

Perseverance as an Intellectual Virtue

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Much recent work in epistemology has focused on the analysis of cognitive character traits. These traits comprise an important kind of intellectual virtue.¹ Among the intellectual virtues that have received extended treatment in the literature are *responsibility*, *conscientiousness*, *honesty*, *courage*, *open-mindedness*, *firmness*, *humility*, *charity*, and *wisdom*.² To my knowledge, no philosopher has undertaken an extended treatment of *perseverance* as an intellectual virtue. In the present paper, I take up this task.

An inquiry into the nature of intellectual perseverance is worthwhile for several reasons. First, as we'll see below, this virtue has played a crucial role in the history of inquiry. Second, perseverance is importantly related to other intellectual virtues (e.g., courage and practical wisdom) that have already been examined in the literature. We will better understand these virtues for understanding their relations to perseverance. Third, in many ordinary cases, perseverance is conducive to a wide range of epistemic goods (e.g., truth and knowledge). Thus, understanding intellectual perseverance and the goods to which it is a means, can provide at least a modest degree of intellectual guidance. Finally, reflection on perseverance (and on particular examples thereof) can provide motivation to pursue the very virtue under examination.

¹ In focusing on so-called “trait-virtues,” I do not mean to disparage the so-called “faculty-virtues” (e.g., good vision and good memory) that often go by the name “intellectual virtue.” Indeed, in my view, there is room for both sorts of virtue in a fully developed virtue epistemology. For more on the distinction between these varieties of virtue, see Greco and Turri (2009).

² For detailed analysis of several such virtues, see Roberts and Wood (2007).

Here is a brief map of the paper. In section 1, I locate perseverance as a specifically *intellectual* virtue. In section 2, I adopt an oft-borrowed Aristotelian structure in locating intellectual perseverance in relation to its vice-counterparts, *intransigence* and *irresolution*. In section 3, I consider some important relations between perseverance and other intellectual virtues. In particular, I argue that *intellectual courage* is a species of perseverance—an important result, given the prominence of courage in the present literature. If my claim is correct, we can better understand courage by identifying the genus (perseverance) of which it is a species.

1. Virtues, moral and intellectual

We're all familiar with the moral virtue of perseverance. We admire this virtue in such a figure as King George VI overcoming a speech-impediment for the sake of England's WWII morale, or in Hellen Keller's hard won ability to communicate, or in Roger Bannister enduring years of training to run the first sub-four minute mile. But *intellectual* perseverance? That may seem a bit less familiar, or at any rate, further from the forefront of our minds. To begin to locate intellectual perseverance in relation to its moral cousin, note that perseverance becomes *intellectual* perseverance simply because of its tie to some intellectual project of the relevant person. Just as intellectual courage and caution may be distinguished from their moral analogues via the former virtues' association with intellectual projects, so intellectual perseverance may be distinguished from its moral analogue in this way. Thus, following others³, I distinguish between moral and intellectual virtues in terms of the objects that these virtues take; or, to put it differently, in terms of the spheres of activity these virtues involve. The moral virtues are largely dispositions to act in with excellence in some particular sphere of human activity (e.g., action in the management of fear, money, or the appetites.) The intellectual virtues as I construe them here are acquired dispositions to think and act excellently as one carries out distinctively intellectual

³ See (e.g.) Greco and Turri (2009), and Roberts and Wood (2007).

activities. Again: intellectual courage and caution can be distinguished from their moral analogues by the way the former virtues are, but the latter need not be, related to intellectual projects. Likewise for intellectual perseverance. In drawing the distinction between moral and intellectual virtues in this way, I leave open the precise relationship between the two sets of virtues. I do not assume that these sets are disjoint; nor do I assume that one is a proper subset of the other.

2. Perseverance: a partial analysis

Having said a bit about how intellectual perseverance is distinct from moral perseverance, it is time to consider in detail what intellectual perseverance *is*. To get an initial grip on the concept, it can help to think of paradigm cases. In the physical sciences, we might think of Einstein and Newton. For both, success in the field of physics was achieved not just through sheer genius, but through dogged perseverance in thinking through difficult problems. In the field of literature, we might consider Kathryn Stockett, whose bestselling book *The Help* was rejected sixty times before the author found success. Or we might think again of Roger Bannister—this time not as a four-minute miler, but as a medical researcher. Many sports fans know that Bannister was the first runner to crack the four minute barrier. Less well-known are Bannister's considerable achievements in exercise physiology and neurology. In order to obtain his experimental results (e.g., regarding effects of inhaling oxygen-enriched air), Bannister did not merely test subjects and record and collate results. Rather, he made himself a subject in his own experiments. Over a dozen times, he wrapped his mouth around a rubber pipe, stepped on a steeply-graded treadmill, and climbed to exhaustion as assistants pricked his fingers for blood samples. Finally spent, Bannister collapsed and shot out the back of the treadmill into a makeshift pile of blankets and mattresses. All this he did for the sake of gaining a better

understanding of exercise physiology. In doing so he exhibited, to my mind, a paradigmatic kind of intellectual perseverance.⁴ (And your kids think *their* homework is hard!)

Of course, these paradigm cases are of limited value on their own. What we need in addition is *analysis* of our target concept. We can start by locating intellectual perseverance in relation to its intellectual vice counterparts, which I'll call *irresolution* and *intransigence*.

On this vice-virtue-vice schema, a virtue lies between an extreme of deficiency, on the one hand, and excess, on the other. In the present case, *irresolution* is the deficiency. This I characterize as a tendency to give up too early on one's intellectual projects. There is vagueness about what counts as "too early." But we can nevertheless identify clear cases. Here we might consider the high school student who gives up on his geometry homework after five minutes because he finds it too difficult, or the aspiring author who quits writing because he doubts his ability, or the grad student who drops out of school simply because the dissertation seems like too much work.

Irresolution should not be confused with *indifference*, though both sometimes serve as explanations for why someone quits an intellectual project. The high-school dropout who quits because he finds school too difficult does something different from the one who drops out because he doesn't care to learn. The former student exhibits *irresolution*; the latter exhibits an unseemly failure to love knowledge. The irresolute person gives up in the face of intellectual obstacles, though he may value the knowledge to be gained, expressed, or applied in his projects. The indifferent person does not value the intellectual goods associated with the projects in the first place. It is the former, irresolute person who exhibits the deficiency that keeps him from intellectual perseverance.

⁴ For a more detailed account of Bannister's medical research, see Neil Bascomb, *The Perfect Mile* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2004); see especially chapter 7.

So much for the deficiency. Let's turn to the excess to which perseverance is opposed—*intransigence*. Whereas irresolution is a tendency to give up too early on one's projects, intransigence is the tendency to persist in these projects even when there is good reason to think that significant further progress is unlikely. It is a tendency to give up too late, or not at all. As above, there is vagueness about what counts as "too late." But also as above, we can identify clear cases. Here one thinks of Hobbes and friends trying to square the circle, or of nuclear physicists continuing to pursue the achievement of cold fusion, or of philosophers trying to prove the existence of tables and chairs to the philosophical skeptic's satisfaction.⁵

Perseverance as an intellectual virtue lies between these extremes. This sort of perseverance requires, at minimum, a disposition to stick to one's intellectual projects for an appropriate amount of time. What amount of time is appropriate? To begin, we can note that the answer to this question will be determined by *practical wisdom*. That is, the overarching virtue of practical wisdom will, when exercised, enable an enquirer to tell whether the given project is worthy of continued pursuit.

This appeal to practical wisdom is plausible; and surely any good account of perseverance will include it. However, the appeal to practical wisdom is not very informative on its own. We want to know more about what practical wisdom recommends in concrete cases. Here we find no tidy formula. Given the sheer range of possible intellectual projects, inquirers, and circumstances, we should not expect one. Such an expectation would run afoul of Aristotle's advice to avoid seeking more precision than one's subject matter allows.

However, even in the absence of a decision procedure which tells us *exactly* how long we should stay at or intellectual projects, we can find some principles to help us along. We can glean

⁵ For development of a similar point see Hookway (2003).

one such principle by thinking about C.S. Lewis's view of temptation in the *moral* realm. Lewis says,

No man knows how bad he is till he has tried very hard to be good. A silly idea is current that good people do not know what temptation means. This is an obvious lie. Only those who try to resist temptation know how strong it is. After all, you find out the strength of the German army by fighting against it, not by giving in. You find out the strength of a wind by trying to walk against it, not by lying down. A man who gives in to temptation after five minutes simply does not know what it would have been like an hour later. That is why bad people, in one sense, know very little about badness. They have lived a sheltered life by always giving in. We never find out the strength of the evil impulse until we try to fight it...⁶

Though Lewis's words concern *moral* temptation, I suggest that something similar is true in the intellectual realm. Consider a person who succumbs to the temptation to give up quickly on an intellectual project. By virtue of his newness to the project, he knows very little about its difficulty. But it is precisely this ignorance that makes it unwise for him to quit. Only by sticking with the project for an extended period will he learn what he needs to know in order to make an informed judgment about the project's viability. Practical wisdom recommends waiting until he is in just such a position before deciding to abandon the project. In short, within some reasonable limit, practical wisdom may push him to continue his project for a good deal longer than he was initially inclined to think appropriate. This may result in a breakthrough. But if it does not, it will at worst place him in a better position from which to judge that the project should be abandoned. If this line of thought is correct, it provides reason to think that intellectual perseverance lies closer to the vice of intransigence than to the vice of irresolution. In this way, perseverance is akin to moral courage, which lies closer to the vice of rashness than to that of cowardice.

Thus far, we have emphasized the temporal aspect of intellectual perseverance. This temporal notion is a necessary part of our target concept. However, we cannot understand intellectual perseverance merely in terms of time spent. This temporal notion does not capture

⁶ C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996), 126.

the richness of perseverance as a concept. One does not count as persevering merely because one spends a long time on a project—for one may spend a long time on a project that is very easy. Or one may spend a long time simply by lollygagging. In neither case does one persevere in the relevant sense. Central to perseverance is the disposition to stay at one's intellectual projects *in the face of obstacles to the success of these projects*. Such obstacles are legion, but they include such things as the native limitations of the inquirer, the difficulty of the intellectual challenge at hand, setbacks that occur in the course of carrying out the project, discouragement from one's community, the desire to procrastinate, environmental distractions (e.g., the internet, the toilet flushing in the bathroom adjacent to one's office), one's other time commitments, and so on. Such obstacles, whether alone or together, tend to impede progress toward the completion of intellectual projects. The key constitutive feature of intellectual perseverance is the disposition to persist in one's projects in the face of such obstacles.

An important question: are the obstacles relevant to perseverance intrinsic or extrinsic to one's intellectual projects? Above I suggested that the answer may be, *both*. For it seems plausible that such items as project setbacks (intrinsic) as well as distractions (extrinsic) may require perseverance in order to be overcome. But admitting extrinsic obstacles as relevant can seem problematic: we do not want to attribute perseverance to someone just because, say, she disables her internet connection, or ignores a flushing toilet. Not all cases in which one sets aside an extrinsic obstacle are cases of perseverance. So there is some resistance to thinking that extrinsic obstacles are relevant to perseverance.

There is much to be said here. For now, note two points. First, in practice, intrinsic and extrinsic obstacles are often connected. It is often because one finds part of an intellectual project so difficult (this is intrinsic) that one must overcome some extrinsic obstacle. Second, one's

overcoming extrinsic obstacles is relevant to perseverance *when one overcomes an obstacle for the sake of the intellectual project at hand*. I'm much more inclined to attribute perseverance to the person who turns off her internet connection for the sake of getting back to work, than I am to attribute perseverance to the person who merely turns off her internet connection. So I tentatively conclude that setting aside extrinsic obstacles can be, but isn't always, relevant to perseverance as an intellectual virtue, even in cases in which extrinsic obstacles are present.

I'll make three more points to further clarify the necessary conditions for perseverance.

First, the pursuit of some new, undiscovered truth is not necessary for intellectual perseverance. In many cases in which intellectual perseverance is exercised, it is exercised in the pursuit of truth. This is so, for instance, of Newton and Einstein as they work tirelessly to develop systems designed to map the physical world as it really is. But it would be a mistake to think of the pursuit of truth as *necessary* for intellectual perseverance. In some cases, perseverance is present even *after* the truth has been acquired. Here perseverance is expressed primarily in the *dissemination* of the discovered truth, or in its *application*. A novelist exercises intellectual perseverance when she toils to produce a work that teaches the same moral truths that she learned at her mother's knee. This same author exercises intellectual perseverance as she endures rejection from acquisitions editors when she tries to get the work published. So while the pursuit of truth often accompanies perseverance, this pursuit is not the only venture in which the virtue is exhibited.

Second, *completion* of the relevant project is not required for perseverance. Suppose that, while on vacation in Greece, I improbably discover some lost work of Aristotle. Desiring credit not only for the discovery, but also for the translation of the work into English, I set out to translate the text. An immediate problem arises: I can't read Greek. I've learned other languages

in the past, and I'm reasonably confident I can do it—though only with a great deal of effort. So I work to learn the language, taking a dozen classes to hone my skills before beginning the translation project in earnest. I then spend five years translating the text. I arrive at the final paragraph on a Friday afternoon, and decide to finish the translation with Monday morning's coffee. Unfortunately, while running on Saturday, I am flattened by a bus—thus preventing me from completing the project. Have I thereby failed to exhibit intellectual perseverance? I should hope not. And if not, perseverance does not require the *completion* of one's intellectual projects. Rather, it seems to require something weaker: perhaps that one brings these projects as close to completion as one can, given the constraints of time, ability, and practical wisdom.

Third, as with some other virtues, intellectual perseverance is in a sense person-relative. For, what serves as an obstacle for one person may not be an obstacle for another. My three-year-old may exhibit perseverance as she spends an afternoon learning to count to twenty. At least once she passes eleven, this task is somewhat difficult for her. Given her current training, she must overcome certain obstacles in order to complete the project of successfully counting to twenty. But I will not—I'm proud to say—need to overcome such obstacles in order to count to twenty. Likewise, a seasoned professor may be able to write an excellent essay without much of the difficulty her sophomore students encounter. The latter, but not the former, exhibit perseverance in continuing the writing project. In short, what counts as an obstacle to the completion of one's intellectual projects is partly dependent on one's training, native abilities, time constraints, and so on. These are person-relative factors. But because such obstacles are partly constitutive of intellectual perseverance, whether perseverance is exemplified in a particular person's character is to some extent an individual matter.

To sum up: If our analysis is correct, intellectual perseverance is a matter of continuing in one's intellectual projects for an appropriate amount of time, despite the threat of obstacles to the completion of these projects. This virtue is often exhibited in attempts to discover new truths, but it does not require this—attempts to articulate and apply old truths can exemplify perseverance. And perseverance does not require the completion of one's intellectual projects. It does, however, require continued efforts to progress in the direction of completion. Finally, the matter of which acts or traits exemplify perseverance is to an extent person-relative.

Despite my efforts, this analysis is not exhaustive. Further chipping and chisoming may improve it. For now, note that it would be a mistake to think that anything short of a correct, exhaustive analysis is worthless. For the task of *regulative epistemology*—epistemology aimed at intellectual guidance—exhaustive analyses aren't always necessary. Rather, for the purposes of guiding our cognitive conduct, an analysis that provides significant, but not complete, conceptual elucidation sometimes suffices. I suggest that for the purposes of regulative epistemology, the analytical task can become secondary when two conditions are met: (i) we have elucidated a concept well enough for it to do regulative work; and (ii) our efforts at conceptual analysis have reached diminishing returns. The reader must judge for herself whether the above analysis satisfies these conditions.

3. Relations to other virtues

Having explored the virtue of perseverance itself, let us now locate it in relation to other intellectual virtues. For present purposes, we'll be limited to just one such relation—that between perseverance and courage.

Many may think that to this point, I have simply given an analysis of intellectual courage under another name. Perhaps some will think that, once we have an analysis of courage in hand,

there's nothing interesting to be said about perseverance. I'll now set out two arguments that, if sound, show that these claims are incorrect. The first argument aims to show that intellectual courage is itself a species of perseverance. The second aims to show that perseverance does not require courage. I'm less certain about the soundness of the first argument than of the second. But either argument, if sound, shows that perseverance is distinct from courage.

So then, first: courage is a species of perseverance. That is to say, cases in which intellectual courage are exemplified are a proper subclass of cases in which intellectual perseverance is exemplified. This argument proceeds in two stages. First, I'll argue that courage is a subclass of perseverance; then I'll argue that it's a proper subclass.

By the traditional definition of courage, (1) If a person X exhibits intellectual courage, then she exhibits a disposition to overcome her fears for the sake of some intellectual good. But (2) If X exhibits a disposition to overcome her fears for the sake of some intellectual good, then X exhibits a disposition to overcome an obstacle to her pursuit of the good in question. In other words, fears are a kind of obstacle. It follows from (1) and (2) that (3): If X exhibits intellectual courage, then she exhibits a disposition to overcome an obstacle to her pursuit of some intellectual good. Now, the virtue of intellectual perseverance just is a disposition to overcome obstacles to the pursuit of intellectual goods. Thus, (4): If X exhibits a disposition to overcome obstacles to the pursuit of the given intellectual good, then X exhibits intellectual perseverance. It follows from (3) and (4) that (5): If X exhibits intellectual courage, then X exhibits intellectual perseverance. All cases in which courage is exhibited are cases in which perseverance is exhibited. Cases of courage are a subclass of cases of perseverance.

They are also a proper subclass. In other words, exhibiting courage suffices for exhibiting perseverance, but not vice-versa. To see this, note that courage involves perseverance

in the face of fears. But not all *obstacles* to intellectual projects are to be feared. In solving a difficult math problem, I may encounter obstacles, but I needn't encounter fear, nor anything fearful. Rather, I may simply encounter frustration or discouragement. Overcoming these obstacles will require perseverance, but may not require courage. Likewise, in writing this paper I went through several bouts of puzzlement, frustration, and distraction. I worked to overcome these obstacles to the completion of the project, and perhaps in so doing I exhibited a kindergarten variety of intellectual perseverance. But at no point in the project was there really any *fear* to overcome. If these examples are plausible, they show that not all cases of perseverance are cases of courage. The examples, conjoined with the argument of the previous paragraph, show that cases of intellectual courage are a proper subclass of cases of perseverance. Courage is a species in the genus *perseverance*. This concludes my first argument, a two-stage argument.

If this argument is sound, it casts light on the nature of intellectual courage by way of taxonomy. So an understanding of perseverance helps us to understand a virtue that has received significant attention from virtue epistemologists. What emerges from these arguments is a taxonomy which places intellectual perseverance—a matter of continuing in one's projects in the face of obstacles—above intellectual courage, which is a matter of continuing in one's projects despite obstacles that are fearful. Also in this genus is what I'll call *perseverance proper*: roughly, continuing with one's intellectual projects despite obstacles that are *not* fearful. Perseverance proper is differentiated via such obstacles as frustration, discouragement, and the like.

This taxonomy isn't relevant only at the level of conceptual analysis. Rather, it is relevant at the level of virtue inculcation. Suppose I'm an intellectual coward. I'm prone to give in to my

intellectual fears. I want to work on this. One way to do so is to practice overcoming other—non-fearful—intellectual obstacles, in order to develop the general habit of perseverance. Having gained this habit, I become more generally disposed to overcome obstacles. This may pay dividends when it comes to facing down those particular obstacles that are fearful. My recognition of the relation between intellectual courage and intellectual perseverance (proper) is just the sort of thing that will enable me to see this.

Now, suppose I'm wrong in claiming that all cases of courage are cases of perseverance. That is, suppose the first stage of the first argument is unsound. There nevertheless remains the second stage, which can be taken on its own. So taken, we can think of it as a second argument for the claim that perseverance and courage are distinct. This is enough to forestall the objection that in analyzing perseverance, I've really only been analyzing courage. Perseverance as I've conceived of it here deserves separate analysis. It has been my primary goal in this paper to begin that analytical task.

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