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Exploring Epistemic Vices: A Review of Quassim Cassam's Vices of the Mind

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In *Vices of the Mind*, Cassam provides an accessible, engaging, and timely introduction to the nature of epistemic vices and what we can do about them. Cassam provides an account of epistemic vices and explores three broad types of epistemic vices: character traits, attitudes, and ways of thinking. Regarding each, Cassam draws insights about the nature of vices through examining paradigm instances of each type of vice and exploring their significance through real world historical examples. With his account of vices in hand, Cassam turns to addressing three questions in the remainder of the book: how can we be responsible for our epistemic vices? how can we be aware of our epistemic vices? And how can we address our epistemic vices?

This book provides an excellent introduction to the debates about epistemic vices and is easy to engage regardless of one's philosophical background. In being the first book-length treatment of epistemic vices, *Vices of the Mind* is sure to shape the debates surrounding epistemic vices for some time. In what follows we provide brief chapter summaries and raise several challenges to the account Cassam defends in the book.

Chapter Summaries

Chapter 1

Cassam proposes an obstructivist account of epistemic vices. Obstructivism is a consequentialist account according to which an epistemic vice is a “blameworthy or otherwise reprehensible character trait, attitude, or way of thinking that systematically obstructs the gaining, keeping, or sharing of knowledge” (23). Cassam identifies three broad types of vices: character traits, attitudes, and ways of thinking. To be an epistemic vice, the trait, attitude, or way of thinking must get in the way of knowledge and do so in a way that merits criticism.

Vices can obstruct knowledge by obstructing the acquisition, retention, or transmission of knowledge, and they are criticizable when either the person is blameworthy for having the vice or it is appropriate to censure the vice itself. Cassam opts for his obstructivist account over motivational theories of epistemic vice since he argues that not all epistemic vices have a negative motivational component (e.g. the desire for a firm belief that motivates the vice of closed-mindedness is not a bad motivation). While his focus is on epistemic vices, Cassam argues for a multidimensional approach to explaining our epistemic lives, where our epistemic conduct is explained by structural factors, sub-personal factors, as well as individual (or personal) epistemic vices.

Chapter 2

Cassam focuses on vicious character traits, using close-mindedness as a paradigm example to anchor his conception of a character vice. Cassam describes character traits as “stable dispositions to act, think, and feel in particular ways” (31). Unlike moral vices, for Cassam, intellectual character vices tend to be high fidelity traits meaning that they require a high consistency across contexts and are not subject-specific. So, being close-minded on one

subject is not sufficient for being close-minded. Gullibility, however, is an intellectual character vice that is an outlier here. A gullible person need not be consistently gullible. Intellectual character traits often have psychological components.

For instance, in the case of close mindedness there is usually a desire for cognitive closure. However, Cassam argues that some vices, like stupidity or vagueness, do not have any psychological components. Cassam also differentiates personalities and character traits, claiming that character traits are malleable enough to warrant revision responsibility, which is sufficient for blameworthiness. Finally, Cassam addresses the situationist argument that character traits do not exist. While acknowledging the explanatory power of situational factors, he argues that vice explanations are still necessary for a full account of our epistemic conduct.

Chapter 3

Cassam addresses thinking vices which are “epistemically vicious way[s] of thinking or ‘thinking style[s]’” (55). He begins by distinguishing thinking vices from character vices by arguing that character vices build off of thinking vices due to “explanatory basicness”. Thinking vices are more basic since one must refer to the thinking vice in order to define the character vice with which it is associated. Cassam argues that it is important to address ways of thinking individually since one can exhibit vicious thinking on an occasion without possessing the associated vicious character trait. Utilizing the distinction between thinking fast and thinking slow, Cassam argues that thinking vices can occur in both slow thinking (goal-directed, sequential, effortful) and fast thinking (nonsequential, subconscious).

Chapter 4

Cassam examines the third species of epistemic vices—attitudes. Here, epistemic insouciance, an indifference or lack of concern for what the evidence supports, is taken as the core example of an attitude vice. Attitudes are examples of what Cassam calls ‘postures’. Postures are both affective and involuntary, and epistemic postures take an epistemic object (e.g. knowledge, evidence, inquiry). Epistemic insouciance, for instance, involves having an indifferent attitude toward inquiry. Cassam broadens this class of epistemic vices to include stances, which unlike postures are voluntary and typically do involve attitudes. Epistemic malevolence is an example of an epistemic vice that is a stance. Epistemic malevolence is an opposition to knowledge. Attitude vices are also blameworthy, or otherwise reprehensible, since while individuals are not typically acquisition responsible for them, attitudes are malleable, so individuals are often revision responsible. The chapter closes with an investigation of the relation between attitude vices, trait vices, and thinking vices. Cassam argues that attitude vices are more basic than trait vices since trait vices must make reference to the relevant attitudes. The relation between thinking vices and attitude vices is more complicated. Nevertheless, Cassam takes as his primary goal to recognize and analyze this often-ignored type of epistemic vice.

Chapter 5

Cassam considers a puzzle about dogmatism. It seems that dogmatism is an epistemic vice, that epistemic vices get in the way of knowledge, but that dogmatism doesn’t get in the way

of knowledge since it can protect you from misleading evidence. Having examined a range of responses to this inconsistent triad, Cassam argues that it is best to reject the claim that dogmatism does not obstruct knowledge. While dogmatism can protect knowledge, Cassam argues that this is consistent with it being an epistemic vice. To be an epistemic vice, the trait, attitude, or way of thinking must *systematically* obstruct knowledge, it need not universally obstruct knowledge. So, while dogmatism might not *always* obstruct knowledge, it still systematically does so. Cassam concludes the chapter by laying out our intellectual responsibilities. He argues that we must address arguments that we know are misleading and that, "if one can't be bothered to argue against conspiracy theories one can hardly complain if people end up believing them" (117).

Chapter 6

This chapter focuses on the ways in which we can be blameworthy for our epistemic vices. Cassam argues that someone can be responsible, and thus blameworthy, for vice V if their past actions or decisions led to the development of V (*acquisition responsibility*) or if they have the ability to revise or control V, but don't do so (*revision responsibility*). Cassam then defines the types of responsibility with more depth, arguing that revision responsibility requires control and defining various types of control that we can exhibit: voluntary, evaluative, and managerial. The former refers to things that we do only if we choose to do so (raising your arm); evaluative control revolves around our control over our beliefs based on our evaluation of what is true (belief about how long it takes to get somewhere normally versus the same belief when traffic is involved); and managerial control concerns the manipulation of objects or beliefs to make them coincide with our thoughts about said objects (changing the layout of a room or altering your self-image through positive thought). After introducing an opposing view of responsibility called the rational relations approach, he concludes that the type(s) of control which lead to responsibility for a vice depends of the type of vice (character, attitude, or way of thinking) and that control in general is the key to being responsible for our vices.

Chapter 7

Cassam focuses on what he dubs "stealthy vices." Stealthy vices are epistemic vices that block their own detection. Throughout the chapter, he aims to answer three main questions: (1) What makes an epistemic vice stealthy? (2) How possible it is to overcome stealthy vices? (3) How responsible we are for our stealthy vices? To answer (1), Cassam argues that a vice blocks its own detection "to the extent that it nullifies or opposes the very epistemic virtues on which active critical reflection depends," understanding 'active critical reflection' as the intentional reflection on one's epistemic vices (149). The virtues on which Cassam claims such reflection depends are epistemic humility and openness. According to him, the epistemic vices contrary to these virtues are arrogance and closed-mindedness respectively where the latter is stealthier than the former. Regarding (2), Cassam considers other ways in which we can come to know our stealthy vices: testimony and breakthrough experiences. He concludes that self-knowledge by both testimony and breakthrough experiences are not free of the impact of vices, however, they are less vulnerable than self-knowledge by active critical reflection. Further, Cassam argues, self-knowledge is no guarantee of self-

improvement. In answering (3), Cassam questions whether the stealthiness of an epistemic vice diminishes our responsibility for it. Here he argues that a person's ignorance of their vices is culpable even when their ignorance is caused by their vices.

Chapter 8

Cassam argues that self-improvement with respect to epistemic vices is possible. Regarding to what extent this is the case, he rejects *pessimism* (the view that we are not in control of our vices because they are not malleable) and makes the case for what he calls a "qualified optimism" (171). On this view, self-improvement is often possible given the subject has the requisite level of awareness, motivation, and skill. On Cassam's view, the means by which self-improvement is possible is self-control, where self-control itself is a matter of effort. Here he focuses on implicit biases as examples of epistemic vices and argues that for self-improvement to take place, people must be aware of their biases (or potential biases), be motivated to do something about them, and put in the effort required to do so.

Cassam recognizes that people cannot simply will their biases away, however, he claims that there exist specific bias-reduction strategies that are sometimes successful. According to him, this is enough to often grant us managerial control over our biases, which means we can be revisionary responsible for them, and thus blameworthy for them. Cassam's claim is not that self-improvement is *always* possible but that it *sometimes* is. He argues that when there is no prospect of self-improvement, we can instead *outsmart* our biases and the biases of others. That is, we can take measures to mitigate the undesirable consequences of cognitive biases without getting rid of them.

In what follows we present several criticisms of Cassam's account of epistemic vices and our relation to them.

Obstructivism

Cassam defends obstructivism. Obstructivism, as he defines it, is the claim that something is an epistemic vice in virtue of the fact that it systematically obstructs the acquisition, retainment, or transmission of knowledge. In his defense of obstructivism, Cassam takes on motivational accounts of epistemic vices. However, an ignored competitor account of epistemic vices is a broadened version of obstructionism that concerns epistemic ends beyond knowledge (i.e. justified belief, responsible inquiry, etc.). Such a broadened view can capture everything that Cassam's account captures, plus more. Why might such a broadened account be advantageous? Well, suppose that there isn't that much knowledge out there to be had. Perhaps disagreement skepticism is true, or perhaps even external world skepticism is true. If so, then not much would systematically get in the way of knowledge since there wouldn't be much knowledge to obstruct in the first place. That said, it seems that there would still be plenty of valuable epistemic ends that could be obstructed, ends like properly responding to the evidence you have (even when it turns out that there is no prospect of knowledge).¹

¹ Such a move is parallel to the adjustments to epistemic injustice suggested by Gerken (forthcoming). While Fricker originally defined epistemic injustice as a wrong done to someone in their capacity as a knower (Fricker 2007, 1), Gerken argues that a broader account of epistemic injustice better captures the phenomenon.

Further, not all epistemic vices seem to systematically obstruct knowledge. Consider the epistemic vice that obtains when one does not moderate their confidence. Suppose one always (or at least usually) responds correctly to their evidence (they believe when their evidence supports belief and they disbelieve when their evidence supports disbelief), but they hold their doxastic attitudes with far more confidence than their evidence supports. So, when their evidence supports a weak belief, they believe very strongly, when it supports weak disbelief they disbelieve very strongly. Such a vice would never obstruct knowledge (or at least not systematically), since the general direction of the evidence is typically followed. If one has a justified true belief that avoids Gettier complications, then being excessively confident will not prevent them from knowing, if one lacks a justified true belief that avoids Gettier complications, then there wouldn't be any knowledge for excessive confidence to obstruct. So, while excessive confidence sure seems like an epistemic vice, it does not appear to be captured as such by Cassam's account. A broader obstructivist account that references epistemic ends beyond knowledge, however, could correctly capture this intuitive epistemic vice.²

Cognitive Biases

Another concern with Cassam's obstructivism regards his treatment of cognitive biases. Cassam argues that cognitive biases are type of thinking vices. As an example, he illustrates the anchoring bias with a case of a group of judges who, after rolling loaded dice, are asked to specify the prison sentence of a shoplifter. On average, judges who rolled a 9 gave the shoplifter a sentence of 8 months and those who rolled a 3 gave her a sentence of 5 months (65). According to Cassam, the judges can be criticized for the thinking that underpinned their decisions because their thinking was "vicious to the extent that it was influenced by extraneous considerations in the selection of possibilities" (66). Further, he argues that vices are not relative, and that every way of thinking that involves vices is a vicious way of thinking. So, any virtuous thinking process must be bias-free. Cassam also wants virtuous thinking to be a real possibility for people, but it is hard to see how his account makes intellectually virtuous thinking within our grasp. By arguing that any virtuous thinking process must be bias-free, Cassam's account is committed to there being little to no virtuous thinking. This is because most of our thinking is affected by cognitive biases most (if not all) of the time. Given how prevalent the influence of cognitive biases is on our thinking, virtually none of our thinking is free from intellectual vice. The seemingly insurmountable difficulty in ridding ourselves of vicious thinking holds even if we adopt Cassam's optimistic view about de-biasing strategies.

According to Gerken's broader account a subject suffers epistemic injustice when they are harmed in their capacity as an epistemic subject. Such an account captures epistemic injustices that do not involve knowledge (i.e. cases of credibility deficits where there is no knowledge).

² It may be thought that such a broader definition would become circular since not possessing epistemic vices is itself an epistemically good way of being. However, at least Cassam thinks of epistemic vices (and virtues) as having their epistemic value instrumentally (rather than intrinsically). For Cassam, epistemic virtues and vices have their value merely in terms of what they bring about or obstruct. So, on such an instrumentalist account the broader definition would not be circular—the epistemic vices would obstruct things that are epistemic ends in themselves, where the epistemic virtues are merely means to these ends.

Even if our biases can sometimes be controlled and reduced, it is unlikely that we can eradicate them altogether. Given that we cannot attain completely unbiased thinking and completely unbiased thinking is necessary for intellectual virtue, Cassam's account places intellectually virtuous thinking out of reach for normal humans. This goes against Cassam's desire for virtuous thinking to be a real possibility for people. Rather, the outcome of obstructivism is seemingly quite a somber one: since cognitive biases systematically obstruct our knowledge in a criticizable way and since they are ubiquitous, non-vicious thinking looks to be near impossible for normal humans. At best, we can aim to get closer to intellectually virtuous thinking than we are, and even this is not very promising given the mixed results of de-biasing strategies.

Dogmatism

In his discussion of dogmatism, Cassam claims that all challenges to our knowledge call for a serious response, even challenges by conspiracy theorists like Holocaust deniers (117). Cassam goes so far as to claim that, "[i]f one can't be bothered to argue against conspiracy theories one can hardly complain if people end up believing them" (117). Here the claim seems to be that even private engagement with fringe views does not suffice to discharge one's epistemic obligations.³ Cassam downplays the burden that such a responsibility would place on people (and the possible negative consequences)⁴, but more importantly he ignores other harms that can result from such engagement. There are several problems here.

First, such engagement can provide a platform, and in some sense, legitimize the fringe views in question. Engagement, particularly public engagement by those with some authority on the matter, tends to lend credence to such fringe views. Such actions imply that the views in question are worthy of serious debate and deserve a 'seat at the table.' Often, this is not the case, like with the example of Holocaust deniers.

Second, Cassam downplays the demandingness of such inquiry. As cognitive creatures with finite resources, constantly chasing down and refuting silly theories would come at the cost of us finding new knowledge and living otherwise valuable lives. While some issues do not require strenuous effort to address, others are much more difficult. Further, the sheer number of ideas requiring engagement on Cassam's account would require an enormous amount of time. For instance, if we should correct all of our Facebook friends every time they make a false claim or share a misleading article, our days would be spent simply policing Facebook. This is far from an epistemic ideal.⁵ The third problem is that some engagement with fringe views can involve a failure to stand in solidarity with members of oppressed groups in our community.⁶ Unfortunately it is not too hard to think of examples that fit the bill here. Engaging with arguments that undermine the moral value of members of your

³ This is because part of the requirement to do so involves demonstrating to others the problems with the challenge. So, while Cassam does not specifically address the issue of inviting problematic speakers to university campuses, it seems that his view would encourage such practices since they would provide a forum to do exactly that.

⁴ See Fantl Ch. 7 for a detailed account of the negative consequences of engaging with fringe views.

⁵ Cassam's view here also seems to ignore an intellectual division of labor where individuals can rely on others to address some problematic claims as opposed to addressing every challenge oneself.

⁶ For more on this point, see Fantl Ch. 6.

community can pose a real harm to those members of your community. So, engagement with these challenges to our knowledge is not cost free. This kind of engagement can cause real harm, and harm to those that are often the most vulnerable in our community.

Perhaps a middle ground is to claim that people have an *epistemic* obligation to engage with such arguments and challenges, but that such considerations can be outweighed by other normative concerns (like the ethical concerns gestured at above). Such a picture allows for it to be the case that one *all-things-considered* should not engage with many such challenges while noting that there is an epistemic reason to do so.

Blameworthiness

While Cassam is clear that agents needn't be blameworthy for their epistemic vices, he does go to significant lengths to show how agents can be responsible for the various types of epistemic vices he outlines in the book. Given his acknowledgement that criticizability, not blameworthiness, is what is necessary for an epistemic vice, it is curious that Cassam spends so much of the book trying to account for how people can be blameworthy for their vices. Why not instead just focus on the criticizability of the trait, attitude, or way of thinking? Beyond this curiosity, there are several issues with his account of blame.

For one, Cassam simply assumes that people are responsible for their beliefs—an assumption that is contentious at best. Cassam claims that the evaluative control⁷ exercised in beliefs is sufficient for responsibility, but it is hard to see 'evaluative control' as any real kind of control sufficient for responsibility. Either the control requirement for responsibility would need to be dropped (like doxastic compatibilists often do) or a richer kind of doxastic control must be identified. Further, Cassam also gives insufficient attention to conditions for responsibility beyond any control condition.

While Cassam notes that there is an epistemic requirement for responsibility, he does not sufficiently wrestle with the issues involved in meeting it. It seems hard enough for the close-minded person to recognize their close-mindedness, never mind knowing what to do to address it. However, insufficient knowledge of the problem and what can be done provides one with an excuse. Further, in addressing culpable ignorance, Cassam seems to abandon the control condition altogether. Regarding culpable ignorance he claims, "if the only thing preventing one from knowing one's vices is those very vices, then one's ignorance is culpable" (166). So, regarding ignorance, we can be blameworthy even if we have *no control* over our ignorance. This is a significant shift from Cassam's earlier insistence on control for responsibility and makes his insistence on control in other parts of the book more curious.

A final issue here regards the luck involved in the outcomes of any such efforts to bring about changes in our epistemic traits, attitudes, and ways of thinking. In discussing the prospects of self-improvement, Cassam notes that "[t]here is not guarantee of success but also no guarantee of failure" (136). However, it seems that a sufficient likelihood of success

⁷ Borrowing from Hieronymi, Cassam claims that we exercise evaluative control over our beliefs by evaluating what is true. Since our beliefs change in virtue of our evaluations, we can be said to control our beliefs.

is required for the agent to be responsible in bringing about the desired outcome (as opposed to it merely being a matter of luck). If I am praiseworthy for eliminating a vice, or blameworthy for retaining it, then it appears that I must have some reasonable prospects of success—the end result cannot simply be a matter of luck.⁸ It is far from clear that the likelihood of success conditions are met very often regarding epistemic vices.

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⁸ For an exploration of other ways in which luck can interfere with responsibility, see Levy (2011).