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On the Nature of Intellectual Vice

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Vice epistemology, as Quassim Cassam understands it, is the study of the nature, identity, and significance of the epistemic vices (see Cassam 2015; Cassam 2016; Cassam 2017; Cassam Forthcoming). An intellectual vice is a human defect. Paradigmatic examples of intellectual vices include: dogmatism, carelessness, and gullibility (Cassam 2016: 159). A fuller account of putative intellectual vices might also include: “intellectual pride, negligence, idleness, cowardice, conformity, carelessness, rigidity, prejudice, wishful thinking, closed-mindedness, insensitivity to detail, obtuseness, and lack of thoroughness” (Zagzebski 1996: 152).

A fundamental question, which many projects in vice epistemology presuppose an answer to, is this: what makes an intellectual vice a vice? For instance, in this journal, Cassam asks why some vices are included on the above lists, and other vices are not. (2017: 20) Also what, if anything, unifies these lists? In a similar spirit of taxonomy, Kidd (2017) explores the notion of “capital vices”, partly in the service of proposing how vices might be grouped and ordered, understanding which vices are dependent on others, and so on. Before considering such a grouping and ordering, however, it would be good to have an account of what makes an intellectual vice a vice in the first place.

In this paper I shall begin by briefly sketching one popular answer to the question of what makes a vice a vice, namely that offered by the virtue reliabilist. Drawing on other work, I shall introduce a fundamental objection to such approaches, which I call Montmarquet’s objection. This will give us the opportunity to examine Cassam’s own proposal of what makes an intellectual vice a vice, a view he names Obstructivism, which is motivated in part by the aim of avoiding a version of this objection. I shall argue that Cassam’s account is an improvement upon virtue-reliabilism, and that it fares better against Montmarquet’s objection than its immediate rivals. Nevertheless, I contend that it does not go far enough -- Montmarquet’s objection stands.

I conclude that either the objection needs to be answered in some other way, or else proponents of Obstructivism need to explain why their account of the nature of the intellectual vices does not have the counterintuitive consequences it appears to have. Alternatively, another account of the nature of the intellectual vices needs to be sought.

Virtue-Reliabilism and Montmarquet’s Objection

So, what makes an intellectual virtue a virtue, and a vice a vice? According to a popular and influential view known as virtue-reliabilism, what makes an intellectual virtue a virtue is that the trait is truth-conducive (e.g. Sosa 1991; Sosa 2007; Greco 2010). According to the most basic form of virtue-reliabilism, virtues are stable and robust dispositions to form more true beliefs than false ones; understanding vices along these lines insists that a trait is an intellectual vice because beliefs formed through their exercise are more likely to be false than true. While the view need not require truth or falsity-conduciveness in all possible worlds, it does require truth-conduciveness in a broad range of conditions that need to be specified (e.g. Sosa, 1991: 275; Sosa 2007: 83-4).

The simplest and most straightforward version of virtue-reliabilism holds that traits are virtues or vices depending on their truth-conduciveness in the actual world¹. Besides its theoretical parsimony, another advantage of this view is that it aims to give a clear and straightforward account of the value of the virtues and the vices: truth is valuable, and the virtues are instrumentally valuable ways of acquiring truths. Conversely, the vices are instrumentally of disvalue since their exercise results in acquiring falsehoods.

Notice, however, that whether a trait produces true beliefs depends largely in part on the environment a subject finds herself in (e.g. Carter and Gordon 2014)². For example, while being intellectually virtuous might lead to more true beliefs than false beliefs in favorable environments, if owing to factors like extremely bad luck of different sorts, it could transpire that being virtuous would result in systematically false beliefs. Similarly, the environment and other extrinsic elements could conspire to ensure that being dogmatic, careless, and gullible would lead to more true beliefs over false beliefs. So the connection between the virtues and truth seems highly contingent at best.

To make this vivid, consider the following thought experiment, proposed by James Montmarquet. Montmarquet writes,

Let 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 accounts, qualify as intellectual *vices*. Presumably, we would not therefore conclude that these apparent vices are and have always been virtues. (1987: 482)

Montmarquet offers the case of Galileo and his lazy, intellectually uncurious brother Schmalileo. On the face of it, Galileo is a person of intellectual virtue, and his brother is one of intellectual vice. But suppose further that an evil demon sees to it that Galileo’s open-mindedness, insight, intellectual courage, and so on, result in false beliefs, whereas Schmalileo’s dogmatism, gullibility, and intellectual laziness always results in true beliefs. Does this make any difference to who possess intellectual virtues, and to what extent? Should we say that Galileo is intellectually vicious, and Schmalileo is the one who possesses and exercises intellectual virtue? That would be absurd.

Intuitively, Galileo is the intellectually virtuous one, and his brother the intellectually vicious one, and this remains unaffected by whether the demon is manipulating the truth-conduciveness of their belief forming processes. The argument concludes, therefore, that truth-conduciveness is not necessary for a trait to be a virtue³. Montmarquet’s objection makes salient the following questions: could an evil demon really see to it that open-

¹ For a recent defense of this form of virtue-reliabilism, focusing on the key virtue of open-mindedness, see Kwong 2017. For discussion of Kwong’s view, and the more general question of the connection between open-mindedness and truth-conduciveness, see Madison 2017b.

² This is the key motivation underlying Carter and Gordon 2014 – their worry is to explain how it is that open-mindedness is a virtue, given its tenuous connection with truth. For a reply to Carter and Gordon that open-mindedness is truth-conducive, see Kwong 2017; for discussion, see Madison 2017b.

³ For more on Montmarquet’s objection, and for a discussion of Linda Zagzebski’s reply to it in defense of a reliability condition on the virtues, see Madison 2017b, especially pp. 9-11.

mindedness and intellectual courage, for example, are *vices* by making the beliefs formed through their exercise false? Is it also possible that character traits like dogmatism and gullibility could be *virtues*, as long as the demon ensured that forming beliefs in that way happened always to be true?

Cassam's Obstructivism

Cassam understands intellectual vices as bad character traits (e.g. closed-mindedness), thinking styles (e.g. wishful thinking), or attitudes / judgments (e.g. prejudice) (2015: 20-21). They amount to vices because of their negative impact on *inquiry*. Following Christopher Hookway, Cassam understands inquiry as “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.’” (Ibid.) Inquiry is a goal directed activity, and Cassam takes that goal to be knowledge. An effective inquiry, Cassam says, is knowledge-conducive. The vices, therefore, are taken to impede effective inquiry, whereas the intellectual virtues facilitate it. This is why Cassam calls his view “Obstructivism” – intellectual vices are those traits, thinking styles, or attitudes that systematically obstruct the acquisition, retention, and transmission of knowledge.

Cassam is an epistemologist who is sensitive to the problems raised by Montmarquet's objection. In the course of motivating and developing Obstructivism, he aims to avoid the problem of the possibility of a demon being able to turn a vice into a virtue. This can be solved, according to Cassam, by departing from the form of virtue-reliabilism discussed above. Cassam's view is also a form of epistemic consequentialism, insofar as it is the consequences alone of the traits that determine if they are virtues or vices. Obstructivism differs from standard virtue reliabilism, however, since the relevant consequences are considered in terms of being obstructive to *knowledge*, not just truth.

While knowledge entails truth, there is more to knowing than merely believing truly. In addition, believing responsibly or reasonably seems to be required. So on Cassam's account, a trait is a vice because of impeding two things: effective inquiry, which is held to be knowledge conducive, and responsible inquiry. Responsible inquiry, in turn, is taken to be something like justified or rational inquiry. Crucially, both conditions are taken to characterize what makes a trait a vice. Along these lines, virtues are traits that are conducive to effective and responsible inquiry (Cassam 2016: 164-166).

With the elements of this account to hand, Cassam replies to Montmarquet's objections as follows: consider a demon world inhabited by Galileo's intellectually vicious brother Schmalileo, who unlike Galileo, is closed-minded, lazy, and negligent. The demon sees to it that his intellectual vices are nevertheless truth-conducive. Cassam argues that Schmalileo still exhibits *vices* in the demon world, however, even if reliable, since he is being epistemically irresponsible. Schmalileo is an ineffective inquirer not because his beliefs are false (since the demon sees to it that they are true), but because they are unjustified (Cassam 2016: 166-167). So the demon cannot make vices into virtues by manipulating the environment and the truth-conduciveness of Schmalileo's belief forming methods.

Offering an account of the vices that does not allow for the possibility of an evil demon turning the vices into virtues is an improvement over standard virtue-reliabilism. But does it go far enough? In particular, what does it imply about Galileo's beliefs? In the demon world, he is not an effective inquirer on Cassam's account, since he has beliefs that do not amount to knowledge because they are *false*, not because they are unjustified.

So on Cassam's view, he is committed to saying that Galileo is no longer intellectually virtuous in the demon world, despite exhibiting open-mindedness, insight, creativity, intellectual courage, and so. His beliefs in the demon world are not formed in a way that is knowledge conducive, since false, though they are responsibly formed. So the worry is this: on Cassam's virtues-as-knowledge-conducive traits, the demon cannot make vices into virtues, but the demon *can* make virtues into vices (by ensuring falsity and falsity-conduciveness of the belief forming methods used).

If Cassam's account of the vices is correct, why should this asymmetry exist? What makes a normative theory consequentialist is the contention that normative properties depend only on consequences. The relevant consequences here are taken to be knowledge related. It seems odd that an evil demon is unable to turn vices into virtues, but could make virtues into vices. Given the demon's power, one might expect that he should be able to equally make traits either virtues or vices, or lack the power to affect either one. Given his epistemic consequentialism, Cassam's commitment to this asymmetry is puzzling, and so requires explanation.

How might an advocate of Obstructivism respond to the objection that an evil demon should not be able to turn a virtue into a vice by making its exercise falsity conducive? Here I shall briefly consider two possibilities. Cassam hints at one possibility in terms of *normality*. Immediately after defining intellectual vices as those qualities that impede effective inquiry, he suggests in a footnote, "It might be necessary to insert 'normally' before 'impede' to allow for unusual cases in which an intellectual vice abets effective inquiry." (2015: 21) So the suggestion is that vices *normally* obstruct knowledge (and conversely, virtues are *normally* knowledge conducive). One might hold that an evil demon manipulating things so that, for example, open-mindedness always leads to falsity, constitutes an abnormal situation.

What Is Normal Anyway?

But what does 'normality' amount to? It cannot be statistical normality, of course, since an evil demon could see to it that open-mindedness and the other virtues *always* lead to falsity. In such worlds it's metaphysically impossible for the exercise of such traits to lead to truth, and so to knowledge. Even so, in light of Montmarquet's objection, one might hold that these qualities are nevertheless virtues, despite not being knowledge conducive. For this possible solution to amount to more than a promissory note, Obstructivists owe us an account of the relevant sense of normality.

A second possible response is to hold that being intellectually virtuous is not all or nothing. While in the demon world Galileo is not as virtuous as he would be if he had knowledge as

the result of his intellectual character, he is still somewhat virtuous, and to be sure, he is not vicious. In a demon world Galileo has the virtue of employing methods that are knowledge-conducive in *our* world even if, in the demon world, his belief are always false⁴.

This response moves from requiring knowledge conduciveness in the subject's own world to being knowledge conducive in other worlds, for example in our actual world, assuming that this is a demon-free world and the exercise of our virtues tends to result in knowledge. While some form of this response may be workable, an immediate obstacle arises in accounting for the value of the virtues (and the disvalue of the vices).

Recall that an advantage of simple virtue-reliabilism was that it had a clear explanation of the value of the virtues: they are instrumentally valuable insofar as they tend to get truth in the worlds they are exercised in. A consequentialist account in terms of knowledge-conduciveness would have the same advantage: knowledge is also valuable, and the virtues are instrumentally valuable ways of acquiring knowledge. And a related account could be given for the disvalue of the intellectual vices.

But if we move from requiring actual knowledge-conduciveness, but only requiring it in some other privileged set of worlds, then the axiology becomes far less straightforward. Holding on to one's consequentialism, one would be committed to holding that a virtue is valuable in a world because it is instrumental to knowledge in *other* circumstances, even ones that might never obtain. But does instrumental value relativize to other worlds in that way⁵? To take one example, a medicine is instrumentally valuable because of the diseases it is able to cure. If there are no diseases *at all* it can cure, it is very odd to claim that the medicine is still nevertheless instrumentally valuable, since there are some far off worlds (which may never obtain) where there are diseases that the medicine could cure. As this example shows, outside of the right environments, instrumental value disappears.

We ought to judge that Galileo has intellectual virtues, and that these virtues are valuable in the world he finds himself in, and not because of what these traits might lead to in radically different circumstances. Arguably for a character trait to be a virtue, having it should contribute to making its possessor a good person. So in the case of the intellectual virtues, having them should contribute to making one an intellectually good person⁶. And it seems that Galileo is an intellectually good person, even when in demon worlds.

Having the character traits, thinking styles, and attitudes he does contributes to making him

⁴ Cassam suggested this possible line of response in personal correspondence.

⁵ For an argument that instrumental value does not work counterfactually in the way this proposal would require, see Madison 2017a. In that paper I argue that the value of epistemic justification is not exhausted by its instrumental value, and that plausibly, justification is valuable for its own sake. In addition, I argue against Sosa-style indexical-reliabilism (i.e. justification need not actually be reliably produced in a world, but it should be reliable in something like the normal world). I argue that these kinds of proposals cannot explain the value of epistemic justification.

⁶ For the suggestion linking a character trait being a virtue with its thereby being a good making feature of the person who possesses it, see Baehr 2011: ch. 6.

an intellectually good person – and these seem to be good-making features of Galileo and his character, despite not being knowledge-conducive. If one judges that these traits are valuable, and Galileo is an intellectually good person in virtue of having them, it is puzzling to hold that something is valuable *then and there*, because of what it might lead to, if remote possibilities were to obtain (and which by hypothesis, can never obtain).

These are not meant to be knockdown arguments against Obstructivism. Its account of the nature of the vices (and virtues) is an improvement upon virtue-reliabilism, especially insofar as it fares better against Montmarquet’s objection than its immediate rivals. Nevertheless, I contend that it does not go far enough: without a fuller account of either how to block the possibility of an evil demon making putative virtues into vices, or else provide an explanation of why this is not an untoward result, Montmarquet’s objection still stands. Until then, it remains an open question exactly what it is that makes an intellectual vice a vice⁷.

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⁷ Thanks to Quassim Cassam and Rhiannon James for helpful comments.