

Intuition, Reflection, and the Command of Knowledge

Socratic Intellectualism: 'knowledge is a noble and commanding thing, which cannot be overcome, and will not allow a man, if he only knows the difference of good and evil, to do anything which is contrary to knowledge' (Protagoras 352).

1. Knowledge and the rational part of the soul

Gendler contrasts Socratic Intellectualism with Plato's depictions of the rational part of the soul struggling, sometimes unsuccessfully, with the spirited and appetitive parts; she then advances her own picture in which the rational part of the soul struggles also with the invisible 'third horse' of unconscious implicit association.

Q: What is the rational part of the soul?

Perhaps it is (a) the part that is capable of knowledge; perhaps it is (b) the part that reasons, or engages in explicit argumentation, which may or may not arrive at knowledge.

Even if the rational part of the soul is the only part that can know, the fact that this rational part sometimes loses a struggle against contrary factors (whether seen or unseen) does not indicate that knowledge can fail to rule, if it loses by lacking relevant knowledge.

Q: What is it to 'know the difference of good and evil'?

Plausible versions of Socratic Intellectualism will have to take this to mean something quite strong. For a clear counter-example to the Socratic view, I must know, of a specific course of action available to me, that it is good, while simultaneously making a contrary choice to do what I know to be less good.

Q: When do we act contrary to our knowledge (of the difference of good and evil)?

Gendler contends that we act contrary to knowledge in classic cases of weakness of the will, where we experience inner conflict; she also argues that there is a distinctive class of cases where implicit associations we would disavow 'redirect our evaluative and behavioural tendencies in ways that run contrary to our reasoned commitments' (p.191). This kind of conflict within the self is unlike the traditional conflicts between reason and spirit or appetite, Gendler maintains, because 'it pulls and points the chariot without the charioteer or the other horses even realizing there has been a process of redirection' (p.191).

It's not obvious that failing to sense inner conflict marks a distinctive class of problem cases (we also are typically unaware of the 'redirection' when we make an ordinary mistake in reasoning, for example). I'm also not convinced that implicit associations mark a special barrier to the power of knowledge, or even that we ever act contrary to knowledge. I think Gendler's problem cases are better understood as cases in which we lack some relevant knowledge.

I take 'our reasoned commitments' to be the commitments we arrive at through reasoning (or reflective thought). Not every reasoned commitment amounts to knowledge (for example, I may talk myself into a bad idea, reasoning fallaciously or on the basis of faulty premises). Not every instance of knowledge is a reasoned commitment, either: we can also attain knowledge perceptually and intuitively. Acting contrary to reasoned commitments does not necessarily mean acting contrary to knowledge.

2. Intuition and reflection

According to Dual Process Theory (DPT) intuitive and reflective thinking differ in their use of working memory (a single limited-capacity resource whose contents are conscious and available for explicit report). I think either mode of thinking can generate knowledge (or belief, or desire, or other attitudes).

- **Intuition**—used for example in solving easy anagrams (e.g. *spontaenuos*)—does not call on working memory; it operates through autonomous processes which are not open to introspection. Intuitive thought takes consciously available stimuli as input.
- **Reflection**—used for example in solving hard anagrams (e.g. *chidoamlte*)—operates through a series of intuitive stages, each of which posts some content to working memory. Reflection requires the goal-direction production of a series of mental images or inner speech, as in deliberation.

Consciousness matters to whether an attitude is generated intuitively or reflectively, but the manner of generation does not dictate whether the attitude is subsequently available to consciousness for use in deliberation.

Gendler sees the 2012 *PNAS* CV Study (Moss-Racusin et al.) as marking a conflict ‘between our evaluations on the one hand, and our reflective commitments on the other,’ where there are ‘associations that implicitly guide’ the problematic evaluations (p.193); for her, this is a case where knowledge failed to guide action. I see the study as demonstrating a clash, in some experimental participants, between reflectively generated attitudes (about women in general, and about the particular fictional woman job candidate) where these attitudes have little claim to count as knowledge. The evaluations in question—giving a numerical score of hireability, based on a complex and ambiguous CV—were reflective, as were the reasoned commitments to women’s equality presumed to be made by biased participants. More biased evaluations correlated with higher bias as measured by the Modern Sexism Scale, which tests agreement on statements such as ‘It is rare to see women treated in a sexist manner on television’, and ‘On average, people in our society treat husbands and wives equally’. High scores on the MSS correlate with false beliefs about topics such as the percentage of men and women in male-dominated industries. Those with a high score on the MSS might pay lip service to women’s equality, but it’s doubtful that they count as knowing.

Lastly, it’s not clear that there is such a thing as an ‘implicit attitude’, as a distinct type of mental state. Psychologists put the label on attitudes discovered by the use of implicit measures, such as reaction times, but there is considerable evidence that these attitudes are also fairly accessible to explicit report (see especially Bertram Gawronski’s work here). It would be safer, or more neutral, to talk about ‘implicitly tested attitudes’.

3. Self-regulation and the Socratic View

Even if implicitly tested attitudes are available to consciousness when we focus on them, they are not always present to mind. These attitudes can indeed diverge from our reflective commitments, and can also lead us away from those commitments without warning. Gendler proposes that these attitudes consequently call for special forms of self-regulation: ‘traditional strategies for self-regulation cannot be straightforwardly applied to their management’ (p.2). This seems too strong. One very traditional strategy is to pause before acting (for example, Stewart and Payne’s shooter bias effect only emerges under fairly heavy time pressure).

I’m not entirely happy with Stewart and Payne’s non-traditional management strategy. S&P got decreased error on trials where a Black face appeared before a tool, but increased error when a Black face appeared before a gun. It is not obvious that this is a ‘significant reduction in error rates’ as opposed to a case of one kind of error being traded for another. If implementation intentions work by strengthening the association between the stimulus and the desired response, one lesson of the study is that associating safety with the Black prime led participants to expect safe tools rather than guns across the board (whether or not these expectations were accurate). On its own, this manipulation does something attractive (by reducing the Black-White discrepancy), but it is not epistemically unproblematic (even if we are very clear that the association between Blackness and a failure of safety is both empirically false and morally troubling). If this particular manipulation still leaves those manipulated with a weak capacity to act knowledgeably—to produce an accurate sorting of the guns and tools—then it was not an unmixed blessing.

It is not easy to undo intuitive impressions formed by long experience, even when one is aware that this experience has been misleading. We can, as Gendler observes, work to structure our external environment so that our experiences will, over time, be more accurate: for example, by campaigning against distorted media presentations of demographic groups. We can also take steps to reduce reliance in decision-making on the types of judgment we know to be most compromised. I see both types of measure as well motivated by the Socratic view: the first aims to increase the extent of our knowledge, and the second aims to shift the basis of our action away from judgments made in ignorance. **Advocating both of these methods is entirely compatible with the view that knowledge is a noble and commanding thing, which cannot be overcome.**