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Commentary on John Woods' "Knowledge by Telling: Reflections on the *ad verecundiam*"

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1. INTRODUCTION

John Woods seeks within a discussion of the *ad verecundiam* fallacy an argument on behalf of the Causal Response Model of Knowledge. The strategy is intriguing. Experts in logic and the public provision of evidence recognize the *ad verecundiam* fallacy. And,

[i]n its most general form, an agent is guilty of an *ad verecundiam* error when two conditions are met. One is that he has accepted some proposition α that he has been told him. The other is that he has not independently confirmed his teller's *bona fides*, his authority to tell. (p. 2)

Specifically what the problem is, however, varies with one's approach to the analysis of knowing or having knowledge.

2. A SYNOPSIS OF WOODS' ARGUMENT ON BEHALF OF THE CR-MODEL

Generally the worry is presented in every case of appealing to an authority or expert or even a tradition of belief as a source of support for a knowledge claim, where the appellant cannot provide either evidence of the authority's legitimacy or cannot provide independent evidence for the claim expressing what is known. Or at least the so-called Command and Control (CC) Model of knowledge views such a contingency as problematic, indeed a failing on the part of the one basing a claim to know on an appeal to the word of an authority. Claims to know based on immediate experience aside, the CC-model holds that

knowledge is occasioned by our intellectual powers, and the knowledge-states that arise from their free exercise are states for whose occurrence we ourselves are responsible. An important feature of the CC-model is that it conceives of the attainment of knowledge as a kind of *case-making*. (p. 1).

This view leaves every claim to know that is based upon an appeal to authority (or, for that matter, an appeal to anyone's say-so) open to the challenge that the one appealed to has no legitimacy as an authority. That question is treated as always open because the

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idea in the CC-model is that the knower is self-made by virtue of making the case for what is claimed as known, yet the case which turns upon appeal to another is really never complete. Woods argues that because every appeal to expertise requires at some point yet another appeal to so-called told knowledge or simply another appeal to authority, no such appeal can ever be free of yet further challenges to legitimate one's source (the last appealed to) as authoritative. And so the knowing subject can never slip free of the need to legitimate another source. This subject must fail in the attempt to legitimate the source or must provide independent evidence for what is claimed as known and, in effect, thereby vindicate the source of the original appeal. (See the arguments surrounding Propositions 10, 11 and 12. (p. 7)

Something has gone wrong since clearly much is known through appeals to authority or to (putatively) legitimate sources. But the CC-Model seems to preclude this since to know on this view involves making a case for what it is that is known. But every making of a case will involve in some way an appeal to some further source at some point in the history of its legitimation. And then every appeal to an authority will lead to still others without end as far as the CC-model can say. Enter the Causal Response Model of Knowledge.

On pure versions of this view, you know that α if and only if α is true, you believe that α and your belief that α was formed by cognitive devices functioning on good information as they should. (p. 1)

Now if some of those cognitive devices lead their possessors to accept others as authorities on some occasions, they would do so without the cognitive involvement that puts the knower in the position of making a case relying on a legitimate source, and then without having to check into the *bona fides* or the legitimacy of that source. And, further, if there is some reason to accept the reliability of these devices, then the CR-model would have the means to make sense of how a knower can rely on a source without having to show its legitimacy.

Reliabilism with respect to perceptual knowledge could be true (and is) notwithstanding its attendant confirmational impotence [or its lack of capacity to bring the legitimation of authorities to an end by at least sometimes making a complete case for that legitimation]. Reliabilism with respect to knowledge more generally consults a like lesson for knowledge across the board. Having it depends on having cognitive devices that work properly. It does not depend on knowing the conditions thanks to which this is so. (p. 10)

Why might one accept the reliability of devices enabling humans to select the say-so of legitimate authorities or leading them to check the *bona fides* of questionable sources? Woods suggests that evolution has brought humans to the point where they might reliably select sources or might reliably be sceptical about the legitimacy of an authority and be led to check it. (p. 10. And see the introduction of Proposition 4, p. 2.) Presumably, if evolution has brought humans to this point, then whatever these intuition-like devices might be, there is reason to believe that they are reliable. If they were not, then the devices would not have brought humans this far and those devices would not be present or would not be operant in those who make effective appeals to authority or rely aptly on say-so.

So the CR-model obviates the need for endless chasing of the finally certified authoritative source. It does so by replacing the *cognitive* case-making view of knowers who appeal to authority, with a *non-cognitive* view in which humans have come to have constitutions which lead them to accept or to investigate others as sources of evidence needed for knowledge claims, and to do so with sufficient reliability. Of course, if in fact there are many cases in which humans seem to get a source wrong, then however reliable the non-cognitive devices might be on other occasions, the fitness value of the devices humans possess would come under question. And that would cast doubt upon the move toward a view of knowing in which humans rely on evolved equipment, as opposed to relying on making a case for choosing one potential source over another. Maybe an endless progression of needed legitimations of nested sources would not be so bad by comparison.

Woods' argument then needs to show that in fact errors in selecting sources are not so frequent as the CR-theorist might worry. The argument then moves to deal with this point by a summary reference to empirical studies according to which it is not failures to reason well with appeals to sources, but failures "of misinformation" and "errors occasioned by the misperformance of say-so." (pp. 10, 11) Part of properly appealing to an authority is that the source be used in a way reflecting understanding of the source material and that the one making such an appeal carefully (and so accurately) communicate the salient elements of the source material. Any breakdowns in either of these regards will undermine the appeal to others. And this might be said to be the case even though the one appealing to the source has not made any error in reasoning. (Or so it seems that Woods is claiming in this part of his argument.)

So then what should be said of the *ad verecundiam* fallacy? Woods ends partially with a review of two forms the *ad verecundiam* fallacy might take. The stronger form is the error of one who fails to determine or check into the legitimacy of the source. This is the fallacy appropriate to the CC-Model of knowledge. This can hardly be taken as the fallacy to worry about on Woods' view. The implication is that it is too much to ask of those who would appeal to a source in making a knowledge claim given that it would lead to an endless search for something like the self-legitimizing source. The weaker version is seen in cases where the one making a knowledge claim misses or ignores or otherwise does not respond to indications calling for a check of the legitimacy of a source. This is really a possible mistake to worry over. But as indicated already Woods finds evidence that this mistake is seldom made and so its existence does not throw into question the CR-Model.

3. TWO SETS OF QUESTIONS: ONE CONCERNING WOODS' AIM, ONE CONCERNING WOODS' ARGUMENT STRATEGY

If there are only two likely contenders for knowing, the CC-Model and the CR-Model, then Woods could claim to have gone some of the way toward justifying a choice between them. But are these the only models to consider and does the argument Woods mounted really carry the day in favour of the CR-Model? These comments very briefly take up both of these questions.

There is at least one other model of knowing that should be mentioned here because of its actually making sense of appealing to authorities or of trying to associate

one's claim to knowledge with the say-so of experts. The name that will come to seem apt is the Socratic Model of knowing. Woods very clearly sees knowledge as a condition of a knowing being. This condition is spoken of as a state that is "occasioned" by thought or by some other "occurrence," a condition that thought or the operation of "cognitive devices functioning on good information" induces. (p. 1) What seems left out of this picture are those relationships the knower bears to others and in virtue of which this human is said to know. (The concern here is only with humans. It is the knowing of humans that is in question in discussions of fallacies or of errors of reasoning.) The suggestion is that knowing is not only if at all a matter of being in a certain condition, but rather is a matter of having been accorded a certain status by others. This status would include being permitted to act in certain ways on one's beliefs and related mental contents such as well-founded hypotheses; being accorded a certain position among others—a position of authority with respect to pronouncements, decisions, and the venturing of one's views in discussions where there are weighty stakes; and, being in a position of an appropriate source of credible views, if not the truth on issues at hand. One need only look at the positions assumed by those recognized as knowing beings within serious personal and professional contexts. If one is buying a house, to take one of Woods' examples, then one should have a title search done so that it can determine that there is no contest over the ownership of the property, no legal disputes over boundaries of the real estate, no liens held against the property, and so on. Of course there is no guarantee that all such questions can be answered, but they can be investigated and disposed of to an extent that an insurance company is willing to back the claim of a clear title. The title company will conduct the needed investigations engaging in practices and using sources of such sorts and in such ways that they are recognized as best practices and sufficient to make a claim of a clear title that will be taken seriously by the insuring agency. Sources and methods used are not infallible. How could they be? But they are adequate to the task and sufficient to earn recognition as knowing the title is clear.

Similarly, a physician seeking to diagnose the source of a patient's disorder perhaps will have to do further research and engage in extensive testing to rule out several differential diagnoses before coming to a judgment. The tests need not be conclusive. Still in reasoning to the best explanation of the patient's ailments the physician can come to a view that colleagues would grant as knowledge of the problem and even of what to do about it. This is not a grant that the physician knows surely the truth of what the diagnosis claims. But it is a grant of a certain status that no physician should feel comfortable acting without first having earned.

One last example brings the discussion closer to Socratic concerns. Criminal courts (at least those in the U.S.A) often proceed to indictments on the basis of evidence presented to a grand jury. This evidence might be circumstantial at best and provide only a very uncertain case. Things may not improve much before the trial is over and the accused is convicted. But the trial may then end in a verdict of guilty (or innocent) when it is false (true) that the accused committed the crime in question. Great notoriety has been accorded to cases in which new technologies have provided exculpatory evidence for those convicted and serving a penal sentence. In some of these cases the notoriety derives from the fact that the system is reluctant or unwilling to grant a new trial and the accused remains known as guilty. It is a travesty in such cases to allow the judgment to stand and to continue to count the accused guilty, but nonetheless in some such cases

some may lay claim to knowing the guilt of the accused in spite of declarations based on the use of new and complex technology. In many cases it might not be clear whether the new technology or the new evidence that seems exculpating is really reliable. Or worse, as in the case of Socrates, it might not be clear that community standards are rational or reasonable to maintain. Who should be said to know in such instances of justice? Or should the system just give up on dealing in knowledge and take the life or the existence of the accused on the basis of what—a good guess or a well supported opinion?

Life is messy and yet too important to simply come down to the aesthetics of a grant panel or a jury of one's peers or even the conservatism of a brilliant determinist such as Einstein. The philosopher's notion of knowing does not always seem to allow for that. And while the history of that fact might be well-known the point remains that in many real and significant cases, even in the idealized reflections of the philosopher, recognizing someone as knowing is importantly a grant of a certain status and a set of special permissions or rights. It is this perhaps that Socrates imagined the laws teaching when in the *Crito* he is made to say of an imagined bargain he entered into and the terms of which have brought him to the point of execution, that this is just,

thirdly, because he has made an agreement with us that he will duly obey our commands; and he neither obeys them nor convinces us that our commands are unjust; and we do not rudely impose them, but give him the alternative of obeying or convincing us. (Kaplan 1950, 58)

The suggestion to take away for the present discussion is that knowing is sometimes a matter of achieving a certain status by obeying or convincing those in the position of judges. In either case, to know is not to cognitively or non-cognitively put oneself into a certain state, but rather it is to come to enjoy a certain status granted by or with the authority of a system of judges whom knowers must obey by engaging in best practices as appropriate to context or whom they must convince otherwise by engaging in other practices and changing what is thought best for the questions of the context in question.

This Socratic model hinted at here may not be a competitor with the CC- and the CR-models Woods reviewed. But it does have two lessons with which to supplement either or both of those models. The first lesson is that a part of knowing practically beyond elimination is that knowing involves an element of cognitive responsibility owed by those who would be said to know to those who are in a position to hold them accountable for their beliefs and for how they, the knowers, would put them into practice. There is a contextually variant system of proper practice that knowers must obey or convince otherwise those to whom they are accountable. That there is such a system (or really a system of systems) with its experts who articulate and interpret best practice, and who are in a position to hold others to account makes possible the gaining of knowledge as a special status among others.

It is also this system that makes appeals to authority possible, for it is a system of authorities and of the authorized. When one appeals to an authority, one seeks to enter into and take advantage of this system by relying upon the commitment of experts to obey or convince each other otherwise. And for this reason, on this view, the problem of the legitimacy of one's appeal is *not* the problem Woods seems to have imagined (at least in criticizing the CC-Model) in which each appeal might have to be legitimated in order to give due diligence to the credentials of the particular authority to whom one appeals. The problem of the legitimacy of one's appeal is a problem of whether one is obeying (or

ready to convince otherwise) the standards of the system that grant access to the expertise grown and sustained by the experts of the system. On such a model then, a knowing subject appealing to authority would be placing her/himself in that system, under the authority vested in the system and seeking from taking part in that system recognition as legitimate in claims of knowing or knowledge as long as he/she either appeals to an authority in standard conditions or convinces the authorities that they are wrong—that is garners and is ready to bring forward evidence that gains acceptance in the system as credible or worthy of being convincing. Candidates for these standard conditions are those normally noted in discussions of proper appeals to authority; namely, in one statement among others, that there is expertise on the matter at hand, the person appealed to has that expertise; the view cited is not denied by another authority with equal claim to expertise; the view cited emerged from the expert's investigation in light of the expertise; the use of the expertise was not compromised in any way; and the one appealing to authority cited the authority correctly and used the authority's views correctly—that is with understanding and as intended.

Notice two points. First all the standard conditions but the last are ones the experts of the system themselves should enforce on each other. Normally, it is not the job of the individual appealing to authority to check up on each one cited. It is not the responsibility of the jurors to keep the judge in line, but it is the job of the prosecuting and defence attorneys in a particular case, in so far as they know the law and are serving as officers of the court. The one who appeals to authority is tapping into the legitimacy kept alive within the system, not seeking to legitimate the system, or any particular expert within it. Second, it is the job of the one appealing to authority to responsibly avail her/himself of the system. The one making the appeal needs to get right and use appropriately what the experts representing the system have to say. Since this is difficult and tricky, especially when the stakes are high, the one appealing to authority will often rely on expert intermediaries—the real estate title company, the judge and the clerk of the court in which one is a juror.

Because of these points it is appropriate to speak of a *Socratic Assent* that one makes when appealing to authority. One moves up from the word of a single individual to that of the expertise of a system instantiated in a particular case of interest. One does not have the endless task of certifying each individual appeal. Woods is right. Such appeals are not personal in this way. And it is that, that allows appeals to authority to avoid getting bogged down in the way that Woods alleges the CC-Model does. Might the CC-Model go the way of Socratic Assent and still fit the description Woods gives of it as calling for knowing to arise with case-making? Perhaps, except that, again, Woods' version of the CC-Model has no place for knowledge residing in relationships, even metaphoric ones holding between individuals and the keepers of a system of expertise.

It is just here that a criticism of Woods seems called for. The CR-Model, no more than the CC-Model seems interested in the cognitive responsibilities that one takes on by entering a system of expertise. On the CR-Model it is as if the knowing agent is made to know by her or his cognitive machinery. It is no wonder that the role of due diligence is diminished in Woods' account. But this diminishment needs attention. If there is a reason to check a particular expression of the relevant system of expertise, for example, if there is reason to believe that there can hardly be a system of expertise when the experts are at each other's throats in disagreement or when the system's experts do not apply their

expertise carefully or at all because of corruption, then the one who would appeal needs to point out these problems, even if doing so denies that person access to a useful system of expertise on important matters. (What *is* one to do in places where the police, the legislators and the courts are all corrupt?) The CR-Model seems to trade worries with the foibles of the CC-Model for an absence of cognitive responsibility that is made clear in the Socratic Model.

Finally, there seem to be difficulties in resting a defence of the CR-Model on the question of whether the Weak form or the *Ad Verecundiam* is in fact rare. Granting, for the sake of argument, that this is true--it is rare, it seems that the real question is how is it that in those cases where there is a reason to exercise due diligence, the CR-Model can explain that exercise. This seems likely to be a matter of responding to particular circumstances that might be masked or concealed or protected in clever ways with cognitive devices that have evolved to handle quite general problems in quite standardized ways. It is the anomalous character of Ghandi, for example, that rocked the colonial apparatus of unsupportable cognitive authority. How might the CR-Model respond to such a case? It seems at first glance that the Socratic Model would be just the right one to understand what has gone wrong with and how it is that one might constructively respond to the failures of the colonial system, as well as why it was that Ghandi's appeal to those living in a different system of expertise might be both politically and epistemically just the right way to challenge a failed system of expertise and authority.

4. CONCLUSION

Woods has given an intricate argument on behalf of the CR-Model of knowing. This defence intertwines with a discussion of what should be made of the *ad verecundiam* fallacy. The upshot seems to be that while the CC-Model reduces to absurdity, the CR-Model, though not problem free, is able to avoid the deadly mistake of the CC-Model. This comes at a price, however. The CR-Model, like the CC-Model (but more emphatically so), seems unable to incorporate the relational aspect of cognitive responsibility facing those who would appeal to authority. The Socratic Model seems able to make good sense of that aspect. As well, it is suggestive of how real cases of appeals to authority go wrong because of contextual factors and because of aspects of how to think about remedies residing in the formation of alternative systems of authority and expertise such as in the case of Ghandi's non-violent resistance. Still the Socratic Model remains here only a sketch of a form of alternative to those discussed by Woods. Thus these comments claim no more than the status of initial exploratory reflections. Woods' paper is part of a larger project and any such explorations as suggested here would need to be furthered in that larger context.

[Link to paper](#)

REFERENCE

Kaplan, J.D. (Ed.). (1950). *Dialogues of Plato Apology, Crito, Phaedo, Symposium, Republic*. (Jowett Translation) New York: The Pocket Library.