

Intellectual Agency and Virtue Epistemology: A Montessori Perspective

“The...virtues are...the *methods of existence* by which we attain to truth.” – Maria Montessori

Although Montessori studied philosophy under leading Italian philosophers of her day and actively engaged with philosophers like Nietzsche, James, and Bergson, she is not generally thought of as a philosopher. Her lifetime focus on children, educational reform, and social justice might seem distant from the concerns of contemporary analytical epistemology. However, the development in recent years of “virtue epistemology,” which sees epistemology in terms of faculties or traits of character that contribute to epistemic worth” (Baehr, 112) and which seeks to “serve intellectual communities far beyond the borders of contemporary epistemology” and “humaniz[e] and deepen...epistemology” (Roberts&Wood, 112, 7) opens space to think about Montessori as an “epistemologist” in this virtue tradition. The “strongly education-oriented” direction of much recent virtue epistemology (Roberts&Wood, 22) opens the door even wider to insights from one of the great educationalists of the early twentieth century.

Montessori fits virtue epistemology particularly well. Her epistemology is part of her pedagogical concern with cultivating children to be excellent epistemic agents. She situates knowledge and truth in the broader framework of humans’ epistemic faculties, dispositions, and virtues (SA:106). Her approach to “knowledge” fits the core virtue epistemological commitment to locate “the primary focus of epistemic evaluation” in “intellectual agents and communities ... [and] the traits constitutive of their cognitive character” (Greco and Turri, 3). She details several central epistemic virtues, including so-called “character virtues” such as “humility” (SA:106) and “patience” (SA:188; 1913:231; AbsMind:224) and faculty virtues such as sensory acuity (Calif:356; MM:167ff.) or “creative imagination” (SA:186). And consistent with a common methodological approach that favors the “combination of abstract analysis and narrative fragments” (Roberts and Wood 2007:324), she explains and defend the importance of various virtues both in general philosophical terms and with specific references to important examples, particularly from the history of science (e.g. SA:176) and the lives of children (e.g. Secret:98).

Montessori not only anticipates many claims of contemporary virtue epistemology; she also makes philosophical moves that can contribute to its development. She details pedagogical principles and materials to cultivate epistemic excellence, and she aligns virtue epistemology with agency-oriented empiricism, a sophisticated approach to the unconscious, and an embodied conception of cognition. These features give her distinctive and plausible accounts of epistemic virtues that are philosophically sound and enacted in pedagogical techniques and materials.

This monograph develops an approach to intellectual virtue that avoids pitfalls of two opposing approaches in contemporary philosophy, those of “reliabilists” who identify virtues with reliable truth-seeking faculties and those of “responsibilists” who see virtues as praiseworthy acquired character traits.

It addresses problems such as how to naturalize epistemic virtue, integrate insights from cognitive science into epistemology, or respond to situationist critiques. It offers new accounts of key intellectual virtues, from commonly discussed ones like sensory acuity and intellectual love to novel ones like manual dexterity. While it appeals to professional epistemologists, the book also will have a broader impact for educationalists, intellectual historians, and feminist scholars. For educators, the book highlights philosophy's distinctive importance, much as Angeline Lillard's successful *Montessori* (OxfordUP) shows the relevance of contemporary psychology for Montessori practice and Jason Baehr's *Educating for Intellectual Virtues* shows virtue epistemology's relevance to education. A felicitous indirect goal is canon expansion. In this and succeeding monographs, I will present Montessori as an overlooked philosopher worth taking seriously; the book will interest any who seek to diversify the humanistic canon to include previously marginalized voices (e.g., those of women philosophers and children).

By laying out Montessori's underlying philosophy and providing illustrations of specific pedagogies for each virtue, the book will link virtue epistemology, an overlooked figure in the history of philosophy, and concrete pedagogical practice.

MONOGRAPH CHAPTER OUTLINE

1. Introduction offers a brief summary of Montessori's life and work, virtue epistemology, and the importance of increasing the mutual relevance of virtue epistemology and educational theory.

PART ONE. EPISTEMOLOGICAL COMMITMENTS articulates key concepts of Montessori epistemology.

2. Maria Montessori's Interested Empiricism lays out two features of Montessori's epistemology: it is empiricist in taking the senses as the foundation of all knowledge, but also "interested" in that all cognition – bare perception through complex reasoning – depends on knowers' interest in objects of cognition and hence expresses intellectual agency. This sets the stage for one theme of my book, that Montessori resists easy classification as a virtue responsibilist (e.g. Zagzebski) or virtue reliabilist (e.g. Greco). Because *all* cognitive capacity depends upon interest, she might be seen as a responsibilist, but Montessori takes even paradigm reliabilist virtues (such as the senses) as virtues.

3. Intelligence, the Unconscious, and the Body introduces two further themes of Montessori's epistemology, her emphasis on the (legitimate) role of unconscious cognition and her concept of the "mind" as essentially embodied. With respect to the first, I lay out her concept of the unconscious vis-à-vis Freud and contemporary accounts of the adaptive unconscious (Wilson). With respect to the embodiment, I situate her particular theory in the context of a range of approaches to "embodied" and "enactive" approaches to cognition (Noë, Shapiro, Clark and Chalmers).

4. *Epistemic Virtues.* This chapter explains and defends a general account of Montessorian epistemic virtue. While rejecting standard distinctions – e.g., reliable faculties vs. traits for which one can be held responsible – I develop a general account of intellectual virtues as (innately) developmentally-possible capacities developed and specified through interested intellectual activity, whereby a person comes to intellectually engage with (e.g. to know) reality excellently.

PART TWO: EPISTEMIC VIRTUES. This part defends several of Montessori’s accounts of specific virtues.

5. *Character as Virtue* presents Montessori’s distinctive approach to character, the primary expression of which is “the power ... to concentrate” (AbsMind 209) and which is essentially “a tendency ... to raise oneself up” or “gravitate toward ... perfection” (AbsMind 191, 219). Character is itself a virtue and underlies all other virtues. I relate this conception of character to other contemporary (Aristotelian) approaches and to other features of Montessori’s epistemology, and I show how Montessori’s approach to character avoids pitfalls associated with “situationist” criticisms of character (Doris, Harman, Alfano).

6. *Sensory Acuity and Sensory Attentiveness* discusses specific forms of sensory acuity (color-discrimination, tactile sensitivity, etc) as well as the general virtue of being observant of or attentive to one’s surroundings. I discuss why these are virtues, why one can be held responsible for them, how they relate to each other, and in what sense one can consider bare sensory awareness to be driven by “agency.”

7. *Physical Dexterity* draws from chapter three to argue that physical dexterity is an *intellectual* virtue rather than a non-intellectual excellence, and it discusses the implications of Montessori’s account for those with significant physical, sensory, or neuro-diversity, or “disability.”

8. *Intellectual Patience* discusses several different but related forms of intellectual patience, from the patience to follow through on intellectual inquiry (akin to perseverance and tenacity) through patient willingness to wait for unconscious processes to bring insights to light. I also discuss the relationship between patience and “quickness” of thought (SA 154).

9. *Intellectual Love* uses Montessori’s discussion of “intellectual love” to question virtue epistemologists’ tendency to think of intellectual love as love of *knowledge*. I show advantages of Montessori’s description of intellectual love as love of the world (or objects in it) in a particularly intellectual way, rather than love of an intellectual object. I also briefly discuss the related (and widely ignored) virtue of intellectual *joy*.

10. *Intellectual Humility* shows how Montessori’s concept of intellectual humility as first and foremost a form of humility before *nature* incorporates and unifies more widely-held contemporary accounts of humility as an interpersonal virtue and various forms of intellectual “open-mindedness.”

11. *Intellectual Courage* focuses on courage as a willingness to stand up for one’s *own* insights. This counter-weight to intellectual humility incorporates an individuating and Nietzschean dimension into virtue epistemology. Once one sees intellectual virtues as about more than mere “knowledge” (a new

trend in virtue epistemology), originality and autonomy can be intellectual goods *in themselves*. Rather than intellectual virtues always tending towards Truth accessible to all virtuous agents, important creative insights involve construals of the world as active remakings rather than merely receptive understandings.

The book ends with a short conclusion drawing together overall themes and exhorting philosophers to take Montessori seriously and educationalists to take seriously the cultivation of intellectual virtues.