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EPISTEMIC IDOLATRY AND INTELLECTUAL VICE

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ABSTRACT

Following Robert Adams's account of idolatry, this paper develops the concept of *epistemic* idolatry. Where there is devotion belonging to truth but given to a particular epistemic good, there we find epistemic idolatry. With this concept in hand, motivationalist virtue epistemologists gain two theoretical advantages: their list of defective motives can include intellectual motivation in excess without the implausible claim that, intellectually, one can be too motivated by truth; and the disvalue of many intellectual vices, including some putative counterexamples to their theory of intellectual vice, can be explained in terms of epistemic idolatry.

1. Introduction

That there's at least a tenuous link between idolatry and flawed thinking hasn't gone unnoticed. Francis Bacon, for instance, aimed to regulate various cognitive obstructions, naming some of them "idols of the mind," though he seemed uninterested in the concept of idolatry per se.[1] A century and a half later, Thomas Reid used Bacon's nomenclature in an essay on prejudice. While he viewed discussing prejudice under the rubric of idolatry as "perhaps fanciful," he characterized Bacon's work in a way that captures an interesting idea, aptly conceived of as idolatry. "The understanding," Reid wrote, "in its natural and best state, pays its homage to truth only. The causes of error are considered by [Bacon] as so many false deities, who receive the homage which is due only to truth."[2]

What interests me here is the idea that we can devote ourselves to particular epistemic goods—*this* item of knowledge, *that* cognitive method, *those* epistemic authorities—in a way that belongs only to truth. In this paper, I develop the concept of *epistemic idolatry*. But I want to say more about idolatry than Bacon and Reid had. For help I look to Robert Adams. He discusses certain idolatries as motivational defects, devotions belonging to the supreme good but given to particular goods.[3] Clarifying this idea and developing its epistemic analogue will hold much of our attention.

The nature of intellectual vice will occupy us as well. Motivationalist virtue epistemologists hold that intellectual vice requires a defect of motivation—a *deficient love* of truth, for example.[4] Assuming a few theses they accept, I'll develop an epistemic analogue to Adamsian idolatry. Appreciating this concept, I'll then argue, improves their view on two fronts: their list of defective motives can unproblematically include motivation in excess;

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and the disvalue of many intellectual vices, including some putative counterexamples, is explained well in terms of epistemic idolatry.

2. Adams on Idolatry

In *Finite and Infinite Goods*, Adams offers a theocentric, Platonic ethical framework. Within this framework, God is "the Good," the supreme standard of excellence, worthy of love and devotion, to which finite, particular goods faithfully yet imperfectly conform.[5] Motivation in relation to what's good or excellent is key here. Being *for* good things (and *against* bad things) speaks well of us ethically. Ideally, we should *love* or *devote ourselves* to the supreme Good as such and for its own sake, as well as particular goods.[6] "But not all devotion to good things is good," Adams argues, and "good motives gone bad" may even "fall under the heading of idolatry."[7]

How to characterize this motivational defect? It isn't preference for low-level members in a hierarchy of goods. Loving your car more than your friends is bad but not necessarily idolatrous. The specific type of idolatry that concerns Adams occurs when one's motives are *centered on* or *organized around* any particular good. The center of a motivational system *belongs to the Good*, he thinks, and should a particular good usurp this position, it'll leave no room in the heart for all that reflects the excellence of the Good.[8] If my motives are centered on love of art, for example, I'll care for only or almost only art and art-related goods. But loving the Good isn't like that. I can organize my motives around love for the Good and love *all* good things because they all reflect the excellence of the Good, whereas many goods *don't* reflect artistic excellence.

We're limited creatures, of course; to excel at anything often requires absorption in, and strongly felt need for or attachment to, one good thing, perhaps a few.[9] Adams acknowledges that we can't be equally committed to all good things. But he argues that those who (at least implicitly) love the Good are, at least in principle, for what's good in *every* context: "If I do not at least deplore injustice wherever it occurs in the world, I do not really love justice. And if I love art, but hold athletic excellence in contempt, my love of the [Good] is at best incomplete. If some finite and partial good is the only good I am for, surely I have made an idol of it."[10] We can be too deeply absorbed in a good thing. We can be too desperately attached to it. Excessive absorptions crowd out goods that claim us. Excessive needs or attachments, when unmet, kill motivation for goods still in the offing. Absorptions and attachments like these belong only to the Good. For Adams, this makes them idolatrous.

Consider, first, excessive absorption. Bernard Williams has discussed a partly fictionalized Gauguin, a painter who abandons his wife and his children to move to Tahiti to pursue his art.[11] Gauguin wasn't without remorse; it pained him to abandon his family, to leave them emotionally scarred and financially ruined. Even so, his passionate devotion to painting won the day.

Adams imagines a Gauguin-type character *obsessed* with art, one who cut loose his passion and let it consume him. Not "too pathological," this Gauguin's devotion to art nonetheless made it "virtually certain . . . that he would abandon his family."[12] Having centered his motives on love of art, his absorption in it rose to the level of obsession. Since such motives crowd out goods that demand our love—like one's own family—they can't exist in a set of motives centered on love of the Good. Motives so consuming belong only to the Good: an absorbing love of the Good crowds out only that which isn't good, certainly not goods that claim us.[13]

Now consider a separate discussion of Williams's. He suggests that we might as well be dead if we lose our "ground projects." We can have "a nexus of projects, related to [our] conditions of life," he says, which play

a "ground role" for us—they're so important to us that "the loss of all or most of them . . . would remove meaning" from our lives, and so, having lost them, we "might as well have died."[14] With this in mind, we can conceive of a second Gauguin, one who lost his ability to paint, who then felt that with that loss out went the meaning of his life. For Williams, this Gauguin may rightly feel that he has become worthless and unable to be happy, perhaps unable to live.

Adams disagrees. He sees idolatry in allowing particular goods to play this motivational role, an idolatry of excessive need or attachment. A passionate devotion to particular goods, he argues, can accompany a disposition to feel that "one confronts an immeasurable ocean of actual and potential good," a disposition "we have reason to desire . . .both for ourselves and for our associates, and hence to want not to have 'ground projects' in Williams's sense."[15]

Losing a good thing hurts. But it shouldn't then be moved to the center of a motivational system. That would kill motivation for remaining goods. Bracketing debilitating depression, giving up all remaining goods because one (or even a handful) is now lost reveals that that good became an idol. Attachments this desperate belong only to the Good in the sense that motivation appropriately deflates when there's no good to pursue. So, on this view, passionate devotion to a particular good should coexist with a disposition to continue to be, at least in principle, for all good things, come what may.

None of this suggests that we should avoid passionate devotion altogether. Imagine a third and final Gauguin who passionately pursues art but doesn't abandon his family. He balances his devotion to art with his devotion to other goods, including his family. His passion for art, though, sometimes makes him neglect other goods that claim him. These moments of neglect may be wrong, but they don't necessarily evince a motivational defect. Suppose that later he lost his ability to paint, and that although his pain over this loss sometimes negatively affects his devotion to his family, he doesn't let his love for them die away. There's nothing motivationally defective here either—or, if there is, the relevant motive falls short of idolatry.

"An intensity of love," Adams writes, "that exposes one to temptations to wrongdoing to which one sometimes succumbs is not thereby shown to be . . . idolatrous."[16] This is hard to deny; it's difficult to imagine an admirable, humanly passionate devotion marked by near perfect restraint. This Gauguin's devotion to art isn't idolatrous, then. Though it leads him to act (not too terribly) wrongfully now and then, his passionate reach for excellence is compatible with love of the Good at the center of his motives—it's woven in—and he's thereby still disposed to love all good things. That's how an intense, admirable devotion differs from idolatry.

So, for Adams, we can be absorbed in or attached to a good thing in ways that manifest idolatry. Now, we saw that motivational states, such as loving, devoting, and, more generally, "being for," play a key role in Adams's ethical framework. They're also key to his theory of virtue. Virtue, he says, is "persisting excellence in being for the good."[17] Motivationalist virtue epistemologists argue that intellectual virtue requires similar motivational states.[18] On their view, if I regularly and skillfully open my mind only to impress highbrows, for example, then I'm not *virtuously* open-minded; virtuous open-mindedness requires opening my mind *out of good intellectual motivation*. And if out of good intellectual motivation I regularly *close* my mind—I want to resist the pull of specious arguments, say—then I'm *not* viciously closed-minded, for the disvalue of intellectual vice consists in a defect of intellectual motivation. To epistemologists of this persuasion, I hope to show that there's an epistemic analogue to Adamsian idolatry, and

that they have good reason to include it on their list of intellectually defective motives.

3. Epistemic Idolatry

To conceive of an epistemic analogue to Adamsian idolatry, we need an analogue to "the Good." For Adams, God is the Good. But for our topic (one for theists and non-theists alike), what shall we say is the supreme *epistemic* good?[19] For motivationalist virtue epistemologists, it's identical to what chiefly motivates intellectually virtuous persons. James Montmarquet says that intellectual virtues are character traits a "truth-desiring person would want to have."[20] "To manifest intellectual virtue," says Duncan Pritchard, "is by its nature to be motivated by finding out the truth."[21] And Linda Zagzebski argues that "the motivational basis for intellectual virtue" is "the motivation for truth or cognitive contact with reality."[22] *Truth* or *mind-to-world fit* would then be the supreme epistemic good.

But note an apparent disparity. Robert Roberts and Jay Wood claim that intellectual virtues involve love of *knowledge*, and Jason Baehr argues that the intellectually virtuous person aims for *wisdom*.[23] And though Zagzebski claims that intellectual virtues are "all forms of motivation to have cognitive contact with reality," she says that this includes "more than what is usually expressed by saying that people desire truth."[24] It may then seem that only *some* of the relevant epistemologists see truth as the supreme epistemic good. And yet, given certain provisos, a consensus emerges.

For these epistemologists, epistemic value extends well beyond acquiring *just any* true beliefs (and avoiding just any false ones). For one thing, the intellectually virtuous don't care about trivial truths. Celebrity gossip, sports trivia, and the like don't concern the intellectually virtuous as such—they want *significant* truths. But neither are they content to grasp shallow, isolated facts about important matters. They want more than a slice of political science, a few historically significant dates, or a random update on artificial intelligence—they want to gain, and, plausibly, to be able to explain, *deep*, *comprehensive* truth. We can say that these epistemologists maintain that the intellectually virtuous characteristically love truth provided that by this we mean that the latter love significant, deep, comprehensive, explanatory mind-to-world fit.

At bottom, Baehr, Zagzebski, Roberts and Wood, and others accept this claim. For instance, in his discussion on the proper aim of intellectual virtue, Baehr rules out trivial, as well as important yet shallow or fragmentary, truths as candidates. *Sophia* or *theoretical wisdom*—that is, *deep, explanatory understanding of significant matters*—he argues, satisfies these constraints; and for Baehr, truth is *essential* to *sophia's* status as a superior epistemic good.[25] He agrees, then, that the intellectually virtuous aim for significant, deep, comprehensive, explanatory mind-to-world fit. (Zagzebski and Roberts and Wood make similar claims.)[26] So, it seems safe to designate this cognitive state as the supreme epistemic good. For brevity, and to signify its exalted status, let's use a capital "T" and call it Truth.

The next step toward an account of epistemic idolatry involves unpacking what counts as *particular* epistemic goods. In one sense, this is relatively straightforward now. Given that Truth is the supreme epistemic good, particular epistemic goods bear epistemic value to the extent that they contribute to Truth, or to the extent that they're "Truth-conducive." An item of knowledge, for example, is epistemically good to the extent that it contributes to one's grasp of Truth. Epistemic authorities and cognitive methods are epistemically good to the extent that they're conducive to the grasping of Truth.

In another sense, though, things aren't so straightforward. For Adams, particular goods are good to the extent that they conform to or "resemble" the Good. Do epistemic goods

resemble Truth? Perhaps we can make sense of this, but either way this needn't worry us. All we need from Adams's metaphysics of value to cleanly cross over into the epistemic domain is that there's a supreme good and that there are many particular goods. For present purposes, *contribution* and *conduciveness* are adequate surrogates for conformity or "resemblance."

If Truth is the supreme epistemic good, and if particular epistemic goods are epistemically valuable to the extent that they contribute to the grasping of Truth, or to the extent that they're Truth-conducive, then *love of Truth* is the motive around which all other intellectual motives should be organized. What might it look like to (at least implicitly) follow this regulative ideal? Should we suppose that the intellectually virtuous are devoted to grasping Truth in just *one* domain of inquiry? Or is there more to loving Truth?

There seems to be more. For one thing, the intellectually virtuous care about how things generally fit together. If they want to know the age of a given rock, for example, then they're after, say, an excellent understanding of petrology, but also how petrological understanding contributes to geological understanding generally. But that's not all. They also want to understand to some degree "what's going on in the world," and whatever requires attention in their immediate surroundings; even we who fall short of full intellectual virtue should want to have cognitive contact with such features of reality. So, epistemically speaking, we should aim to inch our way toward Truth *in general*—toward deeper, more comprehensive cognitive contact with every significant feature of reality that demands our devotion or care, to the extent that we limited creatures are able (which is consistent with being more passionately devoted to some inquiries than others).

If we're on the right track so far, then epistemic idolatry can be conceived of as this level of devotion that belongs only to Truth but given to some particular epistemic good. Devotion to a particular epistemic good—whether an epistemic authority, a reliable cognitive method, an item of knowledge, or even a specific domain of deep, significant, comprehensive understanding—shouldn't loom so large in one's motivational system that it usurps love of Truth's rightful place at the center. We saw how this sort of motivational defect manifests when one becomes excessively absorbed in or attached to some particular good (*simpliciter*). Let's see how this can happen in the life of the mind.

4. Epistemically Idolatrous Absorption

Recall the Gauguin who obsesses over art, the one whose devotion to art made it virtually certain that he would abandon his family. Does he have an epistemic counterpart? Consider Martin Arrowsmith, the eponymous protagonist in Sinclair Lewis's novel based on the experiences of Paul de Kruif, a microbiologist. Here we have a scientist who finds "unholy joy" in studying, who researches "till his mind [is] burnt raw," and whose curiosities stem from "the irresponsible sniffing beagle in [him]."[27] He's devoted to scientific "gods," and Max Gottlieb, Arrowsmith's mentor and most beloved god, is described as "so devoted to Pure Science, to art for art's sake, that he would rather have people die by the right therapy than be cured by the wrong."[28] At the novel's end, Arrowsmith abandons his wife and child in exchange for uninterrupted experimentation in a lab out in the woods.

With only this much said, who could overlook the resemblance to an idolatrous Gauguin? Yet we may worry that Arrowsmith's case isn't "epistemic enough." True, his devotion to science isn't woven into a love for the Good; however, thus far it's unclear that his motives compete with a love of *Truth*. So, we may wonder whether he exhibits *epistemic* idolatry. In her discussion of Uncle Toby, one who possesses an equally intense

epistemic thirst as Arrowsmith, Zagzebski argues that intellectual motivation in excess isn't *intellectually* defective since it fails to detract from distinctively epistemic goods. On her view, if such motivation *is* defective, then it is so only broadly, creating in one a morally imbalanced character.[29]

But there's more to Arrowsmith. His obsessive absorption in bacteriology excluded many significant, readily available epistemic goods. It made him neglect and thus fail to notice the hurt feelings of those closest to him. Engrossed in work he once raised his head surprised to find that it was spring. He also became oblivious to major global events: "He was so absorbed in staphylolysin and in calculus that he did not realize that the world was about to be made safe for democracy. He was a little dazed when America entered the war."[30] Arrowsmith certainly doesn't pursue epistemic goods as contributors to Truth, not even implicitly.[31] Does he harmlessly sacrifice width for depth? It seems not, for his devotion to bacteriology crowds out significant epistemic goods that claim him. His wife's criticism of him aptly speaks against his character: "You think that because you started in on one tiny branch of mental activity there's nothing else in the world."[32]

Arrowsmith obsesses over a particular epistemic good, so much so that his motivational system has little if any room for devotion to other epistemic goods that demand his devotion. Notice two things here. First, though the flourishing of epistemic communities requires a division of labor, that doesn't excuse Arrowsmith. We need *specialists*, not idolaters. Major political events and the feelings of close ones, for example, earn the attention even of specialists steeped in epistemic work. Second, even if Zagzebski is right that wrongfully favoring epistemic goods over moral goods falls outside epistemic evaluation, Arrowsmith's motives can't plausibly be characterized that way—they're distinctively intellectual.

Intellectual motives so absorbing belong to Truth. An absorbing love of Truth, one which puts it at the center of one's intellectual motivational system, crowds out only trivial, shallow, fragmentary, epistemic phenomena. And since not all truths that demand our devotion have anything to do with, say, bacteriology, inordinate absorption in it crowds them out, which manifests epistemic idolatry. Now, sometimes idolatry in the life of the mind manifests differently. Sometimes we must go without a particular epistemic good, and our response to this intellectual impoverishment may manifest epistemic idolatry just as well. That's next.

5. Epistemically Idolatrous Need or Attachment

In addition to an excessively absorbed Gauguin, above we imagined one who lost his ability to paint. For Williams, recall, such people may rightly feel that they have become worthless and unable to live, or at least unable to love remaining goods. But for Adams, giving up all remaining goods because a particular good is now lost reveals that the latter idolatrously resides at the center of one's motives, where the Good alone belongs.

Is the epistemic life ever so dramatic? Well, we can lose our sight, our hearing, our memory. We heavily rely on these faculties to "contact" reality. Losing them and the epistemic goods they afford may tempt us to organize our motives around their absence, to feel that no remaining intellectual project merits devotion.

But I suspect that many will be loath to criticize despair over losing something as valuable as sight, for example, even with epistemic goods still in the offing. The sort of idolatry we're identifying, however, needn't involve loss of such magnitude, nor utter loss. Let's reflect on how idolatrous attachments or needs infect the life of the mind in other, less dramatic, ways. In the previous section, we

looked at obsession with a particular item of knowledge. Attachments to and needs for lost or unavailable items of knowledge may well manifest epistemic idolatry. Here, though, let's observe an idolatrous attachment to an *epistemic authority* and an idolatrous need for a *cognitive method*.

Bacon warned against excessive devotion either to antiquity or to novelty. "There are some minds," he says, "which are devoted to admiration for antiquity, others to the love and embrace of novelty."[33] It's epistemically good to give ear to important ancient and contemporary thinkers (and everyone in between). We should learn from them and even trust them to some extent. But devotion to them can go too far.

Consider Demea, a character in David Hume's *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*.[34] Ostensibly, this dialogue concerns natural (a)theology. It also offers models of intellectual motivation. Demea models what *not* to be like. He's inordinately attached to ancient philosophers, like Plotinus, and more recent philosophers in vogue, such as Malebranche. He'll say almost nothing to his interlocutors without the support of such authorities. He even admits that from the outset he had refused to take an interlocutor's argument seriously since it was never offered by philosophers he so admires. Because Demea is so devoted to certain epistemic authorities, because he's made idols of them, their irrelevance to any given discussion thwarts his motivation to seriously engage. To interact with interlocutors in this way only when Truth is off the table earns our sympathy. But that isn't the case here.

We love the features of cognitive methods with which we're comfortable. Scientists, mathematicians, and certain philosophers, for instance, prize lucidity, rigorous analysis, "hard data," formal arguments, fine-grained distinctions, and the like. In principle, it's good to prize these things; very often, they're Truth-conducive. This can get out of hand, however. Excessive needs for methods possessing these features might make one disengage subject-matters whose truths require toleration of quite different methods, ones which involve some measure of grasping in the dark. Plato, Kierkegaard, novels, plays, poetry, for example, are then roundly ignored. When this happens, hasn't something gone wrong motivationally?

If having to go without a particular cognitive method kills concern for truths discoverable only by other means—if it makes us overlook or look down on intellectual activities where our favored methods prove impotent or superfluous—then that method became an epistemic idol.[35] Cognitive methods can become epistemic idols, that is, when their absence or apparent uselessness thwarts motivation for epistemic goods that demand our devotion. When *Truth* is unattainable, however, motivation to pursue a given intellectual activity justifiably deflates. In that sense, attachments like this belong to Truth.[36]

6. Intellectual Motivation in Excess

We've seen that epistemic idolatry is a devotion that belongs only to Truth but is given to a particular epistemic good, and that there are at least two ways to manifest such idolatry: by excessive absorption in, or excessive attachment to, a particular epistemic good. The aim of this section is to distinguish epistemic idolatry from other acknowledged forms of intellectual motivation in excess, and to show that epistemic idolatry is both richer and less problematic.

The epistemologists that concern us hold that the disvalue of intellectual vices—such as closed-mindedness, intellectual arrogance, dogmatism, and gullibility—is rooted in defective intellectual motivation. And intellectual motivation can go awry in many ways.

Lacking it is one way. This defect generates intellectual vices like incuriosity. Incurious people fail to wonder and to ask good

questions because they lack good intellectual motivation. Intellectual vice also stems from weak *opposition* to epistemic *ills*. Intellectually lazy people, only mildly concerned to end their ignorance, come to mind. What's bad about other vices has more to do with the *presence* of bad motives. Epistemically malevolent people like O'Brien in Orwell's *1984*—one who destroys others' intellectual autonomy for its own sake—want others to suffer intellectually.[37] And self-deceivers positively oppose epistemic goods. Being *for* epistemic ills, or *opposed* to epistemic goods, constitutes the disvalue of these two vices, respectively.

Insufficiently for the good, insufficiently against the bad, for the bad, opposed to the good—is this exhaustive? It seems not. Intellectual motivation can be excessive, too.

Roberts and Wood discuss a gossiper who "takes pleasure in learning and passing on information about other people that is inappropriate."[38] The gossiper's motive seems excessive in some sense, but note what else Roberts and Wood say. Gossipy knowledge, they argue, is often *trivial*. When it's trivial, it's *not* a genuine epistemic good. But, when gossipy knowledge is nontrivial, the disvalue of being motivated by it, they say, *isn't* distinctively intellectual; the thought is that non-epistemic harm to another typically grounds the disvalue of the relevant motive. This reveals two things. First, the gossiper's motive isn't an instance of epistemic idolatry as understood above. The proper objects of epistemic idolatry are *goods* that *are* distinctively intellectual. Second, when the gossiper wants nontrivial knowledge in order to harm another person, the disvalue of the gossiper's motive, since it isn't distinctively intellectual, can't lie behind an *intellectual* vice.

Montmarquet considers "enthusiasts" who are "disposed, out of sheer love of truth, discovery, and the excitement of new and unfamiliar ideas, to embrace what is not really warranted."[39] There's excessive motivation here, but not obviously an epistemically idolatrous one. To the extent that the novelty of an idea is epistemically good, it could become an epistemic idol. But epistemic idolatry can't spring from "sheer love of truth." For the former motive is at odds with the latter. Besides, it's implausible to suggest that love of *truth* (or "Truth") can be *intellectually* excessive (that is, without stipulating that the relevant truths are trivial, in which case they are poor candidates for genuine epistemic *goods*).

Heather Battaly offers another example. She argues that epistemically self-indulgent people can over-indulge in high- or low-grade epistemic goods.[40] Philosophers, she argues, tend to want epistemic goods so much that they neglect (straightforwardly) moral goods (like friendships), and skeptics tend to over-indulge in avoiding false beliefs so much that they have no true beliefs. For similar reasons as given above, most of the motivational defects here aren't epistemically idolatrous. There might be an exception, though. Wanting an epistemic good so much that one forgoes believing altogether—as with the skeptic—*is* a distinctively intellectual motive. And perhaps to want to avoid false beliefs is to want an epistemic *good*. Epistemic idolatry, therefore, may lurk behind epistemic self-indulgence. The defective motive here might be an excessive *need* to avoid false beliefs (though indulging in avoidance sounds odd).

In any case, appreciating the concept of epistemic idolatry enriches our understanding of defective intellectual motivation. With this concept in hand, we have the notions of devotion to an epistemic good *crowding out other epistemic goods*, and love for a lost or unavailable epistemic good *thwarting intellectually good motivation*—neither of which are found in the above cases of intellectual motivation in excess. This concept, we've seen, also helps us think about such motivation without having to (awkwardly) claim

that, intellectually, one can be too motivated by truth. What's more, many intellectual vices, including potentially problematic cases for motivationalists, stem from epistemic idolatry. Let's consider some examples.

7. Intellectual Vices Rooted in Epistemic Idolatry

Epistemically idolatrous absorptions manifest intellectual obsessions. Obsessed with elusive bits of knowledge, we problematically shrink our focus. We can become viciously *absent-minded* or *inattentive*, much like Arrowsmith, who, owing to his obsessive devotion to a slice of science, failed to notice others' feelings and major political events. Obsessed in this way, we can also develop the vice of excess opposed to intellectual perseverance, namely, *intellectual recalcitrance*.[41] The same goes for vices of excess vis-à-vis intellectual tenacity and thoroughness: obsession makes us press on too far.

Intellectual vices stem from idolatrous attachments, too. Excessive devotion to particular epistemic authorities, à la Demea, can lead to *intellectual servility* and *closed-mindedness*. Demea holds his tongue unless Plotinus or Malebranche have his back. This betrays his servility toward their epistemic authority. Another result of this attachment is his unwillingness to take an argument seriously if not offered by his beloved philosophers. Hence the closed-mindedness.

Idolatrous needs for epistemic goods, such as particular cognitive methods, offer further connections to intellectual vice. Holding on too tightly to any particular cognitive method makes us neglect truths which resist discovery via that method. Such methodological partiality gives rise to *intellectual intolerance*. And if our devotion to a particular cognitive method makes us regularly unwilling to adopt foreign ways of thinking, we'll become *intellectually maladaptive* and *uncreative*.

While these are quick sketches, they help us see that an important link exists between epistemic idolatry and intellectual vice, one which helps motivationalist virtue epistemologists explain the disvalue of vices such as absent-mindedness, inattentiveness, intellectual servility, closed-mindedness, uncreativeness, and more besides.

Having the concept of epistemic idolatry in hand also deflects some cases that may otherwise show that not all intellectual vices require a defect of motivation.[42] For instance, Miranda Fricker argues that certain forms of prejudice permit motives that are good, or at least not ethically bad. She imagines a panel of referees for a science journal who are prejudiced against a certain scientific method. Their prejudice, she writes, is "owing to a deep-seated feeling of loyalty to methodological orthodoxy."[43] If such loyalty is good, or if there's no sense in which the referees' motives are *intellectually* bad, then prejudice may provide a problematic case for theorists who think intellectual vice *requires* defective intellectual motives.

Recall the various defects of intellectual motivation we canvased. Do any of them come to mind here? Fricker's referees don't seem insufficiently for or positively opposed to epistemic goods. Nor are they clearly insufficiently against or positively for epistemic ills. This is because seemingly good motives are packed into the case. These referees don't neglect or oppose a scientific method *as such*; their prejudice stems from *loyalty to an epistemic good*. It seems clear, moreover, that we needn't construe them as motivated in an excessive manner similar to gossipers, epistemic "enthusiasts," or the epistemically self-indulgent. And yet, I think Fricker's referees *are* motivationally defective—they're epistemic idolaters.

As we've seen, devotions to particular epistemic goods can thwart all or most epistemically good motives. Excessive like this, they

amount to epistemically idolatrous needs or attachments. Deep-seated loyalties to methodological orthodoxy that thoroughly kill motivation to entertain alternative cognitive methods is motivationally defective. So, some other motivation must lie behind prejudice for it to pose a problem for the motivationalist approach to intellectual vice.

Quassim Cassam offers another case. He agrees with certain social psychologists that a characteristic motivator for closed-minded people is their "need for closure," that is, their "desire for a firm answer to a question, any firm answer as compared to confusion and/or ambiguity."[44] Closed-minded people can in this way be "passionate about knowledge," says Cassam, and so need for closure, he thinks, "doesn't seem [to be] an inherently bad motive."[45] If need for cognitive closure isn't always intellectually bad, closed-mindedness looks like an intellectual vice not rooted in a defective motive.

Here again defective intellectual motives other than epistemic idolatry hardly seem relevant. But why think that need for closure isn't always bad as regards the life of the mind? Wanting Truth very much is one thing. Need for closure, characterized such that it fittingly grounds vicious closed-mindedness, is another. It seems like an epistemically idolatrous need which thwarts good intellectual motivation whenever there's no promise of cognitive closure. At issue, after all, is a desire for *any* firm answer. That sounds like a motive that belongs only to Truth.

One might think that cases like Fricker's and Cassam's show that some intellectual vices are rooted in motives that aren't bad. But they show that epistemic idolatry, a type of motivational *defect*, grounds said vices. The motivationalist approach to intellectual vice, then, seems like a live option, cases like these notwithstanding.

8. Conclusion: Two Paths Ahead

We're motivated by various particular epistemic goods. This is good, but things can go too far—*intellectually* too far. These motives can swell into idolatry, into a devotion that belongs only to Truth. Epistemic idolatry, as well as its connection to intellectual vice, warrants further exploration. I'll close with a brief word on two paths open to explore, though there are undoubtedly more.

One is to locate other manifestations of epistemic idolatry. Adams sees idolatry in organizing one's life around "some as yet unattained summit from which one expects the equivalent of heaven on earth," which tends to "embitter or destroy the real but limited goods that can be attained."[46] Perhaps reaching over epistemic goods within reach to grasp after epistemic goods beyond reach is epistemically idolatrous. This is a *misidentification*, Adams says, a distinctively *cognitive* defect that may differ from a *motivational* one. It would be interesting to see precisely how, if at all, this defect differs from those discussed above, and what bearing it might have on certain intellectual vice analyses.

Another path worth exploring concerns applied or regulative epistemology.[47] Becoming intellectually virtuous may require imitating exemplars. Spotting them isn't always easy, however. Sometimes we admire extreme people. We assimilate the motives of workaholics into our own character because we construe them as industrious. We admire Gauguin-like artists because we construe them as wholehearted. We might admire epistemic idolaters for similar reasons. It's important that we discover a way to discern how epistemic idolaters differ from intellectual exemplars. It matters because safeguarding the heart of intellectual motives matters.

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NOTES

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1. Francis Bacon, *The New Organon*, trans. and ed. L. Jardine and M. Silverthorne (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000 [1620]).

2. Thomas Reid, "Of Prejudices, the Causes of Error," in *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1969 [1785]), pp. 691–692.

3. Robert Adams, *Finite and Infinite Goods: A Framework for Ethics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), chapter 8.

4. Virtue epistemologists give intellectual virtues a key role in their epistemological theorizing. *Motivationalist* virtue epistemologists hold that intellectual motivation is a key or necessary requirement for intellectual virtues and vices, such as open- and closed-mindedness, respectively. See, for example, Jason Baehr, *The Inquiring Mind: On Intellectual Virtues and Virtue Epistemology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011); James Montmarquet, *Epistemic Virtue and Doxastic Responsibility* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1993); Duncan Pritchard, "Intellectual Virtues and the Epistemic Value of Truth," *Synthese* (forthcoming), pp. 1–14; Robert Roberts and W. Jay Wood, *Intellectual Virtues: An Essay in Regulative Epistemology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007); Alessandra Tanesini, "Intellectual Vice and Motivation," *Metaphilosophy*, vol. 49, no. 3 (2018), pp. 350–367; and Linda Zagzebski, *Virtues of the Mind: An Inquiry into the Nature of Virtue and the Ethical Foundations of Knowledge* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

5. Adams, *Finite and Infinite Goods*, chapter 1.

6. Adams, chapter 7.

7. Adams, p. 199. Having proposed a motivational ideal with love for the Good at the center of our motives, Adams notes *two* dangers. There's the danger that love for particular goods will become inordinate (the danger of idolatry), but there's also the danger that love for the Good will swamp concern for particular goods worth loving as such and for their own sake. To guard against the latter, Adams argues, we should *integrate* love for particular goods into love for the Good. We can love the Good *in* loving particular goods as such and for their own sake. In this way, love for any particular good can be part of a motivational system that constitutes love for the Good, at least implicitly, without loving the latter in a way that swamps love for the former. See Adams, *Finite and Infinite Goods*, pp. 187–198.

8. Adams, *Finite and Infinite Goods*, pp. 200–201.

9. For sympathy here, see Thomas Nagel, *Mortal Questions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), pp. 128–141; Susan Wolf, "Moral Saints," *Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 79 (1982), pp. 419–439.

10. Adams, *Finite and Infinite Goods*, p. 200.

11. Bernard Williams, *Moral Luck* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981) chapter 2.

12. Adams, *Finite and Infinite Goods*, p. 204.

13. I have been and will continue to use the notion of goods that "demand our love" or "claim us." I'll keep things at an intuitive level and set aside the issue of how particular goods have this status. Any plausible way of cashing out this notion, it seems to me, doesn't disrupt the main picture presented here.

14. Bernard Williams, "Persons, Character, and Morality," in *Essays on Aristotle's Ethics*, ed. Amélie Oksenberg Rorty (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), reprinted in Williams, *Moral Luck*, p. 13.

15. Adams, *Finite and Infinite Goods*, p. 207.

16. Adams, pp. 203–204.

17. Robert Adams, *A Theory of Virtue: Excellence in Being for the Good* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

18. Some explicitly acknowledge that their views hew closely to Adams's theory of virtue. See, for example, Baehr, *The Inquiring Mind*, pp. 112, 118–122, and "Intellectual Virtues and Truth, Understanding, and Wisdom," in *The Oxford Handbook of Virtue*, ed. N. Snow (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), p. 811. For general agreement with Adams's broader ethical framework, see Linda Zagzebski, "Obligation, Good Motives, and the Good," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, vol. 64, no. 2 (2002), p. 453.

19. Some form of *epistemic-value monism* is assumed here. Roughly, this thesis says that a single epistemic good is the supreme standard of epistemic value. Not all epistemologists agree with this thesis, but we needn't worry. Though epistemic-value monism is controversial among epistemologists generally, it isn't among motivationalist virtue epistemologists. See, for example, Baehr, "Intellectual Virtues and Truth, Understanding, and Wisdom," p. 800; Pritchard "Intellectual Virtues and the Epistemic Value of Truth"; and Zagzebski, *Virtues of the Mind*, pp. 50, 166–168, 270. Even Roberts and Wood, who stress the plurality of epistemic goods the intellectually virtuous person pursues, group such goods into a single fundamental epistemic good; see Roberts and Wood, *Intellectual Virtues*, p. 153.

20. Montmarquet, *Epistemic Virtue and Doxastic Responsibility*, p. 30.

21. Pritchard, "Intellectual Virtues and the Epistemic Value of Truth," p. 10.

22. Zagzebski, *Virtues of Mind*, pp. 166–168. See also her "Intellectual Motivation and the Good of Truth," in *Intellectual Virtue: Perspectives from Ethics and Epistemology*, ed. M. DePaul and L. Zagzebski (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), pp. 135–154.

23. Roberts and Wood, *Intellectual Virtues*, p. 305; Baehr, "Intellectual Virtues and Truth, Understanding, and Wisdom."

24. Zagzebski, *Virtues of the Mind*, p. 167.

25. Baehr, "Intellectual Virtues and Truth, Understanding, and Wisdom," pp. 808–812.

26. Roberts and Wood, *Intellectual Virtues*, pp. 40–44; Zagzebski, *Virtues of the Mind*, p. 50.

27. Sinclair Lewis, *Arrowsmith* (New York: New American Library, 1980 [1924]), pp. 16, 82, 247.

28. Lewis, *Arrowsmith*, p. 120. For the passages where Arrowsmith is characterized as devoted to scientific "gods," see pp. 94, 105, 165, 178.

29. Zagzebski, *Virtues of the Mind*, pp. 194–197.

30. Lewis, *Arrowsmith*, p. 288.

31. This complaint is compatible with holding that there's nothing wrong with pursuing particular epistemic goods as contributors to Truth *and as such*.

32. Lewis, *Arrowsmith*, pp. 423–424.

33. Bacon, *The New Organon*, I.56.

34. David Hume, "Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion," in *Hume: Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion and Other Writings*, ed. D. Coleman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007 [1779]). The interpretation of Demea and of the overall aim of Hume's dialogue I assume here can be found in Tim Black and Robert Gressis, "True Religion in Hume's *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*" *British Journal for the History of Philosophy*, vol. 25, no. 2 (2017), pp. 244–264.

35. Perhaps "cognitive idol" is preferable. Compare from another angle Paul Moser, "Cognitive Idolatry and Divine Hiding," in *Divine Hiddenness: New Essays*, ed. D. Howard-Snyder and P. Moser (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002); *The Elusive God: Reorienting Religious Epistemology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), pp. 101–105.

36. Note that epistemic idols of particular domains of inquiry (e.g., bacteriology) create a problem of motivational scope, as with Arrowsmith. This likely *won't* involve any epistemic defect within that domain. Idols of cognitive methods or epistemic authorities, however, likely *will* involve such a defect. Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for pointing this out.

37. Jason Baehr, "Epistemic Malevolence," in *Virtue and Vice, Moral and Epistemic*, ed. H. Battaly (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2010), pp. 189–213.

38. Roberts and Wood, *Intellectual Virtues*, pp. 174–175.

39. Montmarquet, *Epistemic Virtue and Doxastic Responsibility*, p. 23.

40. See Heather Battaly, "Epistemic Self-Indulgence," *Metaphilosophy*, vol. 41, no. 1–2 (2010), pp. 214–234. For an insightful essay on epistemic temperance, see Paul Bloomfield, "Epistemic Temperance," *American Philosophical Quarterly*, vol. 56, no. 2 (2019), pp. 109–124.

41. See Heather Battaly, "Intellectual Perseverance," *Journal of Moral Philosophy*, vol. 14, no. 6 (2017), p. 686. For another excellent discussion, see Nathan King, "Erratum to: Perseverance as an Intellectual Virtue," *Synthese*, vol. 191, no. 15 (2014), pp. 3779–3801. King calls the relevant vice "intellectual intransigence."

42. Here I address only *some* putative counterexamples. For additional cases against motivationalist views of intellectual vice that might not be relevant to epistemic idolatry, see Charlie Crerar "Motivational Approaches to Intellectual Vice," *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 96, no. 4 (2018). For replies to Crerar, see Jason Baehr, "The Structure of Intellectual Vices," in *Vice Epistemology*, ed. H. Battaly, Q. Cassam, I. J. Kidd (New York: Routledge, 2020), pp. 21–36; and Tanesini, "Intellectual Vice and Motivation."

43. Miranda Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 35. I should note that Fricker thinks bad motives typically *do* underlie prejudice; she sees no necessary connection, however.

44. Arie Kruglanski, *The Psychology of Closed-Mindedness* (New York: Psychology Press, 2004), p. 6.

45. Quassim Cassam, *Vices of the Mind: From the Intellectual to the Political* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), pp. 16–17.

46. Adams, *Finite and Infinite Goods*, p. 209.

47. For excellent work in this field, see the essays in *Intellectual Virtues in Education: Essays in Applied Virtue Epistemology*, ed. J. Baehr (New York: Routledge, 2016); and see Nathan Ballantyne, *Knowing Our Limits* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019).