Vice Ontology

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One of the frustrations of trying to make headway with the rapidly expanding literature on epistemic vices is the absence of an agreed list of such vices. Vice epistemologists are more than happy to say what makes a character trait, attitude of way of thinking epistemically vicious and most provide examples of epistemic vices or lists of the kind of thing that have in mind. But these lists tend to be a hotchpotch. Different philosophers provide different lists and while there is some overlap there are also some significant variations. Closed-mindedness is a popular favourite but some vices that appear on some lists fail to appear on others. Here, for example, is Linda Zagzebksi's list:

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

Confronted by a list like this several questions suggest themselves: why do these items make it onto the list and not others? Why not dogmatism or gullibility? Is idleness really an *epistemic* vice or a vice in a more general sense? Are all the items on the list equally important or are some more important than others? What is the relationship between the listed vices? It isn't necessarily a criticism of vice epistemologists that they rarely tackle such questions. They are mainly concerned to develop a theoretical account of the notion of an epistemic vice, and individual vices are more often than not only mentioned for illustrative purposes.

An Order for Vice

But as vice epistemologists get down to listing epistemic vices they need to make it clear on what basis included items have been included and excluded items have been excluded. If some epistemic vices are deemed to be subservient to others it needs to be explained why. As Ian James Kidd notes in his valuable contribution, an important but neglected issue for vice epistemology is *taxonomy*, and this means having a story to tell about the basis on which epistemic vices can reasonably be grouped and ordered.[1]

Kidd rises to this challenge by drawing on the historically influential notion of a capital vice.[2] Capital vices are 'source vices' that give rise to other vices. Kidd asks whether there are capital epistemic vices and gives closed-mindedness as a possible example. According to Heather Battaly, whose view Kidd discusses, closed-mindedness is an unwillingness or inability to engage seriously with relevant intellectual options.[3] One way to be closed-minded is to be dogmatic but Battaly suggests that closed-mindedness is the broader notion: one is dogmatic if one is closed-minded with respect to beliefs one already holds but one can be closed-minded without being dogmatic.

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[1] 'Vice epistemology', as I understand it, is the philosophical study of the nature, identity and significance of epistemic vices. See Cassam 2016. 'Vice epistemologists' are philosophers who work on, or in, vice epistemology. Notable vice epistemologists include Heather Battaly, Ian Kidd and Alessandra Tanesini.
[2] Kidd 2017.
[3] Battaly 2017.

For Battaly, closed-mindedness does not require one already to have made up one's mind since one can also be closed-minded in how one *arrives* at one's beliefs. The upshot is that closed-mindedness is the 'source of dogmatism' (Kidd 2017: 14). This doesn't settle the question whether closed-mindedness is a capital epistemic vice if genuine capital vices have more than one sub-vice.

Still, Kidd reads Battaly's view of the link between closed-mindedness and dogmatism as providing at least some support for viewing the former as a capital epistemic vice. Furthermore, it looks as though the capitality relation is in this case a conceptual relation. It might be a psychological fact that being closed-minded tends to make a person dogmatic but the postulated connection between closed-mindedness and dogmatism looks conceptual: it is built into the concepts of closed-mindedness and dogmatism that being dogmatic is a way of being closed-minded.

To what are analyses of concepts of specific epistemic vices answerable? One might think: to the nature of those vices themselves but then it needs to be explained how talk of the 'nature' of epistemic vices is to be understood. In what sense do such vices have a 'nature' that analyses of them capture or fail to capture?

Going Back to Locke

This way of formulating the methodological question should resonate with readers of Locke, not least because it represents the question as turning on the ontology of vice. In Locke's ontology there is a fundamental distinction between substances and modes. Substances, for Locke, are the ultimate subjects of predication and exist independently of us. Gold and horses are Lockean substances, and our complex ideas of substances aren't just combinations of simple ideas or observable properties.

They are ideas of 'distinct particular things subsisting by themselves' with their own underlying nature that explains why they have the observable properties they have (II.xii.6).[4] Since our ideas of substances are 'intended to be Representations of Substances, as they really are' they are answerable to the nature of substances as they really are and aren't guaranteed to be adequate, that is, to do justice to the actual nature of what they are intended to represent (II.xxx.5).

In contrast, our ideas of modes are ideas of qualities or attributes that can only exist as the qualities or attributes *of* a substance. Modes are dependent existences. *Simple* modes are combinations of the same simple idea whereas *mixed* modes combine ideas of several different kinds.[5] So, for example, theft is a mixed mode since the idea of theft is the idea of the concealed change of possession of something without the consent of the proprietor. Locke's key claim about ideas of modes is that they are 'voluntary Collections of simple *Ideas*, which the Mind puts together, without any reference to any real Archetypes' (II.xxxi.3). It

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[4] All references in this form are to a book, chapter and section of Locke 1975, which was originally published in 1689.

[5] Locke's examples of mixed modes include beauty, theft, obligation, drunkenness, a lie, hypocrisy, sacrilege, murder, appeal, triumph, wrestling, fencing, boldness, habit, testiness, running, speaking, revenge, gratitude, polygamy, justice, liberality, and courage. This list is from Perry 1967.

follows that these ideas can't fail to be adequate since, as Michael Ayers puts it on Locke's behalf, we form these ideas 'without the need to refer to reality' (1991: 57).[6] Take the idea of courage, which Locke regards as a mixed mode:

> He that at first put together the *Idea* of Danger perceived, absence of disorder from Fear, sedate consideration of what was justly to be done, and executing it without that disturbance, or being deterred by the danger of it, had certainly in his Mind that complex *Idea* made up of that Combination: and intending it to be nothing else, but what it is; nor to have any other simple *Ideas*, but what it hath, it could not also be but an *adequate idea*: and laying this up in his Memory, with the name *Courage* annexed to it, to signifie it to others, and denominate from thence any Action he should observe to agree with it, had thereby a Standard to measure and dominate Actions by, as they agreed to it' (II.xxxi.3).

When it comes to our ideas of substances it is reality that sets the standard for our ideas. With mixed modes, it is our ideas that set the standard for reality, so that an action is courageous just if it has the features that our idea of courage brings together. Locke doesn't deny that ideas of mixed modes *can* be formed by experience and observation. For example, seeing two men wrestle can give one the idea of wrestling. For the most part, however, ideas of modes are the products of invention, of the 'voluntary putting together of several simple *Ideas* in our own minds' (II.xxii.9), without prior observation.

An interesting consequence of what might be described as Locke's *conceptualism* about modes is that there is in a sense no external standard by reference to which disputes about what is and is not part of the idea of mixed modes can be settled.[7] Again Locke uses the example of courage to make his point.

Suppose that one person X's idea of a courageous act includes the idea of 'sedate consideration' of 'what is fittest to be done' (II.xxx.4). This is the idea of 'an Action which may exist' (ibid.) but another person Y has a different idea according to which a courageous action is one that is performed 'without using one's Reason or Industry' (ibid.). Such actions are also possible, and Y's idea is as 'real' as X's. An action that displays courage by X's lights might fail to do so by Y's lights and vice versa but it seems that the only respect in which Y's idea might count as 'wrong, imperfect, or *inadequate*' (II.xxxi.5) is if Y intends his idea of courage to be the same as X's. Apart from that, both ideas are equally legitimate and can both be used in the classification of actions.

In fact, this isn't quite Locke's view since it omits one important qualification. At one point he argues that:

> *Mixed Modes and Relations*, having no other *reality*, but what they have in the Minds of Men, there is nothing more required to those kinds of *Ideas* to make them *real*, but

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[6] Locke illustrates the arbitrariness of mixed modes by noting that we have the complex idea of patricide but no special idea for the killing of a son or a sheep.
[7] There is more on 'conceptualism' in Cassam 1993.

> that they be so framed, that there be the possibility of existing comformable to them. These *Ideas* being themselves Archetypes, cannot differ from their Archetypes, and so *cannot be chimerical*, unless any one of them will jumble together in them inconsistent *Ideas* (II.xxx.4).

On reflection, however, consistency isn't enough for our complex ideas of mixed modes to be 'real'. For these ideas not to be 'fantastical' they must also 'have a Conformity to the ordinary signification of the Name' (II.xxx.4). So it would count against Y's (or X's) conception of courage that it doesn't accord with the ordinary meaning of common usage of words like 'courage' or 'courageous'.

Return to the Present

What is the relevance of Locke's discussion for the issues that Kidd is concerned with? A natural thought is that epistemic vices like closed-mindedness and dogmatism are, like the idea of courage, mixed modes. As noted previously, there is room for debate about how these epistemic vices are to be understood and how they are related. Starting with dogmatism, here is one account by Roberts and Wood:

> A doctrine is a belief about the general character of the world, or some generally important aspect of the world, which bears the weight of many other beliefs. Thus a mother who refuses, in the face of what should be compelling evidence, to give up her belief that her son is innocent of a certain crime, is perhaps stubborn, obstinate, or blinded by her attachment, but she is not on that account dogmatic. By contrast, someone who holds irrationally to some fundamental doctrine, such as the tenets of Marxism or capitalism or Christianity, or some broad historical thesis such as that the Holocaust did not occur, is dogmatic (2007: 194-5).

Battaly sees things slightly differently. On her view, it is possible for a person to be dogmatic even in relation to relatively trivial beliefs or beliefs that aren't representative of ideologies or doctrines. One can be dogmatic about whether one's pet is well-behaved or whether one's son is innocent of a crime. Roberts and Woods' conception of dogmatism is narrow whereas Battaly's conception is broad. Who is right?

If being 'right' is a matter of conceiving of dogmatism is a way that does justice to its real or true nature then the Lockean conceptualist says that there is no such thing. As a mixed mode, dogmatism is a voluntary collection of simple ideas. Roberts and Wood are free to stipulate that dogmatism has to do with doctrine and Battaly is free to reject this stipulation. Relative to Roberts and Woods' complex idea of dogmatism the belief that one's pet is well-behaved is too trivial to be dogmatic. Relative to Battaly's idea of dogmatism the belief that one's son is innocent of a certain crime might be dogmatic.

However, the disagreement between the broad and narrow accounts of dogmatism is, on a Lockean reading, a not very deep disagreement between two policies about the use of the term 'dogmatic'. The most one can say is that the narrow account is closer to ordinary usage, and this might be a case for preferring that account. Beyond that, it's not clear what is really at issue.

Turning to the relationship between dogmatism and closed-mindedness, Kidd bases his proposal that closed-mindedness is a capital vice of which dogmatism is an offspring on the idea that dogmatism is a sub-class of closed-mindedness: one is dogmatic if one is closed-minded with respect to beliefs one already holds but closed-mindedness doesn't require one already to have made up one's mind. Suppose, to borrow Battaly's example, that P is the proposition that there was no Native American genocide. Even if a person starts out with no prior belief about the truth or falsity of P, their *inquiry* into its truth or falsity can still be closed-minded. They might, for example, systematically ignore evidence that P and look for evidence against P.

But if this is a how the inquirer behaves then a natural question would be: why is their inquiry into the truth or falsity of P closed-minded in just this way? And the answer that suggests itself is that they are closed-minded in just this way because they already really believe that P. So we do not have here a compelling case of closed-mindedness without the subject already having made up their mind about the topic at hand. The belief that P is implicit in their epistemic conduct and this means that their dogmatism can't be distinguished from closed-mindedness in quite the way that Kidd recommends. Ordinarily, dogmatism and closed-mindedness aren't clearly distinguished and there is bound to be an element of stipulation in any proposed way of carving up the territory.

Be Natural – Is There Anything Else?

This is not necessarily an objection to the notion of a capital vice. It is permissible for a vice epistemologist to try to bring some order to the chaos of ordinary thinking and represent one vice as an offshoot of another. It is important to recognize, however, that such proposed regimentations are just that: an attempt to introduce a degree of systematicity into a domain that lacks it. It's helpful to compare the classification of epistemic vices with the classification of so-called 'natural modes'. A criticism of Locke's theory of mixed modes is that it ignores natural modes.[8] Examples of non-natural modes are the ideas of a lie, democracy and property. Lies are lies regardless of their underlying causes.[9]

In contrast, although diseases are modes, 'the name of a disease will normally be introduced, and then be generally applied, on the basis of repeated experience of a set of symptoms, and on the assumption that on each occurrence they have the same common cause, whether a microbe or an underlying physiological condition' (Ayers 1991: 91). However, there is a still a sense in which the individuality and boundary conditions of diseases are imposed by us. So, for example, diseases can be classified by bodily region, by organ, by effect, by the nature of the disease process, by aetiology, or on several other bases.[10] There is nothing that compels us to adopt one of these systems of classification rather than another and there is no absolute sense in which one particular system of classification is the 'right' one. With

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[8] For a helpful discussion of this issue see Ayers 1991, chapter 8. My understanding of Locke is heavily indebted to Ayers' commentary.
[9] See Ayers 1991: 97.
[10] For more on the classification of diseases see Robbins, Robbins and Scarpelli 2017.

diseases and other such modes there is still the relativity to human interests and concerns that marks them out as modes rather than substances.

To make things even more complicated there are some modes that fall somewhere in between the natural and the non-natural. For example, one might take the view that perception and memory are such 'intermediate' modes. Perception is mechanism-dependent in the sense that it isn't really perception unless some underlying physiological mechanism is involved. Plainly, however, no specific mechanism need be involved in all cases of perception. Human perception and dolphin perception both involve and require the operation of physiological mechanisms but the precise mechanisms will no doubt be very different in the two cases. The necessity of *some* mechanism is a respect in which intermediate modes are 'natural'. The fact that no *particular* mechanism is required is a respect in which intermediate modes are akin to non-natural modes.[11]

In these terms, are epistemic vices natural, non-natural or intermediate modes? The discussion so far, with its emphasis on choice and stipulation in the classification of epistemic vices, might be thought to imply that such vices are non-natural but there is room for debate about this. Just as all manifestations of a particular disease are assumed to have a common cause at the level of physiology so it might be argued that the identification and attribution of epistemic vices is based on the assumption of a common *psychological* cause or mechanism. Epistemic vices are in this respect, and perhaps others too, like diseases.

Closed-mindedness is a case in point. There is the view that being closed-minded isn't just a matter of being unwilling or unable to engage seriously with relevant intellectual options. A closed-minded person also has to have what Kruglanski calls a high need for 'closure', that is a low tolerance for confusion and ambiguity.[12] It might be argued that this is the distinctive psychological component of closed-mindedness that causally explains the various cognitive dispositions with which the trait is closely associated. In this case the psychological component is a motive. Would this justify the classification of closed-mindedness as a natural mode, an epistemic vice whose attribution in different cases is based on the assumption of a common motivational core that functions as a common psychological cause?

If so, then dogmatism is different from closed-mindedness in precisely this respect. What motivates a dogmatic commitment to a political doctrine might be a psychological need for closure but other motives are also possible. For example, a person's dogmatism about a particular political doctrine might be a reflection of the ways in which a commitment to it is part of their identity, their sense of who they are.

Whether or not this is the right account of dogmatism it is doubtful that the motivational account applies epistemic vices generally. There are epistemic vices like stupidity, understood as foolishness rather than lack of intelligence, which lack an obvious motivational component. People aren't motivated to be stupid in the way that they are supposedly motivated to be closed-minded. And even in the latter case one might wonder whether the desire for closure is strictly necessary or, even if it is, whether it is an independently

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[11] This paragraph is a summary of the discussion of intermediate modes in Ayers 1991: 96-7.
[12] Kruglanski 2004: 6-7.

identifiable component of closed-mindedness. One might count as having a high need for closure *because* one is closed-minded. Here, the attribution of the motive follows rather than underpins the attribution of the trait.

What Is a Vice of Knowledge?

So one should be careful about representing epistemic vices as natural modes. There is still the option of representing them as intermediate modes but it's not clear whether epistemic vices are mechanism-dependent in anything like the way that perception is mechanism-dependent. This issue merits further discussion. In the meantime, the one thing that seems reasonably clear is that epistemic vices are epistemically harmful and blameworthy or otherwise reprehensible.[13] The sense in which they are epistemically harmful is that they systematically obstruct the gaining, keeping or sharing of knowledge. However, there is considerable room for maneuver when it comes to defining the individual character traits, attitudes or ways of thinking that are epistemically harmful.

Where does this leave the notion of a capital vice and the project of identifying some epistemic vices as capital vices and others as offspring vices? To the extent that ordinary ways of talking about vices like closed-mindedness and dogmatic are imprecise there is a lot to be said for the project of establishing clear lines of demarcation and relations of priority between different epistemic vices.

However, any such project needs to be informed by a proper conception of what epistemic vices are, ontologically speaking, and a well-founded view as to whether the project consists in the *discovery* of real distinctions that are there anyway or rather in the *imposition* of boundaries that only exist in virtue of our recognition of them. To think of epistemic vices as modes is to be committed to an 'impositionist' reading of the capital vices project. The point at which this project starts to look suspect is the point at which it is conceived of as fundamentally a project of discovery.[14] The discovery in this domain is that there is, in a certain sense, nothing to discover.[15]

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[13] This is the essence of what I call 'obstructivism' about epistemic vice, the view that epistemic vices are blameworthy or otherwise reprehensible character traits, attitudes or ways of thinking that systematically obstruct the gaining, keeping or sharing of knowledge. For obstructivism, epistemic vices aren't delineated by their motives.

[14] I'm not suggesting that this is how Kidd conceives of the project. His approach is more in keeping with impositionism.

[15] Thanks to Heather Battaly and Ian James Kidd for helpful comments.

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