**Epistemic Corruption and Social Oppression**

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“[T]he dominant understanding of vice, virtue, and character needs to be revised in light of the recognition by feminist theorists, among others, that character is not simply a matter of what is inside the individual, for which the individual is wholly and solely responsible, but is also a matter of interpersonal, social, cultural, and political contexts.”

(Robin Dillon, 2012: 90)

**CHARACTER AND OPPRESSION**

A key insight of liberatory philosophies is a double connection between character and social oppression: the operation of oppressive social systems requires *oppressors* with what Lisa Tessman called ‘the ordinary vices of domination’, such as cruelty, indifference, contempt, and arrogance, which make for ‘degraded’, ‘twisted’ forms of moral character (2005: 54). Correspondingly, subjection to behaviours and systems characterised by such vices itself will tend to damage the characters of the oppressed, causing what Tessman, inspired by the work of Claudia Card (1996), dubs ‘moral damage’, in the sense that ‘the self under oppression can be morally damaged, prevented from developing or exercising some of the virtues’ (2005: 4).

Such characterological damage has been explored through feminist and critical race-theoretic philosophies within the Western tradition, at least back to early work by Mary Astell and Mary Wollstonecraft at the start and end of the seventeenth century (see Kidd 2019: §2). Although much of this work has focused on forms of damage to moral character, there has been a latent sensitivity to damaged epistemic characters, too. Astell and Wollstonecraft’s critiques of misogynistic social cultures exposed the damage to women’s epistemic capacities and characters, as later critical race epistemologies did for the damaged epistemic characters of members of subordinated racial groups. If subjection to conditions of oppression damages the epistemic character of the oppressed, then it’s reasonable to expect engagement with that fact from vice epistemologists. Moreover, it’s also reasonable to expect them to have useful things to offer for those concerned to understand the character-epistemic dimensions of social oppression.

A sensitivity to the connections between forms of social oppression and damaged or malformed epistemic character is certainly a feature of contemporary vice epistemology, for at least three reasons. To start with, a general interest in epistemic vices should naturally pay at least some attention to the question of how epistemic subjects come to acquire or develop those vices. Granted, such aetiological interest need not necessarily attend to the features of the social world focused upon by feminist and critical race theorists, such as intersectionally structured social identities, systems of social privileged, power hierarchies, and unjust social institutions and traditions. Some prefer to focus on the psychological bases of epistemic vices, or situational factors, or wider sociological, cultural, and ideological conditions that structure our development – and maldevelopment – as epistemic subjects (cf. Cassam 2020, Medina 2012).

A second reason to expect vice epistemologists to attend to the connections between oppression and character is that many of them are working within feminist philosophical frameworks. Standout examples include the work of Miranda Fricker (2007) and José Medina (2012) on epistemic injustice and the work of Alessandra Tanesini (2016, 2018) on the vices of humility: arrogance and *superbia* in the case of the privileged and timidity and servility in the case of the oppressed.

A final reason why vice epistemologists ought to attend to character and oppression is that most of them have at least latent ameliorative aspirations: one of the main reasons for systematically studying the epistemic vices is that epistemically vicious people and patterns of behaviour are sufficiently objectionable that it becomes imperative to find effective ways to reduce the incidence of vices. This is what Quassim Cassam recently called ‘the project of vice reduction’, whose main motivation is the sense that a world of unchecked epistemically vicious behaviour is just ‘too ghastly to contemplate’ (2019: 186, 187).

A first step towards a vice epistemological analysis of the characterological damage to the members of groups subjected to forms of social oppression will be the development of a suitable concept to describe that phenomenon. A good clue comes from some remarks made by Fricker and Medina when describing the effects on people of sustained subjection to forms of epistemic injustice: she says that subjection to gendered and racialised epistemic injustices tends to ‘inhibit’ or ‘thwart’ the development of subjectivity and character (2007: 49, 58). She also argues that internalisation of sexist and racist norms, values, and assumptions ‘corrupts’ the epistemic sensibilities and dispositions of both oppressors and the oppressed (2007: 93, 131, 138). Medina uses a similar language when characterising an epistemic vice as ‘a set of corrupted attitudes and dispositions’, and when arguing that as the period and intensity of a person’s subjection to conditions of oppression increases, so ‘their epistemic character [will] tend to become more corrupted’ (2012: 29, 72).

Although neither Fricker nor Medina think of the members of oppressed groups as the passive victims of their environments, both find it natural to describe the damage done to epistemic character using the term ‘corruption’ – a term that gathers together other terms they use to describe such damage, such as ‘inhibit’, ‘thwart’, and ‘erode’. Taking my cue from Fricker and Medina’s use of the term, my aim in this chapter is to offer a working analysis of the concept of *epistemic corruption*. I think this concept could play a useful role in our efforts to understand the connections between social oppression and epistemic character damage and therefore enhance the ameliorative potential of vice epistemology. But the concept also requires us to critically reconsider some of the conceptual and methodological commitments of vice epistemology. I therefore end the chapter by arguing that the concept of epistemic corruption can inspire the development of a distinctive sort of vice epistemology that – inspired by the work of Robin Dillon (2012) – I will label *critical character epistemology*.

**THE CONCEPT OF EPISTEMIC CORRUPTION**

The term ‘corruption’ has enjoyed a long career as a means of articulating moral damage and other forms of degeneration experienced by people, whether as a result of external or social conditions or internal factors, such failures of the will. Such rhetorics of corruption have often brought with them a vocabulary of vice. Gabriele Taylor remarks that, where the virtues heal and benefit oneself and others, ‘the vices corrupt and destroy’ (2006: 126), while Judith Shklar remarks that vices ‘dominate and corrupt’ our character (1984: 200), while Alasdair MacIntyre remarks that ‘the corruption of institutions is always in part at least an effect of the vices’ (2013: 227). Within the Western tradition, the moral uses of the term ‘corruption’ has generally referred to the loss or deterioration of the essential, typically positive qualities of a thing, and typically in ways that fundamentally compromise its integrity or constitution. Although it need not be coupled to characterological concepts, that is how I will use the term, albeit confined only to epistemic character, rather than moral and political corruption (on the latter, see Rothstein and Varraich 2017).

I propose that epistemic corruption occurs when one’s epistemic character comes to be damaged due to the subject’s interaction with persons, conditions, processes, doctrines, or structures that facilitate the development and exercise of epistemic vices. Three comments on this initial definition. First, ‘damage’ can be understood in two ways: the deterioration of the pre-existing virtues and integrity already evident in the subject’s character, and the failure of the subject to develop an epistemic character characterised by virtues and integrity. I label these *active corruption* and *passive corruption*, respectively, where the distinction is between damage done to qualities they currently possess and to their development.

Second, we need to add some terminology: the *corruptee* is the person or thing being corrupted and the *corruptors* are the persons or things doing the corrupting. Sometimes, of course, they may be same thing, since some subjects are complicit in their *epistemic* *self-corruption*. And third, the term ‘facilitate’ is purposefully broad: depending on the context, it can mean ‘encourage’, ‘justify’, ‘legitimate’, ‘motivate’, ‘promote’, ‘provide conditions for’, and so on. We can roughly divide these into two main modes of facilitation: *material conditions* and *motivational conditions*.

Since there are many ways to materially and motivationally facilitate the development and exercise of epistemic vices, our job as epistemologists is easier if we distinguish different *modes of epistemic corruption*. Without pretending to be comprehensive, consider the following five modes – with the provisos that others exist, and, in practice, that modes of corruption tend to merge into one another:

1. *Acquisition*: a corruptor can enable the acquisition of novel epistemic vices, ones not previously a feature of the subject’s epistemic character. Imagine a student with no natural dispositions or prior tendencies to arrogance who, under the influence of very charismatic but arrogant teachers within a school environment that rewards arrogant actions, comes to acquire the vice of arrogance.
2. *Activation*: a corruptor can activate dormant epistemic vices, ones typically latent or inactive in the subject’s epistemic character. Imagine a student with some underlying arrogant tendencies that are, as a matter of luck, always just ‘below the surface’, never showing themselves. Unfortunately, the student then has the bad luck to move to a school whose culture encourages inflated forms of self-confidence, bordering on arrogance, which activate their dormant arrogant dispositions.

The next three ‘modes of corruption’ are different, insofar as they involve changes to vices already present and active in a subject’s character.

1. *Propagation*: a corruptor can increase the *scope* of a vice, the extent to which it affects the range of the subject’s character. Imagine a person whose vices only affect a certain set of activities or topics, such as someone dogmatic only about music, but not about politics, science, or anything else. Unfortunately, their initially localised dogmatism is amplified under the influence of their peer group, spreading to encompass more and more topics. Soon, they are dogmatic about all sorts of subjects, if not about all things, until that vice comes to ‘infect their whole character’, in Annette Baier’s (1995: 274) useful phrase.
2. *Stabilisation*: a corruptor can also increase the *stability* of a vice, reducing the chances of the vice’s susceptibility to disruption. Imagine an arrogant person prone to say and do arrogant things, but whose saving grace is also that they don’t always act arrogantly and typically cease when challenged. Their arrogance is unstable, since it fluxes on and off and is relatively easily acted upon by others. Unfortunately, the social conventions under which they operate come to be transformed in ways that tend to stabilise their vices – certain norms of censure break down, for instance, as the society slowly starts to become more tolerant of public displays of arrogance. The consequence is that the vice is gradually stabilised. Where it was once fluctuating, blinking ‘on’ and ‘off’, it has become stable and highly resistant to destabilisation.
3. *Intensification*: a corruptor can also increase the *strength* of a vice. Imagine a person with only a weak tendency to dogmatism: confronted with challenges to their beliefs, they are irksomely stubborn, but not aggressively resistant, and if asked to dialectically defend their views are prone to shrug and ‘let it go’. Unfortunately, they are internalising certain attitudes and assumptions as a result of their increasingly privileged social and professional identities. The consequence is that their once weak, incipient dogmatism slowly mutates into a raging dogmatic hubris of a strongly adversarial, agonistic form.

These five modes of epistemic corruption should suffice to indicate some of the main ways a subject’s could become more epistemically vicious as a result of interactions with corruptors. The relevance and significance of the different modes will depend on specifics about specific epistemic subjects, the structure and psychology of the epistemic vices, and different socio-epistemic environments. To spell out some of these, let me note some of the presuppositions of this analysis of epistemic corruption.

**PRESUPPOSITIONS ABOUT EPISTEMIC CORRUPTION**

To start with the most obvious presupposition, subjects *have* epistemic characters, and these consist of a variety of epistemic dispositions or traits of fairly malleable scope, stability, and strength. These include dispositions to argue, evaluate, judge, perceive, reason, reflect, and understand in certain ways and, for most people, most of these dispositions will lack the stability and strength that are constitutive of *virtues* or *vices*. Our epistemic characters aren’t therefore exhausted by our virtues and vices. Most of us have perhaps a handful of virtues or vices and an array of more-or-less virtuous and vicious dispositions, which could be developed into the stable forms of virtue and vice – an ontology of character recently defended with due reference to empirical psychology by Christian Miller (2017). When an epistemic disposition or trait gains in strength, scope, and stability, then it becomes a virtue (if positively valenced) and a vice (if negatively valenced).

A second presupposition – or set of presuppositions – is that a subject’s epistemic character is an active, ongoing product of an array of psychological, developmental, interpersonal, and structural-contextual factors. Much goes into the shaping of one’s epistemic character, and a main purpose of the concept of epistemic corruption is to help us identify the relevant sorts of factors. Our psychological profiles, our patterns of social interactions, the diversity and the quality of our peers, the forms and dynamics of our social institutions, the variety of epistemic exemplars available as models of emulation, and the wider ramifying structures of power and privilege which intersect and interconnect all of these. But since this makes for a very complex picture, it’s helpful to draw on José Medina’s concept of an ‘epistemic predicament’.

An epistemic predicament is the particular, contingent, and changing array of epistemic challenges, deficits, needs, obstacles, and threats that a subject experiences as a result of their positionality in the social world (2012: 28f, 34f). Writing of differently socially situated subjects, Medina emphasises that ‘their epistemic deficits are different, and their resources to overcome these deficits and to resist dominant ideologies are also different [as are the ways they] accrue epistemic gains and losses’ (2012: 28). Given all of this, one’s epistemic predicament profoundly influences the ways a subject can develop and deploy their epistemic agency. I think this includes one’s vulnerability to, and capacities to resist, epistemically corrupting conditions and processes. Medina separates the ‘predicaments of the privileged’ from the ‘predicaments of the oppressed’, although also emphasises their internal variety and fluidity relative to one another. Those who occupy social positions of privilege are especially vulnerable to what he calls the ‘vices of the privileged’, such as arrogance, closedmindedness, and epistemic laziness, at least in certain of their forms (2012: §1.1). Although those vices are not confined to the privileged, not an inevitable feature of the epistemic character of the privileged, they do lie in their path as obstacles which they ought to take special care to avoid. By contrast, members of socially oppressed groups are especially susceptible to developing such vices as servility and timidity, although these are neither confined to them, nor unanimous among the epistemic character of the oppressed.

A key feature of an epistemic predicament is that it shapes the specific range of epistemic vice to which one is especially susceptible and the range of resources one has to detect and to resist epistemically corrupting influences and conditions. The epistemic predicaments of the oppressed may include the challenge of trying to devise effective strategies to protect and, if possible, to restore, their fragile testimonial credibility and epistemic confidence. The epistemic predicaments of the privileged may include the challenge of resisting the acute temptations to epistemically arrogant patterns of behaviour that comes with a privileged social identity.

My account of epistemic corruption also includes several presuppositions about the nature and activity of epistemically corrupting conditions. Such conditions vary along at least four axes. Their *scope* is the breadth of their influence within a given community, institution, or socio-epistemic environment and which can be broader or narrower. Their *strength* is the power of their capacity to corrupt, where more strongly corrupting conditions are those more reliably capable of corrupting subjects. Their *stability* is the capacity of those conditions to maintain their corrupting power in the face of efforts to disrupt them or contingent changes in the wider environment. The *specificity* is the range of vices the conditions can ‘corrupt for’, where we should distinguish *specifically corrupting conditions* that facilitate a specific range of vices—such as appetitive, rather than alethic, vices—and *generically corrupting conditions* which will tend facilitate a whole range of vices. I’d speculate that epistemically monocultural environments can facilitate a whole range of epistemic vices, from arrogance and closed-mindedness to dogmatism and laziness to myopia and obliviousness.

I also presuppose that epistemic corruption is a *diachronic* and *dynamic* process, one that unfolds over time and is dynamic in the double sense that it is *active* and consists of both *corrupting and counter-corrupting* tendencies – a ‘push and pull’. Epistemic corruption should not be thought of as a single, one-off instance of radical character damage, although perhaps certain dramatic or traumatic events could have this sort of destructive effect. In most cases, epistemic corruption takes the form of a complex, constant, cumulative series of interactions, experiences, and influences that is temporally extended and socially scaffolded, which is why studying it must use the resources of feminist and social epistemologies (Dillon 2012, Daukas 2019).

The dynamic character of epistemic corruption also has a happy upshot. All but the most hostile epistemic environments contain at least some *edifying* aspects. We can imagine a radically epistemically corrupting environment, populated by forthright exemplars of epistemic vice and whose practices and structures are designed to systematically materially and motivationally facilitate epistemically vicious conduct – a nightmarish scenario. But such environments are extremely rare and most actual epistemic environments are partially rather than radically corrupting. Even within small communities, such as a workplace, one can almost always find a variety of virtuous and vicious epistemic exemplars, for instance.

**EPISTEMICALLY CORRUPTING CONDITIONS**

A fundamental aspiration of vice epistemology ought to be the improvement the epistemic characters of epistemic subjects and, as a corollary, the provision of practicable methods for the identifying and correcting epistemically corrupting conditions. Such work must be at once philosophically and empirically sophisticated, bringing together vice epistemology, sociology, and psychology as well as other allied disciplines, such as educational studies (cf. Kidd 2019b).

I content myself to sketching out some examples of generically epistemically corrupting conditions. Their purpose is both to help to fill out the idea of epistemic corruption and, more importantly, to help make the case for the development of the distinctive form of *critical character epistemology* to which the subsequent sections are devoted.

1. *The absence of exemplars of virtue*:a community may lack any positive exemplars who model epistemic virtue: those within the environment therefore lack (i) an *admirable* and *emulable* exemplar of epistemic virtue, and who can (ii) *practically exemplify* the virtues and, sometimes, (iii) provide *theoretical elaboration* of virtues, to draw on the exemplarist character theory developed by Linda Zagzebski (2017). Such absence does not, of course, automatically put people on a path to vice, but it does close off at least one important path to virtue (Croce and Vaccarezza 2017).
2. *The derogation of exemplars of virtue*: a community has exemplars of virtue, but they could be subject to derogation by other members of that community – sneered at, or mocked, or derided either openly or in private. Imagine a philosophy department where the ‘tender-hearted’ professors who are fair-minded and temperate in debates are mocked for being ‘soft’ or for lacking the aggressively adversarial spirit allegedly constitutive of properly impressive philosophising – a pattern of derogation criticised by feminist argumentation theorists (Rooney 2010).
3. *The valorisation of vicious conduct and exemplars*: some of all or the members of a community may celebrate exemplars of epistemic vice and also promote, celebrate, and reward epistemically vicious behaviour. Seeing that social and professional goods such as respect, esteem, praise, and recognition reliably accrue to vicious exemplars, can provides incentive to epistemic viciousness. Moreover, the public celebration and advancement of the epistemically vicious sends clear messages about the possibilities available if one cultivates those vices in one’s own life.
4. *The ‘rebranding’ of vices as virtues*: some people will become aware of the ways that corrupting conditions are starting to affect their epistemic character for the worse and they might try to take counter-measures. An obvious way to respond to those counter-measures is to try to *disguise* or *conceal* the fact of their being corrupted, and one way is to ‘rebrand’ vices as virtues (cf. Dillon 2012: 99). Think of how arrogance can become *confidence*, or dogmatism become *tenacity*. If successful, this conceals the *fact* of corruption and so enables it to continue unhindered, at least until the concealment can be revealed.
5. *The establishment of conditions that increase the exercise costs of virtue*: virtues will typically incur *exercise costs*, whether practical, psychological, social, or epistemic. An effective way to discourage the cultivation or exercise of virtue is to increase the costs incurred by their exercise. Think of typical costs for exercising the virtue of honesty: upsetting friends, embarrassing the powerful, angering those who wanted things kept hidden, sacrificing opportunities whose availability was contingent on one’s failure to honestly reveal their existence to others, and so on. By increasing exercise costs for epistemic virtues, the path to vice becomes easier and more attractive. Again, increasing exercise costs does not *automatically* make a person vicious, but does alter their capacity to explore the space of character-epistemic developmental possibilities in the direction of the virtues of the mind.
6. *The establishment of structures that encourage the exercise of vice*: these refer to ways of materially and motivationally facilitating epistemic viciousness. Imagine a doctor working for a tobacco company which incentivises acts of dishonesty by financially rewarding the publication of journal and newspaper articles, insincerely questioning the connections between smoking and various diseases – this being one of many forms of epistemically corrupting conditions created by the tobacco industry, as documented by historians and sociologists of science, including Robert Proctor, who refers to ‘an unparalleled corruption of science’ (2011: 561).
7. *The establishment of policies whose enactment requires the exercise of vice*: our social and institutional environments are often organised and directed by *policies*, which create and empower certain norms, practices, and forms of organisation. If enacting a policy in these ways requires the exercise of vices, then the policy will be corrupting in the material and motivational senses. Several critics have argued that certain higher educational policies in the United States and United Kingdom do this in the case of the appetitive and alethic vices, like epistemic insensibility (Battaly 2013, Cooper 2008).

No doubt there are many other forms of corrupting conditions, as well as variations in the forms taken by the ones sketched above. There is also interesting work to do in tracing out in detail the correlations between *modes of corruption*, *corrupting conditions*, and *specific vices*. There is also more to say, of course, about the psychology of epistemic corruption, the ways that the structure of different vices relates to different modes of corruption, and so on. Such details are best provided in conjunction with specific concrete case studies, for which at the moment the best sources are analyses of epistemic corruption in education (see Kidd (2015) and (2019)).

For now, I hope these examples suffice to give a fuller picture of the nature and sources of epistemic corruption. I want to ask how this awareness of the phenomenon of epistemic corruption may require changes to the ways we conceive of epistemic vices and also how we practice vice epistemology.

**CRITICAL CHARACTER EPISTEMOLOGY**

The phenomenon of epistemic corruption clearly relates to a variety of issues and themes of vice epistemology—most obviously, to aetiological questions about the ways that subjects come to have epistemic vices, ameliorative questions about the possibility of and practices for vice reduction, and explanatory questions about the relationship between vice-based and other ways of explaining of problematic epistemic behaviour (structural and situational, say). It seems clear that theorising epistemic corruption requires a constant, direct sensitivity to agent-environment interactions and the ways that epistemic character and agency are deeply shaped by the norms, practices, structures, and power systems of social environments.

I want to argue that taking seriously epistemic corruption as a pervasive feature of our socioepistemic environments and a major factor in the epistemic character development of epistemic character needs a style of vice epistemology with certain distinctive conceptual and methodological commitments. I call this a *critical character epistemology*, taking as its model and inspiration the *critical character theory* developed by Robin Dillon. It aims ‘to understand moral character as affected by domination and subordination and by the struggles both to maintain and to resist and overthrow them’ (2012: 84). It challenges traditional forms of philosophical character theory for their double neglect of the socio-political dimensions of character and the negative side of character, primarily vice and oppression (and, I would add, corruption).

Dillon emphasises three other features. First, critical character theory sees individuals as situated with systems of social practices and institutions that are organised and animated by systems of power and shape what Medina called their epistemic predicaments. Second, its conceptual pluralism: active sensitivity to the complex interconnections among the core organising concepts of ethical theory, rather than taking one – such as character, action, or intention – as fundamental. Third, critical character theory shares with critical theory a deep aspiration ‘to liberate human beings from the circumstances that enslave them’ (Horkheimer 1982, 244). But critical theory tends to focus on material, social, and political dimensions of oppression, whereas, for Dillon, critical character theory ‘springs from the recognition that enslavement is not only social and material but also operates on and through character’ (2012: 85).

A critical character epistemology aims to deploy Dillon’s insights with an eye on those specifically character-epistemic dimensions of oppression, as articulated using the concept of epistemic corruption. Analyses of the damage done to the epistemic characters of oppressed subjects can only be fully achieved with a vice epistemology characterised by the socialised, pluralistic, and liberatory stance built into critical character theory by Dillon. I therefore want to sketch out some options for a suitably revised form of critical character epistemology.

I focus on three features, which I label *aetiological sensitivity*, *axiological pluralism*, and *normative contextualism*.

**Aetiological sensitivity**

A concern with epistemic vicious characters should naturally invite an interest in the processes or conditions that contribute to the formation and retention of epistemic vices. Much of this interest is currently reflected in debates about agential responsibility for their epistemic vices, such the distinctions between *acquisition-responsibility* and *retention-responsibility* (Cassam 2019: ch.6) and between *responsibilist* and *personalist* forms of vice (Battaly 2016). But these are specific *uses* of what I have elsewhere called aetiological sensitivity (Kidd 2016). It names a commitment to actively attend to the complex, contingent conditions under which the epistemic character of subjects develop (the Greek, *aitía*, means ‘cause’, and in medicine, ‘aetiology’ is the both the causation or origination of a disease and its study).

Aetiological sensitivity is a methodological commitment that urges the theorist to combine description of the current state of epistemic character with attentiveness to its developmental history. To describe someone as *vicious* is to describe the state of their character. To describe them as *corrupted* is to say something about how they got into that state. (Compare describing someone as a *radical* with describing them as having been *radicalised* – the latter term is used in terrorism studies, a discipline whose use of aetiological explanations have been critically discussed by Cassam 2018).[[1]](#footnote-1)

There are many sorts of factors to which one may need to be aetiologically sensitive, since epistemic character can be shaped by psychological, developmental, interpersonal, structural, and historical. Our characters are shaped by our attitudes, cognitive styles, temperaments; by the particular sequencing and patterns of events and experiences we undergo during our life; by the diversity and characteristics of the subjects with whom can or must interact, including the particular ways they respond to our developing epistemic characters; by our emplacement within systems of social practices and institutions that organise the epistemic possibilities that are available and made salient for the members of different groups; by the wider cultural and ideological contexts within which play out emerging and entrenched structures of power, such as the inherited, self-sustaining systems of ‘white ignorance’ described by Charles Mills (2007).

Evincing etiological sensitivity does not *require* appeal to these multifactorial explanations of epistemic corruption in every case. Sometimes narrower forms of explanation will do the job (cf. Cassam 2019: 27) even if, at other times, our analyses of epistemic corruption must go all the way back, historically, and all the way down, structurally. Explanatory adequacy depends on one’s explanatory aims. Medina, for instance, typically prefers to tell socially and historically complex stories about the ‘sociogenesis’ of epistemic character traits – the idea that ‘epistemic virtues and vices [have] distinctive lines of social development’ – because he wants to explore the connections between epistemic corruption and sexist and racist structures and cultures (2012: 30).

There are two sorts of vice-epistemology that typically show sensitivity to the aetiology of epistemic vices and to the phenomenon of epistemic corruption. The first is work in character epistemologies of education, much of which is concerned with the possibility that educational practices and systems can be epistemically corrupting (Battaly 2013, Johnson 2020, Kidd 2019). If an educator worries about the vices of their students, then they should identify the sources of those vices, especially if their own teaching practices maybe among them. A better understanding the aetiology of vice can help us better educate for virtuous epistemic character.

We also find aetiological sensitivity in liberatory vice epistemologies, such as Medina’s and Tanesini’s accounts of the epistemically corrupting effects of systems of subordination and domination, for the privileged and the marginalised, alike. Aetiology here plays a double role. It serves the ameliorative aspiration of liberating people from oppression, since dismantling corrupting conditions is an aim of that project. It also helps to encourage a properly pluralistic stance on our *evaluations* of, and *responses* to, epistemically vicious subjects.

Starting with evaluative responses, Cassam argues that epistemic vices are always proper objects of *criticism*, since vices are *failings* independent of their aetiology. The other typical evealuative response to viciousness is *blame*, on which vice ethicists and epistemologists have tended disproportionately to focus. But this is doubly problematic. First, blaming is a standard strategy of oppression, since it obscures the unjust structures that corruptively generate those vices and failings—a sensitivity informing what Dillon calls ‘the politics of character appraisal’ (2012; 100; cf. Medina 2012: ch.4). Second, a focus of blaming occludes other responses to vicious subjects, like anger, disappointment, regret, and sadness, whose appropriateness is often determined by aetiological considerations. If your vices are the product of sustained subjection to acutely corrupting conditions from which escape was impossible, then the appropriate responses may be *anger* at those conditions and *sadness* at the damage done to your character (cf. Cassam 2019: 21-22).

Aetiological sensitivity also encourages a more pluralistic sense of our practical responses to epistemically vicious characters. By tracing the conditions that corrupt our characters, one can better identify what one can do to reduce the incidence and intensity of vices. Corrective practical strategies can *individual* (self-discipline, edifying instruction) or *structural* (social activism, educational reform). Sometimes, one should act at both levels, bearing in mind the fuzziness of the agents/structures distinction and Dillon’s guiding vision of character as ‘fluid, dynamic, and contextualised’, and ‘processive rather than substantive’ (2012: 105). Crucially, our decisions about the appropriateness of different strategies should be informed by informed understanding of the aetiology of the vicious character of different subjects. Employing individual strategies for vices that are products of epistemically corrupting structures means we are tricked into playing an ameliorative form ofwhack-a-mole, rather than transforming the surrounding structures.

Aetiologically sensitive analyses of epistemic vices motivate the conviction that responses to corrupted agents should therefore be *evaluatively and* *practically pluralistic­*. When confronted with corrupted subjects with vicious characters, our evaluative responses can range from anger, blame, disappointment, frustration, regret, and sadness; moreover, these are often messily bound up with one another in affectively and interpersonally complex ways. A consequence of this for a critical character epistemologist, inherited from feminist ethics, is a default suspicion of *blaming*, which they will regard as one response among others, which is often counterproductive, unjust, and liable to perpetuate patterns of oppression. Dillon puts the point well in her advice that when confronted with corrupted subjects, the point is not to *blame* but ‘to determine what to do, with or for whom, and how’ (2012: 92)

**Axiology and context**

*Axiological pluralism* is the conviction that a proper appraisal of the *badness* of vices cannot always be achieved if only appeals only to epistemic values. Most analyses of epistemic vices are *axiologically monistic* insofar as they appeal to one *type* of value, namely, epistemic value. Consider the main conceptions of epistemic vice. *Consequentialist analyses* construe vices as tending systematically to create a preponderance of bad epistemic effects, or failing to cause a preponderance of good epistemic effects for the *bearer*, other *agents*, or the *environment* (according to Cassam’s *obstructivism*, for instance, epistemic vices are traits that obstruct the gaining, keeping, and sharing of knowledge). *Motivational* *analyses* construe vices as either expressing bad epistemic motives, such as indifference to truth or a desire to thwart the epistemic agency of others, or as marking the absence of good epistemic motives and values, such as what Linda Zagzebski argued is the fundamental motivation for all epistemic virtues, the desire for ‘cognitive contact with reality’ (1996: 167). On both conceptions, the badness of epistemic vices is defined in relation to *epistemic values*, whether a love of truth, desire to acquire knowledge, or an aspiration to ‘cognitive contact with reality’. Granted, none of these *deny* that epistemically vicious conduct is also bad non-epistemically, too. But consideration of the nonepistemic tends to be a secondary aspect of their analyses.

I think analyses of epistemic corruption should motivate a rejection of axiological monism. Appraisals of epistemic corruption requires *axiological pluralism*. In a weaker form, pluralism says appraisal of the badness of at least some epistemic vices requires appeal to epistemic *and* non-epistemic ethical, socio-political values. Explaining the wrongs of vicious testimonial injustice requires inclusion of the moral wrongs, social harms, and political injustices caused by unfair deflations of agential testimonial credibility (see Congdon 2017, Pohlhaus, Jr. 2014). It would, at the very least, be odd to attempt a fully satisfying explanation of the wrongs of testimonial injustice that didn’t reference its integrated moral, social, and political dimensions (Fricker 2007: 44 and 54).

In its stronger forms, axiological pluralism says that appraisal of the badness of at least some epistemic vices requires a *rejection* of the epistemic/ non-epistemic distinction. Nancy Daukas, for instance, speaks of ‘ethico-epistemic’ traits and dispositions (2019:) while Fricker speaks of ‘hybrid’ ethico-epistemic virtues (2007: §5.2). This more radical pluralism maintains that the epistemic, ethical, social, and political dimensions of life are too indissolubly bound up with one another to be even notionally separated. Indeed, the very attempt to separate them may invite suspicion, given Kristie Dotson’s (2012) lucid warning that doing so can serve to conceal and so perpetuate certain aspects of social oppression. If the epistemic is political, then studies of corruption need a richer axiology.

The third feature of a critical character epistemology, perhaps also the most contentious, is *normative contextualism*: the conviction that the normative status of some or all epistemic character traits is dependent on the epistemic predicament of a given epistemic subject. This plays on Dillon’s critical challenges to conventional classifications of traits as virtues or vices: certain traits traditionally classified as virtues may be vices for the oppressed, and likewise in the case of ‘vices’ which could be ‘reclaimed’ as ‘liberatory virtues’ (2012: 98). The conclusion of the critical character theorist is that the valence, appropriateness, and possibility of certain epistemic character traits is contextually sensitive. We should not prejudge the normative status of traits—as vicious or virtuous – since much depends on the socially situated epistemic predicament of the subject in question.

Normative contextualism can take a variety of forms, with the weaker thesis being that at least some epistemic character traits have a *default normative status*, that can be distorted under certain epistemically hostile conditions. Consider Heather Battaly’s account of the trait of closedmindedness, characterised as an unwillingness or inability to engage seriously with relevant epistemic options. She argues that, under epistemically hostile conditions, this trait is an effects-virtue, since its exercise would tend systematically to help one retain true beliefs, avert epistemic opportunity costs, and pursue their own epistemic projects (Battaly 2018b: §4). It may at the least be a ‘burdened’ epistemic virtue, in Lisa Tessman’s sense of ‘traits that make a contribution to human flourishing—if they succeed in doing so at all—*only* because they enable survival of or resistance to oppression, while in other ways they detract from their bearer’s well-being’ (2005: 95).

The stronger form of normative contextualism denies that epistemic character traits have even a default normative status. Independently of a specific epistemic predicament, there is no grounds for normative evaluation of a trait as virtuous or as vicious. A critic might protest that at least *some* traits *must* have a default normative status, perhaps such high-fidelity vices are cruelty or epistemic malevolence. But the critical character epistemologist regards this as an empirical claim, vulnerable to the provision of concrete cases where those traits served the epistemic and other interests of oppressed subjects. Perhaps the most overt advocate of a strong form of normative contextualism is Dillon, who argues that ‘character and character assessment may be deeply context dependent’ (2012: 100):

‘[According to a critical character theory] character dispositions would be understood to be inculcated, nurtured, directed, shaped, and given significance and moral valence as vice or virtue in certain ways in certain kinds of people by social interactions and social institutions and traditions that situate people differentially in power hierarchies; and we would understand vices in and among individuals as, among other things, dispositions that support, direct, shape, and give significance and value to social interactions and institutions’ (2012: 104)

The trick, of course, will be to develop accounts of epistemic character traits and dispositions that are properly neutral, in the sense of not prejudging their normative status. Daukas gives the example of Roberts and Wood’s account of the vice of vanity as an ‘excessive concern to be well-regarded by other people and thus a hypersensitivity to the view that others take of oneself’ (2007: 259). She argues that the trait of vanity functions as a virtue of the members of oppressed groups, for whom intense concern about others’ perception of them ‘expresses a realistic caution, a pragmatically necessary vigilance in self-monitoring’ (2019: 381). A critic will object that since vanity was characterised in terms of ‘excessive’ concern and sensitivity, it is vicious by definition. But the critical character epistemologist responds that Roberts and Wooe’s original definition was imperfect, since it failed to honour trait-neutrality. Perhaps it is better to define the trait of vanity as the disposition to actively and deliberately configure one’s self-presentation to try to ensure one is perceived and evaluated positively by others.[[2]](#footnote-2)

A critical character epistemologist proposes that we start by conceiving of epistemic character traits as normatively neutral, only assigning them the status of virtue or vice once we have considered carefully the range of values judged to be proper to epistemic character evaluation and the epistemic predicaments of different socially situated subjects. What we might end up with is a more complex picture of a variety of epistemic character traits whose normative status is much more contingent than is tolerable for traditional character theory.

**CONCLUSIONS**

I have offered a working analysis of the phenomenon of epistemic corruption and argued it should play a more central role within vice epistemology. An epistemically corrupted subject has experienced certain forms of characterological damage due to interactions with features and members of the social world that facilitate the development and exercise of vices. There are several modes of epistemic corruption and complex stories to tell about the ways that a subject experiences and resists the epistemically corrupting effects of their environment. We also find strong precedent for analyses of epistemic corruption in contemporary and historic vice epistemological projects, including precursor work in early modern English feminist vice epistemology and more recent critical race-theoretic character epistemologies, such as those initiated by W.E.B. Du Bois (see Kidd 2018: §2A).

I also proposed that studying epistemic corruption as a mode of oppression requires a critical character epistemology. It ought to be *aetiologically sensitive* to the complexity and contingency of the conditions that shape epistemic character, *axiologically pluralistic* in the range of values used in appraisals of epistemic character traits, and *normatively contextualist* about the status of character traits for differently socially situated predicaments of different agents. Finally, critical character epistemology is ultimately *liberatory* in its aspirations. It aims to identify and dismantle epistemically corrupting conditions and to find ways to repair damaged epistemic characters. It is unclear how different a critical character epistemology would be from the current forms of vice epistemology. I suspect the real points of difference will be axiological pluralism and normative contextualism, especially in their stronger forms, but, hopefully, time will tell.

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1. Quassim asks: *what model of explanation underlies epistemic corruption*? Options:

   *Mechanistic model*: aiming to identify general underlying causal mechanisms? I am unsure due to the huge variety in subjective responses to xyz conditions: what corrupts some, edifies others, and leaves other still unchanged.

   *Narrative model*: aiming to identify the specific processes and experiences that led to the corruption of subject x, without any pretensions to general explanatory power.

   Think more on this.

   16/5/19: Maybe I ought to distinguish *aetiological* *generalism* and *aetiological* *particularism*. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Alessandra objects: normative contextualism is a *category mistake*; if a trait is virtuous, it cannot become vicious under certain conditions. She made this point in reference to Daukas’ criticism of Roberts and Wood, noting the latter define vanity as *excessive* concern with one’s appearance to others—hence as vicious. But I think that shows only that vanity was not characterised in terms consistent with *trait-neutrality*, hence the amendment offered here. I also wonder if NC is easier to sustain if one adopts a consequentialist conception of vice, since that makes it easier to see how contingent empirical conditions can alter the connection between traits and effects (cf. Tessman). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)