**From vice epistemology to critical character epistemology**

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**1. Introduction.**

A welcome development in recent epistemology has been the growing interest in epistemic vices, the negative character traits that stand opposed to what Linda Zagzebski named the virtues of the mind (Zagzebski 1996). Vice epistemology, named by Quassim Cassam, can be defined as ‘the philosophical study of the nature, identity, and epistemological significance of intellectual vices’ (Cassam 2016: 159). Such studies predate the modern interest, which is a natural development of the earlier emergence of virtue epistemology in the early 1980s. A soberly honest stance on our personal and collective epistemic lives must acknowledge their susceptibilities to arrogance, dogmatism, closedmindedness, and other failings of epistemic character. Without rushing into an optimistic stance on our capacities to overcome them, an important aspiration for vice epistemologists should be to try, as best we can, to find ways of minimising the incidence and severity of the vices of the mind—or, failing that, creating better ways of coping with their persistence within our lives.

I endorse the ameliorative spirit of vice epistemology, although in the absence of any definition of aims and success criteria, that may not be endorsing very much. There are very many things to which one can aspire concerning the epistemic vices, some more ambitious than others. At a minimum, we are coming to understand more about their nature, identity, and diversity and their ontological structures and relation to our human psychology. But we are also making some practical progress, too. Heather Battaly has excellent work on how we should modify features of our environments to mitigate our epistemically vicious tendencies (Battaly 2013, 2016). Alessandra Tanesini has excellent work showing how certain epistemic vices are constituted by stable psychological attitudes, which point to potential practical interventions (Tanesini 2016a, 2018). Further work with ameliorative potential continues to appear thanks to the current flow of interest in vice epistemology from epistemologists and those keen to put their work into practice.

The ameliorative potential of vice epistemology may depend, however, on its being subjected to some methodological refinements. Much of how we ‘do’ vice epistemology is informed by the tradition of Aristotelian virtue theory, which laid the basis of earlier work in virtue epistemology that, in turn, laid the basis for vice epistemology. Some vice theorists do draw upon other traditions, too, especially feminist and critical race epistemology. But there are reasons to think that Aristotelian approaches to epistemic vices lack some of the crucial sensitivities one needs to explore effectively certain aspects of character, virtue, and vice, of the sort brilliantly articulated by Lisa Tessman (2005) and Robin Dillon (2012). But their work also points to potential reconstructions of Aristotelian character theories, albeit some more radical than others. In what follows, I propose a reconstruction of vice epistemology, mainly informed by Dilllon’s proposal for a *critical character theory*.

The aim of this chapter is to present in some detail my proposed project, which, to honour Dillon’s influence, I will call a *critical character epistemology*. I want to sketch out its main features and show how it could, hopefully, better serve some of the ameliorative aims of those working to respond to epistemic vices. If it turns out that those aims can be served without embracing a critical character epistemology, so much the better—we get the goods without needing the reforms. Before we can decide, though, we need to look more closely at the current state of vice epistemology.

**2. Getting started in vice epistemology.**

We can find philosophical interest in arrogance, dogmatism, closed-mindedness, stupidity, indifference to the truth, and other epistemic vices among the earliest periods of the Greek, Indian, and Chinese traditions. Granted, their reasons for concern varied considerably, since their epistemological projects reflected their characteristic themes and concerns. Buddhist interest in epistemic vices, for instance, was tied into their fundamental soteriological aims. The story of the history of philosophical study of epistemic character failings is not yet well understood, alas, though an impressive start has been made by historians of science and theology (DeYoung 2009, Kivisto 2014). Some of those earlier vice-epistemological projects had ameliorative aspirations, too, like the early modern English feminist vice epistemology we find in the work of Mary Astell and Mary Wollstonecraft (see Kidd 2018: §2A).

The earliest modern paper to use the term ‘epistemic vice’ was Casey Swank’s 2002 paper which defined such vices as character traits ‘constitutive of unreasonableness’, therefore ‘bad in a specifically epistemic way’ (Swank 2002: 195). Unfortunately, that paper never got the uptake it merited because it was almost fifteen years before widespread interest really got going. The main figure was Heather Battaly, who did three vital foundational things: she defended the legitimacy of agent-based appraisals from charges of *ad hominem*, she did the crucial conceptual work of distinguishing varieties of epistemic vice, and she provided a set of inspirational case studies of specific vices (see Battaly 2010, 2015). The latter included what I call *esoteric epistemic vices* – ones not currently entrenched within our inherited vice vocabularies, which helpfully expands our sense of the potential range of vices that ought to be on our investigative agenda. If we stick to the vices contingently present in our listings of the vices, then we confine ourselves to a narrow and unscrutinised sense of the range of our epistemic character failings. Some esoteric epistemic vices include *epistemic insensibility* and *epistemic insouciance*, alongside other currently unnamed vices. For instance, Western theorising of the vices is deeply shaped by the concepts and concerns of Christian theology. We inherited rich concepts for theorising pride and other vices of humility, but are much less blessed when it comes to, for instance, the vices of curiosity (cf. Manson 2012, Pardue 2013).

It was common for virtue epistemologists to talk about vices, although usually only in passing with the main business being exploration of epistemic excellences. An exception was Bob Roberts and W. Jay Wood, who offered ‘maps’ of various of the vices that gathered around the epistemic virtues they discussed (Roberts and Wood 2007). As Robin Dillon says, this may reflect the conviction that vices are ontologically and normatively secondary, that there is nothing to be gained by ‘looking at vice directly’ (Dillon 2012: 88). Robert Merrihew Adams, for one, argued that vices get less attention because ‘goodness is more fundamental than badness’ (Adams 2006: 36). Charlie Crerar names that conviction the *inversion thesis* and robustly rejects it. Roughly speaking, vices are not the mirror images of virtues because they have their own distinctive structures and features, which we are liable to miss if we simply create models of virtues and then invert them (Crerar 2018).

It is easy to encourage work on a topic when that work has a name and in the case of epistemic vices that baptism came with Quassim Cassam’s 2016 paper, ‘Vice Epistemology’. It came when there was a lot of that work to gather under that label. Battaly and Tanesini had done a lot of work by then, of course, alongside the sustained analysis of the epistemic vices and injustices integral to systems of gendered and racial oppression offered by José Medina in his outstanding book *The Epistemology of Resistance*. He defines epistemic vices in terms of ‘a set of corrupted attitudes and dispositions’, which, if left unchecked, ensure that one’s ‘epistemic character tend[s] to become more corrupted’ (Medina 2012: 29, 72). Since then, there has been a burst of excellent work in vice epistemology including an edited collection in the *Journal of Philosophical Research* and the first dedicated monograph, Cassam’s, *Vices of the Mind* (Cassam 2018).

The current work in vice epistemology is pleasingly pluralistic in its methods and its inspirations. Aristotelian character theory, feminist epistemology, and intersectional social theory are drawn on alongside attitude psychology, critical race theory, and historical work documenting earlier ventures into the study of the vices of the mind. Much of the work also has an applied contemporary edge. Cassam’s monograph, for instance, subtitled ‘From the Intellectual to the Political’, takes as its case studies recent political misadventures from Britain and the United States, from Brexit to the Trump Administration. In an age of flagrant public displays of vice, it should be no surprise that attention turns to vice theory.

Looking at current work in vice epistemology, there are three main sorts, although in practice they interpenetrate. To start with, there is foundational work on issues like the nature of epistemic vice, their relations to epistemic virtues and ethical vices, and the usual normative issues about how best to articulate their badness. A second sort of work are case studies of specific vices, detailed analyses of their structure, coupled to rich descriptions of their associated motivations, behaviours, and effects. Some of the well-studied vices include arrogance, dogmatism, closedmindedness, hubris, insensibility, timidity, and servility.

The third sort of work is *applied vice epistemology*, putting these concepts to work in the effort to improve our epistemic conduct, practices and systems. Roberts and Wood once referred to their work on epistemic virtues as a sort of regulative epistemology, a term they take from Nicholas Wolterstoff (1996). A regulative epistemology, say Roberts and Wood, is one that seeks to ‘generate guidance for epistemic practice’, and is ‘a response to perceived deficiencies in people’s epistemic conduct, and thus is strongly practical and social’ (Roberts and Wood 2007: 21). We could distinguish two types of regulative epistemology: one aimed at regulation of individual epistemic conduct, another aimed at active reform of our shared epistemic systems and practices. But that would be premature. Arguably the former cannot succeed without the latter given the complex ways that individual epistemic agency tends to be structured by our social environment—a point central to critical character epistemology and the wider traditions in feminist social philosophy to which it is indebted. I return to the collective dimensions of epistemic vices at the end of this chapter.

To summarise the points of this section, the study of epistemic character started in virtue epistemology during the 1980s, which dominated until the turn to epistemic vices in the last two decades. The focus on epistemic virtues and flourishing is important and was a vital resource for vice epistemologists, for sure, although what is needed now is a corrective focus on the grimmer sides of epistemic life—on epistemic vices, failings, and corruption. To a degree this has been helped along by the vigorous attention given these days to the many forms of epistemic violence (see, for instance, Berenstain 2016 and Dotson 2016). This sort of perspective-broadening was advanced by Dillon: a critical character theorist aims ‘to understand moral character as affected by domination and subordination and by the struggles both to maintain and to resist and overthrow them’ (Dillon 2012: 84, 86).

From this perspective, we must change how we think about epistemic vices, too. The claim made by Dillon is that vices must be understood in terms of systems of domination and oppression and as characteristics of oppressors and as forms of damage done to those who are oppressed. A set of tight conceptual and causal connections obtain between vices and oppression that must be acknowledged if progress is to be made in understanding and responding to either. If we look only at epistemic virtues and flourishing, then our vision of the world is not only *incomplete* – taking in only the brighter sides – but quite radically *distorting* in ways that occlude the realities of oppression. It is correction of this systematic distortion of epistemic character and agency that is a main aim of critical character epistemology.[[1]](#footnote-1) The risk is that, without that darker, messier vision of human life, too many people will remain entrapped by the entrenched and ubiquitous patterns of vicious conduct that play out at the everyday and structural levels. Our lives must be understood, as Kate Norlock (2018) puts it, in the terms of a *perpetual struggle* focused on small, tangible acts of determined moral effort. On this view, any serious character ethics should accept that the ideal of flourishing is in reality the prerogative of the privileged. For the rest, what may be more realistic is the more existentially denuded aim of *coping* with the oppressive realities of the world.

Critical character epistemology is not precommitted to anything as foreboding as the vision of perpetual struggle, although it should be honest about the sheer scale of the heavy ameliorative tasks that flow from its vision of the variety and tenacity of our many epistemic failings. It should also be clear why this is a *critical* character epistemology, since a key aim is scrutiny and revision, if necessary, of problematic epistemic conduct and the conditions that sustain it. Of course, there are other senses of criticism, like Kant’ sense of establishing the conditions for the possibility of something.[[2]](#footnote-2) Those may also apply, but that is not something I pursue in this paper. Let’s now say more about epistemic vices and failings.

It should be clear, too, why it is a ‘critical’ character epistemology. Clear enough, at least, for me to move onto to say more about epistemic vices and failings.

**3. What are epistemic vices and why are they bad?**

The complexity of our personal epistemic dispositions is the topic of study of character epistemology. For that reason, we should not think of that discipline as devolving into two relatedly independent enterprises, virtue epistemology and vice epistemology. We need to study our excellences and failings of epistemic character together, rather than taking them in isolation then trying to weld the resulting accounts together. Since virtue epistemology is by now better developed and better known, I devote this section to surveying the current state of the art in vice epistemology. Along the way, I’ll indicate why studying the vices of the mind cannot be done properly without constant reference to the virtues of the mind.

We can start with an ontological question, raised by Quassim Cassam (2020), which is: what kind of things are epistemic vices? Cassam argues the question devolves into three sub-questions: what kinds of things are epistemic vices, how do we distinguish different vices, and, to what are our distinctions between vices answerable? In response to the first question, there are two answers: a *vice-monist* says they are one kind of thing, a favourite answer being that they are *character traits*, an answer that goes back to Aristotle in the West. A *vice-pluralist*, however, allows that epistemic vices can be different kinds of things, including character traits, attitudes, and ways of thinking – or what Cassam neatly labels *character-vices*, *attitude-vices*, and *thinking-vices* (Cassam 2020: ch. 1). We see these kinds in vice epistemology. Battaly focuses on character-vices, Tanesini on attitude-vices, while a vice monism is endorsed by Cassam – and, I think, Medina, who alternately talks of vices as ‘corrupted attitudes and dispositions’ and ‘attitudinal structures that permeate one’s entire cognitive life’ (Medina 2012: 30-31).

A second array of issues for vice epistemology is the set normative questions about how best to understand the badness of epistemic vices, or, more specifically, to justify classification of a certain set of epistemic character traits, attitudes, or ways of thinking as *vices*. Sometimes it is clear *that* a certain epistemic character trait is bad, but less clear what is *bad* about it, and sometimes a fuller account of the badness of some trait only becomes clear once looked at using an appropriate normative framework. Within vice epistemology, there are two main normative models, each with their champions. *Vice-consequentialists* locate the badness of the epistemic vices in their effects and the best example is Cassam’s *obstructivism*, according to which epistemic vices are ultimately bad because they ‘systematically obstruct the gaining, keeping, and sharing of knowledge’ and other epistemic goods (Cassam 2018: 12). Battaly calls these *effects-vices* (Battaly 2014), which I divide into two sub-groups. *Productive effects-vices* are traits, like arrogance, that tend systematically to produce a preponderance of bad effects, while *passive effects-vices* are traits, like epistemic laziness, that systematically fail to produce a preponderance of good effects. (Crudely, productive vices *do* bad, whereas passive vices fail to do good. In practice, of course, many vices do both, in which case we should just call them effects-vices.)

The second normative model, best represented in the work of Alessandra Tanesini, is *vice-motivationalism*. It locates the badness of epistemic vices in the motivations, desires, and values of the epistemic agent. A vicious agent may be motivated by a desire to thwart the epistemic agency of others, or a desire to persist with beliefs that are comfortable even if also false, or the agent might value unearned confidence over humbling self-reflectiveness. Charlie Crerar usually distinguishes the two main types of vice-motivationalism (Crerar 2018: §§2-3). *Presence accounts* see vices are manifesting or revealing the *presence* of some epistemically bad motives, desire, or value, such as the desire to withhold salient information from other enquirers. *Absence accounts* see vices as manifesting the absence of some good motives, values, and desires, such as the lack of care or concern for truth, which is the heart of the vice Cassam calls *epistemic insouciance* (Cassam 2018: ch. 4). Jason Baehr, for one, has argued that ‘the most obvious or straightforward way a person can be intellectually vicious is motivational in nature: viz. by failing to care sufficiently about epistemic goods … or by being outright opposed to them’ (Baehr 2020: 29).[[3]](#footnote-3)

Alongside the consequentialist and motivationalist positions, there is, naturally, also a variety of pluralist positions. Such normative pluralism, as we might call it, can take several forms. One is that the badness of *all* epistemic vices can be articulated in consequentialist and motivationalist forms, with a proviso that, in some cases, references to effects won’t be enough. (I wonder, though, if this is a disguised form of motivationalism, since it relies on the claim that our analyses are deeper when they refer to motives). Another is that some of the vices can be satisfactorily appraised in consequentialist terms, others in motivationalist terms, and others still in more pluralist terms. I prefer that position, since pluralism of that sort seems a natural fit with the sheer variety and heterogeneity of our epistemic character failings. This latter sort of pluralism has a pragmatist streak: our question should be which of the available normative models does the job for any given epistemic vice, and we should not prejudge which model will be needed. Of course, when scrutinising that pluralism, we ought to attend to the familiar issues surrounding consequentialist and motivationalist normative theories – like the connection of intention to outcome, the inscrutability of motives, and so on. At this point, there are rich prospects for more contacts between vice epistemology and normative ethics (see Baehr 2020: 33 and Battaly 2014: ch. 4).

A critical character epistemologist is likely to embrace an ontological and normative pluralism about epistemic vices. Epistemic vices can be many different kinds of things and they can be normatively appraised in reference to effects or inner states of the agent. This is consistent with their general pragmatism and desire to keep their options open, while also avoiding a bland sort of pluralism that says ‘everything goes’. But the ontological pluralism is perhaps quite radical. A character epistemologist, recall, takes as their focus excellences and failings of epistemic character, the main types of which are epistemic virtues and epistemic vices, respectively. But there are excellences of epistemic character that are not virtues and epistemic character failings that are not vices – at least, not on common conceptions of vice and virtue. Other excellences of epistemic character include a fantastic memory, a breadth and diversity of experience, various cognitive and perceptual skills, and a sense of maturity and degree of objectivity and reasonableness. I don’t think those are virtues, but they seem to be excellences of character adjacent to the epistemic virtues. Jason Baehr seems to share something like this view when he argues that intellectual virtues should be understood as ‘personal intellectual excellences’, as traits that ‘contribute to their possessor’s “personal intellectual worth’ (Baehr 2011: 88-89). All virtues are excellences of character, but not all excellences of character are virtues.

A similar asymmetry holds for vices and failings of character. All vices are failings of character but not all failings of character are vices. Other epistemic failings include various cognitive biases, a narrowness and poverty of experience, lack of crucial skills and abilities, and a lack of perspective and integrity (see, for instance, Holroyd 2020). Again, I don’t think those are vices in any familiar sense, but they are failings of epistemic character. Indeed, some of them are often defining *characteristics* of an epistemic agent, the sorts of features we might point out when giving an account of someone *qua* epistemic agent. A radical vice pluralist might just sound them *all* as vices, but, for what it’s worth, that doesn’t sound right to me. Narrowness of experience is not a *vice*, even if it is sustained by vices, like arrogance.

Such issues about the definition of epistemic vices and failings might only exercise an enthusiastic vice epistemologist with ontological interests. If so, that’s fine. However we define terms ‘vice’, ‘failing’, ‘excellence’, and ‘virtue’, we get the point that a character epistemologist is engaged in a careful, philosophical study of the nature, development, and significance of excellences and failings of epistemic character. Let’s now turn to two specific concepts central to their project.

**4. From vices to predicaments.**

Epistemic vices have complex developmental histories. Many sources and conditions play a role in feeding their development and entrenchment within our epistemic character. A vice epistemologist is naturally interested to explore those developmental processes, as complex as they will be. Robin Dillon emphasises that vices emerge and evolve through the complex interaction of psychological, interpersonal, developmental, and environmental processes or conditions. Character, therefore, should be conceived as ‘fluid, dynamic, and contextualised, both bodily and socially [and] as processive rather than substantive, as capable of stability without being static’ (Dillon 2012: 105). In an important remark for my present purposes, Dillon adds that ‘character dispositions [should] 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’ (Dillon 2012: 104). A critical character epistemologist inherits all of these insights and therefore searches for concepts that help us to articulate them. A vital concept is that of an *epistemic* *predicament.*

No one who lives in the social world could seriously think that it provides an Edenic environment that is maximally receptive to the cultivation and exercise of our epistemic capacities. The social world – or the variety of intermingled social worlds – is all messy and ridden with material, epistemic, and other suboptimalities. Some obvious examples include inequalities in distribution of goods, entrenched inequalities, problematic power relations, carefully maintained systems of collective ignorance, and entrenched systems of violence. Several generations of work by social epistemologists, feminist theorists, and activists has abundantly documented these and other suboptimalities (see, for instance, Bartky 1999 and Collins 2000).

An obvious question is how issues of individual epistemic character relate to these wider social and structural conditions, since at first blush they may seem, methodologically at least, to proceed at very different levels. Dillon and other liberatory theorists emphasise, of course, that the situation is rather different—in her words, critical character theory (and epistemology) really ‘springs from the recognition that enslavement is not only social and material but also operates on and through character’ (Dillon 2012: 85). To develop this idea, we can turn to the concept of an epistemic predicament. It is developed in Medina’s book, though not systematically defined by him. He remarks, for instance, that our social identities and circumstances massively shape the sorts of concerns, dangers, needs, and risks that we are likely to experience—and, moreover, the sorts of resources and strategies available in our efforts to cope with those concerns. Medina, for instance, says that our predicaments affect whether and to what extent we labour under the burden of ‘lack of access to information’, ‘lack of a credible voice and authority’, persistent susceptibility to ‘epistemic exclusions and injustices’, and other predicamental challenges (Medina 2012: 29, 120).

Generalising from Medina’s remarks, I will use the term ‘epistemic predicament’ to refer to the complex, contingent, and changing structure of epistemically-toned challenges, dangers, needs, and threats experienced by a person — an individual or a group — as a result of their particular emplacement within the social world. Three clarifications are needed for that definition. First, predicaments are radically *plural*, since they reflect the intersections of our multiple social identities. Ultimately, our predicaments might be unique, reflecting the subjectivity of each epistemic agent, even if the common structures of the social world tend to ensure a certain degree of commonality across the experiences of people sharing certain social identities.[[4]](#footnote-4) Second, predicaments are *ambivalent* – they cannot be neatly categorised as good or bad, even if variable distributions of resources and opportunities favour certain predicaments in certain respects. Even highly privileged predicaments still incorporate *some* dangers and risks, even if these are lesser, qualitatively and quantitatively, than for those of oppressed social groups. Third, our epistemic predicaments are changeable, since they tend to reflect the stabilities and turbulence of the wider social world. People can try to change their epistemic predicaments in various ways, at the individual or collective level, and others can cooperate with or oppose those efforts. Conversely, one can also try to worsen the predicament of others by, for instance, subjecting them to epistemically violent behaviours (Dotson 2011).[[5]](#footnote-5)

The concept of an epistemic predicament helps us to think in more socially sensitive ways about the development and perpetuation of epistemic vices and failings and therefore about the character-epistemic effects of social oppression. After all, it would be banal to say that ‘human beings are prone to develop epistemic vices’, since there are obvious variations and patterns in the prevalence of different vices across different groups of people. No doubt there are very complicated stories to tell about how different people acquire or develop the vices they do in the ways that they do. Medina, for instance, says that ‘epistemic vices of all sorts are definitely possible outcomes of a socialisation under conditions of oppression’, and emphasises that ‘some epistemic vices are indeed more likely to be found among oppressed subjects’ (Medina 2012: 40). His claim is not that ‘oppressed people develop ABC vices’ and that ‘privileged people develop XYZ vices’, which is obviously crude; the subtler point is that ‘the social positionality of agents does matter for the development of their epistemic character’ (Medina 2012: 29 and 40). Since that is a very general claim, we can add some more useful detail by appealing to the concept of epistemic predicament.

I propose that the particularities of our predicaments fundamentally structure the space of character-epistemic developmental possibilities that a person inhabits and their ability to move through that space. There are many ways that can affect the relationship between vices and agents. Consider two: *susceptibility* and *salience*.

Start with susceptibility, there is a very general sense in which all agents are to some degree susceptible to developing some or all vices. Anyone, in principle, could develop vices like arrogance, closedmindedness, and mendaciousness. In practice, though, things will be more complex. There are often tangible patterns of susceptibility, shaped by genetic, social, and structural factors as well as, in some cases, bad epistemic luck (although see Berenstain (forthcoming) for salutary warnings about attributing to bad epistemic luck processes that in fact are part of systems of oppression). To take an example, those with multiply privileged identities may be more systematically susceptible to the ego-inflationary epistemic vices like arrogance and haughtiness (cf. Tanesini 2016b and 2018). As Medina emphasises, belonging to a privileged group is neither necessary nor sufficient for development of epistemic vices (Medina 2012: 40). Many actions and contingencies can intervene to realise or suppress the susceptibilities that confront us in our efforts to navigate the vice-conducive pressures and temptations of the social world. For that reason, one very important protective capacity will be what Medina calls ‘lucidity’ about our epistemic predicament—at a minimum, a sense of which vices or clusters of vices lie in one’s path as upcoming or tangible risks, and which, by contrast, safely lie well outside one’s path.[[6]](#footnote-6)

A second way that predicaments can shape our character-epistemic developmental possibilities for the worst concerns the *salience* of different epistemic vices. In a general sense, all epistemic vices are salient to some degree, since all of them will stand out to as significant in some sense—vice may appear as alarming, horrifying, irritating, serious, trivial, and so on. I expect most people would regard, say, arrogance and manipulativeness as worse vices than, say, incuriosity and superficiality. The salience of epistemic vices depends on many different factors, many of which are refracted through our specific predicaments. A good example is the fact that members of some social groups are negatively stereotyped as being *essentially* prone to or *characterised by* certain vices—women, for instance, as banal, incurious, unreflective, and so on. Mary Astell wrote in 1694 of the entrenched expectations of her society that women, by virtue of their ‘degraded reason’, necessarily suffered from a ‘degenerated and corrupted’ epistemic character, incapable of sustaining epistemic virtues. Astell was alert to the culturally reinforced expectation that women were, or would always become, marked by the ‘Feminine Vices’, like submissiveness and superficiality. Within that

misogynistic social and epistemic culture, those gendered vices become especially salient to women seeking to improve their epistemic predicament (Astell 2002: 62).

A critical character epistemologist can use the concept of epistemic predicaments to think about epistemic character and vices in relation to the specifics of our emplacement in the social world. By thinking in terms of predicaments, we can go beyond abstract accounts, and talk in more discerning ways about the ways that our susceptibility to specific epistemic vices, and the specific salience of those vices, is shaped by our predicaments. Naturally, the task is complicated. Epistemic predicaments are plural, changing, and intersectional; some vices are highly gendered and racialised and some are embedded in wider cultural or moral conceptions. But this is the price we pay for the sorts of social sensitive study of epistemic vices that we need to ensure we are tracking the complex connections between epistemic agents and social structures.

**5. From predicaments to corruption.**

A critical character epistemologist wants to explore the specific patterns of susceptibility to epistemic vices for differently situated groups of epistemic agents. Thinking in terms of the predicaments people face can help with that task. But thinking in terms of susceptibilities and of salience only tells us about which vices we might develop and which might stand out for us. We also need to ask *how* people actually acquire the vices to which they are susceptible and which they presumably *want* to avoid, given the negative salience of those vices. (I assume it is more important to try to avoid developing a vice that is judged to be more alarming or worrisome). To answer that question, we need to add the concept of *epistemic corruption*.

A vocabulary of corruption often features within vice-theoretic discourses. Gabriele Taylor remarks that moral ‘vices corrupt and destroy’ (Taylor 2006: 126) while Judith Shklar remarks that vices ‘dominate and corrupt’ our character (Shklar 1984: 200). We also find the language of corruption in vice epistemology. For Miranda Fricker, internalisation of sexist and racist norms, values, and assumptions ‘corrupts’ our epistemic sensibilities and in that way can ‘inhibit’ and ‘thwart’ the development of epistemically virtuous character (Fricker 2007: 59, 58, 30). José Medina, recall, defines epistemic vices in terms of ‘corrupted attitudes and dispositions’, and argues that, under oppressive conditions, one’s ‘epistemic character [will] tend to become more corrupted’ (Medina 2012: 29, 72).

Although none of these writers used the term ‘corrupt’ in a technical sense, they use it to refer to a specific phenomenon specific to critical character epistemology. One of the main ways that agents become epistemically vicious is that they are subjected to corrupting processes and conditions – a concept I have developed elsewhere (see Kidd 2019 and 2020). On my account, epistemic corruption occurs when one’s epistemic character comes to be damaged due to one’s interaction with *corruptors* –conditions, processes, doctrines, or social structures that tend to facilitate the development and exercise of epistemic vices. Corruption is dynamic and also diachronic, typically consisting of sustained exposure to corruptors, rather than singular events. The term ‘facilitate’ includes ‘encourage’, ‘promote’, ‘incentivise’, and providing inducements, rewards, and temptations to acts of epistemic vice. There are several modes of corruption, of which the main ones are:

1. *Acquisition* of novel epistemically vicious attitudes, character traits, and ways of thinking, of a sort not previously a feature of the subject’s epistemic character.
2. *Activation* of epistemically vicious attitudes, character traits, and ways of thinking that were present in the subject’s epistemic character but dormant and inactive.[[7]](#footnote-7)

The next three modes are different, since they involve intensification of certain aspects of whichever epistemic vices are already active:

1. *Propagation* occurs when corrupting conditions increase the scope of a vice, viz., the extent to which it affects one’s epistemic activities. In Annette Baier’s useful remark, an initially localised vice propagates when it starts to ‘infect their whole character’ (Baier 1995: 274).
2. *Stabilisation* occurs when corrupting conditions increase the *stability* of a vice. Some vices are unstable, flickering ‘on and off’, under the positive counteracting influence of acts of willpower, social censure, or whatever. As vices stabilise, though, they become more resistant to destabilisation.
3. *Intensification* occurs when corrupting conditions increase the *strength* of a vice. The vices in their weaker forms tend to produce fewer bad effects and express weak bad motives. But vices can be strengthened, making them more intense and extreme and therefore become ever-more problematic.

The social world is filled with potential corruptors that can act on our epistemic characters by facilitating our complex predicamental susceptibilities to epistemically vicious attitudes, character traits, and ways of thinking. A critical character epistemologist will be very keen to study the conceptual and causal relationships between vices, corruptors, and characters (cf. Battaly 2013 and Cooper 2008).[[8]](#footnote-8) This calls for combined vice-epistemological and empirical research of the sort already profitably taken by moral psychologists interested in the virtues (see, e.g., Miller 2017, Snow 2014).

I think that the social world is vastly epistemically corrupting and that our epistemic predicaments structure the diversity and intensity of the epistemically corrupting influences that we have to navigate. That includes the vices that are salient to me and to which I’m susceptible and the specific types of corruptors that loom large in my social experiences, not to mention the sorts of counter-corrupting influences and resources on which I can try to draw in order to protect the fragile mesh of virtuous dispositions that make up the better parts of my epistemic character. A universal feature of all epistemic predicaments is the task of trying to avoid or manage those corrupting influences and structures while trying to simultaneously minimise the character damage one suffers and also trying to fulfil the many other pressing demands of one’s epistemic and social life. Struggling against the perpetually present risks of epistemic corruption is only ever a part of the business of trying to live well.

A key task of critical character epistemology is to develop a working understanding of the variety of corruptors out there in the world, partly to guide the empirical research but also as a way of training our epistemic sensibilities. To that end, consider some general sorts of corruptors that the critical character epistemologist wants to identify and, ultimately, try to either remove or reform:

1. The absence or derogation of epistemic exemplars or ‘heroes’, who practically model forms of epistemic virtue, excellence, and integrity (see Croce and Vaccarezza 2017; Zagzebski 2017).
2. The valorisation and elevation of exemplars of epistemically vicious persons and acts by, for instance, ensuring that they receive social goods such as authority, respect, and power.
3. The rebranding of vices as virtues in ways that can prevent someone from detecting that they are being corrupted (see Dillon 2012: 99). Sometimes, a person might be genuinely unaware they are becoming corrupted, not least given that certain vices have a self-concealing capacity—so-called *stealthy vices* (Cassam 2018: ch. 7).
4. The establishment of conditions that increase the exercise costs of virtues. One can make it harder to exercise certain epistemic virtues by, say, depriving a person of the necessary amounts of *time* or reacting to acts of epistemic courage with an elevated threat of violence.[[9]](#footnote-9)
5. The establishment of conditions that increase the incentives to vice. By arranging an environment to incentivise and reward act of vice, one can habituate people to acts of vice that, over time, can transform their epistemic character for the worse.

These are some of the main types of corruptor, described very generally, each inviting more investigation. Alongside their general relevance to vice epistemology, they are of particular significance to a critical character epistemologist. Many of those corruptors are themselves implicated in wider systems of oppression. José Medina, for instance, describes *epistemic heroes*, ‘extraordinary subjects who under conditions of epistemic oppression are able to develop epistemic virtues with a tremendous transformative potential’ (Medina 2012: 186). Obviously, such epistemic heroes are often characterised by the virtue of epistemic courage, and a natural response to oppressors to such heroes is to derogate and assail them – a clear case where an oppressive system tries, often successfully, to massively increase the exercise costs of epistemic virtues (see, further, Kidd 2018).

The deep relationship between processes of epistemic corruption and oppressive social systems is one reason why the ameliorative goals of a critical character epistemology necessarily take on an overtly political character. When characterising the ultimate aims of critical character theory, Dillon quotes Max Horkheimer’s explanation that the aim of critical theory is ‘to liberate human beings from the circumstances that enslave them’ (quoted in Dillon 2012: 85). Systems of enslavement act on and through character, including through a complex web of epistemically corrupting processes and structures that damage and distort the epistemic character of subjects, the oppressors and the oppressed alike.[[10]](#footnote-10) It is in relation to that socially transformative goal that critical character epistemology should ultimately be understood.

To summarise: current work in vice epistemology offers powerful ways of thinking in systematic detail about the variety of failings of epistemic character to which human beings are subject due our innate psychological and cognitive limitations, the suboptimalities of our social worlds, and the systems of oppression characteristic of so many of those worlds. I have described a specific style of vice epistemology – *critical character epistemology* – and some of its distinguishing features. These include its adoption of the concepts of epistemic predicaments and epistemic corruption and the explicit socio-political goals that align it in many ways with wider progressive social movements. I do not think that all of those with an interest in epistemic vices need to be critical character epistemologists. But I do think that a vice epistemologist with liberatory aspirations might find critical character epistemology an ally in their efforts.

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1. It is interesting to notice that although we have a well-developed tradition in virtue ethics, there is hardly anything we could call *vice ethics*. Granted, there are honourable exceptions, like Lisa Tessman (2005). There are also those who urge relevantly grim estimations of our collective moral and epistemic condition, like David E. Cooper (2018) and Kate Norlock (2018). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. I thank Mark Alfano for this useful point about the different senses of ‘criticism’. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Crerar also adds a third ‘compatibility’ position, which sees some vices, at least, as being composed of intermingled virtuous and vicious motivations: think of a conspiracy theorist who is radically doxastically rigid, but also genuinely driven by a conscientious commitment to the truth. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Medina speaks of the predicaments of the privileged and of the oppressed, although would likely emphasise their heterogeneity (Medina 2012: §§ 1.1 – 1.2). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. The term ‘epistemic violence’ was introduced by Gyatri Spivak (1998). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. I am thinking here of Wittgenstein’s remark: ‘[t]here are problems I never tackle, which do not lie in my path or belong to my world’ (Wittgenstein 1998: 11). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. A vice-consequentialist might not recognise the existence of dormant traits, since they are not producing any bad epistemic effects. But dormant vices would, if activated, produce bad effects, so vice-consequentialist should still worry about them. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. An important distinction to consider is that between *monocorrupting* and *polycorrupting* conditions: those that facilitate one single vice and those that facilitate a broader range of vices. Is it the case, for instance, that an epistemically homogeneous environment can corrupt for a whole range of vices? [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Consider, for instance, the procedural epistemic virtues, such as carefulness, diligence, and thoroughness (Kidd forthcoming). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Compare Lisa Tessman on the two types of ‘moral damage’ – that is, damage to the moral character of people – integral to systems of oppression (Tessman 2005: chs. 2 and 3). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)