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Article:

Crerar, C.B. (2017) Motivational approaches to intellectual vice. *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, 96 (4). pp. 753-766. ISSN 0004-8402

<https://doi.org/10.1080/00048402.2017.1394334>

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Motivational approaches to intellectual vice

Abstract

Despite the now considerable literature on intellectual virtue, there remains relatively little philosophical discussion of intellectual vice. What discussion there is has been shaped by a powerful assumption, that just as intellectual virtue requires that we are motivated by epistemic goods, intellectual vice requires that we aren't. In this paper, I demonstrate that this assumption is false; motivational approaches to intellectual vice cannot explain a range of intuitive vice cases. The popularity of the assumption is accounted for by its being a manifestation of a more general understanding of vice as an inversion or mirror image of virtue. I call this the inversion thesis, and argue that the failure of the motivational approach to vice exposes its limitations. I conclude by suggesting that recognising these limitations can help kick start philosophical interest in intellectual vice.

Keywords

Virtue epistemology; intellectual vice; motivations; the inversion thesis; intellectual virtue

What features characterise the intellectually vicious agent? For all the surge of interest in intellectual character traits over the past couple of decades, this is a question that epistemologists have rarely engaged with. Instead, virtue epistemology has been marked by an overwhelming focus on the positive, on the virtues that constitute intellectual excellence. Until very recently the traits at the opposite pole of the character spectrum, the vices that constitute deficiencies in intellectual agency, have attracted attention only fleetingly¹.

In this paper I wish to contribute to recent efforts to draw attention to and rectify this imbalance². In particular, I want to challenge what is emerging as the orthodox answer to my opening question. Where attention has turned to vice, either in passing or more purposefully, it is often claimed that the vicious agent exhibits a distinctive psychology: that vice requires a *defective motivational state*³. Thus, Linda Zagzebski grounds criticism of intellectual vices in a “defect of motivation” (1996:209), James Montmarquet identifies vice with a “lack of effort” (2000: 138-9), Jason Baehr claims that vices involve a “lack of desire for knowledge” (2010: 209), and Heather Battaly that they require “dis-valuable motivations” (2016b: 106). This assumption, commonly endorsed but rarely explicated or defended, is the main target of this paper. In challenging it, however, I also draw attention to the limitations of a broader but similarly common assumption regarding the nature of vice and its relationship to virtue. I term this assumption *the inversion thesis*: that in a range of theoretically significant ways, virtue and vice are straightforward opposites. I contend that the tendency to assume an unrefined form of the inversion

¹ Where discussed, vice is often treated as derivative from or an aid to the development of a theory of virtue; see respectively the seminal works by Zagzebski (1996), and Baehr (2011). Swank (2000), Fricker (2007), Baehr (2010), and Battaly (2010) are all relatively early exceptions to this rule, whilst Roberts and Wood’s *Intellectual Virtues* (2007) contains discussion of several vices.

² See Battaly (2014, 2016b), Cassam (2016), Kidd (2016a), and Tanesini (2016).

³ Two theorists who reject a motivational approach are Swank (2000) and Cassam (2016). Swank’s analysis is premised upon an undeveloped and unconvincing distinction between epistemic traits and ‘personal traits’. Cassam, meanwhile, approaches the analysis of character vices from a consequentialist perspective, whereas I am interested in a responsibilist analysis. This is not the place to explore the merits and demerits of these two frameworks, though I touch upon my reservations about employing virtue-theoretic language to describe purely consequentialist phenomena in Sections 2 and 3.

thesis at least partially accounts for the paucity of substantive, stand-alone discussion of vice, and in particular accounts for the popularity of the motivational approach. The hitherto unacknowledged implausibility of the latter, I argue, highlights the need to be more careful about how we put the inversion thesis to work.

The purposes of this paper, then, are twofold. My more specific goal is to develop and reject the motivational approach to intellectual vice. Accordingly, in Sections 1 and 2 I explicate two forms of motivational approach, in which vice requires either the *presence* of bad motivations or the *absence* of good ones. I demonstrate that neither of these approaches can accommodate the full range of intuitive and important vice cases. Then, in Section 3, I examine the asymmetry between virtue and vice that this leaves us with, such that the former, but not the latter, is characterised by a distinctive sort of motivational state. I show that this asymmetry actually follows quite straightforwardly from the orthodox view of virtues as praiseworthy and vices as blameworthy, which raises the question of why this point has not been more widely recognised in the virtue epistemological literature. This brings me to my second, more general purpose, of using my criticism of the motivational approach to vice to highlight the limitations of the inversion thesis. I address this in Section 4, where I argue that, even if virtue and vice are opposites in some senses, this does not mean they can't also come apart in interesting and important ways.

I shall start with some quick clarifications and qualifications. First, as is customary in the literature, I use the terms 'intellectual' and 'epistemic' broadly interchangeably. Second, and more substantively, in talking of intellectual *character* as I have done I purposefully align myself with responsibilist virtue epistemology. I do not discuss virtue reliabilism, the position that epistemic virtues are qualities or faculties that reliably produce epistemic goods. However, I do not take this to be a limitation that requires defending, since I do not think that responsibilism and reliabilism, in their most interesting and plausible forms, are in tension⁴. Rather, I take them to be fundamentally different projects

⁴ I also suspect modelling vice on reliabilist terms will be more straightforward. See, for example, Battaly (2014).

trying, for the most part, to answer fundamentally different questions⁵. Similarly, in talking of *intellectual* character I have signalled my intention to focus on virtue epistemology. Given the influence of virtue ethics on responsibilist virtue epistemology I shall have recourse to insights from the former, and I suspect that similar conclusions to those offered here will be applicable to virtue ethics, but I do not commit myself to or require this outcome. Accordingly, when I speak of ‘virtue’ or ‘vice’ I shall be referring solely to (responsibilist) epistemic virtues and vices, unless otherwise stated.

1: The presence conception

What does it mean to say that vice involves a defective motivational state? To unpack this, it will be worth considering what responsibilists mean when they maintain that *virtues* involve an *excellent* motivational state. Generally speaking, they hold that there are two elements to virtuous motivation. Clearly, virtues involve dispositions to act and think in certain ways: the open-minded person will habitually take seriously a range of viewpoints and remain open to alternative explanations, the diligent person will pursue every lead and check and recheck their findings, and so on. A given virtue is therefore partially a disposition to be motivated by a particular set of these ends. We can refer to these as the *proximate ends* of that virtue.

Being motivated by the proximate ends of a particular virtue does not, however, itself make you epistemically virtuous. Rather, the virtuous agent is one whose motivation for these proximate ends is itself grounded in a more fundamental motivation for epistemic goods, like truth, knowledge, and understanding. These are the *ultimate ends* of epistemic virtue. So, the virtuously open-minded person is motivated to take seriously a range of viewpoints, and is so *because of* their more fundamental motivation for epistemic goods⁶. This motivation towards the appropriate ultimate ends is crucial because of how

⁵ Whilst reliabilism remains focused on attempts to answer some of the classic questions in epistemology, (see, for example, two seminal texts: Greco, 2010; Sosa, 2007), the consensus now seems to be that responsibilism, at least alone, is ill-suited to address these issues (see Baehr, 2011; Roberts & Wood, 2007).

⁶ Baehr (2012) is the only theorist to analyse this grounding relation in any detail. He claims that the virtuous agent must ‘reasonably believe’ that their proximate ends are ‘suitably related’ to the ultimate ones, where suitable relations

responsibilists conceive of virtues: as aspects of an agent's character that are intrinsically excellent, their value not (or not entirely) derived from the value of some external good to which they are conducive. Being motivated by epistemic goods for their own sake is good in precisely this way, and thus grounds the motivational excellence of virtue (Zagzebski 1996: 202-211; Baehr 2011: 91-102). Proximate motivations, meanwhile, connect the agent's ultimate ends and their actions in the world, but they are not themselves constitutive of intellectual excellence. This is not to dismiss them as unimportant. As was noted above, each individual virtue involves a characteristic disposition to act and think in certain ways, and it is through these proximate motivations that we individuate specific virtues; hence, there is not just a single virtue of motivation towards epistemic goods. However, it is the ultimate ends that play the crucial, value-conferring role. One can have the proximate ends of a particular virtue and not be virtuous, as in the case of someone who acts in open-minded ways purely to appear enlightened before their colleagues. One can plausibly even be virtuous despite lacking the proximate motivations characteristic of any particular virtue⁷. Intellectual virtue *requires*, however, and is at least partially constituted by, an agent's being motivated by the appropriate ultimate ends.

If an agent's orientation towards epistemic goods is what grounds the excellence of intellectual virtues, we might naturally think that a contrasting orientation grounds the *disvalue* of intellectual vice. It is this thought that underpins the motivational approach to intellectual vice. This idea of a contrasting orientation can be expanded on in two ways, both of which do in fact enjoy some support within the literature. The first account of this form takes vice to involve the *presence of bad epistemic motivations*. So,

might include relations of epistemic reliability, of constituting the (partial) fulfilment of the ultimate ends, and so on. I am wavier of the intellectualism inherent in this account than Baehr, despite his attempts to offset it, but sustained elaboration of this grounding relation need not concern us here. I trust that the picture I have presented, whilst simple and stylised, is sufficiently clear to proceed.

⁷ Baehr and Montmarquet may accept this, since both make the appropriate motivational state sufficient for virtue. Zagzebski thinks it is merely necessary, and the virtuous agent will also be reliably successful in producing epistemic goods. Thus, she might maintain that appropriate proximate motivations are necessary too, but only insofar as they are necessary to secure this reliability. The value of proximate ends here is still not intrinsic, but derived from the good consequences they produce.

mirroring how virtue requires that, ultimately, we are motivated by epistemic goods, vice on this account requires that we are, ultimately, motivated by epistemic *bads* (or, perhaps, away from epistemic goods). I call this form of motivational approach ‘the presence conception’.

Heather Battaly has explicated a responsibilist conception of vice in several places, and in so doing often suggests something like the presence conception. She claims that, like virtues, “epistemic vices will also require motivations” (2016b: 105) and that they are “partly composed of bad epistemic motives” (2017: 5), thus construing vice as something active that involves being motivated in the (in)appropriate way. Furthermore, and again echoing the conventional responsibilist story of virtue, she claims that it’s these motivations that ground the intrinsic dis-value of vice: “epistemic vices will get some (or all) of their dis-value from the dis-valuable motivations they require” (2016b: 106)⁸. To be viable, of course, this picture requires that we construe bad motivations more broadly than simply motivations for ignorance or falsehood; if there are ‘epistemic rebels’, as Battaly describes people with such motivations, they are likely to be rare (2014: 73). Accordingly, she counts not only the motivations to not believe certain things or to remain ignorant as epistemically disvaluable, but also, more subtly, motivations for things like easy beliefs, comfortable beliefs, or to believe whatever will help you fit in with your own group (2014: 62-65; 2016b: 105), all ways of ordering one’s epistemic affairs that don’t attempt to have beliefs track what is true or justified.

At first glance, the picture of vicious motivation advanced by the presence conception is a perfect opposite of the responsibilist picture of virtuous motivation: the vicious agent is ultimately motivated by epistemic *bads*, and this grounds a set of proximate motivations characteristic of a particular vice. In fact, the story is not quite so straightforward, in a way that is already suggestive of an interesting disanalogy

⁸ At times Battaly suggests that other blameworthy psychological features, notably an agent’s faulty conception of the epistemic good, might also be sufficient to ground vice (2014, 2016a). However, her examples of people with a faulty conception of the good are all people who take some set of epistemic *bads* to be good, such as people “caring too much about upholding the party line or upholding the views in which he is already invested” (2016a: 210). Accordingly, this is really another way of specifying the same motivational approach: these people are motivated by epistemic *bads*, they just don’t realise it.

between virtue and vice. Prominent responsibilists, as we've seen, think that the epistemic goods that serve as the ultimate ends of our virtuous traits must be sought for their own sake; they can't be merely instrumentally useful for the fulfilment of some other goal. However, setting aside the occasional epistemic rebel, it's likely that motivations towards the kinds of epistemic bads that *ex hypothesi* characterise the vicious agent (easy beliefs, comfortable beliefs, and so on) are generally instrumental. The ultimate epistemic end of an epistemically vicious motivation, that is, will itself often be grounded in a deeper, non-epistemic motivation: someone who is motivated to believe things that sustain their own privilege, for example, is concerned with the sustenance of their own privilege, not the false beliefs in and of themselves⁹. That a motivation for epistemic bads is itself *instrumentally useful* for some other end, however, does not prevent it from being *intrinsically disvaluable*, in that a motivation of this form is problematic in and of itself¹⁰. Consequently, we can set this complication aside and continue to focus on the presence conception's picture of the vicious agent's *epistemic* motivations, their ultimate end in this sense being the acquisition of some set of epistemic bads.

The kind of motivations discussed here are familiar and, surely, vicious. However, the presence conception does not provide a *general* account of the psychological structure of intellectual vice, since it overlooks cases of vice where people simply *fail* to be motivated by the epistemic good, or to even take it into consideration. Consider, for example, vices of apathy or inertia, such as laziness, incuriosity, thoughtlessness, negligence, and forms of cynicism and snobbery. A striking character who embodies many of these vices is Ilya Ilyich Oblomov, the eponymous protagonist of Ivan Goncharov's classic novel (1859). Oblomov is presented as a parody of a lazy young nobleman, who is almost totally incapable of making any decisions or undertaking any actions. Consequently, he spends much of the novel confined to his bed. His indolence does not stop here, however, but extends to his intellectual life even within the confines of his bed, to the extent that at one point Goncharov notes that when "Oblomov began

⁹ See Mills (2007) for discussion of such cases.

¹⁰ Compare the ethical case: willing the suffering of innocents, say, is intrinsically bad even if you only wish to use that suffering as a means to some end. For more on this, see Hurka (2001).

thinking... he could not make up his mind what to think of first" (*ibid*: 24). One way that Gabriele Taylor, who introduces Oblomov as a paradigm case of sloth, makes sense of such a character is that "as far as he can see there is nothing on offer worth making an effort for" (Taylor 2006: 20). Oblomov, in other words, is simply uninterested in any form of intellectual engagement with reality.

Oblomov is intellectually vicious in an extreme way. He is, at the very least, a limit case for laziness and incuriosity, deeply engrained character traits that are inhibitive of attempts to acquire epistemic goods, that reflect badly upon him, and for which he is blameworthy. However, on Taylor's reading certainly, these traits are motivated not by an active desire to avoid knowledge or to remain ignorant, but by an utter indifference to the two. That is, he is not vicious on account of any bad ultimate ends that guide his epistemic life; he is vicious because he has *no* epistemic ends. Of course, we should be wary of moralism here: at least in the sparse picture I've sketched, Oblomov's vices are largely self-regarding – there are no projects that he's letting peter out or companions that he's disappointing – and consequently he is probably not deserving of the same level of criticism or reaction as, say, the type of actively ignorant privileged agent briefly mentioned above. Nonetheless, I do not take epistemic agency to be something one can simply opt out of. Epistemic activities of some sort or another are vital for a good human life, and the very least we would want to say is that, in light of these particular traits, Oblomov is unable to flourish *qua* epistemic agent and therefore *qua* human.

This is an extreme case, but a multitude of more mundane and localised examples, of the kind that populate the responsibilist literature, also fit this model. The scientist who doesn't care enough about her work to rerun experiments, the negligent detective who overlooks clues because she wasn't paying attention, and the friend who refuses to try anything new because 'I know what I like and I like what I know' all plausibly count as intellectually vicious not because of what motivates them, but because of what

fails to¹¹. The inability of the presence conception to accommodate such cases should be a decisive mark against it.

2: The absence conception

The inability to accommodate cases like Oblomov's, along with the more mundanely lazy, apathetic, or thoughtless, poses a serious problem for the presence conception of vicious motivation. An appealing move might therefore be to argue that the kind of defective motivational state that characterises vice is not necessarily the presence of bad motivations but, more broadly, the *absence of good motivations*. Epistemic vice will thus be a matter of failing to take epistemic goods, in certain appropriate cases, as one's ultimate ends. This is our second motivational approach to vice: 'the absence conception'.

The absence conception will be messier than the presence conception. For a start, whilst it is plausible to think that motivation by epistemic bads is straightforwardly sufficient for vice, it is surely not right that *any* trait that lacks a motivation for epistemic goods is vicious; the traits that characterise me as a tennis player, for example, are not ultimately motivated by epistemic goods, but that presumably doesn't make them epistemic vices. We thus need a non-*ad hoc* way to determine which traits are relevant to the epistemic domain. A further complication can be grasped by considering Thomas Hurka's theory of ethical virtue and vice, in which he also initially identifies vice with opposition to the good before acknowledging the viciousness of indifference (Hurka 2001). Hurka, however, then takes the dialectic a step further and argues that virtue also requires that one is *sufficiently* motivated by the good, the intuitive idea here being that if there is some significant good on the line, there is something amiss with the person who is only mildly concerned with it. When applied to virtue epistemology, the upshot is that to avoid vice we have to care *enough* about intellectual goods, a slippery and highly contextual standard.

¹¹ I don't claim that *all* people who do such things are vicious, and are so because they lack the appropriate epistemic orientation. However, these examples offer support for my case just so long as it is granted that this is one plausible story about their characters.

For argument's sake I shall assume that these difficulties are surmountable, and that vice as the absence of a (contextually appropriate) concern for epistemic goods is a *prima facie* viable position to take. Indeed, its ability to accommodate both actively bad motivations¹² and those of people, like Oblomov, who simply don't care for the epistemic good means it is an intuitively more plausible position than the presence conception. It's therefore unsurprising that this understanding seems to underpin much responsibilist thinking on vice, with Zagzebski, James Montmarquet, and Jason Baehr all gesturing at something like it¹³. Montmarquet, for example, identifies intellectual character vices with a "characteristic *failure* to attend to truth or truth-related considerations"; even if there's more to a given vice than just this, he claims it is the "lack of effort that is *blameworthy*" (Montmarquet, 2000: 138-139). Similarly, in his paper on epistemic malevolence, Baehr claims that all vices share, and at least partly derive their viciousness from, "either a straightforward lack of desire for knowledge or an insufficient concern with knowledge relative to other goods" (2010: 209). This, he explains, is why epistemic malevolence is the epitome of intellectual vice; it takes this lack of desire to the extreme in the form of an outright opposition to epistemic goods. Finally, whilst Zagzebski's contention that it is a "defect of motivation" that serves as the "primary object of criticism" in vice is ambiguous between the presence and absence conceptions, her stipulation that people can be criticised for a "lack of motivation for knowledge" suggests that she is probably more sympathetic to this broader motivational approach (1996:207-209).

Nonetheless, this account also fails to capture all the ways in which an agent can be intellectually vicious. That is, there remains an important, and indeed common, type of vicious agent who doesn't conform to this psychological structure, people who exemplify intellectual vices even though they actually *are* ultimately motivated by epistemic goods. This possibility is attested to by a number of familiar

¹² If one is motivated by the bad, one is thereby not motivated by the good.

¹³ Like almost all virtue epistemologists, each of these theorists focus primarily on virtue, and none elaborate upon vice in any great detail (one exception being Baehr's [2010]). This picture has thus been pieced together from various suggestive comments each of them have made. Whilst I therefore don't take any of them to necessarily be *committed* to the details of this account, I nonetheless think the picture they indicate is highly significant, given their huge influence within virtue epistemology and the paucity of fully developed and avowed vice theories.

character types. Consider, for example, the shortcomings in Galileo's intellectual highlighted by Roberts and Wood in their *Intellectual Virtue*:

“As brilliant and productive a scientist as Galileo Galilei was, his work was impeded by his arrogance... His sense of intellectual superiority led him to disregard the work of other scientists who disagreed with him, and the incorporation of which could have improved his own work. He overestimated the probative force of his arguments for heliocentrism, and thus underestimated the justification of those who hesitated to accept his hypothesis.” (2007: 254)

Galileo's towering intellectual achievements were undoubtedly made possible only by a significant degree of intellectual virtue. However, no one's character is blemish free, and his dealings with other scientists paint the picture of an archetypal arrogant genius, keenly aware of his own intellectual superiority and thus closed-minded in his dealings with others. As Roberts and Wood note, this imposed an epistemic cost even for someone like Galileo.

Next, consider another recognisable (though on this occasion fictional) character type, drawn from the world of politics. Let's call him Dave. Dave was born into a wealthy family, who sent him to the best schools and finest universities in the world. He was always cognisant of the extent of his privilege, though rather than keeping him grounded this awareness merely bestowed upon him a flawed understanding of what constitutes an intelligent and reliable person. He thus believed that the only people worth listening to were people who, like him, had received a high level of formal education, had studied the relevant issues, and could articulate their position through reasoned and dispassionate argumentation. When he moved into politics it was therefore with people like this that he surrounded himself. Like Galileo, Dave was closed-minded, but he was also prejudiced, partial, and a snob. Consequently, when he came to decide whether to implement a policy that would disproportionately harm members of a marginalised social group he discounted their concerns about the true extent of the damage, listening instead to his team of advisors who downplayed the potential costs.

Both Dave and Galileo bear, to varying degrees, the hallmarks of intellectual vice. However, it's by no means clear that their ultimate ends are the problem. That is, we can expand upon these examples with plausible stories in which Galileo was genuinely committed to his intellectual endeavours and Dave was a well-intentioned politician who truly wished to ascertain the impact of his policy¹⁴; indeed, stories in which both engaged in their intellectually vicious acts *precisely because* they thought doing so would see them attain valuable epistemic goods. Roberts and Wood's analysis suggests that Galileo's arrogance was grounded in his sense of intellectual superiority, that it was his belief that he was the most brilliant person working on these issues, combined with a desire to get to the truth, that led him to (wrongly) conclude he would be better off not listening to lesser intellects. Similarly, Dave surrounded himself with people from backgrounds like his own precisely because he wanted an informed, reliable answer, and he had grown up to believe that such people will always be the people to provide one¹⁵. The motivational approach would thus require that we exonerate them for their failings as epistemic agents. If vice requires not being appropriately oriented towards epistemic goods, and Dave and Galileo *are* appropriately oriented, then they are not vicious.

This, I think, is the wrong result, though the reason for this is not simply that they both had epistemically unreliable or damaging character traits, since this is not always a reliable guide. Consider, by way of helpful comparison, a character introduced by Quassim Cassam (2016): Oliver, a gullible conspiracy theorist with a genuine desire for truth but who is led astray on the internet. Cassam argues that, despite his good motivations, Oliver's gullibility still constitutes an intellectual vice, since it is a trait that produces bad epistemic effects: it reliably impedes responsible and effective inquiry. I'm not sure I

¹⁴ Again, to undermine the view that vicious agents will necessarily not be motivated by epistemic goods, all that matters is that this is one plausible story about their motivational structures. Many actual politicians who fit Dave's profile, for example, will not deserve this relatively charitable analysis.

¹⁵ One could argue that they acted in this way only because of a prior failure to be sufficiently motivated by the epistemic good, which led to them forming these problematic beliefs. Even if this were necessarily the case, and I am sceptical that it is, ascriptions of vice are not assessments of one's overall character, but rather of particular aspects of it. The question at hand, then, is are Dave and Galileo intellectually vicious at this point, in this respect. If vice requires inappropriate motivations, then we'd be forced to say no.

agree with Cassam here. His depiction of Oliver's character, as is often the case with fictional examples of this form, is sparse and probably underdetermined – there probably isn't a 'correct' assessment of Oliver's character – but Cassam himself suggests at least the possibility of an alternative reading when he claims that Oliver might just be “generally the kind of person who is easily conned” (*ibid.*: 163). Reading between the lines here, a fairer assessment might be that Oliver is the 'kind of person' who lacks the cognitive talents or skills necessary to discern reliable sources of information; in other words, that he suffers from a cognitive deficiency more readily associated with a lack of intelligence than with a flaw of character. The language of virtue and vice, at least within the responsibilist tradition, is distinctive and normatively strong; vice is more than simply a sub-optimal inability, it's a fault or flaw. If Oliver's gullibility, whilst reliably damaging in the way Cassam indicates, is simply a fact about his cognitive capacities that operates below the level of his beliefs, motivations, attitudes, and desires, if he is trying to ascertain the truth but just isn't cut out for it, then this language does not seem warranted.

So I'm not supposing that acting in epistemically harmful ways, even if they are reminiscent of certain intellectual vices, is always indicative of intellectual vice. Dave and Galileo are different from Oliver, however. Theirs are not deficiencies in cognitive capacity, but rather complex dispositions involving acquired commitments, values, beliefs, sensibilities, and so on. These dispositions are what are sometimes referred to as 'personal traits'¹⁶, traits that reveal things about the kind of person one is: they reveal that Dave only sees a very small portion of society as truly worth listening to, and that Galileo saw himself as without epistemic peers. Unlike with 'my' Oliver, we might also say that, given their faculties and opportunities, they should have been able to see why conducting their inquiries as they did was problematic, and thus they are potentially blameworthy for doing so. In other words, these are precisely the traits that a plausible theory of intellectual vice should look to accommodate. Thus, this second version of the motivational approach is also inadequate.

¹⁶ See Battaly (2016b; 2017).

3: An asymmetry between virtue and vice

What I hope to have shown over the previous two sections is that the three ways of being oriented towards epistemic goods are all consistent with forms of intellectual vice. First, some intellectually vicious agents are, as the presence conception highlights, motivated *away from* epistemic goods, or towards epistemic bads, as when people ultimately just want to believe whatever is easiest. Second, as acknowledged by the absence conception, some are *indifferent* to epistemic goods, as in the case of Oblomov's incuriosity about the world. Finally, there are those who, like Dave and Galileo, *are genuinely motivated* by epistemic goods yet nonetheless intuitively warrant the ascription of epistemic vice, a possibility captured by neither form of motivational approach. Given this diversity in intellectual vice, any theory that grounds vice in an inappropriate orientation towards epistemic goods, as the variants of the motivational approach do, cannot be successful.

At this point, the motivational theorist might attempt a reply. Hitherto the discussion has focussed almost exclusively on the ultimate epistemic ends of particular traits, and specifically on an agent's orientation towards epistemic goods. However, earlier I noted that there are two parts to intellectually virtuous motivation – proximate and ultimate ends – and *mutatis mutandis* the same is presumably true for vicious motivation. Even if no single orientation to a set of ultimate ends can capture the diversity of intellectual vice, it also seems undeniable that each of the agents I have discussed have *proximate* motivations that go wrong in some way: they are all motivated by the proximate ends that are characteristic of vices like closed-mindedness, arrogance, and so on. Perhaps the conclusion we should draw, then, is not that we should reject the motivational approach, but that we should broaden it. Could intellectual vice be a matter of defective motivation at the level of *either* proximate or ultimate ends?

This move is not open to the motivational theorist, however, or at least not straightforwardly. To see why, it will be helpful to remind ourselves why theorists adopt a motivational approach in the first place. As was noted in section 1, responsibilists conceive of intellectual virtues as intrinsically excellent features of an epistemic agent. They afford a central role to motivation in the form of a positive

orientation towards epistemic goods because it is the intrinsic excellence of such an orientation that grounds the excellence of virtue. Proximate motivations might connect the agent's evaluative orientation to the world and allow us to individuate the virtues, but they are very much subsidiary regarding the *value* of virtues; they themselves do not constitute intellectual excellence. Similar thinking, we have seen, underpins the motivational approach to vice, if we adopt the responsibilist conception of vices as an intrinsically dis-valuable feature of an epistemic agent. The role motivations are assumed to serve is to ground the appropriate dis-value in the agent: recall Battaly's remarks that vices inherit their dis-value from their 'dis-valuable motives', and Zagzebski and Montmarquet's suggestions that the primary object of criticism and blame in vice is a defect of motivation. The vicious agent's ultimate orientation towards epistemic goods take centre stage in such accounts because it is this orientation that confers the requisite intrinsic dis-value. Specific proximate motivations to, say, prefer one group's testimony over another's or to call an inquiry to a halt at a given point, in the absence of an underlying aversion or indifference to epistemic goods, just do not fulfil the same role¹⁷. Thus, the idea of 'defective' proximate motivations as part of a disjunctive motivational approach not only goes beyond what any motivational theorist has in fact said on the subject, it would also take them beyond the theoretical constraints of their own theory.

The upshot of my arguments against the motivational approach, combined with the orthodox picture of virtue, is that we are left with an overlooked but fundamental asymmetry between virtue and vice. Whilst, for the reasons discussed, it makes sense to think of the virtuous agent as characterised by a particular motivational state, the same cannot be said for vice. A particular orientation towards epistemic goods is necessary for an agent to be intellectually virtuous. However, whilst certain such orientations might be sufficient for vice there is none that is necessary for, unifying amongst, or characteristic of the intellectual vices. Virtue, in short, enjoys a psychological unity that vice does not.

¹⁷ Similarly, recall my contention that, in spite of his unreliability as an intellectual agent, Oliver's intellectual character is not flawed or problematic in a way appropriate for intellectual vice. This is at least in part, I suggested, because his unreliability is not tied in with deeper evaluative commitments and the like.

Although hitherto unacknowledged, this asymmetry in fact follows straightforwardly from a central plank of the responsibilist conception of virtue and vice. Influenced as they are by the virtue ethical tradition, responsibilists generally maintain that virtues and vices are the kinds of things that reflect upon us as epistemic agents, and for which we are *praiseworthy* and *blameworthy*. Whilst there is some debate over whether this attaches to the development of our traits or their exercise, and how exactly to accommodate the role of what we might, to paraphrase Thomas Nagel, call ‘constitutive epistemic luck’, this remains an important part of the responsibilist project¹⁸. Now, certainly within Aristotelian and Kantian traditions, it is generally accepted that for an agent to be personally praiseworthy for something they must do it purposefully and do it for the right reasons; we do not praise someone if it becomes apparent that they donated to charity only for self-serving reasons, or if they did so by mistake. As such, it’s right to take a motivation for the good to be necessary for virtue. However, these standards for praise are more ‘demanding’ than our standards for blame; we generally *don’t* make an analogue of the motivation requirement for blame¹⁹. Defective motives might be sufficient for blame, but they are not necessary. We would blame someone who purposefully steals from the charity, but we may also blame someone who does so unwittingly, picking up a collection box whilst negligently not appreciating what it was.

Blame’s catchment area is, in fact, quite broad. People can be blamed for things they do negligently, for which they are culpably ignorant, that were foreseeable but unintended consequences of their actual goal, and so on. Zagzebski herself has suggested that there is a presumption of blame and responsibility for character traits that are reliably harmful: if one acts in a way that is epistemically damaging then one has a responsibility to acknowledge this and correct it, with subsequent failures to do so only increasing the blame due (Zagzebski, 1996: 208). Similarly, the intuitive thought underpinning

¹⁸ See Battaly (2016b).

¹⁹ Philip Pettit has recently made a similar point about good and evil (2015). Whilst ascriptions of goodness often presuppose that the agent *controlled* for the good effects of their acts, ascriptions of evil generally require only that they *allowed* bad things to happen.

our assessment of Dave and Galileo as vicious was that they ‘should have known better’; that they didn’t, and that in spite of their capacities and the opportunities available to them they both thought they were acting in epistemically appropriate ways, speaks badly of them as epistemic agents in the deep, normative way required for a responsibilist ascription of vice. We do not need to locate an inappropriate orientation towards epistemic goods to make this judgement; there are other ways to ground the badness of vice. I suspect that considerations like this ground blameworthiness for a range of damaging character traits that far exceeds, in both type and quantity, those beneficial character traits for which people are praiseworthy.

4: The inversion thesis

If this asymmetry, and ultimately the inadequacy of the motivational approach to vice, follows straightforwardly from a basic feature of virtue and vice, we might wonder why it is these points *have* gone unnoticed. Why, that is, have a range of virtue responsibilists felt confident to endorse a motivational approach without, in many cases, offering a detailed defence of it, and despite its apparent implausibility? To answer this question, it will be useful to take a step back and consider a broader one: why has there been so little discussion of *any* aspect of intellectual vice?

Given the practical and theoretical significance of vice, this oversight should be surprising. Paradigm vices, like closed-mindedness, partiality, thoughtlessness, and the intellectual manifestations of laziness and snobbery, are a common and damaging feature of our lives, and as the counterpoint to virtue vice is a concept of great significance in virtue theory. However, virtue responsibilism has been heavily influenced by virtue ethics, and it’s noteworthy that virtue ethics has itself been characterised by a corresponding imbalance for much of its long history. According to Robin Dillon, two popular assumptions go a long way towards explaining this continued imbalance in ethics (Dillon 2012)²⁰. First, she claims that philosophers have falsely presumed that vice is something dramatic, rare, and exceptional, with the folk concept of ‘viciousness’ and all its connotations of brutality and cruelty perhaps a testament

²⁰ For further discussion of this oversight, see McKinnon (1999).

to this. The question of how widely this assumption has been held by philosophers is an empirical one²¹, as is the validity of the assumption itself, but the answer to the latter question at least is clear. As far as epistemic vices go, I take the idea that these are rare or exceptional to be as patently false as Dillon takes it to be for ethical vice. It is not difficult to think of an epistemic analogue of the traits described by Judith Shklar as “ordinary vices”, “the sort of conduct we all expect, nothing spectacular and unusual” (1984: 1). The examples mentioned earlier in this paragraph would probably fit the bill.

More interesting is the second assumption identified by Dillon: that vice is simply the opposite of virtue, and so does not merit a stand-alone analysis. Of course, in some sense it is trivially true that virtue and vice are opposites; they are the opposing poles of virtue theoretical character evaluations, for a start. However, for this fact to (justifiably) inhibit stand-alone discussion of vice one must subscribe to a stronger, more substantive assumption. This I term the *inversion thesis*: that virtue and vice are the mirror image of each other, such that they are characterised by the same, if opposing, features. So, for any given feature of virtue, vice can be assumed to involve either the evaluative opposite of that feature, or else its absence. If a strong version of this thesis were true, then the lack of attention to vice would be justifiable. As straightforward mirror images, a theory of vice would fall neatly out of a theory of virtue, and we would have two for the price of one.

I believe that the inversion thesis accounts for the paucity of substantive, stand-alone discussion of vice in epistemology in much the same way as Dillon suggests it does in ethics. Consider, for example, Montmarquet’s speculation, in justifying his book’s exclusive focus on virtue, that “it will be clear how the vices can be understood as appropriately contrary qualities” (1993: 19), or Battaly’s tendency, when elaborating upon responsibilist theories of virtue and vice, to state a commonly acknowledged feature of virtue and then invert it to get the corresponding feature of vice (2016b: 103-106). Now, even if a strong

²¹ One notable virtue theorist who clearly *didn’t* take this position is Philippa Foot (2002), who suggests that virtues are bulwarks against the natural human drift towards badness. A similar idea regarding intellectual virtues features in Roberts and Wood (2007: 82).

variant of the epistemic inversion thesis were true there would still be interesting vice epistemology to do, in the investigation of less orthodox and recognisable vices²² and drawing out the various different forms the opposite of a virtue can take²³. However, my concern is that an unthinking adherence to the inversion thesis, and the concomitant assumption that virtue and vice are mirror images in all or most respects, has stymied discussion of vice and thus occluded the important disanalogies between the two.

Of particular relevance to the discussion at hand, I suspect that the inversion thesis accounts for the widespread tendency to assume that intellectual vice necessarily involves some kind of inappropriate orientation towards epistemic goods, an assumption rarely explicated or explicitly defended. Virtue requires motivations towards the epistemic good, and since virtue and vice are opposites, so this line of reasoning goes, vice must involve the opposite. My purpose in this paper is not to reject the underlying idea that virtue and vice are opposites; as I've noted, this is trivially the case. Rather, my purpose is to problematise inferential leaps like the line of reasoning just given. Sure, virtue and vice are opposites in some respects, but maybe these respects are simply the very general and uninformative: virtues are good and vices bad, or virtues praiseworthy and vices blameworthy. Or perhaps they are more substantive after all; perhaps, for example, there is a more complex account of virtuous motivation that goes beyond a focus on one's orientation towards epistemic goods, or an account where virtuous motivation is supplemented by some further non-motivational requirement,²⁴ that could be inverted to provide a plausible account of vice. I shall not attempt to settle this question here. What I have argued is that the kind of motivational approach often presumed by virtue epistemologists, in which vice requires an inappropriate orientation towards epistemic goods just as virtue requires an appropriate one, is implausible. This provides a cautionary tale concerning the inversion thesis: namely, that if an assumption of symmetry between virtue and vice serves as an impediment to focussed vice epistemology, then we risk

²² For example, testimonial injustice (Fricker 2007), epistemic self-indulgence (Battaly 2010), and epistemic malevolence (Baehr 2010).

²³ See Roberts and Wood (2007: 235) on the plethora of vices that correspond to humility.

²⁴ After all, a further implication of the Galileo and Dave cases is that the appropriate orientation towards epistemic goods cannot be straightforwardly sufficient for virtue.

missing out on the interesting and important ways that virtue and vice can come apart. Even if there are parallels between the two concepts, that is, we need to be careful where and how we draw them. We should not presume that every feature, or even every important feature, of one will find a straightforward corollary in the other.

5: Conclusion

I have argued that vice does not require a defective motivational state, either in the form of the presence of a motivation towards epistemic bads or the absence of motivation towards epistemic goods. Rather, the badness and blameworthiness of these character traits can be derived from other psychological and, perhaps, non-psychological features. I have not attempted to state in any detail what these may be, although I have given some indications along the way. With the motivational approach rejected and a note of caution issued about the inversion thesis, this is one of several areas where there is now important vice epistemology to be done.

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