



# The Platonic conception of intellectual virtues: its significance for virtue epistemology

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## Abstract

Several contemporary virtue scholars (e.g. Zagzebski in *Virtues of the mind: an inquiry into the nature of virtue and the ethical foundations of knowledge*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1996; Kvanvig in *The intellectual virtues and the life of the mind*, Rowman & Littlefield, Lanham, 1992) trace the origin of the concept of intellectual virtues back to Aristotle. In contrast, my aim in this paper is to highlight the strong indications showing that Plato had already conceived of and had begun developing the concept of intellectual virtues in his discussion of the ideal city-state in the *Republic*. I argue that the Platonic conception of rational desires satisfies the motivational component of intellectual virtues while his dialectical method satisfies the success component. In addition, I show that Plato considers *episteme* as the primary intellectual virtue. *Episteme*, which is quite similar to Pritchard's (in: Pritchard, Millar, Haddock (eds) *The nature and value of knowledge: three investigations*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2010) conception of understanding, is a cognitive achievement that cannot be attained by luck or testimony. The realization that Plato was the first to conceive of and develop the concept of intellectual excellences is not merely of historic significance. I illustrate, through the example of Zagzebski's (1996) virtue theory, how the Platonic conception of intellectual virtues could prove promising in contemporary debates on virtue epistemology theories.

**Keywords** Contemporary virtue epistemology · Plato · Episteme · Intellectual virtues · Duncan Pritchard · Linda Zagzebski

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## 1 Contemporary virtue epistemology

The contemporary revival of aretaic ethics in the second half of the twentieth century (Anscombe 1958; Foot 1978; MacIntyre 1981) did not leave the field of epistemology unaffected. This aretaic turn in moral philosophy, led epistemologists in the 1980's to investigate the possibility of a virtue approach to epistemology. Since then, virtue epistemology has grown substantially to the extent that some scholars have recently urged for the development of an autonomous virtue epistemology branch that is distinct from analytic epistemology (Roberts and Woods 2007; Baehr 2011).

Virtue epistemology is a wide collection of approaches to epistemology and thus its members have significant conceptual differences and pursue a wide variety of different projects. However, scholars working within the virtue epistemology tradition share two fundamental commitments that unite and define them as virtue epistemologists (Greco and Turri 2011). Their first commitment is their commonly shared belief that epistemology is a normative discipline. This comes in direct opposition to the views expressed by theoreticians, such as Quine (1969), who argue that scholars should stop working on questions about what is reasonable for an agent to believe and should only preoccupy themselves with questions about cognitive psychology (Greco and Turri 2011). The second commitment of virtue epistemologists is that “intellectual agents and communities are the primary source of epistemic value and primary focus of epistemic evaluation” (Greco and Turri 2011). Contemporary virtue ethics focus on the agent's (moral) character and not on specific action-guiding rules, and likewise virtue epistemology focuses on the (intellectual) character of the agents and considers them as the primary source of value. Unlike traditional epistemologists, who evaluate justified beliefs with no regard to the properties of the person that holds such beliefs, virtue epistemologists argue that a justified belief is one arising out of an intellectual virtue that the agent possesses.

One can crudely divide contemporary virtue epistemologists into two distinct camps, viz. virtue responsibilists and virtue reliabilists.<sup>1</sup> For example, Sosa (1980), who was the first to introduce the concept of intellectual virtues into contemporary epistemology, is a prominent virtue reliabilist. Sosa (e.g. 1991, 2007) argues that epistemology should be person-based rather than following the belief-based approach that traditional epistemology promotes. Memory and vision are some of the faculties that Sosa, and other virtue reliabilists, have in mind when they talk of intellectual virtues (*faculty-based virtues*—see Greco and Turri 2011; Baehr 2011). According to Sosa, an intellectual virtue is “a quality bound to help maximize one's surplus of truth over error” (1991, p. 225) and a belief “... is justified, just in case it has its source in an intellectual virtue” (Ibid., p. 189). John Greco, who is also a virtue reliabilist, defines intellectual virtues as “...innate faculties or acquired habits that enable a person to arrive at truth” (2002, p. 287). For Greco (2002, 2010), a belief is objectively justified if and only if it is the product of an agent's intellectual virtues.

In contrast, virtue responsibilists conceive of intellectual virtues as epistemically valuable character traits for which the agent is responsible (*character-based*

<sup>1</sup> Not everyone agrees with this distinction. See, for example, Fleisher (2017).

*virtues*<sup>2</sup>—see Greco and Turri 2011; Baehr 2011). Some of the most common character traits they consider as intellectual virtues are open-mindedness, intellectual tenacity and attentiveness (Roberts and Woods 2007; Baehr 2011). One of the first contemporary scholars to discuss intellectual virtues and vices as traits of character is Lorraine Code. According to Code, intellectual virtues are “... a matter of orientation towards the world, towards one’s knowledge-seeking self and towards other such selves as part of the world” (1987, p. 20). Linda Zagzebski, who is also a prominent virtue responsibilist, has developed a Neo-Aristotelian<sup>3</sup> theory of intellectual virtues arguing for a unified account of moral and intellectual virtues (1996, p. 78). According to Zagzebski, a virtue is a “... deep and enduring acquired excellence of a person, involving a characteristic motivation to produce a certain desired end and a reliable success in bringing about that end” (Ibid., p. 137).

One of my main aims in this paper is to show that there are strong indications that Plato was the first to conceive of and develop intellectual virtues, in contrast to the widely held belief attributing the conception of intellectual virtues to Aristotle. Upon a careful examination of the middle Platonic dialogues,<sup>4</sup> and especially the *Republic*, one finds several strong indications of the Platonic conception of intellectual excellences. In the first part of this paper, I focus on the two most important indications: (1) rational desires and (2) the dialectic. These two indications, when combined, satisfy both the success and the motivational component of intellectual virtues identified by contemporary scholars, such as Zagzebski (1996), as the two building blocks of the concept of intellectual virtues. I proceed to discuss Plato’s notion of *episteme* and to show that Plato considers it the primary intellectual virtue. I also show that *episteme*, although commonly translated as knowledge, is quite similar to Pritchard’s conception of understanding: it is a cognitive achievement that cannot be attained by luck or testimony.

When discussing the history of the concept of intellectual virtues, virtue epistemologists make no mention of the Platonic conception of the term (e.g. Baehr 2015; Roberts and Woods 2007). Some scholars even explicitly state (Zagzebski 1996; Kvanvig 1992) that the concept of epistemic excellences originates from the Aristotelian tradition. Not only that, but both the reliabilist and responsibilist approaches to virtue epistemology take aspiration and build upon the Aristotelian conception of virtue (Slote and Battaly 2018, p. 766). This shows that contemporary virtue epistemologists have somewhat neglected the Platonic conception of intellectual virtues and the potential value it can bring to contemporary theories.

In the second part of this paper, I focus on underlying the value that the Platonic conception of intellectual virtues can bring to contemporary theories. I argue that the Platonic conception of intellectual virtues has to offer to contemporary virtue epistemology something different than what the Aristotelian does. I proceed to argue that Plato, unlike Aristotle, does not differentiate between theoretical and practical

<sup>2</sup> As opposed to the reliabilists’ conception of intellectual virtues as faculty-based.

<sup>3</sup> Other contemporary virtue epistemologists have also drawn direct inspiration from Aristotle—see for example, Greco (2002, p. 311) and Sosa (2009, p. 187).

<sup>4</sup> I follow Vlastos’ (1991) taxonomy of early (e.g. *Republic* Book I, *Georgias*, *Crito*, *Apology*, *Euthyphro*, *Laches*) and middle dialogues (e.g. *Symposium*, *Republic* Books II–X, *Phaedrus*).

wisdom. A wise agent, according to Plato, is wise in both practical and theoretical matters. Moreover, Plato, unlike Aristotle does not make a sharp distinction between moral and intellectual virtues. Therefore, I conclude that the Platonic conception of intellectual virtues offers a more suitable starting point for scholars who want to argue that intellectual virtues are but a subpart of moral ones (e.g. Zagzebski 1996).

## 2 The Platonic conception of intellectual virtues<sup>5</sup>

### 2.1 The motivational component

In Book IV of the *Republic*, Plato deduces from the presence of three different kinds of conflicting desires in the human psyche that the soul has three parts: the rational, the spirited and the appetitive (439c-d; 441a3-10). The rational part desires epistemic goods such as truth and wisdom (*Rep.*, IX, 581b), the spirited part desires honor and reputation (581a10-15) and the appetitive part has desires of a bodily nature such as the desire to eat, drink and have sexual intercourse (580e-581a10). For the purposes of this paper, I focus in this section on the desires of the rational part of the soul.

One of the strongest indications showing that Plato was the first to conceive of intellectual virtues is the discussion of rational desires in his philosophical corpus. Rational desires are dispositions to pursue rational goods and thereupon constitutive of intellectual virtues. In order to reach the object of their rational desires one must excel intellectually; that means that one must develop intellectual virtues. The rational desires, which Plato discusses in many sections of his dialogues, satisfy the motivational component of intellectual virtues discussed by several contemporary scholars (Zagzebski 1996; Roberts and Woods 2007, p. 307; Baehr 2016, p. 87). Zagzebski, for example, argues that "...an act of intellectual virtue A is an act that arises from the motivational component of A" (1996, p. 270). For Zagzebski, all intellectual virtues arise out of the agent's motivation for rational goods such as knowledge (Ibid., p. 269).

For Plato, it is this rational desire for rational goods that motivates and leads the agent to develop intellectual virtues. According to Plato, if an agent lacks rational desires, then she cannot excel intellectually. Consider, for example, an agent who has no rational desires and is solely interested in pursuing ways to satisfy her unnecessary<sup>6</sup> appetitive desires. Such an agent cannot be intellectually virtuous; such an agent is not motivated to excel intellectually (see for example Plato's description of the tyrannical individual—*Rep.*, IX, 571a–576b). In contrast, consider an agent who has rational desires and has dedicated her life in trying to acquire *episteme* of the Forms and the

<sup>5</sup> Sections 2.1, 2.2 and 2.3 build upon another paper of the author, forthcoming at the Proceedings of the 'Aristotle 2400 Years' World Congress (Kotsonis, forthcoming). Nonetheless, the two papers are completely different both in context and aim.

<sup>6</sup> Unnecessary in that they are not indispensable to life: "Then do you think that, if we are to avoid arguing in the dark, we had better define the difference between necessary and unnecessary desires? Desires we can't avoid, or whose satisfaction benefits us, can fairly be called necessary, I think. We are bound by our very nature to want to satisfy both, are we not? But we can call 'unnecessary' all desires which we can be got rid of with practice, if we start young, and whose presence either does us no good or positive harm" (*Rep.*, VIII, 558d10–559a).

Form of the good. Such an agent is motivated to excel intellectually (see for example Plato's description of the philosopher-king—*Rep.*, VI, 490b).

There are numerous sections in Plato's works discussing the importance of rational desires. Evidence of rational desires as the motivator for the pursuit of epistemic goods, can be found amongst other Platonic dialogues, in several passages of the *Symposium* (e.g. 209a–e) and the *Phaedrus* (e.g. 253c–256e). Still, for the purposes of this paper, I focus on Plato's definition of the term 'philosopher' in the *Republic*.

## 2.2 Rational desires in the *Republic*

One of the strongest pieces of textual evidence for the importance of rational desires for the acquisition of intellectual ends can be found in Book V of the *Republic*; and more specifically in the passage where Socrates provides his definition of philosophers by explaining what he means when he calls someone a philosopher and what he expects from true philosophers (474c–487a). In this passage of the *Republic*, Socrates explicitly states that what defines philosophers, and sets them apart from the non-philosophers, is their unending love (i.e. desire) for wisdom, which includes a desire for learning, truth and knowledge: "A philosopher's passion is for wisdom of every kind without distinction..." (475b).

Socrates proceeds to argue again that a philosopher is defined by their rational desires for rational goods; and that this desire never ceases in them: "...the man who is ready to taste every branch of learning, is glad to learn and never satisfied—he's the man who deserves to be called a philosopher, isn't he?" (475c). And again, later on, Socrates argues that philosophers are "...those who love to see the truth" (475e5). By 'seeing the truth' Socrates refers to a purely rational 'seeing' which very much resembles contemporary conceptions of understanding (see Sect. 2.4). According to Socrates, philosophers do not only desire rational goods but also find true pleasure in their intellectual pursuits—while disregarding all physical pleasures:

So when the current of a man's desires flows towards the acquisition of knowledge and similar activities, his pleasure will be in things purely of the mind, and physical pleasures will pass him by – that is if he is a genuine philosopher and not a sham (485e).

In addition, Socrates notes in the *Republic* that what demarcates philosophers from non-philosophers is that the former strive to acquire an understanding of reality and are not satisfied until they have reached it:

Then shall we not fairly plead in reply that our true lover of knowledge (philosopher) naturally strives for reality, and will not rest content with each set of particulars which opinion takes for reality, but soars with undimmed and unwearyed passion till he grasps the nature of each thing as it is, with the mental faculty fitted to do so, that is, with the faculty which is akin to reality, and which approaches and unites with it, and begets intelligence and truth as children, and is only released from travail when it has thus attained knowledge and true life and fulfilment... (490b).

Overall, one of the strongest indications that rational desires are the motivator for the development of intellectual virtues is to be pinpointed in the Platonic definition and employment of the word philosophy. ‘*Φιλοσοφία*’ is a compound word deriving from the ancient Greek words ‘*φιλεῖν*’ (i.e. love) and ‘*σοφία*’ (i.e. wisdom). Thus, a philosopher is by definition an agent driven by her rational desires. She is a lover of wisdom who, because of this love, is greatly motivated in her epistemic endeavours. She finds true pleasure in learning and in acquiring wisdom, knowledge and understanding.

The Platonic conception of rational desires satisfies one necessary and quite significant condition of intellectual virtues, that is to say that the intellectually virtuous agent is driven by her rational desires to acquire intellectual goods. As far as I am aware, the significance of rational desires as evidence of the Platonic conception of intellectual virtues has never been pointed out. This feeling of attraction towards intellectual ends can be classified under the contemporary conception of epistemic emotions—According to Morton, epistemic emotions are characterized by “the important role (they play) in our attempts to acquire beliefs correctly” (2010, p. 385). However, rational desires, although necessary, are not sufficient for the possession of intellectual excellences. In order to be intellectually virtuous, an agent must also be reliably successful at reaching the object of her rational desires. In the section that follows, I discuss another very important and necessary condition that an agent needs to satisfy in order to be intellectually virtuous: the success component.

### 2.3 The success component

The method of the dialectic, which Plato describes in the *Republic* more extensively than in his other writings (Kahn 1996), is another major indication of the Platonic conception of intellectual virtues. Plato’s dialectical method is the only<sup>7</sup> method that philosophers have at their disposal in order to reach *episteme* of the Forms and to the ‘vision’ of the good (VII, 532a–b, see also Taylor 1926, p. 285). Philosophers, in the *Republic*, practice with each other—they discuss and work on definitions together. Philosophers encounter problems, usually in the form of trying to define x, and attempt through the dialectic to find out the truth. Dialecticians strive through the dialectic to reach to the unhypothetical first principle (533d1–5), and according to Simile of the Sun (507a–509c), this unhypothetical first principle is the Form of the good which illuminates all other Forms and from which all other Forms originate.

Plato’s dialectic satisfies the success component of intellectual virtues, which contemporary scholars, such as Zagzebski (1996, p. 270) and Baehr (2016, pp. 91–92), have identified as a necessary condition for an agent to be intellectually virtuous. For example, Zagzebski argues that “an act of intellectual virtue A is an act that arises from the motivational component of A, is something a person with virtue A would (probably) do in the circumstances, is successful in achieving the end of the A motiva-

<sup>7</sup> See for example *Rep.*, VII, 533a13–15: “And should we add it is only the power of dialectic that can reveal it (true reality), and then only to someone experienced in the studies we have just described? There is no other way, is there? ‘We can claim that with certainty’”.

tion...” (1996, p. 270). The dialectic is also a virtue developer. Through practicing the dialectic, philosophers develop intellectual virtues (such as *episteme*—see Sect. 2.4).

Plato never discusses the exact nature of the dialectic in detail (see e.g., Lee and Lane 2007, p. 263). Still, we learn in Book VII of the *Republic* that it involves the ability to give account of the nature of each thing and to ask and answer questions with the highest degree of clarity (534). The dialectic is a purely rational method that leads to intellectual success:

‘But isn’t this just the theme which dialectic takes up? It is of course an intellectual theme, but can be represented in terms of vision, as we said, the progress of sight from shadows to the real creatures themselves, and then to the stars themselves, and finally to the sun itself. So when one tries to get at what each thing is in itself by the exercise of dialectic, relying on reason without any aid from the senses, and refuses to give up until he has grasped by pure thought what the good is in itself, one is at the summit of the intellectual realm, as the man who has looked at the sun was of the visual real.’

‘That’s perfectly true.’

‘And isn’t this the progress what we call the dialectic?’

‘Yes.’ (532a-b)

The dialectic is a system of success that leads to *episteme*. However, agents first need to be trained in the dialectical method before being able to employ it with success in their pursuit of intellectual ends. Agents are not born possessing fully-fledged rational desires or knowing how to acquire intellectual goods through the method of the dialectic. The dialectic, which is the cornerstone of the Platonic educational regime, enables philosophers to develop intellectual virtues to their fullest and be reliably successful at reaching the objects of their rational desires.<sup>8</sup>

Overall, I have argued that both the success and the motivational component of intellectual virtues can be found in the Platonic corpus. Rational desires satisfy the motivational component and Plato’s dialectic satisfies the success component. I will now proceed to argue that Plato considers *episteme* to be the primary intellectual virtue.

## 2.4 Pritchard’s conception of understanding and the virtue of *episteme*

Plato, in many of his dialogues, discusses the concept of *episteme*. *Episteme* is commonly translated as knowledge<sup>9</sup>; and we learn from Platonic dialogues, such as the *Republic* (e.g. V, 478a) and the *Phaedrus* (e.g. 247c), that the true object of *episteme* are the Forms. Still, as I am going to show to have *episteme*, one must not simply have knowledge of the Forms; one must have understanding of them. Moreover, and more importantly, I argue that Plato’s *episteme* exhibits both definitional components of intellectual virtues and is a cognitive achievement that aims at what is finally valuable.

As I have already argued, rational desires satisfy the motivational component of intellectual virtues. The objects of these rational desires are epistemic goods such

<sup>8</sup> I anticipate objections as to the reliability of the dialectical method but, as in the cases of pianists and athletes, one never has a guarantee of success.

<sup>9</sup> See for example Lee’s translation of the term (in Lane and Lee 2007).



as knowledge, truth and wisdom (see for example, *Rep.*, IX, 581d). Still, for Plato, the ultimate object of rational desires is *episteme* of the Forms. According to Plato's theory of the Forms, as presented in the *Republic*, Forms are eternal, unchanging and indivisible (V, 479a1–3). Forms are the 'absolute reality' (VI, 507b). Thus, since the Forms are the 'absolute reality', it necessarily follows that philosophers ultimately desire to acquire *episteme* of the Forms (V, 479e)—*episteme* of that which 'truly exists' (478a). According to Plato, Forms are the true object of epistemic inquiry and it is only those following that pursuit who should be called philosophers.<sup>10</sup> Plato makes this point abundantly clear in the *Republic*:

One trait in the philosopher's character we can assume is his love of any branch of learning that reveals eternal reality, the realm unaffected by the vicissitudes of change and decay... He is in love with the whole of that reality, and will not willingly be deprived even of the most insignificant fragment of it... (485b).

Philosophers, in order to acquire *episteme* of the Forms (the object of their rational desires), practice the dialectic. As I have already noted, Plato's dialectical method is the only method that philosophers have at their disposal in order to reach *episteme* of the Forms (VII, 532a–b). *Episteme* involves a motivational component (rational desires to acquire *episteme* of the Forms) and a success component (dialecticians are reliably successful at acquiring *episteme* of the Forms through the dialectic). Thus, the Platonic conception of *episteme* satisfies both building blocks of the concept of intellectual virtues identified by contemporary scholars such as Zagzebski (1996).

Still, *episteme*, although commonly translated as knowledge, is closer to the contemporary conception of understanding. In order to show this, I compare it to Pritchard's (2010) conceptions of knowledge and understanding. I show that Plato's *episteme* is quite similar to Pritchard's notion of understanding. Most importantly, the discussion that follows highlights further aspects of Plato's conception of *episteme* as a virtue: *episteme* is a cognitive achievement (and therefore finally valuable) that steers clear of the various value problems faced by the contemporary concept of knowledge.

Pritchard (2010) identifies three value problems for knowledge.<sup>11</sup> He argues that if one were to tackle successfully these three problems, one would show that knowledge is finally valuable. According to Pritchard, the primary value problem is showing why knowledge is more valuable than mere true belief (*Ibid.*, p. 6). The secondary value problem is showing why knowledge is more valuable than what falls short of knowledge (*Ibid.*, p. 7). Lastly, the tertiary value problem is the need to explain why knowledge has a different kind of value than whatever falls short of knowledge (*Ibid.*, p. 9).

In order to answer these three value problems, Pritchard (2010) goes on to develop a new theory which he calls anti-luck virtue epistemology (see also Pritchard 2007, 2018) and argues that this approach can provide answers to the primary and secondary value problems of knowledge. However, he also argues that epistemic luck and knowledge acquired by testimony undermine the position of robust virtue epistemology that

<sup>10</sup> For a similar point, see Mason (2010, p. 50).

<sup>11</sup> For more on the value problems of knowledge and the credit approach to solving it see: Riggs (2002), Greco (2003), Sosa (2003) and Zagzebski (2003). See also, Peterson (2013) for a more general overview of the issue.



knowledge has final value (2010, p. 50). Therefore, Pritchard rejects the argument that knowledge has final value on the basis that it is not a cognitive achievement. He argues that final value comes from achievements that are the result of ability, where the success in question either involves the overcoming of a significant obstacle or the exercise of a significant level of ability (Ibid., p. 66). Still, Pritchard argues that understanding, which is distinct from knowledge, is a form of cognitive achievement and therefore finally valuable<sup>12</sup> (Ibid., p. 67). According to him, understanding is both factive and resistant to epistemic luck (Ibid., p. 82).

In order to explain his conception of understanding and how it differs from knowledge, Pritchard gives the example of the burned house (Ibid., pp. 81–84). According to Pritchard, for someone to understand, and not simply know, that a house burned down due to faulty wiring, one must have a conception of how faulty wiring could cause the fire (thus, for Pritchard, understanding involves explanatory connections<sup>13</sup>). Yet, a kid may know that a house burned down due to faulty wiring, if for example her parents tell her so. However, the kid does not have understanding, because she has no conception of how faulty wiring could do this.<sup>14</sup>

I agree with Pritchard's argument that, unlike knowledge, understanding is finally valuable and in what follows I proceed to show that Plato's *episteme*—although commonly translated as knowledge—is quite similar to Pritchard's conception of understanding.<sup>15</sup> Evidence of the latter can be found in several sections of Plato's dialogues. For example, in Book X of the *Republic*, Socrates discusses how the bridle maker lacks *episteme* and that he has to rely on the horseman's instructions to craft the bridle:

The painter, we say, will paint both reins and a bit...But the maker will be the cobbler and the smith" "Certainly" "Does the painter, then, know the proper quality of reins and bit? Or does not even the maker, the cobbler and the smith, know that, but only the man who understands the use of these things the horseman? "Most true" (601b-c).

Then, a few lines later, he argues:

Then in respect of the same implement the maker will have right belief about its excellence and defects from association with the man who knows and being compelled to listen to him, but the user will have true *episteme* (601e-602a).

<sup>12</sup> See also Pritchard (2013, p. 242) "Acquiring an understanding of anything remotely complex will often be difficult and make a number of cognitive demands on the subject. In gaining that understanding one is thus either displaying great cognitive skill (if one gains the understanding effortlessly), or overcoming significant obstacles to cognitive success (if a great deal of effort is required to gain the understanding)."

<sup>13</sup> See also Kvanvig (2003, pp. 192–193) for a similar point: "understanding requires...an internal grasping or appreciation of how various elements in a body of information are related to each other in terms of explanatory, logical, probabilistic, and other kinds of relations."

<sup>14</sup> See also Riggs (2003, p. 217): "Understanding...requires a deep appreciation, grasp, or awareness of how its parts fit together, what role each one plays in the context of the whole, and of the role it plays in the larger scheme of things."

<sup>15</sup> I am not the only one (nor the first) to argue that *episteme* is more suitably translated as understanding (see e.g. Burnyeat and Barnes 1980). Still, my ultimate purpose in this section is not simply to argue that *episteme* is more suitably translated as understanding but to show that it is a cognitive achievement that aims at what is finally valuable.

It is evident from passages of the *Republic* such as the above that knowledge is not an accurate translation of Plato's notion of *episteme*. The bridle maker is like the kid in Pritchard's example. He has to rely on the user in the same way that the child has to rely on her parents. The maker knows how to make the bridle but not why it has to be made in a specific way.<sup>16</sup> It is only the horseman (who has understanding of why the bridle ought to be made in a specific way) that has *episteme*.

Another example, showing that Plato's conception of *episteme* is quite similar to Pritchard's conception of understanding, can be found in Plato's analogy of the knowledge of Form and letters. Plato uses the knowledge of letters as a model of the knowledge of the Forms (see for example *Theaetetus* 205c4–206c5). Knowledge of the Forms, like the knowledge of letters, is holistic: "Like the subject matter of a man who knows letters, the subject matter of the dialectician, viz. Forms or Kinds, can be exhibited in a systematic body of theory. And it is essential of his knowledge, that he knows which kind can and which cannot combine" (McDowell 1973, p. 250). This, however, goes beyond the modern conception of knowledge; it involves a kind of understanding. Simply 'knowing' forms x or y, for example, is not enough. One also needs to understand how the Forms are interrelated in order to have *episteme*.

Yet another example showing that Plato's *episteme* is quite similar to Pritchard's conception of understanding can be found in Book VII of the *Republic* where Socrates discusses the method of the dialectic:

So you would agree in calling the ability to give an account of the essential nature of each particular thing Dialectic; and in saying that anyone who is unable to give such an account of things either to himself or to other people has to that extent failed to understand them." "I can hardly do otherwise" "Then doesn't that apply to the Good? If a man can't define the Form of the Good and distinguish it clearly from everything else, and then defend it against all comers, not merely as a matter of opinion but in strict logic, and come through his argument unshaken, you wouldn't say he knew what Absolute Good was, or indeed any other good. Any notion such a man has is based on opinion rather than *episteme*, and he is living in a dream from which he is unlikely to awake this side of the grave, where he will finally sleep for ever (534 b-c).

It is evident from the above passage of the *Republic* that the dialecticians can give an account of the being of each thing and also display its relation to the first principle (i.e. the Form of the good). The dialectician's *episteme* of a thing then "...involves the ability (1) to say what that thing is and (2) to explain, in terms of the notion of goodness, why that is so" (McDowell 1973, p. 230). Thus, Plato's conception of *episteme* entails more than simply saying what a thing is. It involves displaying its relation to a first principle—it involves explanatory connections. This relates back to Pritchard's example of the burned house: the kid is able to say that the house burned down but she cannot explain why. The philosophers, on the other hand, give an account of something by displaying its relation to the first principle—they can explain why.

<sup>16</sup> Whether or not Plato is right in arguing that the makers of a product have knowledge while its users have understanding does not affect my argument that Plato's *episteme* is very close to Pritchard's conception of understanding.

Still, Pritchard argues that understanding is finally valuable because it is a cognitive achievement. Is this however also the case for Plato's conception of *episteme*? I want to show that this is indeed the case: Plato's *episteme* is a cognitive achievement. This is especially evident in the *Republic*. According to Plato, in order for an agent to reach an understanding of the Forms, one has to undergo the entire educational program that Plato describes in the *Republic* (VII, 521d–540c). Reaching an understanding of the Forms and the Form of the good is the most important and valuable human endeavor; it is a cognitive achievement that requires agents to dedicate their whole lives in this rational pursuit. One cannot reach an understanding of the Forms either by luck<sup>17</sup> or by the testimony of others.

However, the strongest evidence showing that for Plato *episteme* is a cognitive achievement is that philosophers must move from hypothesizing<sup>18</sup> to the first principle. This relates to Socrates' first and second sailing (*πλοῦς*). According to Socrates, the hypothetical method is second best to a teleological account (*Rep.*, VI, 511b; 508e–509a). This move to the first principle, which yields *episteme*, cannot be achieved either by luck or by testimony—the two reasons why Pritchard (2010, p. 50) argues that knowledge is not a cognitive achievement.

Overall, I have shown in this section that Plato considers *episteme* as the primary intellectual virtue.<sup>19</sup> The Platonic concept of *episteme* involves a motivational component (philosophers ultimately desire to acquire *episteme* of the Forms), a success component (philosophers are reliably successful at acquiring *episteme* of the Forms through the dialectic) and is a cognitive achievement that aims at what is finally valuable.

### 3 Building upon the Platonic conception of intellectual virtues

Now that I have outlined the most significant indications (viz. rational desires, the dialectical method and *episteme*) showing that Plato was the first to have conceived of intellectual virtues, I proceed to discuss an example of how the Platonic understanding of intellectual excellences can be of merit for contemporary theories of virtue epistemology.

I begin this section by highlighting certain fundamental differences between the Platonic and the Aristotelian conceptions of virtue in what regards the relationship

<sup>17</sup> The dialectical method safeguards against epistemic luck. It is true that one might give a correct definition of a piece of knowledge by sheer luck. Still, philosophers who practice the dialectic are after the first principle. Only those who reach the first principle will possess *episteme*. And reaching the first principle is a cognitive achievement that cannot be achieved by sheer luck (or testimony).

<sup>18</sup> A discussion on the value and use of making hypotheses can be found in the *Meno* (I use Beresford's 2005 translation) where Socrates introduces the concept for the first time: "And when I say 'on hypothesis', I mean the way mathematicians often look at problems, when someone asks them a question...we can do the same thing with our question about being good: since we don't know what it is, or what sort of thing it is, let's first find a hypothesis and then use that to look at whether or not it's teachable" (86e–87b).

<sup>19</sup> *Episteme* is an intellectual virtue in the same manner that theoretical (*sophia*) and practical wisdom (*phronesis*) are Aristotle's two principal intellectual virtues. According to Aristotle, theoretical and practical wisdom are faculties (powers) of the soul by which the soul comes to acquire the truth (and are therefore intellectual virtues), likewise for Plato *episteme* is the aptitude to act in such a way as to acquire understanding of the 'absolute reality'—the Forms (*Rep.*, V, 478a).

of moral and intellectual virtues. These fundamental differences between the two philosophers' conceptions of virtue lead me to argue that contemporary scholars<sup>20</sup> of virtue epistemology who believe that moral and intellectual virtues are not as neatly separated as Aristotle considered them to be (Zagzebski 1996; Roberts and Woods 2007; Baehr 2011), are better off following the Platonic conception of virtue. To show this, I re-introduce Zagzebski's virtue theory, discuss how her theory is more compatible with the Platonic conception of intellectual virtues rather than with the Aristotelian and also highlight ways in which the Platonic conception can help her answer some strong criticisms raised against her views.

In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle draws a clear distinction between moral and intellectual virtues both in what concerns their function and in what concerns the methods through which agents develop them. He argues that there are two parts in the human soul: the intellect, which has reason in the full sense, and the appetitive, which is responsive to reason (*EN*, 1102b13–15). He then proceeds to argue that since the human soul has two different parts, there are also two distinct kinds of virtue—moral and intellectual: “Virtue too is distinguished into kinds... for we say that some of the virtues are intellectual and others moral, philosophic wisdom and understanding and practical wisdom being intellectual, liberality and temperance moral. For in speaking about a man's character we do not say that he is wise or has understanding, but that he is good-tempered or temperate; yet we praise the wise man also with respect to his state of mind; and of states of mind we call those which merit praise virtues”<sup>21</sup> (*EN*, 1103a1–10). According to Aristotle, the locus of the moral virtues is the appetites (*EN*, 1103a5–10) and intellectual virtues are “... states by virtue of which the soul possesses truth” (*EN*, 1139b15). Moreover, he argues that intellectual virtues owe their growth to teaching (*EN*, 1103a14–15), while moral virtues are acquired through a process of habituation and mimesis (*EN*, 1103a30–1103b5). According to Aristotle, the two primary intellectual virtues are philosophical wisdom (*sophia*) and practical wisdom (*phronesis*). Practical wisdom involves an awareness of the particulars while philosophical wisdom involves the highest objects of knowledge which are not human affairs (*EN*, 1141b1–7).

In contrast to Aristotle, Plato does not draw such a sharp distinction between moral and intellectual virtues. For example, in his account of the four cardinal virtues in the *Republic* (IV, 427e–433b), wisdom<sup>22</sup> (*sophia*) is listed besides justice, courage and temperance. Plato does not treat wisdom any differently than the other three virtues in the sense that he does not ascribe to it elements that would identify it as a virtue that has no moral applications (as for example Aristotle does in his description of *sophia*). According to Plato, wisdom entails both theoretical and practical elements. This is evident from the fact that philosophers have to hold offices to help the city-state with practical issues, and are best suited to do so because of the understanding of

<sup>20</sup> For example, according to Roberts and Woods (2007) “No strict line can be drawn between moral and intellectual virtues”.

<sup>21</sup> I use Rowe's translation (in Broadie and Rowe 2011) of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*.

<sup>22</sup> Plato uses the terms *sophia* and *episteme* interchangeably. See, for example, the *Theaetetus* “‘And does this differ at all from episteme?’ ‘Does what differ?’ ‘Wisdom. Or are people wise in that which they have episteme?’ ‘Of course’ ‘Then episteme (*ἐπιστήμη*) and wisdom (*σοφία*) are the same thing?’ ‘Yes’” (145e).

the Forms—and most crucially of the Form of the good—they have acquired through the dialectic (*Rep.*, VII, 540a–b). Philosophers are best suited to rule because having ‘seen’ the Forms they will try to imitate their patterns in their ruling (501b). There is nowhere in Plato’s writings any mention of some type of wisdom/knowledge that has no applicability in human affairs. For Plato, the source of moral and intellectual virtues is the same, viz. understanding and mirroring the order and harmony of the Forms and the Form of the good (540a2–540b5—see also Moravcsik 1992, p. 300).

Also, unlike Aristotle, Plato thought that the method for developing moral virtues does not differ from the method for developing intellectual ones. For an agent to be truly virtuous (morally and intellectually), they need to have acquired an understanding of the Forms and the Form of the good through the dialectic (i.e. the last stage of the Platonic educational program). It is only those agents who have reached understanding of the Forms that are truly, both morally and intellectually, virtuous (*Rep.*, VII, 540a–b). All previous stages of Plato’s educational program prepare learners for the study of the dialectic. Indicatively, the early stages of Plato’s educational program (i.e. literary education—II and III, 376c5–403c5—and physical and military training—III, 403c5–419a) prepare the learners for the dialectic by helping them develop a harmonious and steady character and building their epistemic dispositions. The study of music and the poetry accompanying it, for example, develops the students’ rational desires (by giving them their very first contact with the Form of the good through musical harmony—see III, 401d) and discourages them from pursuing unnecessary appetitive ones (through exemplarist stories representing the pursuit of unnecessary desires as harmful for the agent—see III, 391d1–3).

Contra Aristotle, Zagzebski does not differentiate intellectual virtues from moral, considering them all to be part of virtue ethics.<sup>23</sup> She proposes a theory of “... virtue and vice that includes intellectual virtues as forms of moral virtue” (1996, p. 258). In fact, scholars such as MacAllister (2012) have criticized Zagzebski for labelling her theory Neo-Aristotelian given that she clearly deviates from the Aristotelian position on such a fundamental topic as the relationship of moral and intellectual virtues.<sup>24</sup> I agree with Zagzebski’s critics on this point. I believe that her theory is much closer to the Platonic conception of virtue than is to the Aristotelian. Plato, similarly to Zagzebski (and unlike Aristotle), also does not differentiate between intellectual and moral virtues, at least not to such a large extent as Aristotle does.

It is most likely the case that Zagzebski does not use the Platonic conception of intellectual virtues as the starting point for her theory simply because she is unaware of its existence. This conclusion is compatible with some of the arguments she makes in her book (*Virtues of the mind*, 1996). For example, in her brief summary of the

<sup>23</sup> “I will argue that the intellectual virtues are so similar to the moral virtues in Aristotle’s sense of the latter that they ought not to be treated as two different kinds of virtue. Intellectual virtues are in fact, forms of moral virtue. It follows that intellectual virtue is properly the object of study of moral philosophy” (Zagzebski 1996, pp. xiv).

<sup>24</sup> See for example, MacAllister (2012, p. 259): “Zagzebski (1996) is of course aware of the distinction that Aristotle draws between the moral and intellectual virtues, but in considering this to be unimportant, and in merging the two together, I believe she has greatly underplayed the extent to which Aristotle perceived essential differences between the intellectual and moral virtues”. See also, *ibid.* p. 257: “Zagzebski has so fundamentally re-imagined the intellectual virtues that they are no longer recognizably Aristotelian and that it is therefore inaccurate to describe her epistemology as Aristotelian”.

history of the concept of virtue, she makes no mention of Plato's contribution to the development of the concept of intellectual virtues.<sup>25</sup> She also mentions other contemporary scholars, who similarly to her, suggest that the history of the concept of intellectual virtues begins with Aristotle's conception of the term.<sup>26</sup> Still, if I am mistaken, and Zagzebski is aware of the Platonic conception of intellectual virtues, then she obviously does not deem it has anything important to offer to her theory. Otherwise, there is no reason why she would label her theory Neo-Aristotelian when it is obviously much closer to the Platonic theory of virtue.

Still, Zagzebski's theory is not only more compatible with the Platonic rather than the Aristotelian virtue theory, but the former can also help her answer some of the criticisms raised by scholars against her views. For example, according to both Pritchard (2005) and MacAllister (2012), one problematic feature of Zagzebski's virtue theory is her suggestion that an agent has knowledge only when he is able to consider the evidence that grounds his beliefs. This view, however, categorizes those who cannot do so, such as for example young children, as non-knowledgeable (Pritchard 2005, p. 234). For MacAllister, the problem of this implication for Zagzebski's theory is that Aristotle "... is clear that the young can become knowledgeable in the full sense about some matters at least. Furthermore, it will become apparent that Aristotle did not think knowledge (*episteme*) required reflective engagement on the part of the knower either." (2012, p. 259).<sup>27</sup>

In contrast to Aristotle, and similarly to Zagzebski's virtue theory, Plato does not believe that children can become knowledgeable in the full sense. An agent, in order to acquire *episteme*, has to undergo the entirety of Plato's rigorous educational program. Moreover, as I have shown in the previous section (Sect. 2.4), Plato's conception of *episteme* does require reflective engagement on the part of the agent. This is another reason why I believe Zagzebski's virtue theory would be better off having the Platonic theory of virtue (rather than the Aristotelian) as a starting point.

## 4 Concluding remarks

The case I have discussed above is only a small sample of the potential applications that the Platonic conception of intellectual virtues can have in contemporary virtue epistemology. The realization that Plato was the first to have conceived and started developing intellectual virtues can have a significant positive impact on the field of

<sup>25</sup> "The sense in which Greco's examples can be considered virtues, then, is misapplied if it is intended to reflect the way the concept of virtue has been used in ethics. In fact, it has little connection with the history of the concept of intellectual virtue, although that history is quite sparse as already noted. Aristotle's examples of intellectual virtues include theoretical wisdom (*sophia*), practical wisdom (*phronesis*) and understanding or insight (*nous*). Hobbes's list includes good wit and discretion; Spinoza's primary intellectual virtue is understanding" (Zagzebski 1996, pp. 10–11).

<sup>26</sup> "Even when Kvanvig traces the roots of virtue epistemology to Aristotle, it is to Aristotle's epistemology that he briefly turns, not to Aristotle's theory of virtue" (Zagzebski 1996, p. 11).

<sup>27</sup> For example, in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle argues that it is possible for the young to "develop ability in geometry and mathematics and become wise in such matters" (*EN*, 1142a13–14). He notes that "... indeed one might ask this question too, why a boy may become a mathematician, but not a philosopher or a physicist. It is because the objects of mathematics exist by abstraction..." (*EN*, 1142a16–17).

contemporary virtue epistemology. It can lead to the formulation of new theories that deviate from the Aristotelian and Neo-Aristotelian tradition that is currently dominating the field. Indicatively, I have shown through the example of Zagzebski's virtue theory that it can be of significant merit for those contemporary scholars (as for example the vast majority of virtue responsibilists) who identify strong ethical elements in their conception of intellectual virtues and oppose the sharp distinction between moral and intellectual virtues that is present in the Aristotelian understanding of virtue. And even if a contemporary scholar does not want to build her theory upon the Platonic conception of virtue (because for example she disagrees with one of its integral features), we still have a lot to gain (in terms of inspiration or by 'borrowing' something from it) when fully aware of the options it provides to contemporary virtue epistemology theorists.

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## Compliance with ethical standards

**Conflict of interest** The author declares that they have no conflict of interest.

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