THE SPECIAL VALUE OF EPISTEMIC SELF-RELIANCE

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*Abstract:* Philosophers have long held that epistemic self-reliance has a special value. But, this view has recently been challenged by prominent epistemologist Linda Zagzebski. Zagzebski argues that potential sources of support for the claim that epistemic self-reliance has a special value fail. Here I provide a novel defense of the special value of epistemic self-reliance. Self-reliance has a special value because it is required for attaining certain valuable cognitive achievements. Further, practicing self-reliance may be all-things-considered worthwhile even when doing so is a less reliable way of getting to the truth than relying on others and even when doing so is flatly unreliable in getting to the truth.

It has been common, especially following the Enlightenment, for philosophers to claim that there is something especially valuable about self-reliance in the epistemic domain.[[1]](#footnote-1) The life of full epistemic self-reliance has been viewed as an ideal type. But these views about the value of self-reliance have recently come under attack. Linda Zagzebski (2007, 2012) has argued that potential sources of support for the claim that self-reliance has a special value fail to support this claim. The life of full epistemic self-reliance is not an ideal type.

Whatever the merits of Zagzebski’s arguments against the specific potential sources of support she identifies, I believe she is wrong about the value of self-reliance. Epistemic self-reliance *does* have a special value.[[2]](#footnote-2) The trouble is to say exactly *why* it is especially valuable and to specify those circumstances under which practicing it is all-things-considered worthwhile. After explaining in further detail what epistemic self-reliance is and what it would take to show that it has a special value (Section I), I develop a novel explanation of its special value (II). My view is that epistemic self-reliance has a special value because there are valuable cognitive achievements available *only* through practicing self-reliance. After developing this explanation of the special value of self-reliance, I turn to two objections to it each of which asks us to consider what happens when the reliability of self-reliance is called into question (III). I argue that neither objection undermines the present defense of self-reliance. Additionally, I show that practicing epistemic self-reliance can be all-things-considered worthwhile even when it is a less reliable way of attaining the truth than relying on others and even when it is flatly unreliable.

1. What is epistemic self-reliance?

In the small but growing contemporary literature on epistemic self-reliance, this concept is described in numerous and not-obviously-equivalent ways. Sometimes it is described as a view about reasons, such that the self-reliant person ‘maintains that the fact that someone else has a belief is never a reason for her to believe it (Zagzebski 2007, p.252).’ More frequently, it is described as some kind of practice or disposition concerning belief-formation or the basing of beliefs. The fully self-reliant person ‘relies on no one else for any of her knowledge.’ She ‘takes no one else’s word for anything, but accepts only what she has found out for herself, relying only on her own cognitive faculties and investigative and inferential powers (Fricker 2006, p.225).’ Similarly, the fully self-reliant person ‘has no need for authority. She may take a belief on the word of another person, but she is free not to do so (Zagzebski 2012, p.7).’ She manifests a ‘reluctance to get beliefs from others (7).’ Finally, self-reliance is sometimes explained in terms of trust: ‘All else being equal, the egoist [a term Zagzebski uses for the practitioner of self-reliance] puts greater trust in her own faculties than in the faculties of others (2007: p.256).’

 As I say, it is not obvious that these descriptions of self-reliance are equivalent. There are surely interesting and important questions to ask about the relations between the key conceptual components of these definitions—components like reasons, need for authority, epistemic freedom, reluctance, trust, and so on. For present purposes, however, the following account of epistemic self-reliance will suffice:

*Epistemic self-reliance* is the practice of relying on one’s own faculties, rather than those of others, in the formation and maintenance of beliefs[[3]](#footnote-3)

*A person is epistemically self-reliant* to the extent that she practices epistemic self-reliance.

This account, in any event, is faithful to the authors with whom I hope to dialogue. And, it has the pleasant consequence that a person may be more or less self-reliant, since she can more or less engage in the practice which is self-reliance. The person who fully practices epistemic self-reliance is fully epistemically self-reliant; and it is this person whom the advocate of the special value of epistemic self-reliance says is an ideal type.

 But what does it mean to claim that the fully epistemically self-reliant person is an ideal type, or to say that self-reliance has a special value? Here the literature is more helpful. Elizabeth Fricker writes,

A superior being, with all the epistemic powers to find out everything she wanted to know for herself, could live up to this ideal of complete epistemic autonomy without thereby circumscribing the extent of her knowledge. . . .In the same way that I might regret that I cannot fly, or live to be 300 years old, I might regret that I am not such a being (2006: p.243).

As Zagzebksi summarizes, Fricker’s view is that the life of full epistemic self-reliance ‘is an ideal that we [humans] must give up because of its impracticality, but a superior being could live up to it, and would be superior for being able to do so (2012: 9).’ By saying that humans must give up the ideal of epistemic self-reliance because of its ‘impracticality,’ Zagzebski is noting Fricker’s point that, for beings like us, self-reliance can severely circumscribe our knowledge. For a superior being for whom self-reliance does not compromise the extent of its knowledge, self-reliance is part of what makes this superior being superior. Thus, we may infer that to claim that the life of full epistemic self-reliance is an ideal type is to claim that a life of full epistemic self-reliance is better than a life which is not one of full epistemic self-reliance, *other epistemic values being equal*. That is, so long as fully practicing epistemic self-reliance doesn’t compromise other epistemic values, like the extent of one’s knowledge, fully practicing epistemic self-reliance is more valuable than not doing so.

 Given this account of what it means to claim that the life of full epistemic self-reliance is epistemically ideal, it is not difficult to see what we should say is meant by the claim that self-reliance has a special epistemic value. For, it is the special value of epistemic self-reliance which must *explain why* a life of full epistemic self-reliance is better, other epistemic values being equal, than a life which fails to be a life of full epistemic self-reliance. The life of full epistemic self-reliance will be, other epistemic values being equal, better than a life that is not a life of full epistemic self-reliance because there is some unique epistemic value or values to be had through practicing epistemic self-reliance. Either engaging in the practice has a fundamental and intrinsic value which makes the life of full epistemic self-reliance better than the life without it, or engaging in the practice of epistemic self-reliance has some instrumental value that does this. In the latter case, epistemic self-reliance will have a special value by virtue of its instrumental relationship to other epistemic values. Because it is required for attaining these other values, practicing it can contribute something uniquely epistemically valuable to a life.

 In this paper, I will not be arguing that self-reliance has an intrinsic value. It is at least highly questionable whether self-reliance is appropriately practiced for its own sake and not for the sake of something else. That is, it is at least highly questionable whether it is appropriate to practice self-reliance just to practice self-reliance. But, plausibly, if self-reliance is not appropriately practiced for its own sake, then self-reliance is not intrinsically valuable.[[4]](#footnote-4) Thus, instead of attempting to defend the view that self-reliance is intrinsically valuable, I want to argue that it has a special value by virtue of its relationship to some other epistemically valuable properties. Specifically, I will argue that epistemic self-reliance is required for attaining certain valuable cognitive achievements.

1. Self-reliance and Cognitive Achievements

This section defends a simple explanation of the special value of epistemic self-reliance. Epistemic self-reliance has a special value because practicing it is required for attaining certain cognitive achievements, and these cognitive achievements which require self-reliance are valuable. A life with such self-reliant cognitive achievements is, other things being equal, better than a life without them. Thus, self-reliance has a special instrumental value with respect to attaining these valuable states.

 In order to defend this line of argument for the special value of self-reliance, I need to say more in defense of its two key claims. First, I will say a bit more to explain and defend the idea that those cognitive achievements (if such there be) which require self-reliance are valuable—that a life which has them is other things being equal enhanced.

One way to support this claim is to follow the line of thought defended by those who advocate an achievement or credit-based theory of the value of knowledge.[[5]](#footnote-5) According to these theorists, knowledge is valuable because it is an achievement. Achievements are successes attained because of the exercise of abilities or competencies or virtues.[[6]](#footnote-6) And, as such, they are distinctly valuable—more valuable than successes not attained because of the exercise of abilities or competencies or virtues. When the archer shoots a bullseye on account of his exercise of competencies in archery, his doing so is more valuable than if he had shot the bullseye luckily. Like the archer, the inquirer who obtains knowledge deserves more credit for her performance than one who gets to the truth luckily. Indeed, in a certain way, it seems that only those whose success is attained because of an exercise of ability properly *achieve* anything at all.

Advocates of this sort of achievement or credit-based theory of knowledge will often not say much in defense of the idea that achievements, like knowledge, are valuable. It is commonly thought that once it is agreed that knowledge *is* a cognitive achievement, little more needs to be said to defend its value, since every achievement, qua achievement, adds some value to a life which has it. Even achievements of what we might be inclined to regard as bad ends are, qua achievements, valuable.[[7]](#footnote-7)

I should be clear here that my defense of the special value of epistemic self-reliance does not assume that knowledge is a cognitive achievement or that it is a cognitive achievement of a special kind.[[8]](#footnote-8) What I wish to borrow from the achievement or credit theory is only its approach to defending the value of a certain kind of epistemic state—cognitive achievements. I wish to follow credit theorists in affirming the value of achievements generally, concluding on this basis that if there are any cognitive achievements attainable only through the practice of epistemic self-reliance then these too will be valuable.

Some readers will want to hear more about why achievements are valuable generally or may even be skeptical of this idea, thinking that only certain achievements—say, those with intuitively good ends—are valuable.[[9]](#footnote-9) Though I think that the above approach of following credit theorists in assuming the value of achievements generally should be sufficient to generate interest among contemporary readers in the present defense of the value of self-reliance, I do want to briefly point toward one further approach to arguing for the value of those cognitive achievements which require self-reliance (if such there be). This approach is to provide a response-dependent account of the value of these achievements which parallels Jonathan Kvanvig’s (2012) recent defense of the special value of understanding.

Generally speaking, response-dependent accounts of the value of a thing argue that this thing has an evaluative property because it is disposed to elicit a certain kind of response from ordinarily functioning human beings in certain circumstances.[[10]](#footnote-10) One helpful way to think of these kinds of accounts of value is to think of them as arguing that a thing is valuable because of its role in ordinary human functioning. The reason a thing is disposed to elicit certain responses from ordinarily functioning human beings is the role it plays in motivating their behavior. Once the thing is attained, ordinarily functioning human beings characteristically respond in a certain way indicating that they got something they were motivated to get. Thus, we could defend a response-dependent account of the value of a thing by showing that ordinarily functioning human beings are ubiquitously motivated to pursue this thing. Kvanvig argues that there indeed is a motivational state of precisely this sort which aims at understanding and so on this basis affirms the special value of understanding.

Here again nothing I wish to say in defense of the special value of epistemic self-reliance assumes that Kvanvig is right about there being a motivational state which aims at understanding. I only wish to borrow his general strategy for arguing in favor of the response-dependent value of certain cognitive states. If one desires a deeper story about the value of achievements generally or a story about why some achievements are valuable while others are not, I am suggesting she look to response-dependent accounts of value like that discussed by Kvanvig. On this sort of account, achievements are valuable because there is a ubiquitous motivation among ordinarily functioning human beings to pursue them—at least, there is a ubiquitous motivation among ordinarily functioning humans to pursue those of them we are inclined to regard as accomplishing good ends. We have, then, the resources for either a deeper story or an alternative story about the value of those cognitive achievements which require self-reliance. The story is either that, as achievements, they are the sort of thing for which there is a ubiquitous motivation among human beings and so like all achievements they are valuable; or, the story is that insofar as they are not the sorts of achievements which we intuitively judge as having bad ends they share value with other such achievements which are the object of a more discriminating ubiquitous motivation.

So far, then, we have seen two ways to defend the first key premise in the argument above concerning the special value of epistemic self-reliance—the claim that if there are cognitive achievements which require self-reliance, then they are valuable. One might appeal to the fundamental value of achievements generally, or one might attempt to explain the value of achievements or a relevant subclass of achievements by resorting to ubiquitous human motivations.

Let us, then, turn to consider support for the second key premise in the above argument—the claim that there indeed are cognitive achievements which require practicing epistemic self-reliance. This claim should be no more difficult to defend than the first claim. The idea is this. If one never practices epistemic self-reliance, never relying on one’s own faculties rather than those of others, then there will be cognitive achievements one can never attain. For, cognitive achievements are by definition successes achieved because of an exercise of one’s cognitive competencies, abilities, or virtues. But, if one never relies on oneself in the formation and maintenance of one’s beliefs, then there will be certain cognitive competencies, abilities, and virtues one never exercises. Indeed, it is even plausible that if one never practices self-reliance, one will never develop these competencies, abilities, and virtues to begin with. Though there are likely cognitive achievements to be had through relying on others, reliance on oneself is a key ingredient in accomplishing many cognitive achievements—even to putting oneself in the position to do so. To put the point more positively, practicing self-reliance makes possible a wider variety of valuable epistemic achievements which cannot be attained in its absence.

Consider the following illustrative example. Joe is a recent convert to Christianity who has taken a real liking to reading his Bible. Lately, he’s been focusing on the first chapter of Ephesians, attempting to discern the major truths communicated there. Luckily for Joe, his friend Sally just completed writing her dissertation on this very chapter of the Bible. She’s been studying Ephesians 1 for the last five years, applying skills she has developed through a long history of practice. She has poured over the best ancient manuscripts using her own knowledge of Koine Greek. She has read incessantly the very best commentaries on this chapter and has presented her own work on this chapter at scholarly conventions, receiving feedback from the experts. On the basis of her investigation, she now confidently tells Joe the ten major truths which are communicated in Ephesians 1, and Joe takes her at her word. Supposing that Sally has gotten things right, both Joe and Sally will have true beliefs about the ten major truths communicated in Ephesians 1.

Now, perhaps we should say that Joe and Sally have both attained some kind of cognitive achievement here. They do both have true beliefs. We might even say that both know the ten major truths taught in Ephesians 1. But, there is at the same time a clear and powerful intuition that Sally has achieved more than Joe in this case, cognitively speaking. We might explain this by saying that Sally deserves more credit than Joe does for having the true Ephesians beliefs. In Sally’s case, getting to the truth about Ephesians 1 was very much her doing; in Joe’s case, getting to the truth was still his doing, but it was less his doing than Sally’s getting to the truth was her doing. And the explanation for this is that Sally was epistemically self-reliant while Joe was not. Indeed, Joe simply couldn’t attain the level of credit for getting to the truth which Sally did in this case unless Joe were to practice self-reliance in the way Sally did. Thus, the case shows that there are some cognitive achievements—like maximizing one’s credit for getting to the truth—which are not attainable in the absence of practicing epistemic self-reliance.

Another case will be helpful as well and more so since we will return to modified versions of it below. Imagine Edward and his wife Jen are cordially competitive Sudoku puzzle addicts. Edward decides he wants to move up to the next level of difficulty in the puzzles and he quickly finds that the puzzles at this level are significantly more challenging than on the previous level. Jen leans over and taunts, ‘I know what to do-o. I know what to do-o. Do you want me to tell you?’ ‘No,’ he replies. ‘I want to figure it out for myself.’ Though it isn’t easy, he solves the puzzle after a few minutes of intense thinking.

Imagine that Edward had instead replied, ‘Fine, fine—tell me,’ allowing Jen to show him how to fill in each number in the puzzle. In both this case and the previous one, Edward will have gotten to the truth about the numbers which had to go in the blanks (supposing Jen knew the correct numbers). In each case he will have filled in the puzzle correctly. But, clearly there is something distinctly valuable about Edward’s performance in the first case. Edward achieves something in the first case that he doesn’t in the second case. Indeed, we’re tempted to say that in a straightforward sense Edward only really *solved* the puzzle in the first case. Again, this seems to be a case where a certain cognitive achievement—solving the puzzle—is available only through self-reliance and not through reliance on others.

We have, then, powerful reason to conclude that both of the key premises of the argument above for the special value of epistemic self-reliance are true. There are cognitive achievements which cannot be attained without practicing epistemic self-reliance—achievements such as maximizing one’s credit for getting to the truth or solving a puzzle. And these cognitive achievements are valuable—either because achievements generally are valuable or because achievements of this sort, which do not aim at bad ends and are the objects of ubiquitous motivations, are valuable. Thus, we have a powerful case for the claim that practicing epistemic self-reliance has a special instrumental value.

1. Objections

Despite this powerful case for the special value of epistemic self-reliance, there are two significant objections to this line of argument which we should address, each of which has to do with how the unreliability of self-reliance affects the value of practicing it.

The first objection runs as follows. We shouldn’t say that practicing self-reliance enables one to attain cognitive achievements one cannot attain in its absence. At least, we shouldn’t say that practicing self-reliance enables one to get more *credit for getting to the truth* than one can get if one doesn’t practice it. For, if we say that one gets more credit for getting to the truth through self-reliance than through others-reliance, then it ought to be that this remains the case even if self-reliance is a less reliable strategy for getting to the truth than others-reliance. But, plausibly, if self-reliance is a less reliable strategy for getting to the truth than is others-reliance, one who pursues self-reliance *doesn’t* get more credit for getting to the truth. And the same goes for cognitive achievements more generally. When practicing self-reliance is less reliable in getting to the truth than practicing others-reliance, one doesn’t achieve anything special from a cognitive standpoint by practicing the former rather than the latter. In fact, doing so wouldn’t be sensible from a purely cognitive point of view.[[11]](#footnote-11)

My response to this first objection is two-fold. First, even if one doesn’t receive more credit *for getting to the truth* through practicing self-reliance where self-reliance is less reliable than others-reliance in getting to the truth, this does not imply that one does not achieve something valuable through doing so which cannot be achieved without self-reliance. To see this, consider a modified Sudoku case. Imagine that Jen is a more advanced puzzle solver than Edward. Edward is newer to the exercise, but has become fairly comfortable at the beginner level. Jen invites Edward to try a puzzle at the intermediate level. He notices it is certainly a bit more challenging than those at the beginner level, but he is confident he can solve it with sufficient effort. He goes to work, taking his time. But, given her advanced skill level, Jen is able to see far more quickly and easily how to solve the puzzle. She again pipes in ‘I know what to do-o. I know what to do-o. Do you want me to tell you?’ Edward again is faced with a choice between self-reliant and others-reliant approaches to filling in the blanks of the puzzle. Notably, this time the path of self-reliance is less reliable than the path of others-reliance with respect to filling in the blanks correctly. It’s not that Edward is bad at solving these puzzles or that he is unreliable at solving them, even at the intermediate level. It’s just that Jen is better and more reliable than Edward. What is important to note here, though, is that it remains clear in this example that if Edward chooses the path of self-reliance he is able to attain a cognitive achievement he is not able to attain by choosing the path of others-reliance. Whether we say that self-reliant Edward gets more credit for getting to the truth (supposing he does get it) about the blanks than others-reliant Edward or not, we should at least say that self-reliant Edward achieves something others-reliant Edward does not. Plausibly, what he achieves is appropriately described as “solving the puzzle”. Thus, even where the path of self-reliance is less reliable than the path of others-reliance, there are still valuable states of cognitive achievement to be attained along the former path which cannot be attained along the latter path.

A second response to this first objection is also tempting. For, there is at least some pull toward affirming that even where self-reliance is less reliable than others-reliance, one gets more credit for getting to the truth through self-reliance than one does through others-reliance. After all, suppose we are indeed comfortable saying that only self-reliant Edward ‘solves the puzzle.’ One plausible explanation of what it is to solve a puzzle is that it is to fill in the blanks of the puzzle such that one receives the credit, or receives a certain level of credit, for doing so correctly. If this is accurate, then self-reliant Edward receives a certain level of credit for filling in the blanks correctly that others-reliant Edward does not. Thus, it is not implausible that even where self-reliance is less reliable than others-reliance, practicing it enables one to maximize one’s credit for attaining the truth.

This defense of the value of self-reliance in the face of our first objection does not imply, of course, that choosing the self-reliant path is always all-things-considered worthwhile, especially when doing so is less reliable than choosing the path of others-reliance. Choosing the path of self-reliance when the path of others-reliance is available and more reliable brings with it a certain epistemic risk—an increased chance of getting things wrong. On some occasions, the risk is not worth it. But, on other occasions, like that illustrated by the modified Sudoku example, the risk *is* worth it. Part of what this shows us is that getting to the truth is not all that matters to us from a purely cognitive perspective. It also matters how we get to the truth. Sometimes risking getting to the truth for the sake of getting to it in a certain way is worthwhile.

Move to a second objection, one which asks us to consider what happens not when self-reliance is *comparatively* unreliable (with respect to others-reliance), but *absolutely* unreliable. We might put it as follows. If one attains cognitive achievements through practicing self-reliance which one cannot attain through practicing others-reliance, then it ought to be that even where practicing self-reliance is an unreliable way of getting to the truth, one attains a cognitive achievement when one gets to the truth through self-reliance that one cannot attain otherwise. But, surely this does not make sense. One does not attain cognitive achievements through practicing unreliable methods of attaining the truth. Thus, one does not attain cognitive achievements through self-reliance that one cannot attain otherwise.

This objection is on to something, but not anything which will threaten the present defense of the special value of self-reliance. The objector gets close to the truth when claiming, ‘One does not attain cognitive achievements through practicing unreliable methods of attaining the truth.’ This claim may be correct, but it depends upon a controversial assumption which should not be made here. What is clear is that one does not attain cognitive achievements without exercising genuine skills, competencies, abilities, or virtues. If skills, competencies, abilities, and virtues are to be explained in terms of reliability in getting to the truth, then the objector’s claim stands. But, the idea that these properties are to be explained in terms of reliability in getting to the truth is controversial and should not be assumed here.[[12]](#footnote-12) All that should be agreed upon is that one does not attain cognitive achievements without exercising genuine skills, competencies, abilities, or virtues.

Though the present point is well-taken, it will not permit this second objection to pose a problem for the defense of the special value of self-reliance developed here. This is because, once this point is itself appreciated, it becomes clear that the first premise in this objection describes an impossible scenario. Recall that this premise, as originally stated, asks us to consider a scenario in which practicing self-reliance is an unreliable way of getting to the truth, but one nonetheless attains the truth through practicing self-reliance. What the objector needs to ask us to consider, however, is a case in which practicing self-reliance will not involve the exercise of competencies, virtues, etc.—not one in which practicing self-reliance is unreliable. By doing so, she appropriately leaves open the question of whether virtues, competencies, etc. are to be explained in terms of reliability. But, as soon as we appreciate this point, it is clear that the objector is asking us to consider an incoherent scenario. She is asking us to consider a scenario in which practicing self-reliance will not involve the exercise of competencies, virtues, etc., but where nonetheless one gets to the truth *through* self-reliance in the sort of way that I have said leads to valuable cognitive achievements. But, to get to the truth *through* self-reliance in the sort of way that one attains valuable cognitive achievements just is to get to the truth because one has exercised one’s own cognitive competencies, virtues, etc. Thus, the objector is asking us to consider a scenario in which practicing self-reliance will not involve the exercise of competencies, virtues, etc., but where nonetheless one gets to the truth by exercising precisely such competencies, virtues, etc. This is incoherent and cannot form the basis of an objection to the present defense of the special value of epistemic self-reliance.

While this second objection poses no threat to the present defense of the special value of epistemic self-reliance, it raises an interesting question about those conditions under which practicing self-reliance is all-things-considered worthwhile. The present defense of the value of epistemic self-reliance defended that value by appealing to the role self-reliance plays in attaining cognitive achievements. Where such achievements will not be attained through the practice of epistemic self-reliance, as when one does not possess the requisite virtues, competencies, etc. for attaining such achievements, would pursuing self-reliance ever be worthwhile?

Surprisingly, I believe that the present defense of the value of epistemic self-reliance has the resources to offer an affirmative response to this question, so long as the virtues, competencies, etc. are only *currently* absent. For, there are cases where it is only by attempting to attain the truth on one’s own that one will acquire those competencies, virtues, etc. required for *future* cognitive achievements. For example, suppose that Jen alone has experience with the puzzles, but she finally has persuaded Edward to take up the habit. He has no experience at all with the puzzles. He doesn’t yet have the skills that make one a good Sudoku puzzle solver, and as a result he’s quite unreliable in solving the puzzles. He picks one up to give it a try. It isn’t too long before Jen taunts, ‘I know what to do-o. I know what to do-o. Do you want me to tell you?’ Here the path of others-reliance is reliable and the path of self-reliance is *unreliable*. Here, Edward will not *achieve* anything in the here and now if he tries to solve the puzzle on his own. Nonetheless, it may still be worthwhile for Edward to pursue the path of self-reliance, and this can be explained by the present account of the value of this practice. For, while Edward will not attain any cognitive achievement in the here and now through practicing self-reliance, *attempting* to do so is a key ingredient in his acquiring those skills and abilities which will enable him to do so in the future.

Thus, neither of the two objections surveyed in this section threatens the present defense of the special value of epistemic self-reliance. Self-reliance has a special value because it is required for attaining certain valuable cognitive achievements. Indeed, we have seen in this section that practicing epistemic self-reliance can even be all-things-considered worthwhile where it is less reliable than others-reliance in attaining the truth and even where it is flatly unreliable.

I’ll note, in conclusion, that the present defense of epistemic self-reliance has a natural application to self-reliance more generally. Quite plausibly, it is valuable to rely on ourselves in non-epistemic domains just as well as in the epistemic domain because by doing so we will develop and deploy our characters in valuable ways. More generally, then, there is a powerful explanation of the value of self-reliance which ties this practice to its essential role in achievements.

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1. See (Zagzebski 2012, ch.1), which lists several prominent examples including Descartes and Locke. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. One argument for this involves appealing to two hypothetical omniscient deities, one of which gets all of its knowledge for itself and the other of which gets its knowledge from the first. Zagzebski (2012, fn.8) comes close to conceding this point. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The definition does not require that in order to be self-reliant, one must *have the opportunity* to rely on others. And, this seems to match common sense, since it is clearly coherent to speak of people who *had* to rely on themselves. Notably, this implies that *refusing* to rely on the faculties of others, though perhaps characteristically exhibited by those displaying self-reliance *who have opportunity to rely on others*, is not itself required for this practice. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. For more on this and other accounts of intrinsic value, see (Zimmerman 2010). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. See (Sosa 2007), (Zagzebski 1996) and Greco (2010). It is Greco (2010) that I follow most closely in the text. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. It will not make a difference to anything I will say in defense of the special value of self-reliance whether there are differences between competencies, abilities, skills, virtues and the like and whether only some or others of these are constitutive of achievements; so, I will not pursue these distinctions in the text. It is worth noting, however, that these kinds of properties areoften thought to be distinct and that epistemologists of the sort I have in mind in the text may differ with one another concerning which properties they think are relevant to the analysis of knowledge. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. This approach is very clear in (Greco 2010). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. For an important objection to the claim that knowledge is an achievement, see (Lackey 2007) and (Riggs 2009) for response. For objections to the claim that knowledge is a cognitive achievement *of a special kind*, see (Pritchard 2010). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. For a brief but helpful response to concerns along these lines, see (Pritchard and Turri 2012). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. (Johnston 1989) offers such an approach to moral properties. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Zagzebski (2012, ch.5) develops an objection along these lines to a credit-based defense of the special value of epistemic self-reliance. However, she wishes to apply the objection only to attempts to defend the value of self-reliance which refer to its ability to enhance our credit *for getting to the truth*. One way to see what is going on in the text is to see it as explaining what other sort of credit might be available through practicing self-reliance. However, see the second response to the present objection developed in the text for a defense of the claim that the sort of credit attained through practicing self-reliance indeed *is* credit for getting to the truth. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. There is a significant divide between virtue reliabilists who conceive of cognitive virtues as involving a reliable success component and virtue responsibilists who conceive of cognitive virtues as not involving a reliable success component. For discussion, see (Greco 2011). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)