

## The Banality of Vice Georgi Gardiner

Reply to Ian James Kidd’s “From Vice Epistemology to Critical Character Epistemology”

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Kidd argues that vice epistemology is fruitfully developed as critical character epistemology.<sup>1</sup> He outlines three hallmarks of critical character epistemology, which it shares with forebears such as critical race theory, feminist epistemology, and—more directly—Robin Dillon’s critical character theory. The first hallmark is social critique. Critical character epistemology theorises harms and injustices, focusing on systems of domination and subordination. Kidd argues that current epistemology has a distorting focus on epistemic goods, such as virtue. Foregrounding aphotic and unpropitious facets of social-epistemic life, including vice, is a needed corrective. Secondly, critical character epistemology aims to ameliorate current conditions. Thirdly, it highlights interconnections between the individual and their society, especially how social forces shape epistemic character. This is the epistemic analogue of Dillon’s (2012: 85) claim that “enslavement is not only social and material but also operates on and through character”.

Social position, such as race and class, affects which character traits are differentially nurtured and discouraged, which benefit or impede us, and to which vices we are particularly susceptible. Kidd investigates these relations between social position and epistemic character development. I focus on the effects of salience distributions—specifically the relative salience of vices—on how social position affects epistemic character.

Kidd claims “all epistemic vices are salient to some degree, since all of them will stand out to us as significant in some sense—vice may appear as alarming, horrifying, irritating, serious, trivial, and so on.” He notes the salience of particular vices can depend on social position. Kidd writes, “A good example is the fact that members of some social groups are negatively stereotyped as being *essentially* prone to or *characterised by* certain vices—women, for instance, as banal, incurious, unreflective, and so on” (emphasis in original). This stereotyping affects the salience of vices. Drawing on the 1694 writing of Mary Astell, Kidd writes,

Astell was alert to the culturally reinforced expectation that women were, or would always become, marked by the ‘Feminine Vices’, like submissiveness and superficiality. Within that misogynistic social and epistemic culture, those gendered vices become especially salient to women seeking to improve their epistemic predicament.

Kidd is correct that salience plays crucial roles in how social position affects epistemic character development. But I don’t think Kidd aptly sketches these roles. I sketch alternative ways the differential salience of vice influences character development.

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<sup>1</sup> Kidd’s claim is slightly stronger: Vice epistemology should proceed as a critical character epistemology; being attuned to epistemic vice rationally compels us towards the tenets of critical character epistemology. Cf. Mills’s (2007) mapping the trajectory from naturalised, non-idealised epistemology to critical race epistemology.

Firstly, I disagree with Kidd's contention that "all epistemic vices are salient". Indeed, a critical character epistemologist should take particular issue with this claim. Salience is the property of being attention-grabbing; it reflects descriptive, rather than prescriptive, facts. Salient things have cognitive prominence. We must distinguish this from what is important, relevant, or concomitant. Some moral facts might be important, for example, but are typically overlooked and so not salient.

Social inequalities, including in distributions of epistemic traits and expectations about those traits, can be more pernicious when overlooked. The epistemic vices of chauvinism, white ignorance, and unquestioning deference to one's birth culture and religion, for instance, are widespread in part because they are not grokked. They compose part of the background tapestry of society. The vices of bias are often unnoticed, rendering them harder to correct. Similarly, we expect wealthy people to exhibit high confidence in their beliefs and abilities, making it difficult recognise vicious overconfidence.

Epistemic vices might be more salient to those who suffer their effects. Women are more apt to identify sexism, for example. But, firstly, current attunement to such vices benefits from decades of feminist theorising; prior to this, chauvinist epistemic vices would often be inaccurately viewed as the person's having apposite beliefs. Secondly, even those injured by the vice might not see it as vice. A daughter might suffer consequences of having sexist parents, for example, yet not recognise their traits as sexist epistemic vices.

Vice can be like air—invisible, unnoticed, camouflaged by ubiquity. Charles Mills highlighted the pervasion of white ignorance; critical character epistemology should emphasise how vice can be similarly banal. Vice is the normal condition of everyday lives.

Men's emotions can enjoy a similar inconspicuousness. Society shapes it, and individuals contort around it, without fully appreciating its presence or seeing it *as* emotion. Part of the social potency of some emotions, vices, and virtues stems from their being rendered invisible or mistaken for something else, such as pure "rationality".

Secondly, specific stereotyped epistemic traits have a complex relationship to salience. I'll use Kidd's seventeenth century example of stereotypes of women as incurious. Given this, women are expected to be incurious. The expectation constitutes and reinforces the norm. People might not notice the expectation unless it is violated. Incuriousness in women is not remarked upon; instead curiosity is salient. Departures from normed vices, or attempts to shed normed vices, attract attention. Deviance is noticed. And this salience, with its concomitant censure or risk, disincentivises the aberrance. This helps explain why people conform; it can be safer to not stand out.

For some groups, character traits are noticed but the perceived valence is switched or downplayed. One might notice the elevated confidence of wealthy people, for example, but not perceive it as bad. It might instead garner respect, emulation, or deference. Or one might see it as bad but tend to downplay or overlook it. To illustrate the distinct role of attention, suppose pop musicians are stereotyped as incurious and gender-nonconforming youths as epistemically mercurial; they are seen as changing their minds frequently. A person might regard each property as—let's say—equally bad. But only the latter and the latter's badness are salient to him. When he thinks of celebrities, he seldom remembers their incuriosity. When he thinks of gender-nonconforming youths, by contrast, he often remembers their perceived epistemic caprice. The social privilege of celebrities, and relative marginalisation of trans youths, bolsters—and partly comprises—these attention patterns.

Kidd suggests that “gendered vices [like submissiveness and superficiality] become especially salient to women seeking to improve their epistemic predicament”. Perhaps. But the vices reinforced by social norms might accordingly be *less* salient as foci for epistemic self-improvement. Astell was unusual—a visionary. Most contemporaries seeking self-improvement may have instead read novels, listened attentively at dinner, and aimed to absorb insights from men, who were considered epistemic superiors. (Indeed men actually were epistemic superiors in many domains because women were hamstrung by educational inequality.) Agitators aiming to improve the epistemic predicament of women may have campaigned for more tutoring or for permission to attend public lectures. These approximate gender-approved modes of self-betterment, such as absorbing information, sponge-like, from men, rather than gender-aberrant reforms, such as shedding submissiveness. Indeed, to many of Astell’s contemporaries, shedding submissiveness may have seemed degenerate, even to those seeking epistemic self-improvement.

Kidd writes, “women were, or would always become, marked by the ‘Feminine Vices’, like submissiveness and superficiality.” The term “marked” has two connotations. The first is “assigned”, “designated”, or “goes with”. In soccer and hockey, each attacker is marked by a separate defender, for example, driving lanes are “marked for overtaking” and the third son is “marked for the military”. (The first inherits the land; the second joins the clergy.) In this sense, women are “marked” as submissive means “women are normed as being submissive”. Secondly, “marked” connotes that those traits stand out as conspicuous or salient.

I suggest women can be marked as submissive in the first sense, but not the second. Women’s submissiveness can be non-salient even to those injured by that submissiveness or seeking to improve their situation. It can require acuity to clock epistemic vice and its social powers even though—or perhaps because—vice is so pervasive and injurious.

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### **Bibliography**

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