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Citation for final published version:

Tanesini, Alessandra 2022. Precipitous of the mismeasure of the self. *Journal of Philosophical Research* 47 , pp. 61-66. 10.5840/jpr20221024193

Publishers page: <https://doi.org/10.5840/jpr20221024193>

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## PRECIS OF *THE MISMEASURE OF THE SELF*

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**Abstract:** In this precis I offer an overview of *The Mismeasure of the Self* (2021). The book provides accounts of the psychology and epistemology of virtues and vices of self-evaluation such as humility, arrogance, servility, vanity and timidity. I adopt the social psychological framework of attitudes to explain that these virtues and vices are underpinned by clusters of mental states that are the product of motivated cognition, and which, in turn, promote motivated reasoning. I show that each virtue and vice is accompanied by a characteristic emotion. I assess whether we are responsible for vices and briefly describe an ameliorative intervention.

Keywords: vice epistemology; virtue epistemology; intellectual humility; arrogance; servility

In *The Mismeasure of the Self* (2021), I offer an extensive examination of the psychology and epistemology of some virtues and vices of self-evaluation. My focus is on humility, modesty, acceptance of limitations, proper pride, and proper concern for others' esteem as virtues of self-evaluation. These virtues would be based on assessments of the worth or value of psychological aspects of the self that are formed and sustained by the desire to know the truth about oneself. The book is also especially concerned with vices of self-assessment such as *superbia*, arrogance, vanity, narcissism, servility, self-abasement, timidity, and fatalism. These vices are underpinned by self-evaluations that are faulty because driven by the desire to self-enhance or to be socially accepted. One of the book's guiding hypotheses is the thought that some vices of self-evaluation are characteristically related to experiences of social privilege or subordination. For example, *superbia* and arrogance are forms of self-evaluation, characterised by inflated but fragile self-esteem, which are typically associated with privilege. They are manifested in defensive behaviours aimed to feel good about oneself. To examine the distortions of self-esteem caused by unjust social relations, I draw on the resources of attitude psychology to argue that the virtues and vices of self-evaluation are underpinned by attitudes rather than traits. In psychology, character virtues and vices are usually understood to have trait-like features that are studied in personality psychology. By claiming that virtues and vices are underpinned by mental states rather than dispositions, I open the road for a different approach to the psychological measurement of virtue and vice as attitudes to objects. This is not a point I develop extensively in this book, but it supplies an avenue for future research.

Attitudes are associative states that are summary evaluations of objects which are their targets. For example, my attitude to chocolate is ambivalent. I like chocolate but also dislike it. The liking of chocolate is a positive attitude to it. It is an assessment based on past experiences, beliefs, desires, and behavioural tendencies. The positive attitude summarises these beliefs, desires, and memories so that I don't need to re-evaluate chocolate every time that I come across it. In this way, the attitude is a cognitive shortcut. My positive attitude to chocolate though is based only on some of my beliefs, desires, memories about it. This base has been selected for its relevance to answering a directional question about chocolate's ability to supply a hedonistic reward.

I also have a negative attitude to chocolate that leads me to avoid eating it. This attitude is also based on experience, beliefs, desires, and behavioural tendencies that it summarises. These form the evidential basis of the negative attitude; they overlap with those underwriting the positive attitude to the same object. However, the experiences, beliefs, desires, and behavioural tendencies that are the basis of the negative attitude have been selected for their relevance to fitting in with the group to which one wishes to belong. This evidential basis then includes beliefs that chocolate makes one fat, that fat women are unattractive, and so forth. The example illustrates that one can have more than one attitude to the same target object, each attitude being formed on a different evidential basis, determined by the function served by the attitude. In this example, the functions are utilitarian and social-adjustive respectively.

In this book I argue that the virtues and vices of self-evaluation are underpinned by clusters of attitudes, serving varied functions, each directed at a different aspect of the self.

Intellectual humility, conceived as the sum of two distinct virtues, modesty about achievements and awareness of limitations, is explained as a cluster of attitudes serving the knowledge and value-expressive functions. That is, intellectual humility is underpinned by summary evaluations of one's own cognitive competencies, intellectual skills, and abilities, which is based on evidence that has been selected for its relevance to knowing oneself. These are attitudes 'biased' by the desire for accuracy. Hence, intellectually humble people have the measure of themselves since their evaluation of their self-worth is guided by their desire to know themselves. These attitudes also serve a value-expressive function, because knowing themselves is for them an expression of what they value. The view does not entail that humble individuals are reliable in their self-evaluations. It is wholly possible that, if they inhabit a social environment where misleading evidence is prevalent, their assessments are off the mark, but these mistakes would not be the product of motivated cognition.

Humility as modesty about achievements combined with owning of, in the sense of being disposed to own up to, limitations could easily lead to a lack of aspiration to improve. It is also easy to see how a person could slide from humility into adopting attitudes of self-flagellation because of one's limitations or of resignation to one's own shortcomings. These attitudes would not be virtuous. In this book I argue that the truly humble person avoids the risks of becoming self-abasing or fatalistic by possessing an optimistic attitude to the possibility of self-improvement. This attitude is one of hope which the book describes as humility's characteristic emotional orientation.

The main focus of the book, however, lies with the vices of self-evaluation. These vices are underpinned by clusters of attitudes to aspects of the self that are not motivated by the desire to know oneself. They are instead driven by the needs to feel good about oneself or to fit in society. These vicious attitudes are mismeasures of the self. They are miscalculations because they assess intellectual abilities and skills not for their epistemic value but for their contribution to self-enhancement or social adjustment. That is, and this is the metaphor contained in this book's title, these attitudes are the result of measuring intellectual abilities using the wrong unit of measurement.

In this book I provide extensive accounts of the vices that oppose the virtues of intellectual self-evaluation. These vices might initially be understood using Aristotle's taxonomy of vices of excess and deficiency. However, if the attitude framework is correct, it would be a mistake to think, for instance, of servility and self-abasement as excessive modesty. Servility is a low assessment of one's abilities motivated by the desire to be accepted by a society or a group that holds one in low regard. Modesty is an evaluation of one's achievements that is motivated by the desire to know oneself, without any desire to boast or show off. Hence, what is distinctive of each vice is the motivational structure that produces and sustains the attitudes rather than the resultant evaluations of one's own intellectual skills, competencies, and abilities. For this reason, the account defended in this book is a motivational account of (some) intellectual virtues and vices.

The vices of mismeasuring the self can be divided into two groups. The vices of superiority are characteristic of people who occupy privileged social positions and typically involve the behaviours and emotions that are consonant with feelings of superiority. The vices of inferiority exemplify the damage that oppression can do to those who occupy subordinated positions. They are manifested in feelings of inferiority and in the behaviours and emotions associated with them. In this book I focus on four vices of superiority and four of inferiority. The vices of superiority are: *superbia*, arrogance, vanity, and narcissism. Those of inferiority

are: servility, self-abasement, timidity, and fatalism. Each vice is described in terms of characteristic behaviours and emotional orientations. It is individuated by the valence and the functions (motivations) of the attitudes that underpin it.

*Superbia* is a form of self-esteem that consists in making one's sense of self-worth wholly dependent on being better than other people whose successes, therefore, are always perceived as a threat. It is underpinned by positive attitudes to the self serving the function of self-enhancement. It is accompanied by an angry emotional orientation and is manifested in boasting, bragging and behaviours designed to humiliate and intimidate other people.

Arrogance is a deepening of *superbia* into hubris underpinned by positive defensive attitudes that are manifested in feelings of invulnerability and aloofness. Contempt toward those one judges to be inferior is the characteristic emotion of arrogance.

Vanity is a vice of superiority motivated by the desire to fit in as an admired member of one's social group. Hence, it is a form of self-esteem that consists in making one's sense of self-worth wholly dependent on being liked and admired by other people. It is underpinned by positive attitudes to the self serving a social-adjustive function. It is manifested in compartments designed to draw the attention of other people but also in obsessive ruminations over minor defects. Spiteful envy – the tendency to spoil others' achievements by disparaging them – is the characteristic orientation of vanity. Narcissism as a form of excessive self-love is a deepening of vanity. It is underpinned by positive social-adjustive attitudes to the self which are manifested in comportment typical of grandiosity.

The four vices of inferiority also serve either social-adjustive or ego-defensive functions.

Servility is a form of low self-esteem which consists in making one's sense of self-worth wholly depend on being accepted by a society that holds one in low regard. It is underpinned by negative attitudes to the self serving the function to fit in. Thus, it is characteristic of those who adopt for themselves the negative evaluation that society has of them. This vice is manifested in excessively deferential behaviours. Chronic and acute shame are its characteristic emotions. Self-abasement is a deepening of servility into a form of self-humiliation. It is also underpinned by negative social-adjustive attitudes which give rise to feelings of worthlessness.

Timidity is a form of low self-esteem that is manifested in a tendency to retreat and hide to avoid rejection and vilification. It is underpinned by negative evaluations of the self serving the need to defend the ego by choosing to avoid real or perceived threats. Fear is the emotional orientation characteristic of this vice. Fatalism is a deepening of timidity by

adopting an attitude of resignation whose manifestations include feelings of hopelessness, listlessness, and passivity.

The attitudes underpinning these vices are the outcome of cognitive processing of information that is biased by the motives of ego-defence or social adjustment. However, and this is the topic of chapter seven, these same attitudes, and their accompanying emotions, are also responsible for downstream harms and wrongs. I focus on three families of negative effects. First, I show that the vices of superiority and inferiority harm the epistemic performances of those who suffer from them. These harms are due to the role of biased self-evaluation in facilitating motivated processing of further information. It is for this reason that vices are stealthy -that is, invisible to those who have them- and resistant to rational revision. Second, and relatedly, these vices obstruct self-knowledge, and are the causes of dysfunctional self-trust which is unwarrantedly inflated or deflated. Third, these vices cause epistemic and moral harms to other agents and to the whole epistemic community. For instance, narcissists pass off others' achievements as their own. Arrogant people are prone to humiliate and intimidate those subjects whom they regard as their inferiors. Further, since those who suffer from the vices of superiority tend to be deluded about their abilities, they are likely to pass on their views as knowledge even when they are false or based on insufficient evidence. Individuals who have acquired the vices of inferiority because they occupy subordinated social positions are harmed by their vices. Moreover, insofar as having these vices causes subordinated individuals to be less effective in resisting oppression and makes them more likely to disseminate false or unjustified information obtained from more powerful individuals, timid and servile individuals might be the source of epistemic and moral harm to other people.

One might thus wonder whether vicious individuals should be held responsible for these harms. In this book I suggest that we should approach the question by examining our current practices of holding people responsible.<sup>i</sup> These practices highlight three ways of holding responsible: attributability, answerability, and accountability (Shoemaker, 2015).

Attributability responses include admiration and disesteem. They target a person's character. Answerability responses include approval and disapproval. They target the quality of a person's judgement. Finally, accountability responses such as anger, praise and gratitude target the quality of a person's will. I defend the view that people are attributable- and accountable-responsible for their vices since these reflect their character and the quality of their will. But they are not answerable for these vices since they are not capable of seeing reasons that are contrary to their own. That is why it is pointless to try to reason people out

vice. This consideration is at the root of the book's final suggestion on how to help people overcome their vices. The proposal is that individuals adopt a technique known as value or self-affirmation (Steele, 1988). It consists in reflection on one's values to understand why they are of value. This reflection has the effect of making self-esteem more secure.<sup>ii</sup> Another motivation for suggesting, counterintuitively, that self-affirmation might be a remedy for arrogance is the realisation that although people are responsible for their vices, they are not likely to either recognise them or take well to the attribution. Vice attributions, I argue in this book, tend to become self-fulfilling prophecies. That is why they are often counterproductive. That said, even though we should often refrain from attributing responsibility to others for their vices, it is, or so the book argues, important that we take individual, and collective, responsibility for our own vices with a view to ameliorating them.<sup>iii</sup>

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<sup>i</sup> I now realize that the book pays insufficient attention to the fact that these practices might vary in different cultural and historical contexts. Thanks to Mari Mikkola for pressing this point.

<sup>ii</sup> I am fully aware that given the social roots of these vices of superiority and inferiority, agent-centric remedies are bound to have limited effectiveness. This, however, does not imply that they are useless.

<sup>iii</sup> I would like to thank Heather Battaly for organising the author meets critics session on the Mismeasure of the Self at the Pacific APA in Vancouver. I am also grateful to the commentators and the audience for that occasion for their helpful criticisms and suggestions. This material was also presented at a NOMOS workshop on the book. My thanks to Mari Mikkola and Esa Diaz-Leon for organising that event.