

I N T E R V I S T E

**Conversation with Alessandra Tanesini**

*By Giada Fratantonio*

*Alessandra Tanesini is Professor of Philosophy at the University of Cardiff. Her research lies at the intersection between epistemology, ethics, and philosophy of language. She has written extensively on epistemology, including virtue, social, and feminist epistemology. Her most recent work has focused on understanding virtues, e.g., modesty, as well as vices, e.g., arrogance. Tanesini is the author of two books: An Introduction to Feminist Epistemologies (1999) and Wittgenstein: A Feminist Interpretation (2004). She is also a Co-Principal Investigator of the interdisciplinary research project “Changing Attitudes in Public Discourse”, whose main aim is to reduce arrogance in public debate. In this interview, Tanesini talks about epistemic humility, its nature, whether and how we can become more epistemically humble, as well*

*as why the development of virtues like modesty and self-acceptance can be beneficial to the public discourse. She also talks about her role as an active member of SWIP UK, and her recent participation to the opening conference of the newly formed SWIP Italia. Her new book The Mismeasure of the Self: A Study in Vice Epistemology will be published in 2021 with Oxford University Press.*

*1. Tell us a little about yourself. How did you get into philosophy?*

AT: As a young teenager I was primarily interested in astronomy. I loved especially cosmology. But I have also always been fascinated by numbers. In high school I kept asking questions about ‘zero’. I was troubled by the fact that division by zero is undefined. My math high school teacher deflected my questions by saying that they were philosophical rather than mathematical. I believed her even though high school philosophy bore no resemblance to the kind of discipline that would deal with such questions. I thought I would study mathematics at University, then at the last moment I opted for philosophy. I can’t quite recall why. I doubt the decision was well thought out. Be that as it may, I did tons of logic as part of my degree and audited some mathematics and computer science courses.

*2. Given your Italian upbringing, I am assuming you also had to study philosophy in high school. How much did that influence your choice of studying philosophy at the university?*

AT: I did not find philosophy as taught in high school back then particularly inspiring. Partly I think because we were expected merely to parrot what we read. Partly because we only read summaries of the lives and works of famous philosophers. Nevertheless, I remember becoming increasingly suspicious that there must be more to philosophy than that. In particular I tried to find out something about the philosophy of science and of mathematics. I came across some books by Carnap and tried to read them. I remember asking my philosophy teacher to tell me about truth tables but I drew a blank look.

*3. And what about your experience of doing philosophy abroad?*

AT: I was one of the first students to go to the UK under the precursor of the Erasmus scheme. My main aim was to improve my knowledge of the English language. I was writing an undergraduate dissertation on a medieval treaty on obligations (understood as rules governing debates) which I argued countenanced the possibility of truth value gaps (or was it the truth value indeterminate? I can't remember). Be that as it may, I ended up in Hull where I audited a module on Kripke's *Naming and Necessity*. There I discovered that students were allowed to disagree with lecturers, to engage in debates, to be critical even of famous philosophers. It was an eye-opener. It was the first time I did not feel condescended to. There, I also discovered that abroad I could continue to pursue my interest in logic. My decision to try to continue my studies abroad was also personal. At the time I found the sexism and conformism that surrounded me in Italy to be stifling. Britain felt more open-minded. It also felt more meritocratic. I thought it was a place that could open up opportunities for me. On this last point I was right. I am now less optimistic about British meritocracy since the educational system is predicated on public schools where economically privileged children are carefully prepared to win places at some of the best universities.

*4. You have written extensively in epistemology, including feminist epistemology and virtue epistemology. In particular, your recent work has focused on the notion of epistemic humility. So I'd like to ask you some questions about this topic first. In your work, you take epistemic humility to be, in a nutshell, a psychological attitude. More precisely, on your view, "epistemic humility" is a concern towards one's epistemic success and limitations. As you stress in your paper "Intellectual humility as attitude" (2018), in the contemporary literature on this topic there seem to be two main ways of cashing out the notion of epistemic humility: i) as a virtue related to ignorance about one's epistemic success (e.g., Driver 1989); ii) as a virtue related to a high degree of accuracy about one's intellectual limitations (e.g., Hazlett 2012). Instead, you argue that epistemic humility does not require either ignorance of one's own intellectual success or accuracy of one's own intellectual limitations. Why do you think these views are problematic? What do you think these views are missing?*

AT: My objection to these accounts is twofold. First, they give what are intuitively the wrong verdicts in several cases. Second, these accounts make humility a matter of belief. The humble person would be characterised either by

their false beliefs (or at least absence of true ones) about the intellectual abilities or by their especially accurate beliefs about these capacities. These accounts thus miss the fact that virtues are dispositions to think and act but also to feel in specific ways out of characteristic motivations. Although this description of virtue was developed for moral virtues, I believe that it applies also to their intellectual counterparts. I shall say a little bit more about each of these two points. First, ignorance of ability is not necessary for humility. It seems perfectly possible for an individual to be fully aware of their abilities, even when these are considerable, and yet be humble about them. Such a person would not brag or boast about their intellectual superiority. They would also not be invested in it so that they are not motivated to defend it. Ignorance of ability is also not sufficient for humility. A person might like to boast and brag in their limited circle, thinking that they are better than others around them. If they turn out to be actually even better than they think, they are not therefore humble. In addition, accurate beliefs about one's intellectual abilities are not necessary for humility. A person might be humble and yet underestimate or overestimate their abilities because of a honest mistake. Accuracy is also not sufficient. A person might be accurate in their self-assessment but if they are invested in their superiority, if they boast about their ability, they are not humble about them. Second, I do not wish the above to be read as suggesting that humility is all about behaviour. Rather, intellectual virtues can be thought as involving dispositions to act, but also to feel, and to be motivated in characteristic ways. If this is right, the psychology of virtue cannot make sole reference to beliefs but must include affective and motivational states. This is why I think the social psychological notion of an attitude is particularly helpful since attitudes are states whose informational bases include beliefs, desires, emotions and action tendencies.

*5. Although you reject these “cognitive” accounts, you nevertheless argue that intellectual humility has two dimensions: modesty and self-acceptance. But if modesty is not a matter of ignorance, and self-acceptance is not a matter of accuracy, then what are they and how are they related to intellectual humility in an integrated way?*

AT: My view is that modesty and self-acceptance are not conceptually integrated. They are two distinct virtues. However, since they are often found together, we have a name for a virtue that consists in being both modest and self-accepting. Humility is that virtue. There are examples of people who are

modest about their achievements without being accepting of their limitations. I have primarily in mind people who are fanatic followers of some ideologies. Some of these people can be extremely modest about their individual success whilst being unwilling to admit to some limitations because of their dogmatic following of a given worldview. There are also examples of people who are immodest about their strengths and yet very receptive to owning up to their failures. I have in mind especially some cocky academics who have a puffed up ego but who are also genuinely interested in academic issues and prepared to admit when they are wrong. Whilst these cases might be rare, I see no reason why they would not be possible. If that is the case, then modesty and self-acceptance are conceptually distinct. That said, in the vast majority of cases the cultivation of modesty about one's own individual achievements should promote acceptance of one's own intellectual shortcomings. Conversely acceptance of limitations should contribute to make one modest about one's successes. But there are exceptions especially among individuals who are devoted to supra-personal ideals or causes. My account of modesty and acceptance of limitations and of the other virtues and vices of intellectual self-assessment is motivational. The intellectually modest person is the person whose assessment of their own intellectual personal worth based on their abilities, strengths, achievement and successes is motivated by the need to figure out the true epistemic value of their qualities. They are thus different from the arrogant individual whose self-assessment is biased by the need for self-enhancement. They are also different from the servile person whose self-evaluation is motivated by the need to be socially accepted by powerful individuals and members of their in-group. It does not follow that the modest person has an accurate assessment of their strengths, since the evidence available to them might be limited or misleading. They are, however, all else being equal more likely to have a realistic assessment of their strengths than their arrogant or servile counterparts. So modesty is not a matter of ignorance. Similarly, acceptance of limitations consists in self-assessments of one's own personal intellectual worth based on evaluations of one's own shortcomings and is motivated by the need to figure out their true epistemic disvalue. The self-accepting person thus differs from the vain individual whose evaluation of their own defects is driven by the need to be socially accepted. They also differ from the timid individual whose self-assessment is driven by a fear of social rejection. As with the modest person, the self-accepting individual is more likely to possess a realistic self-evaluation than their counterparts. But this cannot be guaranteed.

6. *It seems to me that your work can have wide applications within and outside academia. For instance, I know that you are the Principal Investigator, together with Prof. Greg Maio, of the Project “Changing Attitudes in Public Discourse”, as part of the larger project “Humility and Conviction in Public Life”. Can you tell us a bit about what this project is and what it aims to achieve?*

AT: The project has two main aims. The first is to test the hypotheses that arrogance in debate is an expression of defensiveness and that attitudes toward the self serving a knowledge function underpin intellectual humility. The second is to verify whether value affirmation manipulations are effective to reduce arrogant behaviours in debate. As part of the project we tested 300 naïve participants and carried out and video-recorded 116 short debates on a controversial topic. We are still analysing the results, but preliminary findings are promising. In particular, the hypothesis that arrogance in debate could be reduced by inviting participants to reflect on their values prior to discussion, if confirmed, has the potential to improve the quality of public deliberation in face-to-face discussions and on-line.

7. *As you have argued in your papers, both dimensions of intellectual humility, namely, modesty and self-acceptance, can be thought of as intellectual virtues. How do you think the development of such virtues can be beneficial to the public discourse in the community?*

AT: I think of these intellectual virtues as capital virtues. That is to say, I think that they are instrumental in the cultivation of further virtues. More specifically, because individuals who are modest and self-accepting of their limitations do not have an inflated conception of their own intellectual worth, they are likely to be intellectually generous. That is to say, they are likely to be forgiving of others' shortcomings, supportive of their intellectual efforts, and able to interpret others charitably. These are attitudes and behaviours that are likely to foster cooperation in debate. Philosophers tend to emphasise the importance of adversariality in discussion when aiming to figure out the truth. However, psychological studies on group deliberation suggest that the motivation to argue to learn rather than to win promotes better epistemic outcomes. Whilst adversariality could be combined with a desire to learn, it is most often an expression of wanting to win arguments. In turn, this motivation is often coupled with the intellectual vices of arrogance and vanity opposed

by modesty and self-acceptance. In short, these virtues are beneficial in public discourse because they are instrumental in the development of cooperative attitudes in argumentation and discussion that lead to conduct that promotes convergence onto the truth. Here, I have in mind, for instance, the range of behaviours characteristic of argument repair. This is an idea championed by Catherine Hundleby. It involves cooperative activities whereby parties in a discussion tend to try to improve arguments rather than knock them down or defend them to the death.

*8. Do you think it is possible to learn how to be intellectually humble? If so, how?*

AT: I am sceptical about the possibility of learning to be intellectually humble by means of explicit instruction. I have also expressed in print (2016a) my reservations about the effectiveness of exemplarism. In my view the main challenge is motivational. It is very hard not to be swayed by the desires to feel good about oneself and to be accepted by one's peers. Nevertheless, it is possible to bolster one's motivation by regular reflection on the values that one endorses and to create opportunities to practice becoming more humble by putting oneself in situations in which a humble response would be especially apt. That said, I think that ultimately the most effective intervention to promote humility are at the level of social structures. Arrogance and vanity are vices of superiority because people who suffer from them feel superior to others but also because they are the vices that often accompany social privilege. Similarly, servility and timidity are vices of inferiority also because they mostly affect members of socially subordinated groups. Intellectual humility can be indirectly promoted by reducing the prevalence of the vices that flank it. One way of doing this is to fight against unjust structural power social relations.

*9. As mentioned before, your work can be thought of as belonging to that branch of epistemology called "virtue epistemology". However, it seems to me that the label "virtue epistemology" refers to two different projects. One project is concerned with explaining epistemic notions like understanding, knowledge, or justification in terms of some virtuous and reliable cognitive process. An example is the traditional version of "virtue reliabilism" defended by Ernest Sosa (1980), or the more recent "knowledge-first virtue epistemology" defended by Christoph Kelp (2017, 2018) or Lisa Miracchi*

(2017, 2019). Another project, instead, is concerned with epistemic vices and epistemic virtues understood more broadly as referring to some more general positive intellectual traits and characters (e.g., Lorraine Code 1987, Linda Zagzebski 1996). Your work on intellectual humility is a prominent example of this second project. To what extent does your work draw on traditional virtue reliabilist epistemology, if at all? How sharp do you think the distinction between these two approaches is? What do you think the two approaches have to learn from each other?

AT: Another important distinction in this context is that between ameliorative and standard or traditional epistemology. The first, pioneered by Christopher Hookway, seeks to understand what people are doing when they engage in epistemic activities with a view to suggesting realistic ways of improving performance. It is largely unconcerned with the problems of defining knowledge or refuting the skeptic that characterise traditional epistemology. This distinction is orthogonal to that between virtue reliabilism and virtue responsibilism. Zagzebski is a virtue responsibilist who attempts to offer a virtue-theoretic definition of knowledge, for example. My interests lie within the ameliorative camp and within that camp I have focused largely on motivational accounts of virtue. Hence, it is fair to categorise me as a virtue responsibilist, but I do not think of myself as addressing the same issues that are discussed by many who belong to either the reliabilist or knowledge-first camps. That said, my interests overlap with some work done by Kelp, Simion and Carter on the knowledge norm of assertion. Whilst I ultimately prefer a different account, I believe that thinking in terms of epistemic norms governing assertion throws some light on the nature of this speech act and its role in testimony.

10. You have also written extensively on feminist epistemology and standpoint theories (e.g., forthcoming, 1999). Can you very briefly explain to the reader the core idea behind these approaches to epistemology?

AT: I would say that the core tenet that is shared by most feminist epistemologists is the view that knowledge is socially situated. There are several interpretations of this point but one fairly uncontroversial way of fleshing it out is to say that putative evidence for or against some claim or theory is sometimes more easily accessible from some social locations rather than from others. For example, women might be better placed than others to notice sexual harassment in the workplace because they are more likely experience it due to their

gender. This characterisation might invite the objection that whilst knowledge about social phenomena is socially situated, perceptual knowledge or knowledge in the physical sciences is not. A careful response to the objection would require more space than that I have here. Nevertheless, I can at least suggest that it is not implausible to think that social location matters in these cases, too. To appreciate the point, it is worth reflecting on the fact that when we talk about perceptual knowledge, we are often really discussing the result of activities such as observing or listening. These are acquired skills. Social factors can make a difference to how they are refined and cultivated. Another tenet of feminist epistemology is that scientific knowledge is not value neutral. A fairly uncontroversial way of defending the claim is to argue, as Elizabeth Anderson does, that the aim of science is not simply the discovery of truths but more precisely the discovery of significant truths. Of course, it is not possible to ascertain what counts as significant in a value-neutral way. This conclusion does not make all science akin to propaganda since it is possible rationally to evaluate values.

*11. How do you think your work on virtue epistemology and your work on feminist epistemology are related?*

AT: The most obvious connection is a sustained interest in the influence of social factors on epistemic practices. More recently, in my work on the vices of superiority and inferiority I explore how facts about social privilege and underprivilege shape individuals' psychology including their intellectual character. My research on vice epistemology is thus very indebted for example to Sandra Lee Bartky and her work on femininity and domination.

*12. Do you think it is possible to do epistemology in a supposedly "pure" manner and "outside" a standpoint, or are these misguided goals?*

AT: I think the terminology of "pure" and "outside any perspective" is too vague to be meaningfully addressed. I believe that there are facts and there is propaganda and that there is a difference between the two. It might be the case that social factors play little or no role in the justification of a limited number of propositions (e.g., those that are analytic). All I can say is that that I am not interested in these issues.

*13. As we know, philosophy (especially analytic philosophy) is widely dominated by white English speaking males. How much has your experience as a minority in such an environment been relevant in shaping your ideas on both feminist philosophy and virtue epistemology?*

AT: It is always difficult to offer an exact assessment of the influence of personal experience in one's philosophical thinking. In my own case, the commitment to feminism has been a determinant element. More specifically, the examples that inform the discussion of arrogance in assertion that I provided in "Calm Down Dear" (2016b) and those that support my articulation of the vices of intellectual servility and timidity in my (2018) are largely based on my experiences of gendered behaviour in academia and especially among professional philosophers in the English speaking world.

*14. In connection with this issue, I know you have been and are an important and active member of SWIP UK. It's also been great for me to hear that some Italian women philosophers have recently founded SWIP Italia. Can you tell us a bit more about your experience in SWIP UK? What do you think is the main impact these networks can have? Do you think underrepresented philosophers in Italy face different or more specific challenges than underrepresented philosophers in the UK?*

AT: I have been a member of SWIP UK for over two decades and for the past ten years or so I have served on its executive committee. In partnership with the British Philosophical Association, SWIP UK has been effective in improving the climate for UK-based women in the profession. As far as I know, its good practice guidelines for departments, learning societies and research teams are generally implemented and have led to the creation of more inclusive spaces (at least for white women). During the past twenty years SWIP UK has not been free of turmoil. There have been internal controversies over men's participation or attendance at events, and over the status of transwomen. Navigating the dual aim of supporting all women in philosophy irrespective of their area of research and fostering feminism in philosophy has also not been easy. Nevertheless, SWIP has often been a welcoming community that has provided encouragement and mentorship of early career philosophers. I have recently attended a conference in Modena organised by the newly formed SWIP Italia and I was greatly encouraged to see the enthusiasm of its members. I have great hopes for this organisation also because it

includes in its executive committee seasoned campaigners and junior colleagues who can lead it in future years. The institutional challenges faced by SWIP Italia are without doubt partly different from those against which SWIP UK has fought for years. But there are also similarities and I hope that the two organisations will collaborate in future.

*15. Finally, what's the plan for the future?*

AT: I am putting the final touches on a book – *The Mismeasure of the Self: A Study in Vice Epistemology* – that is due out with Oxford University Press early in 2021. I am also writing a bunch of papers on related themes. In the next few years I plan to pursue two topics of research. The first would involve interdisciplinary work on the psychology of intellectual virtue. I think that my account of virtues as attitudes could lead to a new approach to virtue measurement. This is something I would like to pursue with colleagues in psychology. The second is a project on the epistemology of algorithmic decision making. I think that there are all sorts of question about using the outputs of algorithms as evidence informing human judgement. The current focus of much discussion is about training these algorithms to be less biased, but I am interested in what we can learn from the debate about moral encroachment about relying on algorithms when making decisions about risk of re-offending, for example.

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