

# Epistemic Humility as a Virtue of Public Health

Dr. Kathryn MacKay

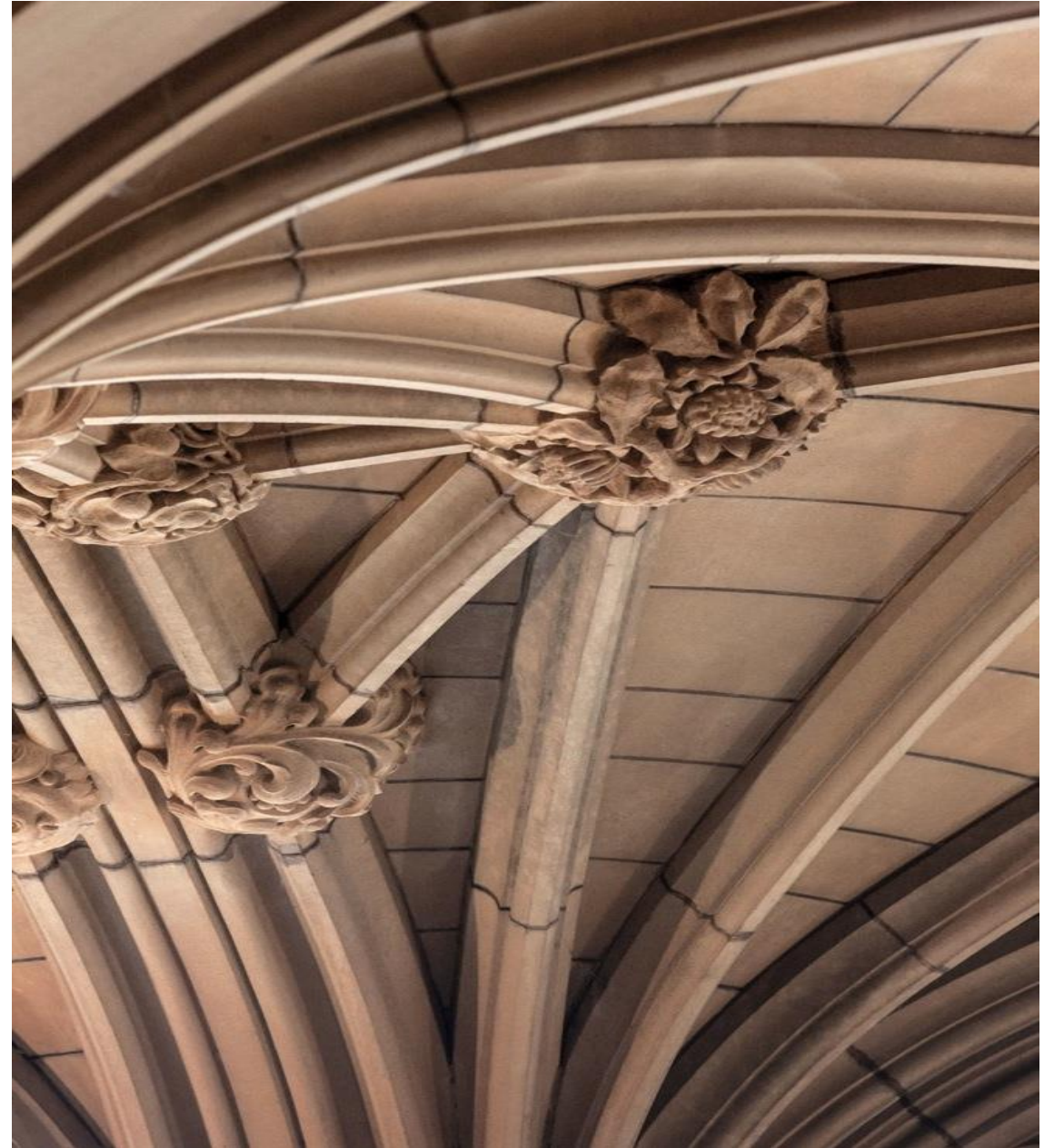
Sydney Health Ethics

02 December 2024

AABHL – University of Sydney



THE UNIVERSITY OF  
**SYDNEY**



We acknowledge the tradition of custodianship and law of the Country on which the University of Sydney campuses stand. We pay our respects to those who have cared and continue to care for Country.



THE UNIVERSITY OF  
SYDNEY

# Outline of the talk

1. Epistemic Humility
  - The virtue
  - Deficiencies and excess
2. Epistemic Humility in Public health
  - Three reasons it is needed
3. Three areas of application:
  - Evidence
  - Concepts
  - Communication

# 1. Epistemic Humility

- *Episteme* – Aristotle’s intellectual virtue, concerned with scientific knowledge or understanding (Greco, 2014; Solopova, 2016)
  - Epistemic goods include truth, understanding, explanation, and knowledge of causes
- *Humility* – modesty, or being humble?
  - Underestimating self-worth, under-valuing accomplishments?
  - Henry Sidgwick: “it would seem just as irrational to underrate ourselves as to overrate” (1907, 334-335)
- Rather, humility is the virtue of accurately assessing our abilities, self-worth, and accomplishments
  - Keeping merits in perspective; allow awareness of limitation to influence behaviours

# The Virtue of Epistemic Humility, then

A disposition to accurately evaluate one's epistemic stance, prepared to act on one's limitations, recognising fallibility yet confident in knowledge

- Not making snap judgments, but also not resisting evidence in an unwarranted way.
- Maintaining a critical stance toward evidence, evaluating it rigorously, while not demanding more or different evidence when what is available is of good quality.
- Appropriately valuing and evaluating evidence of different kinds and avoiding dogmatic thinking.

# Deficiencies and Excess

- Twin vices of deficiency of humility:
  1. Too much skepticism wrt the ability or testimony of others, empirical facts (Richards 1988, 1992)
  2. Lack of awareness of one's epistemic limitations, and a corresponding lack of response to these limitations (Snow 1995, 2020)
- Excess of humility:
  - To exceedingly doubt one's ability or chronically underappreciate one's own merits – state of epistemic subservience

## 2. Epistemic Humility in Public Health

- Three primary reasons that PH should develop the virtue of epistemic humility:
  1. PH is interdisciplinary, requires detailed and accurate information from many different sources
  2. Public health as a privileged ‘knower’, as expert, or authority; at risk of treating other groups in testimonially unjust ways
    - “Knowledge held by experts is highly partial, insecure and incomplete” (Parviainen et al., 2021)

# Epistemic Humility in Public Health

3. PH needs practical wisdom – treading the line between respecting individual values, rights, preferences, and achieving the collective good in improving health outcomes

- Practical wisdom is an excellent dispositional state that enables its possessor to attain practical truth

- “that is, he gets things right in action in what we would call ‘the moral sphere’” (Hursthouse, 2006)

## 3.i Evidence

- What is enough? What is quality? What to do when evidence is lacking?
  - For public health to have the virtue of epistemic humility means having to tread the line between waiting for enough evidence and demanding too much before acting
  - Also, considering the right kinds of evidence and testimony for particular issues
  - What counts, and who is considered able to provide it?

## 3.ii Concepts

- Definitions of health? Well-being?
  - Established critiques based on value-hegemony of white middle-class in countries like Aus, Can, UK, US.
  - PH needs epistemic humility when it comes to their value concepts and orderings
- Defining the problem – and what counts as a problem – as well as what would count as a solution (Aquino et al., 2023; Degeling et al., 2017)
  - Testimony – listening to the concerns, values of other groups outside of PH

## 3.iii Communication

- How to respectfully communicate with the public? How to maintain cooperative relations?
  - Hegemony of middle-class values, or scientific values, over the concerns and values of other groups
  - Requires “sensitivity to what’s at stake” for others (McMillan, 2023)
- Connected to maintaining good quality public debates and room for questioning Public Health perspectives/decisions
  - E.g. making space to discuss some concerns about vaccines

# Conclusion

Epistemic humility should become a central virtue developed by public health institutions.

An excellent disposition toward knowing and deliberation requires public health to appropriately assess its own expertise, the evidence it looks for, and the assumptions it makes.

Epistemic humility is indispensable to public health, to achieve its ends, and to maintain just relations while doing so.

Thank you for listening!

Questions?



THE UNIVERSITY OF  
**SYDNEY**

