audience, in particular ways in relation to oneself. For example, a person may be motivated to see themselves as better than their audiences in various respects, as we saw in Chapter Four with the vice of intellectual arrogance. Someone motivated in this way is likely to selectively attend to negative features of their audiences, and to interpret features of their audiences uncharitably so as to perceive themselves as superior to their audiences. In a similar way, a person may be motivated to view certain others *qua members of their social groups* as inferior to themself *qua member of their social group*. Such motivations can prevent them from accurately assessing features of their audience when this audience includes members of a different social group from their own. This vice, and others like it, are particularly destructive in the kinds of contexts of particular concern to liberatory virtue epistemologists—contexts containing epistemic interactions across social divides.

There are also further ways a person may be motivated to view others in relation to themselves that can occlude their access to others’ distinctive features besides motivations to perceive themself as in some respect superior to others. For example, a person may simply be motivated to maintain their perception that they are normal—that others are not so different from them. This motivation can occlude them from noticing the distinctiveness of their audiences.

And still further motivations can distort one’s attentiveness to one’s audience, even if they do not involve motivations to view that audience as being related to the self in a particular way. For example, Stephen Grimm (2019) describes the vice of judgmentalism as one that “encourages us, as a default, to attribute poor behavior to a person’s deficient character” (346). It may be that many judgmental individuals are motivated to judge others harshly out of an ultimate motivation to view themselves as superior to others. But, Grimm’s comments suggest this is not essential to judgmentalism. Some people may simply have a biased interest in discovering negative or demeaning facts about others as opposed to more flattering facts. Such an interest can prevent one from attending well to the distinctive features of one’s audiences in the way characteristic of audience sensitivity.

An important pattern has emerged in our contemplation of these various vices opposed to audience sensitivity. Each of these vices shares something in common. They all involve patterns of attentiveness (or inattentiveness) to others’ features that run counter to the pattern of sound attentiveness characteristic of the audience sensitive. And yet they are a diverse lot. This helps to illuminate that being a virtuously audience sensitive person is in part a matter of training one’s attention in a particular way, and avoiding training one’s attention in many other possible opposing ways. Being a virtuously audience sensitive person requires developing a pattern of attending carefully to the distinctive features of one’s audiences liable to influence their reception of one’s communications. Developing this pattern of attention rather than another requires not prioritizing too highly attending to one’s own features to the neglect of others’ features, not selectively attending to negative information about others, not selectively attending to information about others that reflects in particular ways on oneself, and so on. It requires both skill in understanding which features of one’s audiences are important to attend to for purposes of advancing their epistemic goods via one’s communications, as well as the motivation to grasp these features as they in fact are rather than as various possible attention biases might motivate one to see them.

Also standing opposed to virtuous audience sensitivity are vices that tend to inhibit sound fitting of one’s communications to one’s audiences. Here the example that comes immediately to the fore is what is sometimes called rhetoric or sophistry. Those who engage in vicious rhetoric or sophistry may not be at fault for failing to attend to the distinctive features of their audiences. Indeed, they may excel in doing exactly this. More precisely, they may excel in attending to those features of their audiences likely to influence how their communications will be received. Yet, despite attending to these features with skill, the viciously sophistical do not fit their communications to their audiences in the way characteristic of the virtuously audience sensitive. It’s not that sophists don’t “fit” their communications to their audience in some sense. In fact, here again, there is a sense of “fitting” in which they may excel in fitting their communications to their audiences. It’s just that the way in which they fit their communications to their audience is not the same as the way in which the virtuously audience sensitive fit their communications to their audience.

Bringing out this contrast between virtuous and vicious ways of fitting one’s communications to one’s audiences was an important part of Plato’s visceral and sustained attack on rhetoric, sophistry, and the allied practice of poetry. For Plato, poetry was a part of rhetoric, and the distinction between rhetoric (as practiced by professional rhetoricians at the time) and sophistry was not sharp. Both rhetoric and poetry were forms of persuasive speech. They involved the use of particular techniques aimed at persuading the speaker’s audience.

In the *Republic*, the poets are “characterized as making claims to truth, to telling it like it is, that are in fact—contrary to appearances—little more than the poet’s unargued imaginative projections whose tenability is established by their ability to command the applause of the audience. . . . selling their products to as large a market as possible, in the hope of gaining repute and influence” (Griswold 2016: sect 3.4). The poets use a technique that involves attending to features of their audience and exploiting those features. They “take advantage of that part in us the *hoi polloi* are governed by”—the irrational part. They “help enslave even the best of us to the lower parts of our soul; and just insofar as they do so, they must be kept out of any community that wishes to be free and virtuous” (Griswold 2016: 3.3). The poets manipulate their audiences’ feelings in a way that will harm their audiences’ characters and will “maim the thought of those who hear them” (*Republic* 595a), as a means to gaining fame.

The contrast between rhetoric and philosophy takes center stage in the *Gorgias*. There Socrates asks Gorgias to define what he, a rhetorician, does, and to do so in such a way as not to confuse rhetoric with philosophy, what Socrates does. Gorgias proposes that “rhetoric is a producer of persuasion. Its whole business comes to that” (453a). Socrates then brings out that there are two different kinds of persuasion: one that instills beliefs only, and one that instills knowledge, and it seems that rhetoric, as practiced by Gorgias and his ilk, is of the former sort. Griswold observes, “The analogy of this argument to the critique of poetry is already clear; in both cases, Socrates wants to argue that the speaker is not a truth speaker, and does not convey knowledge to his audience” (2016: sect. 4).

Instead, Socrates proposes that the rhetorician aims to produce a pleasure in the audience that is a cheap, false imitation of knowledge. In this way, rhetoric comes to be related to justice in the way that cookery is related to medicine or that cosmetics is related to gymnastics. Whereas in each case the latter arts are true forms of caring aimed at appropriate goods—whether for the body or for the soul—the former are not, but merely pretend to be. The rhetorician thus pretends to care for the recipients of their communication in the way that an appropriately caring communicator does, but is in reality only concerned with “producing pleasure in the audience and the pleasures of power” for themselves (*ibid*).

Socrates’s attack on rhetoric is not an attack on rhetoric *pe se* but an attack on the sort of rhetoric popularly practiced in his day. He in fact holds out hope for a true rhetoric, which is ultimately synonymous with philosophy. This true rhetoric is the art of speaking or communicating. Socrates summarizes the requirement for artful speech in the *Phaedrus*, where he argues that this involves both knowledge of the subject matter of the speech as well as—and more importantly for our purposes—appropriate fitting of one’s speech to one’s audience. He says:

A man must know the truth about all the particular things of which he speaks or writes, and must be able to define everything separately; then when he has defined them, he must know how to divide them by classes until further division is impossible; and in the same way he must understand the nature of the soul, [277c] must find out the class of speech adapted to each nature, and must arrange and adorn his discourse accordingly, offering to the complex soul elaborate and harmonious discourses, and simple talks to the simple soul. Until he has attained to all this, he will not be able to speak by the method of art. (277 b-c)

The true rhetorician, the artful communicator, is one who takes care both to know that of which they speak and those with whom they are speaking, and fits what they speak to those with whom they speak so as to lead the latter toward knowledge. As such, Socrates’s ideal of the artful communicator appears to incorporate within it something very closely approximating our virtue of audience sensitivity, and is sharply contrasted with the opposing ideal of vicious rhetoric or sophistry, which is a manipulative enterprise not oriented toward fostering its recipients’ epistemic well-being, despite its pretence of doing so.

In contrast to Plato, contemporary philosophers have taken very little interest in the subjects of rhetoric or of artful speech more generally. A notable emerging exception is research on the philosophy of argumentation and informal logic. Here some authors, especially Christopher Tindale (2013, 2015), have begun to advocate for the importance of attending to one’s audience in constructing arguments, out of aims to advance their epistemic interests. This kind of proposal sits very well also with the recent development of virtue argumentation theory and its interest in identifying the virtues and vices of argument (for an overview, see Aberdein and Cohen 2016). Audience sensitivity may seem a good candidate for a virtue of argumentation, and vices opposed to it would include sophistry of the kind vilified by Plato. Yet, one thing that our discussion of Plato’s attack on sophistry and rhetoric reveals is that we might also hope for philosophers to broaden their attention beyond arguments to artful or virtuous communication more generally. Doing so will involve returning to consider the kinds of issues that were central for Plato in his juxtaposition of philosophy and rhetoric—issues also central for understanding the nature of audience sensitivity as a virtue. Considering these issues helps to highlight that the virtuously audience sensitive fit their communications to their audiences, but not in the way characteristic of vicious rhetoric or sophistry. They do so with the aim characteristic of the philosopher for Plato: that of advancing their audiences’ epistemic well-being. And this makes all the difference.

1. Measuring Audience Sensitivity

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