Capital Epistemic Vices

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The vices of the mind are the subject of vice epistemology, characterised by Quassim Cassam (2016) as the study of the nature, identity, and epistemological significance of those attitudes, character traits, and ways of thinking that obstruct enquiry. These vices range from the familiar, like arrogance and dogmatism, to the more esoteric, like epistemic insensibility and epistemic insouciance. At the moment, the small but growing body of work in vice epistemology is devoted to three broad sorts of issues:

> First, to *foundational issues*, concerning the nature of epistemic vices—are they confined to character traits, or might they include attitudes and ways of thinking, as Cassam (2016) and Alessandra Tanesini (2016) argue?

> Second, to studies of specific vices, most obviously the vices of epistemic injustice, but also closed-mindedness, hubris, servility, timidity, to name just a few. Specific studies also include taxonomic projects, ways of organising these vices, for instance by clustering them around the virtues they oppose.

> Third, there is work in *applied vice epistemology*, studies of how the vices manifest in specific contexts, practices, and communities—of how, for instance, certain conditions under which scientific enquiry is conducted may nourish the exercise of vices like timidity.

By organising current work in vice epistemology in this way, it's clear that this discipline is tracking the dialectics of virtue epistemology. In this journal, Cassam (2015) proposed *stealthy vices* as an important concept for understanding epistemic vices. Using his argument, I propose another—*capital vices*.

The Vice Tradition and Capital Vices

An important issue for vice epistemology is *taxonomy*. By what sorts of features or properties can we reasonably group epistemically vicious character traits, attitudes, and ways of thinking? It's an important task to identify and describe the various vices of the mind, but vice epistemologists should do more than produce undifferentiated lists of thosee sundry vices. After being identifying, they need to organised in illuminating and instructive ways, as Jason Baehr (cf. 2011, 21f) did for the epistemic virtues, grouping by him according to the specific 'demands' of enquiry to which they respond.

An intriguing taxonomic strategy, offered by Cassam, is to argue that certain epistemic vices are *stealthy*, in the sense that, 'by their nature, they evade detection from those who have them' (2015, 20). Stealthy vices are not, of course, *impossible* to detect—just *harder* to, since they incorporate features that tend to conceal them successfully from those who have them; as such, they are *self-concealing*.

Cassam's examples of stealthy vices include *carelessness*, a disposition to fail to perform epistemic tasks, including those constitutive of 'conscious critical reflection', including

critical reflection on one's own epistemic psychology. A careless person will tend to impede enquiry, for by not caring enough about epistemic goods, they fail to perform consistently and adequately the various tasks one needs to contribute to it. But that includes *self-enquiry*, which includes attending to actual or potential deficiencies in one's epistemic capacities, dispositions, and performance. If so, that vice is likely to persist, at least until some other events force one to reflect critically, or until someone points it out for us (see Cassam 2015, 21-24ff). Moreover, it is easy to imagine other candidate stealthy vices, self-concealing by their nature (a further example, to which I later return, is closed-mindedness—one option an agent might be closed to is the possibility of their being epistemically vicious.)

Cassam's concept of self-concealing, 'stealthy' vices offers a compelling way to reflect on and taxonomies the vices of the mind. Certain vices will be stealthy, while others will be more overt, even to the point of being *self-disclosing*. But here I want to suggest another way, distinct but complementary, taken from the history of philosophical and theological reflection on the vices. This is the idea of *capital vices*, an idea that has, historically, been mainly confined to moral and spiritual character traits, but is able to play a role in vice epistemology—or so I want to propose.

The best introduction to the concept of a capital vice is Rebecca DeYoung's excellent 2009 book, *Glittering Vices*, a history of the vices tradition in the West. For the first thousand years of that tradition, reflection on the vices was motivated by practical and pastoral purposes. Concern with vices was motivated by concerns with ethical and spiritual self-examination and formation, initially following Aristotle, but developing rapidly in the early Christian period. Indeed, the first list of the vices was compiled by the 4th century desert father, Evagrius of Pontus (346-399AD), who described the seven 'thoughts' or 'demons' that afflict desert hermits. Many of his entrants persist today as standard vices—gluttony, avarice, pride—alongside others now either lost or substantially transformed, such as *acedia*, a spiritually-inflected weariness or lethargy, that later developed into the vices of sloth or laziness.

Such early compilations of the vices quickly developed, after Evagrius, into a more systematic project of revising and, crucially, *ordering* the vices. John Cassian (260-430AD)—a disciple of Evagrius—made a crucial move, by widening the scope of vice theory from solitary desert monks to communal spiritual life. Vice was made an active concern for humans in general, laity as well as clerisy, social as well as solitary. A crucial subsequent development was Pope Gregory's (540-604 AD) editing of the list of vices down to seven— a number of biblical significance—which, importantly, made *pride* their root. (A historically late consequence of this, for vice epistemology, is receipt of a rich vocabulary for talking about humility and its opponent vices.)

An emerging problem in the vice tradition was that of reasons why certain vices made the list, while others did not. The worry became acute since, as DeYoung (2009:33) remarks, the seven that came to be entrenched are neither the only vices, nor indeed 'the worst possible or the most frequent vices'. The formalised inclusion of an articulated set of vices into a list of *the* vices—let alone the *capital* vices—must be *justified*, not least given the possibility of

alternative lists. The main response of the vice tradition, explains DeYoung, was development of the new concept of *capital vices*—*capit* in Latin meaning, of course, 'head', as in a 'source', 'origin', or, in her more poetic term, 'fountainhead'. Such vices are therefore *self-proliferating*.

Using this new concept, one can argue that the capital vices have a special status as 'source vices', distinguished by their capacity to 'proliferate other vices', which she calls 'offspring vices' (DeYoung 2009, 33f). To use a tree metaphor favoured by vice theorists at the time, certain vices are the 'trunk', from which other vices 'branch off'. It is for this reason that capital vices are, in Gabriele Taylor's (2006, 124) phrase, 'corruptive of the self'. Although she does not define the term, I've argued elsewhere for a vice-centric conception of *epistemic corruption*, where x is corrupting if it creates conditions conducive to the development and exercise of epistemic vices (Kidd 2015, 70f). If there are capital vices, then they are corrupting, for they increase one's vulnerability to other vices, by creating internal psychological conditions for their development. A capital vice, once in place, provides conditions in which a sub-set of offshoot vices can begin to develop.

Identifying the capital vices is important, on this view, for educative and ameliorative purposes. In the early Christian tradition, vice was a problem because it obstructs our capacities for moral self-knowledge and spiritual progress—a spiritual variant on what Cassam dubs the 'obstructivist' account of vices. DeYoung (2009, 34) explains that, in the vice tradition, 'the goal is to get to the problem's source, and root *it* out, thereby eliminating a whole host of related vices'. If one cuts off the offspring vices at their roots, they will, hopefully, wither and die. A further advantage of thinking in terms of capital vices, continues DeYoung (2009, 34), is that it 'encourages people to see certain sins as likely indicators of deeper moral problems and to see their connection to that great original sin, pride'.

The hope was that efforts at the purgation of vices would be more efficient if one's energies were focused at the fundamental source—the deep 'roots'—of the corruption. An advantage of this was that strategies for combating the vices can take forms other than urging cultivation of the virtues; the early Christians favoured spiritual exercises, fasting, psalmody, and so on. This matters, since a major problem with stealthy vices is that they can only be combated if they can be detected, but their detection often seems contingent on the exercise of a variety of epistemic virtues—like open-mindedness, alertness, and so on (cf. Cassam 2016, 21-22).

After this brief sketch of the origins of the concept of a capital vice in the vice tradition, let me ask how it can be applied to vice epistemology.

Capital Epistemic Vices

Can the concept of capital vices be usefully applied to our efforts to understand and combat epistemic vices? Since this is a big question, break it down into the following:

1. What makes an epistemic vice a *capital vice*?

2. Which are the capital epistemic vices?
3. How, if at all, are capital vices related to their offshoot vices?

Sharp-eyed readers will recognise that these questions are modelled on those that Cassam (2015, 20) asks of stealthiness and stealthy vices. Answering these questions will require detailed investigations of putatively capital vices and the putative offshoots vices associated with them—work that I encourage vice epistemologists to pursue. It also requires systematic reflection on issues specific to capital vices. Is the 'capitality' relation conceptual, causal, or psychological? Could an agent develop a capital vice without giving also developing offshoot vices—or are those 'offshoots' inevitable? Are there other ways to explain the dangers or harmfulness of capital vices than invoking their self-proliferating potentiality? If there are capital vices, how many are there, and how do they relate to one another? Might there be capital epistemic virtues, and, if so, what is their relation to the capital epistemic vices?

Instead of exploring these questions, let me make a modest start on the most basic issue, that of whether there *are* capital epistemic vices. I offer an example of a plausible candidate capital vice—*closed-mindedness*.

In a recent paper, Heather Battaly (2017) offers a sophisticated account of the vice of closed-mindedness. At its core, it is an unwillingness or inability to engage seriously with—to be 'closed to'—relevant intellectual options. Consistent with her pluralism about vice, closed-mindedness is objectionable since it has bad *effects* and reflects bad *motives and values* on the part of the agent (see Battaly 2014). Crucially, such vicious failures to engage with intellectual options can take different forms, since there are different options to which one could be closed, and different ways in which closure can manifest. One might fail to engage seriously with relevant methods, topics, ways of thinking by scorning them or perhaps deny the intelligibility of alternatives to beliefs or views that one already holds. On the basis of this second possibility, Battaly proposes that the vice of *dogmatism* should be understood as a 'sub-set of closed-mindedness', a particular form that it can take. Dogmatism is one way—among others—that an agent can be closed to intellectual options.

Although my sketch glosses the details of Battaly's rich account, it offers clear reasons for regarding closed-mindedness as a capital epistemic vice. Certainly it has many of the features that upgrade a vice to capital status. At the most basic, it secures the status of closed-mindedness as a vice, whether by reference to its typical effects, motives, or values. If something isn't a *vice*, then it can't be a *capital* vice. An essential difference, though, is that closed-mindedness is plausibly identified to be at the root of other vices—dogmatism, for instance. If so, closed-mindedness is acts as the source of dogmatism, which takes its place as what Battaly calls a 'sub-vice' or as what DeYoung calls an 'offshoot vice'. Built into the idea of capital vices is a principle that to possess an offshoot vice is always to possess, even if only in a subspecific form, a capital vice. On Battaly's account, though one can be closed-minded without being dogmatic, one cannot be dogmatic without being closed-mindedness. For to be closed-minded about alternatives to one's beliefs or views just *is* to be closed-minded, within and about the doxastic domain.

These two features of closed-mindedness do not, in themselves, secure for us the claim that it is a capital vice. Granted, it's a vice that can admit of sub-vices, but some further features are needed. If the early theorists in the vice tradition are right, we would also need to show that closed-mindedness admits of *other* sub-vices—no less than sixteen in the case of sloth, for one early Christian vice theorist (see DeYoung 2009, 34). Whether it does or not, I can't say, though my intuition is that closed-mindedness is the root or source of several other sub-vices. If so, then we can become more confident about its provisional status as a capital epistemic vice.

Upgrading that intuition will require further investigation of the array of vices proximal to closed-mindedness, and studies of other candidates. A prime candidate is epistemic laziness, roughly defined as a culpable failure to acquire or exercise the epistemic capacities required for enquiry (Kidd, unpublished manuscript). Arguably, such laziness lies at the root of a whole range of vices characterised by failures to do epistemic work—think of vices like inaccuracy or rigidity, both of which are, ultimately, fails to do the work needed to ensure accuracy or revision of one's beliefs. If laziness is a capital vice, then its various sub-vices may be distinguished by their different effects, values, or motives. A person may not care enough about the status of their beliefs to put in the epistemic work, such that laziness trumps diligence.

The case of epistemic laziness is a speculation, pending further work, and I'm more confident about closed-mindedness. But hopefully these ideas offer to vice epistemologists a useful concept, one that played important and useful role in earlier stages of the vice tradition. *Capital epistemic vices* may help us think about an obvious set of issues, like the ontology and structure of the vices of the mind. If so, we can retrieve from the rich, neglected vice tradition a concept that may be crucial to the vice epistemological project. Indeed, we might come to include the category of *self-proliferating capital vices* alongside *self-concealing stealthy vices*. Hopefully this can show the value of building into vice epistemology an historical dimension that it has, so far, tended to lack.

Acknowledgements

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