

# Vice Epistemology

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## ABSTRACT

Vice epistemology is the philosophical study of the nature, identity, and epistemological significance of intellectual vices. Such vices include gullibility, dogmatism, prejudice, closed-mindedness, and negligence. These are intellectual character vices, that is, intellectual vices that are also character traits. I ask how the notion of an intellectual character vice should be understood, whether such vices exist, and how they might be epistemologically significant. The proposal is that intellectual character vices are intellectual character traits that impede effective and responsible inquiry. I argue that situationist critiques of virtue epistemology pose no significant threat to this proposal. Studies by social psychologists of belief in conspiracy theories suggest that it is sometimes appropriate to explain questionable beliefs by reference to intellectual character vices. Neither ‘regulative’ nor ‘analytic’ epistemology has any good reason to question the epistemological significance of such vices.

## I

Suppose you think that human beings have character traits, and that some of these traits are *intellectual* character traits such as open-mindedness, thoroughness, attentiveness, dogmatism, carelessness, and gullibility. Some of these character traits (the first three) tend to get classified as intellectual *virtues* and others (the last three) as intellectual *vices*. Such intellectual virtues and vices have attracted the attention of virtue epistemologists, though it’s fair to say that virtue epistemologists have by and large been more interested in intellectual virtues than in intellectual vices.<sup>1</sup> My aim here is to convince you, if you need convincing, that epistemologists should pay more attention to the intellectual vices.<sup>2</sup> It’s not that intellectual virtues aren’t epistemologically interesting or important, but intellectual vices are just as interesting and important from the standpoint of epistemology. Indeed, when it comes to the epistemological predicament of human beings, vices are arguably *more* important. Few of us are model epistemic citizens, the idealized *homo philosophicus* of much philosophical writing, and one way of making this point is to draw attention to the influence of a range of more or less pernicious intellectual vices in the day-to-day cognitive lives of most members of the species *homo sapiens*.<sup>3</sup> My aim in this paper is to make the case for what I’m going to call *vice epistemology*, a branch of epistemology which

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concentrates on the nature, identity, and epistemological significance of intellectual vices.

Must intellectual vices be character traits? Consider this list of intellectual vices: “forming beliefs by guesswork, wishful thinking, and ignoring contrary evidence” (Goldman 1992, 158). These certainly look like intellectual vices but they aren’t character traits. It’s hard to make the case that wishful thinking shouldn’t be classified as an intellectual vice just because it isn’t a character trait.<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, even if intellectual vices don’t have to be character traits I’m going to focus here on intellectual vices that *are* character traits, that is, on what I’ll call *intellectual character vices*, or *character vices* for short. Character vices are the most easily recognized intellectual vices, and a core aim of vice epistemology is to investigate their nature, identity, and epistemological significance. This leaves it open that vice epistemology should also have something to say about the nature, identity, and epistemological significance of intellectual vices that aren’t intellectual character traits. Indeed, I’ll be suggesting that some of the factors that explain why intellectual character traits such as closed-mindedness, gullibility and dogmatism are intellectual vices also help to explain why processes such as wishful thinking and ignoring contrary evidence are intellectual vices.

Among the foundational questions which a vice epistemologist might be expected to answer are the following:

1. How should the notion of an intellectual character vice be understood? What makes a character trait an intellectual *vice*? How are intellectual vices related to other vices, and what is intellectually vicious about dogmatism, carelessness, gullibility, and other examples of character vices?
2. Do character vices exist? In its most extreme form, scepticism about character says “there is no reason at all to believe in character traits as ordinarily conceived” (Harman 2000, 223). If Harman is right, and character vices are supposed to be character traits as ordinarily conceived, then it follows that there is no reason at all to believe in the existence of such vices. How should vice epistemology tackle scepticism about character?<sup>5</sup>
3. What is the epistemological significance of character vices?<sup>6</sup> You could think that such vices exist and are philosophically interesting in their own right without thinking that they are of *epistemological* interest. What are the epistemological questions which reference to intellectual vices might help us answer, and in what sense are these questions distinctively epistemological?

This is my plan: in part II, I’ll argue that intellectual character vices are intellectual character traits that impede what Christopher Hookway calls “effective and responsible inquiry” (2003, 198). In contrast, intellectual character virtues are intellectual character traits that abet effective and responsible inquiry. Intellectual virtues are cognitive excellences, intellectual vices are cognitive defects. It has been claimed that intellectual character traits are acquired, that they have a motivational component, and that they are deep and lasting qualities that define a person’s identity.<sup>7</sup> I will question all three claims.

In part III, I'll argue that the primary motivation for scepticism about character traits is *situationism*, and that vice epistemology can withstand the situationist challenge. Crudely, situationism is the view that how people behave in new situations is much better explained by reference to situational factors than by reference to character traits as we ordinarily think of them.<sup>8</sup> If character traits are explanatorily redundant that would be a good reason for not positing them. In philosophy, situationism has mainly been used to attack virtue ethics but recently has also been used against virtue epistemology.<sup>9</sup> I'll argue, in response, that there is very little hope of explaining our epistemological conduct without reference to intellectual vices. Far from epistemic situationism being a problem for vice epistemology, vice epistemology is a problem for epistemic situationism.

Finally, in part IV, I'll suggest that you would need to have a narrow and impoverished conception of epistemology to be seriously worried that intellectual vices might turn out to be epistemologically insignificant. The conception of epistemology I'll be recommending has been called "inquiry epistemology."<sup>10</sup> On this conception, the focus of our epistemic lives is the activity of inquiry. Inquiry is the attempt "to find things out, to extend our knowledge by carrying out investigations directed at answering questions, and to refine our knowledge by considering questions about things we currently hold true" (Hookway 1994, 211). On one traditional view, epistemology should make it its business to understand, guide, and improve human inquiry, with the aim of enhancing the effectiveness and responsibility of our investigations. From this standpoint, there are fairly obvious reasons for epistemology to be interested in intellectual vices: understanding the activity of inquiry is partly a matter of understanding how and why it goes wrong (when it does), and that is partly a matter of grasping the influence of intellectual vices of various kinds on our attempts to find things out. Epistemological guidance will include measures on how to reduce the pernicious influence of intellectual vices, and being alert to the influence of such vices may be expected to improve human inquiry. Since we are all too human, our cognitive lives can never be vice-free, but we can at least hope to understand how and why we go wrong. Vice epistemology is, in this sense, an exercise in self-knowledge, as well as a component of inquiry epistemology.

Unlike inquiry epistemology, analytic epistemology analyses key epistemic concepts such as *knowledge* and *justification* in the hope of being able to provide informative answers to questions like 'What is knowledge?' and 'What is justified belief?' In this context, it may not seem obvious why epistemology should be interested in intellectual vices. Nevertheless, I will argue that intellectual vices are relevant even in this context, and that it would be a mistake for analytic epistemology to ignore them. The take-home message is straightforward: intellectual vices are epistemologically relevant, and any self-respecting epistemology must take on board the insights of vice epistemology.

## II

What, then, is an intellectual character vice? Rather than tackling this question head on I think it might be helpful to look at a concrete example:

Oliver has an unhealthy obsession with 9/11. He spends much of his spare time reading about what he calls the ‘9/11 conspiracy’ and he regards himself as something of an expert in the field of 9/11 studies. He believes that [P] the 9/11 attacks were not carried out by al-Qaeda and the collapse of the World Trade Center towers on 11 September 2001 was caused by explosives planted in the buildings in advance by government agents rather than by aircraft impacts and the resulting fires. As far as Oliver is concerned, the collapse of the twin towers was an inside job and specifically the result of a controlled demolition.<sup>11</sup>

One question you might ask about Oliver is: why does he believe that P, given that P is (I take it) not just false but demonstrably false. On one reading, to ask why Oliver believes that P is to ask after his *reasons* for believing this proposition, the reasons for which he believes P.<sup>12</sup> Oliver is happy to tell you. For example, one of his reasons for believing that P is his belief that aircraft impacts couldn’t have caused the towers to collapse. It is, Oliver says, a physical impossibility. Of course you might ask Oliver why he believes *that*, and again he is happy to tell you: he read an article on a 9/11 conspiracy website proving (as he sees it) that aircraft impacts couldn’t have caused the towers to collapse. In addition, explosive residues found in the debris point to a controlled demolition.

To explain Oliver’s belief that P by reference to his reasons is to give a rationalizing explanation, but such explanations only get you so far. Part of the problem is that Oliver’s reasons for believing P are so bad. In fact, there were no explosive residues in the debris of the WTC towers and reputable studies have shown that aircraft impacts could have caused the towers to collapse (Lew, Bukowski, and Carino 2005). The outrageous claims on the conspiracist websites on which Oliver relies have been conclusively refuted and the evidence of al-Qaeda’s direct involvement in the planning and execution of the 9/11 attacks is overwhelming.<sup>13</sup> Oliver should know better but doesn’t. He is neither a responsible nor an effective inquirer into the events of September 11, 2001. The problem with his account of what happened that day in New York is not that it is inconsistent or incoherent. The problem is that it is baseless and false.

It’s hard to get away from the feeling that merely outlining Oliver’s defective reasons for believing that P is only scratching the surface. There is still a clear sense in which, despite knowing his reasons, we still haven’t satisfactorily explained why Oliver believes that P. The same goes for many other cases in which we try to understand why, as Michael Shermer puts it, “people believe weird things.”<sup>14</sup> Suppose Oliver believes that the 1969 moon landing was faked or that the AIDS epidemic was a conspiracy by government officials. We want to understand why he believes these things, and merely knowing what he calls his “reasons” is unlikely to satisfy us. A different kind of explanation is called for, and this creates an opening for the notion of an intellectual vice. Oliver explains his beliefs by reference to his reasons, but we might prefer an explanation in terms of his character, including his intellectual character.

Where does character come into it? Responsible inquirers have a good sense of when they are in danger of being duped but Oliver's sense of this is poor. In forming his views about 9/11, the AIDS epidemic and the moon landing he relies on dodgy websites, paranoid talk radio stations, and a narrow circle of eccentric, conspiracist friends and acquaintances. He combines high levels of trust for these dubious sources with high levels of mistrust for the debunking efforts of genuine experts. Such efforts, Oliver claims, are further evidence of a conspiracy, and 'They would say that wouldn't they?' is one of his favourite ripostes when confronted by well-informed, reasoned rebuttals of his views. The fact that Oliver attaches so much weight to claims on conspiracist websites, fails to grasp the absurdity of the theories peddled by such websites, and dismisses the testimony of genuine experts tells us something about Oliver. It tells us something about his intellectual character and thereby enables us to understand why he believes the things he believes about 9/11, AIDS, and so on.

The intellectual character traits by reference to which we can start to understand why Oliver believes that P are intellectual vices. The Concise Oxford Dictionary defines 'gullible' as "easily cheated or duped." My characterization of Oliver suggests that he is gullible in this sense. It's not just his liking for conspiracy theories that is at issue; perhaps he is generally the kind of person who is easily conned. The opposite of gullibility is cynicism, and this is another of Oliver's character traits. However, he is only cynical about legitimate sources of information; he gives epistemic credit where it isn't due and fails to give it where it is due. In both senses, Oliver displays a form of what Miranda Fricker calls "prejudicial dysfunction" (2012, 340), whereby other people either receive from him more credibility than they rationally deserve ("credibility excess") or less credibility than they rationally deserve ("credibility deficit"). The one thing Oliver is not is discerning. If cynicism and gullibility are opposite intellectual vices, discernment is the virtuous mean between them, and something which Oliver clearly lacks.

Let's ask again, 'why does Oliver believe P?' Instead of a rationalizing explanation, we have an intellectual *character-based* explanation: he believes that P because he is gullible, cynical and prejudiced. Oliver's intellectual vices help explain his belief that P without being reasons, or his reasons, for believing that P. Rationalizing and character-based explanations work in different ways but are not unrelated: the reasons Oliver gives for his belief that P only strike him *as* reasons because he is gullible, cynical, and prejudiced. For example, if it weren't for his unwarranted cynicism about 'official' studies of the design and construction of the towers, he wouldn't believe that aircraft impacts couldn't have brought down the towers and so would not regard that supposed impossibility as a reason for believing their collapse was caused by explosives. Oliver has been led astray by his intellectual character defects, and it is by reference to these defects that we can start to make sense of his bizarre views.

Prejudice is one of the intellectual vices identified by Linda Zagzebski in *Virtues of the Mind*. Here is her list:

intellectual pride, negligence, idleness, cowardice, conformity, carelessness, rigidity, prejudice, wishful thinking, closed-mindedness, insensitivity to detail, obtuseness, and lack of thoroughness. (1996, 152)

Elsewhere she points out that the reaction of ordinary people to epistemic impropriety “is not simply to say that a person’s belief is unjustified but to direct evaluation toward the person himself” (1996, 20). Most of the vices on Zagzebski’s list are character defects, and beliefs formed as a result of such defects are open to criticism.<sup>15</sup> Gullibility and cynicism are not on the list but there is no reason not to add them. Dogmatism might be another candidate intellectual vice. Typically, characters like Oliver tend to display a range of interconnected intellectual vices, such as those listed by Zagzebski, and this helps to explain why and in what sense their beliefs are “unjustified.”

What makes an intellectual character trait an intellectual vice and how, in general are such vices to be understood? Let’s begin by trying to get a little clearer about the notion of an intellectual character trait. As John Doris observes, character traits are “invoked to explain what people do and how they live,” and are “widely held to involve dispositions to behaviour” (2002, 15). *Intellectual* character traits, I submit, are invoked to explain how people think and reason, or how they go about trying to find things out. They are habits or styles of thought or inquiry, and to describe someone as, say, gullible or closed-minded is to say something about their intellectual style or “mind-set,” for example, about how they tend to approach novel hypotheses. To put it another way, intellectual character traits are distinctive ways of seeking out and evaluating evidence, and assessing the plausibility of explanatory hypotheses, such as the hypothesis that 9/11 was an inside job.

The next question is: what makes intellectual character vices vicious? My proposal is that intellectual character vices are intellectual character traits that impede effective and responsible inquiry. The force of this suggestion can be brought out by thinking about Oliver. Oliver is certainly an inquirer. He tries, in his own way, to find things out and to extend his knowledge by carrying out investigations directed at answering certain questions. His questions include: who was responsible for the 9/11 attacks? Who planned the attacks and why were they carried out? Could aircraft impacts and the resulting fires have brought down the twin towers? If not, what actually caused them to collapse? And so on. His investigations are aimed at answering these questions, and his methods include searching the web, reading books about 9/11, and studying video footage of the planes flying into the WTC towers. So far so good, but his investigations are blighted by his intellectual vices. Because he is gullible, dogmatic, closed-minded, cynical, prejudiced, and so on, he ignores important evidence which bears on his questions, relies on unreliable sources, jumps to conclusions and generally can’t see the wood for the trees. The fact that this is how he goes about his business is a reflection of his intellectual character. He ignores critical evidence *because* he is grossly negligent, he relies on untrustworthy sources *because* he is gullible, he jumps to conclusions *because* he is lazy and careless. He is neither a responsible nor an effective inquirer, and it is the influence of his intellectual character traits which is responsible for this. It is in this sense that these traits impede effective and

responsible inquiry, which in turn is what makes them intellectual vices rather than virtues.

On this account, the classification of intellectual character traits as vices or virtues is driven by our sense of what makes for responsible and effective inquiry. Being gullible is a vice rather than a virtue because being easily cheated or duped makes us less effective at discovering the answers to our questions and trying to understand the events we are trying to understand. Being careless or negligent diminishes the effectiveness of our inquiries and also opens us up to the charge of acting irresponsibly. Giving credit where it isn't due, and failing to give it where it is due, is just the kind of thing which impedes serious inquiry and that is why prejudice is an intellectual vice. In contrast, traits like thoroughness and discernment are intellectual virtues because they promote effective and responsible inquiry. Even if you are as dismissive of conspiracist websites as Oliver is of the report of the 9/11 Commission, you aren't in the same boat as Oliver epistemologically speaking. The difference is that you are giving conspiracist sources precisely the credit they rationally deserve whereas Oliver's sense of what deserves epistemic credit and what does not is totally skewed.

This account of character vices also has some plausibility when applied to intellectual vices that are not character traits. Part of what makes wishful thinking and ignoring contrary evidence intellectually vicious is that they are as likely to impede effective and responsible inquiry as intellectual character vices. This isn't surprising since the two types of vice are closely related. For example, ignoring contrary evidence, which is not itself a character trait, is exactly the sort of thing one would expect someone who is dogmatic or closed-minded to do. So we have here the makings of a general account of intellectual vice. It is their malign influence on the investigative practices of those who have or practice them that explains, at least to some extent, the status of intellectual vices generally.

One worry about this proposal might be that it is unacceptable to use the notion of responsible and effective inquiry to explain what makes the intellectual vices vicious and the intellectual virtues virtuous because we have no independent grip on the notion of such an inquiry.<sup>16</sup> Isn't an "effective and responsible inquiry" just one that is conducted in the way that an intellectually virtuous person would conduct it?<sup>17</sup> If that is so, then it is circular to explain intellectual virtues and vices by reference to their impact on responsible and effective inquiry. It's not that we begin with the idea of a responsible and effective inquiry and then explain on this basis the distinction between intellectual virtues and vices. It would be more accurate to say that we have to start with the distinction between intellectual vices and virtues and then define a responsible and effective inquiry as one that is regulated by intellectual virtues rather than intellectual vices. Or so it might be argued.

Is it true that an effective and responsible inquiry can only be defined as one that is conducted in the way that an intellectually virtuous person would conduct it? Not exactly. Remember that the aim of inquiry is to extend or refine our knowledge. Inquiry is an activity rather than a state, whereas knowledge is a state rather than an activity. An effective inquiry into whether, say, 9/11 was an inside job is liable to produce in us the corresponding mental state—the state of knowing whether 9/11 was an inside job—and this suggests that our core notion of an effective inquiry is that of

an inquiry that is *knowledge-conducive*.<sup>18</sup> This is not to define “effective inquiry” in terms of intellectually virtuous inquiry so there is no circularity. There might be an issue with characterizing effective inquiry as knowledge-conducive if knowledge is in turn reductively defined by reference to intellectual virtues.<sup>19</sup> However, someone who thinks of effective inquiry in the way I have been recommending isn’t committed to any such definition or, indeed, to any reductive definition of knowledge. Nothing I have said so far is inconsistent with a so-called “knowledge-first” epistemology that regards the concept of knowledge as epistemologically primitive and uses this concept to explain other key epistemological concepts, including the concept of an effective inquiry.<sup>20</sup>

What about the notion of a responsible inquiry? Isn’t responsible inquiry intellectually virtuous inquiry? Perhaps so, but not because this is the definition of responsible inquiry. A responsible inquiry is one that is guided by the evidence and recognizes the obligations that come with being an inquirer. These include the obligation not to be negligent and to exercise due care and attention in the investigation of the matter at hand. A responsible inquirer has a certain attitude towards the business of inquiry, knows what he is doing and has the necessary skills.<sup>21</sup> Responsible inquiry is in these respects just like responsible driving, which also takes a combination of knowledge, skill, and attitude.<sup>22</sup> On this account, while it is undeniable that a responsible inquiry is indeed the kind of inquiry that an intellectually virtuous person would participate in, it is neither the case that responsible inquiry is *defined* as intellectually virtuous inquiry nor that all there is to say about responsible inquiry is that it is one that is conducted in the way that an intellectually virtuous person would conduct it.

My inquiry-based approach is broadly speaking a form of epistemic consequentialism but not standard epistemic consequentialism.<sup>23</sup> The standard consequentialist position in this area says that character virtues are truth-conducive character traits, while character vices are truth-obstructive. The former reliably produce true beliefs. The latter reliably produce false beliefs. On my account, intellectual virtues and vices are still delineated as such by reference to their consequences, but the consequences that matter are consequences for effective and responsible inquiry rather than the consequences for the ratio of true to false beliefs. To see what difference this makes consider the following scenario:

thatLet us assume that a Cartesian “evil demon” has, unbeknownst to us, made our world such that truth is best attained by thoroughly exemplifying what, on our best crafted current accounts, qualify as intellectual *vices*. Presumably, we would not therefore conclude that these vices are and have always been virtues. (Montmarquet 1987, 482)

In demon world, Galileo is less good at attaining the truth than his closed-minded, lazy, and negligent brother Schmalileo, but this surely doesn’t make Schmalileo’s intellectual vices any less genuine or turn them into intellectual virtues. Assuming that intellectual virtues shouldn’t be affected by sceptical scenarios Montmarquet concludes that truth-conduciveness “cannot, as such, be the distinctive

mark of the epistemic virtues” (1987, 482). By the same token, it would seem truth-obstructiveness cannot, as such, be the distinctive mark of intellectual vices.

The approach I have been recommending needn't be disturbed by such scenarios. On this approach, the issue is whether an evil demon could bring it about that intellectual vices such as gullibility, prejudice, negligence, and dogmatism abet rather than impede effective and responsible inquiry. Suppose that the demon has set things up so that when Schmalileo is presented with strong evidence that not-P, it is generally the case that P. Because Schmalileo is careless and negligent he disregards the evidence that not-P and continues to believe that P. This makes him an intellectually irresponsible inquirer even if, in demon world, ignoring the evidence available to him does not result in Schmalileo's beliefs regarding P being false. The key point is that a genuinely responsible inquirer doesn't disregard the evidence he has and continue to believe that P when presented with strong evidence that not-P. Even in evil demon world, the standard intellectual vices impede responsible inquiry, since even in this world gullible, prejudiced, careless, and negligent inquirers are being epistemologically irresponsible.

Isn't it nevertheless the case that Schmalileo's intellectual character traits make him a more *effective* inquirer in demon world than Galileo? Not if effectiveness in this context is understood in terms of *knowledge-conduciveness* rather than *truth-conduciveness*. The aim of inquiry is to find things out, and an effective inquiry is one that produces knowledge rather than mere true belief. Even in demon world Schmalileo's negligence and dogmatism don't make his inquiries liable to produce knowledge. He is an ineffective inquirer not because his beliefs are false but because they aren't justified. To think of Schmalileo's belief that P as sustained or produced by character traits like negligence and closed-mindedness is to imply that he isn't justified in believing that P and so doesn't know that P.<sup>24</sup> In contrast, Galileo's beliefs don't amount to knowledge because they are false, not because they are unjustified. He doesn't fail to know because he is careful and thorough. He fails to know *despite* rather than *because of* his carefulness and thoroughness, and his pursuit of knowledge is impeded by the evil demon rather than by his intellectual character.

Are there convincing examples of someone acquiring or retaining knowledge *because of* the operation or influence of intellectual character traits that would normally be classified as intellectual vices? Consider this: veteran journalist Louis Heren once suggested that when a politician tells you something in confidence the first question you should ask yourself is: “Why is this lying bastard lying to me?”<sup>25</sup> This dictum looks like the expression of a prejudice against politicians but one that also supports the acquisition or retention of knowledge. For Heren's prejudice made him less likely to be misled by the pronouncements of mendacious politicians and so more likely to know their real beliefs or intentions. This knowledge was available to Heren because of, rather than despite, the prejudice to which his dictum gives expression. Prejudice abets rather than impedes political inquiry by insulating us against rampant insincerity in the political realm. Yet prejudice is supposed to be a vice rather than a virtue.

Faced by such examples, the correct response is not to concede that prejudice isn't a vice or that intellectual vices needn't impede effective and responsible inquiry. A better response is first to question the idea that Heren's dictum expresses a

*prejudice* against politicians. This description is only justified if he lacked any evidence of the mendaciousness of politicians. Assuming that his experience of the ways of politicians fully entitled him to be suspicious of their pronouncements, his dictum is best described as an empirically grounded heuristic. Heuristics can be knowledge-conducive but needn't be prejudices. Now suppose that someone lacking Heren's experience subscribes to his dictum but disbelieves politicians not because he has evidence or experience of their mendaciousness but because he doesn't like them. Such a person might reasonably be described as prejudiced but his prejudice no longer looks like a character trait that abets political inquiry. If you are a politician and I only think you are lying because I am prejudiced against politicians then I don't *know* that you are lying, even if you are lying. The reason is that I'm not justified in believing you are lying to me, given that I only think you are lying because I am prejudiced against you and your kind. Then there is the case in which a politician tells me the truth about his intentions but in which I fail thereby to acquire testimonial knowledge of his intentions because I don't believe politicians. Genuine prejudice impedes our inquiries because it blocks the acquisition of knowledge and weakens the connection between what we do believe and what we have reason to believe.<sup>26</sup>

We now have what looks like a quite general strategy for dealing with putative counterexamples to the thesis that intellectual vices impede effective and responsible inquiry. Faced by a case in which a vice *V* supposedly abets rather than impedes such inquiry, the first option is to show that *V* is not genuinely *knowledge-conducive*, even if turns out to be truth-conducive. In these cases, *V* isn't knowledge-conducive because its role in generating or sustaining our beliefs makes it difficult to see our beliefs as epistemically justified. The other option is to deny that it is *V* that is helping us with our inquiries, as distinct from some other character trait or heuristic with which *V* is being confused. Either way, the upshot is that the putative counterexamples aren't genuine.<sup>27</sup>

The next issue concerns the relationship between my account of intellectual vices and motivational approaches. In brief, motivational approaches say that intellectual vices are vicious because they require or involve bad motives.<sup>28</sup> It has also been held that intellectual vices, like other vices, are acquired defects, that they are deep and lasting qualities that define a person's identity, and that we are responsible for our vices. Our vices, on this account, are blameworthy. What is the motivational component of intellectual vices? If, like Zagzebski, you think that "the primary motivation underlying the intellectual virtues is the motivation for knowledge" (1996, 181) you might conclude that the intellectual vices are marked by the absence of this motivation. But the gullible or obtuse inquirer needn't lack a motivation for knowledge. The problem with Oliver is not that he shows a lack of this motivation but that the particular way he goes about trying to acquire knowledge is no good. Another suggestion, made recently by Heather Battaly, is that the bad motives in virtue of which intellectual vices are vicious include "wanting to believe what is easiest" (2014, 65). Again, this does not appear to be a component of all intellectual vices. Like the rest of us, the gullible or cynical inquirer wants to believe what is true and Oliver certainly isn't motivated in his inquiries by the desire to take the path of least epistemological resistance.

As for whether intellectual vices are acquired, this is certainly not the case if what this means is that they are “acquired by a process that involves a certain amount of time and work on the part of the agent” (Zagzebski 1996, 135). Oliver doesn’t work at being gullible, cynical, or prejudiced, and time and effort don’t come into it. He might be accused of failing to make an effort to counteract his intellectual defects, but he can’t really be expected to work at correcting defects he doesn’t know he has. Such defects may or may not be deep and lasting, at least if we think of deep and lasting character traits as ones “we would ascribe to a person if asked to describe her after her death” (Zagzebski 1996, 135). It wouldn’t be that surprising if Oliver is gullible and cynical about some things but not others, and his cynicism and gullibility might underpin his 9/11 inquiries without being sufficiently pervasive to merit a mention in his obituary. No doubt Oliver is open to criticism for his intellectual vices but not necessarily blameworthy if the implication is that they are within his control. However much we might deplore Oliver’s conspiracism, we should also be willing to admit the possibility that he can’t help himself.

To sum up, I’ve suggested that intellectual vices figure in intuitive, character-based explanations of a person’s beliefs in Oliver-type cases, that is, cases in which people believe weird things, and that intellectual character traits are habits of thought or inquiry by reference to which we explain how people go about trying to find things out. I’ve further suggested that the intellectual vices are vicious in virtue of their role in impeding effective and responsible inquiry, and that this approach is different from standard epistemic consequentialism as well as motivational approaches to what makes intellectual vices intellectual vices. Finally, I have argued that we need to be careful about the idea that the intellectually vicious have “blameworthy psychologies” (Battaly 2014, 65).<sup>29</sup> In this area, as in other areas, we should refrain from being excessively moralistic.

### III

It’s easy to predict the reaction of sceptically minded philosophers to what I have just been arguing. The sceptics I have in mind are sceptics about the existence of character traits, and they are unlikely to be impressed by attempts to explain what is going on with Oliver by positing intellectual character traits. As I said in the introduction, philosophical doubts about character have been inspired by situationism, so it would be appropriate to ask at this point if there is anything to situationist-inspired scepticism about character, especially as applied to intellectual character traits. Is scepticism about character a problem for my take on Oliver or could it be that cases like Oliver are a problem for situationist scepticism about character?

Strictly speaking, situationism is not committed to the view that people don’t have character traits. What writers in this tradition criticize is the tendency to exaggerate the extent to which such traits can be used to explain and predict how people will behave in new situations, while failing to recognize the importance of situational factors in affecting behaviour. This is the so-called “fundamental attribution error,” and one question is whether virtue epistemology makes a version of this error in its account of epistemic conduct.<sup>30</sup> If so, where does this leave vice epistemology? Could it be that Oliver’s epistemic conduct is better explained by situational factors

than by his character traits? If so, it wouldn't follow straight away that he has no intellectual character traits; but what is the point of attributing such traits to people if they neither explain nor predict their epistemic conduct?

Someone who criticizes virtue epistemology on situationist grounds is Mark Alfano. As I've already noted, Alfano objects that intellectual virtues are empirically inadequate since they neither explain nor predict a sufficient portion of epistemological conduct. The reason they fail in this regard is that people are "inordinately susceptible to seemingly trivial and epistemically irrelevant situational influences" (2012, 232). Such influences include "mood elevators, mood depressors, ambient sounds, ambient smells, social distance cues and even the weather" (2012, 225). In playing up the surprising influence of such factors and playing down the influence of the intellectual virtues, Alfano is making the case for what he calls "epistemic situationism." The focus of Alfano's discussion is the role of the intellectual virtues of curiosity, flexibility, and creativity in explaining our epistemic conduct. Drawing on the work of social psychologists, Alfano concludes that:

[M]any people do not possess creativity, flexibility and curiosity as such but inquire and reason creatively, flexibly and curiously when their moods have been elevated by such seemingly trivial and epistemically irrelevant situational influences as candy, success at anagrams, and comedy films. (2012, 239)

For virtue epistemologists there is always the option of retreating to 'local' rather than 'global' character traits, so that a person's epistemic conduct is not explained by their curiosity per se but by their curiosity while in a good mood. One challenge then facing virtue epistemologists is to explain how such local traits can be genuinely explanatory.

Should vice epistemologists be worried about Alfano's arguments? The first thing to say is that intellectual virtues like curiosity, flexibility, and creativity are ideals to which we might aspire but few of us attain other than in highly attenuated forms. Alfano might be right that such virtues are "rare" (2012, 226) but it is hard to believe that vices like gullibility and closed-mindedness are rare. Such vices are, one would have thought, all too common, and it is barely credible that human epistemic conduct isn't heavily influenced by them. This is not to say that other factors aren't also influential, but the Olivers of this world aren't gullible or closed-minded depending on their mood, ambient sounds, smells, or the weather. If Oliver's epistemic conduct is at all influenced by situational factors they are nothing like the ones that interest Alfano, and vice-based explanations look far more compelling.

Epistemic situationists might object that Oliver is a fictional case and that while it is open to me to stipulate that Oliver believes what he believes about 9/11 because of his traits of character, nothing follows about the viability of such explanations in the real world. As far as epistemic situationism is concerned, the merits of situationism and vice epistemology have to be settled empirically, by looking at actual cases of questionable beliefs and trying to work out why real people have such beliefs. What we should be trying to understand, that is to say, is the epistemic conduct of real world Olivers rather than fictional Olivers. This might seem a tall order but there

is in fact a fairly extensive psychological literature on this topic. So now would be a good time to look at what social psychologists actually say about why real people believe weird things. Does the empirical evidence support vice epistemology, situationism, or some mixture of the two?

In honour of Oliver I will concentrate on the psychological literature on conspiracist beliefs.<sup>31</sup> In a widely cited 2010 paper Viren Swami and his colleagues investigate “personality and individual difference predictors of beliefs in 9/11 conspiracy theories” (2011, 750). One of their main findings is that the best predictor of belief in one conspiracy theory is belief in other such theories. The question why people become conspiracy theorists in the first place is not addressed by the finding, but later work by Swami and others is helpful in this regard. For one thing, the fact that endorsement of specific conspiracy theories is associated with greater belief in other conspiracy theories has been taken to indicate the existence of a “conspiracy mentality,” that is, “the general propensity to subscribe to theories blaming a conspiracy of ill-intending individuals or groups for important societal phenomena” (Bruder et al. 2013, 2). This sounds like a character trait, and the obvious follow-up question is how this trait relates to other character traits and cognitive mechanisms. Does the “conspiracy mentality” form a “meaningful individual difference variable” (Imhoff and Bruder 2014, 28) or is it reducible to the influence of any other factor?

In a paper published in 2011, Swami and his colleagues describe the results of two interesting studies of what they call “conspiracist ideation,” that is, a belief in the existence of a “vast, insidious, preternaturally effective international conspiratorial network designed to perpetrate acts of the most fiendish character” (Hofstadter 2008, 14). Study one was about conspiracist ideation in relation to the 7/7 bombings in London. Study two looked at belief in an entirely fictitious conspiracy theory about the success of Red Bull (the drink) in Austria. As well as showing that the strongest predictor of belief in 7/7 conspiracy theories was belief in other conspiracy theories, Study one showed an association between conspiracist ideation and political cynicism. Study two showed that belief in the Red Bull conspiracy was predicted by a belief in paranormal phenomena. Swami et al. suggest that “this association may be predicated on the fact that both conspiracist and paranormal ideation are underpinned by similar thinking styles” (2011, 458). The 2011 paper concludes with the observation that “the importance of the two studies . . . is that they identify a constellation of individual difference traits that are associated with conspiracist ideation” (2011, 460).

The suggestion that conspiracist ideation is associated with a particular thinking style leads back to the notion of a conspiracy mentality. Evidence for the existence of a conspiracy mentality, with its associated thinking style, is provided by the Conspiracy Mentality Questionnaire (CMQ) devised by Bruder et al. Their aim was to devise a measure of generic conspiracist beliefs that is independent of knowledge of specific conspiracy theories, since the latter may vary between cultures. One study examined relations between conspiracy mentality as measured by CMQ and (a) peoples’ tendency to believe in paranormal events, (b) paranoid ideation, and (c) schizotypal personality disposition. Bruder et al. show that although “conspiracy mentality is related to other constructs in meaningful and describable ways, none of the

correlations was of a size that would raise doubts as to whether conspiracy mentality is viable as an independent construct” (2013, 8).

What conclusions should we draw from this brief survey? On the face of it, there is little support in the psychological literature on conspiracism for epistemic situationism. What makes the latter interesting is the suggestion that our epistemic conduct is influenced by *unexpected* or *surprising* situational factors. It’s not that situational factors play no role in the formation of conspiracist beliefs but the factors in question are entirely unsurprising. Swami et al. report that belief in 9/11 conspiracy theories is strongly associated with exposure to 9/11 conspiracist ideation while others draw attention to the influence of geographical or cultural factors.<sup>32</sup> None of this is remotely surprising. What is gratifying from a vice-epistemology perspective is the fact that the social psychological research vindicates what look very much like intellectual character explanations of belief in specific conspiracy theories. My account of intellectual character traits as habits or styles of thought or inquiry is very much in keeping with the finding that conspiracist ideation is underpinned by a distinctive thinking style, and what is a general propensity to subscribe to conspiracy theories if not a character trait? The researchers in this field don’t talk explicitly about “intellectual character,” but they certainly talk about “individual difference traits,” and these are character traits as I understand them. So there is nothing here which supports scepticism about character, and no reason not to regard a general propensity to think in conspiracist terms as an intellectual vice rather than a virtue. The positing of such a vice is justified by its predictive and explanatory validity, both of which are very well attested by the empirical research.

It’s true that “conspiracist mentality” is not on any of the standard philosophical lists of intellectual vices and that the standard intellectual vices barely figure in the psychological research on conspiracism. But there are several things to be said about this. First, there might be a case for adding the general propensity to subscribe to conspiracy theories to the list of intellectual vices recognized by philosophers. Second, it remains an open question how this particular vice relates to more familiar vices like gullibility, prejudice, and cynicism. As I’ve already noted, saying that the best predictor of belief in one conspiracy theory is belief in other such theories leaves it open how people become conspiracy theorists in the first place, and the vice epistemologist’s hypothesis is that conspiracist thinking is a manifestation of deeper and more general intellectual vices. The research I have been describing doesn’t put this hypothesis to the test, but it would be surprising, at least on the face of it, if it turned out that the conspiracy mentality has nothing to do with broader intellectual character traits. This is in fact a suggestion taken up by Swami et al. They report a link between conspiracist thinking and “intellectual curiosity, and active imagination and a proclivity for new ideas” (2010, 759). The latter are intellectual character traits and the idea is that they foster conspiracist thinking. It’s true that intellectual curiosity and a proclivity for new ideas would normally be regarded as intellectual virtues, but they become vices when unconstrained by good judgement and a healthy dose of scepticism. The proposal that remains on the table is that intellectual vices, at least some of which might be perversions of the corresponding intellectual virtues, provide a fundamental nonsituationist explanation of some popular but questionable beliefs.

Other nonsituationist explanations are, of course, possible. In *How We Know What Isn't So* Thomas Gilovich denies that people hold questionable beliefs “simply because they are stupid or gullible” (1991, 2). He argues instead that many such beliefs “have purely cognitive origins, and can be traced to imperfections in our capacities to process information and draw conclusions” (1991, 2). For example, belief in the phenomenon of the “hot hand” in basketball—the belief that players have self-sustaining successful streaks—can be explained by the fact that many people tend to misconstrue random events and don’t understand what chance sequences look like. The truth is that many factors have a part to play in answering the question, “why do people believe weird things?” and vice epistemology is not saying that only intellectual vices are relevant.<sup>33</sup> What it is saying is that intellectual vices exist, and that our intellectual character traits are among the significant influences on our epistemic conduct.

Perhaps the most significant challenge to vice epistemology arises from antiglobalist accounts of character traits. Globalists expect character traits to be consistent, where “consistency requires that people respond in the same way wherever they have the same reasons” (Alfano 2012, 230).<sup>34</sup> So, for example, if Oliver is genuinely gullible or careless in relation to conspiracy theories then he should be no less gullible and careless about other matters. If prejudice or closed-mindedness are the character traits by reference to which his conspiracism is to be explained, then we should expect these traits to be manifested in his epistemic conduct more generally. Yet it is surely conceivable that in other domains Oliver functions differently, and does not display the same intellectual vices. If he isn’t consistently gullible or careless, how can these be genuine character trait by reference to which *any* of his epistemic conduct can be explained?

The vice epistemologist’s response to this question should be to question the thesis that genuine character traits need to be consistent. Suppose you give money to charity and quite often also give to homeless people you pass on the street. Often but not invariably. You occasionally ignore people in need though the reasons for giving to them are exactly the same as the reasons for giving to anyone else in the same circumstances. So you aren’t consistent, and it might even be that your decision whether to give on a given occasion is influenced by your mood or how much of a hurry you are in. But it doesn’t follow that you aren’t generous or that your charitable behaviour can’t be explained by reference to this trait. You can be generous without being consistently generous, and the same goes for other character traits. You can be gullible without being consistently gullible, cynical without being consistently cynical, and so on.

Obviously there are limits to how isolated or ‘local’ characters traits can be without ceasing to be recognizable as character traits. It would certainly be surprising if Oliver goes in for conspiracy theories but his epistemic conduct is impeccable apart from that. However, what we would expect to find, and what we do find in practice, is that the propensity to go in for conspiracy theories doesn’t exist in splendid cognitive isolation. This propensity is rooted in a thinking style which has other ramifications and typically manifests itself in a range of other beliefs and investigative practices. This is perfectly consistent with allowing that some of Oliver’s investigative

practices are not affected. Perhaps when he is investigating the pros and cons of different mortgages he does just fine and displays none of the vices he displays in his 9/11 studies; he can be an effective and responsible thinker about his personal finances without being an effective or responsible thinker about politics, just as someone can be a careful driver but a careless cook. The sweet spot is somewhere between the mythical global traits which demand absolute consistency and ultra-fine-grained, situation-specific local traits which carry no implications for a person's conduct other than in a single case. Most character traits are in this sense *in-between* traits, and neither the existence nor explanatory potential of in-between intellectual vices is seriously threatened by situationist attacks on the straw man that is globalism. If situationism denies the existence of intellectual vices in this sense then so much the worse for situationism.

#### IV

My last question is: what is the epistemological significance of intellectual vices? The answer to this question depends on how we conceive of epistemology. If, as I have been assuming, inquiry is the main focus of epistemology then it is difficult to see how intellectual vices can possibly fail to be relevant, given the characterization of intellectual character vices as intellectual character traits that impede effective and responsible inquiry. Inquiry epistemology, as I understand it, makes it its business to understand, guide, and improve human inquiry, and this means that inquiry epistemology has to be, at least to some extent, a vice epistemology. Consider the aim of understanding human inquiry. Inquiry is the attempt to find things out and extend our knowledge by carrying out investigations directed at answering questions. In that case, one way to understand human inquiry is to look at *how* we attempt to find things out and try to extend our knowledge. Obviously there are very many different ways of doing that, and there are also characteristic ways in which we do well as inquirers and characteristic ways in which we do badly. When things go wrong, when our inquiries go badly, we want as inquiry epistemologists to understand why we go astray. No doubt there are lots of reasons for that, but one key fact is the extent to which human inquirers are intellectually vicious. Since it is not uncommon for our inquiries to be flawed because of our closed-mindedness, gullibility, wishful thinking, rigidity, and so on, any serious attempt to understand human inquiry should include the serious study of the prevalence and influence of such intellectual vices.

Oliver is one illustration of how human inquiry is impeded by our intellectual vices, and this case also brings into focus the challenge of self-ignorance. Self-ignorance is an issue because the extent to which his thinking about 9/11 is influenced by his intellectual vices is not apparent to Oliver.<sup>35</sup> It's obvious to us that gullibility and other intellectual vices account for some of Oliver's views but it certainly isn't obvious to him; the one person who doesn't think that he only believes P because he is gullible is Oliver. He might be perfectly happy to accept the insights of vice epistemology but of course will deny that they apply to him. This is the sense in which he is self-ignorant: recognizing one's own intellectual and other vices is a fundamental form of self-knowledge, and Oliver lacks self-knowledge in this sense. The extent to which we can ever really know our own vices is open to question but even a partial recognition of

our own intellectual character flaws represents progress of sorts: we can't try to overcome our flaws unless we know what they are and how they affect us.

The idea that epistemology should seek to guide or regulate human inquiry has a long and distinguished history. Descartes, Spinoza, and Locke, among others, are all practitioners of what has come to be called "regulative epistemology," and the central aim of regulative epistemology is to improve our epistemic conduct. Drawing on Nicholas Wolterstorff's work on Locke, Roberts and Wood distinguish two kinds of regulative epistemology, rule-oriented and habit-oriented regulative epistemology.<sup>36</sup> The former offers guidance in the form of rules or directions for acquiring knowledge. The latter tries to inculcate good habits of epistemic conduct. However, both varieties of regulative epistemology are a response to "perceived deficiencies in people's epistemic conduct" (Roberts and Wood 2007, 21). It is because of our shortcomings as inquirers that epistemology does, or should, make it its business to offer us guidance with a view to helping us do better. On this interpretation, epistemology is "strongly practical and social, rather than just an interesting theoretical challenge for philosophy professors and smart students" (Roberts and Wood 2007, 21).

What has this got to do with vice epistemology? The answer should be obvious but there is no harm in spelling it out: to the extent that inquiry epistemology seeks to guide and improve human inquiry it incorporates regulative epistemology. Since inquiry epistemology in its regulative dimension is a response to perceived deficiencies in our epistemic conduct it has to start by identifying these deficiencies. As Alvin Goldman points out, "if we wish to raise our intellectual performance, it behoves us to identify those traits which are most in need of improvement" (1978, 511). These traits include the various intellectual vices that impede our inquiries. Since vice epistemology is the study of the nature, identity, and epistemological significance of these vices, the project of identifying of those traits which are most in need of improvement will certainly need help from vice epistemology. Inquiry epistemology incorporates regulative epistemology, and regulative epistemology incorporates vice epistemology. Or, to put it another way, the bad intellectual habits which inquiry epistemology tries to improve are, or at least include, the bad intellectual habits which vice epistemology identifies and studies.

Earlier I contrasted inquiry epistemology with analytic epistemology, where the latter is conceived of as analysing key epistemic concepts with a view to answering questions such as 'What is knowledge?' and 'What is justified belief?' Even if it is clear why inquiry epistemology should be interested in intellectual vices, why should analytic epistemology be interested in intellectual vices? One thought is this: in order to answer a question like 'What is justified belief?' you need to have a story to tell about the distinction between justified and unjustified beliefs. However, the evaluation of the justificational status of a particular belief is closely related to the evaluation of the believer. In the case of Oliver, for example, one reason we might regard his belief that P as unjustified is that he is being gullible or closed-minded or in some other way intellectually vicious in believing that P. Here, as in other cases, the justificational status of Oliver's belief is a reflection of, among other things, our view of the intellectual character traits in which the belief is grounded. For his belief to be unjustified there must be a particular way in which it is unjustified, and originating in an

intellectual vice is one fundamental way for his belief to be unjustified. By the same token, a justified belief is characteristically one which arises through the exercise of intellectual virtue.<sup>37</sup> In evaluating a belief as justified we are in effect commending the believer.

There is obviously much more to be said about this, and I have only tried to sketch an argument for the view that analytic epistemologists should be interested in intellectual vices. One issue left open by this argument is whether conceptual analysis of the sort practiced by analytic epistemologists casts any light on the nature and significance of intellectual vices. If so then inquiry and analytic epistemology can work together, with each adding to the insights of the other. If not, then that would not be a reason for questioning the idea that epistemology should be interested in intellectual vices. Rather, it would be a reason for suspecting that the analysis of epistemic concepts is not the best way, or the only way, to answer questions like ‘What is justified belief?’

Many of the same points can be made about the task of answering the question ‘What is knowledge?’ Given that inquiry is all about extending and refining our knowledge, it looks as though inquiry epistemology should be interested in this question. The substantive issue is whether and to what extent conceptual analysis can cast any light on the nature of knowledge. A natural thought is that understanding human knowledge is partly a matter of understanding how it comes to be, and this in turn requires the identification of our basic sources of knowledge.<sup>38</sup> Since these sources include inquiry, the philosophical study of human knowledge should include the philosophical study of human inquiry.<sup>39</sup> If it turns out that conceptual analysis doesn’t cast much light on the nature of inquiry that would not be a reason for concluding that analytic epistemology is asking the wrong questions. It would be a reason for concluding that analytic epistemology doesn’t have the right tools for answering the questions it asks.

To sum up, I have argued that intellectual vices are clearly of epistemological interest if you conceive of epistemology as inquiry epistemology. The case for analytic epistemology to be interested in intellectual vices is less strong but can still be made. My own sympathies are very much with inquiry epistemology, and for my purposes the important point is that the epistemological significance of intellectual vices is not or, or should not, be in question as far as inquiry epistemology is concerned. The interesting question is not whether, if intellectual vices exist, epistemology should be interested in them (it should) but whether such vices exist as genuine character traits which affect our inquiries. My contention in this paper has been that they do. With scepticism about intellectual character out of the way, vice epistemology can get down to the serious business of identifying and studying specific intellectual vices. Vice epistemology is the epistemology of real human beings, and a failure to engage with the intellectual vices by which our cognitive lives are blighted represents a failure to engage with the human epistemological predicament.<sup>40</sup>

## NOTES

1. Axtell (2000), Baehr (2012), and Battaly (2012) are all excellent overviews of virtue epistemology in its different incarnations. In virtue epistemology, “agents rather than beliefs are the primary objects of epistemic evaluation, and intellectual virtues and vices, which are evaluations of agents, are the fundamental

- concepts and properties” (Battaly 2012, 4). Virtue ‘responsibilists’ conceive of intellectual virtues as states of character, whereas virtue ‘reliabilists’ take intellectual virtues to be reliable faculties. The distinction between ‘reliabilism’ and ‘responsibilism’ is due to Lorraine Code. See Code (1984).
2. There is some discussion of intellectual vices in Zagzebski (1996) but the main focus is intellectual virtues. Four philosophers who do write about intellectual vices are Jason Baehr, Heather Battaly, Miranda Fricker, and Casey Swank. See Baehr (2010), Battaly (2010, 2014), Fricker (2007), and Swank (2000).
  3. The distinction between *homo philosophicus* and *homo sapiens* is borrowed from Cassam (2014).
  4. It’s worth pointing out that vices in the ordinary, nonphilosophical sense needn’t be character traits. Being a gambler might just about be a character trait, but gambling is an activity rather than a character trait. Yet when someone describes gambling as one of their ‘vices’ they aren’t misusing the notion of a vice. Someone who thinks that intellectual virtues must be character traits is Linda Zagzebski. A virtue, she writes, “is a deep and lasting quality of a person, closely identified with her selfhood, whereas natural faculties are only raw materials for the self” (1996, 104). This is directed against those who think that intellectual virtues are natural faculties like eyesight and memory. I think Zagzebski is right that such faculties aren’t virtues, let alone intellectual virtues. The processes on Goldman’s list are neither natural faculties nor character traits, but still look like vices. Curiously, wishful thinking is on Zagzebski’s list of intellectual vices. See (1996, 152) and footnote 15.
  5. Harman is an extreme sceptic about the existence of character traits. See Harman (1999) and Harman (2000). Doris (2002) gives expression to a milder form of scepticism which targets the attribution to people of ‘global’ rather than ‘local’ character traits. A useful overview of character scepticism is Merritt, Harman, and Doris (2010).
  6. Baehr (2006) presses the parallel question about intellectual virtues.
  7. This is Linda Zagzebski’s view in her Zagzebski (1996).
  8. See, for example, Nisbett and Ross (2011).
  9. See Alfano (2012) and King (2014) for a response.
  10. This label is taken from Alfano (2012) and the position it labels is associated above all with the epistemological writings of Christopher Hookway. For Hookway, inquiries are “goal-directed activities, attempts to find things out” (2003, 194), and the main concern of inquiry epistemology “is with explaining the evaluations we must be able to make if we are to carry out inquiries in a responsible, well-controlled fashion” (1994, 212). My thinking about vice epistemology is indebted to Hookway’s work though, like most virtue epistemologists, Hookway doesn’t talk much about intellectual vices.
  11. This example is from Cassam (2014).
  12. When it comes to an agent’s actions, as distinct from his beliefs, the parallel notion is that of the reasons for which he acted. See Dancy (2000) for an extensive discussion of this notion.
  13. Even a cursory reading of the 9/11 Commission Report leaves very little room for (rational) doubt on this score. See Kean and Hamilton (2012).
  14. See Shermer (2007).
  15. As noted above (footnote 4) it’s a little odd that wishful thinking is on Zagzebski’s list. Everything else on her list is something that a person can be said to *be* or to *have*. You can be closed-minded or to have intellectual pride. But you can neither be nor have wishful thinking. You can perhaps be a wishful thinker but occasional wishful thinking doesn’t make you a wishful thinker. In this respect wishful thinking is unlike ordinary vices such as smoking. A person who smokes occasionally is still a smoker (at least by the standards of most insurance companies).
  16. Thanks to Heather Battaly and an anonymous referee for raising this worry.
  17. I owe this suggestion to Heather Battaly.
  18. See Williamson (2000) for a defence of the idea that knowing is a mental state.
  19. For example, Zagzebski defines knowledge as “a state of cognitive contact with reality arising out of acts of intellectual virtue” (1996, 298).
  20. “Knowledge first” is the defining idea of Williamson (2000). See Cassam (2009) for further discussion of Williamson’s view.
  21. What kind of attitude is required for responsible inquiry? One that is knowledge-conducive.
  22. This account of responsible driving is from the Ontario Ministry of Transportation Driver’s Handbook (<http://www.mto.gov.on.ca/english/dandv/driver/handbook/section2.0.0.shtml>).
  23. See Ahlstrom-Vij and Dunn (2014) for a good discussion of epistemic consequentialism.
  24. Zagzebski presumably has something along these lines in mind when she argues that closed-mindedness prevents a person from having knowledge “even if he has true beliefs.” This is because

- “closed-mindedness tends to prevent a person from going through the process that would justify his beliefs” (1996, 188–89). This is, however, an unrepresentative passage. Most of the time she isn’t careful to distinguish the idea that intellectual virtues are knowledge-conducive from the idea that they are truth-conducive.
25. As British readers might recognize, this advice is often wrongly attributed to the BBC journalist Jeremy Paxman. Heren himself attributes the dictum to his mentor, the industrial correspondent of the *Daily Worker*: “when I asked him for some advice before interviewing a senior official, he said, ‘Always ask yourself why these lying bastards are lying to you’” (Heren 1988, 59).
  26. See the discussion of prejudice in Fricker (2007).
  27. Another putative counterexample, suggested by an anonymous referee, can be dealt with in much the same way. This is Kuhn’s idea that dogmatism aids the scientific pursuit of truth. See Kuhn (1996). But what Kuhn describes as dogmatism is better described as perseverance, which is the virtuous mean between the twin vices of dogmatism and the flakiness that can result from being “hypercritical” (Rowbottom 2011, 119).
  28. See Battaly (2014) for further discussion.
  29. To be fair, Battaly (2014) allows for ‘responsibilist’ intellectual vices that are blameworthy, but also for ‘reliabilist’ intellectual vices that aren’t.
  30. Ross and Nisbett describe the fundamental attribution error as “people’s inflated belief in the importance of personality traits and dispositions, together with their failure to recognize the importance of situational factors affecting behavior” (2011, 4).
  31. The relevant literature includes Goertzel (1994), Swami et al. (2010, 2011), Brotherton, French and Pickering (2013), Bruder et al. (2013), and Imhoff and Bruder (2014). Also relevant is Sunstein (2014). Aaronovitch (2009) is a useful overview of influential conspiracy theories.
  32. Imhoff and Bruder claim that “conspiracy thinking is particularly rife in the Middle East” (2014, 40).
  33. Apart from cognitive, character and cultural explanations there also has to be room for explanations of the sort that a psychiatrist might give. Some weird beliefs might be due to a mental or personality disorder but I take it that such explanations aren’t always appropriate. Oliver’s beliefs might be highly questionable but that doesn’t make him mentally ill. Character explanations are broadly speaking psychological but not medical.
  34. As Doris characterizes it, globalism about character has three elements, consistency (character traits are reliably manifested in trait-relevant behavior across a diversity of trait-relevant eliciting conditions), stability (character traits are reliably manifested in trait-relevant behavior over iterated trials of similar trait-relevant eliciting conditions), and evaluative integration (in a given character, the occurrence of a trait with a particular evaluative valence is probabilistically related to the occurrence of other traits with similar evaluative valences). See Doris (2002, 22–23).
  35. See the discussion of self-ignorance in Cassam (2014, ch. 14).
  36. See Wolterstorff (1996, 152–54).
  37. See Goldman (1992).
  38. This way of putting things is inspired by Barry Stroud’s comment that “the philosophical study of human knowledge seeks to understand what human knowledge is and how it comes to be” (2000, 99).
  39. See Hookway (2003) and other papers by Hookway making a strong and, in my view, convincing case for inquiry epistemology.
  40. Many thanks to Heather Battaly, Fleur Jongepier, Jeroen de Ridder and two anonymous referees for excellent comments on an earlier draft. This paper was written as part of a wider research project on vice epistemology. I thank the Arts and Humanities Research Council for its support (grant reference number AH/M011089/1) for this project.

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