

Neuromedia, Cognitive Offloading, and Intellectual Perseverance

Key Words Neuromedia – Virtue Epistemology – Intellectual Perseverance – Cognitive Offloading - Virtue Responsibilism

I. The Virtue Epistemology of Technology

The virtue epistemology of technology is a burgeoning philosophical subfield that examines the relationship between the use of cognitive artifacts and the cultivation and maintenance of intellectual virtues. A cognitive artifact is any technology used to help support cognitive processes. Intellectual virtues are character traits that make one an excellent person from an epistemic point of view or contribute to making one a superb thinker (e.g., open-mindedness, intellectual autonomy, intellectual humility, and intellectual perseverance).¹ Virtue epistemology examines the nature of intellectual virtue as well as how the virtues relate to one another and other epistemic elements like knowledge and justified belief (Turri, Alfano & Greco 2011).² Unlike traditional analytic theorists in epistemology (e.g., Chisholm 1966, Nozick 1981, Goldman 1986), virtue epistemologists treat virtues as foundational epistemic elements and hold that knowledge and justified belief can be understood in terms of the intellectual virtues and not vice versa.

The virtue epistemology of technology analyzes both (a) how different cognitive artifacts shape (or are prone to shape) the cultivation and possession of intellectual virtues and (b) how the cultivation and possession of different intellectual virtues shape (or are prone to shape) the manner in which agents approach and navigate their use of cognitive artifacts. Up until now, the majority of scholars working in this area have focused on contemporary cognitive artifacts like pharmaceutical ‘smart’ drugs (Ranisch 2015, Carter 2017), GPS navigation systems (Gillett & Heersmink 2019), and more than anything else, the internet and online search engines (Sunstein 2006, Greenfield 2014, Heersmink 2016, Smart 2018a, Schwengerer 2021). Richard Heersmink (2018), for example, demonstrates how nine different intellectual virtues ought to be deployed within the context of online search engines. Regarding the virtue of intellectual carefulness, he says, “An intellectually

¹ These traits can be contrasted with intellectual vices, which are traits that reflect poorly upon an agent in an epistemic sense or contribute to making one a lackluster thinker (e.g. close-mindedness, intellectual servility, intellectual arrogance, intellectual cowardice, and intellectual laziness).

² The origins of contemporary virtue epistemology can be traced back to Ernest Sosa’s work in the early 1980s (Sosa 1980, 1991). Sosa appeals to the concept of intellectual virtue when articulating his theory of ‘virtue perspectivism,’ which he contends can resolve the longstanding debate in epistemology between coherentism and foundationalism. The field of virtue epistemology is structurally analogous to the field of virtue ethics. Just as virtue ethicists ground the morality of actions in evaluations of moral virtues, so do virtue epistemologists ground the epistemic status of beliefs in evaluations of intellectual virtues.