

# Epistemic Character Damage and Normative Contextualism

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Recent proposals for a “critical character epistemology” (Kidd 2020) attend to the ways in which environments, institutions, social practices, and relationships promote the development of epistemic vice whilst acknowledging that the contexts of differently situated agents demand different epistemic character traits. I argue that a tension arises between two features of critical character epistemology: the classification as “epistemically corrupting” (Kidd 2020) of environments, institutions, or structures which promote the development of epistemic vice; and commitment to normative contextualism – the doctrine that the normative status (the status of a trait as a virtue or as a vice) of some or all epistemic character traits is context-dependent. I show how these two features lead to the claim that certain traits both are epistemic virtues and hinder the development of epistemic virtues. To make such an evaluation consistent, I propose a modified form of normative contextualism: dual-level normative contextualism.

Keywords: Vice Epistemology, Epistemic Virtue, Corruption, Character Damage

A central concern in the developing field of vice epistemology is vice amelioration: the project of reducing the prevalence and severity of epistemic vices within our epistemic communities.<sup>1</sup>

As such, vice epistemologists' interest is not just in identifying and defining epistemic vices, but also in understanding how they come to be and, ultimately, what we can do about them. To make progress in preventing and counteracting the development of epistemic vices, we must understand how external forces, such as environments, social practices, and institutions, promote or facilitate the development of epistemic vice.

Most intuitively, the development of epistemic vices is undesirable due to their negative consequences for their bearer's epistemic endeavours – they will obstruct the acquisition, retention and sharing of epistemic goods (Cassam 2019). But there is also a deeper sense in which individuals are made worse off in terms of the *damage* done to their epistemic character. To isolate this deeper sense in which character is damaged, I consider cases in which an individual's character develops in ways which are conventionally recognised as epistemically vicious in order to cope within ubiquitously hostile environments and in which their vicious epistemic character development makes them epistemically better off than they otherwise would have been. I will call the changes to character in such cases “epistemic coping strategies”. In such cases, how should we understand the nature of the damage to epistemic character done by the development of epistemic vice given that the development of those epistemic vices makes the individual better off than they otherwise would have been?

In character theory both within and beyond epistemology, an attempt to pay attention to the socially embedded nature of epistemic character has been made through the development of critical character theory (Dillon 2012). One of the central features of critical character theory – as developed by Robin Dillon (2012) and recently applied to character epistemology by Ian James Kidd (2020) – is the doctrine of *normative contextualism*. The doctrine's core claim is that the normative status of a character trait (its classification as a virtue or as a vice) is

dependent on the specific context of its bearer (Kidd 2020: 81). Therefore, whether a character trait is classified as a virtue or as a vice will depend on the context of the particular agent by whom it is exercised. Such an approach has been adopted by a number of virtue and vice epistemologists, including Battaly (2018) and Daukas (2019), in order to make sense of the value of strategies which help individuals cope with particular challenges in their environments.

However, in this paper I will demonstrate that such theorists face a tension between these normative contextualist commitments and a second aim of critical and socially informed theorising about epistemic character: the identification of the ways in which social oppression causes harm through the shaping of character. Character is shaped by the social world – particularly relationships of power, privilege and oppression (Dillon 2012: 84). Environments, structures, institutions or agents can corrupt character (Kidd 2020: 71). Identifying the corruption of character and understanding how and why it occurs is an important step in creating conditions in which the development of vices can be avoided, discouraged, or reversed.

I will argue that the tension arises between the two claims following, respectively, from the desire to classify the development of epistemic coping strategies as epistemic corruption and the endorsement of normative contextualism:

- 1) As products of epistemic corruption, the traits developed as part of an epistemic coping strategy must be epistemic vices or hinder the development of epistemic virtues.
- 2) According to normative contextualism, as traits which help agents respond to and cope with their circumstances, traits developed as part of an epistemic coping strategy are epistemic virtues.

Therefore, traits developed as part of epistemic coping strategies must simultaneously be epistemic virtues and hinder the development of epistemic virtues (or be epistemic vices).

I will argue that we can avoid this tension by modifying normative contextualism. The position I develop in this paper – *dual-level normative contextualism* – involves the evaluation of epistemic character traits on two separate levels. One level of evaluation reflects the salience and effectiveness of the epistemic character trait as a means for the individual to respond to the particular challenges of their epistemic predicament. The second level of evaluation reflects the relationship between the epistemic character trait and the non-contextual ideal of epistemic flourishing. This allows us to simultaneously and consistently evaluate the same traits both negatively (and thus class their development as epistemic corruption) and positively (in accordance with normative contextualism).

After providing a brief background to critical character epistemology in §1, I will define and give an example of an epistemic coping strategy (§2). In §3, I will show that epistemic corruption requires changes to epistemic character involving the development of epistemic vice or which hinder the development of epistemic virtue. I will argue that epistemic coping strategies are a form of epistemic corruption and traits developed as part of them are epistemic vices or hinder the development of epistemic virtues. In §4, I set out the motivations for and main claims of normative contextualism. I then argue that according to normative contextualism, traits developed as part of epistemic coping strategies are epistemic virtues because they are effective and salient means for agents to respond to the challenges of their particular contexts. In §5, I make explicit the conflict between the conclusions arrived at in §3 and §4: the traits developed as part of epistemic coping strategies cannot be both epistemic virtues and hinder the development of epistemic virtues (or be epistemic vices). I then propose a resolution to the tension by developing *dual-level normative contextualism*.

## I. CRITICAL CHARACTER EPISTEMOLOGY

Character epistemology, which developed first as virtue epistemology (for example Code 1984; Sosa 1985; Montmarquet 1993; Zagzebski 1996) and later as vice epistemology (for example Battaly 2014; Cassam 2019; Tanesini 2022) subscribes to the general ontological thesis that epistemic agents have an epistemic character consisting of a set of dispositions that guide the way in which they engage in epistemic activities. Being a knower and part of an epistemic community is active and dynamic (Baehr 2011: 1). It involves a range of different activities including: forming and holding beliefs, learning, discovering, investigating, teaching, listening, discussing, evaluating and many more. How well we do in our epistemic projects is influenced by how we go about these activities.

Epistemic virtues are excellences of epistemic character – dispositions which make us excellent epistemic agents. Paradigm examples include intellectual honesty, open-mindedness and intellectual perseverance. On the other hand, epistemic vices are flaws or failings of epistemic character such as intellectual arrogance and closed-mindedness. Both epistemic virtues and vices must be stable aspects of epistemic character – over time and across different situations. I use ‘trait’ to refer to the kind of things which are candidates for being epistemic virtues or vices. I take these broadly to be behavioural dispositions which are underpinned by specific motivations.<sup>2</sup>

Exactly how ‘excellence’ and ‘failing’ are understood varies. There are two main views within character epistemology regarding what makes a trait an excellence or a failing: consequentialism and motivationalism. Consequentialists define epistemic virtues and vices in terms of their consequences. An epistemic virtue is a trait which systematically produces a preponderance of good epistemic effects (see for example, Sosa 1985) whilst an epistemic vice is a trait which systematically produces a preponderance of bad epistemic effects, or systematically obstructs the acquisition, retention or sharing of epistemic goods (Cassam

2019). According to motivationalism, it is not (only) the effects of a trait which make it an excellence or failing of epistemic character, but rather its underlying motivation. For example, epistemic virtues require a certain kind of motivation – often understood as a love of truth, or some more specific motivation derived from a love of truth (for example Zagzebski 1996; Baehr 2011).<sup>3</sup>

Epistemic character does not develop in a vacuum. An individual's circumstances, the challenges they face, the resources and opportunities they have available to them will all impact the development of their epistemic character. Kidd (2020) argues that theorising about epistemic character should take seriously this fact and pay attention to the ways in which social structures, practices and institutions shape the development of character. The kind of theorising which Kidd describes – and terms “critical character epistemology” (2020; 2022) – is largely influenced by Robin Dillon's (2012) proposals for a ‘critical character theory’. Dillon challenges some of the assumptions made in traditional virtue ethics - such as the assumption that if a trait is a virtue, it is a virtue for all agents in all contexts. She argues for character-focused theorising that seeks to understand “how character is shaped by, supports, and resists domination and oppression” (Dillon 2012: 83). In the epistemic domain, critical character epistemology examines the relationship between epistemic character and social oppression.

Dillon criticises the limited range of evaluative responses which traditional character theory has at its disposal (Dillon 2012: 105-106). According to traditional character epistemology, epistemic virtues are praiseworthy and epistemic vices are blameworthy. But recognising the ways in which epistemic character can be shaped by relationships of oppression and privilege or plays a role in reinforcing or resisting such relationships, means that our evaluative responses must be responsive to varying levels of responsibility and control, conflicting needs, and the ways in which flourishing may be impossible for some individuals. Therefore, we need a greater repertoire of evaluative responses beyond simply praise and blame (Dillon 2012: 105-

106; Kidd, 2020). Some traits are regrettable but not blameworthy; others can be commended as effective coping strategies without being praiseworthy. As I will argue below, this more complex repertoire of evaluative judgments can be supported by a normative contextualist framework.

## II. EPISTEMIC COPING STRATEGIES

Under certain conditions agents can be led to adopt epistemic character traits, which under normal conditions are defects of epistemic character, in order to cope with the challenges of their environment. In some cases, this can involve the sacrifice of epistemic goods for the sake of other goods. Consider the characters in George Orwell's (1949) novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four* who face persecution for challenging the complete epistemic authority of the totalitarian Party. Many of them develop epistemic vices such as extreme gullibility or closed-mindedness in order to keep their heads down and protect themselves.<sup>4</sup>

However, it need not always be the case that the development of traits conventionally considered to be epistemic vices involves the sacrifice of epistemic goods for the sake of other goods. Under some extreme hostile conditions, adopting epistemic character traits which typically have bad epistemic effects for the individual and would not normally be endorsed or admired, actually help agents to do epistemically better than they otherwise would. This kind of case is discussed by Heather Battaly (2018) when she considers the possibility that closed-mindedness can have good epistemic effects (and be an 'effects-virtue') in environments heavily polluted with propaganda and misinformation. For ease of reference, I will call these cases "epistemic coping strategies". For something to be an epistemic coping strategy in the sense I have in mind, it must, as a matter of fact, make the individual epistemically better off than they would otherwise be, were they not to adopt the strategy.

Consider the following example. The voices of people with marginalised racial identities are often suppressed, overlooked and silenced in structurally racist societies. Often, honest and frank accounts of the ways in which people’s lives are affected by structural racism do not fit with dominant narratives of a fair, post-racist world. As a result, these conversations can be draining, frustrating or even dangerous, leading some people of color to avoid them.<sup>5</sup> As the writer and journalist Reni Eddo-Lodge writes:

I can’t talk to white people about race anymore because of the consequent denials, awkward cartwheels and mental acrobatics that they display when this is brought to their attention [...]

I cannot continue to emotionally exhaust myself trying to get this message across, while also toeing a very precarious line that tries not to implicate any one white person in their role of perpetuating structural racism, lest they character assassinate me. (Eddo-Lodge 2017: x–xii)

Like the example from *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, this is a coping strategy. Eddo-Lodge describes a strategy through which she can somewhat protect herself from burnout,<sup>6</sup> “character assassination” and other hostile or aggressive responses, should her interlocutors wish to silence or discredit her to avoid addressing the issues which she is highlighting.<sup>7</sup>

In addition, this approach can also give epistemic benefits and prevent epistemic harms in at least two ways. Firstly, it allows more room for deeper and more fruitful discussion within marginalised communities (and amongst genuine allies) because time and energy are not wasted establishing foundational claims like the reality of racism. Secondly, it protects against the epistemic harms arising from the systematic dismissal, testimonial injustice (Fricker 2007) and smears on credibility that can be used as tactics to avoid facing uncomfortable truths and conversations. Repeatedly being on the receiving end of such dismissal can undermine



speakers' faith in themselves as competent epistemic agents (Fricker 2007: 47–48)<sup>8</sup> or by limiting agents' status within the epistemic community (Pohlhaus Jr 2014: 106–107). Therefore, this approach can be described as an epistemic coping strategy: a strategy developed to allow an individual to avoid some of the potential epistemic harms in their environment and direct their time and energy towards more fruitful and worthwhile epistemic endeavours.

Imagine an individual, Sarah, in a very similar context to Eddo-Lodge who adopts the strategy described. Whilst the strategy has epistemic benefits, it is not consciously adopted for this purpose. Sarah primarily adopts the coping strategy to avoid harms such as damage to her sense of self, social exclusion, or other hostile reprisal. Sarah comes across hostile interactions with members of privileged racialised groups regularly and in most aspects of her life. Therefore, the behaviours associated with her epistemic coping strategy become entrenched and widespread, settling into a stable disposition.<sup>9</sup> This disposition, along with the distinct underlying set of motivations, allows us to identify a set of traits which are developed by Sarah as a result of adopting the epistemic coping strategy.

### III. EPISTEMIC CORRUPTION

We often talk of environments, people, institutions, or educational systems having a corrupting influence on individuals. The pressures resulting from oppressive environments may incentivise practices which would not normally be endorsed or lead individuals to face moral dilemmas which have a lasting impact on their moral character (Tessman 2005). This is just one of the ways in which oppression causes harm.

*Epistemic corruption* occurs when an individual's epistemic character comes to be damaged as a result of interactions with agents, environments, institutions, or structures that facilitate the development and exercise of epistemic vices or prevents and erodes the development of epistemic virtues (Kidd 2020: 71; 2021; 2022).<sup>10</sup> Epistemic corruption can occur through a

number of different means, including the absence or derision of virtuous exemplars, the valorisation of vice and vicious exemplars, establishment of policies which necessitate the exercise of vice, and incentivisation of the exercise of vice (Kidd 2020: 75-76). Recognising epistemic corruption and understanding its causes, processes and effects is an important part of the ameliorative project of vice epistemology since promoting the development of virtuous rather than vicious epistemic character will require preventing, mitigating and reversing the effects of epistemic corruption.

#### *A. Epistemic Character Damage*

For an environment, institution or practice to be epistemically corrupting, it must be liable to cause *damage* to epistemic character. The idea of damage to character has been explored in the moral domain in the work of feminist ethicists Claudia Card (1996) and Lisa Tessman (2001; 2005).<sup>11</sup> Card explores the *constitutive moral luck* involved in the development of the self. In particular, she focuses on the ways in which the development of moral agency can be limited, or prevented entirely, by the “damaging nature of oppression” (1996: 4). Tessman (2005) develops this idea within the framework of Aristotelian virtue ethics. The possession of virtue is not sufficient for one’s life to go well – certain external factors also affect our ability to lead a good life: ill-health, misfortune or poverty can prevent one from living a good life even when one is perfectly virtuous.<sup>12</sup> Oppression can impact these external factors: it can deprive one of material resources, deny opportunities or impact health and well-being such that one cannot live a good life.<sup>13</sup>

But, as Tessman argues, oppression can also negatively affect one’s ability to flourish by impacting who one is, how one thinks, and by affecting one’s values and motivations.<sup>14</sup> *Moral damage* occurs when an agent is “prevented from exercising or developing some of the virtues” or “when there is a certain sort of self that one ought to be, but the uncondusive conditions of oppression bar one from cultivating this self” (Tessman 2005: 4)

Kidd notes that the attention paid to character damage within feminist and critical race theories has tended to focus on damage to *moral* character. He speculates that such work has “useful resources to offer those who want to understand the character-epistemic dimensions of social oppression” (2020: 69). Transferring this notion across to the epistemic domain, Kidd describes damage to epistemic character as:

the deterioration of any pre-existing virtues and integrity already present in the subject’s character, or the failure of the subject to develop an epistemic character characterised by virtues and integrity. (Kidd 2020: 71)

Damage to epistemic character need not always be the result of epistemic corruption. It can also be the result of bad luck or failing cognitive abilities for which no one is culpable.

Two things must occur in order for epistemic character to be damaged. Firstly, epistemic character damage requires *change* to epistemic character. Something has not been damaged if nothing about it has changed. There are ways in which changes to an individual’s circumstances may change the *prospects* of her virtuous epistemic character development without making an actual change to her epistemic character. For example, imagine a young student who moves from a school which encourages intellectual humility to one which rewards intellectual arrogance. On day one in her new school, her prospect for developing the virtue of intellectual humility has changed, although no epistemic character changes have yet taken place. Her character has not been damaged at the point when she first joins the school, although it may be damaged at a later time.

Secondly, to damage something is to change it for the worse. The changes which take place as a result of epistemic corruption must be negative. This includes the development of epistemic vice. Kidd also states that damage to epistemic character includes the “failure to develop epistemic character characterised by virtues and integrity” (Kidd 2020: 71). However, it is not

the case that epistemic character is damaged *whenever* epistemic virtues are not being developed: epistemic agents, even those who are virtuous, need not be constantly developing epistemic virtues. Instead, epistemic character is also damaged when it changes in ways which *hinder* the development of virtuous epistemic character – that is, decrease the agent’s prospects or likelihood of developing epistemic virtues or involve the loss, weakening or destabilising of existing epistemic virtue.

### *B. Epistemic Coping Strategies as Epistemic Corruption*

One way in which environments can be epistemically corrupting is by incentivising the development and exercise of epistemic vice and disincentivising the development and exercise of epistemic virtue (Kidd 2020: 76–77). In such environments individuals who develop and exercise epistemic vices may, for instance, benefit from social goods such as esteem and respect from others or accrue material goods such as greater success in their careers than those who are epistemically virtuous. In some cases, the development and exercise of epistemic vices is incentivised because it is the only or most viable response to threats of harm. Environments which give rise to epistemic coping strategies fall into this category: epistemic vices are incentivised because they lead to better outcomes and prevent harms while epistemic virtues are disincentivised because they lead to worse outcomes and do not prevent harms.

In the previous section, I established that epistemic character damage (and therefore epistemic corruption) requires either (a) the development of epistemic vice or (b) changes to epistemic character that hinder the development of epistemic virtue. Therefore, as a form of epistemic corruption, the traits developed as part of epistemic coping strategies will either be epistemic vices or will hinder the development of epistemic virtues. In short, we can argue the following:

- (A1) For epistemic character damage (and thus epistemic corruption) to occur there must be changes to epistemic character which involve the

development of epistemic vice and/or hinder the development of epistemic virtue.

(A2) The development of an epistemic coping strategy is an instance of epistemic corruption.

(A3) Therefore, the development of an epistemic coping strategy must include changes to epistemic character which involve the development of epistemic vice and/or hinder the development of epistemic virtue.

The traits developed in Sarah's strategy are conventionally recognised as epistemic vices, or at the very least are contrary to the kind of character profiles conventionally evaluated as epistemically virtuous. The tendency to truncate one's testimony is putatively at odds with the virtue of intellectual honesty since it involves avoiding or leaving out certain truths pertinent to the topic at hand or altering one's testimony so that it is more palatable than telling the truth. Holding an attitude of hostility and suspicion towards others and making a general assumption of bias and prejudice in others seems opposed to the virtue of intellectual charity – the disposition to interpret others charitably. There may also be aspects of closed-mindedness at play within this coping strategy if the individual holds firmly to her experiential beliefs regarding the existence and nature of racism and is unwilling to engage with any alternative viewpoints, even if just to argue against them.

In principle, being intellectually honest need not be inconsistent with sanitising one's testimony in hostile exchanges with those in positions of power. As noted above, doing so may very well be more conducive to the promotion of epistemic goods than sharing one's testimony unreservedly because of how the audience will respond to and interpret that testimony. However, even if an intellectually honest person were to act in the very same way as Sarah under those circumstances, Sarah's epistemic coping strategy is not consistent with her

exercising the virtue of intellectual honesty since she adopts the strategy primarily to protect herself from harm and not for the sake of epistemic goods. Therefore, the trait which Sarah exercises when sanitising her testimony is not intellectual honesty.

The concept of epistemic corruption is useful as a means of evaluating environments, practices and institutions. It highlights the negative changes that they make to epistemic character. Just as we explain this harm in terms of epistemic corruption in cases like *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, it is desirable that Kidd's account of epistemic corruption can play this explanatory role with regard to the adoption of Sarah's strategy.

Perhaps the problematic nature of these environments can also be located elsewhere – in, for example, injustice, inequality or the objectification of members of marginalised groups. But, whilst these often coincide with epistemic corruption, we should not neglect the harm that is done through the impact on individual character. The best possible intellectual life that can be lived under oppressive conditions – achieved through the adoption of an epistemic coping strategy – is not comparable to living the best possible intellectual life under non-oppressive conditions. Recognising the changes to agents' epistemic character as damage (and thus the result of epistemic corruption) allows us to recognise how oppression causes harm by limiting and distorting character development (Tessman 2001; 2005).

#### IV. NORMATIVE CONTEXTUALISM

I will now turn to normative contextualism and demonstrate how its application to cases of epistemic coping strategies brings us to a conclusion that conflicts with (A3). I will explain the motivations for and define normative contextualism and then argue that the traits which are developed as part of epistemic coping strategies are classified as epistemic virtues according to normative contextualism because they are effective and salient means for their bearer to respond to the particular challenges of their epistemic predicament.

Normative contextualism has been defended and endorsed in a number of different forms within character epistemology. Heather Battaly (2018) considers whether closed-mindedness can be an ‘effects-virtue’ given its potential positive effects under certain extreme conditions. Nancy Daukas (2019: 380–381) argues that acontextually characterising certain epistemic character traits as epistemic vices by definition can obscure the ways in which they may be helpful to members of marginalised groups as means of surviving under conditions of oppression. The position has been developed most systematically by Kidd (2020) - for this reason, I will largely follow Kidd’s formulation of normative contextualism. Since Kidd’s formulation is intended to systematize the proposals made by theorists such as Battaly and Daukas, I take it that my argument also applies to their endorsements of normative contextualism.

Different epistemic agents have different *epistemic predicaments* (Medina 2013: 28; Kidd 2020: 73–4; 2022: 93). That is, each agent is uniquely socially and epistemically situated, facing different epistemic challenges and having access to different epistemic opportunities and resources. As a consequence, different agents require different epistemic character profiles in order to achieve epistemic excellence (Daukas 2019: 381). For example, developing intellectual humility may help agents prone to arrogance achieve epistemic excellence, but its development may not be so beneficial to those who are socialised to be prone to doubt their epistemic capabilities or are generally regarded by others as less capable.

It is important to note that “epistemic predicament” does not refer to some particular circumstances in which an agent may find themselves on a given occasion, but rather to the more general set of epistemic challenges and opportunities that an individual faces over time and in a range of different contexts. The normative contextualist does not claim that the normative status of a trait can vary from situation to situation for an individual. For example, it is not the case that closed-mindedness becomes an epistemic virtue for an individual when

they are, for a short time, in a setting where they can easily be misled by misinformation, but then becomes an epistemic vice for them when they are in a setting that is not heavily polluted with misinformation. Rather, the normative status of a trait for an individual is dependent on the value that it has for them in their epistemic life more broadly.<sup>15</sup>

A consequence of normative contextualism is a weakening of the connection between virtue and praise: whilst the normative contextualist might agree that, say, intellectual arrogance can be a virtue for some individual given their epistemic predicament, they may want to resist the claim that we should praise that individual for their intellectual arrogance. Thus, endorsement of normative contextualism goes hand-in-hand with an expansion of our evaluative repertoire to also include evaluations such as endorsement of a trait, but regret that it must be developed. I will explain in §5.2, how my proposal for dual-level normative contextualism can support such evaluations of epistemic character traits.

It could be argued that the use of the terms “virtue” and “vice” does not seem appropriate when discussing these traits whose value is contextually dependent and which may not be wholly praiseworthy or blameworthy. Normative contextualism is posed in direct opposition to conventional character theories which take virtues and vices to be defined and valuable acontextually. By using the terminology of virtues and vices the normative contextualist is therefore positing that the categories of virtue and vice as understood by conventional (acontextual) character theories are mistaken and should be replaced with the notion of traits whose value is contextually dependent. Therefore, retaining this terminology is useful for demonstrating that the view is posed as a direct challenge to acontextual theories of virtue and vice.

Kidd (2020: 82) makes a distinction between *strong* and *weak* normative contextualism. According to *weak normative contextualism*, some or all epistemic character traits have a default normative status but under certain conditions this default status is overridden. *Strong*



normative contextualism denies this and holds that some or all epistemic character traits only have a normative status in relation to particular agents in particular contexts. I will return to the significance of this distinction in §5.1, but for now I will offer a general picture of normative contextualism.

When establishing what determines the normative status of epistemic character traits for particular agents and in particular contexts we should be motivated by critical character theory's concern with understanding the social nature of character and, in particular, how it allows agents to respond to conditions of oppression. Therefore, the normative status of an epistemic character trait, for some agent in some context, will be determined by how it allows that agent to respond to the particular challenges and opportunities that make up their epistemic predicament. They have a positive normative status (as epistemic virtues) if they are effective and salient ways for the agent to respond to their epistemic predicament and will lead them to do well epistemically given the circumstances.

We can therefore define normative contextualism as follows:

- (B1) Normative contextualism: Traits which are salient and effective means for some particular agent to respond to the particular challenges of their particular epistemic predicament are, for them given their epistemic predicament, epistemic virtues (and not epistemic vices).

The epistemic character traits developed as part of epistemic coping strategies enable their bearers to do better epistemically given their epistemic predicaments than they would otherwise. Therefore, according to normative contextualism, these traits have a positive normative status as epistemic virtues.

In other words, we can argue the following:

- (B2) Epistemic character traits developed as part of epistemic coping strategies in hostile or oppressive environments are salient and effective ways for a particular agent to respond to the challenges they face, given their epistemic predicament.
- (B3) Therefore, the epistemic character traits developed as part of epistemic coping strategies are epistemic virtues (and not epistemic vices) for that particular agent in that context.

It could be objected that the “some or all” clause in Kidd’s definition of both strong and weak normative contextualism leaves open the possibility that the traits developed as part of the epistemic coping strategies are not the kind of epistemic character traits whose normative status is contextually dependent. Kidd does not offer any suggestion as to a criterion by which we can distinguish those traits with a contextually dependent normative status and those without. However, given the examples used by Dillon, the traits developed as part of epistemic coping strategies appear to be a paradigm example of the kind of traits whose normative status is contextually dependent.

## V. RESOLVING THE TENSION

In the remainder of the paper, I will pinpoint the tension and present my solution. The two arguments given above – (A1) to (A3) and (B1) to (B3) – give rise to seemingly conflicting conclusions: (A3) and (B3). The changes to epistemic character that occur in epistemic coping strategy cases cannot be both the loss or hinderance of epistemic virtue and the development of epistemic virtue.

The classification of epistemic coping strategies as a form of epistemic corruption rests upon the recognition that the epistemic character traits to which they give rise change epistemic character for the worse. But this comes into conflict with the implications of normative

contextualism: those same epistemic character traits are epistemic virtues in light of their value for their bearers in coping with their environments. If the normative status of epistemic character traits is determined solely by their value for a particular individual given their epistemic predicament, then we lose the ability to criticise the environments which necessitated the development of epistemic coping strategies on the grounds of being epistemically corrupting.

*A. Strong and weak normative contextualism*

*Strong* normative contextualism rejects the notion of a default normative status for some or all epistemic character traits. It holds that character traits must be defined in value-neutral terms and only within a particular context and in relation to a particular agent can they be assigned a normative status as an epistemic virtue or vice. (Kidd 2020: 83). For example, Nancy Daukas (2019: 380–381) argues that an inherently value laden definition of the trait of vanity leaves no room for recognition that for members of marginalised groups, who must be vigilant about how they are perceived, taking special care to ensure that one is seen positively by others can be a virtue. According to strong normative contextualism there is no context or set of conditions assumed to be ‘normal’ in the sense that it sets the default normative status of the trait. The only way in which the normative status of a trait can be determined is by looking at its relationship to the epistemic excellence of a particular agent given their epistemic predicament.

Strong normative contextualism gives rise to the tension outlined above. If the only normative status of a trait is the one determined by the value of the trait for an individual given their epistemic predicament, then traits conventionally understood as epistemic vices that are developed as effective coping strategies in hostile environments would be evaluated in a positive way because of their effectiveness and salience as responses to that environment for that agent. Because strong normative contextualism holds that the normative status of a trait is

determined by its value for an agent given their epistemic predicament, it does not classify traits developed in epistemic coping strategies as epistemic vices and therefore the result of epistemic corruption.

The alternative, *weak* normative contextualism, holds that some or all epistemic traits may have a default normative status – one that features in the way in which the trait is defined - but under certain conditions this may be revised (Kidd 2020: 83). The status will be revised because, under certain circumstances and given the agents particular epistemic predicament, the trait is salient and effective for responding to the particular challenges faced by the agent when it was not under normal conditions or, if it is normally a salient and effective response, it is not under certain conditions.<sup>16</sup> The key difference between weak and strong normative contextualism is that, according to the former but not the latter, a normative evaluation (the default normative status) is built into the definition of the epistemic character trait – although it may be overwritten in certain contexts.

If we adopt weak normative contextualism, then the normative status referred to in (B1) and (B3) will be the contextualised status of the traits as epistemic virtues for those agents given their epistemic predicaments. On the other hand, the normative status referred to in (A1) and (A3) is the default normative status of the traits as epistemic vices. Therefore, weak normative contextualism offers a potential means to resolve the tension between (A3) and (B3). To defend this solution, I will say more about how the default status of an epistemic character trait arises.

One way in which a trait may have a default status is because we make general assumptions about the context in which it is being developed and exercised. That is, under ‘normal’ conditions a trait has certain effects and the default status is the status accrued in light of these effects. For example, under normal conditions closed-mindedness has bad epistemic effects, such as causing agents to dismiss relevant information or fail to revise their false beliefs and undermining the justification for their true beliefs (Cassam 2019: 35; Battaly 2020: 26–31).

Thus, it has the default status of being an epistemic vice – though this default status is overridden when the context differs from the range of ‘normal’ conditions in certain ways. In an extremely hostile epistemic environment dominated by vast amounts of propaganda and misinformation, closed-minded agents may avoid being misled by unreliable sources or being overwhelmed by the task of sifting through information (Battaly 2018: 39–40). Therefore, for the agent under these conditions, closed-mindedness is an epistemic virtue.

To the extent that the ‘abnormal’ conditions are temporary or limited in their scope we might still consider the default status to be relevant. Our recognition of closed-mindedness as an epistemic virtue in the propaganda-filled environment may be tempered by the consideration that, were the agent to develop closed-mindedness as a stable and entrenched part of her character, then when she finds herself in better epistemic environments, it would not serve her well epistemically.

But this does not help us in cases such as Sarah’s. Racism is structurally and historically entrenched in society and so the conditions which give rise to Sarah’s epistemic coping strategy are not “abnormal”. Were we to imagine a world in which those conditions did not obtain, it would be sufficiently different from the actual world to make it no longer a relevant comparison. Having epistemic character traits that are unsuited to contexts where epistemic coping strategies are not needed does not make her worse off since it is highly unlikely that she would find herself in such a context. Therefore, we have no reason to consider the development of these traits to be damage to her epistemic character. The default status of traits arising from their effects under ‘normal’ conditions cannot be used to explain why epistemic coping strategies constitute a form of epistemic corruption.

*B. Dual-level normative contextualism*

The default status of a trait may still hold sway over our judgements if it is derived not from the effects of the trait under ‘normal’ conditions, but rather the relationship between the trait and the kind of life we would wish for the individual to lead. Such an approach, which I call ‘dual-level normative contextualism’, involves evaluating epistemic character traits on two levels: a contextualised level reflecting the salience and effectiveness of the trait in responding to the agent’s particular epistemic predicament and a non-contextualised level reflecting the relationship between the trait and the living of a ‘flourishing’ epistemic life.

The contextualised level is the level on which the default status of epistemic character traits can be revised if they play a role in allowing their bearers to cope with extreme or hostile environments. But on the non-contextualised level, on which epistemic character traits are assigned their default normative status, they are measured against the ideal of an epistemically flourishing life.

The two levels of evaluation play different roles in our thinking about epistemic character traits. We appeal to the contextualised level in order to understand the forces at play in character development. It helps us to understand why individuals choose or are influenced to develop certain traits in particular environments. It is unhelpful to assume that, for all individuals in their differing contexts, the same epistemic character trait will be equally as valuable for them. If we are to understand what it means to be an epistemic agent who does well given one’s epistemic predicament, we must look to the contextualised level of normative evaluation.

Furthermore, we do on occasion appeal to the contextualised level of evaluation to appraise agents’ epistemic character. For example, we might commend the development of a coping strategy. We also critique the futility of developing traits which are not helpful in an agent’s epistemic predicament. These appraisals need not be as strong as praise and blame – we might

recognise the necessity and utility of developing a coping strategy and in some sense commend the agent but would hesitate to describe this as praising them for developing the coping strategy.

The non-contextualised level informs our thinking about the kind of lives which we hope for agents to be able to live. The regret we may feel at the development of traits which are necessary given the context is derived from our non-contextualised evaluation of the traits.

It is this non-contextualised level, I propose, to which we refer when describing the development of a trait as character damage. In the case of epistemic coping strategies, we label them as epistemic character damage because they deviate from the kind of life that we hope for individuals to lead. This is not a consideration of the kind of life which agents could or should lead given their particular circumstances, but the best kind of life which would be possible were circumstances conducive to it. After all, we deem environments to be corrupting because they lead epistemic character development away from the ideal.

To illustrate this dual-levelled approach to the evaluation of character traits it is useful to consider Lisa Tessman's (2005) account of *burdened virtues* – virtues which are 'disjointed from their bearer's own flourishing' (Tessman 2005: 4). Tessman's account itself does not involve a commitment to normative contextualism since for neither of the forms of burdened virtue which she identifies does the status of the trait as a virtue or a vice differ depending on whether it is developed under conditions of oppression or not. It does, however, demonstrate a two-fold evaluation of moral character traits on which dual-level normative contextualism can be modelled.

According to Tessman, burdened virtues are *virtues* because they are morally necessary for resisting oppression or practically necessary for surviving. To understand what it means to eradicate oppression we require an understanding of what it means for all to have the ability,

freedom and potential to live a good or flourishing life (Tessman 2005: 108). Burdened virtues are *burdened* because they are incompatible with the conception of a good life which liberatory projects aim to make possible for all, either because they have no place in a post-oppression world, or because their exercise under conditions of oppression leaves lasting psychological scars which impede flourishing (Tessman 2005: 108).

Among the burdened virtues are traits which have conventionally been classified as vices and are not part of a character profile constitutive of flourishing as implicit in liberatory projects but, nonetheless, are necessary for surviving and resisting oppression (Tessman 2005: 114). Examples include traits which form part of a ‘hard resolve against the oppression’ and “encourag[e] or cultivat[e] anger and rage in addition to withholding more sympathetic forms of attention.” (Tessman 2005: 115).

Tessman’s two-fold evaluation of traits can be combined with normative contextualism as follows. The status of burdened virtues as *virtues* occurs on the contextualised level of evaluation: it reflects the salience and effectiveness of a trait as a response to an oppressed agents’ context. But their status as *burdened* occurs on the non-contextualised level of evaluation – when they are measured against the ideal of a flourishing life.

To parallel Tessman’s terminology, we might say that the traits developed in epistemic coping strategies like Sarah’s are *burdened epistemic virtues*<sup>17</sup> which are inconsistent with *epistemic flourishing*. On the contextualised level, these epistemic character traits have a positive normative status – as epistemic virtues – due to their value in resisting oppression and working towards liberatory goals. This allows for a much richer understanding than simply recognising their conventional status as vices. It recognises them as understandable and predictable responses to oppressive conditions, underpinned by commendable motivations such as a desire to protect one’s epistemic agency and gain a deep understanding of systems of oppression and how to resist and overcome them.<sup>18</sup>



On the non-contextualised level, we express regret regarding the traits developed as part of Sarah's epistemic coping strategy. This regret can be explained by the sense in which Sarah would be better off had these traits not been strongly incentivised by her environment. The person she becomes as a result of developing these traits is inconsistent with the kind of person we would wish for her to become under better circumstances. Were Sarah to find herself in a better environment in which she does not encounter racism, the traits developed as a part of her epistemic coping strategy would constitute a maladaptation to her environment. Without further development, she would not be epistemically flourishing. Of course, further development of her character may very well be possible and lead to the loss of those traits, but the regret arises because of this extra step which would be required for her to flourish in a better environment.

Under oppressive conditions, many, if not all individuals are prevented from living the kind of life we would wish for, due to the denial of opportunities, failures to have important needs met, or other external factors. But whilst in many instances this is due to external factors, in the case of Sarah it is in part due to characterological factors – even when external factors improve, character change would also be required for her to live the kind of life we would wish for her. This is not distinctive to epistemic coping strategies. The same is true for individuals who for other reasons develop traits conventionally regarded as epistemic vices – in order to live the best kind of life, these aspects of their character would need to change.

We can formulate this idea as follows: traits which are inconsistent with the life we would wish for the individual to lead, were they in more amenable circumstances, are negatively evaluated on the non-contextualised level of evaluation. I will say a little more about the notion of 'the life we would wish for them to lead'. The regret that is explained by our negative evaluation on the non-contextualised level is a regret regarding what could have been. This kind of regret is informative because it identifies the way in which the individual is harmed by the conditions

under which they are living – the harm of having the possibilities for how one’s life can go restricted. Bearing this in mind we can see that the norm against which character is being evaluated is not one that is relational to the actual conditions under which the individual lives. Rather, it is a norm which reflects a better form of life which would be made possible for the individual were the conditions more amenable. How “ideal” these conditions are – that is, how far they are from actual conditions and how close they are to “perfection” – is to be determined and will depend on the nature of the broader liberatory approach and project.

Spelling out the details of such a norm is beyond the scope of this paper and my aim here is to present an argument which is compatible with a range of different views as to what constitutes a good epistemic life. However, I will say a little about the notion of epistemic flourishing as an example of how this norm might be cashed out.

There has been very little discussion of flourishing in relation to epistemic virtues and vices.<sup>19</sup> Berit Brogaard describes epistemic flourishing as the “epistemic equivalent of Aristotle’s eudaimonia (well-being, flourishing, happiness)” (2012: 97). For Brogaard, there is much more to epistemic flourishing than just the acquisition of knowledge.<sup>20</sup> It is to live a life that is epistemically fulfilling. An important part of eudaimonia is membership in a community. In parallel, epistemic flourishing requires having good epistemic relationships with others such that they enable one to share knowledge back and forth, embark on successful shared epistemic projects, and support the epistemic flourishing of others.

There will be many different ways to live a good epistemic life, but in general, to epistemically flourish is to be oriented towards the world such that one is able to direct one’s epistemic projects and engage in them in a way that is fulfilling and meaningful. This fulfilment might include an enjoyment of learning, appreciation of complex questions and satisfaction in solving them, wonder at the natural world, and curiosity about and interest in the world around (Baril 2019: 78).

What would it mean for someone in Sarah's context to intellectually flourish? Living a good epistemic life involves recognising the value of epistemic goods and pursuing fruitful and rewarding projects which give rise to the acquisition, retention and sharing of epistemic goods. Since knowledge production and sharing is a collective project, living a good and fulfilling intellectual life necessarily involves having positive relationships with others in the epistemic community, based on mutual respect. As Tessman (2005: 75-76) notes, a liberatory conception of flourishing differs from a standard approach in part because of the emphasis it places on the relationship between the flourishing of the individual and the well-being of her community. To live a good life, on this picture, requires being part of a community that is doing well – that is, in which all members are given equal respect and do not have their ability to flourish infringed upon by others.

Doing this requires certain epistemic character traits which encourage collaboration and positive interactions with others – including, what Kawall (2002) terms “other regarding epistemic virtues”. They require interacting with others in a way that promotes trust and facilitates effective communication and collaboration. The epistemic character traits involved in Sarah's strategy are at odds with developing such epistemic character traits since they promote distrust and disengagement.

One might respond that although they do not foster cooperation and collaboration with all members of the epistemic community, the traits developed as part of Sarah's strategy are still part of what leading a good intellectual life looks like for her in her context. Given her circumstances, a good intellectual life is one in which she avoids fruitless, draining and hostile conversations in order to focus her energy on developing a robust understanding of her own circumstances, allowing her still the possibility of some fruitful collaboration and relationships with those members of her epistemic community who do not treat her with hostility.

But this does not amount to flourishing in Tessman's liberatory sense. At the heart of liberatory movements is the conviction that there is a better form (or forms) of life which all should be able to lead but are prevented from doing so by structures of oppression (Tessman 2005: 3). One of the aims of liberation is to make possible something more than mere survival. One of the harms inflicted by Sarah's environments is that she is denied the opportunity of having fruitful and fulfilling relationships with *all* members of her epistemic community. Traits, which are necessary for her own survival, may be at odds with promoting the flourishing of others, promoting positive relationships or fostering a healthy epistemic community.

Therefore, one of the relevant ideals against which we should evaluate the character profile developed by adopting Sarah's strategy, is the kind of life which such an individual could live if they lived in a world free of oppressive structures – one in which a greater range of positive relationships within the epistemic community is possible. Evaluating character against this ideal allows us to identify the extent to which oppression limits the kind of intellectual life that can be lived by such an individual.

### *C. Resolving the tension*

I will now argue that adopting dual-level normative contextualism resolves the tension because it allows us to hold both (A3) and (B3) simultaneously and consistently. This is because they each refer to different levels of normative evaluation.

As it stands, Kidd's definition of epistemic character damage does not specify on which level of evaluation the changes to epistemic character must involve the development of epistemic vice or hinder the development of epistemic virtues. That is, epistemic character damage could involve changes to character which erode or prevent the individual from developing either: (a) traits which are virtues when evaluated on the *contextualised* level; or (b) traits which are virtues when evaluated on the *non-contextualised* level.

If we want to resolve the tension, then it cannot be the former. Therefore, it must be the latter.

So (A1) should be revised as follows:

(A1)\* For epistemic character damage (and thus epistemic corruption) to occur there must be changes to epistemic character which, when evaluated on the non-contextualised level, involve the development of epistemic vice and/or hinder the development of epistemic virtue.<sup>21</sup>

Given this reformulation of (A1) to (A1)\*, we can revise the conclusion (A3) as follows:

(A3)\* Therefore, the development of an epistemic coping strategy must include changes to epistemic character which, when evaluated on the non-contextualised level, involve the development of epistemic vice and/or hinder the development of epistemic virtue.

When we adopt dual-level normative contextualism we must revise (B1) slightly:

(B1)\* Dual-level normative contextualism: traits which are salient and effective means for some particular agent to respond to the particular challenges of their epistemic predicament are, for them given their epistemic predicament, epistemic virtues (and not epistemic vices) when evaluated on the contextualised level.

We therefore must revise the conclusion to the argument, (B3):

(B3)\* When evaluated on the contextualised level, the epistemic character traits developed as part of epistemic coping strategies are epistemic virtues (and not epistemic vices) for that particular agent in that context.

(B3)\* refers only to the normative status of the traits developed as part of epistemic coping strategies on the contextualised level. Therefore, we no longer have any conflict between (A3)\* and (B3)\* and we can consistently hold them in relation to the same epistemic character traits.

## VI. CONCLUSION

In this paper, I have demonstrated that there is a potential tension between two features of critical character epistemology. On one hand, according to normative contextualism, traits which are salient and effective ways for an agent to respond to their epistemic predicament are epistemic virtues. On the other hand, epistemic corruption requires either the development of epistemic vice or changes to character that hinder the development of epistemic virtue.

I have proposed a way in which we can satisfy both the motivation behind normative contextualism and classify the development of epistemic coping strategies as a form of epistemic corruption. By distinguishing the two levels of evaluation we can highlight a particular feature of oppressive environments. Namely, such environments give rise to evaluations that pull in different directions depending on the level of evaluation. Agents in such environments cannot effectively respond to the challenges of their epistemic predicament whilst also pursuing epistemic flourishing. This gives rise to complex and ambivalent evaluations of epistemic character traits and creates situations in which developing traits that are positively evaluated on one level will lead to negative evaluations on the other level. Using the dual-level framework I have developed, we can explain how these ambivalent evaluations of epistemic coping strategies arise.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See for example Kidd (2020: 70) and Cassam (2019: 186–187)

<sup>2</sup> See King's (2021) account of intellectual honesty, and its distinctness from moral honesty, as an example how traits are individuated according to underlying motivations. Crerar (2017) argues that epistemic vices need not be tied to specific motivations however, in order to capture only traits which could be either epistemic virtues or vices, I take motivations to be necessary for the individuation of traits.

<sup>3</sup> Note that this distinction is connected to, but not identical to the common distinction between reliabilism and responsibilism which concerns whether epistemic virtues and vices are limited only to those traits for which an individual can properly be held responsible. The distinction with which I am interested in this paper concerns, not which kinds of traits can be intellectual virtues or vices, but rather what it is that determines their status as a virtue or as a vice. Thus, I do not take for granted any traditional assumptions regarding the extent to which individuals are responsible for their virtues or vices and are thus worthy of praise or blame.

<sup>4</sup> Heather Battaly (2018: 39-40) discusses the utility of closed-mindedness in relation to this example.

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<sup>5</sup> This is similar to a practice which Kristie Dotson (2011: 244) terms “testimonial smothering”, wherein a speaker pre-emptively edits or withholds certain kinds of testimony because they believe that offering such testimony would put them at risk of hostile reprisal, or they avoid expressing themselves in certain ways, because they believe their audience will be unable and unwilling to understand.

<sup>6</sup> This burnout may be caused by epistemic exploitation: the expectation for members of marginalised groups to undergo “unrecognized, uncompensated, emotionally taxing, coerced epistemic labour” (Berenstein 2016: 57).

<sup>7</sup> Eddo-Lodge herself does not in fact adopt this strategy but rather has continued to contribute to public discourse on racism in the U.K., most notably in her 2017 book *Why I’m No Longer Talking to White People about Race*.

<sup>8</sup> See also Bartky (1990) on internalised or “psychological oppression”.

<sup>9</sup> Of course, this will not occur in all instances of epistemic coping strategies, but it is sufficient for my argument here that it is plausible that in some cases an epistemic coping strategy involves the development of stable dispositions that are consistent across a wide range of contexts.

<sup>10</sup> Kidd distinguishes between two modes of corruption: “active” corruption (vice-promoting) and “passive” corruption (virtue-stifling) (2020: 71).

<sup>11</sup> Focus on the impacts of oppression on character has a long precedent in the work of, for instance, Du Bois (2015), Césaire (1972), Wollstonecraft (2004), and Astell (1999).

<sup>12</sup> For example, Aristotle writes that external goods are required for happiness, either because they are required for virtuous action or their lack is “like a stain on happiness” (Nicomachean Ethics, I.8, 1099a31-b3). See also Nussbaum (1986).

<sup>13</sup> Tessman argues that we do not need to give a fully fleshed out account of the good life in order to understand the concept of moral damage. All we need is an understanding of the way in which lives go better, for example, in the absence of overwhelming loss, when one believes that one is deserving of love, and when one does not fear violence (2001: 79).

<sup>14</sup> Tessman offers “psychological oppression” (Bartky 1990) – the internalisation of prejudicial attitudes towards oneself – as one example of how this can occur.

<sup>15</sup> It is most natural to spell this out in consequentialist terms: epistemic virtues are traits which, for that individual, given their epistemic predicament, lead to the greatest acquisition, retention and sharing of epistemic goods overall. However, I leave open the possibility that it might be developed in a non-consequentialist fashion. For example, the normative contextualist might challenge the claim that certain motivations – such as a “love of truth” (Zagzebski 1996) – have intrinsic value. Rather, different motivations may be valuable for different individuals given their epistemic predicaments. If such a challenge could be made, then the normative contextualist need not define epistemic virtues and vices in purely consequentialist terms.

<sup>16</sup> An example of weak normative contextualism is Battaly’s (2018) argument that closed-mindedness is *standardly* an epistemic vice but under certain conditions is an epistemic virtue.

<sup>17</sup> The possibility of burdened epistemic virtues has also been discussed by Alfano and Robinson (2017) who argue that gossip is one such example.

<sup>18</sup> Nancy Daukas calls epistemic character traits that contribute to resistance to oppression and achievement of liberatory goals “liberatory epistemic virtues” (2019: 387).

<sup>19</sup> With the exception of Brogaard (2012) and Baril (2019).

<sup>20</sup> For a critique of virtue epistemology’s focus on purely the acquisition of knowledge, see Manson (2012).

<sup>21</sup> Whether or not we use the term “virtue” both to describe traits that are constitutive of epistemic flourishing and to describe traits that contribute to the achievement of liberatory goals is, I think, a terminological point regarding which I have no strong feelings either way. On one hand, we might reserve the terms “epistemic virtue” and “epistemic vice” for terms which are evaluated positively or negative, respectively, on the contextualised level and define epistemic character damage purely in terms of epistemic character traits which are consistent or inconsistent with epistemic flourishing. On the other hand, as I have done here, we may use “epistemic virtue”

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and “epistemic vice” for evaluations on both levels but specify in each instance to which level of evaluation we are referring.

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