**The State-of-the-Art in Vice Epistemology**

*OZSW, 19/3/23*

**1. Preliminaries**.

**Vice epistemology** is ‘the philosophical study of the nature, identity, and epistemological significance of intellectual vices’ (Cassam 2016, 159).

It emerged *circa* 2010s as an offshoot of **virtue epistemology** (Zagzebski) and as a corrective to one-sided perspectives on epistemic character – it’s not all virtues/flourishing/good stuff!

Virtue and vice epistemology are the component departments of **character epistemology** – whose foundational claim is that epistemic character is real and significant to understanding epistemic life and practice.

**2. Vice epistemology.**

There are three main kinds of work in vice epistemology (cf. Kidd, Battaly, Cassam):

1. **Foundational work** – what are epistemic vices, what makes them vices, how are they acquired, how do they manifest in personal and collective epistemic life, what are the aims of vice epistemology?
2. **Analyses of specific epistemic vices** – arrogance, dogmatism, and closemindedness are well-known, but there are also less-known **esoteric epistemic vices**, ones neither recognised nor entrenched in our inherited vocabularies (eg epistemic hubris).
3. **Applied vice epistemology** – applications of vice-epistemological resources to specific issues in **professional** domains (science, healthcare, media), specific **topics**/**problems** (fake news, ‘bullshit’), and specific **social and political phenomena** (social oppression, respect for truth, fanaticism and extremism, etc.).

Heather Battaly’s work – in early 2000s/2010s – represented essential contributions to each, later followed by foundational work by Quassim Cassam and Alessandra Tanesini.

Character epistemology is a kind of **regulative epistemology**, ‘a response to perceived deficiencies in people’s epistemic conduct’ (Roberts and Wood), and many contemporary vice epistemologists endorse a specifically **ameliorative**function – good vice epistemology ought to identify effective strategies for (i) reducing incidence of epistemic vice, (ii) rehabilitation of epistemically vicious agents, and (iii) correcting **epistemically corrupting** conditions.

Vice epistemology also includes reflection on the **methodology of vice epistemology**: how should we ‘do’ vice epistemology, roles for historical and empirical work, of relations to other types of epistemology and other epistemological concerns (eg epistemic injustice).

- eg Kidd on **deep epistemic vices***,* rooted in broader metaphysical worldviews and the historical phenomena of **transient** and **promiscuous** epistemic vice-concepts.

**2. What are epistemic vices?**

Cassam distinguishes two answers to this question:

* **vice-monism** – epistemic vices are one kind of thing (Aristotle on dispositions or traits of character; Tanesini on vices-as-attitudes)
* **vice-pluralism** – epistemic vices are many kinds of things (eg Cassam **–** character traits, attitudes, and thinking-styles)

I speculate that Aristotle’s influence on European character theory has encouraged the entrenchment of vice-monism, thereby occluding other ontological possibilities.

Questions about the ontology of epistemic vices relate to two other issues:

* **vice-bearers** – what kinds of things can have epistemic vices? Three answers:

1. **individual epistemic agents** (standard answer)
2. **collective epistemic agents** (debated possibility)
3. **abstracta** – policies, doctrines, ideologies (minority position)

Collective agents include **groups** and **institutions** – Fricker offers the concept of an **institutional ethos** as an analogue of **individual character**.

* **aetiology of epistemic vice** – how do agents acquire epistemic vices? what one thinks epistemic vices are will influence how we think agents become vicious (eg habitation? psychological maldevelopment? internalisation of corrupt social norms?)

I talk more about **epistemic corruption** later in the talk.

Ontological issues have ameliorative implications: if there are epistemically vicious agents other than individual epistemic agents, we need to know.

**3. Why are epistemic vices bad?**

I distinguish (i) **normatively** monist/pluralist and (ii) **axiologically** monist/pluralist answers.

**Normative question**: what accounts for the badness of epistemic vices?

Battaly distinguishes two answers to this question:

* **consequentialism –** the badness of epistemic vices is explained in terms of effects

Cassam’s **obstructivism**: epistemic vices are dispositions, attitudes, and thinking-styles which are bad because they ‘systematically obstruct the gaining, keeping, and sharing of knowledge’ and other epistemic goods (truth, understanding).

‘*Systematically’*matters – vices can occasionally be epistemically beneficial, either randomly or under unusual or contrived conditions.

Battaly calls these **effects-vices** – distinguish bad effects for the **individual**, for **other** epistemic agents (contemporary and future), and also the **epistemic environment**.

Kidd distinguishes two kinds of effects-vices:

* + **productive epistemic vices** – traits which tend systematically to produce a preponderance of bad effects (eg epistemic arrogance).
  + **passive epistemic vices** – traits which systematically fail to produce a preponderance of good effects (eg epistemic laziness).

In practice, some epistemic vices *both* cause bad effects *and* fail to cause good effects.

* **motivationalism** – the badness of epistemic vices is explained in terms of the values, desires, or motivations integral to the vice.

Tanesini is the best representative – eg epistemic arrogance expresses desires to assert superiority over other epistemic agents, signals an intolerance of criticism, etc.

Some epistemically vicious motivations:

* + - to undermine the epistemic agency of others
    - to propagate false beliefs that serve one’s own interests
    - to lower the collective epistemic standards of one’s community
    - to create social conditions hostile to epistemic values

Distinguish **proximate** (or **immediate**)and **ultimate** motivation: the ultimate motivation common to all epistemic vices is arguably a desire to resist what Zagzebski calls ‘cognitive contact with reality’.

Charlie Crerar distinguishes three kinds of vice-motivationalism:

* + **absence** **accounts** – vices express absence of good epistemic motivations
  + **presence** **accounts** – vices express presence of bad epistemic motivations
  + **hybrid** **accounts**

The vice of **epistemic** **insouciance** – a lack of care or concern for truth – is an absence-vice, whereas the vice of **epistemic** **malevolence** is a presence-vice.

Consequentialist and motivationalist positions can be combined into kinds of **normative** **pluralism** – eg ‘the badness of all vices can be articulated in effects- or motives-terms’, or ‘the bad motives are primary and the bad effects are secondary’ – Battaly and Kidd are pluralists.

**Axiological questions**: should our accounts of the badness of epistemic vices be confined to bad epistemic effects/motivations or also include moral/practical/other values, too?

Kristie Dotson warns us against the epistemic/non-epistemic distinction, because she thinks it obscures the intimate interpenetration of the ethical, epistemic, and political.

* **Axiological** **monism** – confines accounts of the badness of vices to the epistemic

Cassam’s obstructivism is axiologically monistic, even if he acknowledges the bad moral and political effects of vices—cf. concept of **political vices** (cf. Button).

* **Axiological** **pluralism** – includes multiple kinds of values in accounts of the badness of epistemic vices – epistemic, ethical, practical, political.

For axiological pluralists, what makes vices ***epistemic vices***is their relation to our epistemic practices (enquiring, researching, explaining etc) and not the values

Consider **vices of truth** – dishonesty, deceptiveness, etc. – which Bernard Williams describes as hybrid ethico-epistemic vices.

I think axiological pluralism is the better option: (i) feminist epistemologies and (ii) liberatory concerns about the relation of epistemic vices to sociopolitical concerns (eg Medina).

**4. How do people become epistemically vicious?**

Our epistemic characters are clearly changeable to some degree: we can become more or less epistemically vicious and more or less epistemically virtuous.

To develop that thought, consider the concepts of **aetiology** and **corruption**.

**Aetiological sensitivity**: what are the origins or causes of an agent’s epistemic vices? How, when, and why did they become epistemically vicious? Medina speaks of the sociogenesis of epistemic character.

Kidd urges **aetiological sensitivity** – when attributing epistemic vices to an agent, enquire into the origins or causes of their vicious character – for at least the following reasons:

1. identify deficiencies in our epistemic socialisation
2. avoid essentialising assumptions about epistemic character
3. demonstrate justice and fairness to epistemically vicious agents
4. effective diagnosis is crucial for effective amelioration.

Aetiological sensitivity complicates issues of **blame** and **responsibility** – Battaly argues that vice epistemology has a ‘responsibility problem’. I agree and think vice epistemologists should emphasise the diversity of our responses to vices, which are not limited to *blaming*.

**Epistemic corruption**: occurs when an agent’s epistemic character comes to be damaged, in one or both of two ways:

* **active** **corruption** – the erosion or extirpation of epistemic virtues and excellences
* **passive** **corruption** – the development and exercise of epistemic vices and failings

Corruption involves destructive interactions with **corruptors** – conditions, processes, social structures, incentives (etc.) that tend to erode excellences and/or feed failings.

Several **modes of epistemic corruption**:

1. *Acquisition*  – of new epistemically vicious dispositions.
2. *Activation* – of latent epistemically vicious tendencies.
3. *Propagation* – increasing the **scope** of a vice.
4. *Stabilisation* – increasing the **stability**of a vice.
5. *Intensification* – increasing the **strength**of a vice.

Epistemic corruption is a **dynamic** and **dialectical** phenomenon, which agents can often try to counteract in various ways.

If so, explanations of personal epistemic failings must be **multidimensional**, sensitive to a range of psychological, characterological, situational, interpersonal, and structural factors.

Studying epistemic corruption should be an empirically-informed activity (see, for instance, Chubb, Kidd, and Forstenzer on corrupting structural features of UK academia).

Consider some general **kinds of corruptors**:

1. The absence or derogation of epistemic exemplars who model epistemic virtue.
2. The valorisation of exemplars of epistemically vicious persons and actions.
3. The rebranding of vices as virtues.
4. The establishment of conditions that increase the exercise costs of virtues.
5. The establishment of conditions that increase the incentives to, and rewards of, vice.

For what it’s worth, I think the social world we have inherited is profoundly epistemically corrupting in ways that should encourage **pessimism** about the prospects for any significant amelioration of our collective epistemic condition ☹

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