

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Some vices of vice epistemology

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Abstract

The actual or potential epistemic vices of a given discipline or field of study are its disciplinary vices. This paper identifies three actual or potential disciplinary vices of vice epistemology. Vice epistemology explains people's epistemic misconduct by reference to their supposed epistemic vices. Such vice explanations are contrasted with attempts to achieve *Verstehen* of people's epistemic conduct and understand it from their point of view. Although vice explanations do not preclude *Verstehen*, vice epistemology is in danger of overlooking alternatives to its preferred mode of explanation. In some cases, *Verstehen* calls into question the assumption that a person is guilty of epistemic misconduct. Vice explanations also risk attaching insufficient weight to politico-strategic factors in the explanation of political action. Care needs to be taken by vice epistemologists to avoid intellectual myopia, political naivety, and overconfidence in attributing vices.

KEYWORDS

Covid-19, disciplinary vices, epistemic vices, intellectual myopia, intellectual vices, naivety, overconfidence, vaccine hesitancy, *Verstehen*, vice epistemology, vice explanations

1 | VICE EPISTEMOLOGY

Vice epistemology is a discipline or field that is dedicated to the study of the nature, identity, and epistemological significance of epistemic or intellectual vices. These are character traits, attitudes, or ways of thinking that systematically obstruct knowledge or understanding.¹ Examples include closed-mindedness, dogmatism, prejudice, wishful thinking, and gullibility. These only qualify as epistemic *vices* rather than mere defects to the extent that they are

¹This is the Obstructionist account of epistemic vice elaborated and defended in Cassam 2019a.

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failings for which a person can legitimately be blamed or criticized. The philosophical study of epistemic vices is far from straightforward, however, and is open to the accusation that *it* is in danger of systematically obstructing particular types of knowledge or understanding. To put it another way, there are respects in which vice epistemology might itself turn out to be epistemically vicious.²

The “might” in this formulation is important. The claim is not that vice epistemology is *bound* to be epistemically vicious, only that it is liable to be, or to become, epistemically vicious in particular ways, and that care needs to be taken by vice epistemologists not to instantiate in their investigations the very epistemic vices whose nature, identity, and significance is their focus. Since, in practice, vice epistemologists *do* take care not to instantiate these vices, the discussion that follows should not be understood as accusatory, though some of it is self-critical.³ The intention is rather to identify some of the intellectual risks that are inherent in the vice epistemological project, to explain what makes them inherent in the project, and to invite philosophers who are about to embark on the project to reflect on some of its potential pitfalls and, if possible, correct for them. Like everyone else, philosophers who think of themselves as vice epistemologists need to be self-critical.

The epistemic vices to which a particular discipline or field of study is inherently prone are what might be called its *disciplinary* vices. The vices of some disciplines, such as astrology, are all too obvious. Indeed, it is only in a loose sense that astrology can be called a “discipline.” In the case of other disciplines, it is difficult to think of any specific vices. For example, while engineers are not immune to epistemic vice, it is not obvious what would qualify as an “engineering vice,” a vice to which engineering as a discipline is peculiarly prone. Why, in that case, should vice epistemology have any distinctive vices? What are its distinctive vices, and what kind of knowledge or understanding do they obstruct?

A *vice attribution* is the judgement that another person has a particular epistemic vice. Typically, vice epistemologists attribute epistemic vices to others because they think that these attributions explain the epistemic misconduct of the people to whom the vices are attributed. Explanations of a person's epistemic misconduct by reference to their supposed epistemic vices are *vice explanations*.⁴ For example, if the vice subject—the person to whom a given vice is attributed—is a political leader like Boris Johnson or a conspiracy theorist like Alex Jones, we may be faced with the task of explaining their propensity to spread misinformation. An example of a vice explanation of this type of epistemic misconduct would be one that explains it by reference to the vice subject's *epistemic insouciance*, that is, their casual lack of concern about whether their beliefs have any basis in reality or are adequately supported by the best available evidence.⁵ If the vice subject is an anti-vaxxer, their negative response to evidence that vaccines are safe might be explained by reference to their closed-mindedness. And so on.

Vice explanations are causal. The “because” in the claim that vice subjects spread misinformation because they are epistemically insouciant is plainly a causal rather than a rational or a rationalizing “because.” Being epistemically insouciant is not the subjects' *reason* for spreading misinformation and does not rationalize or justify the spreading of misinformation. This brings into focus another feature of vice explanations: they are third-personal explanations that an outsider might give. They are not explanations that would be given or endorsed by vice subjects, who doubtless have their own reasons for their epistemic conduct. In order properly to understand their conduct, however, it is essential to see it from *their* point of view, in terms of their reasons and objectives. The pursuit of this kind of

²Some vices of vice epistemology are on display in Cassam 2019a.

³Tanesini 2021 is an example of a major contribution to vice epistemology that is largely free of the vices described here.

⁴There is more on vice explanations in Cassam 2021a.

⁵See Cassam 2018 on epistemic insouciance.

understanding is the pursuit of *Verstehen*. From this perspective, the challenge is to make sense of another person's take on the world, especially when that take is very different from one's own.

Verstehen is the type of understanding of other people that vice explanations potentially obstruct. To explain other people's epistemic misconduct in terms of their supposed epistemic vices is precisely *not* to understand it from their point of view. Even if vice explanations do not *preclude* the pursuit of *Verstehen*, there is little incentive to seek *Verstehen* of others once one has settled for a vice explanation of their conduct. Furthermore, vice explanations are not the only explanations of a person's flawed epistemic conduct. They become problematic when they result in a failure to notice other potentially more important explanatory factors. This amounts to a kind of intellectual myopia, which is the first potential vice of vice epistemology.

Another potential vice of vice epistemology is naivety. The fact that someone spreads misinformation might have much more to do with their political strategy or ideology than their supposed epistemic vices.⁶ Even if specific vice subjects are epistemically vicious, it might be politically naive to focus on this rather than on the other factors that underpin their conduct. Furthermore, as Alessandra Tanesini notes, "it is exceedingly difficult to have sufficient evidence that the attribution of a vice to another person is accurate" (2021, 182). It is tempting to overestimate the extent of one's insight into the springs of human conduct, and this points to another potential vice of vice epistemology: overconfidence in the attribution of epistemic vices to other people. The epistemic vices of Boris Johnson and Donald Trump might be all too obvious, but in less pathological cases vice attributions are rarely straightforward.

The discussion below proceeds as follows. Section 2 focuses on vice explanations and the difference between *explaining* and *understanding* apparent epistemic misconduct. The difference is illustrated by contrasting a vice-theoretic and *Verstehenist* approach to the phenomenon of vaccine hesitancy. At least in this case, the two approaches are hard to reconcile, since *Verstehenism* puts pressure on the assumption that vaccine hesitancy results from a type of epistemic conduct that calls for a vice explanation. It remains to be seen, however, whether, *in general*, vice explanations get in the way of *Verstehen*. Section 3 focuses on a different case, one in which the apparently flawed epistemic conduct of significant political actors is explained in politico-strategic terms. A key issue here concerns the role of *Verstehen* in politico-strategic conceptualizations of political behaviour and the extent to which such conceptualizations leave room for vice explanations. Section 4 returns to the three potential vices of vice epistemology. Is it fair to describe myopia, political naivety, and overconfidence as disciplinary vices of vice epistemology? If so, what is the vice-epistemological antidote?

2 | VICE EXPLANATIONS AND UNDERSTANDING

Vice explanations have so far been characterized as causal explanations of someone's epistemic misconduct, but how should the notion of epistemic misconduct be understood? It is easy to see why spreading misinformation is epistemic misconduct. It is an action that deprives others of knowledge or accurate information. Flawed thinking or reasoning can also amount to epistemic misconduct. For example, one is guilty of epistemic misconduct if one's thinking is superstitious, confused, illogical, careless, or biased. Talk of *misconduct* is appropriate in these cases to the extent that thinkers are at least to some extent responsible for their flawed thinking. It counts as *epistemic* misconduct because of its impact on

⁶This is the lesson of Cassam 2019b.

knowledge or understanding. A different type of epistemic misconduct is perceptual. For example, people who misidentify a hand tool as a gun might, in certain circumstances, be guilty of epistemic misconduct even if their perceptual misidentification involves no active thinking or reasoning.⁷

How does the pursuit of vice explanations differ from the search for *Verstehen*? Some of the background theoretical issues are well explained by Michael Martin (2000). He describes a fundamental tension between positivism and *Verstehenism* in the social sciences. Positivists do not distinguish between explanation and understanding, because of their view that “to explain a social phenomenon, for example, some social action, one explained it by subsuming it under a causal law” (2000, 2). Explanation is “not necessarily tied to understanding the action from the point of view of the actor” (2). In contrast, *Verstehenism* does draw a distinction between explanation and understanding. Natural scientists explain and predict the behaviour of natural phenomena by searching for covering causal laws. When it comes to human action, a different approach is needed. The appropriate method is *Verstehen*, the objective of which is “to understand social phenomena from the point of view of the social agent” (3). In the case of actions, *Verstehen* means comprehending them in terms of the actor's beliefs, purposes, and motives.

Explaining, say, the movement of the planets by reference to laws of planetary motion is something one does “from the outside.” There is no inner standpoint or perspective to grasp. To understand an action from the point of view of the agent is to understand it “from the inside” (Martin 2000, 7). On one account, *Verstehen* requires empathy, and the understanding it delivers is a form of empathetic understanding. This is a less helpful characterization than it sounds because there are so many ways of understanding the notion of empathy. Positivists who are sceptical about the need for empathy sometimes make the point that the actions of people from very different cultures “may sometimes be explainable and predictable in terms of general principles even though the scientist who establishes or applies these principles may not be able to understand his subjects empathetically” (Hempel 1965, 258). In contrast, *Verstehenism* regards human beings as organisms who are in the business of making sense of other people, where this is not the same as explaining and predicting their actions by reference to scientific laws. What sensemaking requires is *Verstehen*. In its absence, other people remain opaque to us. No doubt other people *are* sometimes opaque to us. In these cases, we have no choice but to view them from an external standpoint, but there is something important missing when we do this. What is missing is the personal understanding that only *Verstehen* can provide.

The contrast between *Verstehen* and vice explanations can be illustrated by means of an example: before the development of vaccines that provide protection against Covid-19, vaccine hesitancy in relation to the combined vaccine against measles, mumps, and rubella (MMR) was the most significant modern example of *vaccine hesitancy*, a hostile or ambivalent attitude towards vaccines, leading in some cases to vaccine refusal.⁸ Despite medical advice that parents should arrange for their children to have the MMR vaccine, significant numbers of well-educated and caring parents refuse to comply. Given that lack of education and lack of care are not the issue, it is sometimes suggested that the appropriate explanation for vaccine hesitancy is a vice explanation.⁹

Vaccine hesitancy can look puzzling. Measles, mumps, and rubella are potentially very serious childhood illnesses, and the MMR vaccine is both effective and safe. The suggestion that the vaccine causes autism has been debunked, and it seems irrational not to vaccinate one's children against measles, mumps, and rubella when it is safe and easy to do so.

⁷See Payne 2006 on the phenomenon of weapon bias.

⁸The following discussion of vaccine hesitancy is based on Cassam 2021b.

⁹See Cassam 2021b for some examples of vice explanations of vaccine hesitancy.

Popular vice explanations pin the blame for vaccine hesitancy on any number of epistemic deficits, including epistemic vices. Two vices that are mentioned in this context are gullibility and dogmatism. Their gullibility explains the susceptibility of some parents to misinformation about the MMR vaccine, including the claim that it causes autism. Presented with compelling and authoritative evidence that the vaccine is safe, many vaccine-hesitant parents are unmoved. This is seen as evidence of their dogmatism, their unwillingness to engage seriously with alternatives to beliefs they already hold. The suggestion is that they are irrationally vaccine hesitant *because* they are gullible, dogmatic, or epistemically vicious in some other way.

This is not a rationalizing explanation of vaccine hesitancy. The fact that one is gullible enough to believe misinformation about vaccine safety is not a *reason* to believe that vaccines are unsafe and does not make it rational not to vaccinate one's child against MMR. If a person's epistemic vices cause and explain their hesitancy, then in one sense the vice explanation is also a source of understanding. One can, however, have this kind of *causal* understanding without having an *empathetic* understanding of vaccine hesitancy from the point of view of those who are vaccine hesitant. For the most part, vice epistemologists say little about subsuming the phenomena they study under causal laws, but their explanations still have a positivist feel. They assume that there is a lawlike connection between the epistemic vices attributed by vice explanations and the epistemic misconduct that is explained by vice attributions.¹⁰ It is only because there is a lawlike connection that vice explanations count as genuine explanations. They are usually retrospective, but vice attributions can also be used to predict epistemic misconduct of one sort or another.

Now compare a Verstehenist approach to vaccine hesitancy. The Verstehenist mission is to make sense of vaccine hesitancy by engaging with the subjectivity of vaccine-hesitant parents. The aim is to see their actions or inactions from *their* point of view, in the light of *their* reasons and lived experience. Rather than assuming at the outset that people who are vaccine hesitant must be epistemically defective, Verstehenism is committed to looking for a rationale for vaccine hesitancy that allows one to see it as at least intelligible even if, from an objective standpoint, refusing to vaccinate one's children is both sub-optimal in health terms and anti-social. This is how ethnographers approach vaccine hesitancy. They argue that analysing vaccine hesitancy in terms of the supposed epistemic deficits of vaccine-hesitant individuals misses what Melissa Leach and James Fairhead describe as the “the opportunity to identify the ‘framings’—forms of knowledge, value and social commitment—people bring to an issue, and which shape their anxieties about it” (2007, 4).

Consider, in this light, Jennifer Reich's observation that “we live in an age of personalization,” in which “we see heightened efforts to personalize medical care to meet the desires and needs of the individual” (2018, 11). As a result, Reich continues, many parents engage in *individualist parenting*, “expending immense time and energy strategizing how to keep their children healthy” (5). This parenting model is inimical to a one-size-fits-all vaccination routine that, some parents argue, “may not be appropriate for their children” (11). In much the same vein, Leach and Fairhead argue that a “particularistic view of child health” (2007, 59), along with the particularistic thinking that underpins it, “characterizes the ways that many parents now think about vaccination, evaluating the actual, or potential, effects of vaccination on their own child in relation to his or her particular strengths or vulnerabilities” (51).

To the extent that every child is a unique individual, with distinctive strengths and vulnerabilities, parents who tailor parenting advice to the needs of their own children are not epistemically vicious on that account. Talk of epistemic vice in this context needs to be weighed against the

¹⁰None of this is explicit in the writings of vice epistemologists, but it is implicit.

reality that, at least in the West, parents today are *expected* to be experts on their own children and to engage in personalized parenting. Good parents know their own children and have information about their family history and vulnerabilities that play an important and legitimate role in decision-making about vaccinations. As Maya Goldenberg points out, “While the safety of vaccines is sufficiently established for public health purposes, parents want to know if vaccines are safe for *their* kids” (2021, 36). Fear of a genetic predisposition to being harmed by vaccines “overwhelmingly shapes vaccine refusal” (Reich 2018, 83). Parents worry about unknown or unknowable factors that may affect their child and are not reassured by being told that adverse events are very rare. Viewed in this light, parents' concerns about the safety of vaccines for their own children might be exaggerated, but they do not obviously call for a vice explanation.

A striking feature of the ethnographic approach to vaccine hesitancy is its willingness to see vaccine-hesitant parents as acting for reasons rather than because they are gullible victims of manipulation by other parents or websites that peddle misinformation about vaccine safety. In Constantine Sandis's terminology, an *agential reason* is “any consideration upon which one actually acts or refrains from doing so” (2015, 267). Ethnographers have identified at least some of the agential reasons for which some parents refuse to vaccinate their children. Whether or not these reasons are objectively valid, ethnographic research makes it understandable that some parents find them subjectively compelling. The representation of vaccine-hesitant parents as epistemically vicious ignores or misrepresents the considerations upon which they act and thereby fails to make sense of decisions that are, in fact, not difficult to understand.

There is a question about the role of empathy in this framework. Is empathy the source of *Verstehen*? On one view, empathy is “the activity of imaginatively adopting another person's perspective in a way that somehow engages the emotions of the one doing the imaginative work” (Bailey 2022, 52). Others represent it as a bloodless exercise in reading the mind of another. The former is sometimes called “emotional empathy,” while the latter is “cognitive empathy.”¹¹ It is questionable whether emotional empathy is necessary for *Verstehen*, although it is certainly a possible source of this type of understanding. *Verstehen* of vaccine hesitancy does not require the imaginative, emotionally charged adoption of the perspective of a vaccine-hesitant parent. It does, however, require *active listening*, which is a form of cognitive empathy. Active listening is attentive, compassionate, unhurried, non-judgemental, and unaggressive.¹² Active listeners use respectful questioning and non-verbal cues to demonstrate their interest in what the speaker is saying. They do not interrupt, and they verify their understanding through paraphrases of the speaker's message. The distinctive “from within” understanding of vaccine hesitancy that Reich and Leach and Fairhead make available are the product of their skills as active listeners.

Verstehenist and vice-epistemological approaches to vaccine hesitancy are different, but are they strictly incompatible? According to what might be called *weak* *Verstehenism*, there is no incompatibility, since the two approaches are not in the same explanatory space. That is, one can seek *Verstehen* of vaccine hesitancy while also allowing that a vice explanation of the same phenomenon might have some merit. If explanation and understanding are two different things, then why should the vice epistemologist's explanatory project not continue in parallel with the ethnographer's *Verstehenist* project? According to *strong* *Verstehenism*, the reason the two cannot run in parallel is that effective *Verstehen* potentially deprives vice epistemology of its explanandum. The more successful the search for *Verstehen*, the less obvious it is that there is any genuine epistemic misconduct that calls for a vice explanation. This is rather a case in which “although people's actions may superficially seem irrational,” a *Verstehenist* analysis reveals that “given their aims and beliefs about the world, their actions are perfectly reasonable”

¹¹On the distinction between the two kinds of empathy, see Bloom 2018, 17.

¹²See Hochschild 2018 and Cassam 2023 on the importance of active listening.

(Martin 2000, 123). If there is no epistemic misconduct, then there is nothing that calls for a vice explanation.

Strong *Verstehenism* is too strong. Even if vaccine hesitancy makes sense and is not plainly irrational, it is not “perfectly reasonable.” It needs to be acknowledged that *something* has gone wrong, epistemically speaking, when people refuse permission for their children to be given safe and effective vaccines. It is possible, in at least some cases, to have *Verstehen* of a person's seeming epistemic misconduct without implying that the seeming misconduct is not real misconduct and therefore without implying that there is nothing for the vice epistemologist to explain. By engaging with a person's subjectivity, it might be possible both to make their actions and choices intelligible from within while also recognizing the respects in which they call for a vice explanation. The balance in these cases is a delicate one, however, as can be seen from the case study of vaccine hesitancy. The greater one's *Verstehen* of someone's conduct, the harder it becomes to see it as misconduct. In these cases, to understand is not only to forgive but also to find it increasingly difficult to see that there is anything to forgive.

The upshot is that vice explanations do not preclude *Verstehen* and *Verstehen* does not preclude vice explanations. While the *Verstehenist* and vice epistemological projects are not strictly incompatible, however, there is a degree of tension between them, and a strong preference for one or the other approach can induce a kind of intellectual myopia. This myopia cuts both ways. On the one hand, *Verstehenism*'s intellectual generosity can result in a failure to acknowledge epistemic misconduct as misconduct. *Verstehenists* bend over backwards not to condemn their subjects for being epistemically vicious but can be accused of being *too* charitable. On the other hand, vice explanations of apparent epistemic misconduct are not charitable enough. By focusing on explaining people's epistemic conduct by reference to their supposed epistemic vices, vice epistemology does more than disincentivize the pursuit of *Verstehen*. It can also obscure the considerations upon which people act or fail to act. To put it another way, it can all too easily induce a kind of intellectual myopia that gets in the way of understanding people on their own terms.

It remains to be seen whether there is a real rather than a merely theoretical risk of vice epistemology obscuring the considerations upon which people act. If there is no likelihood of this happening, then intellectual myopia should not be classified as a *disciplinary* vice of vice epistemology, though it might still be the case that some vice epistemologists are too inclined to ignore alternatives to their vice explanations of apparent epistemic misconduct.¹³ In the discussion so far, the focus has been on *Verstehenist* alternatives to vice explanations, but there are other possibilities to consider. It is illuminating to explain some epistemic misconduct in politico-strategic terms. Assuming that such explanations are sometimes effective, the key questions for present purposes are whether politico-strategic explanations preclude vice explanations, and whether they provide a kind of *Verstehen*. The latter means understanding people's conduct partly in terms of their motives and purposes, but is this not what politico-strategic explanations do? If so, does it not mean that they straddle the boundary between explanation and understanding?

3 | POLITICO-STRATEGIC EXPLANATIONS

In the days leading up to Britain's 2016 vote to leave the European Union (Brexit), campaigners for the Leave side repeatedly made false or highly misleading claims about Britain's financial contribution to the E.U. and the E.U.'s plans. A key figure in this context was Boris

¹³Here, I include Cassam 2019a.

Johnson, who was once described by a former boss as someone who would not recognize truth if confronted by it in an identity parade (Hastings 2019). The author of this description was the historian and journalist Max Hastings. In the same article, Hastings describes Johnson's "willingness to tell any audience whatever he thinks is most likely to please, heedless of the inevitability of contradiction a few hours later." These traits were on display throughout the Brexit referendum campaign and during Johnson's spell as prime minister. Similar things were said at the time about President Donald Trump, and it became fashionable to see in the success of Trump and Johnson evidence of the rise of "post-truth" politics.

One attempt to explain Johnson's epistemic misconduct in vice-epistemological terms consists in the attribution to him of the vice of *epistemic insouciance*, defined as a lack of concern with respect to whether one's claims are grounded in reality (Cassam 2019a, 79). It means being casual and nonchalant about the challenge of finding answers to complex questions and viewing the need to find evidence in support of one's views as a mere inconvenience, as something that is not to be taken too seriously. The primary product of epistemic insouciance is bullshit in the Frankfurtian sense. Because the epistemically insouciant bullshitter "does not care whether the things he says describe reality correctly" (Frankfurt 2005, 56), his bullshit is "a greater enemy of the truth than lies are" (61). On this account, someone like Johnson bullshits precisely because he is epistemically insouciant: his epistemic insouciance causally explains his epistemic misconduct.

This explanation is politically naive and misses the point of the misconduct it tries to explain. For example, in November 2021, a British newspaper reported that staff at 10 Downing Street had held a series of drunken parties the previous year at a time when such gatherings were banned by the Covid-19 regulations then in force. When questioned in the House of Commons, Johnson asserted that Covid-19 guidance was followed completely at number 10. As further evidence emerged, it became clear that Johnson had not only known about the parties but had even attended some of them. He was eventually fined by the police and lost the support of many of his own members of Parliament as a result. His statement to the House of Commons was not bullshit but a lie.¹⁴ The epistemically insouciant bullshitter does not care whether the things he says describe reality correctly, but Johnson *had* to care because he knew that a *correct* description of the parties in Downing Street would be politically disastrous. The political and legal consequences of revealing the truth gave him every incentive not to be truthful about these events. It is arguable that to describe his lack of truthfulness as an example of his epistemic insouciance is to trivialize it.

In other cases, talk of lying is less appropriate, but attributions of epistemic insouciance remain problematic. When Johnson and other campaigners for Brexit repeatedly asserted that the United Kingdom sends £350 million a week to the E.U., their claim had some basis in reality, since it represented the U.K.'s gross contribution. It was nevertheless misleading, since it failed to take account of factors that made the net figure substantially lower. Those responsible for the £350 million figure were clear that its aim was to provoke and focus public attention on the U.K.'s financial contribution to the E.U. Even denials that the figure was accurate were helpful, since they highlighted the fact of a substantial, albeit much lower, contribution.¹⁵ Viewed in this light, the £350 million claim was an effective piece of political propaganda.¹⁶ If the repetition of the claim amounted to epistemic misconduct, it was epis-

¹⁴Compare: "[W]hen Boris Johnson made claims about the EU he knew to be false, he wasn't being 'epistemically insouciant.' He was lying" (Cassam 2019a, 80).

¹⁵In a blog post published in 2017, one of the architects of the successful Leave campaign in the Brexit referendum wrote that the aim of the £350 million a week slogan was "to provoke people into argument" and that "there is no single definitive figure because there are different sets of official figures but the Treasury gross figure is slightly more than £350 million of which we get back roughly half" (<https://dominicummings.com/2017/01/09/on-the-referendum-21-branching-histories-of-the-2016-referendum-and-the-frogs-before-the-storm-2/>; accessed 21 October 2023).

¹⁶As argued in Cassam 2021c.

temic misconduct the explanation of which is politico-strategic rather than vice epistemological. The £350 million claim advanced the cause of Brexit, and that is why it was repeated. To explain it by reference to the epistemic insouciance or some other epistemic vice of those making it is to fail to grasp its strategic rationale, and this is the basis of the charge of political naivety.

Epistemic insouciance is not the only epistemic vice that has been posited to explain epistemic misconduct in political contexts. Marco Meyer characterizes intellectual virtues as “character traits that support their bearers in gaining knowledge and understanding,” whereas “intellectual vices are deficits in intellectual virtue” (2019, 9). Examples of the latter include intellectual vanity and arrogance. Meyer argues that “conspiracy theorists suffer from intellectual vice” (9) and that intellectual vice is strongly predictive of acceptance of conspiracy theories. The conspiracy theories that are at issue in this context are political. They include the theory that George Soros is part of a plot to destabilize America and that the U.S. invasion of Iraq was driven by Jews. Although Meyer proposes a vice explanation of a particular type of epistemic misconduct, however, the type of misconduct that leads to belief in baseless conspiracy theories, the vices he cites do not include epistemic insouciance.

Philosophical apologists for conspiracy theorizing deny that, in general, such theorizing is a form of epistemic misconduct. Only epistemic misconduct of one sort or another could lead a person to endorse the conspiracy theories cited by Meyer, however. Vice explanations of conspiracy theorizing are seductive, but there is an alternative. Consider the epistemic position of conspiracy theory *producers*, who invent, publicize, and distribute conspiracy theories. They benefit financially from their theories, but the primary rationale for their conspiracy theorizing is politico-strategic: their theories advance their political agenda.¹⁷ The theories cited by Meyer are designed to advance a right-wing, racist political agenda to which anti-Semitism is integral. Since these theories are a form of misinformation, a person who spreads them is certainly guilty of epistemic misconduct. The instrumental reasoning that leads them to produce and market their conspiracy theories might, however, be impeccable. Furthermore, the question whether their epistemic vices explain their belief in conspiracy theories need not arise, since there is no need to suppose that notorious conspiracy theory producers like Alex Jones believe their own theories.¹⁸

Conspiracy theory *consumers* are in a very different position. But although many of them believe the theories they consume, vice explanations do not explain why they believe a *particular* conspiracy theory. The explanation is ideological, since there is plenty of empirical evidence that “people’s political ideologies play a strong role in determining which conspiracy theories they will subscribe to” (Uscinski and Parent 2014, 12). However, while Meyer does not deny that politics plays a part in explaining belief in conspiracy theories, he insists that his intellectual vice explanation “has explanatory power over and above established explanations appealing to religiosity and political orientation” (2019, 17). Hence, the challenge is to explain belief in conspiracy theories in a way that does justice to the sheer multiplicity of explanatory factors. The risk here is that focusing on the explanatory significance of intellectual vices might result in the neglect of other equally significant explanatory factors.

What is the relationship between vice explanations and politico-strategic explanations of epistemic misconduct, and between a politico-strategic and a *Verstehenist* approach to such

¹⁷See Cassam 2019b, 49. The financial benefits of conspiracy theorizing are amply illustrated by reports that between 2015 and 2018 Alex Jones’s conspiracist *Infowars* website generated \$165 million in sales of survivalist and other conspiracy-related paraphernalia. See “Alex Jones’ Infowars Store Made \$165 Million Over 3 Years, Records Show” ([huffingtonpost.co.uk](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/alex-jones-infowars-store-made-165-million-over-3-years-records-show); accessed 21 October 2023).

¹⁸Notoriously, Jones claimed that the 2012 killing of twenty children and six staff members at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut, was a hoax, but he subsequently acknowledged, under legal pressure, that the shooting did take place. A Texas court ordered him to pay the parents of a six-year-old boy killed at Sandy Hook \$45 million in punitive damages, in addition to \$4 million in compensatory damages.

misconduct? Meyer's account demonstrates that vice and politico-strategic explanations of a person's epistemic misconduct are compatible. When it comes to a conspiracy theory producer such as Alex Jones, it is possible that his epistemic misconduct is *driven* by politico-strategic motives and *enabled* by his epistemic and other vices. Only people who do not care about the truth and are in this sense epistemically vicious would knowingly circulate misinformation because doing so is in their own political or financial interests. This way of describing the matter, however, confirms the impression that politico-strategic factors *motivate* their misconduct while epistemic vices make their misconduct possible. On this account, epistemic vices are best thought of as enabling conditions for epistemic misconduct rather than as providing its motive force. A similar story can be told about Boris Johnson: his epistemic insouciance was not the cause of his epistemic misconduct but ensured that he would not be deterred from his misconduct by a serious commitment to truthfulness.

A politico-strategic explanation of a person's epistemic conduct seems far removed from a *Verstehenist* approach, but is there indeed such a clear distinction? Achieving *Verstehen* of an action requires one to make sense of it in terms of the actor's beliefs, purposes, and motives, but this is what politico-strategic-action explanations do. Either politico-strategic explanations are themselves a form of *Verstehen*, in which case there is less to *Verstehen* or to understanding an action from the point of view of the actor than one might have thought or they do not amount to *Verstehen*. In that case, what more is required for *Verstehen*, and what is its added value? In a non-technical sense of "understanding," it is arguable that little more is required to understand the actions of a conspiracy theorist like Alex Jones than to identify his political and financial motives, the likely objectives of his policy of spreading toxic conspiracy theories, and his beliefs about their likely consequences.

This line of reasoning succeeds in bringing out some of the obscurities of the notion of *Verstehen*. It is easy to say that *Verstehen* of an action involves understanding it "from the point of view of the actor" or "from within," but it is much more difficult to cash out these ideas. When, however, politico-strategic explanations are contrasted with ethnographic perspectives on vaccine hesitancy, it is easier to see the difference. *Verstehen* of vaccine-hesitant parents not only makes sense of their actions but does so in a way that raises questions about the initial assumption that they are guilty of epistemic misconduct. Even if in the end it is decided that they are guilty of epistemic misconduct, the *Verstehenist* tries to keep an open mind about this and tries to avoid rushing to judgement. In contrast, a politico-strategic explanation of the conduct of someone like Boris Johnson or Alex Jones puts no pressure at all on the assumption that their epistemic conduct is misconduct. Regardless of whether spreading misinformation or misleading statistics has a politico-strategic rationale, it is still epistemic misconduct in virtue of its overall impact on knowledge or understanding.

There is also another difference: *Verstehen* of those who are vaccine hesitant results from serious attempts to engage with their subjectivity by active listening. Only a direct engagement with putative vice subjects can reveal their underlying motives and thinking in such a way as to call into question their initial characterization as epistemically vicious. No such direct engagement is required from a politico-strategic perspective. One can infer the objectives and motives of Alex Jones from his behaviour and pronouncements. The resulting inferential knowledge is not the result of "engaging with his subjectivity." Faced with the *Verstehenist* recommendation to engage with Jones's subjectivity, or that of Boris Johnson or Donald Trump, one would hardly know where to begin. This need not, however, prevent one from developing a theory about their politico-strategic motives and objectives, and testing and refining that theory by observation of their behaviour. This model of "mindreading" is plainly very different from the *Verstehenist* model, whatever the obscurities of the latter.

If in these cases one is persuaded that a vice attribution is justified, there is no reason not to make such an attribution. It is important, however, to be sure that this is not a case in which we

“see vice where none exists” (Kidd 2016, 186). The following very different example makes the point: in a paper published in 2003, Uri Bar-Joseph and Arie Kruglanski discussed the 1973 Yom Kippur surprise, when Israel's Directorate of Military Intelligence ignored indications of an impending attack on Israel.¹⁹ Bar-Joseph and Kruglanski blamed the intelligence failure on the closed-mindedness of the director of military intelligence, Eli Zeira. A paper published by Bar-Joseph ten years later, however, paints a more nuanced picture, not least because of information that came to light after 2003 (Bar-Joseph 2013). He concludes by remarking that “why Zeira acted the way it did is a mystery which is not likely to be fully solved” (2013, 15). It is difficult to read this sentence and not conclude that the earlier analysis was overconfident in its vice attribution and assumption that it had insight into the springs of Zeira's conduct. On the face of it, this type of overconfidence is more likely to be a vice of vice epistemology than of Verstehenist analyses of human conduct. The remaining question, therefore, is whether it is fair to characterize overconfidence, naivety, and intellectual myopia as disciplinary vices of vice epistemology.

4 | DISCIPLINARY VICES

It is not sufficient for an epistemic vice *V* to be a disciplinary vice of a given discipline *D* that many or most practitioners of *D* display *V*. Nor is it necessary. The epistemic vices of *D* are ones that are inherent in *D* or flow from the nature of *D*. In principle, *V* could fail to be a disciplinary vice of *D* even if many or most *D* practitioners display *V* in their *D*-relevant work, since *V* might not be *inherent* in *D*. Even if *V* is inherent in *D*, it does not follow that most *D*-practitioners are guilty of *V* in their *D*-relevant work, since they might have taken steps to avoid *V*. The sense in which *V* would still be a disciplinary vice of *D* is that, in the absence of countermeasures, one would expect most *D*-practitioners to display *V*.

In what sense might a vice be “inherent” in vice epistemology? An intuitive answer to this question might run as follows: since vice epistemology is the philosophical study not just of the nature of epistemic vices but also of their significance, it would be unsurprising if vice epistemologists are on the lookout for evidence of the impact of epistemic vices on the way that humans think, reason, and inquire. There is a risk, however, that paying special attention to the practical impact of epistemic vices in a domain will divert attention away from other factors. Confronted by plainly dysfunctional epistemic conduct in the domain, vice epistemologists will find it natural, if not unavoidable, to search for vice explanations. For example, it is no accident that the Brexit referendum and the Trump presidency have been such a rich source of examples for vice epistemologists, since the temptation to explain the resulting political chaos in terms of the epistemic vices of key political actors is virtually irresistible. If all one has is a hammer, everything looks like a nail.

The point of describing intellectual myopia as a disciplinary vice of vice epistemology is simply to make the point that a discipline that is dedicated to highlighting the significance of epistemic vices for our cognitive activities is, by its nature, in danger of downplaying other factors. In theory, of course, vice epistemologists understand perfectly well that explanations of epistemic misconduct in vice terms do not preclude non-vice explanations and might be less compelling than some non-vice alternatives. In some cases, vice and other explanations can and should be combined. For example, if the epistemic vices of a group of political actors are explained by their social class, then a vice explanation and an explanation of their epistemic misconduct in socio-structural terms are not rivals but allies (see Tanesini 2020). Nevertheless, it requires special care and effort to keep in mind socio-structural, politico-strategic, and many other factors when explaining a particular pattern of

¹⁹Bar-Joseph and Kruglanski 2003. This paper is the basis of the account of the vice of closed-mindedness given in chapter 2 of Cassam 2019a.

epistemic misconduct. The best type of vice epistemology is pluralistic: it favours multi-dimensional over one-dimensional explanations.

When intellectual myopia results in the neglect of socio-structural and politico-strategic factors in the explanation of epistemic misconduct, the result may be a vice explanation that is politically naive. Political naivety is recognizable as a disciplinary vice of vice epistemology when intellectual myopia causes neglect of politico-strategic factors in explaining the epistemic misconduct of political actors. Another source of naivety is vice epistemology's preference for third-personal over first-personal explanations of apparent epistemic misconduct. Failing to see the epistemic conduct of voters from their point of view can lead to nasty political surprises, as when they act in ways that, viewed from the outside, seem perverse and epistemically vicious. As Ken Booth notes, “[T]he inability to recreate the world through another's eyes, to walk in his footsteps and to feel his hopes or his pain has been the cause of a plethora of strategic failures and problems” (1979, 38). It is not that vice epistemology is *against* seeing the world through the eyes of putative vice subjects but that this type of empathy or *Verstehen* is not *integral* to vice explanations, which are resolutely and sometimes naively third personal.

The result of vice epistemology's tendency not to engage with the subjectivity of vice subjects is that the confidence with which it proposes vice explanations of their conduct is often misplaced. As illustrated by the case of Eli Zeira, what strikes a vice epistemologist as an open-and-shut case for a vice explanation of someone's epistemic conduct might turn out, on further reflection, to be no such thing. Tanesini is right in saying that it is exceedingly difficult to have sufficient evidence that the attribution of a vice to a person is accurate (Tanesini 2021, 182). It is exceedingly easy, however, to *suppose* that one has sufficient evidence in a given case and that a vice explanation of the vice subject's epistemic conduct is justified. Fortunately, though, it does not take familiarity with the novels of Henry James to recognize that the springs of human conduct, including one's own, are often unfathomable. In virtually every case in which a vice explanation of a person's conduct is put forward, it is possible that one's confidence in the validity of the explanation is misplaced. Not taking this possibility into account is a form of overconfidence.

To the extent that individual vice epistemologists have avoided these potential pitfalls of their discipline, it is a testament to their sensitivity to the risks of myopia, overconfidence, and naivety. It is also proof that while it might be in the nature of vice epistemology to be subject to these vices, effective countermeasures are possible. The ultimate antidote to all three vices is the virtue of intellectual humility. In Philippa Foot's terminology, the virtues are *corrective*, “each one standing at a point at which there is some temptation to be resisted or some deficiency of motivation to be made good” (1978, 8). Intellectual myopia, overconfidence, and naivety are three vice-epistemological temptations that can be corrected by a healthy dose of intellectual humility. It is this virtue that makes it possible to see that one's own explanation of a person's epistemic misconduct might not be the best explanation, that one's confidence in a particular explanation might be misplaced, and that insisting on a vice explanation of a person's epistemic misconduct might be evidence of political naivety. Only by cultivating and exercising the virtue of intellectual humility can vice epistemology continue to flourish as a discipline and take on board the insights of other disciplines.

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