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Vices of the Mind, by Quassim Cassam. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019. Pp. xiv + 202.

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The publication of Cassam's *Vices of the Mind* is a landmark in the study of epistemic vices. This is the first monograph exclusively dedicated to the topic; it is likely to set the agenda for the field for many years to come. This slim volume exhibits many virtues. It carefully lays out a clear and distinctive account of the heterogeneous nature of intellectual vices. It explores thorny issues concerning responsibility for vice and the possibility of self-improvement. It demonstrates the social and political importance of studying these topics by prefacing each chapter with the discussion of a political episode where the closed-mindedness, gullibility, arrogance, and prejudice of some main actors resulted in disastrous consequences for the actors themselves and other parties to the unfolding events. These episodes include: the havoc caused by the arrogance and dogmatism of American politicians prior to the invasion of Iraq; the closed-mindedness which prevented Israeli intelligence analysts from heeding warnings and thus led to Israel's unpreparedness at the start of the six day war; the financial and reputational damage caused by the gullibility of a journalist who believed he had acquired Hitler's war diaries.

Cassam defends an account of epistemic vices that he labels obstructivism (p.5). Vices, on this view, are psychological qualities for which an individual is blameworthy or otherwise justly criticisable and that, in ordinary circumstances, systematically obstruct knowledge acquisition, retention and transmission (p. 23). These psychological qualities are varied. Cassam identifies three main species: character traits such as closed-mindedness; attitudes such as prejudice or epistemic insouciance (lack of concern for the truth); and ways of thinking such as wishful thinking. In the final chapter of the book he adds implicit biases that

he treats as attitudes because they are akin to prejudicial attitudes even though they can only be measured implicitly.

One feature these psychologically heterogeneous qualities share is that they are causally responsible for individuals' failing to acquire, retain or transmit knowledge. In short, these qualities systematically (rather than sporadically or accidentally) get in the way of or obstruct knowledge. Individuals who are prejudiced or closed-minded, gullible or prone to wishful thinking often fail to acquire knowledge or to retain the knowledge they had because their attitudes, character traits or ways of thinking cause them not to give due weight to counter-evidence or make them too susceptible to believe what they want to believe or what they are told. Epistemic vices share this feature with other intellectual defects such as cognitive shortcomings including for instance poor eyesight. However, whilst cognitive shortcomings do not reflect badly on the person they afflict, individuals can be justly criticised or even blamed for their vices.

For Cassam there is no one kind of epistemic vice that is clearly explanatorily prior to the others. Instead, explanatory priority varies from case to case (p. 15). He notes that we might explain some character traits in terms of ways of thinking. For example, a closed-minded individual is someone who systematically adopts closed-minded ways of thinking. He also notes that character traits can sometimes be explained by way of attitudes. For instance, an arrogant person is one for whom arrogant attitudes are in character. However, in his view, often neither attitudes nor ways of thinking are more basic than the other. Arrogant attitudes, for instance, involves thinking in characteristically arrogant ways, so that the attitude cannot be fully explained without reference to the ways of thinking that express it. At the same time this way of thinking cannot be fully understood without reference to the attitudes it expresses (p. 99).

Cassam's defence of the heterogeneity of epistemic vices is welcome. It seems right to think that, for example, wishful thinking is an epistemic vice, yet it would be very strained to identify it as a character trait. However, I believe that a case can be made for the explanatory priority of attitudes over the other kinds of vice and this fact is *contra* Cassam of practical as well as philosophical interest (p. 99). I do not wish to suggest that in every case grasp of the concept of the vicious attitude is a pre-requisite to the understanding of the concepts of corresponding ways of thinking or character traits. In this regard, Cassam is

correct to assert that the concepts of vices of one kind are not always more basic than those of different kinds. Nevertheless, explanations using the vocabulary of attitudes are illuminating if we wish to understand more fully how vices, including character traits and ways of thinking, work and what drives them.

In this context, attitudes are associative states that function as summary evaluations of their formal objects. Hence, attitudes are akin to preferences for or against some object. For example, a person's attitude toward a social group, a political party or a quality of the self can be positive or negative. If positive, the person likes that group, or prefers that party or even values that aspect of the self. If negative, the group is disliked, the party not preferred, and the aspect disvalued. These attitudes are acquired and retained in the service of goals such as ego-defence or value-expressions. These goals provide motivations that bias the cognitive processes leading to attitude formation and retention. For instance, attitudes motivated by the need for ego defence might consist of negative evaluations of their formal objects because they are perceived as threats. To make an initial case for the explanatory priority of attitudes over character traits and ways of thinking, I consider the case of intellectual arrogance.

Intellectual arrogance can be thought of as a character trait. It is a disposition to think or feel that one is intellectually superior to others, and to be supremely confident in one's abilities and in the correctness of one's views. It is manifested in a tendency to dismiss contrary opinions, a propensity to ignore counter-evidence, and a disposition to dominate conversations. To call someone arrogant is to describe his character. However, if we wish to describe this aspect of character in more detail, we are bound to mention that he has characteristically arrogant attitudes toward his own alleged strengths, and other people's alleged weakness. We are also likely to refer to his characteristically arrogant ways of thinking. If we press even further in the attempt to understand the psychology of the arrogant person, we might seek to explain why arrogant people think the way they do. The most plausible answer is to be found in the study of the psychology of attitudes. I have argued elsewhere that intellectual arrogance is underpinned by positive attitudes to the self motivated by the goal of ego-defence (Tanesini 2019). If this is right, the characteristically dogmatic ways of thinking of arrogant individuals are explained by their defensive attitudes that cause them to ignore evidence contrary to their pre-existing opinions.

One might grant that, in some cases, the presence of specific attitudes explains the resulting character trait and associated ways of thinking, whilst remarking that there are also examples where attitudinal accounts are ill-fitting. Wishful thinking would seem to be a prime example. The wishful thinker is someone who often engages in motivated cognition. His wishes and desires shape what evidence he considers and the weight he assigns to it. He might also engage in rationalisation and confabulation. Be that as it may, the wishful thinker ends up believing what he wishes to believe rather than what is supported by the evidence that is available to him.

Without doubt wishful thinking is not in itself an attitude, but if we wish to understand what wishful thinking consists in, we must explain it as an example of how motivations bias information-processing. The vocabulary of attitudes as motivated by the pursuit of specific goals supplies the theoretical framework for these explanations. Wishful thinking is an example of cognition driven by goals such as ego-defence, or value expression that are at variance with the pursuit of accuracy. These are the motivations at work in attitude formation. We can thus explain these biased ways of thinking as information-processing mechanisms involved in the acquisition of attitudes, and shaped by the presence of pre-existing attitudes formed in the service of the pursuit of non-truth-conducive goals.

If these considerations are along the right lines, there is a sense in which attitudes and their motivations might be the basic building blocks of all epistemic vices including character traits and ways of thinking. This result is of practical significance since it suggests that if we wish to reduce the prevalence of epistemic vices and their expression, there is much that we could learn from the study of attitude-change. For example, self-affirmation might be deployed to reduce the defensiveness of those who are arrogant (Sherman and Cohen 2002).

The most distinctive feature of Cassam's view is its consequentialism. Throughout this book he carefully describes several epistemic vices including closed-mindedness, insouciance, gullibility and prejudice to show how they get in the way of knowledge. These vices make one unable to evaluate the relevant evidence, or to listen when such evidence is presented. They prevent one from paying attention to the right things, noticing what is salient, or even from caring that one's beliefs are based on careful assessments of the facts. Cassam is, in my view, right that epistemic vices systematically have these epistemically negative

consequences. He is also correct, in my opinion, to resist the view, recently adopted by Battaly – for instance – that in hostile circumstances ordinary vices assume the character of virtues.

Battaly (2018) has argued that closed-mindedness can be a virtue because in hostile circumstances it can minimise the production of bad epistemic effects. For example, a person might be epistemically better off when he closes his mind to the widely shared prejudices and misinformation that abound in his society, rather than to be receptive to these views. Battaly is right that virtue does not require that one believes propaganda and misinformation. This is not because closed-mindedness is a virtue in these circumstances. Rather, it is explained by the fact that open-mindedness does not require that one is willing to engage with all views but only that one engages with those that one justifiably judges to be salient. Hence, the open-minded person can, and should, discount what he warrantably takes to be propaganda or prejudice. Cassam provides similar considerations to rebut those who argue that in some circumstances dogmatism is virtuous. He notes that some of the cases where dogmatism seems beneficial do not describe instances of dogmatism at all. Instead, they are instances of firmness, where firmness consists in a warranted preference for preserving our current views by first testing whether objections can be refuted or accommodated (p.113). In the same way as open-mindedness does not require that every view, no matter how implausible or prejudicial, is carefully assessed, the non-dogmatic attitude is compatible with an initial preference for one's settled view in the face of seeming counter-evidence. In addition, as Cassam also notes, even though there might be circumstances in which epistemic vices lead to the formation of true beliefs, these vices still obstruct knowledge since such beliefs are not knowledge because they are unwarranted.

Even though I am in full agreement with Cassam that epistemic vices, in ordinary circumstances, systematically obstruct knowledge, I disagree with him that negative consequences are the essence of what makes an epistemic vice epistemically bad. As Cassam notes, the alternative to his consequentialist approach is a kind of deontology that holds that what makes epistemic vices epistemically bad are their motivational components. One can subscribe to this motivational approach, as I do, while agreeing with Cassam that epistemic vices also have, at least in ordinary circumstances, systematically bad consequences. The opposition to the motivational approach runs deep in *Vices of the Mind*.

In what follows, I briefly describe Cassam's views on this issue before raising some objections that speak in favour of the view that bad motivations are crucial to epistemic vices.

Cassam grants the epistemically bad motivations are at the core of some epistemic vices. For instance, he acknowledges that closed-mindedness is motivated by a psychological need for closure (p. 39). This is the desire to reach quickly clear and unambiguous answers and to freeze on them, thus resisting subsequent rational update in the light of counter-evidence. However, he also claims that several vices do not have a psychological component that individuates them. He thinks, for example, that stupidity as foolishness lacks a motive or desire that would be specific to it (p.16). Similarly, epistemic insouciance is the epistemic attitude of being indifferent to the truth. This attitude seems to be characterised by a lack of motivation to acquire, retain or transmit epistemic goods, rather than by the presence of epistemically bad motives.

In addition to challenging his opponent to supply specific motivations for epistemic vices that appear to lack them, Cassam also formulates a more general worry for the defender of the view that epistemic vices always include epistemically bad motivations. He notes that epistemic vices are not necessarily rooted in a desire for ignorance nor in an excessively weak desire for knowledge. The arrogant person can, by her own light, be strongly motivated by a desire for the truth, accompanied by an unwarranted confidence in her ability to discover it. It would thus seem that a person might have wholly virtuous epistemic motivations while suffering from epistemic vice.

The defender of the motivational view of epistemic vice would be ill-advised to focus on the motives that the vicious person would adduce to rationalise her behaviours. Many epistemic vices are, as Cassam explains, stealthy because they are invisible to those who have them. Closed-mindedness prevents the closed-minded person from coming to realise that his mind is closed. Arrogance might stop the arrogant person from appreciating that she is arrogant. In similar ways the true motives that explain, in the sense of making intelligible, the behaviours expressive of epistemic vices are often hidden to those who possess them. If, as I contend, some of these motives are epistemically bad, there will be pressure on the individual to rationalise them away since, psychologically speaking, one cannot hold on to a

belief whilst at the same time believing that one holds it for epistemically disreputable motives.

For example, arrogant individuals are not motivated by a concern for the truth for its own sake. They might care instrumentally for the truth, but only in so far as it promotes their ultimate goal of self-enhancement. Since other people's epistemic successes are an obstacle to arrogant people's pursuit of a superior social status, an important motivation at the root of intellectual arrogance is the desire to put obstacles in the way of others' epistemic achievements. It is this epistemically bad motivation that makes intelligible the bullying, intimidating, domineering and humiliating behaviours that are the trademark expression of arrogance (cf., Tanesini 2018). This is a motivation that might be somewhat obscure to the person who harbours it.

But what about foolishness? This kind of stupidity consists at least in part in worrying about the wrong things, and asking bad or badly phrased questions. It involves systematically mistaking the trees for the wood and ending up down a cul de sac on a regular basis. At times, the foolish person cannot tell the difference between pretentious nonsense and demanding but rewarding artworks or academic papers. I agree that there is no motivation that is specific to all foolishness, but this is because there are different kinds of fool. Some people's foolishness is the result of snobbery driven by a desire to belong to what is commonly perceived to be the epistemic elite irrespective of epistemic merit. This is the epistemically bad motivation to disregard epistemic merit in favour of esteem obtained by any means. Other people's foolishness is really gullibility. It is a tendency to believe what one is told even when one ends up making poor judgements and believing patently stupid things. The gullible individual is driven by the epistemically bad motivation of wanting to believe what others tell him. When what he believes is patently false, he appears foolish especially when his incautious believing has especially catastrophic consequences. This is why we might feel foolish, when we have been scammed.

These two examples alone clearly do not settle the issue whether epistemic vices have characteristic epistemically bad motivations. However, they indicate that if we think of motives as what makes the behaviour intelligible rather than in terms of the motives that an agent might adduce to justify it, it is at least *prima facie* plausible that motives to pursue goals such as self-enhancement even at the expense of accuracy are often among the most

significant causes of ways of thinking that are systematically bad because they result in the absence of true belief, in the presence of false beliefs, or in the absence of thought about things that matter. Sometimes ignorance is not the outcome of motivated cognition because it is just bad luck or the product of cognitive shortcomings. But these are precisely the cases where epistemically bad effects, even when systematically produced, are not said to be the product of vice because they do not reflect badly on the person who has failed to acquire, retain or transmit knowledge.

The theme of individuals' responsibility for their vices looms large in *Vices of the Mind* (pp. 17-22; 121-43). For Cassam, blame requires responsibility and responsibility requires control. The necessary control does not have to be volitional. If it were, we would not be responsible for our vices since we can't modify them at will. Instead, Cassam holds that at least some ways of thinking, character traits and attitudes are malleable. Even though we often have no control over their initial acquisition, we have the control necessary to revise them. For instance, we possess some amount of managerial control over our character traits, because provided we possess the motivation, we are able to manipulate them. We can, for example, engage in techniques that are designed to extinguish the bad epistemic habits. For instance, we can learn to pay more attention to other people's opinions by repeating what they told us using our own words (pp. 181-2).

Cassam is open to the possibility that we might not have this kind of control over all character vices. In some cases, we cannot manipulate a character vice because we are not even aware of its existence. However, absence of control does not always exempt one from blame. If the ignorance of the vice is itself blameworthy, possession of the vice is also blameworthy despite the inability to revise it by manipulation. In other instances, ignorance is blameless, and we are not therefore responsible for the vice. Nevertheless, the trait in question is a vice whenever it reflects badly on the person who has it, so that they are justly criticisable for this aspect of their character. The question of which bad features reflect badly on one and which do not is not easily settled. Cassam resorts to a distinction made by Angela Smith between deep and superficial evaluations, where only the former cast a negative shadow on the person (p. 134). Along similar lines, Cassam argues that we have a degree of evaluative control over our attitudes so that we are able to modify them in accordance to the evidence. He is also cautiously optimistic about our degree of evaluative

and managerial control over our ways of thinking. Be that as it may, were it turn out that we do not have the requisite control over our vices, in Cassam's opinion we are still criticisable for them in so far as they define who we are.

Whilst Cassam offers a clear and careful account of the conditions under which individuals might be responsible for their vices, he does not tackle the question whether people must be held responsible for them. Maybe, he assumes that a positive answer to the question of responsibility settles the issue of the appropriateness of holding others responsible.

However, this is not so. First, there might be prudential reasons not to hold people responsible by attributing vices to them. Mark Alfano has pointed to the existence of such reasons. He provides empirical evidence that vice is factitious. That is, telling people that they are vicious makes them behave more viciously rather than less so (Alfano 2013: 94-6). Second, even though some people are blameworthy for their vices, it does not follow that others possess the requisite standing required to blame them. For instance, it would be hypocritical of one to blame someone else for a feature one also possesses and has done nothing to eradicate. It would also be inappropriate to blame others for a vice when one suspects that one would have acquired the same vice, had one found oneself in their position. For these reasons, even though individuals might be blameworthy or at least criticisable for their vices, it is extremely unclear whether, or how often, it is appropriate and opportune to blame or criticise them at least directly to their face.

I conclude with a brief discussion of another central theme of this philosophically rich volume. Throughout the book Cassam worries about the explanatory depth of vice explanations (pp. 49-51). He contrasts these with explanations of events as primarily caused by structural factors and with explanations that invoke cognitive biases. Cassam conceives of these kinds of explanations as competitors and attempts to argue that at least in some cases vices play the most illuminating explanatory role. He notes, however, that this is not always the case. Further, in his most recent forthcoming work Cassam has argued for an expansive role for structural and ideological explanation in his account of phenomena such as conspiracy theorising for which he had previously offered an explanation in terms of individual psychological vices.

I am inclined to think that vice and structural explanations are complementary rather than competitors. Often events are the result of individuals' actions. People exercise agency

when engaging in these activities that are reflective of their characters. These actions take place in, and respond to, situations that are shaped by structural forces. Furthermore, the same forces, including structural power relations, shape people's psychologies including their vices and virtues. Which of these kinds of explanation has the greater explanatory power is not just a function of the event to be explained but also of other factors. That is, whether vice or structural explanations are in each instance to be preferred might depend on our pre-existing interests when attempting to explain a given event. For instance, we might try to explain what happened to avoid a repeat, to ascertain if a remedy is likely to work, to understand what could have been done to prevent it from happening, and so on and so forth. These different questions might require as answers explanations of different kinds.

In conclusion, this volume sets out what is destined to become one of the mainstay positions in vice epistemology. It articulates clearly and precisely a coherent account. But it also conveys the political and social importance of doing vice epistemology because it offers us some tools to understand and thus address some of the serious ills of our times. *Vices of the Mind* is a classic in the making. It is essential reading for anyone with an interest in epistemology.

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