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## Having the Measure of Self and World: A Response to my Critics.

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**Abstract:** In this response I address criticisms raised by Ashton, Battaly, McGlynn and Simion that my account of intellectual humility (hereafter, IH), and of the vices opposed to it, is too internalistic, is insufficiently social and structural, and finally that my proposal for ameliorating vice might be not efficacious.

In *The Mismeasure of the Self* I deploy a vice theoretical framework to explore, among other things, how unjust social relations damage the intellectual characters of individuals occupying various privileged and subordinated social positions. Virtue (and consequently vice) epistemology is often thought to be politically retrograde. Its focus on individual failings would prevent researchers from appreciating the social and political causes that partially explain people's motivations and conduct. In *The Mismeasure of the Self* I try to develop a social vice epistemology that is politically informed. One of my aims in the book is to offer an anatomy of what Frantz Fanon (1986) and Sandra Lee Bartky (1990) have called the psychology of oppression (cf., Cudd, 2006). I am thus extremely grateful to Natalie Ashton, Heather Battaly, Aidan McGlynn, and Mona Simion for highlighting aspects of my approach that seem to be too wedded to the individualistic, internalistic, and politically conservative proclivities of virtue and vice epistemology. In different ways these critics all show that we cannot neatly disentangle measures of the self from measures of the world. In what follows I address whether my account of intellectual humility (hereafter, IH), and of the vices opposed to it, is too internalistic, whether it is insufficiently social and structural, and finally whether my proposal for ameliorating vice is adequate.

### 1. Reliability, Internalism and Normativity

Battaly (2022) and Simion (2023) take issue with aspects of my account which they regard as being too internalistic. Battaly advances an account of IH, according to which *de facto* reliability about one's own intellectual limitations is a necessary condition for the possession of this virtue. Battaly correctly notes that reliability is not required for IH on my account. She also argues that her view has two distinctive advantages over mine. First, it makes better sense of the thought that intellectually humble individuals are exemplars worthy of emulation. Second, it provides a better account of the harms caused by oppressive social relations to underprivileged individuals. In what follows I respond to Battaly's insightful criticisms by showing that her account of IH is deeply revisionary. This is not, by itself, an objection to it. One may say that she provides an ameliorative analysis to be evaluated for its explanatory payoff. I thus turn to the two advantages claimed by Battaly for her account and argue that it is at best unclear whether her view is superior to mine on this score. Subsequently, I consider some of Simion's queries about my account of epistemic vices. I argue that this account is not as problematically internalistic as Simion claims it is.

In her "Measuring and Mismeasuring the Self" Battaly (2022) argues for a view of IH according to which proper owning of one's intellectual limitations requires sensitivity to what these are so as to support the formation of reliable true beliefs about one's own shortcomings. Battaly agrees that the motivation to know one's intellectual limitations is an important component of the virtue of IH but she thinks that this motivation must be supplemented by the possession of the cognitive abilities required to detect accurately said limitations. I disagree, but I believe that the nature of this disagreement is more complex than it might seem at first sight.

Part of the issue lies with the nature of IH itself and how it differs from other epistemic virtues such as open-mindedness or intellectual courage. Mild cognitive impairment seems no obstacle to possessing intellectual humility, but depending on the nature of the impairment, this shortcoming is likely to affect the reliability of the person's judgments about their own intellectual limitations. In this regard, IH differs from other intellectual virtues whose exercise might well require a degree of reliability. For example, open-mindedness requires that one gives serious consideration to relevant alternative viewpoints before making up one's mind. However, in order to evaluate these viewpoints one must be able to figure out what they are with some degree of accuracy. Similarly, intellectual courage requires that one takes intellectual risks, which in turn presupposes that one is not completely mistaken about what these are. In this regard, or so it seems to me, IH, intellectual pride and the epistemic vices of arrogance, vanity, servility, and timidity that

oppose them, differ from other intellectual character virtue and vices. Their connection to reliable judgments about one's strengths and weakness is more tenuous. IH, in particular, can be exhibited by individuals whose cognitive abilities have been affected by the processes of ageing, by trauma, or other causes of mild impairment.

Another factor complicating the proper evaluation of the disagreement between Battaly's consequentialist account of IH and the motivationalist view that I defend lies in the misleading nature of the epistemic environments within which some agents form, and revise, judgments about their intellectual strengths and limitations. I argue in *The Mismeasure* that intellectually humble individuals usually possess true reliable beliefs about their shortcomings, but that in exceptional circumstances, their judgments could be systematically false without thereby making them less humble. Such circumstances include those leading to mild cognitive impairment, but also situations where the environment in which an agent finds herself is highly misleading about the nature and extent of that agent's intellectual limitations. These are the kinds of circumstances I envisaged when I said that intellectually humble individuals might be systematically mistaken about their cognitive limitations.

In the second sort of case individuals' inferential and evaluative abilities function well, and are driven by accuracy motivations, but they yield false outputs because their inputs are false or otherwise misleading. That is, the cognitive abilities deployed in self-evaluation are dependent on the reliability of their inputs; in circumstances in which these are not reliable, the agent's conditionally reliable abilities yield beliefs that are both false and unreliable. In these situations, an agent might systematically underestimate or overestimate their intellectual abilities; but these mistakes are not indicative of the quality of their reasoning or of their dispositions to inquiry. If these mistakes are not something for which the agent could be epistemically blamed because they do not reflect the quality of her judging abilities, it would seem that they cannot be the sort of shortcomings that transform a virtuously humble individual into someone who lacks the virtue.

To see this, consider the case of a person growing up in an environment where people are not hostile to her ethnic group. Imagine that this person learns to appreciate and own up to her intellectual limitations. Suppose that this individual moves to another country where many people are prejudiced against members of her race. In this novel context she faces numerous microinvalidations when she is made to feel that her thoughts and intuitions are all wrong. It is possible that long-term exposure to disrespectful treatment changes this person's character and

motivations, so that she becomes timid or servile to avoid being the target of microaggressions. But it is also possible that this person starts to underestimate her capacities because she finds herself doubting the truth of her own opinions under the pressure of the skepticism of the society that surrounds her. This can occur without change in abilities or motivations. In this case, it seems at least counter-intuitive to say that this person has lost the virtue of intellectual humility.

I suspect that in response Battaly would argue that in these circumstances the individual in question has become excessively humble since she starts to underestimate her abilities. Since excessive humility is not a virtue, this individual has lost the virtue of humility. But, that cannot be right. The person's intellectual character in this hypothetical case has not changed. Her epistemic dispositions have remained the same. What has changed are her circumstances which have plumed her in an environment that is populated with false and misleading evidence about her intellectual abilities. Because, as far as she can tell, the evidence and/or the evidential standards have changed, she has rationally updated her views about her abilities. She has in the process lost self-knowledge, but it seems to me, she need not have lost her epistemic virtues.

Ultimately the disagreement between Battaly and I rests on our criteria for virtue individuation. In my view, virtues are psychological properties of individuals. Battaly, instead, adopts a view which Ian James Kidd (2020, pp. 81-83) has dubbed "normative contextualism". In her opinion the same set of psychological dispositions can be a virtue, a vice or neither depending on their reliability within given circumstances. Her view thus allows for the possibility that one acquires or loses intellectual virtues simply by traveling to a new location. This account is at variance with folk psychological notions of intellectual virtue but also with less radical accounts that make reliability a necessary feature of epistemic virtue. According to these views, some cognitive abilities and psychological dispositions are epistemically virtuous only if they are functioning properly, and thus reliably, in their proper environments. Hence, for instance, a virtuously observant person does not lose their virtuous sensibility when they happen to find themselves in darkness. These externalist views individuate intellectual virtue by some of their externalist features (e.g., reliability in normal environments). Nevertheless, they take virtues to be psychological features of individuals that can only be acquired or lost through psychological change. A change in environmental conditions alone is never sufficient to turn a virtuous agent into someone who is not virtuous.

Battaly takes externalism a step further; she construes virtues as an extrinsic property of human psychology which can change even though the person has not undergone any real

psychological change. What Battaly proposes is in effect a radical revision of the concept of intellectual virtue. Thus, her approach cannot be really evaluated for how it fits pre-theoretical intuitions about intellectual humility since that is not what it is intended to do. Instead, we can only evaluate the merits of this ameliorative account for its power to explain and illuminate the phenomena. Battaly claims two advantages for her account over the motivationalist view that I defend. First, her account is better suited to identify exemplars worthy of emulation. Second, her account would provide a better explanation of the harms caused by oppressive relations.

With regard to the first advantage Battaly holds that individuals who are motivated to know their intellectual limitations, but have false beliefs about what these are, are always less admirable and worthy of emulation than those who are similarly motivated but who in addition also get it right. In response I would like to first point out that there might be much to admire about the first person if their false beliefs are due the hostility of the epistemic environment. For instance, they have epistemically good motivations, and act in accordance with them. They also form their beliefs about their intellectual limitations by giving careful consideration to the evidence. Battaly, I think, would agree. But she would also claim that the person who in addition gets it right is always more admirable. However, there are reasons to be suspicious about this claim. The person who has the good fortune of inhabiting an environment where the available evidence about their intellectual qualities is plentiful and informative is only luckier than the individual possessing and deploying exactly the same epistemic dispositions in a context littered with misleading evidence. The first succeeds in acquiring true beliefs, and the second fails. But this failure is not a failing on their part. The success of the first person is creditable to them because their evidential epistemic luck is not knowledge undermining.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, being the beneficiary of good fortune does not make them more admirable than the person who would be as knowledgeable had they been equally lucky.

Battaly claims that the ability to fully account for the damage that oppression does to those who occupy subordinated positions is a second advantage of her view over mine. I am not convinced. In my opinion both accounts have the means to offer similar explanations of the epistemic harms caused by oppression. However, but I realize she would resist this construction, Battaly's account mischaracterizes as harm to epistemic character what are in reality other forms of harm. The person who is unfairly denied access to informative evidence about her abilities is harmed

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<sup>1</sup> Evidential epistemic luck occurs when a person is lucky in their acquisition of the evidence supporting their beliefs (Pritchard, 2005, pp. 136-138).

since she is prevented from knowing her strengths and weaknesses. Nevertheless, her character, I think, could remain unscathed. But even if we concede to Battaly that there is a conception of character according to which these harms can be said to affect a person's character, the advantage of adopting it remains unclear. It seems to me that both viewpoints can adequately explain the phenomena, even though they differ in the concepts used to explain them. If that is right, my account would have the advantage over Battaly's of explaining all the facts without requiring a revisionary conception of character.

Battaly is not alone in finding my approach to the intellectual virtues and vices of self-evaluation too internalistic. In her probing discussion Simion (2023) argues that my account of epistemic vices lacks the resources to explain why vices are epistemically bad. She claims, broadly correctly, that in my view epistemic vices supervene on people's psychological attitudes and concludes that such an account cannot ultimately answer questions about what is ultimately wrong with biased selection of the evidence or with motivated reasoning. In her view any account of why epistemic vices are epistemically bad must make some references to externalistic notions such as truth, knowledge or reliability. But, she adds, no account of epistemic vice committed to the supervenience claim is able to invoke these notions. It is, therefore, bound to fail. On this last point I disagree.

In my account epistemic virtues and vices of self-evaluation are individuated by their motivations. Intellectual virtues have intrinsically good epistemic motivations, such as love of knowledge. Intellectual vices have motivations that are bad from an epistemic point of view, such as believing whatever makes one feel good about oneself. Thus, my initial answer to the question of the badness of vice is that they have constitutive bad motivations. But of course, Simion would probe further and ask what makes these motivations epistemically bad. My answer is the badness of the goal of the motivation, such as believing something for its self-enhancing value irrespective of its truth. Such an answer explains the wrongness of epistemic vice. Further, this answer is available to a supporter of the claim that vice supervenes on psychological attitudes. To see this, consider the following analogy. Being a magnet supervenes on the intrinsic properties of a thing such that any duplicate of a magnet is also a magnet. Yet, we cannot explain what it is for something to be a magnet without reference to things such as pieces of iron that are external to the object. If this is right, my view has a plausible answer to the normativity challenge articulated by Simion in her critical discussion of my work.

## 2. Epistemic Vice and Oppression

While Battaly and Simion focus their criticism on some internalist features of my view, Ashton's (2023) concerns target my claim to have developed an account of epistemic vice that seeks to illuminate its social determinants. More specifically, Ashton argues that my account of the causes of epistemic vice is compatible with a view that sees them as being wholly the outcome of individual choices. In addition, Ashton's correctly remarks that my proposal to ameliorate epistemic vice is agent-centric and as such wedded to individualism. I address this second point in the next section dedicated to criticisms of my ameliorative proposal to reduce vice by means of the adoption of self-affirmation techniques.

In her commentary Ashton highlights three desiderata that must be met by any explanation of social injustice and specifically of oppression that interprets it as being at least partly structural. First, the injustice cannot be the outcome of a single policy. Second, it cannot be wholly explainable in terms of individual choices. Third, it cannot be wholly explainable in terms of luck (2023, p. 4 in MS). The application of these desiderata to accounts of the causes of epistemic vice is not straightforward. Iris Marion Young (1990), on whose work Ashton relies, distinguishes between structural, and non-structural, forms of oppression in terms of their etiology. Structural oppression is oppression whose causes cannot be wholly reduced to individual choices.

Epistemic vices, however, are stable psychological features of individuals that are not individuated by their causes. Further, it is doubtful that a unified account of the etiology of the same epistemic vice in all the different individuals who suffer from it can be supplied. What we can do, instead, is attempt to isolate some common social causes that would explain the demographic distribution of the kind of behaviours and emotions associated with some epistemic vices of self-evaluation. Thus, for instance, if as I suspect the cluster of attitudes that underpin servility and timidity are more commonly found among members of some social groups rather than of others, we have reason to suspect that some of the causes of the formation of those attitudes are often social, and the relevant group-membership is in many instances implicated in the process.

A critic could argue that these points are in principle compatible with analyses of these patterns that explain them in terms, for instance, of innate psychological differences between genders and ethnic groups. Whilst one cannot rule out this possibility *a priori*, it is exceedingly



unlikely that systemic differences in social power are not, for example, partially responsible for some women's tendency to exhibit behaviours characteristic of timidity when immersed in competitive institutions (cf., London, Downey, Romero-Canyas, Rattan, & Tyson, 2012). In *The Mismeasure*, as Ashton correctly points out, I do not develop these points further. The reticence is deliberate since what is required to fill in these gaps is empirical social and psychological research for which I lack the requisite expertise. I should add, however, that I am sceptical about the prospects of any purely structural account of the etiology of epistemic vices of self-evaluation in members of privileged and subordinated groups. Since these are psychological qualities that constitute individual differences one would expect that accidental circumstances (good or bad luck) and personal choices, tendencies and motivations, must play a causal role in the formation of epistemic vices additional to structural and interpersonal social power relations. In short, my account is less social, because less structural, than Ashton thinks it should be. It remains an interesting and open question the extent to which structural, as opposed to social, accounts of epistemic vices are theoretically cogent.

### 3. Amelioration via self-affirmation

In the last chapter of *The Mismeasure* I present self-affirmation as a technique that might assist individuals to reduce their tendencies to vice. One form taken by the technique involves asking subjects to figure out their most important values and to write a short reflection on why these values are important to them. In recent empirical work with colleagues in psychology, we have found that the technique helps people to behave more humbly in debates over controversial issues (Hanel et al., 2023). In the book I propose that this technique is more efficacious than explicit teaching about virtue, habituation and exposure to exemplars. My main argument against these commonly endorsed strategies in virtue education is that they are ineffective to assist people who already possess vicious motivations. Explicit teaching about virtue does not change those who are not already motivated to act in accordance with vice. Any offer of opportunities to practice virtue so that one may acquire virtuous habits is also simultaneously an opportunity to cement vicious ones. Finally, exposure to exemplars prompts emulation only in those who are already appropriately motivated. On the one hand, individuals who suffer from timidity or servility, and thus have a low opinion of themselves, might see exemplars as unattainable models and thus find the whole experience demoralizing. On the other hand, arrogant or narcissistic individuals might fancy themselves as already possessing

many of the exemplar's attributes. Thus, exposure to an ideal model might for them be an opportunity to fan their egos.

In her commentary Ashton notes that this ameliorative proposal is agent-centric rather than structural. She also acknowledges that the proposal is intended to target individuals and their psychologies, rather than social structures. Ashton argues that for this reason the proposal is bound to be inadequate. Structural problems in her view require structural solutions. She is to a large extent correct. However, the development of clear proposals for ameliorating oppression is beyond the scope of a book on vice epistemology. Nevertheless, I certainly could have said more in the book about how to promote the construction of epistemic environments that evince more virtuous and less vicious behaviours in the agents that inhabit them.

Be that as it may, it would be a serious shortcoming of my proposal if, instead of being a partial and perhaps temporary improvement of a bad situation, it was a counterproductive distraction. However, I see no reason in support of this pessimistic conclusion since self-affirmation through reflection on value is not a moralizing proposal that might induce those suffering from vices of inferiority such as timidity and servility to blame themselves for their low self-esteem. As long as self-affirmation works to scaffold and bolster their sense of self-worth and self-respect, this technique is at least part of the solution rather than of the problem.

Of course, the technique can contribute to a solution only if it is effective. In his perceptive commentary McGlynn (2023) queries the power of self-affirmation to induce virtuous motivations in those who do not already possess them. If my proposal is defective in this regard, then it suffers from the same problems that I have highlighted with regard to exemplarism. McGlynn ingeniously reframes my objections to this approach in the form of a dilemma. If the exemplars lack all imperfections, they will fail to inspire emulation in those suffering from timidity and servility because of their apparent unattainability. However, if the exemplars have recognizable limitations that make them attainable, they will fail to inspire those who suffer from arrogance and narcissism who may think of themselves as already matching the exemplars in the relevant respects.

I find this dilemma congenial, although I did not have it in mind when writing the book. Instead, my argument relied on empirical findings from the psychology of social comparison judgements according to which under conditions that might feel threatening to one's self-image, individuals with high trait self-esteem compare themselves for similarities with individuals that are

presented as successful, whilst those whose trait self-esteem is low are on the lookout for dissimilarities (Vohs & Heatherton, 2004). In my view exposure to exemplars constitutes such a threat and thus should elicit these typical responses. I presume that this occurs even when the exemplar is objectively attainable. However, the nature of the threat would in such a case be attenuated compared to exposure to perfect exemplars.

In my view, therefore, people who don't already possess good motivations are unlikely to be moved to emulate exemplars in virtue enhancing ways. McGlynn raises the possibility that self-affirmation technique suffers from similar limitations. He rightly notes that even if my proposed ameliorative strategy weakens bad motivations to self-enhance or to ingratiate, it might fail to strengthen good motivations. If this is right, its efficacy might be limited. In particular, McGlynn highlights a lack of a clear articulation in the book of the mechanisms by means of which self-affirmation would strengthen the motivation to know the truth about one's intellectual character. McGlynn is right to point out that I am silent on this important point. My reticence is based on lack of clear empirical evidence on the mechanisms underlying the correlation between reductions in defensiveness and self-affirmation.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, McGlynn is correct that more should be said on this point.

In order to begin to address this issue, I find it useful to build on McGlynn's own reconstruction of some aspects of self-affirmation through value. Because the technique encourages subjects to identify their values and to reflect on what makes them valuable, self-affirmation plausibly strengthens the motivation to hold attitudes that are expressive of the values that one cares about. Reflection on values should strengthen one's commitment to them which in turn should be reflected in one's attitudes. Of course, as McGlynn notes, it is unclear how this might promote the motivation to know one's strengths and limitations unless one's values already include a love of knowledge, curiosity, and other values of self-transcendence and openness to change (Schwartz et al., 2012). For this reason, self- (value-) affirmation might work best if people are not left alone to identify their values but are instead encouraged to reflect on specific values and to evaluate the extent to which they value them. Hopefully, most people uphold values of openness and self-transcendence at least to some extent, and the prompt will function as a reminder that strengthens their commitment to these values. That said, these conclusions are speculative. I hope to supply a

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<sup>2</sup> See Critcher and Dunning (2015) for one possible explanation.

more definite answer to McGlynn's insightful criticism in future once planned interdisciplinary research precisely on this question has been carried out.

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