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Adam Morton
Bounded Thinking: intellectual virtues for limited agents

the argument

chapter one helping one another to think well

There are conventional norms of thinking. They do not say how we should think but rather how we should encourage one another to think. There are virtues of selective compliance with these norms.

chapter two externalism about thinking

The analog of knowledge for practical reasoning is accomplishment. Externalist assessments can also be extended to processes of thinking. These are particularly appropriate for fallible agents with limited thinking powers.

chapter three irreplaceable virtue

We have to appeal to many intellectual virtues in describing and assessing our thinking. Many of them are virtues of limitation management. Paradoxical virtues, virtues which can be described so they sound like vices, are particularly interesting.

chapter four the difficulty of difficulty

In order to plan sequences of actions we have to know in advance which problems we can solve. But often we cannot know what we are going to know. This is connected with a general fact that it is often hard to know how hard a problem is. But we have other ways of succeeding at sequential problems.

chapter five dilemmas of thinking

There are situations in which the best strategy for a person depends on what intellectual virtues she possesses. I discuss Pascal problems, where one has a motive to acquire beliefs one thinks are false, and preface problems, where one has reason to believe that specific beliefs that one holds are false. From this discussion, I suggest an ordering in which intellectual virtues apply.

chapter six rationality and intelligence

Some of our commentary on one another is phrased in terms of intelligence and rationality. Neither of these is a very useful concept. I trace the illusion of their usefulness to a false belief about thinking, that most thinking is inference. There is a greater variety in the ways that people can be or fail to be capable, which can be articulated by a structured vocabulary of intellectual virtues.

the argument

We manage the fact that our environments present us with many problems that are too hard for us to solve individually. We manage it by shaping one another's thinking and by cooperating in practical and intellectual projects. Problems are difficult in many different ways, and there are many ways that we solve them: so many and so varied that we cannot as part of our thinking grasp the all the ways situations and capacities connect. So we cannot by systematic thinking regulate our responses to our limitations. In this way the concept of rationality - the understanding-based oversight over our thinking - is not very helpful, and since reactions to our limitations and failures are an important part of thinking well, rationality is in general not a helpful frame to put on thought. Instead, we can discuss connections between environment and thinking directly, talking both of knowledge and accomplishment and of intellectual virtues, which represent the variety of targets we can achieve. The difficulty of mapping the potential connections and disconnections also makes problems in anticipating whether one will succeed in solving a problem. There are important virtues that are specific to the consequences of this fact. Though we have no useful classification of our intellectual skills we can classify our virtues. The categories of such a classification must be very broad and include paradoxical-seeming virtues that in rationality-shaped terms will seem like vices. But such a classification represents our best hope of any systematic understanding of human limitation-management.