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Shared Knowledge from Individual Vice: the role of unworthy epistemic emotions

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Thus every Part was full of Vice,
Yet the whole Mass a Paradise
Bernard Mandeville, *The Grumbling Hive*, 1705

Abstract: This paper begins with a discussion the role of less-than-admirable epistemic emotions in our respectable, indeed admirable inquiries: nosiness, obsessiveness, wishful thinking, denial, partisanship. The explanation for their desirable effect is Mandevillian: because of the division of epistemic labour individual epistemic vices can lead to shared knowledge. In fact it is sometimes essential to it.

1. *Hagia sophia*

Here is an attitude that has a long history among philosophers and scientists. As a species, we are marked by an admirable curiosity: people by nature desire to know, and want true beliefs for their own sake as well as for various practical reasons. The desire for knowledge is often primitive and selfless, unmotivated by personal rivalries or ambitions. And here is an opposite attitude, which portrays the human investigator in a rather different light. We are a nosy, opinionated, biased species: scurrilous, libellous, low-minded, prurient, self- and other-deceptive, and we go for titillating information, half-truths, and information that embarrasses our adversaries. The desire for unbiased information, for truths that are not selected by epistemically unworthy emotions, is a rare consequence of what comes easily to us. When we get it, it is more of an accident than we realize. We might, on this view, better support an elevated epistemic ideal by aiming at a Stoic ideal of *ataraxia*, not caring about or renouncing the desire to fix our beliefs on topics where we do not really need the information.

My sympathies are more with the second picture than with the first. But I am also committed to a shared aim of testable well-confirmed scientific knowledge. In this paper I begin by discussing the role of less-than-admirable epistemic emotions in our inquiries. Then I try to reconcile my sympathies and my

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commitments by describing how a suitable distribution of unworthy emotions can work for the overall epistemic good. The couplet from Mandeville at the head of the paper gives the main idea.

2. *Virtues, vices, emotions*

Epistemic virtues are essential: we would know very little if we were not sometimes honest or tenacious or perceptive. But epistemic emotions? The ones that come to mind immediately are little more than re-labellings of epistemic virtues: the flush of honesty that overcomes a temptation to a sneaky shortcut, the horror of defeat that keeps one inquiring, the wonder at detail that makes one attend perceptively. These are all emotions that move us in epistemically virtuous ways. Are there epistemic emotions that are less directly connected to epistemic virtues? To begin, define the "epistemic" in "epistemic emotion" as "concerned with belief acquisition". And then consider not virtuous but vicious epistemic emotions: nosiness, obsessiveness, wishful thinking, denial, partisanship. (Epistemic virtues are tied to high-minded motivation in Zagzebski 1996. A more varied set of virtues can be got from Hookway 2003. I discuss epistemic emotions in Morton 2010, and in chapter three of Morton 2012. A pioneering discussion of epistemic emotions is Hookway 2002; see also Hookway 2008.)

Nosiness makes us want to know things that are not our concern. They may be not our concern for moral reasons, or for practically epistemic ones. In the latter case, it may be a bad use of one's knowledge-gathering resources to investigate something. In both cases, the emotion, which urges us to investigate what we should not, is directed at knowledge. After, a nosy person does not want false beliefs, or even accidentally true beliefs about the object of their nosiness. In both cases, there is a connection with obsession. I will return to the question of whether some epistemic emotions are more fundamental below, and to the interesting question of whether the really basic ones tend to be disreputable ones. Obsession obviously can lead to nosiness and other forms of inappropriate inquiry, but it can also be manifested in non-nosy ways, as when someone investigates too many details of something that they should be investigating. One might think that in such cases the person is diverting resources from more important epistemic tasks, but this need not be the case. For example, she may wake in the middle of the night fascinated by some acquaintance's motives in some trivial action and spend the rest of the night exploring various hypotheses, when it would have made a lot more sense simply to sleep.

Another epistemic vice is triviality, or more generally unsuitable choice of topics of investigation. The emotion at work here can be obsessiveness, but it

can also be fascination. In my own work, for example, I find that I am easily sidetracked into issues about infinity, and more generally into set-theoretical issues about cardinality, that I am not very well equipped to investigate but which always have an interest for me which is greater than my capacity to say anything helpful about them. Again, there is often an element of misdirected intellectual resources, but there can also be something like simple obsession. Described as an emotion, we can call this fascination, an emotion which can drive both epistemic virtues and vices. There are vices of misunderstanding oneself and vices of bad taste here. And the emotions that drive them are very varied. They can include egotism, pride, ambition, modesty, and others. It would be very rash to claim that such emotions played no part in the constitution of well-equipped scientists or other knowers.

Any emotion can drive both virtues and vices. Generosity can drive atrocity, anger can drive courage. Epistemic virtues and vices can both be motivated by similar emotions. In this paper, I am interested in the role emotions that we do not easily think of as admirable can play in motivating epistemic virtues. It is a commonplace that personal ambition and rivalry can motivate the acquisition of knowledge: some people are too nice to be fully successful scientists or philosophers, given the rest of their characters. As epistemologists will always say, these genetic factors are irrelevant to whether the beliefs that result from them are reasonable, justified, true, and so on. But note that they are much less obviously irrelevant to whether it is easy or hard to have an epistemically valuable belief on a given topic. Or to the difference between belief, conjecture, idle thought, and other similar states.

I shall argue for a rather drastic claim. That is, that although emotions, including epistemic emotions, are essentially neutral, it is a contingent fact about human beings that the easiest connections and transitions between emotions and our epistemic lives lead to vices. We have had to learn how to fuel our inquiries with passion without derailing them, and it is not easy to get it right.

The core of the argument is that the passion for impersonal objectivity is not needed, to produce knowledge supported by evidence. In fact, the search for hypotheses and evidence may go better if individual epistemic agents are moved by less worthy emotions. I shall spend the rest of this paper trying to fill in this core.

3. *Justification*

When you believe something for a reason you can defend it against attacks or undermining. Note the military metaphors. If you are in a position to defend it successfully then, speaking crudely in the terms we use when first introduc-

ing students to the concept, the belief is justified. The relation between justification and knowledge is complicated and controversial, but a standard and well-defended view is that one basic reason we have the concept of knowledge is to assess the credentials of testifiers (Welbourne 1986, Craig 1990). Someone reports that p: are they in a position to know that p or is it likely to be one of several unwanted substitutes such as guessing, delusion, or saying what the audience wants to hear? We also have the related concepts of an epistemic peer and of an authority, people who are at least as likely to be right – on this topic in this situation – as one oneself is. And, important for my purposes now, we have the phenomena of challenges to epistemic authority and of testimonial injustice.

Epistemic authority can be challenged in two ways. One is when a presumption that what one says is correct confronts a demand that one give reasons. The presumption is routine for parents and teachers, and it has frequently been pointed out since Reid (1764, especially ch. 6 section 24) that humans would know very little if they did not begin their epistemic careers taking this presumption widely: a small child has to take it for granted that parents, older siblings, and care-giving adults are generally correct in what they say. At some point this presumption has to change, and it is a central feature of adolescence that one comes to see that all these people are capable of being quite often wrong. Testimonial injustice, as described in Miranda Fricker's much-cited work (2007), consists in taking the expressed beliefs of some people as constituting weaker evidence for the truth of a claim than that of others, because of the group to which these people belong. A disputed example is the status of the testimony of women in Islam, and testimony of women in traditional Jewish law has little weight in court cases (see Deuteronomy 19). More subtle testimonial injustice is widespread. Pointing out the arbitrary assumptions that underlie testimonial injustice amounts to challenging the epistemic authority of the conventionally non-ignored. A hard-to-classify phenomenon in this area occurs during a Kuhnian scientific revolution, when the opinions of older scientists about what is a plausible explanation for new data, or about what is a good candidate for a hypothesis to test, are not taken seriously by a younger generation of scientists (Kuhn 1970, Hacking, ed. 1981.)

Another absolutely everyday occurrence is disagreement that is not resolvable by appeals to evidence. I tell my wife "there was a Steller's Jay at the feeder just now" and she, as sharp-eyed, observant, and as good at bird identification as I, says "I've been watching the feeder for the past fifteen minutes hoping to see one, but there were only some sparrows". One of us is mistaken, but in the particular case we can only resolve the issue politically, by taking one of us to be the less reliable observer. If the issue were the direction we have been moving if we are lost in the woods, or whether a financial adviser is trustworthy, a lot

will rest on how we resolve the conflict of epistemic authority (see the essays in Feldman and Warfield 2010, Zagzebski 2012.)

Yet another fact of epistemic life tending in the same direction is ubiquitous scientific and less-than-scientific partizanship. We join groups who share many beliefs about what is true and what explanations are plausible. Within a group we also share assumptions about what counts as evidence and how conflicts in the evidence are to be resolved. Many of these assumptions are not shared by members of other groups to whom we feel rivalry or hostility or pity (Morton 1987.)

The result is that human social life is marked by constant attacks and defences of epistemic authority. Who should we believe when, with how much support from the uncontroversial shared evidence. We defend our beliefs and our authority to hold them from attack, of course, but we would not feel the need to in the absence of challenges. (You look out the window and remark "it's beginning to rain". You do not normally add "and I have a good record in telling real rain from simulated rain, and I have nothing to gain here, and I am awake and perfectly sober.") Challenges are frequent, and defences against them, and attacks on the authority of others, are a routine part of maintaining one's own epistemic status.

It is here that the connections with epistemic emotions are made. There are

> *emotions of partizanship*: rivalry, epistemic hostility, solidarity – and others
> *emotions of self-assertion*: epistemic pride, resentment, independence – and others
> *emotions of epistemic denigration*: contempt, condescension, challenge – and others

The role of these emotions in maintaining one's epistemic authority is clear, and I hope that it is more than plausible – plausible to the point of being the default explanation – that these emotions are primary means by which people maintain their beliefs as the correct or orthodox ones. In any case it has been argued on analytical (Dogramaci 2012) and empirical (Mercier & Sperber 2011) grounds that this is so, that is, that there are communal advantages to individual rivalries for epistemic leadership.

These emotions set up a pervasive tension between the need for accurate information and the desire to maintain one's authority. In most of human history this tension has been resolved in favour of authority except in the case of undeniable perceptual evidence (and not always then.) The question that arises for the issues of this paper is the connection between the way the accuracy/authority balance is struck and the frequency of the less worthy

emotions I described earlier: obsession, nosiness, fixation. My claim is that the basic human emotions of wanting one's beliefs to have a high status with respect to those of others generate others of pointless inquiry and unprofitable persistence. We can see how this comes about in terms of one simple connection between them, whatever others there may be.

The connection is this. Conflicts of epistemic status arise when people share informational projects. (Most informational projects are shared.) Epistemic status is then usually and traditionally derived from social status, as Hans Christian Andersen understood. But to the extent that a project is not shared, it is immune from such conflicts. Spying on your neighbours, or collecting trivia about a celebrity, or recording the serial numbers of railway trains are largely solitary activities, which an individual can carry out on her own. The driving emotions here are fear of competition and resentment at being subordinate. They can drive epistemic projects which are not socially isolated, too, as when a group indulges in a shared obsession in isolation from the informational needs of a larger society. And they can drive projects which are epistemically perfectly respectable, as when a person finds a niche as an isolated investigator carrying out a self-contained portion of a larger project, a very common situation in the humanities.

I should be explicit that the claim is not that escape from status conflict is the psychological cause of obsession, nosiness, or other epistemic vices. More and different evidence would be needed, and the idea seems unlikely. The claim is rather that inhibitions against some kinds of epistemically vicious behaviour are overcome by the motive of fleeing conflict and control. (It is a commonplace of teenage life that youths acquire and share interests which are attractive largely because adults have no interests in them, and do not care what information the teenagers acquire and spread.) So although we are unlikely to explain in this way why obsession, for example, is a constant of human life, we can explain why certain obsessions are indulged in.

4. *A central vice and its driving emotions*

In information-gathering as in other shared activities one can be cooperative or individualistic. If one thinks orthodoxy is mistaken one can combat it, usually to minimal effect. Or one can opt out and engage in some epistemic project of one's own, unconnected to those of the larger group. If the orthodox project is completely misconceived, this will not add to the amount of falsity that is generally believed. But very often orthodoxy is a puzzling and intricate mixture of false assumptions, perverse methodology, and arbitrary authority, on the one

hand, and true conclusions, sensible procedures, and good use of well-earned trust on the other. So, as in many other cases, the externalist description of a virtue or vice may not give much guidance to the perplexed individual. But, still, there is a vice here, that of investing disproportionate energy in isolated epistemic projects at the expense of shared ones where information of use to the community stands to be gained. Call it the vice of epistemic self-indulgence. One main reason, I have been arguing, why we fall into this vice – become philosophy professors rather than plant geneticists? – is that it gives us an escape from unwanted epistemic emotions of resentment and subordination.

The same motives can underlie a subtler move. If you are not comfortable bowing to one epistemic authority you can be loyal to another. Even when there is a dominant view of a topic, with licensed sources of information, as in many medical areas, there are usually, especially in an opinion-rich culture such as ours, rebel and deviant views, and they may have their own disciplinary standards governing large numbers of adherent. You can learn about traditional Chinese medicine as a treatment for allergies, and do research designed to extend and confirm it. You may find the demands of your new epistemic cooperators more congenial. They may appreciate you more; you may in fact have more to contribute. The motives overlap with the retreat from shared to private enquiry: you may feel more appreciated and better preserve your self-respect.

5. *Virtuous distributions of individual vices*

In belief-acquisition as in other things, humans work best when they work together. So in moving to solitary obsessive nosiness one is usually condemning oneself to fewer, less interesting, or less surprising beliefs. Still, the price in terms of escape from subordination may be worth it. When there are epistemic tribes, though, operating in a balance of rivalry and cooperation, there can be a reconciliation of apparent opposites. The struggle for epistemic dominance can result in impersonal objectivity. I shall try to explain how this can be, in terms of three instances. (See also chapter eight of Goldman 2002.)

data-gatherers Throughout the history of science there have been field-biologists, star-gazers, statistics-gatherers, and fact-checkers engaged in Baconian enterprises of accumulating uninterpreted observations. (Many observationalists have had more definite theoretical motivations, too.) The motivations vary, of course, but a love of unregulated but careful observation is often central. The unregulated aspect provides freedom from the standard authorities and the carefulness provides a defence against contradiction. If one is loyal to a

team of observationalists one will want the team to get respect – if only, or sometimes best as, grudging respect – from more theoretically minded groups. This means coming up with data that is positively or negatively relevant to the ideas of the theoreticians, but consistently with this one can be as petty, obsessive, and competitive as one wants.

free-spirited theoreticians There is usually an orthodoxy in the theoretical side of a discipline, and in familiar Kuhnian manner the orthodoxy usually faces phenomena it cannot explain ('anomalies'), internal contradictions, and the need for *ad hoc* assumptions. These notoriously attract the interest of young theoreticians, who, moved partly by Oedipal sentiment and partly by the desire to make names for themselves in a crowded field, reject or re-interpret central parts of orthodoxy with gestures towards a new synthesis. Popperian pirates. Sometimes the young Turks succeed, and become respectable pillars of the next orthodoxy. As structural realists emphasise, the departure from previous theory often looks less drastic in retrospect (Ladyman 1998). For the new generation can make trouble for their elders best if they have learned the standard tools well. It is particularly delicious if one can turn the favourite mathematical techniques of one's scientific parents into sacred cow-slaughtering devices.

contrary teams Theoreticians and observationalists or experimenters can have opposed motives, but they can also gather into congruent teams. This is particularly true if the emphasis is not on confirmation by explanation of independent observation but by survival of rigorous tests. Then the experimentalist and the theoreticians have to understand each other's work in some detail. The tests that a successful theory passes will be most convincing if they are maximally disconcerting to rival alliances of theoreticians and experimentalists. One effective pattern is an experimental set-up that produces results that make the tested hypothesis H much more probable than a null hypothesis H_0, even when the conditional probabilities of the evidence on H_0 (the likelihoods) are calculated in terms of the rival view. The members of such a team can be motivated by shared nationalistic fervour, or personal hostility to dominant figures of a rival group, or by a sense of the social implications of the views they defend and oppose. Whatever it is – group selection versus selfish gene, heritability of IQ versus psychological plasticity, terrestrial or celestial origins of life – the group's authority as a group will be best served if one can produce considerations that will be disconcerting to that of rivals.

6. *Social epistemic emotions*

Bernard Mandeville was not only the first to argue that private vices can promote public goods. He was also one of the first to see the economic importance of the division of labour. The division of epistemic labour is between observationalists, theoreticians, teachers, guardians of orthodoxy, radical thinkers, appreciators of common sense, mathematicians, statisticians, experts in experimental design, and others. Each can be moved by epistemic emotions – meaning by this simply emotions that motivate the gathering and processing of information – that are directed at self-aggrandizement, the accumulation of information that will humiliate others, attractions to views that have no relation to the evidence for or against them, and others that do not look like tributes to our species, and which individual thinkers may be very reluctant to ascribe to themselves. I have paid particular attention to emotions of group loyalty, antipathy, rivalry, and attitudes to epistemic authority whether of submission or resentment. All of these can result in the shared possession of well-supported knowledge.

How and when? There are combinations of degraded motivation that result in the entrenchment of prejudice, the ignoring of evident fact, and the suppression of promising ideas. Some, probably most, combinations of emotions directed at epistemic authority and emotions of loyalty and rivalry to epistemic groups have these bad effects. But not always: some virtuous combinations of vices result in more knowledge, of greater predictive and explanatory power, than we can have from the enterprises of dispassionate sages. Since the time of Galileo we have been reaping the benefits of one such combination, which has evolved and diversified. The individual motives have not got any nobler, but the result continues to be, broadly and for the most part, epistemically valuable. It may not be possible to say in general what combinations will work in this way. It may not be possible any more than it is possible to say what combinations of expertise will result in a working industrial society.

Train one person as an electrical engineer, another as a welder, another as a food-quality technician, and so on. Then strand them on a desert island and wait ten years. The result will most likely be mass starvation but there are a few combinations – as stumbled on by the Japanese after the Meiji restoration – that will result in an efficient prosperous society. I am sure that no sociologist or economist can give us a recipe for this. (The failure of efforts to create from blueprints modern market economies in Eastern Europe in the 1990s suggests as much.) Similarly any amount of expertise in social epistemology may fail to identify the essential points of winning combinations of epistemic emotions. I cannot prove that this must be so, but here is a loose consideration. If there was

such an identification then it would be possible, from apriori considerations or reflection on the history of science, to fine-tune our epistemic society in order to get more and better knowledge. The epistemologists would be able to tell the working scientists how to get organised to improve their collective output. Though there is no proof that this cannot be, you must admit that it is pretty implausible.

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