

## On Complacency

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*In all life one should comfort the afflicted, but verily, also, one should afflict the comfortable, and especially when they are comfortably, contentedly, even happily wrong.*

– John Kenneth Galbraith<sup>1</sup>

Complacency seems an especially common and troubling vice. It is not as easily recognized as cruelty, dishonesty, and those vices which lead to distinctively vicious forms of behaviour. Instead it works quietly, an often subtle drift into an easy self-satisfaction with one's efforts and accomplishments (no matter how meagre). Complacency does not cause evil or mediocrity; it is a vice that allows these to exist.

And as with many moral vices, complacency has received little recent philosophical attention; this paper represents an attempt to address this neglect.<sup>2</sup> It begins by drawing attention to inadequacies in common characterizations of complacency. An alternative account is presented that avoids these flaws. The distinctive nature of complacency is then clarified by contrasting it with related vices, including apathy, resignation, akrasia, pride, and hypocrisy.

### I

As a starting point, consider the following dictionary definitions of complacency:

1. 2. *spec.* The fact or state of being pleased with oneself; tranquil pleasure or satisfaction in one's own condition or doings; self-satisfaction.<sup>3</sup>
2. 1. A feeling of contentment or self-satisfaction, especially when coupled with an unawareness of danger, trouble, or controversy.<sup>4</sup>

3. 1. self-satisfaction especially when accompanied by unawareness of actual dangers or deficiencies.<sup>5</sup>

The first definition (from the OED) seems problematic insofar it would count appropriate or justified feelings of self-satisfaction as instances of complacency. This seems too broad - surely if one does perform admirably (or even just satisfactorily), some degree of self-satisfaction would be warranted; this ought not to be seen as complacency.

Complacency seems to require that one be mistaken about one's level of achievement or status with respect to some good or project. In particular – it seems to require that one overestimates one's own positive status in an epistemically culpable fashion, leading to an excessive self-satisfaction.<sup>6</sup>

The second and third definitions come closer to providing an adequate definition of complacency as a vice. In both there is a recognition that an epistemic flaw is a necessary component of complacency ('an unawareness of actual dangers or deficiencies'). Still, it is not clear that all such lacks of awareness are sufficient for complacency (even when coupled with excessive self-satisfaction). Consider a person who is quite conscientious and hard-working who justifiably and responsibly believes that she has fulfilled her moral duties in some respect. For example, she gives large amounts to a well-known and respected charity. Unfortunately an employee at the charity has embezzled funds, including the worker's donations. As such, she has not successfully helped other people with her donations; her beliefs about her moral performance are false – she is in fact deficient in actually helping others. Still, it seems quite inappropriate to describe her as thereby complacent (even if she feels satisfaction in

her moral behaviour in this regard, and is unaware of her lack of actual success). A lack of awareness must be epistemically culpable if a person is to be considered complacent.

A further worry with the second and third definitions is that they would include cases merely involving excessive pride as instances of complacency. Imagine a wealthy person who grossly overestimates her accomplishments with respect to some project – she believes she is extraordinarily generous in giving \$1000 this year to charities. She is quite smug and self-satisfied with this ‘accomplishment’. Yet she does not wish to rest on her laurels. She is so inspired by her own tremendous generosity that she intends to give \$1500 next year. Now it should be clear that this individual’s estimate of her accomplishments is quite inaccurate, and that her smug sense of self-satisfaction is excessive and unjustified. Still, she is not properly considered complacent. She strongly desires to continue to improve, she plans on giving more. She has excessive pride in her minimal accomplishments, but she is not complacent. Complacent people stop short; they rest content with their achievements or efforts, either failing to make any further efforts at all (“I’ve already done enough”), or only proceeding with inadequate efforts and actions. More precisely, complacency requires an excessive self-satisfaction that leads to an insufficiently strong desire or felt need to improve to or maintain an appropriate level of accomplishment (that, in turn, produces a problematic lack of appropriately-motivated, appropriate action or effort).

Finally, a certain smugness is often associated with complacency. For example, Béla Szabados and Eldon Soifer in their *Hypocrisy: Ethical Investigations*, suggest that

The assumption of the complacent is that all is well in one’s own moral house, in one’s own spiritual state. This sort of smug moral self-satisfaction deters and

deflects the crucial tasks of self-examination and self-criticism, and proceeds to the examination and criticism of others.<sup>7</sup>

Still, despite common associations of smugness and complacency, it should not be treated as a necessary component of complacency. Consider an individual who, in reflecting on his impacts upon the environment, holds that “Well, sure I’m not perfect – I’m not some environmental saint. But I do alright; I’m basically a good environmental citizen”. He then drives away in his SUV to his massive house with its three-car garage, etc. This individual is complacent about his environmental impacts – he simply assumes that he is acting appropriately, and does not recognize a strong need to improve his behaviour; but he is not obviously smug in his self-satisfaction (he is not bragging; his self-satisfaction, while unjustified, is not offensively strong). The problem with this individual is rather a certain thick-headedness, or perhaps an unwillingness or lack of effort to subject himself and his attitudes to critical scrutiny.

More broadly, complacency is often – contingently – associated with such other vices as smugness, thick-headedness, ignorance, and a lack of self-reflection. Which, if any, of these contingently-associated vices will be present in a particular complacent person will vary, and will presumably be a matter of temperament, upbringing, social circumstances, and similar factors.

## II

With these points in hand, consider the following, alternative definition of the vice of complacency:

**Complacency** (with respect to some good or project G): is constituted by (i) an epistemically culpable overestimate of one’s accomplishments or status that produces

(ii) an excessive self-satisfaction that produces (iii) an insufficiently strong desire or felt need to maintain (or improve to) an appropriate level of accomplishment, that in turn produces (iv) a problematic lack of appropriately-motivated, appropriate action or effort.

In speaking of complacency with respect to some good or project, this is intended to allow that a person might be complacent about certain matters and not others, and that one may be complacent with respect to both moral and non-moral projects. For example, consider a professional basketball player who is complacent with respect to his 45% free-throw shooting. He believes, culpably, that his performance is satisfactory, and given his resultant sense of self-satisfaction (and lack of desire to improve), fails to put forth an adequate effort at improving. Or imagine a professor who has become complacent about a course she has taught for many years – she no longer reads new material relevant to the course topic, does not change the assignments, and so on, as she believes (culpably) that the course is still good enough as it is. An apathetic professor would simply not care; the complacent professor feels self-satisfied as she culpably believes that she has already done enough, that no further work is needed.

Consider now the other elements of the proposed definition:

(a) Complacency involves an excessive self-satisfaction. Note that this need not amount to a smug self-satisfaction; rather, it merely requires that one feels greater self-satisfaction than is warranted by one's accomplishments (where the status of one's accomplishments is or ought to be epistemically accessible). If one's accomplishments are minimal, even an apparently modest self-satisfaction could be excessive.

(b) Complacency requires an insufficiently strong desire or felt need to maintain (or improve to) an appropriate level of accomplishment.<sup>8</sup> This lack of an appropriately strong desire or felt need must stem from (be a result of) one's excessive self-satisfaction. For example, if one were to lack a desire or felt need to improve merely due to a lack of interest in a project, this would seem to be an instance of apathy, not complacency. A "felt need" is intended to capture one's sense that one ought to perform certain actions, even if one lacks a desire to perform such actions (we could perhaps call it 'a felt sense of obligation or requirement'). One may feel that one's commitments require one to exercise more, even if one does not desire to do so, and be thereby motivated to exercise. A 'felt need' in this sense is a motivating state, but not a desire. It is not necessary here to commit as to whether such states exist (some may hold that only desires can motivate) – but if there are such, complacency will involve a lack of both appropriate desires, and appropriate felt needs to maintain or improve to appropriate levels of accomplishment.

At its limit, the lack of a sufficiently strong desire or felt need would be the absence of any desire or felt need at all to maintain or improve to (what is in fact) an appropriate level of accomplishment. But one could be complacent even while having some desire or felt need to improve – where either this desire (or felt need) (i) is insufficiently strong or (ii) is a desire (or felt need) for an insufficient level of activity, where one's belief about sufficient levels of activity is epistemically culpable. For example, in the face of a nearby natural disaster a wealthy man donates only old ripped clothing. He might judge in an epistemically culpable manner that his response, while good, is still somewhat inadequate, given his circumstances; he develops a weak desire to

improve further, to perhaps give away some old cans of food that he knows he will never use. But his desire is so weak (due to his excessive self-satisfaction in merely giving away ripped clothing) that he never even bothers to collect the cans from his basement. Such an individual would have both an insufficiently strong desire (i.e., lacking motivating force), and a desire for an inadequate level of improvement (i.e., he needs to do more than give off his garbage, and he is epistemically culpable in not forming a belief to this effect). He is complacent with respect to the project of helping others in the face of this disaster.

The proposed definition includes both ‘maintaining’ or ‘improving to’ an appropriate level of achievement. Notice that complacency can come in two forms. First, one might be acting at a certain level L in terms of achievement with respect to some project (where L may or may not be adequate for the agent at stake). Complacency here might take the form of culpably judging that one has done enough, or is doing more than enough, and that as such, one can *reduce* or *cease* one’s efforts. With the resultant sense of self-satisfaction, such a complacent person will come to lack a sufficiently strong desire or felt need to maintain an already achieved level of accomplishment (which itself might not even have been an adequate level of accomplishment for this agent with respect to this project). Second, one might be acting at a certain level L in terms of achievement with respect to some project, where L is inadequate for the agent at stake. Complacency here might take the form of culpably judging that one has done – or is doing – enough, and that as such one need *not make efforts to improve*. With the resultant self-satisfaction, such a complacent person will lack a sufficiently strong desire or felt need to improve to an appropriate level of achievement for her with respect to this

project. In either case, there will be a self-satisfaction on the part of the agent that produces a lack of a sufficiently strong desire or felt need for appropriate actions (either to maintain or to improve one's level of achievement).

(c) Complacency involves a problematic lack of appropriately-motivated appropriate action or effort, where this is a result of the lack of a sufficiently strong desire or felt need to maintain (or improve to) an appropriate level of accomplishment. In speaking of a lack of appropriate action or effort, notice that there could still be some action taken or effort made, but where this is not sufficient. A wealthy complacent person might consistently give just \$50 to charitable organizations every year – actions are thus taken, and will continue in the future. But these actions fall short of what is appropriate for him (given his circumstances).

Notice also that it is a lack of *appropriately-motivated* appropriate actions or efforts that is necessary for complacency. Why is this qualification required? Because there are cases where an agent is complacent with respect to some project, but still performs what are in fact appropriate actions for him with respect to the project. Such an agent would culpably believe that he has already done enough, and feel satisfied with his efforts on the project. But suppose that he wishes to impress others, and so performs appropriate actions; or perhaps he has been forced or coerced into further efforts. Either way, these actions are not motivated by any genuine concern for the project; the agent still seems complacent with respect to the project. Any further actions, even if appropriate for this agent, are not properly motivated.

(d) Complacency involves an epistemically culpable overestimate of one's accomplishments or status. There are two common ways in which this might occur. First,



one might have a belief (appropriate or not) concerning the demands imposed by a particular project, but overestimate in an epistemically culpable manner how well one's actions satisfy these demands. One might think that one ought to act so as to significantly reduce the harm done to those facing a natural disaster (perhaps relative to one's own wealth); assume that this is a justified, true belief. A person who believes this, but who culpably believes that giving a dollar (given his high level of wealth) counts as significantly reducing harm grossly overestimates how well his actions satisfy these demands. The second way in which an overestimate could occur is for one to have an accurate belief with respect to how well one's actions satisfy what one takes to be the demands of a project, but where one culpably (epistemically) underestimates how demanding the project in fact is. So a wealthy person might realize that giving a dollar to assist those facing a natural disaster will have little impact, but also believe (culpably) that one is only required to make such a minimal effort to aid those facing a natural disaster. Note that in either case, one overestimates (in an epistemically culpable manner) how well one is meeting the actual demands of the project at stake.

A third (rarer) phenomenon would involve failing to note flaws in one's behaviour while not forming an explicit belief that one is performing satisfactorily. For example, consider an agent who enjoys a nearby green space in her small city; it is announced that developers hope to build a subdivision in this space. The agent cares a great deal about the green space, but never even considers that she ought to become involved, and fails to notice the flaws in her behaviour – though she doesn't explicitly form a belief that her actions are satisfactory. For current purposes a culpable failure to notice shortcomings is tantamount to overestimating one's status. The agent will still feel

contentment and general self-satisfaction in using the green space. In such cases the epistemically culpable failure to notice flaws *allows* the agent's satisfaction, rather than *producing* it.

Compare Nicholas Unwin's brief description of moral complacency:

Moral complacency [...] is not a doctrine, but a state of mind, and is therefore less easily characterized. It is normally defined as general unwillingness to accept that one's moral opinions may be mistaken, but such an unwillingness can come about for a number of reasons. I shall restrict the notion by concentrating on just one: namely because it is believed that there is nothing more to moral truth than moral opinion itself.<sup>9</sup>

This construal of moral complacency is not yet adequate; there is a worry that it is both too narrow, and incomplete. It fails to explicitly require any sort of epistemic culpability, or sense of self-satisfaction. Unwin focuses on cases where one underestimates how demanding (moral) standards in fact are (coupled with a refusal to accept that one could be mistaken about this). This fails to accommodate cases where one embraces appropriate moral standards, but culpably overestimates how well one's actions satisfy these standards. Note also that an 'unwillingness to accept that one's moral opinions may be mistaken' seems too strong a requirement for complacency. A person who simply never contemplates the possibility that her moral standards could be flawed seems complacent (assuming a sense of self-satisfaction, etc.), even if she would be willing to accept that her moral opinions could be flawed, if she were ever to actually reflect on the matter.

Finally, there are mixed cases – where one not only culpably underestimates what a given project or practice demands, one also culpably overestimates how well one has lived-up to these lowered standards. This could well be true of most of people living in the United States and Canada, with respect to their environmental impacts. They both underestimate (in an epistemically culpable manner) what a sustainable, environmentally sound lifestyle would demand of them, and further overestimate (culpably) the quality of their behaviours even with respect to the diminished, problematic standards that they embrace.

The crucial epistemic flaw implicated in complacency is not unwarranted or unjustified belief concerning one's level of achievement or status, but beliefs formed in an epistemically irresponsible (culpable) manner. If a person simply has unreliable faculties and lacks epistemic access to this fact, she does not thereby seem to exhibit the problematic epistemic negligence or irresponsibility we associate with complacency (even if the resultant beliefs lack epistemic warrant). For example, if a person is deceived by an evil demon with respect to her moral accomplishments, she may feel self-satisfaction, and have an unreliably-formed (and false) belief about her accomplishments but this is not yet sufficient to charge her with complacency. If a person is simply incapable of properly assessing evidence (e.g., she embraces a wide range of fallacious forms of inference due to brain manipulation by an evil neuroscientist) then her beliefs might lack common forms of internalist epistemic justification (e.g., her beliefs do not in fact cohere, and she is incapable of realizing this due to the brain manipulation), but this is not yet sufficient for her to be deemed complacent.

In instances of complacency there must exist evidence (concerning her status or level of achievement) such that the agent ought to be aware of it, and draw certain conclusions from it (i.e., she would do so, were she behaving in an epistemically responsible fashion, given her capacities), but fails to do so. If a person pays insufficient attention to sources of evidence that would indicate to her that her actions are inadequate, or fails to draw obvious conclusions from evidence she possesses concerning her accomplishments (where she is quite capable of doing so, and an epistemically responsible agent would do so), then she is complacent (assuming she meets the other necessary conditions).<sup>10</sup>

Note that a lack of concern with a good or project can in some cases lead to the epistemically flawed behaviour characteristic of complacency. That is, an agent who has only a minimal concern for a project may as a result be epistemically careless; this in turn can lead to an overestimate of her status, which leads to an excessive self-satisfaction. A general lack of concern with a project may thus lead to complacency on the part of an agent. Put otherwise, in some cases an agent may independently exhibit components (iii) and (iv) of the proposed account of complacency; if so, these may well lead to complacency itself as the lack of concern manifests itself in careless, overly-generous epistemic assessments of oneself.

Throughout this discussion appeal has been made to *appropriately* strong desires, *appropriate* levels of accomplishment, and *appropriate* levels of ongoing action or effort. How are such standards established? It is beyond the scope of this paper to properly treat this question, but at least some relevant factors can be noted. Often appropriate levels of action and effort will be largely established by a given practice (morality, professional

basketball, etc.); there are certain levels of achievement that are expected of practitioners (though some accounting for an individual's particular talents, weaknesses, and so on, might be required). Beyond this, an individual's personal commitment to a given goal, practice, or project will typically be relevant.<sup>11</sup> There are standards maintained by the best classical guitarists in the world; if a person is committed to these, and yet fails to live up to them due to a culpable overestimate of her accomplishments and (the resultant self-satisfaction, etc.) she would be complacent, and culpably so – even if people in general need not live up to these standards.

Further complications arise in considering what would establish an appropriate level of self-satisfaction (relative to some level of accomplishment). The question is a difficult one – perhaps surprisingly so, and it will not be fully addressed here. It could be that, for example, with respect to moral matters, morality establishes standards for appropriate levels of self-satisfaction, relative to one's accomplishments. But then does the practice of basketball include standards for appropriate levels of self-satisfaction, given a certain shooting percentage? This seems to fall outside the scope of the practice itself. The practice and tradition of professional basketball might allow one to judge whether a given player's shooting percentage is excellent, or below average, and so on. But surely it does not itself establish the level of self-satisfaction a player should feel given his excellent shooting.

Perhaps there is a universal principle that establishes an appropriate sense of self-satisfaction relative to accomplishment across practices or projects; i.e., perhaps there is an algorithm for calculating how well one's accomplishments measure up to the standards of any given practice, and yielding some particular level of self-satisfaction as

appropriate. But even if this were possible, it seems that achieving to a very high level with respect to a trivial project may not warrant as great a sense of self-satisfaction as a somewhat lower (though still acceptable) level of achievement with respect to a more important or difficult project or practice.

As noted above, there is no attempt here to establish a firm position on how appropriate levels of self-satisfaction are determined. Still, as a tentative step, notice that inappropriate levels of self-satisfaction (either excessive or deficient) will tend to undermine the motivation required for appropriate accomplishment in a project. One will give up if one feels one's actions and efforts are ineffective or worthless; and one will be tempted to stop trying if one feels one has already accomplished enough. As such, appropriate levels of self-satisfaction could well be understood and established in terms of the motivational levels needed for appropriate accomplishment in a given practice (for a given agent). And more broadly, notice that such levels of appropriate self-satisfaction do seem to be established in a wide range of cases, and that appeal can be made to them. One way or another, for a wealthy person to donate \$5 to a charity over the course of a month and to thereby feel a tremendous sense of self-satisfaction and pride is a clear case of an excessive, inappropriate level of self-satisfaction, however this is ultimately grounded.

### III

It is now possible to contrast complacency with a set of vices with which it might be confused; or at least, steps can be taken to clarify precisely how complacency differs from these other, related vices.

To begin, contrast complacency with apathy or indifference. Both vices would seem to involve a lack of adequate effort, action, or concern with respect to some good or project. Still, two crucial differences between these vices exist: (1) the complacent person does concern herself with the given good or project, though in typical cases she does not concern herself to an adequate degree (and in cases where there is appropriate concern, it still does not translate into appropriate actions or efforts). The paradigm apathetic person, on the other hand, fails to value or concern herself with the good or project at all (even if she recognizes that others value this project or good). (2) Relatedly, the complacent person feels some degree of self-satisfaction, and typically has a belief that she has performed adequately with respect to the good or project. The paradigm apathetic person would not feel any sort of satisfaction with her actions in this case (if these exist; e.g., if she has been forced to participate in some project) – she simply does not care. The complacent lack of action ultimately arises out of self-satisfaction and a lack of attention; the apathetic out of a complete lack of concern.

Still, apathy could plausibly be construed as a limiting case of complacency. As a complacent person concerns herself less and less with a project, and / or feels less satisfaction from her actions related to the project, she is becoming more and more apathetic (with respect to this project). And at its limit, an agent with no concern at all for a given project is purely apathetic with respect to this project.

Next, consider complacency and resignation. The vice of resignation can be treated here as requiring an epistemically culpable belief that additional efforts to improve with respect to some good or project will be unsuccessful, leading to an inappropriate lack of action, effort, and / or concern. Here, both vices again involve a

lack of adequate effort, action, or concern with respect to some good or project. In addition (and unlike apathy), both complacent and resigned people are concerned with the good or project at stake. The crucial difference between the two is that the lack of effort on the part of the complacent person is ultimately due to sense of satisfaction, and a culpable belief that one has performed adequately; the lack of effort on the part of the resigned person is ultimately due to a culpable belief that further efforts are near futile or bound to fail.

Nor should complacency be confused with akrasia. Once again, these are vices that involve a lack of appropriate actions or efforts. And once again, both the complacent and weak-willed person will be concerned to at least some degree with the good or project at stake. The crucial difference here also lies in the source of the lack of appropriate actions. The weak-willed person's lack of action is not directly due to a sense of self-satisfaction or a culpable belief that her performance has been adequate, unlike that of the complacent person. Instead, one could say (roughly) that her lack of appropriate action is due to the presence of a stronger motive to perform some other action (or simply a general lack of motivation owing to listlessness or depression), even while she recognizes that she ought to perform the appropriate action. Furthermore, the weak-willed person will be explicitly aware of her failure to perform appropriate actions, while the complacent person has the epistemically culpable belief that she is performing acceptably. The weak-willed person feels guilt or regret where the complacent person feels a sense of contentment.

That said, there are cases where a person exhibits complacency and weakness of will in closely-related projects. Take the environmentally complacent person: he believes



culpably that his actions, taken as a whole, are acceptable (even if not perfect) and as a result of his satisfaction in this, feels only a slight need to attempt to improve (and only to a small degree). In particular, suppose he has a slight felt need to be better about walking down the hall at work to place his empty pop cans in a recycling bin. In fact, he ought to be doing much more, and we can assume he is epistemically culpable in believing that the biggest improvement he ought to make involves recycling a few more cans. To this point there is simply an instance of complacency. But given his (unwarranted) general satisfaction with his environmental behaviour, he is led into a certain form of weakness of will. One can well imagine that he rarely acts on his felt need to recycle more cans at his office; it is easily overridden given its weakness - and its weakness, of course, is a result of his general satisfaction with his behaviour with respect to its environmental impacts. So he will be prone to weakness of will here; he feels at some level he ought to recycle more, but he will easily succumb to laziness given the weakness of his motivation to improve. He will feel some slight guilt about this (seeing it as a minor peccadillo), but ultimately, we can trace the origins of such episodes back to his culpable overestimate of the quality of his lifestyle in general with respect to its environmental impacts (and the resultant self-satisfaction).

What of the relationship between pride and complacency? Jane Austen hints at a possible connection (through the voice of Mary Bennet, in her *Pride and Prejudice*):

‘Pride,’ observed Mary, who piqued herself upon the solidity of her reflections, ‘is a very common failing, I believe. By all that I have ever read, I am convinced that it is very common indeed; that human nature is particularly prone to it, and

that there are very few of us who do not cherish a feeling of self-complacency on the score of some quality or other, real or imaginary.<sup>12</sup>

Putting aside the irony of the passage, one construal of the connection would be to equate the two vices; that is, to hold that complacency and pride are one and the same vice. But this is untenable – one could have excessive pride even while not being complacent.

Recall the example of the wealthy woman who is excessively proud of donating \$1000 to charity but who intends to give more in the future; she is not complacent.

What is less clear is whether one could be complacent without also thereby exhibiting the vice of pride; and, in turn, it might appear that excessive pride is a necessary condition for the self-satisfaction of complacency. One could argue as follows: if a person feels an excessive self-satisfaction in her efforts and accomplishments, this must be due to her experiencing excessive pride in these efforts and accomplishments – it is because of this pride that she feels self-satisfaction. Still, there is a better understanding available to us. The pride and self-satisfaction can be seen as two distinct results of the fundamental, epistemically culpable overestimate of one's efforts and accomplishments. The excessive pride does not produce the self-satisfaction - one does not primarily take satisfaction in pride itself; rather, one takes satisfaction in that which also produces the pride.

Still, could some degree of pride (even if not excessive) be a necessary accompaniment to complacency, arising out of the overestimate of one's efforts and accomplishments? Consider a person who culpably overestimates her accomplishments. Could this occur without her also feeling an excessive pride? It seems in principle possible – she could have such poor self-esteem that even given her overestimates, she

still does not feel an excessive pride. It could well be that she does not even feel sufficient pride relative to her actual accomplishments. But – crucially - would this be possible while this agent at the same time takes an excessive self-satisfaction in her overestimated efforts and accomplishments? This is much harder to imagine; for a person to see her actions in a sufficiently positive light to be excessively self-satisfied and complacent, it seems she would also thereby see them in a sufficiently positive light to take at least some pride in them – even if not excessive.

There is yet another possibility here. Perhaps the self-satisfaction that one feels in complacency simply is a form of pride. That is, the pride involved is not taken to produce self-satisfaction, or merely accompany it; rather the pride is the self-satisfaction. Thomas Hurka characterizes vicious pride in general as involving excessive pleasure in certain aspect's of one's own good.<sup>13</sup> Still, while viciously proud people typically believe themselves to be better than others and take pleasure in this, this need not be so with complacent people – they may acknowledge that they are quite ordinary in their actions (but culpably believe that these are adequate when they are not).<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, while the pleasure of pride seems quite compatible with a desire to do more, or to strive harder, the satisfaction characteristic of complacency inhibits further concern or greater efforts; again consider the agent who feels great pride in giving \$1000 but who intends to give more in the future. Tentatively then, a certain degree of pride (not necessarily excessive) can be taken as a necessary accompaniment to complacency, while not being a component of complacency itself.

Finally, complacency and hypocrisy can be contrasted. First, following Szabados and Soifer, it seems to be a necessary condition of hypocrisy that some form of deception

is involved – including, in some cases, self-deception.<sup>15</sup> For example, in common cases of hypocrisy, the hypocrite creates (or attempts to create) an impression in others that she maintains certain standards of moral behaviour; however she deceives these others insofar as her actual actions fail to live up to these standards. And self-deception is possible – at some level a self-deceived hypocrite might know that she is not living up to her professed standards, but convinces herself at a conscious level that all is well with her behaviour. Complacency does not require any such deception. A complacent person forms epistemically culpable beliefs about her performance with respect to some good or project, but these beliefs could be sincerely formed.

Still, mixed cases seem possible. Suppose an SUV driver believes that her driving such a vehicle is satisfactory from an environmental point of view that she shares. This belief is epistemically culpable – the atrocious mileage and comparatively high level of emissions from these vehicles are quite well-known and this information is easily accessible. If the driver simply misses this common knowledge and cannot be bothered to investigate the matter, she seems best described as simply complacent. But if one notices that she avoids reading stories about SUVs in the newspaper, and in other ways deliberately avoids evidence that would undermine her belief, the case would be better described as an instance of self-deception. At some level, she has become aware that there are problems with SUVs (or at least that there might be) – this is precisely why she avoids carefully looking at evidence concerning their environmental impacts.<sup>16</sup> This, then, is a hypocritical complacency.

Variations of W.K. Clifford's well-known ship-owner example can also serve to illustrate the difference between pure and hypocritical complacency:

A shipowner was about to send to sea an emigrant ship. He knew that she was old, and not over-well built at the first; that she had seen many seas and climes, and often had needed repairs. Doubts had been suggested to him that possibly she was not seaworthy. These doubts preyed upon his mind and made him unhappy; he thought perhaps he ought to have her thoroughly overhauled and refitted, even though this should put him to great expense. Before the ship sailed, however, he succeeded in overcoming these melancholy reflections. He said to himself that she had gone safely through so many voyages and weathered so many storms that it was idle to suppose she would not come safely home from this trip also. [...] He would dismiss from his mind all ungenerous suspicions about the honesty of builders and contractors. In such ways he acquired a sincere and comfortable conviction that his vessel was thoroughly safe and seaworthy<sup>17</sup>

The case, as described by Clifford, seems to be one of hypocritical complacency. The shipowner is aware at some level that there are serious doubts about the seaworthiness of his ship, but he puts them aside, at least at a conscious level. He deceives himself with respect to the safety of his ship. If one were to modify the case so that these doubts never even entered the mind of the shipowner (or so that if he considered them, he granted them no force; they did not ‘prey upon his mind’), so that he simply rested content with his belief that since the ship had made successful trips in the past, it would do so in the future, then this would be a case of pure complacency. His beliefs concerning his maintenance of the ship are epistemically irresponsible and culpable; any shipowner ought to be much more careful with respect to the safety and seaworthiness of a ship. It

is because of his culpable beliefs that the shipowner feels a satisfaction in his efforts, and lacks a desire or felt need to perform further maintenance, etc.

Roger Crisp and Christopher Cowton treat complacency as a form or subspecies of hypocrisy:

Being complacent may be part of a pretence to virtue or it may involve blaming others for minor blemishes while ignoring one's own perhaps greater faults. And complacent hypocrites may say one thing and do another. But none of these must be the case. Complacent hypocrites are often just that – complacent. [...] morality for them is a small part of life, a set of duties to be performed like household chores. This is not to say that their concern for morality is consciously insincere. It may well appear to them to be serious and genuine. What makes their concern hypocrisy is the extremely undemanding nature of their morality and their unwillingness to reflect upon it.<sup>18</sup>

Crisp and Cownton's description of hypocrisy in the final sentence of this passage seems much better understood as a description of complacency. But even here, note that this excludes (i) cases where one espouses appropriate moral standards, but overestimates one's accomplishments, and (ii) cases where one might be willing to reflect upon their moral commitments and accomplishments, but simply never do so. Cases of both kinds seem to be clear forms of complacency (assuming the other necessary conditions are met). More broadly, Crisp and Cownton maintain that

the strand that runs through paradigm cases of the various kinds of hypocrisy is a failure to take morality seriously. This also explains much of what is bad about

hypocrisy. If anything is morally blameworthy, then lack of concern for morality surely is.<sup>19</sup>

But surely this is too broad a construal of hypocrisy. Not only would this subsume (moral) complacency, it would include apathy, and many paradigmatic instances of akrasia. These are importantly different vices, and it seems worthwhile to recognize the distinctions between them and not to subsume them under the heading 'hypocrisy'. Furthermore, even if these vices do all involve a failure to take morality seriously, it is dubious that hypocrisy is the best candidate category for such a lack of concern; it seems that moral negligence or indifference would be the most natural genus.

So what, then, is complacency? At its foundations are an epistemically culpable overestimate of one's efforts and achievements, and a resultant excessive self-satisfaction. In turn, these produce a lack of desire or felt need to improve or maintain one's efforts with respect to a project. As such, complacency falls within the range of what Hurka refers to as the vices of indifference, and Kathie Jenni as the vices of inattention.<sup>20</sup> Hurka suggests that such vices "involve not a positively inappropriate orientation to a good or evil, but the absence, at least to a minimum threshold intensity, of an appropriate one".<sup>21</sup> Complacency, with its easy self-satisfaction and lack of effort constitutes a paradigmatic case of vicious negligence and inadequate concern for one's projects and achievements.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> John Kenneth Galbraith, "In Pursuit of the Simple Truth", *The Guardian (London)*, July 28, 1989.

<sup>2</sup> For recent work with at least some discussion of complacency, see Béla Szabados and Eldon Soifer, *Hypocrisy: Ethical Investigations* (Peterborough, Ont.: Broadview Press, 2004), esp. ch. 13; Tara Smith, "Morality Without the Wink: A Defense of Moral Perfection", *Journal of Philosophical Research* 29 (2004), pp. 315-331; Roger Crisp and Christopher Cowton, "Hypocrisy and Moral Seriousness", *American Philosophical Quarterly* 31 (1994), pp. 343-9; and Nicholas Unwin, "Relativism and Moral Complacency", *Philosophy* 60 (1985), pp. 205-14.

<sup>3</sup> "complacency", *The Oxford English Dictionary* 2<sup>nd</sup> ed.. OED Online. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989). <<http://dictionary.oed.com/cgi/entry/50045570>>. [Accessed July 7, 2006.]

<sup>4</sup> "complacency", *The American Heritage® Dictionary of the English Language*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2000). <<http://www.bartleby.com/61/77/C0527700.html>>. [Accessed July 7, 2006.]

<sup>5</sup> "complacency", *Merriam Webster's Collegiate Dictionary* 10<sup>th</sup> ed. (Springfield, MA: Merrriam-Webster, 1993).

<sup>6</sup> The first definition seems to reflect more the etymology of 'complacency' than its more common current usage, where it refers to a vice. The term comes from the (rather archaic) French verb 'complaisir', 'to feel pleasure with' (and ultimately the Latin 'complacere', 'to be pleasing'). The first definition seems to focus on this original sense of pleasure or satisfaction.



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<sup>7</sup> Szabados and Soifer, p. 266. It should be stressed that Szabados and Soifer are not offering an account of complacency and do not claim that smugness is a necessary feature of complacency.

<sup>8</sup> Note that a lack of both sufficiently strong desires and felt needs (to maintain or improve to an appropriate level of accomplishment) is required for complacency. That is, if a person were to lack a strong felt need to improve, but while possessing a sufficiently strong desire to improve, she would not be complacent.

<sup>9</sup> Unwin, p. 205.

<sup>10</sup> Several philosophers have proposed accounts of epistemically responsible (and irresponsible / negligent) belief. See, for example, John Greco, "Virtue Epistemology", in Edward N. Zalta (ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Winter 2004 Edition)*, <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2004/entries/epistemology-virtue/>>, Hilary Kornblith, "Justified Belief and Epistemically Responsible Action", *Philosophical Review* 92 (1983), pp. 33-48, James A. Monmarquet, *Epistemic Virtue and Doxastic Responsibility* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1993), and Richard Foley, "Justified Belief as Responsible Belief" in Matthias Steup and Ernest Sosa (eds.), *Contemporary Debates in Epistemology* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2005), pp.313-26.

<sup>11</sup> 'Typically' as there are practices (in particular, morality), where one might hold that appropriate levels of action and effort for an individual cannot be reduced simply by her lack of interest or commitment to the practice. On the other hand, perhaps there would be different appropriate levels of effort and action if one person were committed to being a moral saint, while another has no such commitment. It is not necessary here to resolve such issues.

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<sup>12</sup> Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*, rev. ed. (New York: Penguin Classics, 2002), ch. 5. Originally published in 1813.

<sup>13</sup> Thomas Hurka, *Virtue, Vice, and Value* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 98.

<sup>14</sup> Hurka, p. 98. Hurka suggests agents can be viciously proud even if they do not have exaggerated beliefs about their merits; “Imagine that someone knows his achievements are no greater than other people’s but dwells on them constantly, taking intense pleasure in them, and expressing that pleasure in boasting. He is objectionably proud despite not having the relevant belief” (p. 98). This is plausible, but again a complacent agent need not take such intense pleasure in her achievements.

<sup>15</sup> See Szabados and Soifer, chs. 12-4.

<sup>16</sup> In speaking of being aware ‘at some level’ that there are problems with SUVs, one could simply (if unilluminatingly) hold that there is a subconscious belief. A more promising approach might lie in appealing to a dispositional account of belief, and holding that such a person would possess some aspects of the dispositional stereotype of a belief that SUVs are environmentally unsound, while lacking others (particularly those that involve an explicit, reflective awareness of one’s own belief). For more on dispositional accounts of belief, see Eric Schwitzgebel, “In-Between Believing”, *Philosophical Quarterly* 51 (2001), pp. 76-82, and “A Phenomenal, Dispositional Account of Belief”, *Noûs* 36 (2002), pp. 249-75.

<sup>17</sup> W.K. Clifford, “The Ethics of Belief” reprinted in Louis J. Pojman (ed.), *The Theory of Knowledge: Contemporary and Classical Readings* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 2003), pp. 515-18; quotation from p. 515.

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<sup>18</sup> Crisp and Cownton, p. 345.

<sup>19</sup> Crisp and Cownton, p. 347.

<sup>20</sup> See Hurka, pp. 94-6, and Kathie Jenni, “Vices of Inattention”, *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 20 (2003), pp. 279-95. Hurka and Jenni provide plausible accounts of why these traits are vices; see also Ronald Milo’s discussion of moral negligence in his *Immorality* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), ch. 4.

<sup>21</sup> Hurka, p. 94.

<sup>22</sup> Versions of this paper were read at the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga, the International Society for Environmental Ethics (Eastern Division), and the Pacific Division of the APA. Many thanks to the commentators (Lijun Yuan, Simon Keller, and Ronald Sandler) and audience members, including Ben Bradley, Horton Entendawho, Dale Jamieson, John Philips, Douglas Portmore, David Shoemaker, Bill Throop, and Talia Welsh. Thanks also to Colleen Baish, Thomas Hurka, Nancy Snow, Neil Tennant, and an anonymous referee for their helpful comments (not all of which could be addressed here).