**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 the study of epistemic vices—the negative or problematic traits of epistemic character, opposed to what Linda Zagzebki (1996) named the ‘virtues of the mind’. Interest in epistemic vices has a long history due to their abiding relevance to our epistemological and practical interests. An honest stance on our personal and collective epistemic lives must acknowledge their deep susceptibility to arrogance, dogmatism, and other epistemic failings. But documentation of our failings is not the sole task of those engaged in what Quassim Cassam (2016) named *vice epistemology*. Our study the epistemic vices should be driven by concern, as well as interest, hence a general commitment among vice epistemologists to their amelioration. Of course, the possibility of amelioration is one of the main empirical or practical questions for modern vice epistemologists.

I endorse the conviction that vice epistemology ought to commit itself to the project of trying to reduce the incidence and intensity of our personal and collective epistemic vices and think most vice epistemologists would, with due qualifications, agree. But I also think it is important to make certain changes to the methodology of vice epistemology to help it to advance those ameliorative aims more effectively. Since some of the required changes are both complex and contentious, we should give a label to the proposed reformed sort of vice epistemology that can distinguish it from more mainstream efforts. I propose that we call it *critical character epistemology*. If in turns out to lack the distinctness it seems to me to have then that is just as well—what matters are the changes to how we conceive of the aims and methods of studying epistemic vices. I start with some general remarks on the current state of the art in vice epistemology before adding, one by one, the concepts and methods that I think add distinctness to critical character epistemology.

**2. Epistemic vices and character.**

The earliest paper to use the specific term ‘epistemic vice’ was published in 2002 by Casey Swank, who defined them as character traits ‘constitutive of unreasonableness’, therefore ‘bad in a specifically epistemic way’ (Swank 2002: 195). Unfortunately, that paper never got the uptake it deserved. It was almost fifteen years later before there were signs of growing interest in epistemic vices, mainly driven by the sterling work of Heather Battaly. She did at least three vital tasks: first, to defend the legitimacy of agent-based appraisals from charges of *ad hominem*; second, to perform the crucial conceptual work of distinguishing varieties of epistemic vice; third, to offer inspirational studies of specific epistemic vices. Several other virtue epistemologists had mentioned epistemic vices, albeit usually in passing remarks that were adjuncts to their main focus on the virtues of the mind (see, for instance, Baehr 2011 and Roberts and Wood 2007). In a foundational 2016 paper, Quassim Cassam then formally named the emerging discipline *vice epistemology*, following that up two years later with the first dedicated monograph, *Vices of the Mind* (Cassam 2016, 2018). By this time, there were also superb studies of epistemic vices being offered by José Medina in his book on epistemic resistance and oppression and, in a similar vein, the work of Alessandra Tanesini, which very closely engages with empirical psychology (Medina 2012; Tanesini 2017, 2018).

An attractive feature of these foundational ventures into vice epistemology is the diversity of their normative orientations and methodological inspirations, not to mention the variety of vices and examples selected for study. Aristotelian character theory, feminist epistemology, intersectional social theory, and attitude psychology are deployed by Battaly and the other members of what was inevitably dubbed the Vice Squad. The examples and case studies include academic philosophical practice, gendered and racialised oppression, and British and American political misadventures, from Brexit to the Trump Administration.

Within this diversity, we can distinguish three types of work in vice epistemology. First, there is foundational work on issues like the nature of epistemic vices, their relations to epistemic virtues and to ethical vices, and normative and classificatory issues about how best to classify the vices and articulate their badness. Second, there are case studies of specific epistemic vices, including the familiar ones, like arrogance and closedmindedness, through to more esoteric ones, not yet entrenched in our conceptual repertoire, such as ‘epistemic insouciance’ and ‘epistemic insensibility’. Some of these are epistemic analogues of various ethical vices, while others might be character failings confined to the epistemic aspects of human character.

The third sort of work is *applied vice epistemology* which uses vice epistemological resources to improve our epistemic conduct, practices and systems. Such applied work can be understood in two senses: the active regulation of our individual epistemic character and conduct or, more ambitiously, the active reform of our epistemic systems and practices. The motivation for *doing* vice epistemology comes from concern with one or both of these goals – a rationale that also applies, of course, to virtue epistemology (eg Baehr 2011 and Roberts and Wood 2007). Obviously, those senses are continuous with one another, and much effort is currently being devoted to assessing the conceptual and practical relationships between the individual and collective dimensions of epistemic vices. If Battaly is right, for instance, then individual level self-reform is inadequate to the task of genuinely reforming epistemic vices (Battaly 2016).

The range of projects in vice epistemology largely mirrors that of its sister discipline, virtue epistemology, which emerged earlier as a result of responses to the Gettier problem in the early 1980s. Actually, the two disciplines developed in similar ways: some early papers were followed by substantive monographs that offered inspiration and framework for a larger and more expansive independent research programme – in the case of virtue epistemology, this included the work of Lorraine Code, James Montmarquet, and Zagzebski. But virtue epistemology was up and running long before vice epistemology, which reflects a similar pattern in ethics—we have a robust discipline of virtue ethics, but not similarly well-developed discipline of *vice ethics*. (If that latter term sounds odd, read it as ‘philosophical study of vices and other failings of character’). There is only a tiny literature on vice ethics, even defined very broadly, relative to the enormous volume of work in virtue ethics. This is an understandable tendency, given how depressing it can be to study ethical and epistemic failings and to study closely examples of them. But our character and conduct do not consist exclusively or perhaps even primarily of virtues and other excellences and it would be naïve to suppose that flourishing and the good life are tangible prospects for all people. As argued by feminist ethicists, like Kate Norlock and Lisa Tessman, we should honestly acknowledge a grim consequence of our individual and collective vices and failings: too many human beings are entrapped by the entrenched and ubiquitous patterns of vicious conduct and systematic failings into lives fundamentally characterised by a perpetual struggle whose plausible aim is not flourishing in the world – a prerogative of the privileged – but rather at the existentially denuded possibility of *coping* with its oppressive realities (Norlock 0000, Tessman 0000).

By this point, the ‘critical’ dimensions of a critical character epistemology should be a little clearer, even if more will need to be said later. For now, I need to o explain that second term – the reference to *character* epistemology.

**3. Epistemic vices and failings.**

I said that vice epistemology and vice epistemology are two sister disciplines. Each could be understood as engaged in a division of labour, the study of the positive and negative aspects of epistemic character. I want to challenge that way of thinking about the two disciplines by reconceptualising them as part of a unitary enterprise of character epistemology.

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We can start with an ontological question: what kind of things are epistemic vices? Quassim Cassam offers a very useful overview of the responses to that question, which he breaks down into three related questions: what kinds of things are epistemic vices, how are we to distinguish different vices, and, relatedly, to what are our distinctions between vices answerable? (Cassam 2020). In response to the kind question, there are two main answers. A *vice-monist* maintains that epistemic vices are one kind of things, with by far the favourite answer being *character traits* – an ontological presupposition about vice going back in the Western tradition to Aristotle. A *vice-pluralist*, however, allows that epistemic vices can be different kinds of things. Contemporary vice epistemologists offer, as candidates, character traits, attitudes, and ways of thinking – what Casassm neatly labels *character-vices*, *attitude-vices*, and *thinking-vices* (Cassam 2020: 00). Battaly focuses on character-vices and Tanesini on attitude-vices, while Cassam – and, I think, Medina (2012: 00)– embrace all three kinds.

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Second, there are normative questions about how best to understand the *badness* of epistemic vices. After all, knowing that something is bad is quite different from being able to say what is bad about it. Sometimes, a blunt judgment that x is bad is sufficient, but not in all cases. In the case of vices, there are often contrasting judgements about whether a given normative explanation of why a certain vice is bad really goes deep enough – while in other cases, there is the opposite worry that some analyses go too far. (Such disagreements often arise for consequentialist accounts of the vices, since traits like arrogance and dogmatism in some cases arguably have positive or productive effects).

There are two main normative models of epistemic vices, each with their champions, and a third hybrid option which allows for their combination. *Vice-consequentialists* locate the badness of vice in relation to their epistemic effects or ends. Battaly calls these *effects-vices* which I divide into two groups. *Passive effects-vices* are ones that systematically fail to directly produce good epistemic effects, such as apathy and laziness, which of course might in turn create conditions more directly productive of bad effects. *Productive effects-vices*, by contrast, are those that systematically tend to produce bad epistemic effects. Arrogance, for instance, typically manifests in the propagation of false beliefs by disrupting our receptivity to learning and critical correction – it produces the bad effects of avoidable ignorance. Some effects-vices may have both passive and productive forms, depending on the behaviour and situations of the vicious agent.

The second main normative model, *vice-motivationalism*, appraises the badness of epistemic vices in their constituent epistemically bad motives, values, and desires, and it is best represented by Alessandra Tanesini. Charlie Crerar usefully distinguishes the two main forms of motivationalism. *Presence accounts* see vices are manifesting the presence of some epistemically bad motive, desire, or value, such as the desire to withhold salient information from other enquirers. *Absence accounts* see vices are manifesting the absence of some good motives, values, and desires, such as the lack of care or concern for truth that, for Cassam, is constitutive of the vice of *epistemic insouciance* (Cassam 2018: ch. 4). Actually, Crerar adds a third ‘compatibility’ position, according to which certain vices include intermingled virtuous and vicious motivations (think of a conspiracy theorist who is radically doxastically rigid but also driven by a genuine and conscientious commitment to the truth).

Considering these two main types of normative model and their variants, there is the further option to embrace what Battaly calls normative pluralism (Battaly 2014). It allows us to maintain that some vices are effects-vices, other motives-vices, while others have a more hybrid complexion. For a pluralist, we need not prejudge which normative framing ought to be used for any given epistemic vice—sometimes appeal to effects does the job, whereas in other cases one might need to attend to inner features of the agent, like motives. This is an obvious point where the ontological and normative issues converge – if, like Tanesini, vices are defined in terms of attitudes, then their badness should be assessed according to those internal features rather than external effects in the world. If your inner motivating desire is to disrupt the epistemic agency of other people, then you are epistemically vicious, prior to and independently of any actual success in doing so.

A critical character epistemologist can remain neutral about the ontological and normative accounts of the nature and badness of epistemic vices. By keeping options open, their retain maximum flexibility. But there is a specific ontological issue on which they have a firmer view, one that explains the reference to *character* epistemology. Simply enough, their object of investigation is epistemic character and its excellences and failings, meaning that character epistemology should not be thought of in compound terms as virtue epistemology *plus* vice epistemology.

There are two reasons. First, epistemic character is not only made up of *virtues* and *vices*. Its most basic components are epistemic dispositions, to argue, criticise, deliberate, explain and so in in certain ways. Only some dispositions will be sufficiently strong and stable to class as virtues and vices, a claim recently defended by Christian Miller (0000). In a nice term used by Mary Midgley, character is ‘dappled’, not a definite mosaic of virtues and vices. Second, the major categories for assessing character are *excellences* and *failings*, not virtues and vices. Granted, virtues and virtues are the main types, but there are many other excellences and failings of character. Some other sorts of character failings include absence of valuable skills, a dearth of experience, inauthenticity and lack of integrity, perceptual and cognitive incapacities, and so on. Of course, a radical vice pluralist may just class all of these as vices, but, for many, a poverty of experience is not really a *vice*, even if it is sustained by certain vices, such as arrogance. Ditto with epistemic excellences, like a fantastic memory or a wealth of diverse experience, which may would regard as skills or faculties, not virtues. Of course, a radical virtue-pluralist would happily class them as all virtues.

A character epistemologist therefore sees themselves as engaged in a philosophical study of the nature, development, and significance of excellences and failings of epistemic character, and not just *virtues* and *vices* of the mind. But what makes that project ‘critical’?

**4. From corruption to predicaments.**

An obvious concern for all those who study epistemic character is how it develops, including both explanatory work on the developmental conditions and processes and normative work on their contingent suboptimalities. No-one thinks that the social world provides an Edenic environment for the cultivation and exercise of our epistemic excellences. The development of epistemic character depends on an array of contingent and suboptimal social, material, and epistemic conditions. These include, *inter alia*, inequalities in the distribution of goods, entrenched inequalities, problematic power relations, and entrenched systems of violence – all of these well-studied by epistemologists inspired by feminist and critical race theory (see Dotson 0000, Medina 0000).

An attractive of vice epistemology has been a keen appreciation on the importance of these suboptimalities for any serious theorising of epistemic character. This appreciation comes from at least two places. First the focus on epistemic vices naturally directs attention to the negative aspects of our personal and collective epistemic lives and their sources, like the ways that arrogance can be generated by unequal gendered power relations. Second, several leading vice epistemologists explicitly operate with liberatory goals and sensibilities, most obviously a default sensitivity to what Robin Dillon calls the sociopolitical dimensions of character, the ways that ‘character is shaped by, supports, and resists domination and subordination’ (Dillon 2012: 83).

A critical character epistemologist thus operates with the conviction that epistemic character is largely the product of contingent social and material conditions that will often or usually have two problematic features. First, they are suboptimal, in various ways, such as being materially impoverished, epistemically violent, and dialectically inert. Epistemic life will tend to go badly if one is cold and hungry, constantly harassed and unstable, and lacking constructive opportunities to develop and expand one’s epistemic capacities and projects. A second problematic feature of the social world is that it is often *epistemically corrupting*, my term for all those events, processes, or structures that tend to damage or distort epistemic character and conduct, whether by facilitating the development and exercise of epistemic failings or militating against the cultivation and exercise of epistemic virtues (Kidd 2019 and 2020). Earlier analyses of epistemic corruption can be found in feminist and critical race epistemologists back as far as early modern England, all of which affirmed the experience of having one’s epistemic character subjected to damaging influences.

Critical character epistemology conceives of our character-epistemic developmental possibilities as being shaped – and, often, for the worse – by the interrelated contingencies and suboptimalities of the social world. A main inspiration for this way of conceptualising the relation of character and oppression, to the social world is Claudia Card (0000). At the moment, perhaps the richest concept available for understanding the ways that epistemic character relates dynamically to social environments is offered by José Medina (2012): that of an *epistemic predicament*. Although not systematically defined by him, it is presented as the particular and changing structure of epistemically toned challenges, dangers, and needs experienced by people as a result of their emplacement within the social world (see Medina 2012: 000).

I think that theorising about epistemic character can benefit enormously from the concept of an epistemic predicament. Specifically, the particularities of our predicaments fundamentally structure the space of character-epistemic developmental possibilities that a subject naturally inhabits. This is because epistemic predicaments incorporate and sustain different *patterns of susceptibility to certain* *vices.* Obviously, there are many vices, some of them already described, and others only later described by vice epistemologists. However, our susceptibilities to developing these vices varies across different agents. Much depends on their internalised psychologies of power, the current developing state of their character, and the dynamic assemblage of pressures and temptations acting upon them and their own awareness and responsiveness to them. An important lesson of Alessandra Tanesini’s work, for instance, is that those who occupy more privileged social standpoints at are a much greater risk of developing ego-defensive vices, like arrogance and haughtiness. Conversely, those occupying marginalised and oppressed social positions are more highly susceptible to the vices she labels timidity and servility (Tanesini 0000, 0000). Even if all subjects are, in the abstract, susceptible to a range of epistemic vices, the actual patterns of susceptibility will be quite different and much more particularistic.

A second way that epistemic predicaments relative to epistemic character lies in the specific range of challenges, dangers, and threats to which a person gets subjected. Some of the worst epistemic predicaments will be characterised by horrible constant and oppressive patterns of epistemic violence. Consider those occupying less privileged social standpoints: to simply survive in the world they must learn to cope with systematic experiences of unjust credibility deficiency – experiences of silencing and testimonial smothering and other forms of intersubjective epistemic violence (Dotson 2012). But that is not a challenge experienced by those with more privileged places in the world, who, in a sense, may be experiencing the opposite challenge—that of trying to become aware of, and then to resist, the inducements to internalise a corrupted testimonial sensibility. In these and other similar ways, epistemic predicaments fundamentally structure our how we experience and engage with the social world—the challenges one faces, ones resources for responding to them, the specific risks or dangers one is likely to encounter in the world, and so on.

Inclusion of epistemic predicaments complicates our thinking about the nature and the development of epistemic vices and other failings of epistemic character. For one thing, it means we must stay closer to empirical studies about the prevalence and distribution of epistemic vices and failings within a given population. It also requires us to think in socially and intersectionally sensitive ways about the details of our emplacement within the social world. It also complicates the individualistic framing of a lot of vice epistemology because it is clear that epistemic predicaments can be collectively shared, not least due to the shared patterns of epistemic socialisation due to the material structures of the social world and the gendered and racialised norms and structures of the social world. A classic study of this, of course, are W.E.B. Du Bois’ analyses of the ‘double consciousness’ developed by oppressed African-Americans. A further complexity is that there is a *dynamic relationship* between subjects and their predicaments. We are not necessarily passive in the face of our epistemic predicaments. People often try to transform their predicaments, and sometimes those of others, out of some combination of frustration, compassion, and the imperatives of survival. Individually and collectively, people can try to alter the forms or intensity of immanent risks, to change the structural relationships between epistemic needs and resources, and so on. Indeed, much of our epistemic agency is surely taken up with attempted alterations of such predicaments—whether to improve our own predicaments or to worsen that of others. The sad truth is that, for many people, the former requires the latter, insofar as systems of social and epistemic oppression invariably disadvantage one group to the benefit of another.

**5. From criticism to amelioration.**

The intermingling of epistemic character and social environments captured using Medina’s concept of an epistemic predicament sets up various difficult questions of an ameliorative sort. Given the plurality of predicaments, at least two issues need discussing: the difficulties of *diagnosing* *predicaments* and of developing *replicable interventions*. If predicaments are plural, it can be very difficult to work out, in detail, the particular patterns of susceptibility and to describe in detail the structure of needs, challenges, and so on. Moreover, the very plurality of predicaments may feed a worry that our interventions to improve predicaments must be highly particular, in ways that deny us the efficiency and tractability of workable general strategies of amelioration.

I will not provide comprehensive responses at this point to these worries, contenting myself to a pair of general points that, hopefully, lessen the worry. First, a certain degree of generality to predicaments is assured by the general psychological features common to human beings. These can provide a basis for at least some general solutions to problems of susceptibility to at least certain ranges of epistemic vices, like the vices that mark excesses and deficiencies of humility described by Tanesini. Second, epistemic predicaments can relatively limited by the considerable degree of material stability of our world – the relative fixity of many of our social structures, the endurance of our institutions, and the rigidity of our practices. These offer a basis for designing fairly larger-scale generalised ameliorative interventions and the critical character epistemologist should here engage with cognate work by those doing the sorts of applied work one sees in feminist epistemologies of science and a newly emerged discipline, political epistemology (Fehr and Plaisance 2010; Hannon and de Ridder 2021).

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*Critical character epistemology* studies epistemic character as it develops within the constraints inherent in social environments characterised by vast systemic suboptimalities, systems of oppression and corruption, and so on. Theorising vices and failings is therefore a powerful critical tool for understanding the development and activities of epistemic agents emplaced within those social environments. The critical character epistemologists thus has a very definite *social conception of epistemic subjects*, that being an inheritance from feminist epistemology and wider developments in social epistemology. As Dillon says of her own 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’ (Dillon 2012: 104).

This social conception of epistemic agents points to two other features of a critical character epistemology. One is an inherent sensitivity to the socio-political dimensions of epistemic character, the ways, for instance, that our practices of character appraisal are often distorted by invidious prejudices. We do not always perceive or acknowledge the vices of others and when we engage with those we regard as enemies, rivals, or inferiors, we are often prone to virtues as vices – courage as insubordination, for instance. Similarly, we can be prone to see vices as virtues, as when the arrogance of the stereotypical white man is so easily seen and praised as confidence. Another feature is an explicit *liberatory aspiration*, an inheritance from critical theory, the general theme of being, in Max Horkheimer’s words, ‘to liberate human beings from the circumstances that enslave them’ (Horkheimer 0000: 00). The deep aim of a critical character epistemologist is to try as best as possible to remove or mitigate those corrupting structures and replace them, as much and as far as possible, with edifying alternatives. That is a broad goal, consistent with various moral and political goals, the choice of which is an crucial task for a critical character epistemologist.

7. *Critical character epistemology demands* *aetiological sensitivity*

A critical character epistemologist wants to understand how our vices and failings develop, a desire that expresses itself in a methodological commitment I call *aetiological sensitivity*. It’s a commitment to investigate the conditions under which the epistemic character of agents developed—the assemblage of conditions, processes, interactions, and events that feed the cultivation or the corruption of people. Medina refers to it when speaking of his interest in the ‘socio-genesis’ of epistemic character and we see it, too, in Dillon’s emphasis on the developmental complexity of our vices, from the psychological to the cultural (Medina 2012: 000, Dillon 2012: 000).

I see three main reasons why aetiological sensitivity should matter for those who are interested in epistemic virtues and vices, as well as for the a character epistemologist more specifically. The first is *explanatory*: we better understand the development and persistence of epistemic failings if we attend to their material and social scaffoldings and the facilitating psychological and cultural factors. Quassim Cassam has recently emphasises the need for a sort of explanatory pluralism – explaining our epistemic failings in terms of psychology and ideology and political-rational terms, rather than in solely in terms of vice epistemology. The fact is that our epistemic failings are the complex products of all sorts of factors, appraisal of which requires a careful aetiological sensitivity (Cassam 0000: 000). A tricky question will be the specific character of explanations of the formation of our vices: are these explanations to be understood *mechanistically* (in terms of stable causal mechanisms) or *narratively* (in terms of the particular contingent interactions and decisions of individuals)? Granted, there is probably a need for some combination of mechanistic and narrative explanations, for the reasons described by Cassam. General psychological mechanisms, interpersonal relations, and the practical and epistemic possibilities build into social structures all play their roles. A critical character epistemologist can sensibly default to this sort of pluralism, although they still need to give details of whatever processes are being disclosed when one exercises the relevant sorts of aetiological sensitivity.

A second reason in support of aetiological sensitivity concerns our evaluation of vicious epistemic agents. When confronted with an epistemically vicious person, one very natural response is criticism and blame, whether their viciousness is destructive or merely very irritating. But our social practices of epistemic character appraisal must be much more complicated. First, there are many evaluative responses to vicious people, some of them neglected, such as anger, disappointment, frustration, resentment, and sadness. Vice epistemologists have tended to focus on blame due to the prominent place in wider virtue theory of debates about responsibility (Battaly 0000). But blame should not occlude what is a much more diverse array of responses to vicious people.

Second, aetiological sensitivity is liable to complicate many of our social practices of epistemic character appraisal. Think of the practice of *vice-attribution* and one of its specific sub-practices, which I have elsewhere labelled *vice-charging* (Kidd 2016). We attribute vices to ourselves and to other and do so for a variety of purposes—to articulate our discontents, to condemn, to warn others, and so on. But we may become warier about attributing vices and issuing condemnatory charges if we appreciate the messier aetiological histories behind many vicious characters. Indeed, we could consider shifting our language, since many epistemically vicious subjects will arguably be described as *epistemically corrupted*. To attribute vices is one thing, but when that is also accompanied by an aetiological story, however tentative or incomplete, one should perhaps use the term corrupted. (Corruption, after all, is often something that *happens* to a person or is *done to them* by persons or structures who should themselves be included in a critical or evaluative story).

When it comes to evaluations, a critical character epistemologist’s slogan might be: ‘NO ATTRIBUTION WITHOUT AETIOLOGY!’ Like any slogan, that admits of a variety of interpretations. At its strongest, it can act as a refusal to attribute vices without complete aetiological investigation, but that seems clearly too strong. In more moderate versions, the point might that one should not rush into blaming and criticising without taking into account the likelihood that there may be a messier developmental tale to tell. Granted, aetiology is a difficult activity in many cases, given the limitations on our time, investigative powers, and a more general need to press on with the business of life, which usually prevents us stopping to do the diligent work of conscientious scrutiny of our actions and appraisals.

For that sort of reason, humility and reticence will often be well-advised. But there are three other considerations to guide our efforts to develop a relatively fair-minded sort of aetiologically sensitive appraisal of epistemically vicious people. First, we must distinguish *vicious acts* and *vicious persons*. An act of dogmatism need not be performed by a dogmatic person, since it could be a one-off or a *folie*. Second, we should largely confine ourselves to making *conditional vice attributions*: a tentative attribution that one is willing to amend or withdraw upon exculpatory aetiological data. When one says, “Oh, he’s so dogmatic!”, the implied conditionals might be, “At least, that’s how it appears to me, based on the evidence available to me, which may be incomplete or lacking vital context.” Third, judgments about if and to what extent we need aetiological sensitivity may depend on the *function*s of vice-attributions. Clearly there are many, ranging from venting and social bonding to warning and publicly condemning. Intuitively, the more serious the function, the greater the need for aetiological sensitivity, where the criteria may be the riskiness of the attribution or the severity of ramifications if an attribution is proven to be unjust.

A critical character epistemologist should take care to guard aetiological sensitivity against potential abuses and misconceptions. An obvious one is that allowing appeals to the aetiology of people’s epistemic vices should not be used as a ‘Get Out of Jail Free Card’. Blame can be preserved because some people are genuinely responsible for having sought or allowed the corruption of their character. Some people make bad decisions and ignore warnings and in other ways facilitate their own corruption—a phenomenon that we might call *wilful epistemic self-corruption*. But blaming should be used with care. It must be based in a careful scrutiny of the agent in question and one should also ask whether the blaming is likely to be counterproductive (Alfano 0000: 000 and Tanesini 0000).

A second way to ensure proper use of aetiological sensitivity is to be clear about the ways it affects the *content* and *object* of evaluative responses. Confronted with a dogmatic individual, one might feel anger—but should it be directed at the avoidable bad decisions of that individual or at the dogmatising social structures that corrupted their character? Where should be put the anger, as it were? As Robin Dillon points out, criticising individuals rather than the structures that corrupt their character and behaviour is a standard way in which structures of oppression remain intact and invisible (Dillon 2012: 000). Given the liberatory aspirations of the critical character epistemologist, it would be a terrible irony if their own sincere efforts to overcome corrupting structures ended up perpetuating them.

There are two other closed related ways in which aetiological sensitivity can be abused. One is that it can be exploited as part of a *perpetual delay strategy*. A vicious agent can attempt to suppress any character-epistemic evaluation by insisting on a need for more and more aetiological scrutiny. There are always more questions one can ask, a fuller story, a broader evidence base – just as climate sceptics and Big Tobacco can always insist on the need for more studies before action under the guise of a sincere conscientious epistemic proceduralism. A related risk is that certain vicious agents can use their social power in the effort to manipulate public records of their character, actions, and career with the aim of impeding effective aetiological investigations. It’s already famously difficult in many cases to discern an agent’s internal motivations (a problem for a motivationalist about vices) but also often easy enough to conceal at least certain of the bad effects of acts of epistemic vice. Not always, of course, but often. Many epistemically vicious agents are quite cunningly skilled at concealing what they are doing whether through subtlety, misdirection, and similar skills.

Considering these complications and potential abuses, one might ask why a critical character epistemologist does not simply abandon aetiological sensitivity for being more trouble than it’s worth. Such abandonment would be premature. Aetiological sensitivity, like any tool, has risks if used without care or understanding: the important question is whether the work it does is worth it. I have already explained the explanatory and evaluative work of aetiological sensitivity—in deepening our explanation of how agents come to be and remain vicious and in thickening our evaluative responses. But I think the most important function of aetiological sensitivity is that it is important to the ultimate goal of *amelioration*. When we are studying epistemic vices, the end goal should be the effort to improve our personal and collective epistemic functioning.

Cassam calls this the project of *vice-reduction*, though that needs spelling out a little (Cassam 0000: 000). We could try to reduce the *frequency* of vicious behaviours or the range of vices that consistently mar our characters or their *severity*. I doubt we could ever really eradicate our arrogance and dogmatism, but perhaps we could become less arrogant and dogmatic. Maybe we are doomed to a certain amount of epistemic viciousness due to a combination of our inherent epistemic frailties and the ineradicable suboptimalities of our shared social world—a Pascalian vision of our inveterate ‘wretchedness’. But that is a gloomy vision consistent with the brighter hope that we can make at least some progress in managing that wretchedness, whether through acts of individual self-discipline or reform of our collective structures or, more likely, some artful combination of these responses (see Battaly 2016). We might even follow Pascal in hoping for some redemptive act of corrective grace. Whatever our responses, we should not merely acquiesce in our epistemically vicious and corrupted status. We should try to identify systematically what works to improve our epistemic character and conduct through empirical investigations. Vice epistemologists and wider philosophical character theorists offer many candidates – from blaming and vice-charging to structural reform and exposure to edifying exemplars. Indeed, much current work on vices aims to work out what works Battaly (2016) is sceptical about prospects for self-reform and there are good criticisms of exposure to exemplars of virtue, whether as a general corrective strategy (Tanesini 2016) or for specific virtues (Watson 2019). There are also significant *backfire risks* that need to be assessed: some of our attempted ameliorative strategies could have an unintended effect of promoting vices, due to failures in design or implementation.

Ultimately, I suspect we will end up asking very specific questions of the sort, “What sorts of actions tend to work for X agents, under Y conditions, for Z vices?” The worry here is that we end up with a sort of *ameliorative particularism*. If our interventions tend to be *too* specific, they will lack a desired degree of generality and we just lack the resources for custom case-by-case ameliorative interventions. Limited resources necessitate general solutions. Still, we can hope for a certain degree of generality, due to general psychological features of human beings and the fact that we participate in common social and material structures.

A critical character epistemologist can therefore have a degree of confidence in our ability to make at least some progress in their wider ameliorative project, enough at least to justify their pressing on with that work. To do so, they need to consider the scale of any proposed inventions – whether localised corrections to vicious conduct of oneself and a few others or more radical dismantling of entrenched corrupting systems – and the specific sets of values they want to promote. But those sorts of concerns will only matter to those who do want to buy into something like the project of critical character epistemology as I have described it.

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