Although relativists about virtue are fond of reminding us of widely differing lists of virtues that various cultures have embraced, one feature which almost invariably turns up on every list of virtues is courage. And, while some forms of courage, such as physical courage and mental courage, are required for the continued survival of the species, other forms of courage, such as epistemic courage, have also played and continue to play a very important role in human intellectual development. This last aspect of courage, epistemic courage, I suggest, provides an important explanation for the almost universal recognition of courage as a virtue. My central concern in this paper is to clarify the nature of epistemic courage and to examine its role in the epistemic enterprise.

That courage should play an important role in epistemology should be seen as a challenge to work, both by certain naturalistic epistemologists, [e.g., early work by Alvin Goldman], and certain super-naturalistic epistemologists, [e.g., Alvin Plantinga], which emphasizes how we human beings are either naturally constructed by evolution or super-naturally designed by God to have the beliefs we do. While it is important to acknowledge the inherited and/or created aspect of our doxastic system, there seems to be more to the acquisition of knowledge and belief than mere receptive passivity. And, an examination of epistemic courage will help recover important elements that some current efforts in epistemology have left out. In this paper, after distinguishing several different forms of courage from epistemic courage, I present and defend a six-part scheme of epistemic courage. I then use this scheme to consider how epistemic courage contributes to knowledge.
Some Introductory Comments

It will strike some as odd to think of the business of knowledge as requiring a specific form of courage. For, it usually looks as though the direction of courageous activity goes the other way round. That is, traditionally, in the business of courage it is knowledge that comes first. One first comes to know, or, perhaps, strongly believe, something that is disturbing or troubling. One then realizes that one possibly can do something about the threatening situation to prevent, alleviate or, at the very least, slightly lessen the prospective harm. Further, one must also perceive that such action would involve one taking a significant risk. One is then faced with performing a difficult or challenging action that involves taking this perceived significant risk. If one does so engage and take the risk, one is then regarded as courageous. If one deliberately refrains from engaging in this activity, then, without an adequate excusing condition, one runs the risk of being considered to have acted in a cowardly fashion. This call to dangerous or risky physical activity based upon knowledge is typical of the challenge to be courageous. Standing up to a bully terrorizing innocent children is a typical case. Call this “Physical Courage”

It is tempting to think of all intellectual courage using the same model as physical courage, as involving risky mental action aimed at averting a serious physical problem. That is, one perceives a serious situation and than engages in risky mental activity with the goal of combating the physical problem at hand. An example of such an activity might involve a case of whistle blowing, in which one uses knowledge one has to put oneself at physical risk by making this knowledge available to others, or where one uses one’s wits, as Scheherazade courageously did in The Arabian Nights, to avoid a dreadful fate. Call this “Mental Courage”. Again, it is important to note, the goal of this courageous activity is a particular physical state of affairs. In the case of Scheherazade it is the goal of her keeping her life.
One can, of course, think of cases that combine the two of these, that is, mixed cases of both Physical and Mental Courage. Various cases of espionage come to mind here, where it is the use of both one’s intellect in a physically risky situation that is required. It may be that the vast majority of cases of courage are mixed cases of this sort.³ These typical kinds of courage are familiar to us, but, they are not my direct concern.

I am, instead, interested in a different set of cases, cases where the directionality is the direct opposite of that sketched above, that is, in which one moves from activity to knowledge instead of from knowledge to activity. In this different kind of case, moving from activity to knowledge, or at least to attempted knowledge, one is challenged to engage in certain forms of intellectual and/or physical activity with a different goal, the goal, not of preventing some disastrous physical state of affairs, but, rather, the goal of obtaining knowledge. Thus, what I am suggesting is that, in addition to mental courage, there is a further sort of intellectual courage, namely a form of courage that is specifically related to the enterprise of knowledge. Let us call this “Epistemic Courage”. Those who exhibit epistemic courage do so with the goal of strengthening what is known. This strengthening itself may take one of several forms, including: either, (a) the form of checking or verifying a knowledge claim, or (b) of refuting some knowledge claim, or (c) of producing a new putative point or area of knowledge. Further, the intellectual activity required, in order to count as epistemic courage and not as some other, perhaps totally routine and unchallenging epistemic activity, needs somehow to earn the title of “courage” by being challenging, by which I will, tentatively, understand as meeting one or more of the following features: that of being intellectually disconcerting or epistemically risky, or involving an element of real fear.⁴ So, let us now see what sort of a case can be made for this category of courageous activity.
To set the stage, let us begin by thinking about what might be significantly mentally challenging with respect to getting knowledge. To do so it is useful to compare situations in which there is no such challenge present. Consider such cases as the following.

[1] While there would seem to be no courage required to reflect critically about obvious media propaganda supporting a political candidate one detests, thinking hard about the fairness of media pronouncements about one’s favorite candidate with whom one has for a long time significantly identified would seem to present a significant challenge. While the former is easy to do, the latter is much more difficult.

[2] There is rarely any difficulty encountered in doubting claims from marginal groups, such as doubting those who walk around with signs claiming that the world will be destroyed tomorrow. There is, I would suggest, much more difficulty, often indeed something perhaps like a fear of discovering that one has been in error, in coming to doubt what one has long taken as received orthodoxy. This might include, for instance, entertaining doubt regarding the religious and political principles that one lovingly learned from one’s parents. There would seem to be virtue in the latter case, if done appropriately, but not in the former.

[3] There would seem to be no virtue in being able to demand justificatory support for claims from those who espouse views that strike many as “off-the-wall”: the claims of those who believe in alien visitation based on crop circles seem readily to invite such a response. It is more difficult, however, to consider views one has taken to have almost the status of common sense, but which have come under serious attack from reputable sources whose integrity is impeccable. There can be the fear that a careful examination of the alleged support that can be given for such claims will turn out to be disappointing. Such a demand, which would seem to merit the charge of disloyalty, is much harder to achieve, and thus, when appropriate, to be deemed virtuous.
When one has no strong commitment as to whether a particular city in Central Asia was on the Silk Road, then entertaining the view that a given city was not on the Silk Road is not particularly difficult. However, when one is asked seriously to entertain the thought that one’s life partner has been unfaithful with a half dozen of one’s best friends, this is a much more challenging and, for many, a genuinely fearful belief to consider. It is not uncommon in cases of the later sort to find individuals engaging in massive efforts at self-deception.

With regard to certain cases of admitting possible error, such as the specific date of Caesar’s crossing the Rubicon, those of us who are not professional historians specializing in the history of the Roman world would not find this to be a serious consideration. Admission of possible error, however, regarding the choice of a long-time partner, a religious or a political tradition, or even a “life-style”, is typically much, much harder for most of us.

For those of us who are not experts, the belief that an obscure painter belonged to one of the obscure schools of painting of the early twentieth century would be a relatively easy belief to discard when being informed by an art expert that the painter in question belonged to no school whatsoever, and was an autodidact. Other special beliefs, however, such as the belief that a particular person is a good friend, might be very hard to abandon, even when one has brought oneself to entertain seriously the possibility. A significant personal cost comes with doing so.

For some beliefs, such as the belief there would be a horrible blizzard the day before yesterday that would disrupt travel to this conference, it was easy for me to adopt the alternative belief about good weather being in store based on my going outside yesterday afternoon and walking across campus. For other beliefs, such as adopting the belief that the political allegiance one had learned to mock for four decades was, in fact, the one that better represented one’s basic core values, the adoption of such a belief is by no means a facile achievement.
From these seven sets of contrasting cases we can derive a tentative scheme for locating characteristically *epistemic* courage. This scheme is the following:  

**7-stage scheme:**  
1. The courage to reflect critically about personally challenging matters  
2. The courage to doubt received orthodoxy  
3. The courage to demand warrant for claims widely received.  
4. The courage seriously to entertain alternative beliefs on difficult topics.  
5. The courage to admit possible error regarding important intellectual matters.  
6. The courage to abandon one’s previously cherished central beliefs  
7. The courage to adopt new far-reaching beliefs in place of old-ones.

This scheme is designed as a step-wise procedure for changing one’s deeply valued and entrenched beliefs. Changing one’s deeply entrenched beliefs is, usually, a task that calls for epistemic courage. For a very rough initial account of epistemic courage, one might start with the tentative claim that S has epistemic courage regarding X if S exhibits positive movement on the 7-stage scheme regarding X. By “positive movement” is meant moving from some earlier stage to some later stage. This allows that there can be more or less movement, just as we would want to allow that some acts of epistemic courage are more or less courageous than others. We can then characterize the general virtue of epistemic courage as follows: S has epistemic courage provided S is appropriately disposed to engage in such positive movements.

When it comes to exhibiting epistemic courage, we need to allow for individual differences. Some individuals never exhibit individual courage; some may do so very rarely; and, others may be inclined to do so more frequently. Still, there would seem to be a problem with claiming regular or constant epistemic courage, just as there would seem to be a problem with claiming regular or constant physical or mental courage in most of one’s every day activities. Courage of all sorts seems to be a virtue that is more the exception than the rule, even among the saints.
And, of course we need to recognize that mere belief change, by itself, is not sufficient for epistemic courage. We can well imagine cases where someone suffers a bizarre accident such as having a spike driven through her head, develops a peculiar “brain lesion”, or takes a special “mind-altering” drug which results in turning her from a deeply believing Greek Orthodox to a devout Sufi Muslim. But, all of these potential situations are ones in which the causes for the change are, in an important sense, “external” to the agent. She didn’t have to do anything—the change just happened to her.

This leads directly to my next claim about epistemic courage, namely that epistemic courage seems to be the sort of thing that is not, for the most part, required for what we might call, following Sosa, *biological* knowledge, or knowledge which is determined by the proper operations of one’s biological constitution. It does, however, seem required for what we might call, again following Sosa, *reflective* knowledge, that is, knowledge which depends on our capacity to reflect in some important way about what one believes. The reason is clear. Courage in general requires challenging action based on awareness of a difficult problem. Only reflective knowledge seems to require awareness, hence for the possibility for epistemic courage.

There are, to be sure, remaining questions of clarification that we might ask. One might also ask whether one needs to engage in all of the steps in order from 1 to 7 in order to exhibit epistemic courage, or can one skip certain steps? The answer does not seem to be as clear as one might like. While jumping from step 1 to step 7 would seem to be a bit too facile, perhaps, to count as epistemic courage, it would indeed seem possible, for example, to move from step 4 to step 6, skipping step 5. Whether there are further steps that one might want to add to the process or some steps that one might wish to omit as otiose are also matters appropriate for further consideration.
And, it might be the case that one step by itself could in some circumstances be sufficient to qualify for being epistemically courageous. One can imagine certain cases where, because of extreme negative environmental forces and a deep sense of loyalty to a particular tradition, say of human sacrifice, even getting someone deeply steeped in that tradition genuinely to reflect critically about aspects of that tradition would represent an enormous act of epistemic courage.

Further, we might ask: Is this the only scheme for epistemic courage, or are there others? While I take the above schema to be paradigmatic for epistemic courage, there may be other kinds of related cases. If there can be a courageous changing of belief, then it would seem possible to be courageous in hanging on to a seriously challenged belief in certain circumstances. Taking a suggestion from important work on epistemic virtue by James Montmarquet, I think we should be willing to consider whether holding on to one’s reasonably supported beliefs in the face of ferocious and unfair critical onslaught or in the face of threatening social pressure to change or conform would also count. But these cases are tricky, because they also seem likely to introduce additional elements of courage as well, such as mental and physical courage. The relevant question to ask about such cases is: why is the courageous individual struggling against the odds to hang on to the belief?\textsuperscript{8} If the answer is that it is simply a matter of integrity, then this may be mental courage, but not epistemic. If the answer is that one wishes to retain knowledge, then it might count as epistemic courage, or perhaps even a mixed case.

This leads us to the tricky question of what one should say about the courage of martyrs. If one hangs because one chooses to hang on to a particular religious or political belief, for example, because one wants to be loyal, or because one wants to achieve a good heavenly reward\textsuperscript{9}, then perhaps this, also, is a case of mental and physical courage which is not epistemic, for the courageous aspect of the relevant activity is not primarily the pursuit of knowledge.
There can, to be sure, be epistemic martyrs, those who choose to die for the sake of acquiring knowledge. It is perhaps tempting to think of Marie Curie and other brave researchers who engage in dangerous exploits for the sake of making breakthrough discoveries as epistemic martyrs. But, it would appear to be a mistake to take such a courageous pursuit of knowledge as sufficient for demonstrating epistemic courage in the sense presented here. The courage that Curie and other researchers who undergo enormous hardships and expose themselves to great risks exhibit in their pursuit of scientific insight seems to be predominantly physical, not epistemic, if one interprets their actions as lacking as fear regarding the challenging or accepting of particular hypotheses that had to be faced and overcome.

There are other hard cases that present themselves. What about detective work? Is this epistemically courageous? The answer here is that this is probably not epistemic courage, at least for the most part. While there may be significant physical hardship, personal intellectual challenge or fear is typically not present. And, furthermore, there is the additional important difference that the primary goal of detective work is to gain knowledge but to cause a particular non-epistemic state of affairs to obtain by means of acquiring knowledge: for example, getting information about a crime that will lead to the punishment of an evil doer. Scientific detective work, on the other hand, where one is investigating a particular claim with the goal of getting knowledge, might involve epistemic courage, if the relevant beliefs are sufficiently personally challenging and whose far-reaching consequences cause one to rethink one’s deepest commitments.

I hope to have now said enough to get the reader to be epistemically courageous enough to find herself in stage 1 of my 7-step scheme regarding epistemic courage, that is, I hope to have helped the reader to entertain or reflect critically on the concept of epistemic courage. I now
move to my final concern, which is to argue that epistemic courage is often crucially involved in some of the more significant epistemic situations in which we find ourselves as mature, reflective adults.

**The Epistemic Value of Epistemic Courage**

Why should we be interested in epistemic courage? If it seems to apply only to a relatively limited number of cases—suppose we grant epistemologists like Sosa, Goldman, and Plantinga that most areas of knowledge can be explained adequately without employing it—then why does it have serious interest for us, besides pointing us to cases that complicate reliabilist epistemologies? There are half a dozen good epistemic reasons for valuing epistemic courage.

If we go back to the beginning of modern epistemology with Descartes, we find that Descartes famously starts by squaring off against the prominent skepticism of his age. Whether we approve of the various controversial details of Descartes’ Classical Foundationalist project, we should all recognize two important points from Descartes’ effort. [1] First, that there is epistemic value in entertaining needed skepticism, and [2] second, that there is epistemic value in taking a firm, cognitivist stand against the skeptic when one has good reason to do so. Both of these activities often involve epistemic courage.

As I conceive it, the early stages in the above scheme make a place for taking the skeptic seriously. One reason we need to be able to take skepticism seriously is that fallibilism, the view that most all of our beliefs could be wrong, seems to be the best description of our common epistemic condition. Further, we all are faced with the obvious problem that, on many very important matters, widespread human disagreement is the norm rather than the exception. Being willing to examine and reflect on our beliefs in these cases seems to be a way of improving our
odds of obtaining correct beliefs on controversial matters, which seems of obvious epistemic
value, but only on condition that we part company with the skeptic. And, there are many cases in
which it seems silly to rest with skepticism. The latter stages in the above epistemic courage
scheme for make a place for taking a stand against the skeptic.

[3] An additional reason for taking epistemic courage seriously has to do with enabling
one to combat the all-too human tendency we have to engage in personal rationalizations.12 I
have always found it curious that many (though not all) professional academics, including, to my
dismay, philosophers, were among the most capable rationalizers regarding the interpretation of
their own situation. This contrasts starkly with their heightened ability to be brutally honest
about their fellows. From this I have been forced to conclude that if it can happen to academics,
who are supposed to know better, it can happen to anyone, and I glean from this the following.
Whenever we find ourselves making a difficult decision in which important distinctions with
serious consequences are being made involving comparing our own case and that of others we
need to engage, courageously, in many of the steps listed earlier. The clear epistemic value of
doing so is to avoid falling into obvious inconsistencies and in having enhanced self-knowledge.

[4] A further value, already hinted at above in the discussion of Montmarquet’s point, is
that epistemic courage can enable us to respond to what I will call “Emperor’s New Clothes
Cases”, situations in which is a wide-spread conspiracy to deny true belief. In his famous fairy
tale of the same name Hans Christian Andersen has already made the case for the value of
epistemic courage; I can do no better.

[5] Finally, we should note the value of the role that epistemic courage plays in balancing
other epistemic virtues. Montmarquet, for example, has, as a prime epistemic virtue, epistemic
fastidiousness. It will be obvious that courage is a useful antidote to an excess of this condition.
An Objection

Before concluding I should directly address a likely concern that I suspect the reader may have formulated while perusing this discussion, namely the worry that, whatever it is that I have been talking about, it really does not deserve to be called courage. After all, one might say, paradigmatic courage requires that there be a response to a menacing material threat, demands a genuinely fear-producing, gut-wrenching, life-threatening, situation that imposes physical and or intellectual risk, and that anything less than that cannot involve courage. In reply, the best I can do for now is to remind the reader that we know, since Freud, that there are many opportunities for revising our knowledge claims, or for getting new knowledge that have the same fear-producing effects, the same risks of harm, in some cases even the same serious risk of negative consequences that other acts of physical and mental courage have. And, I suggest, these tend to be exactly the sorts of cases in which epistemic courage is required.

Conclusion

While epistemic courage is not required for most of the beliefs that constitute what we know it is still an important epistemic virtue. It is important because it is potentially involved in many of the most important second-level soul-searching epistemological activities in which we engage. If we never engaged in any of these activities, epistemic courage would be unnecessary. But, since many human beings are practicing epistemologists, who, by definition are committed to second level epistemological activity, many humans are open to possibly being epistemically courageous. And, why should philosophers and other academics engaging in the life of the mind be interested in epistemic courage? The answer should be obvious: This is just what we are called upon to exhibit in our work!
Appendix: Virtue Epistemology and Epistemic Courage

How do the claims that I make in this paper about epistemic courage relate to current work in virtue epistemology (which goes back to the writings of Ernest Sosa.) Sosa thinks of an epistemic virtue as a reliable cognitive power (such as perception, or introspection). Epistemic courage would not count as a Sosa-style virtue. Still, Sosa admits that to account for reflective knowledge additional elements are required: epistemic courage seems to play a key role here.13

Some critics reject Sosa’s reliable powers notion of epistemic virtue, and urge that more traditional virtues should be central to epistemology. For Lorraine Code the basic virtue is responsibility. She claims one is epistemically justified in holding a belief if it is produced in an epistemically responsible fashion. It may be that one can show that to be responsible requires one to be epistemically courageous on occasion.

Another such critic is Jim Montmarquet, who, as previously noted, is a major virtue epistemologist who discusses courage explicitly. For Montmarquet one is subjectively justified in believing p only if one’s belief is produced by a proper character/personality trait. He lists three specific roles for "virtues of intellectual courage": a willingness to conceive and examine alternatives to popular ideas, perseverance in the face of opposition from others, and determination to see an inquiry through to the end. I accept some of these roles but reject others.

For Linda Zagzebski, yet a further critic, an act of intellectual virtue has both a motivational component and a reliable success component; one is justified in believing a true belief provided it arises out of acts of intellectual virtue. Her reliable success requirement seems too strong to accommodate many cases of epistemic courage. Zagzebski is another theorist who explicitly discusses courage in her writings. She also takes courage to be perseverance. This seems inadequate as one might be only intermittently, not persistently, courageous.
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Notes

1 I am assuming that one typically cannot just get others to do things instead of doing them oneself and still be considered courageous.

2 I am also assuming the possibly contentious view that all courageous activity must have some goal or point, that there is no such thing as point-less or goal-less courageous endeavor. This claim may not find favor with the existentialists.

3 In fact there may be those who will assert that members of the species Homo sapiens by our very biological designation are destined to use our intellects along with our physical bodies in every courageous action we try to perform.
I am indebted to conference discussion for emphasizing this last element, that of fear. The response to fear strikes me as a useful way of trying to get at what is central both to courage in general, to its physical and mental forms, and, by extension, to epistemic courage.

My indebtedness to Roderick Chisholm (1989) here should be evident, if not self-evident!

Thus, if we encounter someone who claims to have agonizingly changed her mind six times a day every day of her adult life, we should be a skeptical as to whether this really represents epistemic courage.

Sosa calls this “animal knowledge”, citing George Santyana who talks of “animal faith”. As humans are animals, I prefer the term ‘biological’ as being more useful and less potentially discriminatory as it may well turn out that some other forms of animals in addition to humans also engage in reflective epistemic activities.

Perhaps the character, Winston, from George Orwell’s 1984, or the protagonist from Arthur Koestler’s Darkness at Noon are a propos.

These cases are different from Pascal’s famously rejected option of retaining “just one more trivial true belief”.

It should be admitted that some of Guy Noire’s exploits on Prairie Home Companion might count as good examples of epistemic courage.

Standard Kuhnian philosophy of science is committed to the grave difficulties that researchers from one paradigm have of making the move to another.

As Locke says, we are not reliable judges in our own case.

Goldman’s more recent work more closely resembles that of Sosa.