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Epistemic Vices and Epistemic Ends: A Reply to Beatson, Joly Chock, Lang, and Matheson

Quassim Cassam, University of Warwick, q.Cassam@warwick.ac.uk

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In *Vices of the Mind: From the Intellectual to the Political*, I reflect on the claim that personal qualities like closed-mindedness, prejudice and wishful thinking are *epistemic vices*. This is not, in itself, a controversial claim. The interesting question is: what *makes* such qualities epistemic vices? On my view, an epistemic vice is a personal-level intellectual defect. Such a defect, which can be a character trait, attitude or thinking style, is an epistemic vice just if it systematically obstructs the gaining, keeping, or sharing of knowledge *and* is blameworthy or otherwise reprehensible. I call this view of epistemic vice *obstructivism*. Obstructivism is a form of epistemic consequentialism: epistemic vices qualify as such because of their (negative) consequences for knowledge.

In their perceptive discussion, Benjamin Beatson, Valerie Joly Chock, Jamie Lang and Jonathan Matheson (henceforth BCLM) raise a number of interesting questions about my view. To begin with, they target my formulation of obstructivism. They then go on to raise questions about my account of cognitive biases, blameworthiness, and the appropriate response to certain challenges to established knowledge. I will respond to each of these concerns. Although BCLM are critical of some of my views, their comments are by no means unfriendly. My own thinking about some issues has moved on, partly as a result of writing and publishing another book as soon as *Vices of the Mind* was done. There is more on this below. If I were writing a book about epistemic vices now there are a few things that I would do differently. However, on the main questions raised by BCLM I'm mostly inclined to stick to what I said in *Vices*.

Regarding Obstructivism

The first question raised by BCLM is whether obstructivism is right to focus on the role of epistemic vices in obstructing *knowledge* rather than epistemic ends 'beyond knowledge' (51) such as justified belief or responsible inquiry. Suppose that some form of scepticism is correct and there isn't much knowledge to be had. If there isn't much knowledge to obstruct in the first place then it surely can't be the fact that they get in the way of knowledge that makes epistemic vices epistemically vicious. Instead, BCLM propose, one would have to think of such vices as obstructing *other* valuable epistemic ends. This is still obstructivism but a broadened version of it. According to BCLM, such a broadened obstructivism 'can capture everything that Cassam's account can capture, plus more' (51).

BCLM's confidence that justified belief is 'beyond knowledge', and is possible even in circumstances in which knowledge is not, seems to presuppose an internalist view of epistemic justification. If, like Timothy Williamson, one thinks that 'knowledge is what justifies belief' (2000, 207) then it is false that justified belief is beyond knowledge. I do not commit myself to Williamson's form of externalism. I do claim, though, that 'if one arrives at the belief that P using an unreliable method then one's confidence [belief] that P is *de facto* unjustified' (2019a, 11).

Suppose that *W* is a world in which, due to the intervention of an evil demon, all my usual belief-forming processes are highly unreliable. As it happens, I am also closed-minded but my belief-forming processes would still be unreliable even if I were not. According to

BCLM, it can't be the fact that closed-mindedness is an obstacle to knowledge in *W* that makes it epistemically vicious because there isn't much knowledge to be had in *W*, regardless of whether I am closed-minded.

As it happens, BCLM face a version of exactly the same problem: getting in the way of justified belief can't be what makes my closed-mindedness epistemically vicious in *W* because in *W* there isn't much justified belief to be had either. I neither know nor am justified in believing that *P* given that I arrived at this belief using an unreliable method. In that case, what *does* account for the fact that closed-mindedness is an epistemic vice? Obstructivism's answer to this question is: the fact that it gets in the way of knowledge in "normal" worlds, worlds like ours in which knowledge *is* possible. I try to explain *how* epistemic vices get in the way of knowledge that would otherwise be available to us. One way for them to do that is for them to get in the way of justified belief.

This response to BCLM focuses on their suggestion that justified belief is an epistemic end that is beyond knowledge but they also talk in this connection about 'responsible inquiry' or 'properly responding to the evidence you have'. The implication is that in evil demon world it is still possible for one to be a responsible inquirer as long as one is not epistemically vicious. This, then, is the impact of epistemic vices: they prevent one from being a responsible inquirer even in worlds in which there is no possibility of knowledge. As I see it, the aim of inquiry is knowledge, so it is certainly not possible for one to be an *effective* inquirer in worlds in which there is no prospect of knowing anything.

As for whether it is possible, in such worlds, to be a *responsible* inquirer, much depends on how BCLM understand the notion of evidence. They imply that a responsible inquirer is one who responds 'properly' to the evidence she has. One can respond properly to the evidence one has only if one *has* evidence, but there are views of evidence on which in sceptical scenarios one has little or no genuine evidence for any statement about the external world. Evidence for *P* indicates that *P* or raises the probability that *P* is true. If, in evil demon world, I seem to see a cup, my experience neither indicates the presence of a cup nor raises the probability that a cup is present. It is therefore not evidence that a cup is present. My view avoids these complications by focusing on the impact of epistemic vices on inquiry in the actual world. To inquire into whether *P* is to seek *knowledge* rather than mere justified belief concerning the truth-value of *P*. Obstacles to inquiry, which is what many epistemic vices are, are also obstacles to knowledge.

The Variety of Epistemic Vices

Another of BCLM's concerns is that 'not all epistemic vices seem to systematically obstruct knowledge' (52). Not moderating one's confidence is one such vice. When the evidence supports weakly believing that *P*, someone who suffers from this vice believes very strongly that *P*. When the evidence supports weak disbelief, they disbelieve very strongly. Yet, 'such a vice would never obstruct knowledge (or at least not systematically), since the general direction of the evidence is followed' (52). Much depends, however, on what counts as believing strongly or weakly.

On one view, a person who believes strongly that *P* will not easily give up the belief even in the face of apparent counterevidence. Strong belief is epistemically problematic when one's

determination to hold on to the belief is stronger than is warranted by the evidence. It is arguable, for example, that in 2003 the evidence only weakly supported the belief that Iraq had weapons of mass destruction (WMD). On the basis of this weak evidence, members of the Bush administration believed strongly that Iraq had WMD. As a result, they ignored serious doubts about the quality of the evidence, only looked for new evidence that supported their belief, and got the facts wrong. In this type of case, which is by no means uncommon, excessive confidence *is* an obstacle to knowledge. To suppose otherwise is to ignore the deleterious impact of excessive confidence on inquiry.

On Cognitive Biases

What BCLM say about cognitive biases can be dealt with more succinctly. They argue that ‘most of our thinking is affected by cognitive biases most (if not all) of the time’ (52). It follows that on my view intellectually virtuous thinking is ‘out of reach for normal humans’ (53). This goes against my desire for virtuous thinking to be ‘a real possibility for people’. However, as BCLM note, it leaves open the possibility of getting *closer* to virtuous thinking by debiasing or other self-improvement strategies. Perhaps this is the best we can hope for *if* we accept the premise about the extent to which our thinking is affected by cognitive biases. It is not clear, however, that this premise should be accepted.

Imagine a car mechanic who concludes from all the facts available to her that the car doesn’t start because its fuel pump is defective or a chef who works out that he must have used too much flour in a particular dish. It is not obvious that cognitive biases play a significant role in these or countless other similarly mundane pieces of thinking or reasoning. It is an exaggeration, therefore, that *most* of our thinking is affected by cognitive biases most of the time. The real problem we face is not that intellectually virtuous thinking is out of reach but that such thinking is harder when there is a lot at stake, politically, financially or in other ways that mean a lot to us.

Fringe Views and Conspiracy Theories

Next, BCLM take on question of whether there are sound epistemic or other reasons to engage with what they call ‘fringe views’. They read me as proposing that ‘all challenges to our knowledge call for a serious response, even challenges by conspiracy theorists like Holocaust deniers’ (53). They also quote me as saying that ‘[if] one can’t be bothered to argue with conspiracy theories one can hardly complain if people end up believing them’ (2019a, 117). BCLM see three problems with this approach: first, such engagement can provide a platform for, and thereby legitimize, fringe views. Second, ‘constantly chasing down and refuting silly theories would come at the cost of us finding new knowledge and living otherwise valuable lives’ (53). Lastly, ‘some engagement with fringe views can involve a failure to stand in solidarity with members of oppressed groups’ (51). Specifically, ‘engaging with arguments that undermine the moral value of members of your community can pose a real harm to those members of your community. So, engagement with these challenges to our knowledge is not cost-free’ (53-54).

'Fringe views' is BCLM's expression rather than mine. My two examples of rebuttal-worthy views are 9/11 conspiracy theories and David Irving's version of Holocaust denial. Are these 'fringe views'? Not if fringe views are ones with few adherents. Conspiracy theories about 9/11 and other matters are widely believed and Holocaust denial is increasingly prevalent. The fact that Irving, who has written authoritatively about some other aspects of the Second World War, is a Holocaust denier makes his views about the Holocaust particularly troubling. The idea that such views should be given a free pass for fear of lending credence to them is problematic in at least two related ways: firstly, it underestimates the seriousness of the harms they cause, as described below. Secondly, although the risks of conferring additional respectability on Holocaust denial by engaging with it are genuine, they are not obviously greater than the risks of not tackling it. On balance, in this case and the case a number of other conspiracy theories, I judge that it is riskier to ignore them.

This is not to say that we need to spend time engaging with every crackpot theory that anyone has come up with. It is certainly not my view that *all* challenges to our knowledge call for a serious response. We can safely ignore conspiracy theories that are genuinely 'fringe', in the sense that they have few adherents or are too absurd to need refuting. An example of the latter might be the "theory" that the planet is ruled by shape-shifting reptilians. There is no need to waste time on this type of nonsense unless, as is sometimes alleged, it is a disguised form of anti-Semitism. Far from entailing that we should be chasing down and refuting every silly theory that comes along, my view only entails that we should be chasing down and refuting every silly theory that is both influential and harmful.

In what sense are conspiracy theories harmful? *Vices of the Mind* does not provide a satisfactory answer to this question but in my more recent book *Conspiracy Theories* I argue as follows: conspiracy theories are 'first and foremost forms of political propaganda' (2019b, 7). Their real function is to promote a political or ideological agenda. Many conspiracy theories are designed to promote extremist, right-wing causes, though conspiracy theories can also be left-wing. On this view, conspiracy theories are as pernicious as the ideologies they promote. For example, the point of Holocaust denial conspiracy theories is to advance the cause of anti-Semitism. Even conspiracy theories that aren't explicitly anti-Semitic are on very thin ice, ethically speaking. For as Jovan Byford notes, 'for a substantial portion of its history, the conspiracy tradition was dominated by the idea of a Jewish plot to take over the world' (2011, 95). Recent conspiracy theories about George Soros illustrate Byford's point. Overtly or surreptitiously anti-Semitic conspiracy theories need to be tackled because anti-Semitism needs to be tackled.

This has a direct bearing on BCLM's justified concern that engaging with arguments that undermine the moral value of members of your community can pose a real harm to those members of your community. Racist conspiracy theories are certainly designed to undermine the moral value of some members of the community. However, the question is whether this harm is exacerbated by *engaging* with such theories or by *ignoring* them. I don't share BCLM's confidence that it is more dangerous to try to rebut than to ignore them. Still, BCLM are right to this extent: the focus in *Vices of the Mind* is on tackling the *epistemic* harms caused by conspiracy theories. However, to see why it is wrong to ignore pernicious conspiracy theories much more needs to be said about the other harms they cause, including social harms. To take just one example, the most serious harm caused by AIDs conspiracy theories in South Africa was that they delayed the use of antiretrovirals for HIV prevention. As a

result, many people died unnecessarily. Conspiracy theories with potentially lethal consequences should not be ignored, despite the genuine risks identified by BCLM.

Blameworthiness

BCLM's final comments target my account of blameworthiness. My view, as BCLM understand it, is that it is not blameworthiness but criticizability that is necessary for epistemic vice. Why, in that case, do I spend so much time worrying about whether we are responsible for our epistemic vices in the manner and to the extent required for us to be *blameworthy* for them? Why not ditch talk of blameworthiness and focus on what it takes for our epistemic vices to be criticizable? The distinction between blame and criticism is not as familiar as it ought to be so it is worth thinking about why it is necessary.

Consider Heather Battaly's example of a young man in the Swat Valley whose dogmatism and other vicious attitudes are the largely result of bad luck, 'including the bad luck of being indoctrinated by the Taliban' (Battaly 2016, 100). Perhaps he thinks that women should only be allowed out if accompanied by an adult male relative. Even if in this case we are reluctant to regard the young man as blameworthy for his attitude, this does not make him, or his attitude, immune to criticism. His views are after all indefensible, regardless of how he came to hold them. So, this is a case in which criticism is in order even if blame is not. The same goes for garden variety epistemic vices like foolishness. Not unreasonably, people are criticised for being foolish, regardless of whether they are seen as blameworthy for this trait.

In that case why worry about blameworthiness at all? Because blame for epistemic vices *is* sometimes appropriate. If blame were *never* appropriate it might be better to abandon talk of epistemic *vices* and talk more neutrally about epistemic *failings*. I start with the simple notion that 'in order to deserve blame for a vice a person must be, in the relevant sense, responsible for it' (2019a, 123). There is also the intuition that in order to be responsible for something one must have control over it. Things get complicated at this point because there is more than one kind of responsibility and more than one kind of control. One kind of control is what Pamela Hieronymi calls 'managerial' control (2006, 53). We have this kind of control over something when we can manipulate it. This is arguably the only control we have (if we have any) over epistemic vices that take the form of character traits. We have managerial control over our character vices if there are practical steps we can take to combat them. In the case of epistemic vices that take the form of attitudes or thinking styles other kinds of control are relevant.

Even in the case of character vices, the link between blameworthiness, responsibility and control is not straightforward. It is possible for one to be blameworthy for a character vice over which one lacks managerial control *if* one's lack of control is itself blameworthy. Still, managerial control over our character vices is usually sufficient for us to count as responsible and blameworthy for them. BCLM represent me as abandoning the control condition altogether in my account of blameworthiness. I do no such thing. I simply point out that the connection between blameworthiness and control is more complicated than it might appear, and that any account that posits a simple connection between them is likely to run into

difficulties. What I say about blameworthiness is complicated because blameworthiness is complicated.

How can lack of managerial control over a character vice be blameworthy? Suppose I lack managerial control over one of my character vices V because I don't know that I have V. If my ignorance is blameworthy then the resulting lack of control is blameworthy. A difficult question here is: what makes my ignorance blameworthy? What is culpable ignorance? If I have excellent evidence that I have V but ignore that evidence out of a desire to think well of myself then I am culpably ignorant of V and lack effective managerial control over it. Nevertheless, I am still potentially blameworthy for V. In contrast, if I am *blamelessly* ignorant of V then it is more plausible than my lack of effective control over it is non-culpable, to the extent that this lack of control is accounted for my blameless ignorance. The question in this case is whether I can still be criticised for V even if blame is not appropriate. The answer to this question will depend on the specifics of the case. The fundamental point is this: epistemic vices merit *some* form of negative evaluation. The challenge is to do justice to the variety of negative evaluations that epistemic vices can merit, and to the possibility that epistemic vices that do not merit one kind of negative evaluation might nevertheless merit another.

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