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Blaming the intellectually vicious: A critical discussion of Cassam's account of blameworthiness and reprehensibility for epistemic vice

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Abstract: There is much of interest in Cassam's ground-breaking *Vices of the Mind* (2019). This discussion focuses exclusively on one aspect of his view, namely, his account of what it takes to be properly criticisable or blameworthy for one's epistemic vices. This critical discussion consists of two sections. The first provides an overview of Cassam's account of responsibility and criticizability for intellectual vices. The second raises a problem for that account whose formulation is due to Battaly (2019) and proposes a solution which, at least in part, could also be adopted by Cassam himself if he were prepared to make some small changes to his view. This solution generates a highly disjunctive account of criticizability and responsibility for possessing an epistemic vice. Although such heterogeneity might seem wholly unsatisfactory, it receives a plausible explanation when the account is put within the context of a Strawsonian approach to the practice of holding people responsible for their epistemic vices.

Keywords: epistemology; vice epistemology; responsibility

Epistemic vices such as closed-mindedness or intellectual arrogance have profound consequences. These consequences are almost exclusively negative. Those who suffer from these vices are prone to errors and to ignorance. They are also likely to cause epistemic harms to other people and to the epistemic groups to which they belong. It is this ability of intellectual vices to get in the way of knowledge that is at the root of Cassam's original version of vice epistemology. In his view, only those traits, attitudes and ways of thinking

that obstruct knowledge deserve to be thought as epistemic vices. It is for this reason that his position is known as obstructivism.

Intellectual vices, however, are not the only psychological features of agents systematically to get in the way of knowledge. Cognitive defects, such as short-sightedness, and cognitive biases, such as the confirmation bias, also have profound and persistent consequences that are epistemically harmful. In Cassam's view what distinguishes these shortcomings from vices is that cognitive impairments and biases do not reflect badly on their possessors. Intellectual vices, instead, are something for which individuals can be blamed or at least can be appropriately criticised.

There is much of interest in Cassam's ground-breaking *Vices of the Mind* (2019). This discussion focuses exclusively on one aspect of his view, namely, his account of what it takes to be properly criticisable or blameworthy for one's epistemic vices. This critical discussion consists of two sections. The first provides an overview of Cassam's account of responsibility and criticizability for intellectual vices. The second raises a problem for that account whose formulation is due to Battaly (2019) and proposes a solution which, at least in part, could also be adopted by Cassam himself if he were prepared to make some small changes to his view. This solution generates a highly disjunctive account of criticizability and responsibility for possessing an epistemic vice. Although such heterogeneity might seem wholly unsatisfactory, it receives a plausible explanation when the account is put within the context of a Strawsonian approach to the practice of holding people responsible for their epistemic vices.

1. Cassam on epistemic blame and criticism

In Cassam's view, an 'epistemic vice is a blameworthy or otherwise reprehensible character trait, attitude, or way of thinking that systematically obstructs the gaining, keeping, or

sharing of knowledge' (2019, p. 23).¹ This definition encapsulates three essential features of obstructivism. First, this position is a form of epistemic consequentialism in the sense that epistemic vices are in part distinguished from other psychological features because of their epistemically harmful consequences (2019, p. 18). Second, Cassam's account highlights the heterogeneity of epistemic vices. In addition to character traits, such as closed-mindedness, Cassam is prepared to include attitudes, such as intellectual arrogance, ways of thinking, such as, for instance, wishful thinking, and also implicit biases and prejudices (2019, pp. 12-15). Therefore, features that pertain to different psychological kinds are included among the vices. What unifies this otherwise multifarious category are their epistemically bad consequences and the fact that individuals are justly criticised or blamed for possessing these features. Hence, third, epistemic vices are reprehensible or even blameworthy psychological features of agents (2019, p. 22). It is this third aspect of Cassam's account that is my concern here.

Broadly speaking, in Cassam's view intellectual vices are epistemic character traits, epistemic stances or postures (that is, attitudes) and ways of thinking that are (i) harmful and (ii) such that the person who has them is criticisable because of these features since they are part of who she 'truly is'. In addition, in some instances, agents might also be responsible for their epistemic vices and thus justly blamed for having them (2019, pp. 22, 23). In short, epistemic vices are epistemically harmful psychological features such that others are warranted in taking a dim view of those who have these qualities on the ground that they have them.

In Cassam's view blame requires responsibility and responsibility presupposes control (2019, pp. 18, 123, 125). He defends this view primarily by appealing to our intuitions about so-called hard cases. Cassam asks us to consider the predicaments of individuals who have been indoctrinated, abused or brainwashed and who are unable to change because they are still victims of propaganda campaigns or because they have become so damaged that their ways have become set. Cassam suggests that we are not inclined to blame such individuals. He also thinks that the reason why we do not apportion blame is that we judge these people

¹ In addition, these psychological features must themselves be in some sense epistemic.

to lack control over their vices. It is this lack of control that in Cassam's view explains why we do not hold them responsible, or blame them for their vices (2019, pp. 21-22).

Cassam considers two dimensions of responsibility: acquisition and revision. He argues that individuals are typically not responsible for the acquisition of their epistemic vices since character formation occurs in childhood when individuals are immature (2019, p. 128).

However, Cassam is optimistic about the forward-looking notion of revision responsibility. In his view epistemic vices are malleable and individuals can exercise control in ways that lead to character change (2019, pp. 134-140).

Cassam acknowledges that we have no voluntary control over our character traits or attitudes since we cannot change them at will. We might, however, have to some extent this kind of control over ways of thinking. Be that as it may, he thinks that we can exercise, often indirectly, some managerial control over character traits and attitudes (p. 129). For example, we can directly manipulate ourselves by changing our behaviour. In this manner, we can, for example, indirectly affect our attitudes since these tend to change so to become consistent with conduct. We can also through practice modify our traits of character. Further, attitudes might be responsive to reasons, when they are, we can also exercise evaluative control over them by means of evaluating what is true (p. 126). Ultimately, whether and how we can manipulate ourselves with the goal of self-improvement is an empirical question. I share Cassam's optimism, but I will not pursue this matter here. Based on these considerations, Cassam concludes that often individuals are responsible for their epistemic vices because they are capable of self-improvement.

But what should we say about the person who is dogmatic as a result of indoctrination? Cassam notes that some negative assessment, short of blame, is still in order. We think of this person's dogmatism as a failing, rather than a mere fault or defect, on his part. This failing is reprehensible and for this he can be properly criticised, even though we might not be prepared to blame him. Cassam relies on Sher (2005) to argue that these psychological features warrant criticism because they reflect badly on those who have them.

Cassam delineates those aspects of intellectual vices that distinguish them from mere cognitive shortcomings and that make criticism fitting in the case of vices and unfitting in the case of mere defects. The difference is that vices are part of who the person truly is,

whilst defects are not (p. 134). To use a vocabulary that I owe to Shoemaker (2015) and which I adopt below, vices but not defects are attributable since the former but not the latter are elements of agents' characters.

One might well wonder about the difference between psychological features that belong to a person's character and those that the person possesses but which are not part of who she is. In this context Cassam's invokes Smith's (2008) distinction between deep and superficial assessments of people. Deep evaluations capture what is definitional about the kind of person or thinker one is, whilst superficial evaluations focus on features that would be less important (Cassam, 2019, pp. 133-134).²

Given the weight that this distinction is meant to bear it is surprising that Cassam does not attempt to supply a more robust account of the difference between deep and superficial evaluations of the self. Shoemaker's view of attributability (2015) can be deployed to plug this gap.³ In his theory deep evaluations are those that single out those aspects of an individual's psychology that are causally responsible for her commitments (in the form of the evaluations she endorses) and her cares (in the form of the attitudes that she identifies with) and that in addition are coherent with the contents of these commitments and cares (2015, p. 59). Armed with this characterisation we can explain why the evaluation of a person as arrogant is deep whilst the evaluation of another as short-sighted is not. Intellectual arrogance is a posture that is causally responsible for, and finds its expression in, many of the endorsed evaluations and authentic concerns of the arrogant person. Short-sightedness does not play such a role. The same can be said of other cognitive defects, even those which, like some learning disabilities, have pervasive effects on the person who has

² I presume here that being a certain kind of thinker is part of the sort of person one is. I do not supply arguments here for this assumption that, in my view, I share with Cassam. I base my interpretation on passages where he explicitly commits to it. For instance, he writes that someone can be criticised for his gullibility and foolishness because these "traits are not separate from him; they are a part of him and who is" (p. 134). Earlier on the same page Cassam contrast what contributes to making one the kind of thinker one is with what makes one the kind of person one is. I take it that the point of the contrast is to draw attention to the fact the first set of factors is a proper subset of the latter, so that some features make one the person one is without contributing to making one the kind of thinker one is.

³ I rely on Shoemaker's rather than on other views of the deep self as a basis for attributions of responsibility primarily for two reasons. Firstly, his account includes authoritative judgments and authentic cares within the deep self. Other existing theories usually focus on one aspect only. It is plausible to think, with Cassam, that epistemic vices include character traits that manifest the person's evaluative judgments but also attitudes with which the person identifies. Shoemaker's account would thus be best placed to accommodate all aspects of epistemic vices. In addition, Shoemaker offers an account of responsibility based on the study of responsibility-responses. This is the approach I endorse in this article.

them. The person who is cognitively impaired often has cares and commitments that are not shaped by her impairment. The disability might constrain which commitments and cares a person is able to have but the cares and commitments she has, and that express who she is, are often not expressions of her disability.⁴

Before raising in the next section a problem for Cassam's account of criticizability and responsibility for epistemic vices and offering a solution that Cassam could at least in part embrace with little modification of his view, I complete my overview of his position on this issue by way of a clarification.

Cassam admits the existence of occasions in which a person is responsible for their vices despite lacking control over their revisability. This can happen in some cases where the person is not motivated to revise their character and attitudes, or she is not aware that she possesses the questionable features which she should change. Arguably, this individual lacks managerial control over her epistemic vices since in order to exercise this control one must be aware of the vices' existence and be motivated to do something about them. Intuitively, however, there are instances where ignorance of one's viciousness and disinterest in addressing it does not absolve one from blame. These are cases where the person is at fault for being the kind of individual who lacks the requisite control. It is for this reason that such an agent is responsible for her vices and thus deserving of blame.

2. The responsibility problem and a Strawsonian solution

In a recent article Battaly (2019) has challenged virtue epistemologists to provide better accounts of what responsibility for intellectual virtues and vices might involve. In particular, she raises a dilemma for Cassam's account. In this section I explain why Cassam could have an answer to the problem raised by Battaly if he were prepared to make some changes to his view. This answer, however, were he to adopt it, would leave him with a disjunctive account of criticizability and responsibility for epistemic vice. I conclude the section by

⁴ In some cases, however, one might endorse an impairment as a matter of identity. In such cases, the impairment becomes part of who one is but is usually also not seen as a shortcoming.

providing an account of responsibility that explains why we should expect this variety since people might be the target of different kinds of negative evaluations because of their vices.

In Battaly's view, Cassam is unable to explain satisfactorily responsibility for implicit biases. She notes that Cassam wishes to count these as epistemic vices whilst wishing to exclude cognitive impairments (p. 7). Battaly asks us to consider a person who genuinely holds egalitarian beliefs whilst harbouring prejudicial implicit biases. We could think of this person, for instance, as displaying the characteristics of aversive racists (cf., Gendler, 2011). This individual believes in the equality of all racial groups and her belief is sincerely held. Nevertheless, she also tends to associate some stigmatised racial groups with negative features such as being violent, for example. This person appears to be racially biased as measured by Implicit Association Tests. The fact that she suffers from these biases might also affect her conduct toward members of the group she is biased against.

Battaly formulates her objection to Cassam as a dilemma detailing two exhaustive and mutually exclusive options but such that neither offers a satisfactory answer to the responsibility problem for implicit biases. She notes that either implicit biases reflect badly on the person who has them, or they do not. There are no other options. The first option holds that implicit biases do not reflect badly on agents. If this is the case, these biases are not part of the kind of thinker one is. Yet, for Cassam individuals are responsible for their implicit biases, since these are included among the epistemic vices. Therefore, individuals must be blameworthy for their implicit biases even though these do not reflect badly on them. Battaly argues that this option is not available to Cassam because he thinks that "blameworthiness is a subset of reprehensibility" (Battaly, 2019, p. 4). Hence, contrary to the option entertained here in Cassam's view nothing could be blameworthy without being also reprehensible.

Hence, Cassam would be forced to adopt the second option. This is the view that implicit biases reflect badly on the person who possesses them. But if this is the case, Battaly continues, these biases must be counted amongst the deep features of the self and defining of the kind of thinker one is (2019, p. 7).⁵ However, if something like an implicit bias

⁵ Battaly suspects that this would be Cassam's favourite option. This is indeed his favourite option (private communication). He denies however that cognitive impairments are part of the thinker one is. For this reason,

warrants inclusion in the deep self then it is hard to see why cognitive impairments such as short-sightedness should be excluded (p.7). Yet, everyone agrees that these disabilities do not reflect badly on those who have them.

Battaly is correct in her claim that Cassam explicitly commits to the claim that the vices for which one is responsible are a subset of those for which one is open to criticism. This claim forbids him for adopting the first of the two options outlined by Battaly. However, to my knowledge, he only makes that commitment once on p. 22. He does not offer any detailed argument in its support. In addition, this conclusion is not entailed by his official definition of blameworthiness.

Further, there are independent reasons, also to be found in Cassam, to resist adopting it. To appreciate this, it is enough to note that one can be blamed for ways of thinking that are out of character and do not reflect on whom one truly is. Cassam is willing to countenance wishful thinking as a vice in a person who is not a 'fully fledged wishful thinker' although he engages 'in the occasional spot of wishful thinking' (p. 13). Wishful thinking is thus not defining of who this person truly is. Therefore, it does not reflect badly on him in the sense highlighted above. As a matter of fact, his wishful thinking might be really sporadic and even out of character. Yet, for all of this, this person might be fully responsible for his wishful thinking and therefore blameworthy because of it.⁶

I speculate that both Cassam and Battaly are drawn to the view that responsibility entails reprehensibility because of a focus on intellectual character vices. These are by definition part of the deep self.⁷ But Cassam's view is that epistemic vices are heterogeneous and this heterogeneity extends so far to include psychological qualities that are not part of the person's character and whose expression might even be out of character. None of these considerations by themselves speak against agents' blameworthiness for these qualities.

In short, it is open to Cassam, without needing much change to his position, to adopt the first option in the dilemma she poses to him, rather than be forced to claim that implicit

whilst implicit biases reflect badly on agents, cognitive impairments do not. In my view a defence of these conclusions requires a clearer account of the deep self than Cassam supplies.

⁶ These would be examples of what Cassam thinks as vicious thinking in the absence of thinking vices proper (2019, p. 79).

⁷ On this point see n. 2 above.

biases must be part of the kind of person one is.⁸ He could thus respond to Battaly by claiming that we are responsible for our implicit biases because we have managerial control over them. That is, by manipulating ourselves, we can eliminate these biases or at least reduce their effects. We would nevertheless not be criticisable because of these features since they are not part of the kind of thinker we are.⁹

This approach is commendable also because, provided Cassam adopted the account of the deep self that I proposed above, he could easily explain why the second option of the dilemma formulated by Battaly is false. Implicit biases are not among the agent's authoritative commitments since they are at odds with the person's genuinely held beliefs. They are also not among her authentic cares because she does not identify with the attitudes the biases express. If this is right, implicit biases are not part of a person's character; this is why they do not reflect badly on her. However, agents are responsible for their implicit biases, but not for their impairments, because they have some control over the former and none over the latter.

Nevertheless, there is something unsatisfactory about the solution to the dilemma that I have offered here on Cassam's behalf. This proposed solution adopts a disjunctive account of epistemic vice as a psychological feature that is epistemically harmful and (i) either blameworthy or (ii) reprehensible. So, all vices are epistemically harmful. But only some vices are also qualities for which people are responsible, and therefore, blameworthy, even though these qualities do not reflect badly on them because they are not part of people's deep selves. Other vices are, instead, features for which individuals are reprehensible without being blameworthy. These vices are properties that reflect badly on the person who has them even though that person is not responsible for this fact. Finally, there would also be vices for which people are both reprehensible and blameworthy since these are properties that reflect badly on them and for which they are responsible. This solution to

⁸ Cassam's conceptions of agency and self-knowledge might give him further reasons to resist the approach I am inviting him to accept. Thanks to the reviewer for raising this possibility.

⁹ I thus agree with the reviewer's comment that option one might only seem closed if one adopts a folk understanding of blameworthiness and reprehensibility where these interchangeably indicate that a person is criticisable because of their badness. This is tantamount to forgetting that 'reprehensibility' has a narrow technical definition in this context.

Battaly's dilemma comes at a cost unless we also supply an explanation for the duality of responsibility as blameworthiness or reprehensibility.

One might argue that the explanation for the disjunctive character of responsibility lies in the heterogeneity of the epistemic vices. However, this answer only invites a further question about the notion of epistemic vice. That is, one might ask now for an account of the conditions that must be met for some quality to be an epistemic vice. If responsibility figures among these conditions, the explanation becomes circular. In my view, this circle is so small to be unilluminating. We might as well say that it is a brute fact that both epistemic vices and responsibility for them are heterogeneous categories. Cassam might well be happy to accept that this is the way things are.

In what follows I want to suggest that we do not need to stop here. We can supply an explanation why when we charge someone with a vice we are doing at least one of two things: blaming the person for the vice and/or showing our disdain or disapproval of the person for the kind of thinker they are. It is this explanation that also provides some unity to the definition of epistemic vice. In what follows I cannot defend the details of the account, instead I merely wish to advance it as a supplement to Cassam's theory.¹⁰

I propose that we start thinking about responsibility by considering the practice of holding other people responsible. This practice involves the expression of reactive attitudes such as resentment, admiration, gratitude, and anger directed at others because of who they are and what they have done. Several of these responses can be thought to involve something akin to blame or praise because they are not mere gradings or appraisals but are ways of expressing approval and disapproval. These blame- or praise-related responses are varied but they include the following pairings: disesteem or disdain, esteem or admiration; disapproval, approval; anger, blame, and resentment; warm feelings, praise and gratitude.

We can impose some order on these varied reactive attitudes if we think of them as responses to the quality of the character, judgment, or regard of the person to whom they are directed. Disesteem or disdain for a person indicates disapproval of their character,

¹⁰ For a defence see Ch. 8 of my forthcoming *The Mismeasure of the Self: A Study in Vice Epistemology*. In some regard my view is radically different from Cassam's since I propose to sidestep the issue of control that is the central feature of Cassam's account of responsibility.

whilst esteem and admiration indicate approval of the same. Approval and satisfaction or disapproval and disappointment can be directed at a person because of the quality of their judgment. Anger, blame and resentment indicate disapproval of a person for her failure to give due weight to our perspective and interests; warm feelings, praise and gratitude are responses to those who show due regard toward us.

Of course, these responses can fail to fit the situation. A person could mistakenly be angry at someone. This person might have misunderstood that individual's conduct as expressing lack of due regard when it did not. Conversely, one could fail to feel angry when one should. Hence, if we want to understand the nature of responsibility by exploring the reactive attitudes involved in the practice of holding people responsible, we must focus on those responses that are fitting or appropriate.¹¹ When approached in this way three forms or faces of responsibility emerge.¹²

The first face is attributability responsibility. It is the responsibility that individuals have for their character or deep self. More specifically, it is the responsibility agents have for those features of the self that cause, and are expressed in, the commitments that they endorse and the concerns with which they identify. Others manifest their disapproval of these features through disdain and disesteem and their approval by way of esteem and admiration. In this manner we hold individuals responsible for their character even though its quality might be something that they are not able to change (Shoemaker, 2015, ch. 1).

The second face is answerability responsibility. It is the kind of responsibility to which we hold people when we demand that they answer for their beliefs and conduct by supplying reasons to justify them. Thus, individuals are responsible in this sense for actions and beliefs that are caused by, and give expression to, their judgement. Others manifest their disapproval of these features by means of various expressions of disapprobation and disappointment; they manifest approval through expressions of approbation and satisfaction (Shoemaker, 2015, ch. 2). Arguably, individuals are not fully answerable for their epistemic vices since these are not features of the self that they would be prepared to

¹¹ I set aside the question whether fitting responsibility responses constitute responsibility or whether they track the independent properties whose possession is necessary and sufficient for responsibility.

¹² I owe this tripartite definition and the characterisation of each face of responsibility to Shoemaker (2015).

defend or justify. On the contrary, having epistemic vices means that one's capacity for judgment is impaired so that one's answerability is diminished.

The third face is accountability responsibility. It is the kind of responsibility to which we hold people when we expect them to redress a slight. We express this response through anger to indicate that we find that slight to be caused by, and be an expression of, their lack of regard for our point of view. Such lack of regard might consist in failing to even consider others' point of view, in disregarding it or in giving it insufficient weight. It is perfectly possible to hold people to account for psychological features which we do not take to be part of their character (Shoemaker, 2015, ch. 3). The occasionally careless thinker might anger us when her carelessness has harmful consequences that impact upon us. We can feel this way even if, provided she has no excuse, we think that such carelessness is for her out of character.

These three dimension of responsibility highlight that we might be doing different things when we hold people responsible for their good- and bad-making features. We might indicate that we take them to be an exemplar to emulate or a bad example to shun. We might ask them for a justification. We might express gratitude or demand an acknowledgement or even a change in behaviour. The variety in the practices of holding people responsible explains why responsibility is an heterogeneous notion. It takes different forms because we approve and disapprove of people in different ways depending on what we are trying to achieve through the expression of these reactive attitudes.

If this is right, we should try to understand responsibility for vices by looking at the purposes served by the practice of charging others with them. What is the point of calling someone arrogant or closed-minded? Unlike Kidd (2016), I do not believe that these are primarily attempts to describe people's psychology. Rather, these speech acts serve different purposes. Two especially come to mind. The first is to expose the person as a negative exemplar as a way of encouraging others to distance themselves from, and avoid resembling, the vicious individual. This is the purpose served by many familiar cautionary tales such Aesop's fable of a rooster that having defeated his enemy crows about his success only to be swept up by an eagle ("The Fighting Cocks", Perry Index 281). The second is to demand a response from the person one has evaluated negatively. The expected responses might range from an apology, an action to redress the harm one has caused or at least an

acknowledgment that it has occurred. When we refer to someone as vicious then we might be doing at least one of two things: holding them up as an exemplar to avoid or reproaching them in a way that requires a response from them.

If disapproving of someone as vicious plays these distinct roles it is no surprise that the conditions that must be met for disapprobation to be warranted are somewhat disjunctive. First, when we expose someone as a negative exemplar to shun, we enjoin others to avoid becoming similar in character to that person.¹³ Since disapproval is used as a warning to third parties, it is wholly irrelevant whether the disesteemed individual is capable of change. Second, when we reproach someone, we expect a response from that person. What is important in this case will depend on the nature of the response that is demanded. It might range from an apology, a justification, or a change in behaviour. Some of these responses require that the reproached individual be able to change but some do not. Hence, it is only if the reproach takes the form of a demand for change that control over the reproachable feature might be necessary. However, if what is demanded is an apology or an acknowledgement, this form responsibility might not depend on the possibility to enact some kind of change.

In conclusion, I have argued that Cassam could have an answer to Battaly's responsibility challenge without substantially altering his position. That answer would leave him with a disjunctive account of criticizability and responsibility for vice. Such an account might be thought to be unsatisfactory because of its lack unity. I have addressed this additional concern by means of a Strawsonian backstory that explains why we should expect responsibility for epistemic vice to be a heterogeneous notion.¹⁴

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¹³ On negative exemplars and their presentation to elicit avoidance see Sullivan and Alfano (2019).

¹⁴ My thanks to Quassim Cassam and an anonymous reviewer for their helpful comments.

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