A Case for an Historical Vice Epistemology

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ABSTRACT

This paper encourages greater engagement between contemporary vice epistemology and the work of intellectual and social historians of the vices. I argue that studies of the nature and significance of epistemic vices and failings can be enriched by engaging with the methods and results of the historians who share our interest in epistemic character and its failings. To that end, I distinguish between quotidian and esoteric, and between transient and promiscuous epistemic vice-concepts and offer illustrative case studies.

1. Introduction

There are many different ways to conceptualise the nature and sources of our individual and collective epistemic failings. Within contemporary philosophy, one of the most popular uses the concept of an epistemic vice, the negative counterpart to epistemic virtues. The study of epistemic virtues in the modern period began in the early 1980s during a search for ways of responding to Gettier problems. Attention soon turned, however, onto a wider set of issues concerning concepts of epistemic character, agency, and responsibility, with the latter being identified as the core attribute of an epistemic agent, 'from which [all] other virtues radiate' (Code 1987: 44). During the 1990s, that thought evolved into more systematic reflection on epistemic virtues as a basis for a new normative epistemology grounded in a virtue-ethical framework: the *locus classicus* for this sort of virtue epistemology is Linda Zagzebski's *Virtues of the Mind*. Her ambition was to develop a theory that could 'consciously connect normative epistemological concepts with virtue ethics', the aim being to 'shift the focus of evaluation from the act or belief to the trait of character' (Zagzebski 1996: 15, 73).

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Inspired by Zagzebski's ventures into virtue epistemology, the subsequent literature focused on the study of epistemic virtues within a broadly Aristotelian framework, alongside some exercises in distinctively Christian forms of virtue epistemology. W. Jay Wood, for one, argues that the Hellenically-inspired Christian concern with 'forging virtuous habits of moral and intellectual character' can be developed into a virtue epistemology rooted in specifically Christian aspirations and convictions (Wood 1998: 19; see Dunnington 2016). Such work was to blossom into a fully-fledged sub-discipline by the early 2000s, helped along by interesting educational and empirical psychological work on epistemic virtues (for a good overview, see Turri, Alfano, and Greco 2019).

Similarly systematic interest in epistemic vice, however, only really started with to the important formative work of Heather Battaly, taking inspiration from Aristotle's character ethics and its applications to education. She distinguished the main models of epistemic vice – *effect-based* and *motivation-based*, modelled on 'reliabilist' and 'responsibilist' forms of virtue epistemology; and also presented some of the first analyses of specific epistemic vices (Battaly 2013, 2015). Subsequent advances were made by Quassim Cassam, including baptising the newly-emerging area, 'vice epistemology', defined as 'philosophical study of the nature, identity, and epistemological significance of intellectual vices' (Cassam 2016: 159). Cassam's vice epistemology is grounded in a consequentialist epistemic value theory, according to which the badness of epistemic vices is explained in terms of their systematic tendencies to obstruct the gaining, keeping, and sharing of knowledge and other epistemic goods—a position he dubs *obstructivism*. By contrast, Alessandra Tanesini appeals to work in empirical psychology to defend a motivations-based account – epistemic vices are those attitudes, character dispositions, or sensibilities that manifest bad motivations, values, or desires (Tanesini 2021). Alongside these accounts, there are various hybrid accounts of the nature and normative status of epistemic vices and, naturally, discussions of related issues: our blameworthiness for our vices, the connections between individual epistemically vicious characters and our social contexts and environments, and the relationships between epistemic virtue and vice and epistemic and ethical vices (see, for an overview, Kidd, Battaly, and Quassim 2020).

At the moment, the agenda and methods of vice epistemology are still evolving and show great diversity. Alongside the established influence of

Aristotelian virtue ethics, one finds appeals to feminist social epistemology, liberatory social philosophies, educational epistemology and more besides. For these reasons, it would be premature to talk about entrenched topical or methodological biases: these are lively times for study of epistemic vices, and all signs are that further enrichment will come from engagements with researchers in other growth areas, like political epistemology (Kidd 2021). However, amid this diversity, there are certain directions in which interest might be encouraged, to ensure the discipline will develop with a suitably expansive sense of its topical and methodological possibilities in this early formative stage.

In what follows, then, I want to encourage and guide greater engagement between contemporary vice epistemology and the work of intellectual and social historians. My view is that studies of the nature and significance of epistemic vices can be enriched by engaging with the methods and results of the historians who share our interest in epistemic character and its failings. Naturally, enrichment incurs certain costs, including complications about the nature, significance, and identity of epistemic vices as they have been conceived in different times and cultures. Epistemic vices have histories that are worth our attention. I think, too, that adopting a historically informed approach to studying epistemic vices also means asking new questions and rethinking some of accepted answers. So, more work, but much fruit.

Since asking more work of people should always be justified, much of what follows is an attempt to justify my appeals for a more historical vice epistemology. My claim isn't that all vice epistemologists need to 'go historical', or that all vice-epistemological work would benefit from the work of historians. Lot of perfectly excellent work can and is being done on epistemic vices that is, descriptively, ahistorical. Embracing historical methods where they are unnecessary can be just as problematic as neglecting them where they necessary. If so, then one skill vice epistemologists need is a judicious historical sensibility: an ability to tell if and when it would be advantageous or imperative to adopt a more historical stance.

2. Context and contingency

One can only encourage vice epistemologists to engage with historical work is there already is extant historical research on epistemic vices. Fortunately, there is, and rather a lot of it. A large body of research has appeared over the last twenty or so years by historians of science and philosophy interested in what they call

the 'character', 'personae', and dispositions of character appropriate to scientists and scholars (see Paul 2017, Paul and van Dongen 2017). I focus on the influential work of the distinguished historian and sociologist of science, Steven Shapin. In several books and articles, he charts 'the relationship between knowledge and the virtues of people—a relationship that has taken many different forms of the course of time', thanks to the emergence of 'radically novel configurations of people, practices, and institutions' (Shapin 2008a: xiv). Obviously, in thinking about those relationships, we should think about vices, too.

An instructive aspect of Shapin's research are his descriptions of several socially and historically situated normative ideals about the ideal dispositions and qualities of scientists, the 'characters' taken to be appropriate to the 'man of science'. Each character emerged in a specific context structured by moral, cultural, religious, and political values, assumptions, and conceptions of personal and social comportment. Within the 18th century, says Shapin, four main 'characters' dominated conceptions of the 'man of science', each replete with its own associated virtues and vices—the Godly Naturalist, the Moral Philosopher, the Polite Philosopher, and the Civic Expert (Shapin 2008b: 170ff).

Each character-ideal was built out of culturally and contextually materials. Consider, for instance, the Polite Philosopher, a figure striving to balance their disputatious, pedantic tendencies with the sociable and conversational imperatives of polite society. The character traits that made one an excellent scientist came at the risk of atrophying the virtues and sensibilities expected of members of polite society, a gateway to professional and financial security. For this reason, a specific set of vices became especially salient for men of science. As Shapin nicely puts it, one could not have a polite conversation with an author one could not understand; one could only be lectured at—a concern that lent a salience to socially-tinged epistemic vices, like 'abstruseness, pedantry, and incivility' (Shapin 2008b: 173). As one 18th century psychologist warned, presumably from painful experience, 'Nothing can easily exceed the Vain-glory, Self-conceit, Arrogance, Emulation, and Envy, that are found in the eminent Professors of the Sciences, Mathematics, [and] Natural Philosophy' (quoted in Shapin 2008b: 174).

I offer these points as illustrations of the value of historical research to modern vice epistemologists. Although that was only a quick sketch, Shapin's work already several very interesting points for our thinking about epistemic

vices. First, the virtues and vices that are of concern to people are often connected, if only loosely, by more general conceptions, like the different 'characters' expected of a 'man of science'. Granted, those conceptions may be very general and admit of considerably internal variety; but, still, they are coherently related to one another in ways that it would be useful to understand. Second, certain vices will tend to stand out as salient in various ways – alarming, tolerable, worrisome – against a specific background structure of values, concerns, and ideals of life. Abstruseness, for instance, is an especial vice for enquirers whose social esteem and agency depend on a capacity effectively to communicate their epistemic goods to wider lay communities.

A final point is the fact that ideas about the nature and manifestations of epistemic vices are inseparable from aspects of social and intellectual context – that, say, even if arrogance has general stable constitutive features, its salience and characteristic behaviours will be supplied by the society in which one lives. For that reason, conceptions of what the epistemic vices are, and why and how they matter, are subject to historical change. To put it another way, there is lots of historical contingency that should be appreciated. Shapin offers the example of theologically influenced conceptions of the aims of science in relation to the character of scientists:

> The dedication to truth that drew men to such a life was made manifest by neglect of self and of material self-interest, and by a disregard for public favour and approval ... even in the absence of a pronounced natural-theological idiom, it was repeatedly said that the life spent in pursuit of natural knowledge tended to make men humble, serious, simple, and sincere. The immensity, grandeur, and sublimity of nature made modest those who studied it, as did the awareness of the little that was securely known about nature as compared with the vastness of what remained to be known. Sincerity, candour, tranquillity, and contentment were naturally instilled in men who lived for the love of nature's truth. (Shapin 2008b: 165)

Other scholars have elsewhere described how these shifting conceptions of truth, science, human beings and the natural order altered ways of thinking about epistemic humility and its vices, especially the complicated vice of epistemic hubris (see, eg, Kidd 2018 and 2020a). Roughly speaking, what are regarded as epistemically humble or hubristic attitudes and aspirations is determined relative to deeper metaphysical visions that stipulate the epistemic situation of human beings in the wider order of reality. If this is right, efforts to understand the nature and significance of at least some epistemic vices requires us to go

back into their historical development—to reconstruct the cultural contexts, worldviews, or metaphysical visions from which they emerged and in which they had their place.

I have only begun to sketch out some of the details of Shapin's work and indicate its value for vice epistemologists. Historical work, like his, can contribute to our understanding of the nature, identity, and significance of epistemic vices. Other sorts of historical work can contribute other things, too, including examples of currently-unrecognised epistemic vices.

3. Quotidian and esoteric epistemic vices

It is clear that there are many epistemic vices. Some of them are extremely well-known and these include arrogance, dogmatism, closedmindedness, unimaginativeness, and others that feature within everyday thought and talk. Unsurprisingly, these are quite well-studied within vice epistemology. Alongside these familiar epistemic vices, though, there are arguably a set of other more esoteric epistemic vices—'esoteric' in the sense of being 'obscure' and known only within the specialist community of vice epistemologists.

An interesting feature of the earliest contributions to vice epistemology was a rapid attention to a range of esoteric epistemic vices. Consider, for instance, Battaly's accounts of the vices of *epistemic self-indulgence* and *epistemic insensibility*, neither of which are terms likely to leap to the tip of anyone's tongue when describing problematic forms of epistemic conduct or character. Consulting Battaly's account, though, the constitutive behaviours and motivations are perfectly familiar and, assuming my life has not been unusually awful, quite regularly exemplified by the epistemic agents who populate my world, myself included. This is a good case – or set of cases – of esoteric epistemic vice: a theorist gives a new concept to call attention to a consistent pattern of problematic epistemic conduct, coupled to a careful analysis of its structure and manifestations and a normative account to explain its status as a vice (Battaly 2010, 2013).

A very useful feature of Battaly's work on these esoteric vices is her procedure for identifying these esoteric vices. Call it an *analogical method*– one chooses an established ethical vice, takes an analysis of that vice, then investigates if there are epistemic analogues to the relevant vice. Two caveats, the first being that one should not assume that all ethical vices do have epistemic analogues, and vice versa. Second, the analogical method can guide analysis of

epistemic vices; it does not offer one. Even where ethical and epistemic forms of a vice are related, they will have distinctive features that demand careful identification (this is complicated by questions about the relationship of ethical and epistemic value domains in relation to character epistemology). Battaly, then, exemplifies an analogical method for identifying and developing cogent analyses of epistemic vices not currently recognised in our received lists of the vices of the mind.

Battaly also, importantly, addresses the question of why we *need* new epistemic vice concepts. Sometimes, by furnishing independent arguments that make clear the work those concepts could play within our epistemic practices, as when Battaly argues that the vice of epistemic insensibility could play useful roles in critical discourses about higher education (Battaly 2013: 277ff). In these cases, the new vice-concept proves its worth by doing work. Sometimes, by arguing that the vice fits within the wider framework of a specific theorist, usually Aristotle, as with her defence of the value of an account of the vice of epistemic self-indulgence:

> Aristotle excludes all cognitive pleasures from the purview of temperance and its vices on the grounds that we do not share these pleasures with animals. But Aristotle also famously argues that rationality sets us apart from other animals [...] Since Aristotle thinks that the distinctively human pleasures are epistemic ones, providing an account of epistemic temperance should be even more important for him than providing an account of temperance that addresses physical pleasures (Battaly 2010: 225)

In these examples, esoteric epistemic vices are identified analogically using a study of studies of ethical vice and developed using philosophical and scholarly methods (see, for instance, Battaly 2010: §§ 2A-B). Some further proof of the value of esoteric vice concepts can then come by proving it in practice by demonstrating, for instance, the prevalence of epistemically insensible ways of thinking and acting within higher education (see Forstenzer 2018). If these new epistemic vice concepts do start to prove their value, we may hope they become entrenched over time, thus changing to quotidian epistemic vices.

I have used the vices of epistemic self-indulgence and epistemic insensibility to make the point that there are esoteric epistemic vices and that vice epistemology can perform the useful service of identifying and describing them. After all, our epistemic lives are constantly putting us in situations where we need to appraise the conduct and character of our fellow epistemic agents. We can only do that well if we have an appropriately rich range of virtue and vice

concepts: any gaps in our table of the virtues and vices of the mind are liable to be accompanied by gaps in our interpersonal critical sensibilities, that is, our ability to perceive and recognise the extant epistemic excellences and failings of those around us. For this sort of reason, we have good prudential reasons to want to enrich the range of epistemic virtues and vices to which we are sensitive. Luckily, vice epistemologists have described for us many other esoteric epistemic vices that might otherwise have slipped by unnoticed – epistemic insouciance and epistemic snobbishness (Cassam 2019: ch.4, Crerar 2020). There is also the array of vices marking excesses and deficiencies of epistemic humility explored in the work of Alessandra Tanesini, including pride, timidity, and servility as well as the splendidly-named vices, *superbia* and haughtiness (see Tanesini 2021: chs. 5 and 6).

In this section, I have argued that certain epistemic vice concepts are esoteric in the sense that they are known and used only within certain specialist communities, like that of contemporary vice epistemology. Those outside of those communities do not recognise that vice concept even if, in fact, it could play various useful roles in their lives. I also argued that one important social function of vice epistemology can be to furnish accounts of those vice concepts and make them available to those who might have use of them. This is a clear task for applied vice epistemology. Obviously, the offer should involve an indication of what sort of work those vice concepts could do for those to whom they are offered. For a comparison, think of epistemic injustice, a socially relevant epistemological concept that has proven both useful and popular beyond the community of professional academic philosophy (think of its uptake by those involved with healthcare systems: see Carel and Kidd 2014).

4. Transient and promiscuous epistemic vices

An important lesson of work in cultural, intellectual, and religious history is that there have been considerable historical shifts in the lists or tables of the ethical and epistemic vices. The shifts might affect several things: (a) the specific vice-concepts, (b) accounts of their structure and psychology, (c) the behaviours expressive of them, (d) accounts of their normative status, (e) their priority and dependence relations with other vices, (f) their emplacement within the wider matrix of moral and cultural values, concerns, and life-projects, and, sometimes, (g) the deeper metaphysical and anthropological conceptions in which those vices are embedded.

I want to start by considering the historical shifts in specific vice-concepts. This is the most obvious point made in the historical work, as when Rebecca DeYoung emphasises the 'fluidity of the vice tradition' (DeYoung 2009: 26). Other historians refer to 'changes', 'shifts' and 'developments' in the selection, definition, and classification of vices. Over history one sees considerable and complicated changes in the specific vice-concepts that have appeared intelligible and salient in efforts to critically appraise and, if possible, to reform epistemic conduct and character. Some vices tend to persist over time, surviving through conceptual and cultural transformations, albeit often in newly inflected forms; while the fate of others is to disappear, gradually or rapidly, from our tradition and our imagination: think of such medieval vices as vainglory and *acedia* (see DeYoung 2009: chs. 3 and 6).

When describing the changing historical careers of vice-concepts, we need some new terminology. I suggest we distinguish between *promiscuous* and *transient* vice-concepts (terminology first introduced by Kidd 2018: 50). A *promiscuous vice-concept* successfully persists throughout contextual changes (social, religious, intellectual) by undergoing developments so that it attaches itself successfully to newly emerging values, concerns, and life-projects. In these cases, certain general features remain – the name, say, and its general 'flavour' – even if some other features change, like the associated behaviours or the normative story about its badness. A good example is the vice of arrogance, whose early history is described by Kiril Petkov in a rich essay on 'the shifting conceptual field of arrogance' (Petkov 2012: 44). From the 5th to the 15th centuries, arrogance was conceived in terms of unwarranted individual defiance of collective spiritual and moral order—a conceptualisation tied up with concerns about 'illicit power relations and claims, social restructurings, and cultural forms, denied validity by mainstream moral theology for social reasons' (Petkov 2012: 43). To be arrogant was to depart from the established moral and spiritual authority of scripture and tradition—to *arrogate* to oneself the power and privileges to defy the authority of revelation, tradition, and God. Afterwards, however, the cultural and political situation changes, necessitating a reconceptualization of arrogance: by the 9th century, theological developments required 'the production and discussion of meanings different from the patristic paradigm', even if an association of arrogance and illicit claims to power persisted (Petkov 2012: 49). By the 12th century, things had changed again: attention now turned to the *sources* of arrogance, with a main debate being whether these were ignorance or misrepresentation of true knowledge (as

argued by Conrad of Hirsau) or the egoistic human susceptibilities to praise and self-love (as argued by Bernard of Clairvaux). The remaining eight hundred years, of course, offered many other changes in conceptualisations of arrogance, up to the present day.

What Petkov documents are some early stages in the career of a transient epistemic vice-concept, one that retains, even to this today, associations between power, knowledge, pride, and corrupted forms of epistemic agency. Arrogance is therefore a good example of a promiscuous epistemic vice-concept, one that has successfully persisted, over time, by neat adaptation to contingent social, intellectual, and cultural events and developments. (It was of course technically not the vice-concept that did the changing, but rather the theologians, philosophers and others concerned to use and refurnish inherited concepts.) To develop the idea of promiscuous vice-concepts, we really need other candidates, a promising one being dogmatism. It has a long history entangled with all sorts of epistemological, theological, and scientific issues of a sort some historians are currently investigating.

Prior to such investigations, though, we need to add a caveat about the relationship between transient and promiscuous vice-concepts. Strictly speaking, the promiscuous vice-concepts are the subset of transient vices that have, so far at least, remained intelligible and available over time; nothing guarantees that a promiscuous vice-concept will continue to adapt into the future. Some so-far successfully promiscuous vices may, into the future, turn dormant. Some currently-dormant vice-concepts may spring back into life. This means that all vice-concepts are transient, even if some of them are, so far, better at lasting longer than others. These shifts in the fortunes of vice-concepts reflect the complex historical dynamics of transience.

To develop that thought, though, we should look at an historical case study of some transient vices. The best one, to my knowledge, is the historian Sari Kivistö's book, *The Vices of the Learned* (Kivistö 2014). She explores the rich late Baroque and early Enlightenment discourses on 'scholarly vices', a complex set of ethico-epistemic failings associated with those committed to scholarly enquiry. From the 1670s to the late 1730s, several vigorous literatures emerged exploring *vitia sive errores eruditorum* – 'the vices and errors of the learned', which included 'self-love and pride; the desire for fame; *logomachy*, or a war over words', and 'futile curiosity' (Kivistö 2014: 33). Scholarly vices were not usually discussed in systematic ways, but rather were rooted in longer traditions of moral and social criticism of scholars. These spanned

Aristophanes's plays and Renaissance *Narrenliteratur* and humanist lampooning of the excesses of scholasticism, including Erasmus's essay, *In Praise of Folly*.

Kivistö emphasises that conceptions of scholarly vices were flexible, fluid, compiled from an array of resources including moral and religious concepts, 'rhetorical and literary conventions, images and a largely fixed stock of examples and anecdotes' (Kivistö 2014: 7). Philosophical accounts of character ethics were a part of this, although not the whole of it. These *vitia sive errores eruditorum* were described in hundreds of academic dissertations, polemical tracts, and satires, including no less than sixty-six solely devoted to charlatanry, a new concern in a culture where erudition was a route to social esteem. What see in these discourses, explains Kivistö, was a new culturally salient concern with 'scholarly ethics' that could suit the normative needs of a culture in which *Gelehrter* were now 'important objects of moral concern' (Kivistö 2013: 5-6).

Before moving onto consider the significance of Kivistö's work for thinking about the category of transient vice-concepts, note three features of her work. First, the vice-concepts were constructed using a far richer array of resources than one finds in contemporary vice epistemology—religious concepts, moral norms, polemical and satirical tropes, and much else from the Hellenistic, Christian, and later philosophical traditions. Second, normative analysis of these vices and failings invoked epistemic and 'non-epistemic' values, especially the moral and spiritual. At this point in history, of course, it would be difficult to maintain a substantive partition of those value-domains. The scholarly vice of *logomachia*, a disposition to pointless and perverse quarrelling, would not only interfere with the pursuit of truth, but also deprive one of socially necessary and culturally esteemed attainments, like 'sociability, friendliness, and good manners' (Kivistö 2014: 199f).

A third feature of Kivistö's work are the detailed accounts of the ways the scholarly vices were *inflected* – given distinct form and salience – by historically and socially specific practices and structures. Think of curiosity, an appetitive epistemic disposition, classified at this time as a vice in line with the longer medieval Christian tradition hostile to *curiositas*. As Kivistö notes, the status of curiosity as a virtue or a vice depended on how it was manifested in scholarly practices. It could take the form of an alarming 'search for novelty', a vain desire to be 'singular', an admirable openness to uncertainty, an arrogant disdain for tradition, or – unifying these and other forms – as a disposition which, if indulged, came at the severe cost of an acute 'tension' between prudently wise

deference to tradition and the demands of 'liberty ... renewal and reform' (Kivistö 2014: 258). During periods of transience, confidence in the normative status of a disposition of character became pliable, despite the weight of a tradition that has castigated it as a vice, as was the case with *curiositas* (Blumenberg 1983: ch.5).

Central to these discourses of scholarly vices was a conviction that issues of personal character were essential to the possibility and efficacy of our enquiry into the natural world. What drove these discourses, explains Kivistö, was the conviction that 'true knowledge was only achieved by a righteous agent, someone whose character manifested 'Christian virtues of humility and modesty and who avoided the vices of pride, ambition, and curiosity', which meant that 'the acquisition of knowledge was not a morally neutral activity' (Kivistö 2014: 259). Pride and self-love were taken to characterise human beings in general, of course, but also acquired new and 'peculiar manifestations' within the structures and norms of scholarly culture—that is to say, they become transient, gaining new content and salience in response to changing cultural and intellectual conditions (Kivistö 2014: 22). But this was not true of all of the *vitia sive errores eruditorum.*

Consider, for instance, some specific *vitia sive errores eruditorum* of the period. Here are some of what were called 'prejudices', for example: foolishness (*stultitia*), various bad epistemic habits or behaviours, some practice-specific, such as 'the itch to write' (*pruritus scribendi*). Others included general failings like an excessive reliance on tradition or desire for novelty (*praejudicium antiquitatis et novitatis*). Some were harmful for their effects and others for what they said about the appetitive and conative dispositions of the agent. Some were in themselves trivial, although, if left unchecked, could fester into full-blown vices (see Kivistö 2014: 18). Many of these *vitia sive errores* are now become dormant, like *logomachia* and *titulomania*, two vices characteristic of scholars whose epistemic appetites and desires overmastered proper concern for considerations of polite civility and properly proportioned ethical and spiritual probity. The reason is that those owed their salience to a very complex matrix of cultural, social and moral values that was peculiar to the period studied by Kivistö. Once the context changed, the vice-concepts disappeared—they evidently could not survive the disappearance of the context that lend them their existence and salience.

5. Character, tradition, and contingency

This paper has been a defence of the value to vice epistemologists of engaging more with the history of reflection on the vices of the mind and the historical work devoted to it. Although not all vice-epistemology work needs to 'go historical', some of it does, and, in those cases, it is good to have some idea of, as it were, what one should expect if one plunges into that very complex history. To that end, I suggested some distinctions to guide vice epistemologists in their historical explorations—those between quotidian and esoteric vices, for instance, and also between transient and promiscuous vices. Many of the vices that command attention today are quotidian vices, like arrogance and dogmatism, whose salience is partly sustained by a tradition extending back into the first millennium CE. But we should not naively trust to the systematicity or the completeness of our inherited table of the vices of the mind: there are many epistemic vice-concepts that are underexplored within the current literature that may be identified and developed a little easier if we go hunting for historical precedents. (Think, for instance, how relatively little we know about the vices related to curiosity, when compared to the vices related to humility).

The advantage is that there is a huge literature in which to go hunting. Reflection on human epistemic vices and failings has been pursued by theologians, moralists, satirists, educators, and many others, especially if one embraces Molière's cynical insistence that the 'function of comedy is to correct the vices of men' (Molière 2001: xiv). Some of the relevant writings will be hard-going for the philosophically trained, since they lack the specific sorts of conceptual and analytical sophistication they will want—fair enough. But a lot of these earlier vice-discourses will be very familiar to vice epistemologists, engaging with the sorts of foundational and normative issues that currently occupy them. For instance, from the early sixteenth century, after the Fifth Council of the Lateran, one increasingly finds that sermons and other *pastoralia* 'often contain thorough analyses of the separate sins and of the very idea of sin itself' (Newhauser and Rodyard 2012: 5). Those *pastoralia* are exercises in vice theory, even if their language, examples, and motivations seem quite alien to people in late modernity.

I end with two general remarks from contemporary philosophical character theorists sympathetic to calls, like mine, for more historical approaches. First, Alasdair MacIntyre's influential argument that understanding of the virtues must be alert to their connections to cultural, tradition, and

conceptions of the good life. In later editions of *After Virtue*, there is a new claim that our ideas about vices (and virtues), if they are to be fit for purpose, must be grounded in a philosophical anthropology. MacIntyre explained that studying Thomism led to the realisation that 'an account of the human good purely in social terms, in terms of practices, traditions, and the narrative unity of human lives, was bound to be inadequate until I had provided it with a metaphysical grounding' – what he called a 'metaphysical biology', able to ground a teleological account of our activities and life (MacIntyre 2013: 13). For MacIntyre, study of virtues and vices must, as it were, go all the way back and all the way down—back into our history and down to underlying anthropological and metaphysical conceptions. To repeat a caveat, I don't think *all* vice-epistemological work needs to do this, but do think certain kinds of work does.

The second remark comes from Bob Roberts and W. Jay Wood, whose work is one of an honourable exception to neglect of historical precursors to character epistemology. In a remark I endorse, they suggest that conceptions of epistemic virtues and vices are 'indexed' to – or 'presuppose' – 'conceptions of human nature and the nature of the universe' (Roberts and Wood 2007: 155). Although they do not cite MacIntyre on this point, the spirit of their remark seems continuous with his talk of a metaphysical biology. (For one attempt to develop out Roberts and Wood's remarks on human nature, see Kidd 2018: §§ 4-5). Elsewhere in their book, they explain their original motivations for writing their book by comparting it with John Locke's project in regulative epistemology:

> Like Locke's, our book is a response to a perception of deficiency in the epistemic agents of our time. But it is not a response to any particular historical upheaval or social crisis. We see a perennial set of deficiencies which in every generation need to be corrected, and a perennial positive need for formation in dispositions of intellectual excellence (Roberts and Wood, 2007, 22).

I agree with the gist of this remark, though think it needs amending. There may indeed be a 'perennial set of deficiencies', to which human beings are subject, quite regardless of social and historical context. Certain vices, that is to say, occur in every time and culture. But there are also contingencies and contextual complications. The 'deficiencies' that stand out for us may be ones made salient by prevailing cultural preoccupations; cogent strategies for their correction are shaped by moral and intellectual context—and so on. The vices of the mind were, for medieval Christians, worrisome insofar as they were related to the vices of the soul, those moral and spiritual defects that impaired our relationship with

God. By contrast, the late Baroque and early Enlightenment *vitia sive errores eruditorum* sat within concerns about the social conduct of scholars and the relationship between erudition, civility, and usefulness in the newly emerging sorts of culture. By further contrast, the thrust of modern vice epistemology is either a concern about the dangers of obstructing enquiry and being a bad thinker or the entanglements between epistemic vices and social oppression (see, *inter alia*, Cassam 2019, Kidd 2020b, Medina 2012, Tanesini 2021).

Our contemporary discipline of vice epistemology is the latest stage in a tradition of reflection on the epistemic vices and failings of human beings. By studying that tradition, we acquire many resources for conceptualising those failings and understanding their aetiology and nature. Moreover, we gain new ways of plugging character epistemology into the wider history of philosophy—to fill out the history of philosophical reflection on excellences and failings of epistemic character, at least within the West. In the Indian and Chinese traditions, matters are more complicated, and there is even less work on comparative or cross-cultural character epistemology. This paper is only the start of an historical vice epistemology. I have not even mentioned many crucial figures and periods—like the doctrine of the Fall of Man and Francis Bacon's account of the 'Idols of the Mind' (Corneanu 2011, Harrison 2007). That is all work for another time—and I hope to have shown that such work would be valuable as well as interesting.

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