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The Epistemology of Stupidity

Pascal Engel

1. Negative Epistemology and the Nature of Stupidity

It is strange, although not completely surprising, that epistemologists—unlike satirists, novelists, moralists, and essayists—have devoted so little thinking to the phenomenon of stupidity. Strange, because stupidity being, *prima facie*, a certain lack of knowledge or a pathological condition of knowing, it would seem that epistemology, whose main task consists in the definition of the constitutive conditions of knowledge, ought to discuss seriously this phenomenon. Not completely surprising, because it seems natural to think that once one has defined knowledge and the conditions of its exercise, one has automatically circumscribed, negatively, the domain of its absence or of its failures. Indeed negative epistemology, as we may call the study of defective belief formation or of the lack of knowledge, is but the mirror image of positive epistemology. But not quite: for truth and knowledge, if they are to be defined and to be subject to positive conditions, are one, whereas error, mistakes, and failures to know are diverse and multifarious. As all the literature on Gettier counterexamples shows, there are endless ways of going wrong or not satisfying the conditions of knowledge, although these conditions are supposed to be unique. Negative epistemology seems to cover many diverse phenomena: error, ignorance, irrationality, illusions and biases, and so on. These have been widely studied in cognitive psychology, social psychology, and psychopathology as well as in the history of science.¹ Stupidity, however, is even more elusive. It refers to so many diverse features that it is very hard to pin down. To be stupid is not simply to be ignorant or to be prone to mistakes. The vocabulary of

¹ To negative epistemology belongs a part of social epistemology which deals with situations where false beliefs and absence of knowledge can be widespread in a society and in a culture. While a lot of the history of science deals with ideologies, scientific errors, and failures of rationality, these situations have been recently studied under the name of “agnotology”, a discipline devoted to the study of ignorance in all its forms (Proctor and Schiebinger 2008). One can also consider as belonging to negative epistemology the branch of formal epistemology which deals with the modeling of situations of ignorance as “logics of ignorance” (Hendricks 2010). One can also consider as part of negative epistemology, or at least tools for such an epistemology, the numerous studies in cognitive social psychology which show how subjects can be affected by all kinds of errors, cognitive illusions, or biases, and many studies in psychopathology about delusions.

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stupidity is definitely “thick”, referring to a set of properties which have a lot of family resemblances, but which are so diverse that they seem to resist any attempt at a systematic inventory. To quote only a few expressions in various languages, people are called *stupid*, *dunce*, *dull*, or *dumb* (*stupidus*, *plumbeus*, *stupide*, *bête*, *mudo*, *dum*), *brutish*, (*bestialis*, *brute*), *rude*, *rustic*, or *rough* (*grossus*, *rusticus*), *idiot*, *imbecile* (*idiota*, *imbecilis*), *inept*, *stooge* (*ineptus*), *naïve*, *credulous*, *gullible*, *garrulous* (*credulous*, *inexpertus*), *clumsy*, *goofy* (*stolidus*, *incrassatus*, *balourd*), *fatuitous*, *conceited*, *vane* (*vacuus*, *fat*, *vain*), *silly*, *fool*, (*stultus*, *insipiens*, *tonto*, *sot*, *tor*). These words have as many contraries (“intelligent,” “smart,” “subtle,” “bright,” “clever,” “quick-witted,” etc.). The adjectives “stupid” or “foolish,” as their contraries, apply both to certain acts or performances (“that was a stupid thing to do”), to states (to be *stupidus* designates in Latin the person who is in a state of *stupor*, of astonishment) and to individuals or character traits (“you damn fool”). Another interesting feature is that “stupid” or “fool” and their contraries are gradable adjectives: one can be more or less stupid. But how to put order in such a mess? An important obstacle to this task is that adjectives like “stupid” and its family most of time belong to the class of words which semanticists call “pejoratives”.² Some people are called “stupid,” “morons,” or “nuts.” Does it follow that they are so? This raises immediately the suspicion that the proper semantics for such words is expressivist, and that they are mere projections of our moods, or of the social settings in which they are used. It is true that in many cases such adjectives have an expressive or social meaning (the French *con*, the Spanish *gilipoyas*, or the U.S. *jerk* are notoriously hard to translate). But it does not follow that what they denote is only in the eyes of the beholder. As diverse and context-relative can be the range of properties designated by this multifarious vocabulary, we should not exaggerate their lack of unity. If we presupposed that the notions stupidity or of foolishness have only an expressive or social meaning the present investigation would have no point.

The most natural home for an investigation into the nature of stupidity is the Aristotelian tradition of the description of characters, from Theophrastus to the French and British moralists, taken up in literature by novelists like Fielding, Austen, Eliot, and by many contemporary works.³ But here too the diversity is striking. It is not difficult to see that Don Quixote and Sancho Panza, Dostoevski’s Mychkin, Faulkner’s Benjy, or Flaubert’s Bouvard and Pécuchet are not idiots or fools belonging to the same kind. The first is a lunatic, the second a rough man, the third is an idiot in the clinical sense, the fourth is a mentally retardate, and the last two characters are stupid although intelligent in many ways. The most obvious candidate for unifying these properties is to take them as features of a personal character, hence to take stupidity and its kin properties as species of epistemic or cognitive vices. The negative epistemology of

² On pejoratives see e.g., Hom (2010).

³ Philosophers, it has to be said, have done very little to illuminate the nature of stupidity. Poets, moralists, writers, and satirists like Juvenal, Erasmus, Pope, Swift, Flaubert, Musil, and Kraus, have done a lot, without being able to capture the very essence of the phenomenon (Musil’s *über die Dummheit* (Musil 1937) is an exception).

stupidity is the counterpart of the positive epistemology of epistemic virtues. So it seems natural to treat the epistemology of stupidity as a chapter of virtue epistemology. Just as epistemic virtues, like moral virtues, are specific kinds of excellences based on various dispositions and abilities, epistemic vices are specific kinds of bad dispositions or of inabilities.

Virtue epistemology, however, comes into two varieties. On the one hand, according to what is often called “responsibilist” or “character based” virtue epistemology, virtues and vices are conceived as personal character traits, which are in general voluntary or under the agent’s control. On the other hand, according to what is often called “reliabilist” virtue epistemology, virtues and vices are conceived as basic dispositions and competences, which are not voluntary and not directly under the agent’s control.⁴ A number of writers (Hookway 2003, Lepock 2011, Baehr 2011) distinguish two kinds of intellectual virtues: “low-level” knowledge-generating faculties, like perception, memory, inference, or understanding language, and “high-level” cognitive character traits that regulate inquiry and deliberation, such as conscientiousness, perseverance, open-mindedness, intellectual humility, or intellectual courage. It seems natural to consider that reliabilist virtue epistemology concerns virtues of the first kind, and that responsibilist virtue epistemology concerns virtues of the second kind. Although these are often presented as rivals, one might ask whether they actually compete.⁵ When we consider epistemic vices such as stupidity, however, they seem to compete. For, on the one hand, the property of being stupid seems to designate, in many cases, a certain lack of competence or a lack of the innate dispositions and abilities which are necessary for knowledge, and a defect for which the agent is not responsible. On the other hand, stupidity is a defect in a certain sort of performance, an incapacity to exercise one’s cognitive competence. In a number of cases, this incapacity is, at least partially, under the control of the agent, not in the sense that he is willingly so, but in the sense that he illustrates a certain kind of vanity or fatuity, for which he is accountable. In an even wider sense, stupidity is more an instance of what is called in English *foolishness*, the absence of wisdom, which is, in many ways, something for which we can be accountable. This feature raises the old problem of the relationship between intellectual and moral virtues: to what extent is stupidity a matter of *intellectual* deficiency or a matter of *ethical* deficiency? So where should we place the study of stupidity? At the level of the basic dispositions or competences or at the level of regulative character traits? It is not clear that these two forms of stupidity, a defect in competence, and a form of foolishness are species of a common kind. It is, however, important to understand their relations, if we want to understand the nature of the epistemic vice of stupidity, and more broadly, the relationship between the two kinds of virtue epistemology.

⁴ Sosa (2007), Greco (2010), are usually considered as representatives of reliabilist virtue epistemology, Montmarquet (1993), Zagzebski (1996), and Baehr (2011) as representatives of the responsibilist version.

⁵ Baehr (2011), Sosa (2015). Interestingly the division between the two kinds of virtues coincides in a number of respects with the “dual mind” view of human intelligence defended, for instance, by Kahneman (2011).

The problem of the nature of stupidity raises another familiar issue, about the value of knowledge. Is it bad to be stupid or foolish, and why is so bad? It is bad to lack certain intellectual capacities or to be unable to exercise them, but is it always bad? Blessed are the poor in spirit, says the Gospel, and literature and movies often portrait dumb people who turn out to be much wiser and morally good than those reputed to be intelligent. Just as there is a problem of the relation between intellectual and moral virtue, there is a problem of the relation between intellectual and moral vice. What are the points of contact between the moral and epistemic vice here? So in many ways, stupidity is a test case for virtue epistemology.

Although, to my knowledge, Ernest Sosa has never dealt directly with the problem of stupidity as such, his general framework in epistemology is very relevant to the analysis of this phenomenon. According to Sosa's (2007, 2011) metaphor, an archer can be adroit (in having certain abilities and skills), and can make accurate shots (hit the target), but he is a good archer only when his successes are the result of his abilities and skills. Similarly belief is a kind of performance which has to pass three dimensions of evaluation to become knowledge: when it reaches its aim (when it is accurate, hence true), when it is competent (adroit) and when it is accurate because of this competence (apt). When knowledge of one's apt performances becomes reflective we know "full well." Let us try to apply this scheme to stupidity. Is stupidity a failure at the level of accuracy? No, since having a false belief does not make you stupid. Does having many false beliefs make you stupid? It makes you ignorant, but not stupid. Ignorance can be stupidity if the deficit comes at the level of the basic competence, when the basic low-level dispositions are missing or are unreliable. Stupidity is at least in part a failure in aptness. It occurs also at the level of the performance. An archer can have the abilities to make good shots, and as a result of being clumsy, fail to hit the target. But some archers are so bad that they very rarely hit the target, or if they do so, we are in doubt whether it did not happen by sheer luck. We then tend to say that there is something really wrong with them: perhaps they'd better try another sport, and go for football instead. Stupidity may be located also as the failure of the higher-level performance. But what if the archer goes even more seriously wrong, and, for instance attempts at making the moves and gestures of archery when he actually is doing the moves associated to another game, say tennis? We have the intuition that it is not simply a matter of competence, let alone of cognitive competence, but also of what is actually at stake in the game: the person is not playing the game of archery, perhaps actually refuses to play it. An agent who understands the rules of the game and has the relevant abilities, but systemically fails to take the game seriously is not someone whose competence is defective and he is not *ipso facto* stupid. Similarly someone who understands that the aim of belief is knowledge and truth, has the proper competence and skills, but does not try to reach these goals is not stupid. Or imagine someone whose whole life is devoted *only* to archery, who does nothing else, at the expense of all of his other activities and duties in life. Something in them went wrong, but not with the achievement of their aims; rather with the very meaning of the aims. Such agents are rather what we

normally call *fools*. The kind of vice that they exemplify is *prima facie* better described within the framework of responsibilist virtue epistemology.

In what follows I shall first examine the intellectualist conception according to which stupidity is a kind of cognitive defect and its difficulties. But my problem will be here orthogonal to the one which occupies most writers on virtue epistemology, which is the problem of whether virtues—either in the sense of reliable dispositions or in the sense of acquired character traits—can define knowledge or be constitutive of it. I shall assume that we can define knowledge as a form of safe belief based on certain kinds of competences and which can be apt, accurate, and adroit. I shall reject the idea that stupidity is *only* the absence of knowledge so defined. I shall envisage the alternative hypothesis that stupidity—or at least a distinct species of stupidity lies elsewhere: in a failure to appreciate our epistemic goals. This will lead us towards the view that there is a kind of epistemic vice which consists in a failure to respect *intellectual* values, which is more appropriately called *folly*, *foolishness*, or the lack of wisdom. Finally I shall suggest that there is more continuity between the two kinds—stupidity and folly—than first appears.

2. The Intellectualist Conception of Stupidity

The most common conception of stupidity is that according to which stupidity is a certain lack of intellectual competence. This conception is well entrenched both in our common-sense notion of stupidity as a cognitive deficit which is in many ways innate and in the widespread view among psychologists that it consists in intellectual capacities—of judgment, of reasoning, and of inference. Philosophers like Descartes who insist on the idea that reason is an innate endowment, psychologists like Piaget, who hold that the capacity in question comes through cognitive development and is in a large part acquired, and cognitive psychologists who test intelligence through specific judgments which display rationality or irrationality, all share the idea that intelligence is a special kind of intellectual capacity, and stupidity a lack of it. Smart people have this capacity—they are quick, have a good memory, reason well, and often know a lot. People deemed stupid seem not to have the required competence—they are slow, forgetful, reason badly, and in general know little. But there are different ways of understanding this competence: is it a matter of knowledge, of reasoning, of intuition? Indeed idiocy or cretinism are names of certain kinds of intellectual deficiencies, and often to be stupid is simply to be ignorant. Stupidity may be associated to the lack of knowledge, but the lack of knowledge does not entail stupidity—lots of people know little but are far from being stupid—and being knowledgeable does not entail that one is intelligent or clever, for there are very knowledgeable people who make stupid things. There are “intelligent” idiots, like the “autistic savants” studied by Oliver Sacks (Sacks 1985). So it would be wrong to assimilate intelligence to the possession of knowledge, and stupidity to its absence. The most common cognitive defect associated to stupidity is different.

It is the *lack of judgment*. Let us call this the *judgmental, intellectualist, or rationalist* conception of stupidity. Indeed knowledge consists in a number of dispositions, and the capacity to judge is the capacity to manifest these dispositions, and in this sense being intelligent and being stupid are dispositions associated to the presence or absence of knowledge. Judgment, however, is a distinctive capacity. Kant's famous definition of stupidity locates it in a defect of the capacity to judge:

The right word for a lack in one's power of judgment is "stupidity" (*Dummheit*) and there is no help for it. Someone who is dull or limited in his thinking, having nothing wrong with him except a low-grade understanding and a shortage of concepts, can be instructed—even to the point of becoming learned. But people of that sort usually lack judgment (*Mangel an Urteilskraft*) as well, so that it isn't unusual to encounter learned men whose applications of their science frequently show signs that lack, for which there is no cure. (Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, KRV, I, 174).

Kant actually says here two things. The first is that stupidity is a lack of a certain kind of skill, the skill of judging. The second is that it is the property of a type of character, the one who lacks the skill in question. Let us for the moment leave aside this second feature, which ties Kant's view to the traditional Aristotelian tradition of intellectual virtues and vices. To say that stupidity is a defect of our judgments means that it is not simply a matter of failing to know certain things—in Kantian terms to lack certain concepts—but a matter of being unable to apply what one knows to a particular circumstance—in Kantian terms, to fail to bring together the categories of the understanding and one's intuitions about a particular case. Thus in La Fontaine's fable, *The Bear and the Amateur Gardener*, the bear, intending to remove a fly from the nose of his sleeping master, throws a large stone on his face and kills him. The moral of the story is that "A foolish friend may cause more woe/ Than could, indeed, the wisest foe." The stupidity lies in his being unable to adapt the proper tool for the circumstance as when one "cracks a nut with a sledgehammer." Flaubert's novel *Bouvard et Pécuchet* is another illustration of the judgmental conception. The two "idiots" are remarkably knowledgeable in all sorts of things which they have learnt in books, from agriculture to astronomy and jurisprudence, but all their efforts at applying their knowledge fail: they lack the power to judge correctly, that is, to apply the appropriate concepts in the relevant situations. On this view, stupidity is a lack in a certain skill of judgment. This feature can indeed affect a person as a matter of basic character, thus sorting out certain individuals as "idiotic" in the etymological sense. But it can be shared also by a lot of intelligent people, at least at some moments. This is why it is not necessarily an enduring trait of character.

The capacity to judge is indeed related to a certain competence, but the competence in question is not usually understood as a form of knowledge. It is, rather, the possession of a power not only to issue judgments, but also to infer certain things from others, hence to reason. Judging is supposed to be the main manifestation of our capacity to be rational. So a lack of this capacity is a lack of *rationality*. Man being a rational

animal, it would thus seem that stupidity is the exception rather than the rule. Contemporary cognitive and social psychology, however, seem to show exactly the contrary. They are replete with studies showing how cognitive illusions and biases affect ordinary human performance in reasoning and judgment. These mistakes are not occasional, but systematic. They can affect deductive reasoning (Inhelder and Piaget 1955, Wason 1968, Nisbett and Ross 1980), probabilistic and economic reasoning (Kahneman and Tversky 1982), and a number of our decisions and behaviors, in particular in economics (Leavitt and Dubner 2005). The mistakes also affect a vast variety of behaviors: people make bad estimates of risk, based only on success in the past, they indulge in wishful thinking, they under-evaluate public opinion and technical change, or are overconfident. These persistent errors are generally considered as failures of rationality in the human mind. So on this conception, stupidity is the same thing as irrationality. We may not be stupid, since we have a modicum of rationality, but we often think and do stupid things by reasoning badly, even on very simple tasks.

The intellectualist-rationalist conception of stupidity is both too coarse and too narrow. Too coarse because, in so far as it conflates intelligence with rationality and stupidity with irrationality, it is too broad to capture what is specific to stupidity. If we interpret it, on the one hand, as do many psychologists and philosophers (Nisbett and Ross 1980, Stich 1985) as showing that human beings are, as a matter of empirical fact, deeply irrational and bad in many of their ordinary judgments and reasoning, and in this sense very stupid, the view is too broad, since it entails that everyone, more or less, is stupid, most of the time. As many titles of publications say, “It’s not necessary to be stupid to act stupidly” (Legrenzi 2010) or *Why Are Smart People so Stupid?* (Sternberg 2002). So on the intellectualist conception, everyone has his share of stupidity. On the other hand, it has been argued that these pessimistic results can be obtained only against the background of a general presupposition of general competence or rationality (Davidson 1980, Cohen 1981): a kind of behavior or judgment can be predicated as irrational only if one assumes, from the outset, that human beings are *in general* rational, hence intelligent, and that mistakes and errors are products of performance, not of competence. If one takes this line, human beings are in general intelligent, and only stupid on that general basis. One may further argue that the kinds of mistakes that people make are often artefacts of the formalisms and of the normative principles used by the experimenters, and that when one considers intelligence as the capacity to use heuristics and adaptable behavior—and not as competence judged according to a principled normative theory—the so-called mistakes seem far less salient (Gigerenzer 1996). When the proper logical norms are employed, the overall irrationality disappears, and people appear much smarter, for they use simple heuristics and cognitive tinkering, which show that human intelligence has much more adaptive resources than those predicated on traditional models. “Ecological rationality” which uses “quick and dirty” heuristics fares in general much better in reaching certain goals than a rigid logical conception of reason. In the end, when intelligence is not understood as logical rationality but as a form of adaptive behavior in evolutionist terms, humans

turn out to be much more intelligent and less stupid. This confirms the point noticed above, that one does not need complex cognitive equipment, hence much knowledge, to be able to make good judgments (Todd and Gigerenzer 2007). So everyone has his own share of stupidity—as the movie character Forest Gump famously said, “stupid is as stupid does” applies to all of us—but also everyone has his or her share of intelligence. We may well be rational or very clever in one respect or another. Intelligence and stupidity are very contextual: for instance people who are able to solve a problem quite well in a certain kind of practical context are often unable to solve it in another context or when it is posed in abstract terms. It is not even clear, on the rationality view of intelligence, that we can set a standard of intelligence so that individuals of a certain class can be definitely considered as “stupid” and others as “intelligent.”⁶ So the claims of universal intelligence or stupidity are underdetermined by empirical evidence and by the choice of our normative models of rationality. The intellectualist assimilation of intelligence to rationality is too general to capture stable properties such as dispositions. This generality is but a consequence of the psychological conception upon which the rationality view rests: rationality is displayed in particular *judgments* that people make, which are understood as events falling under laws which cognitive psychology has to investigate. They are never understood as enduring properties of kinds of individuals or as character traits. The idea that intelligence is an enduring power of judgment was indeed Kant’s. But contemporary psychologists have implicitly rejected this conception by concentrating on particular manifestations of a general competence and by rejecting the notion of an enduring power.⁷

The intellectualist-rationalist view is also too narrow. Ryle (1946) notoriously objects to the view that intelligence consists in the contemplation of propositions and in a form of propositional knowledge or of truths, and argues that it is more a matter of knowing how or practical knowledge. He defends the thesis that it consists in dispositions and skills. On Ryle’s view if intelligence is a kind of knowledge, it is a certain kind of *know-how*. It is the style of performance which is intelligent or stupid, not the grasp of propositional rules which govern it. The intellectualist is not necessarily committed to the view that to be intelligent is to be able to grasp certain propositions, but it is an important line of objection to at least some versions of it. The Rylean view is not necessarily in opposition here with reliabilist virtue epistemology, since one can count a number of reliable dispositions as forms of know-how.⁸

Another common objection to the intellectualist view is that intelligence is not only, or not mainly, the exercise of rationality. It has to do with a variety of factors, which involve not only the faculties of reasoning and intellectual judgment, but also emotions and feelings, sensitivity to context, the capacity to decide in various circumstances,

⁶ Ceci (1993), Lepock (2011), Olin and Doris (2014).

⁷ This rejection is clear in Gilbert Harman (2000). But perhaps the notion of a power to judge has been abandoned too quickly.

⁸ Indeed this objection rests upon whether one accepts Ryle’s distinction between knowing how and knowing that. But I won’t go into this here.

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the disposition to learn from one's errors rather than the rigid application of the rules of logic. The use of reason, far from being the criterion of intelligence, is often the mark of stupidity. This was actually the objection that the Romantics addressed to the Enlightenment conception of reason. Schopenhauer accepted Kant's definition of stupidity (*Dummheit*) as a lack of understanding (*Verstand*), but he also said that stupidity can affect reason (*Vernunft*),⁹ which can make mistakes of its own. For Schopenhauer (who here follows Hegel), the substance and proper incarnation of reason is contained in the principle of identity "A = A," which contains all logical truths, but which is empty and tautological. Stupidity for the Romantics is not, as it is for the Enlightenment philosophers, a misuse of a faculty—reason—which is healthy by nature, but it is the mark of an excessive respect for reason, which thus becomes a kind of illness. Nietzsche denounced in the same way what he called the logic of identity.¹⁰ The theme of stupidity as an excess of reason is most present in literature, where stupidity is represented by characters, such as Flaubert's Homais, Dickens's Pickwick, or Lewis's Babbitt, who issue only tautologies and commonplaces, and who are paradigms of stupidity. Flaubert wrote a *Dictionary of Accepted Ideas*, which is a repertoire of such truisms. Like the Romantics, he understood stupidity as the trap in which one falls when one has too much reverence for reason, when one tries to be *too* rational.

On the Romantic view, reason itself and the very search for truth are stupid. A familiar Romantic theme is that we ought not only to praise feeling and sentiment, but also folly and madness rather than cold reason. It's not stupidity which is bad, it's reason which is stupid. The Nietzschean conception of values is, in many ways, a kind of overstatement of the Romantic conception. The values of life are held to be superior to those of knowledge and truth. Stupidity and silliness are, in this respect, to be praised as displaying the dark side of reason.¹¹

3. Stupidity and Understanding

One need not go to such extremes as the Nietzschean inversion of values in order to see what is wrong with the intellectualist–rationalist view. Stupidity may be an excess of reason, as the romantic conception has it, but it does not follow the *very* use of reason is stupid. A less radical hypothesis is that stupidity does not involve the absence or

⁹ Schopenhauer (1909: 50). The main contemporary representative of this conception of stupidity is Deleuze (1968). See the comments on these conceptions by Roger (2008) and Engel (2014).

¹⁰ Nietzsche: "Logic is bound to the condition: assume there are identical cases. In fact, to make possible logical thinking and inferences, this condition must be treated fictitiously as fulfilled. That is: the will to logical truth can be carried through only after a fundamental falsification of all events is assumed. From which it follows that a drive rules here that is capable of employing both means. Firstly falsification, then the implementation of its own point of view: logic does not spring from will to truth" (Nietzsche 1901: 512).

¹¹ See in particular Deleuze (1968), who builds a whole theory of *bêtise* on the basis of his Nietzschean critique of reason, and the comments by Roger (2008: 19–38). The fascination for stupidity as the dark side of reason is indeed a common postmodern theme, which inspires a lot of contemporary literary essays (see Engel 2014).

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the excessive use of reason, but a *misuse* of reason. The rationalist view implicitly identifies the epistemic goal as the attainment of true belief. In identifying implicitly competence to the reliable capacity to maximize true beliefs, the rationalist equates the possession of knowledge and the exercise of intelligence with the reliable manifestation of the disposition to form true beliefs. Now, as we have already noticed, a number of people who possess knowledge in this sense can be stupid. The traditional conception of knowledge presupposes that truth is our ultimate epistemic goal. If all that it takes to achieve knowledge is reaching this goal in maximizing our true beliefs, then someone could get a lot of true beliefs and thus reach knowledge without appreciating the value of these beliefs. According to Catherine Elgin (1988), “currently popular theories of knowledge have the surprising consequence that stupidity can enhance, and intelligence diminish, one’s prospects for knowledge” and so promote “the epistemic efficacy of stupidity.” Most contemporary theories of knowledge, she argues, rest upon:

An unwitting bias in favour of stupidity is characteristic of both internalist and externalist theories of knowledge. It derives from the shared convictions that (a) our epistemic goal is to accept (or believe) a sentence if it is true and reject (or disbelieve) it if it is false, and (b) the standard for acceptability cannot be set too high, else scepticism will prevail. The epistemic inutility of intelligence that follows is not the sceptic’s fatalistic conclusion that since no one knows anything, dullards are no worse off than the rest. (Elgin 1988: 297)

Stupidity, for Elgin, consists in the search for as many true beliefs as possible, without caring for their meanings. A man who knows a lot of truths, without knowing *why* they are truths, is in this sense stupid. To know that a proposition is true, and to attempt to know as many true propositions as possible is one thing, but to know for what purpose these propositions are relevant to our inquiries, and what role they play in our cognition, is another thing. The dull and repetitive registration of information, as it can be accomplished by a mindless bureaucrat or by a computer, satisfies the criteria of reliabilist theories of knowledge. This argument suggests a diagnosis about the nature of stupidity which is quite different from the intellectualist one: stupidity is not a failure in cognitive competence, it is rather a failure to appreciate the real nature of our epistemic goal. A number of writers have argued that the ultimate epistemic goal is not truth or knowledge, but *understanding*. Stupidity is basically a failure in understanding:

Knowledge, as contemporary theories conceive it, is not and ought not be our overriding cognitive objective. For to treat it as such is to devalue cognitive excellences like conceptual and perceptual sensitivity, logical acumen, breadth and depth of understanding, and the capacity to distinguish important from trivial truths. What is wanted is a wide-ranging study of cognitive excellences of all sorts, and of the ways they contribute to or interfere with one another’s realization. (Elgin 1988: 310, 2006, see also Kvanvig 2003)

There are two sides to this argument. The first is that since according to reliabilism the proper goal of cognition is to maximize true beliefs and to minimize errors, to be intelligent cannot consist in our acquiring more true beliefs through our reliable capacities,

and to be stupid cannot consist in having fewer true beliefs and in being less reliable. Understanding, on this view, is another sort of excellence than knowledge, and another sort of epistemic value than truth or knowledge. The narrowness of our conception of epistemic goals distorts our conception of the epistemic vice of stupidity: a man who would aspire only to know truths would be a kind of idiot. Stupidity is the lack of something, which is over and above knowledge and truth, and the value of knowledge and truth, a form of excellence, which is only in part cognitive. It involves other cognitive capacities than those which are associated with knowledge and truth, such as the capacity to grasp coherent sets of beliefs, to explain by relating kinds of facts, and the capacity to grasp meanings. Stupidity is a failure to grasp the relevance of certain facts rather than a failure to know truths. This is familiar from many jokes. A man has a hard time peeling hot potatoes with a knife. He is advised to use a fork. He asks: "Why use a fork to peel potatoes?" His question is stupid because he fails to understand that the fork is not intended as a peeling instrument, but a means to avoid seizing the hot potatoes by hand. A man wants to enroll as a marine for his country. He meets a naval officer, who asks him: "Can you swim?" He answers: "Why? Do n't you have any boats?"¹² An answer or a behavior is stupid because the agent fails to grasp what is relevant in a given situation, or misapplies a category to a particular case. This view of stupidity is actually very close to the Kantian conception of stupidity as a defect in the capacity to judge. When one judges, according to Kant, one applies a given category to an intuition in experience. Bad judging is a matter of failing to subsume the proper intuition under the relevant concept. Judging is not a mechanical procedure; it is an art of grasping what is peculiar to a given situation, and failure to exercise this art is a manifestation of stupidity. The comic effect of stupidity comes from the misapplication of the categories. Stupidity in this sense turns out to be very close to the comic, which is often the product of this kind of mismatch.¹³

The idea that understanding involves capacities other than reliable dispositions towards truth also suggests that it may be located at the level of second-order reflective knowledge rather than at the level of first-order knowledge. What the stories illustrate are not cases of failure to use their basic faculties, but failure to reflect upon their own immediate judgments. But either way, it is hard to see to what extent this conception is distinct from the intellectualist one, since both views rest upon a certain conception of judgment. Moreover, it is not clear that understanding is independent from knowledge, and that it is not based on it (Elgin 2009). If understanding involves the grasp of explanations and of causes, it is hard to achieve without some knowledge of these causes and of facts and truths relevant to the explanations. So Elgin cannot be right that stupidity is the lack of a certain capacity, over and above knowledge, such as understanding. But she is right when she suggests that it can consist in a failure to

¹² The first joke is from Adam (1975).

¹³ This view of the comic as a mismatch between categories (category mistake) or as a mismatch between category and intuition, is Schopenhauer's (who was actually inspired by Kant) is a form of incongruity or of discordance of the faculties (Schopenhauer 1909: §13).

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appreciate the proper goal and value of cognition itself. To be stupid does not involve only an absence of reflective knowledge, but also an absence of proper evaluation of the goal of cognition. In this respect, Elgin's argument is close to two familiar arguments in epistemology against "epistemic value monism," to the effect that the epistemic goal cannot be truth, or at least not truth alone.

The first is Sosa's objection to taking truth *simpliciter* as the prime epistemic goal (Sosa 2001). If the aim of getting true belief were the only goal of our epistemic endeavors, this aim could be satisfied even if the true beliefs failed to be apt. It would be satisfied if we collected a great quantity of trivial truths, such as how many numbers of grain of sands are presently on this spot on the beach, or how many people whose first name is "John" there are in the phone book for Chicago. To consider that our only epistemic goal is truth, period, is a category mistake. We desire the truth, but only in so far as certain truths answer the questions that are of interest to us in the context of an inquiry. In some cases we are just uninterested in the truth of our beliefs, for instance when we lazily read magazines while waiting at the dentist's. In other cases, knowing the truth is very important for us, for instance if we suspect that we have an illness or that our bank account is empty. But we have no desire for truth in itself, nor desire of truth for truth's sake. In Sartre's novel *Nausea* there is a character, named "The autodidact" who endeavors to read all the books in the library, by alphabetical order of their titles (at the moment when Roquentin, Sartre's hero, meets him, he has reached the letter L). The autodidact is a perfect example of this undifferentiated desire for truth which amounts to stupidity. Why is it stupid to have the goal of believing every truth? Because such a believer is indifferent to the significance of the true beliefs thus attained. Sosa's argument, however, does not show that truth is not the goal of inquiry. What it shows is that *undifferentiated* search for truth is not the goal of inquiry and that "significant true belief" is a more reasonable conception of the goal.¹⁴

This line of thought is close to the "swamping argument" about the value of knowledge: if one assumes, as reliabilists do, that knowledge is true belief produced by reliable process and that truth is the only value which is worth pursuing, then the value of a belief is not enhanced by the fact that it was produced by a reliable process, and the value of knowledge is not enhanced by the fact that it was so produced. Unreliably produced true belief is no better than routinely dull true belief (Zagzebski 1996, Kvanvig 2003).¹⁵

Reliabilists, however, have the means to answer such objections: in so far as they agree that *something* has to be added to the mere accumulation of true belief in order to

¹⁴ The phrase "significant true belief", is Kitcher's (1992). Sosa has, here and elsewhere, a tendency to think in terms of epistemic goals rather than in terms of epistemic norms. For objections to this teleological perspective, see Grimm (2009), Engel (2013). But the difference here is irrelevant for my purposes, because the kind of perversion of the value of truth which is described as folly in the next section can be described both in terms of values and in terms of norms.

¹⁵ The swamping argument is not only a problem for the reliabilists. But here I take it to be an objection to the view that the goal of cognition is to maximize true beliefs, which Goldman calls "veritism."

produce valuable true beliefs the swamping argument loses its grip (Goldman and Olsson 2009). Indeed they still have to say what one needs to add to true beliefs to make them valuable. But our problem here is not to say what the value of knowledge is, or whether it is distinct or not from the value of true belief. Neither is it the problem of identifying precisely the goal of cognition. We can assume here that it is truth and knowledge. These questions are orthogonal to the one that we are examining. What we are trying to identify is the kind of significance which is lacking when our cognition becomes “stupid” or “silly.” It is a species of stupidity which is distinct from a lack of basic rational competence. What the understanding view suggests is the idea that to be stupid consists in the lack of a certain form of evaluation of the proper goal of cognition. It is a second-order kind of aptitude which is missing, bearing on the value of knowledge itself. On this view, the stupid person is basically someone who adopts the wrong normative attitude about the nature of inquiry. Arguments such as Elgin’s and others show that something is missing in our theories of knowledge if we take the goal of cognition to be the mere maximization of true beliefs. What is missing, however, may not be a goal which would be distinct from the goal of truth and knowledge, such as understanding. We need not reject epistemic value monism to characterize what makes the mere collection of truths “stupid.” What may be missing is a proper *appreciation* of the goal of truth and knowledge and of its significance.

4. Folly, Foolishness, and Epistemic Indifference

There is a form of epistemic vice which, far from being a cognitive failure, is a failure of sensitivity to the *value* of knowledge and to the value of truth. People who are so insensitive are often called *fools*.

There is no undifferentiated value of truth, in the sense that our epistemic good would be to maximize our true beliefs, whichever they are. The problem is not that this maximization ideal would lead us to accept any belief whatsoever, whether trivial or not, interesting or not. The problem is that the *attitude* of the inquirer, if it is described as directed towards believing truths just because they are truths, is not the attitude of a genuine inquirer. A genuine inquirer does not aim at believing every truth whatsoever. He aims at *believing truths and only truths*. He aims at believing in full consciousness of the aim of belief or of the correctness condition for belief.¹⁶ If he does not, he runs the risk of doing *faked inquiry*, and in this sense to be a fool. Indeed one can aim at acquiring true beliefs without having a conception of what inquiry is: there are non-reflexive inquirers. My claim, however, is that if one becomes aware of the aim of inquiry but fails to respect this aim, one is instantiating a form of foolishness. I can only give some examples of this kind of behavior.

All men, says Aristotle famously, have a natural desire to know. Curiosity is a disposition which all humans, and many animals, have. It is a disposition to aim at knowing

¹⁶ I have examined this elsewhere, alongside many others. See Engel (2013 a, 2013b).

truths, which, in many circumstances, has a strong survival value. Indeed curiosity, when it characterizes an inquiring and attentive mind has an epistemic virtue. But the mere collecting of truths without caring why they are truths and why they can be relevant or not to our cognitive concerns, is a distortion of this natural bias. Leafing through magazines, watching any program whatsoever on the TV, browsing leisurely on the Internet, or simply looking at the passing show in a busy street are cases of *careless curiosity* or *idle inquiry*. These activities are not without purpose—most of the time we aim at being entertained to pass the time, to get *divertissement*, as Pascal said—and they are behaviors which result in our acquiring truths of various sorts. But these behaviors are not aimed *at truth*, in the sense that our activities which have the effect of making us believe truths are not accomplished for the sake of truth, and with a *care* for truth *as the goal of inquiry*. They are not done with an inquiring mind, with the objective of acquiring something which would be cognitively significant. Idle curiosity is the passive reception of undifferentiated truths. Many other activities involve the production of such idle truths: gossiping, chattering, clicking a “like” on a so-called “friend’s” page on social media. In many of these cases, we aim at getting truths, often “interesting” truths—the gossipier undoubtedly exchanges information—but which are neither acquired nor entertained *seriously*. The gossipier is “just talking”: by definition, he does not aim at saying something true, and he is not prepared to give reasons for his claims.

Gossip or idle curiosity are what we may call benign pathologies of truth or of inquiry. There are more severe forms. Thus *gullibility* consists, like idle curiosity, in welcoming as true propositions without being prepared to ask whether they are justified. Just as we are naturally curious, we have a tendency to believe what we are told. In so far as we can’t help it, we cannot be blamed for that. But some people indulge in this tendency, and do nothing to correct their instinctive acceptance of testimony. Independently of the epistemological debates about testimony, it is clear that being gullible is a form of epistemic vice. *Dogmatism*, the disposition not to question one’s reasons is another.

None of these epistemic pathologies, however, are based on the rejection or on the explicit disregard of the value of truth or of knowledge. They are, most of the time, non voluntary, and better understood as forms of laziness or negligence in the epistemic domain. There is, however, a kind of epistemic vice that is voluntary and based on an explicit disregard for the value of truth. It is the one which Harry Frankfurt has successfully described as the production of “bullshit” (Frankfurt 1988/2005).¹⁷ The bullshitter, says Frankfurt, is not someone who actually believes what he says or writes. He is “faking things,” what he says is “phony.” His assertions are not lies but pseudo-assertions (a liar intends to make you believe what he says, whereas the bullshitter does not). His game is a game of pretense, he is pretending to say things, but he actually says nothing:

¹⁷ See also Black (1983), who labels “humbug” the phenomenon, which has engendered a large literature. See Cohen (2002), Schaubroeck and Maes (2006), Olsson (2008), Gjelsvik (2006), Engel (2014).

A bullshit statement is grounded neither in a belief that it is true nor, as a lie must be, in a belief that it is not true. It is just this lack of connection to a concern with truth—this indifference to how things really are—that I regard as of the essence of bullshit. . . . He does not reject the authority of truth, as the liar does, and oppose himself to it. He pays no attention to it at all. (Frankfurt 2005: 60–1)

Bullshitting constitutes a more insidious threat than lying does to the conduct of civilized society. (Frankfurt 2006: 4–5)

Snobbery is another disease of the same family, which we may call *mock-acceptance*. The name “snob” was invented by Thackeray for a certain kind of social behavior in Victorian society, but the kind of character that it designates has been described much earlier, for instance as Theophrastus’s *microphilotimion* (literally: the man who looks for small honors), and as Molière’s *Bourgeois gentilhomme*.¹⁸ Snobbery is, like gullibility, a disease of testimony, most often about matters of taste or aesthetic subjects, but virtually about any topic. Like the bullshitter, the snob accepts or mimicks the acceptance of propositions of which he does not care whether they are true or not, but which he praises because they are uttered by people whom he wants to emulate or because they are fashionable. Other cases of mock-believing are those of the followers of a guru—or of other leaders of opinion—who “accept” propositions which they do not understand, just because they have been uttered by the guru or the leader.¹⁹ C. S. Peirce identified another type of perversion of inquiry as “sham reasoning”:

Men, then, continue to tell themselves they regulate their conduct by reason; but they learn to look forward and see what conclusions a given method will lead to before they give their adhesion to it. In short, it is no longer the reasoning which determines what the conclusion shall be, but it is the conclusion which determines what the reasoning shall be. This is sham reasoning. (Peirce 1937: 1. 56; see Haack 1998: 31–2)

Sham reasoning has affinities with willful belief and self-deception: one reasons in order to reach the conclusion that one wants to reach, not because it is true, but because it is pleasant, or comforting or desirable in some sense.

Many other forms of such epistemic indifference exist. There are indeed degrees. Sometimes they are mere cases of negligence, and are involuntary. In other cases they are voluntary, as kinds of epistemic counterparts of *akrasia* (absence of control) or *acedia* (absence of interest), in the moral domain. Depending on how we describe the case, a gossip can indulge in his behavior without noticing that he does. It is harder to say about the bullshitter or the snob, who most of the time are conscious of what they are doing, even though it is not fully clear whether their behavior is voluntary or not.²⁰

¹⁸ Thackeray (1848), Molière (1670), Theophrastus, *Characters*, 20. For a virtue theoretic account, see Kerian (2010).

¹⁹ See the interesting analysis of such phenomena by Sperber (2010).

²⁰ I owe this remark to Jon Elster. Although I cannot deal with this here, it would be interesting to compare bullshitting and what is called “epistemic *akrasia*,” although the one has to do with assertion whereas the other has to do with belief. The bullshitter says things which he does not care to believe to be true or not, whereas the epistemic akratic believes things that he believes he ought not to believe. Not everyone

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Such phenomena of distortions of inquiry are ubiquitous. Although we often call these behaviors silly, the interesting fact about them is that they do not belong to the same category of epistemic malfunctioning as stupidity. They do not affect the competence of epistemic agents, but the way they regulate their inquiry. Indeed gossipers, snobs, and bullshitters are neither stupid nor idiotic. They may actually be very intelligent and clever. It's only that they *don't care* for truth or knowledge (Frankfurt 2006, Haack 1998). Many behaviors, such as vanity, intellectual laziness, absence of attention, self-indulgence are based on disregard for truth. A vain man is someone who praises himself more than the truth. Someone who is intellectually lazy does not care for finding reasons for his beliefs. Someone who is self-indulgent is content with the reasons that he has for his beliefs, and does not try to find other or more solid ones. Those who are affected by these vices can be highly intelligent. But they manifest a different sort of defect than stupidity. They are cases of an epistemic vice which has a name *stultitia* in Latin, *moria* in Greek, *folly* in English, *sottise* in French, *tonteria* in Spanish, *Torheit* in German. It has been widely described from Antiquity to modern times by moralists and philosophers: foolishness or folly is a kind of absence of wisdom. The fool has many diverse incarnations. Seneca called *stultus* the man who is busy at useless things and whose mind is in constant agitation, always after something new (a form of misplaced curiosity, close to snobbery). Erasmus, in his famous *Morias Enkomion (In Praise of Folly, 1511)* called folly (*stultitia, moria*) the absence of wisdom, which is its proper name. Cervantes's Quixote is a fool who lives in his own fancies. So the contrary of *fool* is not *intelligent* or *clever*; it is *wise*.

There are, however, diverse forms of folly. But the one which is associated with a perversion of inquiry, such as bullshitting, may be called *epistemic folly* or perhaps *epistemic indifference*. Unlike stupidity, which can be temporary, folly is an enduring trait. It is not, as we already noted, based on a lack of competence or of understanding. Unlike stupidity, it deserves the name of epistemic vice, in the sense promoted by responsibilist virtue epistemology, since it is most of the time voluntary. This kind of fool is neither unintelligent nor stupid, for he can be cognitively very smart. But he displays a lack of interest for truth and knowledge, which can be based on a certain kind of insensitivity. He has no love for truth. He is *indifferent* to whether a proposition is true or not, whether it is justified or not.²¹

agrees that this is even possible (Owens 2002). Zagzebski (1996: 154) compares epistemic vice with epistemic *akrasia*, and says of the latter that it is such that "the epistemically akratic person has 'the desire to be intellectually virtuous,' though she fails to act on that desire." But on the present conception, the bullshitter, the snob, or the sham reasoner do not care for truth and have no desire to be intellectually virtuous. So they would be rather, on Zagzebski's view, epistemically vicious. Battaly (2014: 68) has a different description of epistemic *akrasia*, which brings it closer to the kinds of attitude that I describe as epistemic indifference here: "The epistemic akratic has a correct conception of which intellectual actions and processes are epistemically good or bad. He correctly believes that (say) it is bad to ignore evidence and employ wishful thinking, and is thus motivated to avoid such actions and processes. But he can't get himself to act in accordance with his rational desires."

²¹ I am here very indebted to Mulligan (2014) who comments on Musil, and to his many other contributions on epistemic emotions and values. My diagnosis of the insensitivity, however, is slightly different.

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Epistemic indifference or indolence is a kind of vice which has been most clearly identified by French and British moralists and philosophers of the seventeenth century. They often identified it with what they called in French *bel esprit* or in English *wit*. These are the kinds of characters which La Bruyère aptly describes:

If I mention Eurypilus, you say he is a wit.... A workman is proud of his trade. Is Eurypilus proud of being a wit? If he is proud of it, he is a coxcomb, who debases the natural dignity of his intellect, and has a low and mechanical mind, which never seriously applies itself to what is either lofty or intellectual; and if he is not proud of anything, and this I understand to be his real character, then he is a sensible and intelligent man. (La Bruyère 1688, *Of opinions*, § 20)

Malebranche characterizes perfectly wit as opposed to stupidity when he says: “Both the stupid and the wit (*bel esprit*) are closed to the truth. The difference is that the stupid respects it,” whereas the wit despises it (Malebranche 1711).²² Locke opposes *wit*, as an intellectual skill, to *judgment*:

And hence, perhaps, may be given some Reason of that common observation, That Men who have a great deal of Wit and prompt Memories, have not always the clearest Judgment, or deepest Reason. For Wit lying most in the Assemblage of Ideas, and putting those together with Quickness and Variety, wherein can be found any Resemblance or Congruity thereby to make up pleasant Pictures and agreeable Visions in the Fancy; Judgment, on the contrary, lies quite on the other Side. In separating carefully one from another, Ideas wherein can be found the least Difference, thereby to avoid being misled by Similitude and by Affinity to take one thing for another. This is a Way of proceeding quite contrary to Metaphor and Allusion; wherein, for the most Part, lies that Entertainment and Plesantry of Wit which strikes so lively on the Fancy, and is therefore so acceptable to all People.²³

Pope famously defined “true wit” as:

Nature to advantage dress'd
What oft was thought, but ne'er so well express'd;
Something whose truth convinced at sight we find,
That gives us back the image of our mind.²⁴

and contrasted it with false wit as an incapacity to take truth seriously, which he often calls *foolishness*. The fool fails to display the appropriate emotional response to truth and knowledge. The “wit”—the bullshitter, the snob, the sham reasoner—is not stupid, but he has no *respect* for truth. This is a superior form of epistemic vice. The fool is someone who just happens to have no interest for truth and knowledge, and who *does not care* for these, either willingly or not. In any case, he has no *desire* and no *interest* for

Where he emphasizes an affective deficit and insensitivity to values, I emphasize the kind of *reasons* which the believer has.

²² The English translation (Cambridge University Press, 1997: 5) here says: “The dull and the sharp mind”. But “dull” and “sharp mind” are very bad renditions of “*stupid*” and “*bel esprit*”.

²³ Locke, *Essay*, 1710, II, 11, quoted by Addison, “True and False Wit,” *The Spectator* No. 62 (11 May 1711).

²⁴ Pope, *An Essay on Criticism*, 1711, 297–300.

knowledge. No writer probably has given a better definition of epistemic folly than Robert Musil in his lecture *Über die Dummheit*. Musil here calls it “intelligent stupid-ity” or “a higher pretentious form of stupidity” which “is not so much lack of intelli-gence than a failure of intelligence for the reason that it presumes accomplishments for which he has no rights”.²⁵

Wits, bullshitters, and epistemic fools are everywhere.²⁶ The utter diversity of these characters seems to defy generalization. To what kind or genus should we assign them? Indifference, disregard, or insensitivity to the epistemic goals can take many forms. If we refer to the traditional Aristotelian classifications of virtues, which all have their opposite vice, we can say that these people lack wisdom, and given that wisdom can be either practical—knowing what the practical good is, or knowing how to live well—or theoretical—knowing how to think well—they lack at least the latter. They do not know, or have contempt for what is theoretically good. But this classification is too wide, and would require a general definition of wisdom, a task in which I cannot engage here.²⁷ But the proper opposite of the fool may not be *wise*. It may well be, as Musil (1937) suggests, the person who is *modest, sober*, or who exemplifies the virtue of intellectual humility. In order to describe fully the kind of virtue and vice to which this corresponds, we would have to deal with a whole range of other virtues, such as open-mindedness (Adler 2004), intellectual honesty, or intellectual courage (Baehr 2011). I shall here focus on a narrower set of traits.

A responsibilist virtue-theoretic framework is clearly relevant for the epistemic vice of folly or foolishness. What I have called epistemic indifference above is a case of what Battaly (2010, 2014) calls *epistemic self-indulgence* and *epistemic insensitivity* which she defines thus:

A person will be epistemically self-indulgent only if he either: (i) desires, consumes, and enjoys appropriate and inappropriate epistemic objects; or (ii) desires, consumes, and enjoys epis-temic objects at appropriate and inappropriate times; or (iii) desires and enjoys epistemic objects too frequently, or to an inappropriately high degree, or consumes too much of them. Finally, a person will be epistemically insensible only if he either: (a) chooses not to desire, consume, or enjoy some epistemic objects that it would be appropriate to enjoy; or (b) chooses not to desire, consume, or enjoy epistemic objects on some occasions when it would be appro-priate to do so; or (c) chooses to desire and enjoy epistemic objects too seldom, or to an inap-propriately low degree, or to consume too little of them. (Battaly 2010: 224)

²⁵ Musil (1937), Mulligan (2014).

²⁶ In a way—but I am not going to argue for this here—they are one of the main subject matters of literature. They are present today among the kinds of thinkers who prefer to have a lot of obscure but deep-sounding ideas rather than a small set of clear ideas, and who prefer obscurantism to clarification and provide what we may call fake scholarship. See e.g., Elster (2012). Elster distinguishes “soft obscurantism,” by which he means a certain kind of which he finds a lot of samples in contemporary social sciences. Both have the characteristic of being fake scholarship. of postmodernist scholarship from “hard

²⁷ See in pobscurantism,articul” ar Whitcomb (2011), Baehr (2014).

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Battaly explicitly uses the Aristotelian framework, defining first epistemic goods, such as truth and knowledge, and the kind of activities of inquiry which are appropriate for such goods. An epistemically temperate agent is one who has the appropriate reliable traits or virtues adapted to these ends, and the kind of belief-forming activities associated to these. An epistemic self-indulgent or indifferent agent is one who does not have such reliable traits, *and* someone who *chooses* not to desire the appropriate epistemic objects. Battaly's examples are trivia about Paris Hilton or the color of Angelina Jolie's dress, which, in ordinary circumstances at least, are assumed to be both unhelpful and useless. Indeed the belief-forming activities have to be specified contextually in many cases: collecting trivia about Paris Hilton could, in some circumstances (e.g. if one is a police investigator on the scene of a crime involving Paris Hilton) become relevant and useful. But we assume here that the belief formation in question is a more or less enduring trait, not relative to specific circumstances. So the behavior of the epistemic self-indulgent agent is largely voluntary, and does not pertain only to low-level reliable vices, but also to high-level vices regulating inquiry. A fool in general is someone who does not engage in the appropriate belief-forming activities. The question whether such behavior is not only epistemic but also moral—or has moral implications—is open. But in a number of cases, our verdict on such characters as the epistemically self-indulgent person (the bullshitter, the snob, the intellectually lazy, the *wit*) is both epistemic and ethical: we blame the wit or the snob just as we blame characters like *Oblomov*, who is subject to a permanent *acedia*. The fool's kind of vice is both theoretical and practical (actually the German *Torheit*, as Schopenhauer (1909: 50) reminds us, designates a form of practical, rather than theoretical stupidity, unlike *Dummheit*.

Two objections, however, may be raised against this characterization of foolishness as an epistemic vice. Both will help us in characterizing better the kind of epistemic vice we are after. I have defined the fool as someone who is indifferent to the epistemic goal of truth and knowledge or who does not have respect for these goals. There are, however, fools who do have respect for these goals. Thus Flaubert's Bouvard and Pécuchet are very respectful of knowledge and truth. The two "idiots," as Flaubert calls them, are autodidacts who have a lot of respect for knowledge: they read encyclopedias and books for every kind of activity that they want to engage in, and they actually learn many things, although their knowledge is never appropriately put into practice. They have the proper conception of the epistemic objects, their inquiry is directed at these objects, but they fail miserably at each attempt—for instance with farming, gardening, learning mathematics, metaphysics. They are not stupid in the sense of being inapt or intellectually impaired. Shall we say that they are not fools? Actually, although they have the proper conception of the epistemic goal, they are fools, in Sosa's sense that they are not adroit nor accurate, not putting their competence at the service of the relevant activities necessary for their inquiry. They acquire a lot of truths, without understanding what these are truths *for*. This can happen when, like with Sartre's "autodidact" (whose character may have been modeled upon those of Flaubert's fools) people desire *too much* to reach the epistemic goal. As Aristotle insists, the *excess* of a virtue can be a

vice, like in the case of the *great-souled* or *magnificent* man (*megalopsuchos*) who is pleased to help others and to gain their recognition, which reinforces his self-love (*Nicomachean Ethics*, 4, 3) or indeed in the case of the *periargon* and of the *polypragmon* who is idly curious and does not mind his own business.²⁸ The *Pharisee* is also a character who has too much desire for the good. He actually desires the good *as such*, because it is the Good.²⁹ Pharisaism consists in aiming at virtue for the sake of being virtuous. The reason why it is a vice is that one does not choose to be virtuous in order to make it the case that one is virtuous. One is virtuous as the product of one's actions. The good and the true must not be *aimed at* as goals. They must *supervene* on correct belief. Compare: one does not fall in love because one wants to fall in love. One falls in love, period. One does not believe in God because one intends to make it the case that one believes in God. One believes in God, period.³⁰ Similarly we can identify a kind of Pharisee in the epistemic domain, the *epistemic Pharisee*. A man may be convinced that truth is the ultimate goal of inquiry, and can sincerely intend to seek truth (aim at truth) for truth's sake. But if that man believes what is true only because he takes truth to be the epistemic goal, or because he wants to bring himself to believe only what is true because it is true, or because Truth is a Good Thing, he will not pursue truth in the proper way. What is wrong with that kind of person is that he does not believe that a given proposition is true because it *is* true (by his own lights), but because he *wants to believe the truth* and takes believing that proposition as an instance of his goal of believing the truth. Such a man may well be a Victorian character in the style of W. K. Clifford, who takes truth to be the ultimate value on which an ethics of belief is based, or a character like George Eliot's Casaubon in *Middlemarch* (Eliot 1871). Of Casaubon, the heroin, Dorothea, says that his goal in life is Truth: "To reconstruct a past world, doubtless with a view to the highest purposes of truth—what a work to be in any way present at, to assist in, though only as a lamp-holder!" This kind of person, the epistemic Pharisee or the one whom we can call the *benighted truth-lover*, wants to have true beliefs, and may well get many, but he does not have true beliefs *for the right kind of reasons*. He wants to be in the *state* of someone who has true belief. We can here use Parfit (2011) and others' distinction between *content* (or object)-*given* reasons and *attitude* or *state*-given reasons. If you intend to believe that your boss's tie is very elegant—while it is actually ugly and vulgar—because acquiring such a belief will promote your career, you may acquire this belief as the result of some self-indoctrination or by willingly ignoring the evidence. But your belief will be acquired only because you have somehow managed to cause in yourself the *state* of having this belief about your boss's tie. You do not believe that for the *right reason*. If you had, spontaneously and directly acquired the belief because you believed its *content*—sincerely thinking the tie to be very elegant—then you would have the attitude of belief towards its content, for

²⁸ See Leigh (2013).

²⁹ This kind of character is well described by Max Scheler (1916). Cf Mulligan (2008). I am here again indebted to Kevin Mulligan for drawing my attention to this feature, and for his unpublished work on it.

³⁰ See Elster (1983) about "states that are essentially byproducts," Hieronymi (2005).

the right reason, which is the evidence that would then support for belief.³¹ On a common conception of self-deception, a self-deceived person—the stock example of the wife who sees that her husband is unfaithful but manages to believe that he is not—is the one who intends to have, and manages to bring it about that she has, a certain belief. This gives us the general pattern of attitudes which I have called foolish (the list is not exhaustive), and which share with self-deception the same structure:

- Self deception: causing oneself to believe that P because one believes that not P and desires that P
- Bullshitting: causing oneself to assert P without caring for P's truth
- Idle curiosity: causing oneself to believe P without caring for P's truth
- Snobbery: causing oneself to assert or believe P because P is held-true by others
- Gullibility: causing oneself to accept that P because P is said by others
- Sham reasoning: causing oneself to infer P because one likes P
- Pharisaism: causing oneself to believe P for the love of Truth or the Good
- Epistemic indifference: causing oneself to desire inappropriate epistemic objects.

On the basis of this taxonomy, I want to suggest that the kind of epistemic attitudes (beliefs) which are not foolish—hence wise, or epistemically *concerned*—are all content-given attitudes, those which one does not acquire because one wants to bring about that one is a certain state. The fool is the person who not only does not have the correct epistemic attitude towards possible contents, but also who does not have the proper conception of the right attitude that one ought to have with respect to epistemic objects. I have, following Battaly's neo-Aristotelian view, expressed myself in terms of "proper epistemic objects" and in terms of "epistemic goals." But the notion of appropriateness and correctness suggest a kind of analysis of the relevant attitudes is actually different from the teleological and virtue theoretic view. It is the view that epistemic (ethical) goals are better understood as the proposer objects of *fitting attitudes* rather than as values (Scanlon 1998, Engel 2013b, 2013c). The fool is the one who either ignores or does not accept the correctness norms for belief. This is why his kind of believing is mock-believing.

The second objection that one may raise against the conception of folly or foolishness proposed here is that, contrary to my hypothesis, it is not clear that being a fool is such a bad thing, either epistemically or morally speaking. Indeed when Erasmus speaks "in praise of folly," he is being ironical, and means to defend wisdom. But one may object that the frontiers between what is epistemically good and what is epistemically bad are not so sharp, and that it is not obvious that truth and knowledge are the proper epistemic goals or the correctness conditions of all belief and inquiry. Such a skeptic will reject the "epistemic essentialism" about epistemic aims or norms which the present account of folly presupposes. Thus Hazlett (2013), who is such a skeptic,

³¹ I here assume that the distinction is fairly clear, but there is indeed a large literature on the legitimacy of the distinction and on the "wrong kind of reasons" problem. See Hieronymi (2005), Engel (2013c).

asks: why are we so sure that self-deceived and wishful thinkings are epistemically bad? Can't they too contribute to inquiry? Hazlett argues that truth is not the proper epistemic goal, and that behaviors like wishful thinking, in so far as they can do us some good, are not systematically vicious or incorrect. He does not raise this question explicitly for foolishness as I have tried to characterize it, but we could raise the question. False beliefs can be evolutionarily advantageous in some contexts (Stich 1990). Stupidity, lunacy, foolishness could well be good both functionally in general and contextually in many cases. Why should we say that the bullshitter, the sham reasoner, the snob, or the garrulous person are adverse to truth and knowledge? After all about 90 percent of what we know comes from testimony. Why should such social attitudes be intrinsically bad? If literature, especially in the Romantic period, is fascinated by the figure of the idiot or the fool, it is not simply because they are the incarnation of ignorance or of the flight from knowledge, but because they seem to be, in many cases, very close to the genius. The skeptic (or for that matter the naturalist about the epistemic goal) resembles the Nietzschean in his defiance against any kind of essentialism about belief or any view about the final or intrinsic value of truth belief. If he insists upon doubting, in all circumstances, the value of reason and wisdom, he will be a kind of Romantic, who shuns truth and knowledge, because they *are* truth or knowledge. If, on the one hand, he insists that one is more creative, thought-provoking, disruptive, when one is an idiot or a fool than when one tries to be modest or sober in one's inquiries, he will probably be the mirror image of the epistemic Pharisee, a benighted falsity and lover of unreason. Negative Pharisaism is Pharisaism enough. If, on the other hand, he just intends to deflate the ideals of truth and knowledge, and remind us that one need not subscribe to an essentialist conception of belief as necessarily aiming at truth and knowledge, the skeptic can subscribe to the conception of foolishness as indifference to the truth goal. If, however, he accepts the idea that this kind of indifference is a kind of vice, and that modesty and intellectual humility are virtues, and if he does not want to reject any kind of virtue epistemology characterization of these mental habits, he will have to accept the kind of epistemic essentialism about the aim or about the correct norms of belief that he pretends to oppose.³²

5. Two Kinds of Stupidity?

Let us take stock. I have described two kinds of epistemic vice which can only loosely be associated to the broadly common genus of stupidity. One is a cognitive deficit, which is associated either to a lack of knowledge and more specifically to a lack of

³² Hazlett (2012) defines intellectual humility as a “disposition not to adopt epistemically improper higher order epistemic attitudes, and to adopt (in the right way, in the right situations) epistemically proper higher-order attitudes”; Hazlett (2013), however, seems to defend a form of skepticism and relativism (and certainly a form of anti-realism) about epistemic norms and values. So his view seems to be closer to those of the critics of virtue epistemology who would consider that epistemic (and moral) virtues do not have reality outside variable and contextual social situations.

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rational judgment. In so far as the notions of rationality and of intelligent judgment are often elusive and contextual, this kind of intellectual stupidity is elusive too. It does not mean that it does not denote any real property of individuals, for there are lots of behaviors which are stupid in the sense of irrational, although it is not clear that they denote a psychological natural kind. The intellectualist view has also the drawback of characterizing stupidity along only one dimension, the cognitive one. But, as critics of reliabilist epistemology have argued, to be stupid or not must be evaluated along another dimension, with respect to the kind of epistemic goal that an individual pursues, and with respect to his or her appreciation of that goal. There is a kind of stupidity which does not consist in failing to reach the epistemic goal—be it truth, knowledge of understanding—but in failing to have a proper conception of it, and if one does have such an appreciation, in failing to respect it. What I have called, following the classical tradition of the moralists *folly* or *foolishness* is not a cognitive deficit or a lack of understanding. It is rather a form of insensitivity or indifference to the intellectual values, such that the individual refuses to engage in the proper kind of belief formation which is characteristic of inquiry and which is governed by the norms of belief.

Although we could call both stupidity in the narrow intellectualist sense and folly species of “stupidity” in the broad sense, these traits clearly are not the same kind of epistemic vice. The first is most of the time involuntary, and involves unreliable dispositions at the level of basic competence, or errors in performance which flow from the inaptness of the individual. It clearly belongs to “low-level” virtue epistemology. The second is most of the time voluntary, and does not bear on competence or basic intelligence: on the contrary, one of the distinguishing marks of epistemic indifference is that it is an attitude which many learned and competent individuals (intelligent people) can take. It is much more a personal character trait than a basic disposition. It is a high-order epistemic attitude which involves not only the stance that one takes towards the use of one’s low-level dispositions and skills but also the economy of inquiry and intellectual research as a whole. And this attitude has clear ethical underpinnings. Hence its proper study belongs to the “responsibilist” and “high-level” kind of virtue epistemology. So shall we say that there are actually two different kinds of stupidity, which belong to two different kinds of analysis, the former more narrowly “epistemological,” the latter more broadly “ethical” (or belonging to the ethics of belief)? Our taxonomy, correct or not, does not solve the problem of the relationship between the two kinds of virtue epistemology.

There is, however, much more continuity between the two kinds of epistemic vice, stupidity in the narrow sense, and folly in the broad sense of epistemic indifference, if we attend more carefully to the notion of *judgment* which was the starting point of the intellectualist conception. In his most recent work Sosa recasts the distinction between low-level reliabilist virtue epistemology and higher-level responsibilist virtue as the distinction between “on one side intellectual virtues whose manifestation helps to put you in a position to know, and on the other, intellectual virtues whose manifestation in the correctness of a belief thereby constitutes a bit of knowledge” (Sosa 2015: chapter 2).

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On his view of knowledge, a competence can constitute knowledge only if it is a disposition to believe correctly, which is in turn a disposition to succeed when one aims to attain certain objectives. Now, although Sosa agrees that, at a certain level of abstraction we can distinguish the competences which are constitutive of knowledge from those which in some sense regulate inquiry, hence the two kinds of virtues, it would be wrong to trace a sharp frontier between the two. For, in the first place, it would be wrong to suppose that we could divorce completely the competences of the first sort, which may not be reflective, from the kinds of evaluations and accomplishments in inquiry of the second sort, which are reflective. It seems clear that competence and aptness at the low level is a precondition for the exercise of virtues of the high level. A person whom we would be prepared to call wise in the latter sense but who would not be competent and knowledgeable in the former sense is hard to imagine. Indeed, as I have argued, there are competent people who are fools or epistemically indifferent, but it is hard to imagine that these people would attain much knowledge. In the terms of Plato's *Meno* (97c), they would not be able to retain their true beliefs firmly in mind. In the second place, it is not evident that only the "high-level" virtues manifest agency, while the low-level ones would be involuntary and not subject to criticism or praise.

There is a kind of belief which is merely a disposition to hold true, and which can be defined in purely functional terms, without appealing to any intentional attitude towards a proposition taken by an agent to be true. But there is also another kind of belief, more properly called judgment, which is a certain sort of affirmation in the endeavor to get it right on whether P. As Sosa points out (Sosa 2015: chapter 2), this kind of disposition can become an ability, and it can be exercised well or badly by individuals. The important point is that it can be exercised so *in the absence of any conception of the epistemic goal*. A thief can "aim at truth" in his routine judgments about, for instance, the location of what he intends to rob, without any kind of desire to search for the truth. Nevertheless, his capacity to judge is an intentional endeavor to get it right on whether P.³³

Sosa argues that the kind of "aiming at truth" that is manifested in the capacity to judge is independent from the further "aiming at truth" as a goal of inquiry, because the former is compatible with any kind of goal. This is perfectly compatible with the attitude of the fool, who can be indifferent to the final or intrinsic value of truth, while exercising his capacity of judging well—hence being competent and apt in his judgments. But in so far as his exercising judgment involves his awareness of what it means to "get it right" for a belief, he cannot but have at least implicit knowledge of the correctness conditions of his belief. So at the level of the exercise of his basic competence, he must have a conception of the norms of belief and of belief formation.

Consider now lack of judgment, in which, according to Kant, stupidity is supposed to consist. There is a form of absence of judgment which consists in the spontaneous

³³ For arguments to the effect that judgment is a kind of action see e.g. O'Brien and Soteriou (2009).

disposition to believe, without reflection. There is indeed no agency here, and those who judge in this way and reflect afterwards—when they do so—and say to themselves “how stupid I was” are looking for excuses rather than for reasons. But there is also a kind of judging where agents are confusedly conscious that they are wrong, as in self-deception, and possibly in a number of behaviors described above as leading to epistemic indifference. A good sign of this is the tendency of such agents to *rationalize*, that is to give reasons and justifications to their own behavior, *reasons which they know to be inadequate but which nevertheless manifest their recognition of the proper norms of belief*. Perhaps *explicit* and reflective epistemic indifference is a superior form of rationalization. It may be a long way from there to become epistemically vicious, in the sense of attending to the values and the norms of proper inquiry, and nevertheless rejecting them. But even if the way is long, it is most probably a matter of degree and of continuity between the exercise or failure of competence and the exercise or failure of performance, hence between stupidity and folly.³⁴

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³⁴ I have read various versions of this article in talks and conferences in Geneva, Neuchâtel, and in Lund in (2009, 2010, and 2011), and at the “Obscurantism and Bad Incentives” conference in Bogota in November 2013 and in Paris in 2014. I thank Charles Larmore, Louis de Saussure, Pierre Barillet, Erik Olsson, Kevin Mulligan, Antanas Mockus, Jon Elster and Olav Gjelsvik for their invitations, their comments, and criticisms. I thank also for their help two anonymous referees for OUP. To Miguel Ángel Fernández I owe a great debt, for his kindness and angelic patience.

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