
Quassim Cassam, *Vices of the Mind: From the Intellectual to the Political* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 224 pp.

What are epistemic vices? How can we detect them in ourselves and others? Are we responsible for them? And finally, how can we counter them? In *Vices of the Mind*, Quassim Cassam offers the first extensive inquiry into the nascent field of vice epistemology. Classifying epistemic vices into three categories – character traits, attitudes, and ways of thinking – he provides a pliant methodological toolkit for thinking about epistemic vices. To bring his points closer to home, Cassam illustrates each category with real-world examples of political failures caused by the epistemic arrogance, closed-mindedness, gullibility, or insouciance of their perpetrators. As he stresses in the preface, epistemic vices are inseparable from their political consequences. They, after all, lie at the base of poor decision-making, indifference to expert opinion, and careless voting. Cassam also articulates a theory of epistemic vice, obstructivism, which underlines their damaging effect on the acquisition and transmission of knowledge. He does note, however, that some philosophers might deem vice explanations overly personal, and instead opt for structural or sub-personal accounts of epistemic failures. For the sake of simplicity, I will, in reviewing the book, follow Cassam's line of thought. As the first comprehensive work in the domain, Cassam's study is sure to guide future contributions to vice epistemology.

In the first chapter, Cassam introduces his theory of epistemic vice, *obstructivism*. As the name implies, the central feature of epistemic vices is that they systematically get in the way of knowledge. To stay true to Cassam's terminology, they *obstruct* us in acquiring, retaining, and distributing true beliefs. Epistemic vices, in simpler terms, hamper our attempts to gain, keep, and share knowledge. Cassam discerns obstructivism from motivational accounts of epistemic vice. Such models, inherited from virtue epistemology, argue that epistemic virtues and vices entail a distinct motivational component. According to motivational theories, epistemic virtues such as conscientiousness, diligence, and open-mindedness rest on a lively interest in attaining the truth. Yet, Cassam argues, it would be misguided to say that epistemic vices are motivated by a calculated quest for ignorance. While it would be somewhat more reasonable to support the intermediate position, which claims that epistemic vices might hinge upon an overly lenient approach to knowledge, a dearth of positive motivation, Cassam maintains that their crucial feature is that they, by inspiring unreliable epistemic conduct, obstruct our intellectual endeavors. What is more, not all epistemic vices entail a negative motivation: closed-mindedness is, for example, motivated by the desire for intellectual closure, which does not have to be harmful. Obstructivism defines epistemic

vices as “blameworthy or otherwise reprehensible character traits, attitudes, and ways of thinking that systematically obstruct the gaining, keeping, or sharing of knowledge” (23).

Epistemic vices, then, come in different shapes and sizes. Cassam identifies three main types of epistemic vices: (i) character traits, stable dispositions to act in a particular manner, (ii) attitudes, which presuppose an object of our affective stances, and (iii) ways of thinking, isolated epistemic blunders that do not require a genuinely vicious character. To find out whether an epistemic vice is a character trait, an attitude, or a way of thinking, we need to inquire which of the options enjoys explanatory primacy. For instance, we cannot describe a wishful thinker (a person of a particular character) without appealing to the practice of wishful thinking (a mode of thought). The reverse, however, does not hold true: we can easily explain what wishful thinking is without conjuring up a person who habitually engages in such thinking. As wishful thinking is explanatorily prior to being a wishful thinker, Cassam concludes that it is a way of thinking. Similarly, prejudice is an attitude because we cannot outline a prejudiced character without explaining what it is that makes them prejudiced: their negative affective posture towards particular objects. Regarding our responsibility for our harmful epistemic conduct, Cassam briefly distinguishes two kinds of responsibility: acquisition responsibility and revision responsibility. Albeit we are not always responsible for acquiring our vices, he will later maintain that we remain responsible for subduing them, which equips us with enough revision responsibility to be considered culpable. Cassam then notes that some philosophers might consider vice explanations too personal, and instead opt for structural or sub-personal accounts of epistemic phenomena. Structural explanations seek the causes of epistemic failures in the broader systems that frame and direct individual behavior. Sub-personal explanations, too, do not hold individuals liable for their epistemic blunders. Instead, they focus on the automatic cognitive biases that underlie our behavior. Although he acknowledges the advantages of such approaches, such as the fact that structural theories explore more extensive systems of inequality, Cassam maintains that a study of epistemic vices is indispensable for a proper understanding of our conduct.

Cassam elaborates his conception of vicious character traits on the example of closed-mindedness, illustrating it with the case of Eli Zeira, the Israeli general whose obstinacy had him dismiss ample evidence of the incoming attack by Egyptian forces. Although Israel had excellent information about Egypt’s plans to assault them, Zeira’s conviction that there would be no conflict compelled him to disregard all opposing facts. Cassam then defines character vices as “stable dispositions to act, think, and feel in particular ways” (31). Like moral vices, epistemic vices can be high or low fidelity. In simpler terms, high fidelity vices entail a high consistency of behavior across different contexts and are not

subject-specific. Someone who is only closed-minded regarding a particular topic, such as the virtues of their child, is not a candidate for the epistemic vice of closed-mindedness. Low-fidelity character traits, in contrast, require only occasional displays of vicious behavior. Just like one instance of gross cruelty is sufficient to qualify one as cruel, an isolated incident of gullibility demarcates us as somewhat gullible. Cassam contends that most character vices are high-fidelity traits, requiring repeated demonstrations of vicious behavior. The exemption here is gullibility, since gullible people do not need to consistently fall prey to fraud. Regarding the question of whether we can remedy our character vices, Cassam distinguishes them from personality traits, which are deeply entrenched and immutable. As we can attempt to amend our character, we have enough revision responsibility to be held culpable for our vices. Cassam closes the chapter by implying that all character vices stem from vicious ways of thinking, a proposition he further explores in the following section.

In the section on thinking vices, Cassam defines them as “epistemically vicious ways of thinking or thinking styles” (55). He then elaborates his earlier position that thinking vices are explanatorily prior to vicious character traits: In order to describe a harmful feature of someone’s character, we must refer to that what makes it vicious, an epistemically damaging thinking habit. To illustrate a closed-minded person, for one, we would need to describe the closed-mindedness of their thinking – their reluctance to consider opposing information and give up on long-held beliefs. So, although closed-mindedness is usually treated as a paradigmatic character vice, an inquiry into vicious ways of thinking can help us identify isolated epistemic blunders that do not require a genuinely harmful character. Recalling Daniel Kahneman’s distinction between slow thinking, which is goal-oriented and involves intentional efforts, and fast thinking, which is automatic and subconscious, Cassam argues that thinking vices can occur in both.

Cassam then, proceeding to vicious attitudes, illustrates them with epistemic insouciance, an indifference towards evidence and truth, and brings up the example of the Brexit campaign in 2016, which disseminated incorrect data about Britain’s obligations towards the European Union. Unlike vicious character traits and thinking vices, attitudes presuppose an object of our affective states. Another attitude vice, prejudice, validates this point, as it entails a negative emotional posture towards vulnerable social groups. In that vein, Cassam detects two categories of vicious attitudes: postures, which are affective and involuntary, and stances, which involve a considered belief towards a particular object. Returning to the example of epistemic insouciance, it is an epistemically detrimental posture of indifference towards truth and responsible inquiry. While epistemic insouciance is mostly unconscious, as it is not motivated by a deliberated disregard for truth, other vicious attitudes, such as epistemic malevolence, qualify as stances. Cassam exemplifies epistemic

malevolence with the tobacco industry's efforts to annul evidence of the detriments of smoking, and describes it as a willful intention to obstruct the acquisition and transmission of truth. Concerning the question of our liability for vicious attitudes, Cassam maintains that we are revision-responsible for attempting to improve them. He closes the chapter by stressing that attitude vices are explanatorily prior to vicious character traits and that the relationship between attitudes and thinking vices is somewhat more complicated.

Recall that obstructivism had defined epistemic vices as *blameworthy* or otherwise reprehensible behaviors that hamper the acquisition and transmission of knowledge. Cassam then, inquiring whether we can indeed be blamed for our vices, returns to his initial distinction between acquisition responsibility and revision responsibility. Regarding the former, we are responsible for our vices if our choices and behaviors had somehow encouraged the development of the vice. Similarly, when it comes to revision responsibility, we are culpable if we can revise or subdue our vices, but fail to do so. Arguing that revision responsibility requires control over our vices, Cassam proceeds to identify three types of control. First, there is voluntary control, our ability to do things at will. Second, evaluative control concerns our freedom to change our beliefs following evaluations of what is true. Third, managerial control enables us to manipulate our beliefs and surroundings in accordance to our wishes. Cassam then concludes that the type of control required for making us blameworthy depends on whether we are dealing with a vicious character trait, a thinking vice, or a harmful attitude. He maintains that control is a necessary condition of culpability, as we cannot be held liable for something we did not bring about, and cannot change.

In his discussion of epistemic vices and knowledge, Cassam inquires whether the vice of dogmatism can foster knowledge by protecting our true beliefs from unreliable evidence. According to philosophers such as Kripke, assuming a dogmatic stance towards our core creeds can shield them from assaults we would be otherwise unable to dismiss. An average epistemic agent is, for instance, justified in dogmatically refusing to entertain theories in favor of astrology, even if they lack the expert knowledge needed to disprove each particular claim. Cassam then recalls Kuhn's stance that work within normal science, an established scientific paradigm, is inherently dogmatic. Scientists carefully apply the learned procedures and accord the results to what they have been taught to expect, making no effort to question the theoretical underpinnings of their discipline. If dogmatism is indeed conducive to scientific progress, this confronts us with an inconsistency – namely, an attitude is only vicious if it systematically gets in the way of knowledge. And, if dogmatism is an organic part of normal scientific functioning, then it does not hamper the acquisition of knowledge. This conclusion leaves us with three possibilities. First, dogmatism might not be an epistemic vice. Second, epistemic vices might not be a systematic barrier to knowledge, which would

require us to rethink the central tenet of obstructivism. Third, the epistemic phenomenon in Kuhn's account might be something other than dogmatism. After rejecting the first two options, Cassam proceeds to argue that the attitude in question is actually intellectual firmness, a justified trust in one's core beliefs. Without such firmness, we would fall victim to the vice of intellectual flimsiness, the inability to stand by our established knowledge. True dogmatism is an irrational adherence to spurious doctrines that resists all conflicting evidence and, as such, an epistemic vice. Scientists respectful of the dominant paradigm display no such obstinacy. When the orthodox framework proves insufficient for making sense of the incoming data, science undergoes a paradigm shift, and scientists embrace a new theoretical foundation.

Cassam then argues that some epistemic vices are stealthy in that they stymie their own detection. For instance, someone closed-minded might be so invested in the image of themselves as a virtuous epistemic agent, and so unwilling to consider conflicting views, that they will remain ignorant to the fact they are closed-minded. An epistemically arrogant person will, similarly, dismiss notions that they might be overly self-assured, instead choosing to deem their confidence justified. Echoing Miranda Fricker's work on prejudice, Cassam argues that stealthy vices hamper the critical reflection needed to identify them by "nullifying or opposing the very epistemic virtues on which active critical reflection depends" (149). According to Cassam, critical reflection hinges upon the virtues of open-mindedness and humility, the opposites of closed-mindedness and epistemic arrogance, which he detects as the stealthiest of vices. Cassam likens stealthy vices to the Dunning-Kruger effect in psychology, when incompetent individuals lack the metacognition needed to grasp and assess their incompetence. He then inquires how we can overcome stealthy epistemic vices. When critical reflection fails, there are two alternatives: self-knowledge from testimony, when others alert us of our vicious behavior, and breakthrough experiences, when the negative consequences of our vices force us to acknowledge the errors of our epistemic ways. Yet, Cassam notes, even self-knowledge from testimony can fall prey to stealthy vices. A closed-minded person will, for instance, likely disregard evidence that opposes their entrenched view of self. Does the stealthiness of certain vices, the fact they evade detection, exonerate us from blame? Not necessarily. Even if we are ignorant of our vices because they are hard to detect, we remain responsible for our ignorance, and, consequently, for our behavior.

Cassam closes the book by inquiring whether there is room for self-improvement. He rejects epistemic pessimism, the view that we are not in control of our vices because they are immutable, and instead opts for "qualified optimism" (171). According to this stance, remedying our vices requires considerable self-awareness, motivation, effort, and skill, but is nonetheless possible. Using the example of sub-personal cognitive biases, Cassam argues

that, to revise our vicious behavior, we need to be aware of our biases, be motivated to improve them, and undergo the necessary effort to control them in our everyday lives. While we cannot merely wish our biases away, we can use specific psychological strategies to diminish them, which equips us with enough managerial control to make us blameworthy. Yet, Cassam retains a much-needed dose of realism: although self-improvement is not always possible, it sometimes is, and it is surely a worthy endeavor. When there is indeed no room for improvement, because the biases are either too deeply entrenched or too challenging to dispel, we can attempt to outsmart them by way of institutional measures. For instance, we can outsmart the prejudicial beliefs of decision committees by insisting on blind reviews and standardized procedures, which shield vulnerable social groups from deflated assessments of credibility. While such techniques do not annul our epistemic vices, they help mitigate their consequences. Cassam concludes that stark epistemic pessimism is untenable: The prospect that epistemic vices can be neither improved nor evaded is “too ghastly to contemplate” (187), and we should continue seeking ways to amend them.

Having articulated a framework for classifying different epistemic vices, and a theory that underlines their detrimental effect on gaining and sharing knowledge, Cassam has set vice epistemology on a stable methodological footing. Further philosophical efforts, still, remain to be made. Future works in vice epistemology might want to explore the causal link between sub-personal cognitive biases and epistemic vices. It does seem as if epistemic vices build on the foundations provided by our cognitive makeup, such as confirmation bias, the tendency to seek information that confirms our present beliefs. It would be just as interesting to inquire about the balance of structural and personal explanations of epistemic failures. This inquiry would help us determine when we should opt for either approach and how they can be conjoined. We can also work on more nuanced accounts of blame. The question of when we are responsible for acquiring and revising or vices is worthy of careful philosophical scrutiny. Finally, it is crucial to study the room for improvement while remaining realistic about our cognitive limitations. Only then can we distinguish cases that call for intentional efforts from more taxing scenarios when we should merely aim to outsmart our biases by way of institutional methods. Cassam’s fruitful philosophical toolkit, which identifies different categories of vices and different kinds of control, would surely contribute to each of these topics. Our task, then, is to put it to good use.

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