

# Epistemic Insouciance is Not a Moral Vice

Affiliation: MA Student at Virginia Tech

**Abstract:** In this paper, I'm going to ask and answer the following question: Is epistemic insouciance a moral vice? This is an important question because whether epistemic insouciance is a moral vice or not will tell us whether epistemic insouciance should be condemned and avoided. Cassam points out that epistemic insouciance is an epistemic vice, but not all epistemic vices ought to be avoided/condemned. I plan to argue that epistemic insouciance is not a moral vice and therefore the insouciant person should not be condemned. The objection I will offer has everything to do with intentionalism. I first argue that in most cases where it appears something is morally wrong, what is occurring is epistemic malevolence and not epistemic insouciance. I will then argue that in all other cases (actual epistemic insouciance) since they are acting involuntarily, there is nothing morally wrong with their being lackadaisical towards understanding the facts. If it can be established that insouciance is not a moral vice, then there isn't much normative force behind calling somebody epistemically insouciant (which means people may not change their insouciant ways), and this I think, is an interesting conclusion.

**Keywords:** *epistemic, insouciance, malevolence, vice, intention*

My paper will unfold as follows. In section 1, I will reconstruct Cassam's elucidation of epistemic insouciance and bring forth many of the examples he talks of in his paper. In section 2, I will illustrate and explain why most of the examples Cassam gives that are intuitively moral vices are cases of epistemic malevolence and not insouciance. In section 3, I will show that in true cases of epistemic insouciance there is no intuition that what is occurring is morally bad. In section 4, I will further push the narrative that epistemic insouciance isn't a moral vice by asserting that we cannot condemn someone for things that they have either no or little control over. In section 5 I will consider and respond to three potential objections: the consequentialist objection, the "Involuntary Sins" objection, and the fervent commitment objection. Following this, I will briefly conclude.

## Section 1

In "Epistemic Insouciance" Cassam argues that he has elucidated a previously unknown epistemic vice called epistemic insouciance. As Cassam defines it, epistemic insouciance is "being excessively casual and nonchalant about the challenge of finding answers to complex questions, partly as a result of a tendency to view such questions as less complex than they really are." (Cassam 2) The insouciant person then is someone who can't be bothered to look for facts in support (or against) of their beliefs.

Cassam separates epistemic insouciance from epistemic malevolence (an already named epistemic vice) by making a distinction between epistemic postures and stances, with insouciance being a posture and malevolence being a stance. An epistemic posture is a type of emotional feeling you have towards uncovering truths or falsities. You don't control what epistemic postures you have just like you don't control when you have respect or contempt for somebody. On the flip side, an epistemic stance is a non-affective point of view about knowledge; stances are completely voluntary.

The example Cassam gives in representing an epistemic stance is that of the tobacco industry when they rejected all the evidence that tobacco was bad. This was an attempt to

undermine the public knowledge about tobacco's ties to lung cancer. This is a case of malevolence (a stance and not a posture) because the tobaccos companies were aiming to undermine the public knowledge, it was a stance that they took, something they choose to do for instrumental reasons (to keep tobacco sales high).

One example of insouciance that Cassam gives is when Michael Gove was interviewed about the economic implications of Brexit. Many expert economists at the time did not agree with Gove's inclinations about what leaving the EU would do to Britain's economy. When Gove was asked by a news reporter about this, he simply shrugged off the experts and claimed that the people of Britain were done with expert opinions. To Gove facts were boring and unimportant, it was much more important to match the publics' emotional beliefs than to listen to what the experts or facts tell us. (Cassam, 1)

A further example of epistemic insouciance comes from Boris Johnson, who is now the prime minister of the United Kingdom. Boris Johnson began his career as a journalist where he composed comics that often were about the EU. The problematic thing is that the comics were not based in reality and were bearing a tremendous effect on the public. When asked about this, Johnson laughed it off and didn't think much of the fact that his comics were downright made up. He also oddly enough made comics arguing for both sides regarding the question of leaving the EU, even though he had said that he was against the sentiment of leaving. Johnson has since been known to disregard facts and is said to be too lazy to care for evidence gathering or detailed inquiry. (Cassam, 2)

Lastly, there is the more general example of a bullshitter. A bullshitter is someone who speaks about things that they don't know much about, including whether it's true or not. When talking to your friends, for example, you might tell them about some information you don't know anything about, such as a rumor you briefly encountered. You aren't lying because you don't know that it's false, nor have you tried to even understand if it's false, rather you are bullshitting. Cassam points out Frankfurt's notion of Bullshit because he believes that is what is occurring in cases where it looks like the insouciant person is lying. Rather than lying they simply have no aim at understanding the truth. (Cassam, 3)

## Section 2

In section one I reconstructed Cassam's definitions of epistemic insouciance and malevolence as well as summarized many of his examples, in this section I will show that Cassam's examples of epistemic insouciance are not epistemic insouciance and instead epistemic malevolence.

Cassam believes that because Gove had a disinterest in the facts about the economic implications of Brexit he was insouciant, but I am going to argue that he is mistaken. For Michael Gove to say that facts are boring and that he doesn't care for expert opinion specifically when expert opinions disagree with him seems mischievous. Was Gove insouciant if he had a reason to be insouciant? I suppose it's possible, but it seems highly coincidental that he doesn't care about facts that would go against his agenda. Remember that epistemic insouciance is supposed to be involuntary and an emotional feeling towards not caring. This doesn't seem to be the case for Gove because Gove appears to have chosen to adopt a stance towards not caring rather than having an inherent feeling of not caring. There's a big difference between embracing an attitude of not caring or lacking the attitude of caring, and Gove appears to be in the former camp.

What is likely actually occurring within the Michael Gove example is a form of epistemic malevolence; he has taken the stance that he does not care about the facts (as they relate to Brexit). What Gove is doing is wrong because he is undermining the public's knowledge and therefore committing an act of epistemic malevolence. Also, whether Gove was truly insouciant is beside the point, the point is that this is a bad example that doesn't correctly emphasize the difference between epistemic insouciance and malevolence.

Cassam thinks Boris Johnson is insouciant as he is too lazy for evidence gathering and inquiry, but once again I think Cassam is mistaken in labeling Johnson as insouciant. I say this because Boris Johnson intentionally undermined the knowledge of all the people who read his comics. His comics likely had the goal of attracting viewers and being entertaining, the facts of the matter were not of his concern. With that in mind, Johnson likely adopted the stance of not caring about the facts (to be more entertaining) rather than lacking care about the facts. He said himself he didn't want Brexit, which shows he does care, and yet he still chose to provide his audience with incorrect information— which is epistemic malevolence rather than insouciance.

Both Johnson and Gove appear to have adopted a stance that they don't care about the facts in order to be consistent with their other goals/claims, and while it's possible to object that we can never know what is truly going on inside their head, it seems unlikely that they truly lack care. The main takeaway regardless of this objection is that these are misleading examples that don't offer good insight into the distinction between epistemic insouciance and epistemic malevolence.

I also think it's fair to question whether politicians can ever truly be insouciant. A politician by nature is exposed to facts and evidence almost 24/7 and they also likely studied the things they are speaking about throughout their career in academia. Having been exposed to all of these facts and taken the time to study them themselves, only to then say that they don't care about them when they don't align with their views is fishy. The content of political discourse is not something one can typically be insouciant about when they are a politician.

For someone to truly lack care about finding facts, it would need to be the case that there is no outside force causing them to adopt the position. Choosing to be insouciant is a contradiction. In both Gove's case and Johnson's, they are choosing to adopt a lackadaisical view about the facts rather than having a natural insufficient desire to understand the truth. This is problematic for Cassam as he defines insouciance as something that is an emotional state and unchosen, and his examples don't fit this narrative. The examples that Cassam gives mislead the reader about what epistemic insouciance is, and in turn the reader may wrongfully believe that epistemic insouciance is a moral vice when it is not.

### Section 3

Now that I have pushed back against some of the examples Cassam gives of epistemic insouciance, I want to offer a few accounts of what actual epistemic insouciance could look like. In actual epistemic insouciance, there is no intent to undermine others' knowledge and that means that there is no adopting of any positions going on. This will also make clear that epistemic insouciance is not a moral vice, even though Cassam's examples might lead us to believe that they are.

Imagine that you are hanging out with a group of friends, perhaps at a coffee shop or somewhere where you are all just chatting. One of your friends is thinking about adopting a dog

soon and the group starts discussing all the different types of breeds and the respective temperaments and management that each breed has/requires. Also, suppose for the sake of this example that you don't know much about dogs. You do, however, remember some random fact about Maltipoos that your brother had told you just a few days back. With no care for the truth, and by that I mean fact-checking, you spout out that Maltipoos were made to hunt despite their small size. You aren't lying because you don't have any indication that what you're saying is false (though you also don't know if it's true). You are insouciant about the facts of the matter because you just don't care, you were just making conversation. You didn't adopt a stance that you don't care about the facts, you just simply didn't feel a concern to find the truth. If you adopted a stance of not caring for facts (to make conversation), then you would need to have consciously reflected and decided to forgo fact-checking. In this case, it's rather that you just blurt out the fact when it pops in your head, without having a care about its truth value.

Because the lack of care toward the truth about the Maltipoo fact unintentional (it wasn't a conscious decision to not care, you just blurted it out), this is a case where you exhibit an epistemic posture. The worry that the fact might not be true never popped up, and so it is involuntary that you didn't care about whether it was true or not. In this example, there was no attempt to undermine knowledge and the lack of care toward the truth was unintentional, so this is a clear case of epistemic insouciance according to Cassam's criterion.

A different type of case where someone is insouciant is in metaphysical beliefs, such as beliefs about God or free will. This type of insouciance is different because the lack of ability to be certain about any proposition in these debates is why many people don't care about evidence. Imagine that someone you know is an atheist, not because of any evidence or facts, but because they just have a gut feeling that there is no God, and they are insouciant to information supporting that (because they know it won't be conclusive). This is not a person that cares about inquiring into the matter of God, and yet they will still assert that there is no God. The reason I don't think these people are adopting a viewpoint to disregard the facts is that if somehow a fact of the matter appeared in front of them, they wouldn't reject it. If God came down to earth and spoke to this person, their beliefs would surely change. They aren't rejecting the facts; they simply lack care in searching for them (because there's a general understanding with these questions that no certainty will be attained anyways).

When it comes to epistemic insouciance regarding metaphysical beliefs, there is no intent to undermine knowledge since the insouciant person in these cases does not support their beliefs with rationality. When the epistemically insouciant atheist is asked about their beliefs they happily explain that they don't care about searching for facts and go with their gut feeling. This special openness about not caring about the facts makes it the case that there is no intentional undermining of knowledge. Additionally, remember that the atheist is insouciant at the result of an epistemic posture, they simply don't care about the facts (since they know they can't find anything conclusive), and it's not that they choose to disregard facts to support their view. So, the atheist in my example fits the bill for epistemic insouciance according to Cassam because they don't choose to be insouciant or attempt to undermine anyone's knowledge.

Overall, what's different about these two cases I presented is that the insouciance stems from nothing, instead, it is just something that comes over them. These are both better depictions of what Cassam has in mind when speaking of the differences between insouciance and malevolence. This is why it's (wrongfully) clear that in the examples Cassam brings about, there is something immoral or at least questionable going on, whereas in my two cases it is less clear – which is because Cassam's examples are epistemic malevolence.

## Section 4

Having cleared up the difference in cases between insouciance and malevolence, it should now be noted what it is that makes malevolence morally wrong and insouciance morally permissible— intention. Since the insouciant person doesn't intend to undermine knowledge, there is nothing to blame them for whereas the malevolent person directly caused whatever harm they bring about. The epistemically malevolent person uses people as instruments to achieve a goal that is looming large for them. In the case of politicians, they are deceptive about how they feel about the facts, they make people believe that they are insouciant to gain (similar peoples) support. The insouciant person, however, doesn't care about the facts and by definition does not choose to be this way.

It's no new idea that we should be judged, at least somewhat, based on the intention behind our actions. Look at the legal system, for example, the punishment for manslaughter and murder are drastically different even though the consequence of both situations (someone dying) is the same. The reason is that the murderer is malevolent and intends to hurt someone, whereas the person who commits manslaughter has accidentally ended someone's life. One person has a demented moral character while the other person has made a mistake.

Let's move away from legalities just in case you aren't convinced that this distinction of intention is anything more than a way to gauge how long to jail someone. Perhaps you think a person who accidentally hits someone with their car (maybe by being irresponsible) is just as bad as someone who purposely hits someone. Instead, imagine a case where someone, call them person A, has a severe peanut allergy that is so severe that eating anything containing peanuts is fatal. Now imagine two parallel cases: in case one, person B intentionally slips peanuts into person A's food (person B knows of the allergy) and as a result person A dies. In case two, person B also serves person A food that contains peanuts, but they did not know about person A's allergy. Clearly, Person B from the first scenario is a much worse person than the second— Would you rather be friends with person B from the first scenario or person B from the second scenario...

Connecting this back to our epistemological debate, it's evident that the insouciant person is more similar to person B from scenario one, while the malevolent person is more similar to person B from scenario two. In both the cases of undermining knowledge and poisoning someone, the result of the situation is upsetting, but the intention behind an agent's actions is what really determines if an action is a moral vice or not.

Admittedly, the one drawback in judging based on intention is practicality, as we can't always know what an agent intended to happen or what they were thinking at the time. Still, the goal of this paper is not to claim that intentionalism is a practical way to judge whether others are morally wrong or not for undermining knowledge, the goal rather is simply to explain that the insouciance is not a moral vice. At the very least, understanding what is and what is not a moral vice allows an agent to understand whether they should try to change their behavior and whether they should feel guilty about it.

## Section 5

Someone could object that epistemic insouciance isn't a moral vice in three ways. One way would be to take a hardcore consequentialist approach and claim that insouciance causes too much harm. The second way to object would be to claim that insouciance is wrong in and of

itself. This would mean that whether insouciance is a moral vice depends on whether insouciance is itself something blameworthy; this is exactly what Robert Adams had in mind when he wrote his paper "Involuntary Sins". And the third way someone could object to the idea that epistemic insouciance isn't a moral vice would be to claim that there are situations in which anything short of an impassioned search for the truth is vicious. What follows will be an explanation of each objection as well as my response back.

### **Consequentialist Objection**

The claim for the consequentialist objection is that there is too much harm caused by epistemic insouciance for it to not be a moral vice. Think of all the fake news that is being spread these days due to a lack of care to fact check. Or consider someone who spreads a rumor in making conversation (like in the Maltipoo example, only with more important and dark content). You can even imagine a case where someone is spreading misinformation about an election. Suppose someone isn't interested in politics, and so they don't know much about the political world, but they saw someone on social media saying the election was rigged. They could pass along the details of this post without ever considering if it's true. The crisis is that there may be other people in the group who will also buy this fake news story point-blank, perhaps they are extremely gullible. If this occurs, you may have just changed someone's vote in the next election, or at least how they fundamentally view the political parties' behaviors. On a large scale, this type of behavior can sway elections and cause riots of insurrection. The results of being careless about what you say are not good, the consequences of rumors can be drastic and for this reason epistemic insouciance a moral vice.

Indeed, there are cases in which insouciance could lead to harm, but it's not accurate to say that this is a common result. In fact, it is pretty unlikely that insouciance would ever cause much harm as the types of things people can typically be insouciant about are not the types of things that get people stirred up. The reason the facts that are insouciantly adopted are more often than not random facts (as opposed to more important ones) is that anything that carries normative weight (like politics) is usually not accepted insouciantly. An election rumor is probably as bad as it gets, as anything else and it would more than likely not be something someone is insouciant about. And even in the case of the election rumor, the harm caused by telling it to a few friends won't be high. It's far-fetched to claim that this would be the cause of the riots of insurrection, the riots are caused by people with an agenda. So, whether you're making conversation without fact checking or believing/disbelieving in God based on gut feeling, you're not going to be doing any harm.

The little harm that may be caused by insouciance is also greatly outweighed by all of the benefits of epistemic insouciance. Insouciance allows for a greater amount of conversation and can also make the person who believes the unsupported facts happier. If someone believe a random fact about dogs that is wrong but makes them happy then who cares? The extent of harm that is caused by misunderstanding unimportant knowledge is minimal, so the utility of happiness that these misconceptions bring outweighs whatever minuscule negative these beliefs bring. I think it's fair to ask if there is any value in knowing the truth anyways if the truth would be worse for you in every way other than simply the fact that truth is better than falsehoods? In other words, is there intrinsic value to the truth?

When it comes to knowledge about God, it is even more evident the benefits that insouciance can bring. For the most part, I think it would be the case that insouciance people relating to this topic are more often believers in God. For many, belief in God and therefore an afterlife is extremely comforting. It may do as much as make someone happier or it could even have a trickle-down effect and make someone a better person. There is also no negative to

believing in God insouciantly, what does it matter if they are wrong and there is no God. I suppose you could claim that people who believe in God miss out on some of the pleasures of life, but this seems to be more of a tie to religion than a mere belief in a god, and a religious person would not qualify as an insouciant one.

Having to constantly be concerned with the truth can be tiring. It will make conversation hard, it will ruin cool facts that turn out to be myths, and it could even make you unhappy if it means giving up your belief in God. The small amount of harm that potentially arises from epistemic insouciance is not enough to condemn it even within a consequentialist account, as the benefits outweigh the negatives.

### **Involuntary Sin Objection**

To claim that Insouciance is wrong in and of itself appeals to Robert Adams “Involuntary Sins”. Adams concludes that there are involuntary sins by arguing that there are some things that can’t be explained by any form of the control principle— the control principle states that we are only responsible for what we control. It wouldn't be unreasonable to think that epistemic insouciance is one of these intuitively bad behaviors. Consider jealousy or anger, both are feelings that Adams discusses, and claims are involuntary sins. These are sinful states because they're not character states that anyone should desire to have; they generally don't help one to live a happier or more successful life. It's simply obvious to us that anger and jealousy are bad. Insouciance similarly can be viewed as obviously bad and not conducive to a good life. Insouciance is not a character trait that we think of a virtuous person having.

Insouciance is not a character trait that people should have because it does not lead to living a better life. When thinking about what traits the virtuous person has, typically one thinks of the contradictory to insouciance, being inquisitive and curious. A person who often lacks care towards finding the facts is likely either lazy or dull-brained (or both). Being knowledgeable is something that most people think highly of (and being insouciant is not conducive to being knowledgeable). Of course, there can be instances where someone is insouciance without them being automatically dull or lazy, but it still wouldn't be a good characteristic. It's also possible to be angry (for some reasonable reason) without it making you a hothead, but anger would still not be considered anything that people should strive to have. The claim here is that virtuous people are typically not insouciant and being lackadaisical toward the facts doesn't make for a good agent.

The intuition that epistemic insouciance is unvirtuous is not one that is shared by me. Insouciance, while it may undermine some knowledge, would not ever prevent someone from being knowledgeable and smart. Insouciance again, is mostly only possible regarding mundane information, and not caring about the truth of mundane propositions will not make it any harder for you to achieve a good life. Insouciance may actually be a virtuous trait in some respects, as caring too much about the truth in every circumstance is quite odd. An excess of care will drive you crazy and searching for the truth in every little detail you read online will take away valuable time from you that you could have spent bettering your life. It may appear at first that insouciance is an involuntary sin because it comes across as unintelligent and lazy, but epistemic insouciance doesn't take away from intelligence and it isn't being lazy, it would be weird to care and check every little fact you see and hear.

### **The Fervent Commitment Objection**

Lastly, one could claim that there are cases in which anything less than a strong commitment to the truth is vicious. In these cases that would mean being insouciant is itself

moral wrongdoing for the situation. This is different than the consequentialist objection, in that the character of the person is in question as well as the consequences, and it's different from the involuntary sin objection in that what makes it wrong is the scenario, it doesn't have to be the case that insouciance is itself something unvirtuous.

Suppose that you have a somewhat distant family member (like a cousin that you talk to now and then) that has recently been sexually assaulted, their assaulter, however, has denied that anything happened. In any event where you don't seem to care about the truth of what happened to your cousin, something wrong seems to be occurring. Now, it's important to note that you don't feel strong convictions about this family member or feel a need for them to be telling the truth, so it's not the case that you are taking a stance of rejecting facts in order to believe they were assaulted. You simply don't care about the truth of the matter. You may even tell your cousin that you believe them, only you don't really care to hear about the situation and make a well-informed judgment. Lacking care for knowledge, in this case, could cause your cousin significant harm, and it also reflects horribly on your character, as it would seem you lack empathy. Even though you might tell your cousin you believe them, your disinterest in becoming fully invested in the truth and believing them in this way (with all the facts in hand) will cause them sadness and emotional damage. Try to put yourself in the shoes of someone who was just sexually assaulted and imagine hearing that a relative doesn't care to know the facts of the matter. Not truly caring comes off as cold and being on one's side is not the same as being vested in one's side because you know they're right. Understanding the truth and fully believing your cousin is what is morally required in this situation. In this scenario, anything less than a strong desire for the truth is morally vicious.

My response to this objection is that insouciance in situations like these is extremely rare. With that said, should someone truly be insouciant in a case like this then that would qualify as morally vicious, and it would be a moral vice. However, it would still clearly be less bad and on a different level than epistemic malevolence.

More importantly, situations like this are very uncommon, if they even exist at all. The reason I believe these situations are not a worry is because in any case where someone is able to be insouciant, the content of what they are insouciant about is probably mundane. In cases where stakes are high the information in question is important, it is highly unlikely that someone has a lack of care towards the truth of that information in a way that is unintentional and fits into the epistemic posture category. Even in the case illustrated above, it seems unreal that someone wouldn't care to know the truth about their cousin's story. In any of these scenarios where it's the case that simply less than a fervent commitment to knowledge is vicious, it's likely that one would have to be epistemically malevolent to not have that fervent commitment toward obtaining the said knowledge. This is because it's probable that a person in a high-stake scenario who doesn't care about knowledge has an outside reason for not caring. Lacking care for the truth in a high stakes scenario without an outside reason is hard to wrap your head around, and it would seem like something is off within that person's mental makeup. So, while I suppose the objection above is adequate in creating a scenario where epistemic insouciance is a moral vice, I question if scenarios like this ever really happen. In any situation where stakes are high enough to make having a fervent commitment to the truth necessary, not having this fervent commitment would only be the case if one intentionally chooses not to have it (for some other reasons), and this is epistemic malevolence and not epistemic insouciance.

### **Conclusion**

I have argued that Cassam's examples of insouciance were actually cases of malevolence and give us the wrong idea of what distinguishes insouciance and malevolence. I then created



my own examples in order to better capture what the main distinguishing factor is: an adopted attitude to reject information vs a lack of an attitude towards gaining information. Having framed the difference this way, it's clear that while epistemic insouciance may be an epistemic vice, it doesn't appear to be a moral vice. This is interesting because moral vices and epistemic vices typically don't collide. There may also be a good reason to think that moral vices carry more normative force compared to epistemic vices. This would mean that although Cassam believes epistemic insouciance to be an epistemic vice, there isn't a reason for insouciant agents to feel ashamed or be condemned. This leaves us with the puzzling idea that it's okay to live in a world full of lazy people spreading blatantly wrong information.

REFERENCES: Quassim Cassam, 2018, Epistemic Insouciance, University of Warwick, 20 pages