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Precis: The Mismeasure of the Self

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Abstract: In this precis of *The Mismeasure of the Self* I summarise and motivate the attitudinal framework adopted in the book. I defend an account of intellectual humility as a virtue of self-evaluation based on attitudes to the self motivated by the need for knowledge. I provide brief descriptions of some intellectual vices of inferiority and superiority and explain that they are underpinned by attitudes serving either ego-defensive or social adjustive functions. Finally, I detail some of the harms caused by these vices, defend the view that people are responsible for them, and describe an intervention designed to ameliorate vice.

In *The Mismeasure of the Self* (2021) I have sought to supply a detailed examination of some epistemic virtues and vices of self-assessment and of their ethical and epistemic consequences for epistemic agents and epistemic communities. These character traits include the virtues of intellectual humility and proper pride and the vices of intellectual arrogance, vanity, narcissism, servility, and timidity. One of my aims in writing this book was to provide an empirically informed and politically sensitive account of the nature of some intellectual character traits and to propose, on the basis of this account, an intervention seeking to reduce epistemic vice and promote intellectual virtue. The book's methodological commitments are thus consonant with non-idealising and ameliorative approaches to epistemology.

In the book I argue that epistemic vices are heterogeneous and comprise sensibilities (such as being unobservant), ways of thinking (closed-mindedness for instance) and character traits (like arrogance). Despite their heterogeneity, these psychological features of individuals can be ultimately understood as being underpinned by attitudes in the social psychological sense of summary evaluations of objects. These attitudes are not beliefs. They are associative states

relating one or more valences (positive or negative) to a representation of an object. Attitudes are thus akin to likes or preferences which are formed on the basis of a person's beliefs, emotions, and behavioural tendencies relevant to the object of the attitude. Hence, one may think of attitudes as summarising an evaluation of an object (as liked or disliked) on the basis of the information provided by beliefs, emotions and dispositions about the object. Attitudes possess various degrees of strength. The notion of attitude strength is an aggregate of many, and to a philosopher's sensibility, heterogeneous components. In the book I focus on strength as a latency measure that is positively related to the attitude's cross-situational consistency and temporal stability. Attitudes that are strong in this sense are better predictors of behaviour over time and across a range of situations than weaker attitudes.

Attitude objects can range from concrete particulars (such as my sailing yacht) to values (e.g., freedom) social constructs (political parties, for instance) abstract entities, abilities, and activities (e.g., sailing). In short, attitudes can be had about anything that can be subject to being evaluated. For example, my positive attitude to my sailing boat is a summary of: my beliefs about her such as that she is well-found, comfortable and fast; my emotions of excitement, joy and occasionally fear that I experience when sailing on her; my dispositions to regularly check tides and weather forecasts for weekends to ascertain whether they are favourable to sailing. My positive attitude to my yacht is a cognitive shortcut to save the time and effort required to think anew every summer whether I like sailing on this specific boat. The attitude is quite strong since it predicts my behaviour in many circumstances but not in every situation.

In the book I am specifically concerned with agents' evaluations of aspects of their own intellectual characters. I argue that these self-assessments are an essential prerequisite of responsible inquiry that is also effective in leading to the formation and maintenance of knowledge and justified beliefs. Unless an agent has the measure of their own intellectual abilities, they are unlikely to be able to make wise decisions about how and whether to pursue some inquiry or when to defer to the opinion of others who are better equipped to answer a given question. In my view at least some intellectual virtues, such as humility and proper pride, do not require that agents possess excellent cognitive faculties or superior intellectual capacities. Instead, these traits only presuppose that agents have the motivation and abilities necessary to make honest assessments of various features of their own intellectual characters to determine how to conduct themselves in inquiry.

The proposal that the virtue and vices of intellectual self-evaluation have as their psychological underpinnings, or categorical bases, mental states has significant advantages over competitors that identify character traits as a species of personality traits. For example, the

attitudinal framework offers a natural explanation why people can be more or less arrogant about some of their features but not others. There are at least three ways in which arrogance can vary in degree along three distinct dimensions. First, a person can be arrogant about more, and different things, than another. Second, a person can be more arrogant than another about the same things. Third, a person can be arrogant about something in a broader range of situations than another person is about that very thing. A trait approach would need to explain variation along all these dimensions by invoking the interaction between traits and situations. These explanations are likely to be extremely complex. The attitudinal framework supplies neat explanations for these differing variations. Differences over the kind of thing about which one is arrogant are explained as variations in attitudes toward those objects. Differences over the intensity of the arrogance can be explained in terms of the certainty with which the attitude is held and the extremity of the beliefs that inform it. Finally, cross-situational consistency and temporal stability is explained in terms of attitude strength. These explanations account for the intuition that these three forms of variation are differences along distinct dimensions.

The framework of attitudes provides support for a motivational account of virtues but also vices. Often social psychologists classify attitudes by their functions defined in terms of the needs served by the attitude. These include the need for knowledge or accuracy, the need to protect and enhance the ego, to express one's values, and to fit in with one's in-group (Maio & Olson, 2000). For example, my positive attitude toward my sailing yacht serves the need to express some of my values including a love of adventure, and of slow travel using primarily a renewable source.

The needs served by an attitude bias the processes by which the attitude is formed and maintained. For instance, if the function of an attitude is to express some value, the information summarised in the attitude is selected for its relevance to that value. If the attitude instead serves the need to protect the ego, the beliefs, emotions, and dispositions related to the object of the attitude that the attitude combines are those that are relevant to self-esteem. Thus, attitudes to the same object serving different functions are likely to be based on different beliefs and emotions about the same objects.¹ In addition, the function served by the attitude biases the threshold of information required to settle on the attitude. If an attitude serves the function to defend the ego, the motivation to protect self-esteem not only determines what information is relevant to the attitude but also how much information is required. In the specific case of ego defence, since it is much costlier to mistake a threat for something innocuous than the other way round, this motivation generates asymmetries of error costs that bias the evaluation of the information already selected as salient. In short, attitudes are the output of motivated cognitive

processing of information contained in beliefs and other mental states and dispositions (cf., Kunda, 1990).

This account of attitudes as the product of cognition motivated by needs is the basis of my motivational account of virtues and vices. According to this view, the motivations of a virtue or a vice are supplied by the motivations that determine the function(s) of the attitudes that underpin that character trait. These motivations make the behaviour that stems from the attitude intelligible. Thus, these motivations are not necessarily the motives that the agent would cite to justify their behaviour. We should expect this divergence between the motivations that an agent would invoke to rationalise their behaviour and the motivations that cause the behaviour in the case of vice. After all, attributions of behaviour as stemming from vice seek to explain the behaviour but not to rationalise it.

For instance, consider a person who has a positive attitude to their ability to solve mathematical problems, but whose attitude is ego defensive. This person is likely to have a high opinion of their mathematical abilities which is manifested in confident behaviour, in a tendency to brag about their mathematical competence, and also in a disposition to respond defensively to criticism about their performance in maths. We can explain their tendency to brag and disposition to be defensive by invoking the fact they have a positive attitude about their mathematical abilities which serves their need to feel good about themselves. It is the role of this positive attitude in sustaining self-esteem that explains why it results in behaviour that is characteristic of defensiveness and self-enhancement.

In the book I argue that the intellectual virtues and vices of self-assessment are underpinned by attitudes to aspects of the self that are formed and sustained by motivated cognitive processing. On this basis of this thesis, I develop the view that to have the virtues of self-assessment is to have the measure of one's own intellectual strengths and weaknesses. Those who instead suffer from the intellectual vices of self-evaluation have the wrong measure of their intellectual capacities since their self-assessments are not motivated by a desire to know the truth about themselves, but are biased by the needs to fit in or to feel good about oneself. It is for this reason that possessing these vices causes one to mismeasure one's intellectual strengths and weaknesses.

The second part of the book is dedicated to detailed accounts of specific intellectual virtues and vices. Intellectual humility plays a prominent role in these discussions. In the book I defend the view that intellectual humility is not one virtue but the aggregate of two virtues which are usually, but not always, to be found in the same people. The first virtue is modesty about intellectual strengths and achievements. The second is acceptance of intellectual weaknesses and

failures. These virtues are underpinned by attitudes toward aspects of one's intellectual character that are driven by the motivation to be accurate in one's assessment of their epistemic worth. Thus, modesty is based on positive attitudes to some of one's intellectual faculties and abilities serving a knowledge function. These faculties and abilities are evaluated positively and hence individuated as strengths. Further, the evaluation has been arrived at by means of cognitive processing that is driven by the need to be accurate. Acceptance of one's own limitations is underpinned by negative attitudes to some of one's intellectual faculties and abilities also serving a knowledge function. These are psychological features that are evaluated negatively and hence as weaknesses. These assessments are also driven by cognition motivated by the need for accuracy.

The limitations accepting component of intellectual humility bears close similarity to the well-known account of intellectual humility as the disposition to own one's own limitations (Whitcomb et al., 2017). It differs from that view primarily in three respects. First, in my view accepting one's limitations is only one aspect of humility. The other component is modesty about strengths and achievements. Therefore, in my account humility is incompatible with arrogance. The limitations-owning account instead allows for the possibility that one person is both humble and arrogant. I take this to be a problematic feature of the account offered by Whitcomb et al. (2017). Second, in my view it is possible to be intellectually humble and yet mistaken about one's intellectual strengths and weaknesses because one's self-evaluation are unreliable. According to at least some of its supporters, the limitations-owning account requires that the humble person is reliable about their limitations. The nature of this disagreement is more complex than meets the eye since the reliability requirement imposed by the limitations-owning account must be indexed to an ideal environment, whilst in my view it is precisely when the social environment is misleading that a person whose cognition is motivated by a desire to be accurate might nevertheless be unreliable in her self-assessments. Nevertheless, my view also allows that a person whose self-evaluations are unreliable because of cognitive impairment is humble if her assessments are motivated by the desire to be accurate. The limitations-owning account, in its reliabilist version, is committed to denying that such a person could be intellectually humble. Third, the two accounts might differ in what they take owning or acceptance to entail. In the book I define acceptance in a manner that requires that one admits to limitations not just to oneself but also to others. It would thus not be sufficient for intellectual humility that one owns, in the sense of knows about and acts upon, one's limitations, one also needs to own up to them.

A large portion of the book is dedicated to an exploration of the intellectual vices that flank intellectual humility, proper pride, and proper concern for others' esteem. These are a

cluster of vices of superiority including superbia, hubristic arrogance, vanity, and narcissism. This cluster is opposed to the vices of inferiority that comprise servility, self-abasement, timidity, and fatalism. The first cluster of vices is associated with feelings of superiority. These are also the kind of vices that are harder to avoid for people who are economically privileged or are members of dominant social groups. Conversely, the vices of inferiority are associated with feelings of inferiority. People who are underprivileged or belong to marginalised or subordinated social groups are more at risk of developing these vices than more dominant individuals.

Some vices of superiority and some vices of inferiority are underpinned by defensive attitudes to features of one's own intellectual character. Superbia and hubristic arrogance are positive attitudes to the self that serve the need to self-enhance and defend the ego. People who suffer from these vices typically possess inflated self-conceptions because their self-assessments have been biased by the need to feel good about oneself. Further, because these attitudes are defensive arrogant individuals are also aggressive since they perceive others' successes as threats. Conversely, timidity and fatalism are negative attitudes to aspects of one's own intellectual character serving the need to defend the ego from perceived threats to self-esteem. If hubris and arrogance exemplify something akin to a fight response, timidity and fatalism are symptomatic of a flight response. Timidity thus is manifested in behaviours designed to protect the self by receding into the background. Unsurprisingly, it is characterised by low self-esteem, feelings of inferiority and lack of confidence.

Other vices of superiority and inferiority are underpinned by attitudes serving the need to be socially accepted and thus have a socially adjustive function. Vanity and narcissism are vices of superiority that are based on positive attitudes of this kind. They are underpinned by positive self-evaluations of features of one's own intellectual character serving the need to be liked and admired by other members of one's in-group. It is this need to be liked that, for instance, explains the behaviours of individuals who are intellectually vain. These people include, for instance, academics who when they come across a book in their area of expertise first check the index to see whether they have been cited. If vanity and narcissism exemplify valuations of the self that are dependent on being the object of admiration, servility and self-abasement exemplify the strategy of seeking social acceptance by bestowing praise and admiration onto powerful individuals whilst lowering oneself down so that others can excel in comparison. These vices of inferiority are thus underpinned by negative attitudes to features of one's intellectual character that consist in self-evaluations biased by the need to fit in a society that does not hold one, or one's social group in high esteem.

The intellectual vices of inferiority and superiority are epistemic disfunctions since they are based on attitudes that are motivated self-assessments biased either by the need to protect self-esteem or to be accepted by society. These vices also have numerous epistemically harmful consequences. They hinder the epistemic performance of those who suffer from them because in addition to being the product of motivated cognition, the attitudes that underpin these vices also facilitate the motivated processing of novel information. They thus promote tendencies to biased consideration of evidence, preferring information that supports their pre-existing views (Maio & Haddock, 2015, pp. 61-62). These attitudes are also associated with emotional orientations such as fearfulness or a disposition to anger. Whilst emotions can supply important evidence for belief, they can also at times be unwarranted. In the book I highlight how each of the intellectual vices of inferiority and superiority possesses a distinctive emotional orientation that often leads the subject to misjudge their situation. Thus, arrogant individuals, for instance, are prone to experience anger in circumstances which anger does not fit. Consequently, they are also likely to form further false beliefs based on their unwarranted emotional responses.

In addition to harming epistemic performance in general the intellectual vices of inferiority and superiority have especially detrimental effects on self-knowledge and self-trust. Because these vices are based on motivated self-assessments of aspects of one's intellectual character those who suffer from them do not know themselves. Thus, they are likely to be unaware that they have these character traits which are therefore stealthy and resistant to change (Cassam, 2019). In addition, false assessments of epistemic strengths and weaknesses have deleterious effects on self-confidence and self-trust. Individuals who exemplify vices of superiority are disposed to become overconfident and thus suffer from inflated self-trust. Those who embody the vices of inferiority have a propensity to under-confidence and to distrust their own abilities.

The intellectual vices of self-assessment also have harmful consequences for other epistemic agents and the epistemic community as a whole. For example, narcissists tend to claim as theirs results that were obtained by others. Arrogant people often intimidate and humiliate other people and thus directly or indirectly hamper others' epistemic activities. Timid individuals do not share information which others would find helpful but of which they are unaware. Individuals who are servile bestow others with praise that provides misleading evidence of their true abilities. These are just some examples of the harms caused by epistemic vices. In the book I show, drawing on evidence from social psychology, that these harms are precisely what we would expect if vices are underpinned by attitudes whose effects on cognition and behaviour are reasonably well understood.

Epistemic character vices are shortcomings for which individuals are at least criticisable. They are thus distinct from cognitive impairments. In the book I tackle the question of responsibility for epistemic vices by focusing on practices of attribution of responsibility. Following Shoemaker (2015) I identify three kinds of responsibility attributions: attributability, answerability, and accountability. Persons are attributable-responsible for their character irrespective of whether it is up to them that they have become that way. We hold vicious individuals attributable responsible when, for example, we single them out to others as negative exemplars. Persons are answerable-responsible for the quality of their judgments. In the book I defend the view that people are not fully answerable responsible for their intellectual vices and the beliefs that stem from them. We exemplify the propensity not to hold people answerable for their epistemic vices when we accept that it is not possible to reason with people who are arrogant or narcissistic. Finally, people are accountable responsible for behaviour that expresses the quality of their will. We hold people accountable responsible for their intellectual vices when for instance we respond angrily to behaviour that exemplifies arrogance or servility.

In the book, however, I urge caution against blaming even those people who are accountable for vices that are also attributable to them. I argue that it is exceedingly difficult to know with any degree of confidence people's motivations for their behaviour. Thus, we must be aware that any vice attribution runs the serious risk of being false. In addition, there is empirical evidence that charging people with a vice has a tendency to make them worse people (Alfano, 2013, pp. 95-96). Finally, those who are ready to blame others for their shortcomings must seriously reflect on whether they have the requisite standing from which blaming others is appropriate. For example, I counsel against blaming others hypocritically for vices that we possess ourselves.

One may well wonder what can be done to remedy the situation if it is often pointless to reason with those who suffer from the vices of self-assessment given that blaming them is also usually ineffective. In the final chapter of the book, I address the issue of virtue education and propose an intervention. I argue that exemplarist strategies are by themselves at best ineffective and at worst counterproductive. Those who are most in need of character change would not be moved to emulate positive exemplars. For instance, people who show tendencies to arrogance would, upon being presented with a role model, compare themselves to the exemplar for similarities and thus congratulate themselves for their virtue. People who exhibit tendencies to fatalism would, instead, compare themselves to role models for differences. They would then conclude that they are so distant from virtue that any attempt to improve would be pointless.²

In the book I propose value or self-affirmation as an alternative intervention. It consists in techniques designed to prompt people to reflect on their values and on what makes these values valuable (Steele, 2010; Steele, 1988). Subjects are instructed to select some values from a pre-existing list and to explain in their own why these are their values. Self-affirmation works to make people less defensive (Correll et al., 2004; Kim & McGill, 2018). But it also helps to address self-doubt (Sherman & Cohen, 2006). It is perhaps surprising that we might attempt to address arrogance by asking people who are overconfident to affirm the self. But, as I have argued in the book if the vices of self-assessment are underpinned by attitudes that are defensive or based on the need to be accepted by others, it makes sense that an intervention designed to make people feel less insecure about self-worth should be effective in the amelioration of the vices of self-assessment.

There is much in the book that would need further development. For instance, it needs to be supplemented with a closer analysis of the social power relations that play an important role in the promotion of vices of inferiority. In addition, it remains to be seen whether the attitude framework can explain other intellectual vices, such as incuriosity, which are not concerned with self-evaluations. I hope to pursue some these issues in future research.

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¹ Attitudes serving different functions can therefore be drawn from different informational bases. It is thus possible to have ambivalent (both positive and negative) attitudes to one and the same thing.

² In the book I base these claims on empirical evidence from social comparison theory. See, for instance, Corcoran et al. (2011).