**Epistemic Corruption and Political Institutions**

Michael Hannon and Jeroen de Ridder (eds.),

*Routledge Handbook to Political Epistemology*

(London: Routledge, 2021)

**1. Introduction.**

Institutions play an indispensable role in our political and epistemic lives. Consider political-epistemic practices, like acquiring information, criticising arguments, debating ideas, evaluating evidence, and scrutinising proposed policies. In the United Kingdom, these are institutionally realised by the Civil Service, Parliamentary Select Committees, expert advisory groups, Prime Minister’s Questions and other practices, groups, and organisations. Moreover, political-epistemic institutions can also generate negative epistemic phenomena, such as groupthink, polarisation, and propaganda (see Sections 2 and 3 of this Handbook). Some have a special epistemic role within wider political systems, like the UK Office of Statistics Regulations, which ensures appropriate collection, publication, and use of statistics to ‘help inform decisions’ by groups ranging from charities and trade unions to business and community groups (OSR 2010:2).[[1]](#endnote-1) Similarly, the second chamber of the UK Parliament, the House of Lords, ‘shares the task of making and shaping laws and checking and challenging the work of the government’.

A variety of concepts and vocabularies exist for appraisal of political institutions, including ‘efficiency’ versus ‘inefficiency’, ‘economical’ versus ‘expensive’, and ‘orderly’ versus ‘chaotic’. Some of these have epistemic dimensions. It should matter to us that our political institutions perform well epistemically – they should be *efficient,* fulfilling their mandated tasks with maximal speed and success, and *orderly*, perhaps by ensuring conscientious scrutiny of proposed legislation. In the United States, the culture of hyperpartisanship now characteristic of the Senate and Congress is that it bakes in inefficiency and ‘gridlock’, to the point that ‘Congress has stopped working’ (Rauch 2016, Willis and Kane 2018). But there are alternative vocabularies for epistemic appraisal of political institutions, including one invoking *vices*—stable and objectionable dispositions of character, like cruelty, dogmatism, or untruthfulness (Battaly 2014: ch. 4). Some are ethical failings (like cruelty), others are epistemic failings (like dogmatism), while others are hybrid ethico-epistemic failings (such as untruthfulness).

Although vices are most usually attributed to individual agents, we also quite naturally attribute them to collectives and also to institutions. Certainly, attributing vices to institutions is a common critical practice in political discourse, arguably worth protecting for that reason (see Biddle, Kidd, and Leuschner 2017 and Kidd, Kidd 2016). Consider the 2020 Williams Report into the UK Home Office’s failings to safeguard the immigration status of the ‘Windrush generation’ of British-Caribbeans. It speaks of an ‘institutional ignorance and thoughtlessness’ in the Home Office, with its ‘cultural resistance to hearing a contrary view to the department’s own’ and a ‘defensive culture … which often defends, deflects and dismisses criticism’ (2020:7, 14, 141). What we see here is the explicit or implicit attribution to the Home Office as an institution of a set of epistemic vices – thoughtlessness, dogmatism, and closedmindedness.

I want to explore the ways that a vocabulary of epistemic vices can be used in appraisal of political institutions. By epistemic vices, I mean objectionable epistemic traits or dispositions, that can be attributed to *individual*, *collectives*, or *institutions*.[[2]](#endnote-2) By vice epistemology, I refer to philosophical study of the nature, identity, and significance of epistemic vices (Cassam 2019). It emerged over the last twenty years as the partner to virtue epistemology, which studies epistemic virtues, like curiosity, open-mindedness, and reflectiveness (Baehr 2011, Zagzebski 1996). What unifies the two disciplines is a conviction that the concepts of vice and virtue can play indispensable roles in appraisal and reform of epistemic agents, institutions, and systems, a form of what is sometimes called ‘regulative epistemology’ (Roberts and Wood 2007:20-23).

Interestingly, various recent misadventures in British and American political history provide most of the examples in Quassim Cassam’s recent book, *Vices of the Mind* – Brexit and the Second Gulf War, for instance, whose invidious realities motivate his claim that ‘the project of vice reduction’ gains its urgency from a painful awareness that a world of rampant, unchecked epistemically vicious behaviour is just ‘too ghastly to contemplate’ (Cassam 2019: 186, 187). Other overtly politically-engaged vice-epistemological projects include José Medina’s *The Epistemology of Resistance* (2012), which involves analysis of the ways that epistemic vices are integral to the operations of systems of gender and racial oppression.

When urging use of a vice-epistemic vocabulary for appraisal of political institutions, there are at least two main issues that need addressing. First, why adopt that vocabulary, when there are already existing vocabularies? After all, some will protest that talkof ‘vice’ is archaic, moralistic, or intolerably quasi-religious. Cassam, a leading vice epistemologist, replies that we should, first, flexibly use a variety of styles of explanation for epistemic failings, and, second, acknowledge there are aspects of our epistemic failings that are uniquely captured by vice-epistemic explanations (Cassam 2019:29 and his chapter in this Handbook).

A second issue is whether epistemic vices can be attributed to institutions - or, in the jargon, whether institutions are *vice-bearers*. Traditionally, accepted vice-bearers are *individual agents* (‘the arrogant Minister’) and, increasingly, *collective agents* (‘the dogmatic committee’). Those who want to restrict the range of vice-bearers can be called *conservatives*, whereas those who wish to expand the range of bearers – to include institutions, say – are *expansionists*. The Williams Report’s references to the ‘thoughtless’ of the *Home Office*, for instance, indicate that it is implicitly operating with an expansionist conception of epistemic vice. This matters: if institutions cannot be a genuine vice-bearer, then attributions of vice to institutions must be judged as *rhetorical* rather than *attributive*. If Williams’ claim is that the Home Office *qua* institution is viciously thoughtless, then retaining that critical claim requires a defence of expansionism.

In this chapter, I begin by describing *collectivism*, focusing on a specific form recently developed by Miranda Fricker. She offers the useful concept of an *institutional ethos*, the analogue of an *individual character*. The epistemic ethos of a political institution consists of its collective motivations and its stable patterns of institutional performance. These motivations and performances can be appraised, singly or jointly, as epistemically vicious. I then discuss ways that political institutions can develop a vicious epistemic ethos, either by acquiring epistemically bad collective motivations and/or tending to evince epistemically bad patterns of performance. To help with theorising degradations of the epistemic ethos of a political institution, a useful concept is that of *epistemic corruption*.

**2. Institutional ethos.**

Miranda Fricker argues that institutions have an *ethos*, ‘the collective analogue of an individual agent’s character’ (2020: 90). Just as a character of an individual can be (or can become) virtuous or vicious, so, too, can the ethos of an institution. Here we should distinguish between the *vices of political agents* (civil servants, advisers, ministers) and the *vices of political institutions*. Our question is whether vices can be genuinely attributed to institutions, and the affirmative response Fricker develops involves her concept of institutional ethos.

Attributing vices to institutions mean we need to adopt some form of *collectivism*, the most general claim of which is that the epistemic behaviour and motivations of collectives cannot be reduced to those of their constituent members. Collectivists might argue that some collective or institution can have vices lacked by some or all of its members and, relatedly, that a group of individuals might have a vice that is not apparent in their collective behaviour (Lahroodi 2007, Fricker 2010). The rival position is summativism, according to which ascription of a virtue [or vice] to a group is *always* to be understood as a disguised ascription of that virtue [or vice] to individuals in the group’ (Lahroodi 2019:411). The various forms of collectivism are surveyed in Lahroodi (2019: §§33.5-6). Most rely on *divergence arguments*, a term introduced by Gilbert (1989), which appeal to divergences between individual- and collective-level behaviours and characteristics. There are at least two main types (Fricker 2010:137-138):

* *The multiplicity of our practical identities* entail commitments to accept or to resist certain attitudes, behaviors, and goals, including specifications of the accompanying standards and procedures (eg a Member of Parliament accepts the reality of global heating, but is bound by loyalty and disciplinary considerations to voice and vote for the skeptical stance of their party).
* *The collective cancellation effects* occur when the attitudes and behaviors of a group of individuals tend to cancel each other out at the institutional level (eg the procedurally openminded acts of a party of politicians cancel each other out at the level of the party, the outcome of whose deliberations is therefore myopically closed-minded).

Within contemporary political institutions, instances of these divergence effects could be easily provided: think of the competing obligations and demands built into the roles of parent, member of a local community, politician, or member of the party disciplinary structure. The latter two, for instance, are subject to partisan pressures to ‘show loyalty’, to ‘protect the party from embarrassment’, to ‘attack the Opposition’, and so on. Moreover, such felt pressure can be amplified by institutional features, like the ‘whip system’ in the UK Parliament, which acts to enforce voting according to the party platform (Jones 2016). Such formal and informal structures can generate divergence between the motivations and behaviours of individual political actors and wider political institutions. Hence the introduction of *institutional ethos* as a concept for modelling institutional epistemic motivations and behaviours.

Since Walter Bagehot’s influential 1872 essays, *The English Constitution*, the comparison of political systems has compared both the arrangements and composition of different political systems and their distinctive forms of ‘corporate character’ (1872:185). A standard theme of Cold War discourses were critical reflections on the character of the rivalling systems – like the ‘exploitative’, ‘decadent’ character of capitalism, for instance, versus the ‘repressive’ character of socialism. The general conviction is that differences in the structure and activities of political institutions shape the irreducibly collective character of ethos of the institution as a whole. A corollary is that an institutional ethos is to a significant degree mutable, subject to contingent change and deliberate redefinition within the constraints of external influences and its internal rhythms (Clucas 2015).

Fricker characterises an institutional ethos as consisting of the ‘collective motivational dispositions and evaluative attitudes within the institutional body, of which the various good or bad ends orientate the institution’s activities’ (2020: 91). Just as character explains the behaviour of individuals in relation to their motivations, desires, and values, so ethos explains the behaviour of an institution in relation to its constituent motivations, goals, and values – those things for which it *stands*. An ethos of justice, for instance, would consist of (i) certain values (fairmindedness, equality before the law), manifested in (ii) certain institutionalised procedures (eg trial by jury, right to a defence), which (iii) deliver the right sorts of results (eg fair sentencing). Compare, for instance, with Clucas’ account of the character (or ethos) of democratic government:

Ultimately, the question as to which institutional design is better depends on the democratic ideals one favours. It depends on what one wants out of a democracy […] While there is no one right answer to this question, there are ideals or values that, when present in a democracy, reflect the general consent of the governed…:meaningful elections, fair representation, accountability, the balance of majority rule and minority rights, and the functionality of the state (2020: 7-8)

Within an ethos of democratic governance, those values and ideals would be realised in appropriate political-institutional arrangements, such as the separation of powers, open and free elections, and so on. An ethos thus explains the alignment of the collective motivations of an institution and its operations and outcomes.

Fricker defines an institutional ethos as a set of interrelated dispositions and attitudes which are temporally extended and counterfactually stable and therefore a robust and enduring feature of the institution. An ethos will change over time as a result of the natural rhythms of institutional life, deliberate reformative efforts by members of the institution or external agencies, or through periodic dramatic transformative events. The interrelated character of the dispositions and attitudes is articulated using the ‘joint commitment model’ developed by Margaret Gilbert (1989, 2000). ‘Commitment’, here, is defined broadly. It ranges from explicit endorsement through to familiar modes of tacit acceptance that take the form of ‘going along with’ a set of institutionally mandated behaviours, whether as a result of calculated complicity, horizontal and vertical social pressures, institutional incentive structures, and so on.[[3]](#endnote-3) Such joint commitments gradually create and animate an institutional ethos: a collective, intersubjectively binding set of commitments, any deviation from which entails criticism and normatively forceful interpersonal demands that offender justify their deviation. In such cases, there emerge special roles for the practices of *reneging* and *rebuking*, as is the case for some individual instances of epistemic vice (see Fricker 2010: 94f).

Fricker argues that this account explains why individuals retain trust in an institution, even when they disagree with its results (2020: 91f). Consider two epistemically charged examples:

* *Transparency*, a commitment to accurately and comprehensively record and openly report the deliberations, decisions, and composition of component groups of a political system. It can be realized by public interviews, minutes of meetings, parliamentary records, and public statements of select committees, expert advisory groups, and the cabinet.[[4]](#endnote-4)
* *Truthfulness*, a normative expectation that that political actors will be accurate and sincere when reporting their activities, conflicts of interest, pertinent personal contacts, and so on. It can be realized through public scrutiny of statements, fact-checking systems, a critical media, and robust regulation of statistical claims.[[5]](#endnote-5)

If a political institution practically fails in some way, the public may retain trust if they recognise that the conditions of transparency and truthfulness were honoured (including in cases where there is some individual or collective culpability. The transparent disclosure of one’s failings is better than their attempted concealment and truthfulness can preserve trust in one’s sincerity even if trust in one’s competence is dented). The 2006 Home Office strategy on immigration, for instance was titled *Fair, Effective, Transparent and Trusted: Rebuilding Confidence in our Immigration System*. An institutional ethos of accountability, transparency, and truthfulness can elicit public trust, even in the face of undesirable outcomes and practical failings, at least up to a point (O’Neill 2002: chs. 2-4).

An institutional ethos therefore consists of collective motivations (goals, values, ideals) and repeated performances (institutional systems and processes that reliably deliver certain outcomes or results). When an institution has a good ethos, the motivations are commendable and virtuous and so, too, are its consistent outcomes – accountability and representativeness find concrete express in regular meaningful elections, say. We might say that a virtuous ethos is one that expresses and enacts such virtues as justice and fairness. By contrast, a vicious ethos is one whose motivations and performances express and enact vices, including epistemic vices, as defined by Fricker:

*Epistemic vices* are culpable failures of epistemic virtue either (i) in its ‘inner’ aspect of mediate and/or ultimate motivations to good epistemic ends, and/or (ii) in its ‘outer’ aspect of performance—the achievement of those ends.

Fricker builds culpability or blameworthiness into her account of vices. Others do not, arguing instead that *criticism* is our primary attitude to vices, with others being anger, blame, and so on (Cassam 2019: 21). *Mediate epistemic ends* include, for instance, assessing relevant evidence, fact-checking, soliciting criticisms, and considering alternative perspectives, while the *ultimate epistemic ends* may include epistemic responsibility or ‘cognitive contact with reality’ (Zagzebski 1996:101).[[6]](#endnote-6)

Coupled to the account of ethos, Fricker adds second definition:

*Institutional epistemic vices* are displayed whenever there are culpable lapses in the collective epistemic motivations and goals of an institution and/or in their performative implementation.

Note that these two conceptions of vice – ‘motivational’ and ‘performative’ – are analogous to the two main normative models of individual epistemic vice:

*Consequentialism* (or *reliabilism*): epistemic vices are dispositions or traits that are systematically productive of epistemically bad effects (eg failing to consider salient epistemic options) or that fail systematically to generate epistemically good effects (eg identifying alternative possibilities) (see Cassam (2019)).

*Responsiblism*: epistemic vices are dispositions or traits that express or manifest either (i) the presence of epistemically bad motives, goals, and desires (eg thwarting the epistemic agency of others) or (ii) the absence of epistemically good motives, goals, and desires (eg a respect for truth) (see Crerar (2018) and Tanesini (2018)).

Institutional epistemic vices can be understood using either the motivational or performative models. Alternatively, one can use a pluralist model (Battaly 2016, Fricker 2020).

Consider two cases:

1. A government department consistently publishes inaccurate, incomplete information about its own internal activities and the effectiveness of its policies. These failings occur due to its inadequate, outdated informational and communicative systems. Data Isn’t systematically collected, factchecking is marred by inadequate communication between staff, no clear guidelines exist describing what counts as timely or accurate reportage, etc.
2. A government department consistently publishes inaccurate, incomplete information about its own internal activities and the effectiveness of its policies. These failings occur because of a desire by the newly elected Government party to strategically suppress politically embarrassing information and to disguise its underfunding of the department, etc.

Case (1) involves institutional vices of the performative sort. By contrast, Case (2) involves institutional vices of the motivational sort: the failings flow from the intentional actions of the Government, rather than (or perhaps as well as) any contingently inherited inadequacies in the organisation and operation of the department. Whether we should prefer pluralism over its two component positions is an open question among vice epistemologists. Consider just one point about each. First, performative accounts have a lower *attribution threshold* for institutional vice. If institution *A* reliably performs in ways that have bad epistemic effects, then *A* is institutionally epistemically vicious. Second, advocates of motivational accounts will argue that they have better *normative capture*, a richer capacity to articulate the badness of vices and thus given a fuller appraisal of the institution. A Government that suppresses critical reports *both* impairs its citizens’ epistemic activities *and* evinces a fundamental hostility to truth as an epistemic value (Cassam 2019: ch.4). Exploring cases of institutional epistemic vices offers new ways to think about these foundational issues.

**3. Institutional epistemic corruption.**

An institutional ethos can change over time for the worse. Occasional failings may be anomalies, but explicable and forgivable. Sometimes, however, they can build up and become indicative of a more systematic deterioration of the ethos. In the language I offer in this section, there could be *epistemic corruption* of the ethos – either corruption of collective motivations that guide the institution and/or the corruption of its performance, of its processes and their outcomes. Unless mitigated, the institution acquires an increasingly epistemically vicious ethos.

In its everyday sense, ‘corruption’ refers to a decline in the qualities of character of a person or thing and to the processes that contribute to it. Something becomes corrupted when its positive qualities are damaged or destroyed and various negative features take their place. Within political philosophy, the term is already in use. Dennis Thompson, for one, defines ‘mediated corruption’ as a decline in shared norms or character of a democratic system (Thompson 2005:143-173). The term has a long history within political discourse, described Sparling (2019) and more modern uses, surveyed by Rothstein and Varraich (2017).

Within character epistemology the term was introduced to describe a specific form of damage done to the epistemic character of individual agents (Kidd 2019, 2020). It was inspired by foundational work by feminist epistemologists and ethicists interested in the ways that oppression acts on and through character, a theme developed by Claudia Card (1996), Robin Dillon (2012), and Lisa Tessman (2015). It can refer to damage done to the epistemic character of individual or collective agents and the epistemic ethos of institutions.

A working definition: epistemic corruption occurs when the character or ethos of an agent or institution is damaged by conditions, events, or processes that tend to facilitate the development and exercise of epistemic vices. The positive aspects of character or ethos – virtues, excellences, and integrity – all suffer deterioration or destruction; alternatively, one can say that the negative aspects – vices, failings – are amplified, stabilised, or otherwise boosted. What often occurs are simultaneous processes of passive and negative corruption, since the displacement of certain virtues might naturally open a way for certain vices.

Three comments. First, some terminology: a *corruptor* is a thing causing the corruption while a *corruptee* is a thing whose character or ethos is being damaged. In cases of institutional epistemic corruption, there will be a whole variety of corruptees – politicians, civil servants, non-governmental agencies, and so on. Second, epistemic corruption is a dynamic and diachronic process. It is a temporally extended ‘back and forth’ of forces, deeply textured by the structures and rhythms of institutional life. In rare cases, it might occur through a single decisive act, but is usually an assemblage of slower, subtler processes that play out in response other corrective forces.[[7]](#endnote-7) Third, the term ‘facilitate’ is purposefully broad so as to encompass, *inter alia*, ‘encourage’, ‘justify’, ‘legitimate’, ‘motivate’, ‘promote’, or even ‘provide receptive conditions for development and exercise of one or more vices.’ To distinguish these, consider the major modes of epistemic corruption.

A ‘mode’ of epistemic corruption is a general way that an epistemic vice can be facilitated. There are at least five, the first two of which involve the acquisition or activation of new vices and failings, ones not previously characteristic of the ethos or operations of an institution:

1. *Acquisition*: a corruptor can enable the acquisition of new vices, ones not previously a feature of institutional epistemic ethos.
2. *Activation*: a corruptor can activate dormant, ‘sleeping’ vices, ones typically latent, but inactive in the institutional epistemic ethos.

The next three modes are different, insofar as they involve enhancements to vices already present and active in an institution’s epistemic ethos:

1. *Propagation*: a corruptor can increase the *scope* of a vice, the extent to which it spreads throughout an institution’s structures, departments, and so on.
2. *Stabilisation*: a corruptor can also increase the *stability* of a vice, the extent to which it can remain active and therefore increasingly resistant to disruption.
3. *Intensification*: a corruptor can also increase the *strength* of a vice, turning relatively weaker vicious processes and collective motivations into much stronger forms

Although distinguishable, the different modes of corruption usually operate simultaneous and mutually reinforcing. Some corruptors will facilitate a specific vice, others a set of vices – and working out which conditions are *monocorrupting* and *polycorrupting* is a task for social and vice epistemologists to investigate.

Analysis of institutional epistemic corruption can be made easier if we point to some very general examples of corruptors—of conditions, norms, or arrangements that facilitate the development and exercise of vices and deterioration and destruction of virtues. Identifying this needs integration of empirical and conceptual research. These generic corruptors are a starting point:

1. *The absence of exemplars of virtue*: an institution might lack positive exemplars who model epistemic virtue – affording inspiration and practical demonstration of the virtues that may be taken up into the institutional ethos. Without exemplars of virtue, one loses an important way of encouraging and maintaining an epistemically virtuous institutional ethos (Croce and Vaccarezza 2017).
2. *The derogation of exemplars of virtue*: extant virtuous exemplars may be subject to forms of derogation –to sneering, mockery, aspersive questioning, or public or private derision. Under these conditions, the potentially transformative capacity of exemplars to maintain and promote a good institutional ethos is undermined (eg ‘forcing out’ conscientious and honest civil servants who try to maintain high epistemic standards).
3. *Suppression of critics*: institutional commitment to values like epistemic honesty and fair-minded can be eroded by the suppression of those persons who attempt to initiate and take part in the critical dynamics necessary for institutional enactment of those values. Such suppressive behaviours include silencing, intimidation, demotion, expulsion, unwarranted exclusion from institutional systems and contacts, and in severe cases torture and murder. Consider cases of the orchestrated intimidation in the United States of climate scientists trying to discharge their epistemic functions by advising the public and the Government of the realities of global heating (Biddle, Kidd, and Leuschner 2017).
4. *The valorisation of vicious exemplars*: a corrupt institution can celebrate and reward those individuals who are exemplars of epistemic vice using formal and informal mechanisms - reward mechanisms, promotion, hierarchies of esteem, and other means of disbursing the various goods afforded by the institution (eg access, esteem, rank). A corrupt ethos shows itself by rewarding vicious characters (consider the various villains who have populated the Trump Administration).
5. *The rebranding of vices as virtues*: a corrupted ethos can falsely esteem vices as virtues in ways that aim to create corrupted collective motivations and behaviours. This can take both sincere and insincere forms, since some individuals will be aware that a rebranding is being attempted. Former British Prime Minister, Tony Blair, replied to charges of his ‘arrogance’ in centralising power in Downing Street by attributing to himself ‘a sense of direction’ (Rhoades 2011:36) while his notorious ‘spin doctor’ Alasdair Campbell, famously retorted, to critics of his aggressive interpersonal style, “I’m not a bully, I’m robust!” (Oborne 2004).
6. *Increasing the exercise costs of epistemic virtue*: this is a form of passive corruption whose aim is to discourage a virtuous epistemic ethos by increasing the practical, psychological, or social costs – to individuals or the institution – of exercises of epistemic virtue. If virtues incur a prohibitive cost, then a natural alternative is to resist their exercise, which over time can lead to the gradual diminution of the ‘upwards’ pressure that can sustain and protect a virtuous institutional ethos. Standard euphemisms indicative of exaggerated exercise costs includes injunctions not to ‘rock the boat’ and warning about ‘not being a team player’.
7. *Operationalising the vices*: a corrupt ethos can manifest as procedures and policies whose enactment requires performance of epistemically vicious behaviours – such as concealing salient facts or abstaining from practices of questioning liable to lead to awkward answers. Consider the atrocious conventions of aggressive adversariality integral to interpersonal epistemic conduct in the House of Commons with its competitive ethos of political ‘point-scoring’, party-pleasing showboating, and jeering pantomime partisanship (Watson 2020).

Which corrupting conditions obtain will depend on the institution in question. The sheer variety of institutional arrangements and procedures offers a rich variety of options. Exploring these will require analysts of epistemic corruption to engage closely with political theorists, biographers, and anthropologists. This could yield two bonuses. First, useful *concepts*, central among which is that of a *political vice*. Civic or political virtues were features of Graeco-Roman political thought, but went out of fashion, until their revival over the last thirty years. Mark E. Button offer a useful definition in his book, *Political Vices*, whose titular subject are defined as ‘acquired sensibilities and motives—embedded within social institutions and political practices—that undermine the ability of political relationships (domestic or transnational) to coordinate and conciliate diverse social parts to an ideal of the political whole in a manner of justice’ (2016: 1).

A second bonus of engaging with politics researchers is insight into *corruptors* as they have existed within specific political institutors and systems:

1. *‘Cultures of secrecy’*. The British Government during Blair’s premiership suffered from a ‘combination of a genuine need for confidentiality, a siege mentality, and habitual caution’. Given these needs and entrenched mentalities, a culture of secrecy emerged that tended to ‘reinforce the walls of a closed world impervious both to diverse opinions and the consequence of its own actions’ (Rhoades 2011:287). Although secrecy has important uses, a pervasive culture of secrecy progressively impairs collective epistemic functioning – such as efficient information-sharing – and scaffolds vices such as arrogance and dogmatism.
2. *Performative superficiality*. Blair’s premiership became synonymous with ‘spin’, the artful manipulation of political information to present the Government in the most positive light. An ethos of performative superficiality therefore developed focused on the maintenance of a publicly presentable vision of collective epistemic competence, rather than achievement of actual patterns of epistemically effective institutional performance. If epistemic failings can be disguised or reclaimed by ‘spin’, the institutional focus ceases to be *doing well* and becomes fixated on *looking good* (Barnett and Gaber 2001).

Clearly, there is much scope for studies of the epistemic corruption of political institutions, a joint task for political vice epistemologists and scholars of political institutions and systems. In the future, we should ask whether putatively dysfunctional political institutions might actually be functioning perfectly well relative to their values (Klein 2020). We should also ask whether seemingly epistemically good procedures and policies can have bad consequences: the ‘Fairness Doctrines’ in the US, for instance, led to the rise of misleading and polarising forms of populist media (Clogston 2016, Hall and Phillips 2011). We should also investigate cases where individuals challenge institutions they see as corrupted, for instance by whistleblowing (Ceva and Bocchiola (2019) and Sontoro (2018). A final project is studying vice-corruptor pairings within political systems. Some are obvious: institutional closedmindedness is more likely if institutions lack proper procedures for soliciting and engaging with a diversity of perspectives, using public consultations, engagement with stakeholder communities, and so on. But other pairings will be harder to spot: there are many epistemic vices, not all well-known, and a variety of forms of institutional arrangements. So, much to do, and, alas, many reasons for doing it.

**Acknowledgments**

I offer my thanks to an anonymous referee and the Editors for their helpful comments, and, for the latter, the invitation to contribute.

**References**

Allen, A. (2016) “Power/Knowledge/Resistance: Foucault on Epistemic Injustice,” in I.J. Kidd, J. Medina, and G. Pohlhaus, Jr. (eds.), *The Routledge Handbook to Epistemic Injustice* (New York: Routledge), 187-193.

Alston, P. (2018) *Statement on Visit to the United Kingdom, by Professor Philip Alston, United Nations Special Rapporteur on Extreme Poverty and Human Rights* (London: UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights).

Baehr, J. (2011) *The Inquiring Mind: On Virtue Epistemology and the Intellectual Virtues* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).

Bagehot, W. (1872) *The English Constitution* (London: H. S. King & Company).

Barnett, S. and I. Gaber (2001) *Westminster Tales: The Twenty-first-Century Crisis in Political Journalism* (London: Continuum).

Battaly, H. (2013) “Detecting Epistemic Vice in Higher Education Policy: Epistemic Insensibility in the Seven Solutions and the REF,” *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 47 (2): 263-280.

Battaly, H. (2014) *Virtue* (Cambridge: Polity).

Battaly, H. (2016) “Epistemic Virtue and Vice: Reliabilism, Responsibilism, and Personalism,” C. Mi, M. Slote, and E. Sosa (eds.), *Moral and Intellectual Virtues in Chinese and Western Philosophy: The Turn Towards Virtue* (New York: Routledge), 99-120.

Biddle, J., I.J. Kidd, and A. Leuschner (2017) “Epistemic Corruption and Manufactured Doubt: The Case of Climate Science,” *Public Affairs Quarterly* 31(3): 165-187.

Bratman, M. E. (2014) *Shared Agency: A Planning Theory of Acting Together* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).

Button, M.E. (2016) *Political Vices* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).

Byerly, R. (2021). Intellectual Dependability: A Virtue Theory of the Epistemic and Educational Ideal (London: Routledge).

Card, C. (1996) *The Unnatural Lottery: Character and Moral Luck* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press).

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

Ceva, E. and C. Bocchiola (2019) “Personal Trust, Public Accountability, and the Justification of Whistleblowing,[”](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/jopp.12170#jopp12170-note-0001) *Journal of Political Philosophy* 27 (2): 187-206.

Clogston, J. (2016) “The Repeal of the Fairness Doctrine and the Irony of Talk Radio: A Story of Political Entrepreneurship, Risk, and Cover,” *Journal of Policy History* 28 (2): 375-396.

Clucas, R.A. (2015) *The Character of Democracy: How Institutions Shape Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).

Crerar, C. (2017) “The Vices of Truthlessness”, *Open for Debate* blog, 28 September, https://blogs.cardiff.ac.uk/openfordebate/2017/08/28/the-vices-of-truthlessness

Crerar, C. (2018) “Motivational Approaches to Intellectual Vice,” *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 96 (4): 753-766.

Croce, M. and M.S. Vaccarezza (2017) “Educating through Exemplars: Alternative Paths to Virtue,” *Theory and Research in Education* 15 (1): 5–19.

Daukas, N. (2019) “Feminist Virtue Epistemology,” in H. Battaly (ed.), *The Routledge Handbook of Virtue Epistemology* (New York: Routledge), 379-391.

Dillon, R. (2012) “Critical Character Theory: Toward a Feminist Perspective on ‘Vice’ (and ‘Virtue’),” in S.L. Crasnow and A. M. Superson (eds.), *Out from the Shadows: Analytical Feminist Contributions to Traditional Philosophy*, (New York: Oxford University Press), 83-114.

Dotson, K. (2012) “A Cautionary Tale: On Limiting Epistemic Oppression,” *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 33 (1):24–47.

Fricker, M. (2010) “Can There Be Institutional Vices,” in T. Gendler and J. Hawthorn (eds.), *Oxford Studies in Epistemology* vol. 3 (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 235-252.

Fricker, M. (2020) “Institutional Epistemic Vice: The Case of Inferential Inertia,” in I.J. Kidd, H. Battaly, and Q. Cassam (eds.), *Vice Epistemology* (New York: Routledge), 89-107.

Gilbert, M. (1989) *On Social Facts* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press).

Gilbert, M. (2000) *Sociality and Responsibility: New Essays in Plural Subject Theory* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield).

Hall, R.T. and J.C. Phillips (2011) “The Fairness Doctrine in Light of Hostile Media Perception,” *CommLaw Conspectus* 19 (2): 395-422.

John, S. (2018) “Epistemic Trust and the Ethics of Science Communication: Against Transparency, Openness, Sincerity and Honesty,” *Social Epistemology* 32 (2): 75-87.

Jones, H. (2016) *How to be a Government Whip* (London: Biteback).

Kidd, I.J. (2016) “Charging Others with Epistemic Vice,” *The Monist* 99 (3): 181-197.

Kidd, I.J. (2018) “Deep Epistemic Vices,” *Journal of Philosophical Research* 43: 43–67.

Kidd, I.J. (2019) “Epistemic Corruption and Education,” *Episteme*16 (2): 220-235.

Kidd, I.J. (2020) “Epistemic Corruption and Social Oppression,” in I.J. Kidd, H. Battaly, and Q. Cassam (eds.), *Vice Epistemology* (New York: Routledge), 69-85.

Klein, E. (2020) *Why We’re Polarised* (New York: Simon & Schuster).

Lahroodi, R. (2007) “Collective Epistemic Virtues,” *Social Epistemology* 21:281–97.

Lahroodi, R. (2019) “Virtue Epistemology and Collective Epistemology,” *Routledge Handbook to Virtue Epistemology* (New York: Routledge), 407-419.

Machiavelli (2012) *The Prince* [1532], edited by Q. Skinner and R. Price (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).

Medina, J. (2013) *The Epistemology of Resistance: Gender and Racial Oppression, Epistemic Injustice, and Resistant Imaginations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).

O’Neill, O. (2002) *A Question of Trust* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).

Oborne, P. (2004) *Alasdair Campbell* (London: Aurum).

OSR (UK Office for Statistics Regulation) (2010) *Statistics that Serve the Public Good: OSR’s Vision: What We Do and Why*, https://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/

Rauch, J. (2016) “How American Politics Went Insane,” *The Atlantic*, July/August issue.

Rhoades, R.A.W. (2011) *Everyday Life in British Government* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).

Roberts, R.C. and W.J. Wood (2007) *Intellectual Virtues: An Essay on Regulative Epistemology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).

Rothstein, B. and A. Varraich (2017) *Making Sense of Corruption* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).

Sontoro, D. (2018) “Charting Dissent: Whistleblowing, Civil Disobedience, and Conscientious Objection,” in D. Sontoro and M. Kumar (eds.), *Speaking Truth to Power: A Theory of Whistleblowing* (Dordrecht: Springer), 151-172.

Sparling, R. A. (2019) *Political Corruption: The Underside of Civic Morality* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press)

Tanesini, A. (2016) “‘Calm Down, Dear’: Intellectual Arrogance, Silencing and Ignorance,” Aristotelian Society Supplementary Volume 90 (1): 71-92.

Tanesini, A. (2018) “[Epistemic Vice and Motivation](https://nusearch.nottingham.ac.uk/primo-explore/fulldisplay?docid=TN_wj10.1111/meta.12301&context=PC&vid=44NOTUK&lang=en_US&search_scope=44NOTUK_COMPLETE&adaptor=primo_central_multiple_fe&tab=44notuk_complete&query=any,contains,Epistemic%20Vice%20and%20Motivation%20Alessandra%20Tanesini&offset=0),” *Metaphilosophy* 49 (3): 350-367.

Tessman, L. (2005) *Burdened Virtues: Virtue Ethics for Liberatory Struggles* (New York:Oxford University Press).

Thompson, Dennis F. (2005) *Restoring Responsibility: Ethics in Government, Business, and Healthcare* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).

Tirrell, L. (2017) “Toxic Speech: Toward an Epidemiology of Discursive Harm,” *Philosophical Topics* 45 (2):139-161.

Tuomela, R. (2013) *Social Ontology* (New York: Oxford University Press).

Watson, L. (2019) “**Curiosity and Inquisitiveness,” H.** Battaly (ed.) Routledge Handbook of Virtue Epistemology (New York: Routledge), 155-166.

Watson, L. (2020) “Vices of Questioning in Public Discourse,” in I.J. Kidd, H. Battaly, and Q. Cassam (eds.), *Vice Epistemology* (New York: Routledge), in press.

Williams, B. (2002) *Truth and Truthfulness: An Essay in Genealogy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press).

Williams, W. (2020) *Windrush Lessons Learned Review* (London: Her Majesty’s Stationary Office).

Willis, D. and P. Kane (2018) “How Congress Stopped Working,” *ProPublia* 5 November.

Zagzebski, L. (1996) *Virtues of the Mind: An Inquiry into the Nature of*Virtue*and the Ethical Foundations of Knowledge* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).

**Notes**

1. OSR is the regulatory arm of the UK Statistics Authority, a body established by the Statistics and Registration Service Act (2007). It is independent from government Ministers and separate from producers of statistics, including the Office for National Statistics: www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Actually, one can also arguably attribute vices to abstract objects, such as policies or doctrines (Battaly 2013), although this is currently a minority position in vice epistemology. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Some alternative models of collective commitment are offered by Bratman (2014) and Tuomela (2013). [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Some epistemologists argue that transparency is not always an appropriate value in certain political contexts (John (2018). [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Interestingly, contemporary work on politics and epistemology mainly focuses on *truth*, rather than *truthfulness* and the related vices opposed to truth—or what Crerar (2017) calls the *vices of truthlessness*. Some of those vices may include Cassam calls *epistemic insouciance* (2019, ch. 4). The classic study of the truth, truthfulness, and virtue is B. Williams (2002). [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Abandoning the commitment to these ultimate epistemic ends is one way to think about a ‘post-truth’ society’. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Analysts of epistemic corruption should search for appropriate metaphors for describing the deterioration of epistemic systems. Some popular ones are toxicological and epidemiological metaphors of the ‘poisoning’, ‘pollution’, or ‘toxification’ of political cultures and discourses (Tirrell 2017). [↑](#endnote-ref-7)