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Against Obstructivism

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Abstract: For Quassim Cassam, intellectual vices obstruct knowledge. On his view, that's what makes them vices. But obstructing knowledge seems unnecessary. Some intellectual vices can manifest passively, without obstructing knowledge. What's more, obstructing knowledge seems insufficient. Some traits of intellectual character, not yet matured to full virtues, obstruct knowledge but earn us no blame or criticism. A motive-based theory of intellectual vice – a rival theory – can handle both of these issues.

Intrigued and perhaps alarmed by the prevalence of flawed cognitive traits, some philosophers have formed a field of research they call *vice epistemology*, a discipline Quassim Cassam has characterized as "a branch of epistemology which concentrates on the nature, identity, and epistemological significance of intellectual vices" (2016: 159-60). Using the concept of vice to think about flawed cognitive traits raises many questions. And as Cassam indicates here, one of the most pressing questions for vice epistemologists is this: What *are* intellectual vices?

Closed-mindedness, dogmatism, fanaticism, incredulity – these are intellectual vices. Many of them produce bad epistemic *effects*. Often, they make us lack the confidence we need to believe; they make us believe what isn't true; or they make our beliefs – whether true or false – unjustified. Those who want to have proper confidence, believe what's true, and believe justifiably do well to guard against intellectual vices.

But is the defining mark of intellectual vice a matter of producing bad epistemic effects? Cassam thinks so (2016; 2019). Intellectual vices, on his view, obstruct knowledge. They inhibit the getting, keeping, or sharing of truth, belief, or justification. In this essay, I raise doubts about Cassam's "obstructivism." I also recommend that we include the idea of bad motives in a theory of intellectual vice.

1. Obstructivism

Cassam's view of intellectual vice is best seen in light of Julia Driver's. Driver distinguishes two main approaches to the evaluation of traits: evaluational internalism and evaluational externalism. On the former approach, a trait's quality is determined by "factors internal to agency, such as motives or intentions" (2000: 124). On the latter, such quality is determined by factors outside agency – specifically, "actual (as opposed to intended) consequences" (ibid.). Driver rejects the former and accepts the latter.

On her theory, virtues produce mostly good effects and vices produce mostly bad effects. But to what extent? Across all possible worlds? Invariably? Driver argues that a virtue produces "more good (in the actual world) than not *systematically*" (2001: 82, her italics). A trait's effects on a particular world is what matters. Kindness, for example, produces mostly good effects in our world, which makes it valuable in this world. Traits like cruelty, on the other hand, make our world worse; they produce mostly bad effects here. For Driver, the good effects of virtue and the bad effects of vice are produced systematically, that is, on a large scale. She would see kindness as a virtue even if, for an unfortunate few, it just happened to produce mostly bad effects. Similarly, she would see cruelty as a vice even if a handful of cruel people happened to produce mostly good effects. But if in some world kindness produced mostly bad effects on a large scale and cruelty for the most part produced mostly good effects, in that world kindness would be a vice and cruelty would be a virtue (ibid.: 55-6; 82). So, for Driver, the virtues of a particular world systematically produce mostly good effects in that world, and the vices of a particular world systematically produce mostly bad effects in that world.

Those ideas apply to Driver's theory of *intellectual* virtue and vice as well, the relevant effects being distinctively epistemic. She thinks intellectual virtues systematically produce mostly true beliefs (2000: 126). She sees intellectual vices similarly, arguing that they systematically produce mostly false beliefs (2003: 372). The ratio of true to false beliefs a trait systematically produces determines whether it has the sort of disvalue that accounts for what's bad about intellectual vice.

Now, Driver doesn't think that just any trait that systematically produces mostly false beliefs is intellectually vicious. She thinks that intellectual vices are traits of *character*, not cognitive faculties. This is because she thinks intellectual vices are traits for which we deserve blame or criticism. "Someone may be stupid," she says, "yet the stupidity [is] not her responsibility" (2000: 132). Elsewhere she endorses the idea that "we do blame stupidity when we regard it as willful, and when we think behavior modification is a realistic option" (2003: 378). Understood as defective faculties, then, traits like stupidity merit neither blame nor criticism nor the status of intellectual vice. Understood as acquired or revisable character traits, things are different: Driver gives narrow-mindedness as an example of an intellectual trait that earns us blame and hence an example of intellectual vice (ibid.).

So far, Cassam sides with Driver. He's an evaluational externalist and thinks that the disvalue of intellectual vices lies in the systematic production of mostly bad epistemic effects (2019: 11-12). And he thinks that such vices are reprehensible, that "some form of appropriately targeted censure must be in order where vice is concerned" (2019: 6). He thinks we needn't merit blame for our vices in the sense that they needn't be acquired or revisable under our direct control (and so does Driver); but he thinks that we must at least merit some form of criticism for the sort of thinkers we are (ibid.: 17-23).

Unlike Driver, Cassam thinks that intellectual vices needn't be character traits; they can be thinking styles or attitudes (2019: 12-13). But where Driver and Cassam differ most fundamentally concerns the type of bad epistemic effects at issue. Driver says intellectual vices produce *false beliefs*, but Cassam says they obstruct *knowledge*, roughly understood as justified true belief (2019: 7, 9-11). Intellectual vices, he argues, obstruct knowledge in either of three ways: by lowering one's confidence so that one can't be said to believe; by reducing the likelihood that one's beliefs will be true; or by getting in the way of justifying one's true beliefs.[1] Driver focuses on the second way. And while she thinks that a trait like dogmatism is an intellectual vice only if it systematically produces mostly false beliefs, Cassam thinks it's an intellectual vice even if it produces mostly *true* beliefs. This is because he thinks that beliefs held dogmatically, even if they're true, are unjustified, and that being unjustified keeps us from knowing.

Those are the key ideas of Cassam's obstructivism. Our question is whether the disvalue of intellectual vice lies where he says it lies, in knowledge obstruction. Let's first consider whether obstructing knowledge is required to manifest intellectual vice.

2. Must Intellectual Vices Obstruct Knowledge?

A potential problem for Cassam's theory starts with his implied epistemic axiology. What is the fundamental epistemic good? He thinks it's knowledge (2019: 12). And he doesn't exclude *trivia* as epistemically valuable, which seems like a mistake.[2] This implied epistemic axiology makes

[1] This is Cassam's recent view. Previously, he argued that intellectual vices obstruct effective and responsible inquiry (Cassam 2016). It seems he abandoned this view because it was hard to cash out "responsible inquiry" in terms other than exhibiting intellectual virtue, which put his theory at risk of vicious circularity.

[2] For some arguments from the virtue epistemology literature concerning the nature of the epistemic good, see Baehr (2018) and Pritchard (2019).

Cassam's theory of intellectual vice too narrow. In particular, his theory can't handle cases of intellectual excess. But that won't be my main point. I'll go on to argue that even if the epistemic axiology behind Cassam's theory can be refined so that it can handle cases of intellectual excess, such refinement goes only so far. It can't help him handle cases of intellectual vice manifesting passively when knowledge is beyond reach.

Some intellectual traits produce mostly true beliefs yet seem intellectually vicious. We see this in the epistemically self-indulgent, for example – those who desire epistemic objects excessively (Battaly 2010). People who incessantly indulge in celebrity gossip or sports trivia come to mind. With Driver's theory as his target, Charlie Crerar argues that epistemically self-indulgent people "may well acquire *more* true beliefs…since they aim at fairly mundane and trivial truths that are easily acquired" (2018: 70, his italics). Crerar makes a fair point: given how easily trivial truths can be acquired, being epistemically self-indulgent will likely produce mostly true beliefs on a large scale. And having this trait can merit blame or criticism, as trivial truths are desired to the neglect of important ones. Excessive devotion to trivia can crowd out proper concern for, and awareness of, the status of our health or our relationships, for example. If it turns out that we get more true beliefs with this trait, that wouldn't excuse us from neglecting fewer, yet more pressing, matters. Criticism like this can be appropriate: "Why must you always focus on trivial things when important matters demand your attention?" And a theory of intellectual vice should be able to account for cases of intellectual traits that merit blame or criticism.

This case goes against the necessity claim of Driver's theory. Does it run counter to Cassam's? Well, he does have a ready response. We've noted his view that intellectual vices obstruct knowledge, not merely true belief, and that knowledge requires epistemic justification.

Even if an intellectual vice renders mostly true beliefs, he would argue that having that vice would nonetheless make us epistemically unjustified in holding those beliefs (2019: 11). To hold beliefs dogmatically, for example, is to be irrationally attached to those beliefs, which means that they aren't held reasonably. Holding beliefs in this way is epistemically unjustified, Cassam says. So even if traits like dogmatism systematically produce mostly true beliefs, they obstruct knowledge by undermining epistemic justification.

That response works for some cases. Holding beliefs dogmatically or arrogantly or closed-mindedly may well keep us from being epistemically justified in holding those beliefs. But the case above involves none of those traits. It involves epistemic self-indulgence, a disposition to desire epistemic objects excessively. Desiring trivial truths excessively needn't make us unjustified in believing those truths. Unlike dogmatic people, the epistemically self-indulgent needn't be attached to their beliefs, and they might use reliable sources of information and make reasonable inferences. They seem to get knowledge – and plenty of it. Yet they seem open to blame or criticism: "You spend countless hours filling your heads with trivial truths while you remain ignorant of important issues." Here we have a case in which certain peoples' intellectual trait systematically abets rather than obstructs knowledge yet makes them intellectually vicious.[3]

That case seems like a problem for obstructivism. But I also vaguely see a way out. Suppose that in light of this case Cassam modified his theory with a richer epistemic axiology. (Exactly how he might do so is unclear to me. Perhaps the theory could be refined like this: intellectual vices systematically obstruct *valuable* knowledge.) If so, the case above may not be a genuine problem, because it hinges on the idea that epistemic self-indulgence makes us

[3] For a similar challenge to Cassam's obstructivism, see Kotsonis (2022).

intellectually vicious when we merit criticism for indulging in *trivia* to the neglect of important matters – i.e., *valuable* knowledge.

But there's another problem, one that can't be dealt with in that way. It has to do with being helpless. Sometimes we realize that we can't shake off an unwanted belief, that we must simply wait to get information, that the only ones who know our family history are deceased, that life is too short to learn all we had hoped to learn. Sometimes we realize that we're helpless epistemically. Being in such a state, though, doesn't hold back all intellectual traits; some of them can manifest somewhat passively. In that case, our intellectual traits can't be evaluated for obstructing knowledge. Yet we can be worthy of blame or criticism for these traits, which suggests that they're vices. And this can happen whether the issue is epistemically trivial or important. If so, then knowledge obstruction isn't required to account for the disvalue of intellectual vice – no matter what epistemic axiology obstructivism might assume. To see this, let's start with the idea of passive ethical virtue.

J. L. A. Garcia (1997) argues that ascribing virtue only to those whose traits reliably produce good effects comes with a "distasteful implication" (35). The implication is that the helpless can't be virtuous, which seems wrong: "If one must try to help others with reliable success in order to be benevolent, say, then it is hard to see how those severely incapacitated either physically or mentally can be virtuous" (ibid.). Robert Adams (2006) also argues along these lines. He thinks that there are "less active dimensions of virtue," that manifest when we're "relatively passive or even helpless" (16). The elderly and the severely ill, for example, can do very little to improve the world, but they can appreciate the good things they can still enjoy; they can be grateful to those who care for them; they can be gracious in their feelings toward another's wrongdoing. Being appreciative, grateful, and gracious in these ways, I think, earns

them praise. That these traits *would* produce good effects were they not possessed by the helpless doesn't seem to capture what's praiseworthy here, at least not all that is praiseworthy, and I think that this points to moments in ethical life when virtue has nothing to do with producing good effects.

The same goes for intellectual virtue. Sometimes we simply must wait for information, such as medical results or college admission decisions. Sometimes we must wait as we learn new skills; though we may actively try to develop the skill, sometimes we just have to wait for things to "click." Waiting calmly while helpless in these ways manifests intellectual patience. This needn't produce true beliefs or knowledge (or avoid false beliefs or ignorance). And yet, since it can be difficult not to get angry or frustrated at how long it takes to get information, or at how long it takes to learn new skills, being disposed to wait calmly can merit the kind of praise owed to the intellectually virtuous.

We also can passively yet virtuously wonder. It's true that when we realize that something is unknowable, being disposed to wonder about it can help us explore possibilities and thereby help us acquire knowledge. When we want to know unknowable facts of our family history, for example, wondering about them can help us see the possible intentions, choices, and events that occurred. But even when we know that all possibilities have been fully explored, wonder needn't cease. After all, we still don't know what we want to know. As long as it doesn't become obsessive, the wonder left over can merit praise; it can be an expression of caring about epistemic goods even when they're unattainable. It wouldn't produce any knowledge, but in this case that doesn't seem like a good reason to withhold praise. I don't see why the praise earned for being disposed to wonder about what's knowable must be withheld entirely when the object of wonder is evidently unknowable.

So it seems that we can be epistemically helpless yet intellectually virtuous. We can be passively yet virtuously patient and full of wonder without producing epistemically good effects. What about intellectual vice? I don't think that all who fail to be patient or fail to wonder in helpless circumstances are worthy of blame or criticism, and I don't think that falling short of virtue in any way, or to any degree, amounts to viciousness. But I do think that we can be intellectually impatient and wonderless in epistemically helpless circumstances and be fitting objects of blame or criticism.

Take intellectual impatience. Those who have this trait get angry or frustrated when they must wait to gain epistemic goods. When they try to learn a new skill and have to wait for things to click, they throw a fit. When they must wait on others for information, they start fuming. Even over minor things, and when not much time has passed, they say things like "Hurry up!" or "What's taking so long?" More than they want the item of knowledge itself, more than they want the skill itself, more than they care about accuracy, nuanced information, and so on – above all, they want what they want *now*. I think this warrants criticism, a rebuke or admonishment to wait calmly, even though this trait isn't obstructing knowledge. Intellectual impatience certainly *can* get in the way of knowledge. But in the circumstances that I'm imagining here, this trait manifests precisely in the anger and frustration that arise as a response to being unable to change one's epistemic standing.

Being wonderless needn't obstruct knowledge, either. We can regularly fail to wonder about what's unknowable to us. In this brief life, we're able to know very little compared to what can be known. In light of this fact, we might continue to wonder about what we can't know. We might think about all the questions we'll never answer, all the cities we'll never visit, all the books we'll never read, all the conversations we'll never have, and yet still care to know, still

wonder. Or, catching a glimpse of our limits, we might fail to care about what we can't know, or even hate it, finding it easier to devalue valuable knowledge than acknowledge its value and continue to wonder. And *that* seems to warrant at least some measure of disappointment: "Shouldn't you care about the wonderful reality that's out there to be known, even if it can't be known by *you*?"[4]

The case of epistemic self-indulgence, recall, creates a problem for obstructivism only because that trait likely produces mostly trivial knowledge. Cassam might be able to handle that case by modifying his theory's epistemic axiology – by requiring that intellectual vices obstruct *valuable* knowledge. But in epistemically helpless circumstances, where a change in knowledge can't happen, this modification doesn't help. Here, the epistemic object in question can be trivial or important. We saw that people can be worthy of criticism for their intellectual impatience (without obstructing knowledge), and they seem especially worthy of it when the epistemic object for which they must wait is trivial. Being disposed to anger or frustration when we must wait to learn, say, what someone is having for lunch, would make us more fit for criticism than being similarly disposed as we await urgent medical results. But in the case of being wonderless, the opposite is true. Being disposed to hold back all wonder just because *I* am unable to know expresses worse intellectual character when the epistemic object is highly valuable, when its depth or gravity or magnitude calls for wonder even from those who can't pursue it. So, intellectual traits that make us worthy of blame or criticism can manifest in epistemically helpless circumstances, and these circumstances can involve trivial or important epistemic

[4] Cassam thinks that intellectual vices needn't merit *strong* condemnation: "Some intellectual vices are severely criticized. Others are seen as only mildly reprehensible, but there is no such thing as an intellectual vice that merits no criticism at all." He continues in a footnote: "'Reprehensible' is sometimes defined as 'deserving of strong criticism'. I take it to mean 'deserving of some criticism'. 'Mildly reprehensible' is not an oxymoron." (2019: 4).

phenomena. This suggests that obstructing knowledge isn't always required for intellectual vice, no matter how Cassam might refine his implied epistemic axiology.

3. Is Obstructing Knowledge Always Vicious?

As we've seen, knowledge obstruction can occur in a number of ways. For Cassam, it can occur when our traits yield mostly false beliefs; when they yield too few beliefs; or when they make our true beliefs unjustified. Here I'll focus on the second and third ways, on whether producing too few beliefs or unjustified beliefs is sufficient for intellectual vice. (These ways, after all, are what make Cassam's view stand apart from Driver's.)

But first I should bring Cassam's views on confidence and justification into sharper focus. For Cassam, to know something we must believe it, and to believe it we must be ready to rely on it in practical reasoning. So knowing that Advil relieves pain requires confidence to take it as needed. Intellectual vices, he believes, can obstruct knowledge by robbing us of such confidence (2019: 10-11). Cassam also thinks that knowledge requires justification, which is "partly an objective and partly a subjective matter" (ibid.: 11). He thinks that if we form beliefs by using unreliable methods, then our confidence is *de facto* unjustified. By contrast, we're subjectively unjustified when we use reliable methods but have no rational basis for doing so. Belief in a quack's diagnosis, for example, is objectively unjustified, and groundless belief in the diagnosis of someone who just happens to be a real doctor is (merely) subjectively unjustified. Summing up, Cassam says that knowledge requires "both that one's confidence is reliably based and reasonable" (ibid.). Intellectual vices, he believes, can obstruct knowledge by undermining such justification, by systematically producing unreliably based beliefs or unreasonable beliefs.

Understood in those terms, I think we can possess traits that systematically undermine our confidence or our epistemic justification without being intellectually vicious. Or at least we can possess such traits without being worthy of blame or criticism, without which Cassam thinks we can't be intellectually vicious (2019: 17-23). And I think that we find such traits exhibited in the overcompensating efforts of the intellectually premature.

Some thinkers haven't yet matured. Some have become prematurely humble, for example. I'm imagining people who endured domineering know-it-alls – perhaps their parents or priests or bosses. They didn't want to be like those people. They sought a better way to lead their intellectual lives. They have been trying to tread the path of intellectual humility. However, they have been overcompensating. Having any confidence reminds them of the know-it-alls from their past. The thought of resembling their parents or priests or bosses makes them shudder and – most often – beat back their confidence. The trait they ended up with reflects this overcompensation: it's a bit too self-abasing and hasn't yet grown into true intellectual humility. These thinkers abandon old beliefs too easily, and they're slow to form new ones. By getting in the way of keeping and forming so many beliefs, their trait systematically obstructs knowledge.

While some thinkers are prematurely humble, others are prematurely autonomous. Here again I have in mind thinkers who were negatively affected by others. At home or at church or at work, thinking for one's self was frowned upon. They were taught to believe obediently and to hold those beliefs dogmatically. Eager to break free, they started thinking for themselves. But they developed a premature form of intellectual autonomy. They developed a trait that disposes them to think on their own, but in misguided ways. They haven't yet learned how to gather relevant evidence or how to evaluate evidence (or how to attend to the evidence which suggests that they're not good at gathering and evaluating evidence). Most of the beliefs their premature

autonomy produces are likely objectively unjustified in Cassam's sense; that is, they're likely not reliably based. Consequently, this trait regularly obstructs knowledge.

I haven't envisioned far-fetched, otherworldly cases. Premature forms of intellectual humility and autonomy are real – they actually exist. Nor have I introduced something akin to defective cognitive faculties; I've been referring to traits of character. And it seems plausible that premature intellectual humility would produce too few beliefs systematically, and that premature intellectual autonomy would produce mostly unjustified beliefs systematically. Everything is in order on the level of vice-making disvalue, on Cassam's view. Is this enough to be intellectually vicious? Not obviously so. Of course, some forms of *im*maturity are blameworthy. Some people deserve to hear "Grow up already!" But don't the sort of thinkers I have in mind have an innocence to them? Doesn't blame seem inappropriate? Let's put this in terms that sit comfortably with Cassam's views.

Cassam thinks we're blameworthy for having an intellectual trait only if it's a trait for which we're responsible, and he acknowledges two forms of responsibility: acquisition responsibility and revision responsibility (2019: 18-19). We can be responsible for acquiring certain traits, for cultivating them. This is rarely the case for vices, though. Usually we just find ourselves with vices. Still, we can be responsible for revising them: "If a person has the ability to modify their [traits]" Cassam says, "then they still have control over them and, because of that, can be responsible for them" (ibid.: 19). The premature thinkers I have in mind are responsible for their traits in some sense. As I think of them, their traits arise from choices and practice. But none of that earns them any blame. For again, these thinkers are trying to dissociate with the intellectually vicious; they're trying to distance themselves from what reminds them of their bad

intellectual upbringing. So they don't seem responsible for acquiring these traits, at least not in the sense that makes them appropriate targets of blame.

Are prematurely humble or autonomous thinkers responsible for *revising* their traits? Well, yes and no. What these thinkers need is gentle, trustworthy guidance. Prematurely humble thinkers need to be shown that they can have confidence in themselves as thinkers without being like the know-it-alls with whom they wish to dissociate. Prematurely autonomous thinkers simply need to be shown better ways of thinking for themselves. Were either to resist guidance again and again, they would be "revision responsible" and blame may eventually be appropriate. But then they wouldn't have that innocence about them that I tried to describe above, that innocence of trying but failing to be good thinkers. In their present condition, it's inappropriate to blame them. Until they prove resistant to guidance, they're off the hook.

It seems to me that although these thinkers have traits which fall short of intellectual virtues, strictly speaking, they aren't *blameworthy* for having these traits. Cassam might agree. He might think that some people who haven't yet matured as thinkers can be blameless for their intellectual traits. Even so, he might also think that these premature thinkers are open to *criticism*.

For Cassam, being blameworthy differs from being open to criticism in that the former but not the latter requires that we have effective control over acquiring or revising our traits. He thinks criticism is a fitting reaction to vices even if we have no such control. This is because our vices – here he's borrowing language from George Sher (2006) – "reflect badly" on us and are "failings" that "cast a negative shadow" over us (2019: 22-3). To explain, he gives an example from Battaly (2016) of a young man raised by the Taliban. This man became dogmatic, holding

on tightly to the Taliban's views. He could not have avoided becoming dogmatic, and he's unable to change. Cassam thinks that this dogmatism is intellectually vicious since, though the young man deserves no blame, he's nonetheless open to criticism, which involves "finding fault" for a trait that "reflects badly on him" as a thinker. "In this context," Cassam continues, "it doesn't matter whether his dogmatism is also blameworthy. It is still reprehensible and an epistemic vice" (ibid.).

To return to the point about prematurely humble and autonomous thinkers, the idea would be that even if these thinkers' upbringing exempts them from blame, they're still open to criticism. The idea is that these traits reflect badly on them and cast a negative shadow on them. Still, I can't see it. I see what Cassam means about the Taliban recruit; there's something dark going on there. Talk of "negative shadows" that warrant censure might make sense. But I can't see how it's appropriate to criticize people for falling short of intellectually virtuous humility on account of being merely premature, as described earlier – even if that means ending up with too few beliefs.[5] Similarly, it seems inappropriate to criticize people for falling short of intellectually virtuous autonomy on account of being a conscientious yet inept thinker who tries to think for themselves but struggles to do so well. It's inappropriate even if this premature form of autonomy produces more unjustified beliefs than justified ones systematically. I do see a need for gentle guidance. But I see no negative shadows and no warrant for negative reactive attitudes. Why shouldn't we excuse those who do their best to avoid intellectual vice but lack the guidance to achieve intellectual virtue?

[5] Plakias (2020) sees the trait of underconfidence as an intellectual vice open to criticism but, contra Cassam, aims the criticism not at agents but at their environments. Unlike Plakias, I'm arguing that we're *not* open to criticism, and hence *not* intellectually vicious, when we try to become intellectually humble but fall short of full virtue on account of our understandable overcompensating efforts.

I do not claim that trying but failing to do good is *always* a good excuse. Imagine, say, a surgeon who consistently botches surgeries and hopes to be excused on account of their effort. Arguably, criticism is well warranted, despite the surgeon's effort to do good. But this line of thought involves a disanalogy. That a surgery has gone bad is often easy to see, and so botching surgeries again and again may well merit blame or criticism. But having too few beliefs or unjustified beliefs is less clear; it's much less obvious when things aren't going well as we aim for intellectual virtue. (Also, surgeons are supposed to be experts already, unlike ordinary thinkers who try but fail to achieve good intellectual character.)

4. Clearing Up Some Confusion

Just now I argued that we can develop traits that systematically obstruct knowledge and yet be unworthy of blame or criticism. But given the role that blame and criticism play in Cassam's theory, my argumentative strategy might cause confusion. Sometimes Cassam suggests that systematically obstructing knowledge is not sufficient for intellectual vice. He doesn't want to count cognitive maladies, like Alzheimer's, as intellectual vices just because they obstruct knowledge systematically, and so his theory requires that such vices merit blame or criticism (2019: 9-10).

Here's where confusion can arise. Challenging the sufficiency claim of Cassam's theory, we might think, wouldn't involve what I've been doing, namely, arguing that having traits that obstruct knowledge systematically isn't always enough to merit blame or criticism and hence not enough to account for what makes intellectual vices bad. Rather, challenging this claim would involve arguing that having traits that, first, obstruct knowledge systematically and, second, make us worthy of blame or criticism, isn't enough to be intellectually vicious.

But the cause of the confusion lies elsewhere. The question before us concerns what makes intellectual vices bad. It concerns vice-making disvalue. One theory of intellectual vice centers on bad motives (Baehr 2021; Tanesini 2018; Zagzebski 1996). The centerpiece of another theory is bad judgment (Battaly 2014: 68-70). A third theory is based on bad effects, as with Cassam's theory. Bad epistemic motives, judgments, and effects are on trial here. At least one of these disvalues is supposed to account for what makes intellectual vices bad.[6] Cassam seems to confuse things here by packing into his theory of vice-making disvalue the notion of responsibility, as if part of what makes intellectual vices bad is that having them makes us fitting objects of blame or criticism. But that puts things backwards. Assuming there's a tight link between vice and responsibility, here's the right way to think about it: being intellectually vicious is bad in a way that makes us worthy of blame or criticism; being intellectually vicious makes us worthy of blame or criticism *because* it's bad, not the other way around.

The notion of responsibility may serve vice epistemologists well by circumscribing the relevant analysanda. It may offer a helpful criterial constraint on their theorizing about the nature of intellectual vice. Focusing on traits for which we're responsible keeps traits like closed-mindedness, dogmatism, and intellectual arrogance in view and cognitive defects like Alzheimer's out of view. Packing a responsibility component into a theory of vice-making disvalue, however, will only cause confusion. Vice-making disvalue is at issue, and given that intellectual vices produce or manifest a kind of disvalue for which we merit blame or criticism, it's fair to challenge a theory of intellectual vice by trying to show that producing or manifesting

[6] Some vice epistemologists are pluralists, arguing that none of these disvalues are necessary, and all can be sufficient, to account for what makes intellectual vices bad. See, for example, Battaly (2014).

the target disvalue isn't always enough to merit blame or criticism. That's all I tried to do in the previous section.

5. Why Not Include Bad Motives?

Cassam's theory of intellectual vice centers on external disvalue. But what about the mess inside us? What about internal flaws, such as failures of motivation? Can a theory of intellectual vice based on bad motives handle the above cases leveled against obstructivism?

Some virtue epistemologists argue that intellectual virtue requires good epistemic motives (Baehr 2011; Zagzebski 1996). To be intellectually virtuous, on this view, we must have a desire for, or positive orientation towards, epistemic goods – a "love" of truth, knowledge, and understanding. Part of what makes open-mindedness, attentiveness, curiosity, and the like intellectual virtues is that they are rooted in such good motives. Similarly, some vice epistemologists argue that intellectual vices require bad motives (as cited above). They think that incuriosity, dogmatism, closed-mindedness, intellectual laziness, and the like are rooted in some sort of motivational defect or flaw. And there are a variety of such defects. We can care about epistemic goods too little and become intellectually lazy; we can care about trivial truths too much and become epistemically self-indulgent; we can be unwilling to entertain unfamiliar truths and become closed-minded; and so on.

As noted, some intellectual traits, like epistemic self-indulgence, yield plenty of knowledge and at the same time leave us open to criticism. What's more, when knowledge obstruction – important or trivial – is irrelevant, we can still manifest intellectual vice passively. We can be intellectually impatient or wonderless in ways that make us worthy of blame or criticism. A theory of intellectual vice should be able to handle such cases. It should explain why

these intellectual character traits for which we're responsible *are* vices. And a motive-based theory can do just that. Epistemically self-indulgent people have *inordinate desires* for epistemic trivia. The intellectually impatient thinkers we discussed want unattainable knowledge, and they *want it now*. The wonderless people we discussed *don't care* about what they can't know. All of these intellectual character traits are rooted in defects of motivation. On a motive-based theory, they count as intellectual vices, which seems correct. So a motive-based theory can handle the above cases that raise doubts about obstructivism's necessity claim.

What about the sufficiency claim? Obstructivism seems unable to handle certain cases of failed effort. Recall the premature thinkers above. One set of these thinkers is prematurely humble. They had to endure domineering know-it-alls and sought a better way to live the intellectual life. They've been trying to be different, to become intellectually humble. But the trait they actually developed reflects their prematurity. They overcompensated and became unconfident thinkers. The effects? They have too few beliefs. And in lacking so many beliefs, their intellectual trait routinely obstructs knowledge (given that knowledge implies belief). But it seems inappropriate to blame or criticize them. So why think that they possess an intellectual vice? Again, the concern is that our intellectual character can be shaped by *trying but failing*. This genuine effort, I submit, excuses us. The same point applies to prematurely autonomous thinkers. These cases, as I imagine them, involve people genuinely and sincerely trying to be good thinkers. And the badness of their failures – their lack of knowledge – alongside the goodness of their sincere effort doesn't seem to be enough to make them worthy of blame or criticism for their intellectual character. This makes me doubt that these failures are always enough to account for the disvalue of intellectual vice.

A motivational conception of intellectual vice can handle these cases. Sincere effort suggests mostly pure motives. The premature thinkers above *seek* good intellectual character; they *want* to be intellectually humble and autonomous. They want to gain epistemic goods and avoid epistemic ills. Their good motives drive their efforts. On a motive-based theory of intellectual vice, these thinkers are *not* intellectually vicious. And that seems like the right result.

These considerations display the motive-based theory's explanatory power. This theory can handle cases of epistemic excess, of passive intellectual vice, and of premature intellectual character. That alone, of course, doesn't mean that we should accept the motive-based theory. But these considerations should at least get us thinking that perhaps intellectual vices are bad on account of either producing bad epistemic effects *or* manifesting bad motives.

No vice epistemologist has offered an argument to the effect that intellectual character rooted in a defect of motivation can't amount to an intellectual vice. At least not as far as I know. Cassam has asserted that intellectual vices "aren't vices because they have bad motives" (2019: 5). But he offers no argument.[7] It's hard to see why having seriously flawed motives couldn't be enough to make us intellectually vicious, even when no obstruction of knowledge occurs. Demagogues who prize the power of manipulation over truth, vain thinkers who care more about status than truth, cowards who hide their eyes from truth, lazy thinkers who just don't care about truth – all defectively motivated thinkers have bad intellectual character. And they seem worthy of blame or criticism even when their intellectual character abets, rather than obstructs, knowledge. So why not include the notion of bad motives in a theory of intellectual vice?

[7] Cassam's case against the motivational theory of intellectual vice is directed only at its necessity claim. See, for example, Cassam (2019: 16-7). See also Crerar (2018). I think this necessity claim is defensible, but defending it isn't my aim here.

Perhaps now Cassam (2023; 2024) can see a link between motives and intellectual vices.[8] In his more recent work, Cassam cautions vice epistemologists against excessive vice-charging.[9] He warns against being too quick to judge vaccine hesitant parents, for example. We shouldn't rush into charging them with intellectual vices, such as gullibility. We should aim for *Verstehen*, an understanding of others from their point of view. "Verstehen," says Cassam, "requires a willingness to engage another person's subjectivity" (2023: 23); it involves "understanding people's conduct in terms of their motives and purposes" (2024: 37). On this picture, we should look past others' apparent epistemic misconduct to see their true motives: "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" (2024: 40).

This is important for our discussion. It may seem to mark a shift in Cassam's thinking. He seems to imply that having good motives makes people unworthy targets of vice-charging. Has he changed his view? Is he no longer, strictly speaking, an obstructivist? Has he moved toward a more inclusive theory of intellectual vice, which includes the notion of bad motives?

It seems not. At the outset of both recent articles cited above, Cassam explicitly claims that intellectual vices are traits that systematically obstruct knowledge. He cites his own work, the work which has been this paper's focus. How, then, should *obstructivists* more cautiously charge others with intellectual vice? They should take care to ensure that the people in question have traits that *systematically obstruct knowledge*. That, after all, is what makes us intellectually vicious, for obstructivists. Why refrain from charging people with intellectual vice on account of their good motives, if motives have no bearing on what makes people intellectually vicious?

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[8] I thank an anonymous referee for advising me to address this recent work.
[9] Cassam gets the concept of vice-charging from Ian James Kidd. Vice-charging, according to Kidd, is "the critical practice of charging other persons with epistemic vice" (2016: 181).

There are two options open to Cassam. One option is to change his call for caution by explaining it in explicitly obstructivist terms. Again, the idea would be that we should take care not to charge people with intellectual vice unless we can tell that their intellectual traits systematically obstruct knowledge. Another option is to keep his call for caution as it is, with its reference to good motives, and to incorporate the notion of bad motives into his theory of intellectual vice. As the preceding discussion makes clear, I think he should choose the latter. But whatever he chooses, his theory and his call for caution should be consistent.[10]

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