

Stealthy Vices

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Imagine debating the merits of immigration with someone who insists that immigration is bad for the economy. Why does he think that? He claims that his view is based on the economic evidence of the ill effects of immigration. As far as he is concerned, he has good *reason* to believe immigration is bad for the economy and that is why he believes it. Knowing him as you do you offer a different and less flattering explanation: you claim, rightly or wrongly, that his outlook is sustained by prejudice and closed-mindedness.¹

Prejudice and closed-mindedness are two examples of what Linda Zagzebski calls ‘intellectual vices’. Here is her list of such vices:

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

To this list one might want to add arrogance, gullibility and complacency. Suppose we refer to explanations of another person’s beliefs by reference to their supposed intellectual vices as intellectual vice belief (IVB) explanations. The aim of such explanations is to undermine the target belief by implying that it lacks rational grounds and is nothing more than a reflection of the idiosyncrasies of the believer. In addition, there is the implication that the believer is self-ignorant: he doesn’t know why he thinks the things he thinks. He sees himself as being in the space of reasons on questions of immigration but you think you know better.²

Most of us are only too willing to go in for IVB explanations of other peoples’ beliefs but what about our own beliefs? How willing and able are we to spot our own intellectual vices, or to accept IVB explanations our own views? On the one hand, one would have to be remarkably arrogant, if not delusional, to think that one’s own thinking is somehow immune to the influence of intellectual vices. One should therefore be willing to accept, at least in the abstract, that some of one’s views must also have good IVB explanations. On the other hand, it’s difficult to see how a person could coherently regard a given belief of theirs as due to an intellectual vice while continuing to hang on to that belief.³ You might think your opponent is anti-immigration because *he* is prejudiced and closed-minded but how could you coherently think that you are only pro-immigration because *you* are prejudiced or because your mind is closed to the arguments against immigration? As Benjamin Sherman puts it, ‘you are likely to think that the vast majority of the time, your judgements are fair and accurate, otherwise, they wouldn’t persist in being your judgements’ (2015, 10).

¹ This is an example of what Ian Kidd (forthcoming) calls ‘vice-charging’. One reason that charging others with epistemic vice tends to be politically ineffective is that they typically accuse the accuser of the very same vices. For a concrete illustration see the many hostile online comments in response to Cassam 2015.

² I say more about this kind of self-ignorance in chapter 14 of Cassam 2014.

³ ‘I believe that p but only because I’m careless/ gullible/ prejudiced’ sounds like a variation on Moore’s Paradox. See Sherman 2015, 12.

It's one thing to say that you can't *persist* in believing that *p* while accepting that your belief is due to prejudice or closed-mindedness but this leaves it open that you might *revise* your belief if you discover that it is vice-based rather than evidence-based. Perhaps you come to accept an IVB explanation of your belief because you manage to detect and identify the particular intellectual vice that is at play in sustaining it. But how easily detectable are our own intellectual vices? Here one might think that not all intellectual vices are the same in this regard. Consider the vice of carelessness which, as Sherman observes, people can recognize themselves as having.⁴ Over a period of time you might accumulate evidence of your own carelessness and come to know on the basis of this evidence that you are careless. Crucially, being careless needn't prevent you from gathering evidence of your carelessness or grasping the significance of that evidence: being careless needn't stand in the way of knowing that you are careless. In contrast, one might think that being closed-minded is likely to stand in the way of knowing that you are closed-minded, and that your prejudices may prevent you from knowing that your prejudices.⁵ Why would that be? Because vices like closed-mindedness and prejudice seem likely to obstruct the accumulation of evidence of their influence on one's thinking or the ability to see the evidence *as* evidence of one's own closed-mindedness and prejudices.

If this is right, then some intellectual vices are *stealthier* than others: by their nature they evade detection by those who have them. They aren't *undetectable* but are intuitively more difficult to detect in oneself than other vices. The invisibility of prejudice is a theme in Sherman's essay, and Miranda Fricker also notes the 'psychologically stealthy' (2007, 98) nature of prejudice. So here are three questions to which it would be good to have answers:

1. What makes an intellectual vice stealthy?
2. Which are the stealthy or stealthier intellectual vices?
3. How, if at all, are stealthy vices detectable by those who have them?

Before tackling these questions something needs to be said about the notion of an intellectual vice. Some intellectual vices (idleness, closed-mindedness, rigidity, gullibility) are character traits. Others (wishful thinking, insensitivity to detail) are thinking styles. Prejudice is neither a straightforward character trait nor a thinking style but an attitude or perhaps a judgement.⁶ Closed-minded is something that someone might be said to *be*, wishful thinking is what they *do*, while a prejudice is something that a person *has*. A person might be said to *be* prejudiced but being prejudiced is a matter of having particular prejudices, that is, positive or negative attitudes or judgements that, in

⁴ Sherman 2015, 12.

⁵ With regard to closed-mindedness see Cassam 2015.

⁶ Fricker is someone who conceives of prejudices as judgements or, more accurately, as misjudgements. See 2007, 33.

Fricker's formulation, are 'made or maintained without proper regard to the evidence' (2007, 33).

What makes a character trait, thinking style or attitude intellectually vicious is its impact on our inquiries. 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). In these terms, intellectual vices such as those listed by Zagzebski can be characterized as intellectual character traits, thinking styles or attitudes that *impede* effective inquiry.⁷ Intellectual virtues, in contrast, are intellectual character traits, thinking styles or attitudes that *abet* effective inquiry. Examples might include open-mindedness, alertness, carefulness, and humility. An effective inquiry is one that is knowledge-conducive, and this casts light on why carelessness is an intellectual vice whereas carefulness is an intellectual virtue. Carefulness is knowledge-conducive whereas carelessness impedes our attempts to extend or refine our knowledge by inquiry.

Now consider what makes a particular intellectual vice stealthy, that is, what accounts for the fact that the vice is such as to evade detection by those who have it. To make progress with this we need an account of how, in general, one comes to know one's own intellectual vices. Here is one idea: in order to discover whether you have a particular vice *V* you need, first of all, to be open to the idea that you have *V*. You need to understand what *V* is, what would count as evidence that you have *V*, and whether *V* is a vice you are likely to have. You need to be prepared to look for, or at least notice, evidence that bears on the question whether you have *V*, and not be too proud or embarrassed to take on board evidence that suggests that *V* is indeed one of your vices. You need to be prepared to go where the evidence leads.

Suppose that *V* is the intellectual vice of carelessness. You might suspect that you are a careless thinker because people who know you well tell you that you are and you know you have other character traits – such as impatience- that you associate with carelessness. You see carelessness as an intellectual vice you may well have, and you understand what would count as evidence of carelessness. You have lost a number of jobs on account of mistakes that you now realize can only have been due to carelessness. You didn't double check some important calculations and are generally more interested in speed than accuracy. You recognize this as evidence of carelessness and perhaps turn up other evidence that points in the same direction. Finally, you accept that you probably are intellectually careless. It doesn't follow, of course, that you are careless in other ways. You might be a careless thinker and a careful driver but being a careful driver isn't an intellectual virtue.

On this account, you discover you are careless by engaging in a type of inquiry whose aim is to extend or refine your self-knowledge. However, the type of inquiry I have just been describing – Fricker calls it 'conscious critical reflection'- is one that wouldn't be

⁷ There is much more on this conception of an intellectual vice in Cassam, forthcoming. It might be necessary to insert 'normally' before 'impede' to allow for unusual cases in which an intellectual vice abets effective inquiry.

possible for someone who lacks certain key intellectual *virtues*.⁸ A degree of open-mindedness is one pre-requisite. Another is alertness, that is, alertness to evidence that bears on the question at issue. A disposition to go where the evidence leads is another intellectual virtue, and a willingness to acknowledge respects in which you are intellectually vicious implies a significant degree of intellectual humility.

If it's true that such intellectual virtues are needed to uncover one's own intellectual vices, how is it possible for the intellectually vicious to detect their own vices? In one sense there is no difficulty here: it might be that the virtues you need in order to discover your vices are themselves compatible with those vices. You might need to be open-minded to discover by conscious critical reflection that you are careless but you can be both open-minded and careless. However, there would be a problem if in order to discover that you have intellectual vice V you need an intellectual virtue V* that is at odds with V, in the sense that if you have V you can't have V*, or are at least highly unlikely to have V*.

Accordingly, what accounts for the stealthiness of V is this: the fact that a person has V impedes his ability to know he has V by conscious critical reflection. One way V might do that is by being antithetical to the intellectual virtues that the person needs in order to detect V by conscious critical reflection. Given that conscious critical reflection is a form of inquiry, and that intellectual vices impede effective inquiry, one would expect a person's possession of any intellectual vice to have some negative impact on his ability to detect any of his intellectual vices by means of such reflection. However, the interesting case for present purposes is that in which V specifically impedes its own detection. Intellectual vices that are stealthy in this sense are *self-concealing*: they make themselves invisible by stymieing their detection by conscious critical reflection.

To make this a bit more concrete, consider which intellectual vices are particularly stealthy. I've suggested that carelessness is at the less stealthy end of the spectrum while closed-mindedness is at the stealthier end. Being careless needn't significantly diminish your capacity to detect your own carelessness by conscious critical reflection but if you need to be open-minded in order to detect your intellectual vices by conscious critical reflection then it looks as though closed-mindedness is bound to be, to some extent at least, self-concealing. It is an example of an intellectual vice that is antithetical to the one of intellectual virtues that is needed to detect one's intellectual vices by conscious critical reflection. If someone is closed-minded then their mind may well be closed to the possibility that they are closed-minded. Another self-concealing vice is complacency. Being complacent is, on the face of it, hardly conducive to critical reflection on whether one is complacent.

How stealthy is prejudice? It obviously depends to some extent on the prejudice. In theory, the fact that a person has a prejudice against, say, migrants need not itself prevent

⁸ 'Conscious critical reflection' is from Fricker 2010. In her 2007 book Fricker gives the example of a hearer who suspects prejudice in one of her judgements. She writes that the hearer 'should shift gear out of spontaneous, unreflective mode and into active critical reflection' (2007, 91).

him from recognizing that he has this prejudice and adjusting his attitude accordingly.⁹ In his discussion Sherman describes a scenario in which the Grand Cyclops of the local chapter of the Ku Klux Klan spares a moment to ask what causes people to form unfair generalizations: ‘if he correctly identifies some of the mental mechanisms that cause unfair stereotypes, he is then equipped with a conceptual tool that could, if circumstances are favourable, help him recognize his own failings’ (2015, 13).

Why is this scenario so improbable? Partly because, as Sherman notes, people who reflect on what we might regard as their prejudices almost certainly don’t recognize them as prejudices. In addition, a willingness to look into the causes of unfair stereotyping and apply insights about the underlying mental mechanisms to oneself imply a degree of open-mindedness, humility, and diligence that one might be more than a little surprised to discover in the Grand Cyclops. The implication is that the invisibility of his prejudice partly explained by the nature of prejudice itself but also has something to do with other the intellectual vices with which prejudice is typically associated. One imagines that extreme prejudice isn’t an isolated vice, and that it is both sustained and concealed from the subject by other intellectual vices.

To the extent that prejudice is a stealthy intellectual vice, it is easy to understand why people rarely go in for prejudice-focused IVB explanations of their own beliefs. They don’t go in for such explanations because their own prejudices tend to be invisible to them. And yet people can and do sometimes discover and identify their own prejudices or other intellectual vices, even stealthy vices. How is that possible? One consideration is that intellectual vices aren’t uniform in their impact. As unlikely as it seems, a person could be in theory be closed-minded in general without being closed-minded when it comes to the question whether he is closed-minded. This opens up the possibility of such a person detecting his own closed-mindedness by conscious critical reflection.

Another issue is whether, as I’ve been assuming, conscious critical reflection is the only or primary means of arriving at knowledge of one’s own intellectual vices. If so, then intellectual vices that impede such self-reflection also thereby impede their own discovery. But what if there are ways of coming to know one’s own intellectual vices that aren’t dependent on open-minded conscious critical reflection? If such ways exist then vice-detection needn’t be impeded by the various factors, including the intellectual vices themselves, that impede conscious critical reflection.

To get a feel for how this might work it’s helpful to think about the possibility of a person’s fundamental attitudes, including their prejudices, coming into focus as a result of a tragic event or traumatic personal experience. This has been called ‘deep unlearning’, where a ‘sudden, unexpected, and potentially painful event ruptures part of

⁹ The more specific the prejudice the less its likely negative impact on one’s general capacity to engage in critical reflection or inquiry. At this point the prejudice doesn’t look much like an intellectual vice. However, being someone with strong prejudices *is* an intellectual vice to the extent that it makes one less effective as an inquirer. However, at this point we are talking about an intellectual character trait as distinct from an attitude towards a particular group of people. Needless to say, people with strong prejudices like to describe themselves as having strong convictions.

our way of being or deeply held understanding of the world' (Rushmer & Davies 2004). For example, finding oneself on the receiving end of prejudice and experiencing its unpleasantness and unfairness at first hand might conceivably bring to light one's own hitherto concealed prejudices. Assuming that deep unlearning is something that *happens* to a person rather than an active process of inquiry or self-reflection, it needn't be affected by the various factors – including intellectual vices- that impede active inquiry or self-reflection.¹⁰ It can bring to light intellectual vices that the person wasn't looking for and didn't suspect he had.

To say that this *can* happen is not to say that it is *likely* to happen. It would be nice to think that the Grand Cyclops is capable of having his understanding of the world ruptured by deep unlearning but this is probably wishful thinking. The problem is that although deep unlearning is a source of self-knowledge that makes fewer demands on the knower than critical reflection it doesn't make no demands. It isn't simply a matter of the Grand Cyclops getting a taste of his own medicine and changing his cognitive ways as a result. He still has to be sufficiently open-minded and perceptive to recognize what he is getting *as* a taste of his own medicine and to grasp its significance for his world view. In this and in other ways, attitude change by deep unlearning remains sensitive to the presence or absence of intellectual vices. Stealthy vices are ones that obstruct their detection by active reflection *or* deep unlearning, and there is good reason to suspect that they include the prejudices of the Grand Cyclops. If, as Sherman describes them, these prejudices are 'invisible' to the Grand Cyclops, it is easy to understand why.

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¹⁰ This conception of unlearning is at odds with Rushmer & Davies' conception in one important respect: they conceive of unlearning as an active process of doing. This doesn't fit the rest of their fascinating and illuminating discussion.

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