

***Vices of the Mind: From the Intellectual to the Political*, by Quassim Cassam. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019, xiv + 202 pp. ISBN 9780198826903 hb £25**

Quassim Cassam's *Vices of the Mind* is timely in two respects. The first is that it seeks to provide an important part of the explanation for a range of recent political events: Brexit, the election of Donald Trump, and the more general rise of populism in Europe and America. This explanation gives a crucial role to *intellectual vices* such as closed-mindedness, dogmatism, (intellectual) arrogance and blatant disregard for truth. Cassam thinks that our present political problems are partly due to our intellectual vices and partly due to others exploiting those vices.

The second respect in which it is timely is that it provides us with a general framework for thinking about the intellectual vices. It thus promises to do for the burgeoning field of vice epistemology what Linda Zagzebski's *Virtues of the Mind* did for virtue epistemology. While Cassam is part of a growing field, he is to be applauded for producing a book that will 'set the terms' for subsequent debate about and developments in vice epistemology. It should go without saying that, of course, many will take issue with some of the claims within it.

In this review I provide a broad overview of some of the key claims of *Vices of the Mind*. I think these claims are important, and they deserve to be taken seriously. I then highlight three criticisms of Cassam's approach.

Cassam starts in Chapter 1 by introducing and defending a view he calls *obstructivism*:

'An epistemic vice is a blameworthy or otherwise reprehensible character trait, attitude, or way of thinking that systematically obstructs the gaining, keeping or sharing of knowledge' (23).

Cassam illustrates this view with numerous examples: Israeli intelligence officials were caught out when Egyptian and Syrian forces attacked on the 6th of October 1973 because, due to their closed-mindedness, they didn't expect an attack. This illustrates the fact that closed-mindedness is a character trait that systematically obstructs the gaining, keeping or sharing of knowledge: the intelligence officials did not know (or even think) that the attack was coming because of their closed-mindedness. Prominent figures in the Brexit campaign (think Boris Johnson) manifested a complete lack of regard for what is (and isn't) true. This attitude—which Cassam calls *epistemic insouciance*—illustrates the fact that certain attitudes systematically obstruct the gaining, keeping or sharing of knowledge: the epistemically insouciant agent not only lacks certain knowledge themselves, but prevents others from gaining it through their willingness to make claims without any consideration of their truth or whether there is any evidence to support them. While I'll stick to these two examples, Cassam is to be commended for providing us with several more.

Obstructivism is a form of *consequentialism* about intellectual vice: intellectual vices are character traits, attitudes or ways of thinking that systematically produce bad intellectual outcomes. It therefore is the vice analogue of consequentialist accounts of intellectual virtues. To my mind Cassam makes an entirely convincing case for consequentialism about intellectual vice. Non-consequentialists about intellectual virtue generally appeal to virtuous *motivations*: the intellectually virtuous agent is one whose intellectual motives are good (they really want to know), not one whose outcomes are good (they really do know). But it is clearly implausible to suppose that the intellectually vicious agent is one whose intellectual motives are bad (they really don't want to know). Some intellectually vicious agents might have bad motives (cf. Cassam's discussion of epistemic insouciance in Chapter 4), but it is clearly not the case that all intellectually vicious agents do. This suggests an argument for consequentialism: surely it is more plausible to give a

unified consequentialist account of intellectual vices and virtues than a consequentialist account of intellectual vices and a non-consequentialist account of intellectual virtues.

Chapters 2-4 examine several examples of intellectual vices. Each vice falls into one of three categories: character vices, attitude vices and 'thinking vices'. I gave examples of character vices (closed-mindedness) and attitude vices (epistemic insouciance) above. Thinking vices differ from both character and attitude vices in that they concern qualities of a person's thinking rather than qualities of them as a thinker (56). A piece of thinking may be closed-minded yet not be the thinking of a closed-minded thinker; there is an important difference between thinking in a closed-minded way and actually being closed-minded. While Cassam thinks there are interesting connections between these categories, if I understand him correctly, he doesn't regard one of them as more fundamental than the others. This refusal to engage in a reductive project is admirable, and means he spends time on the more interesting issue of the nature of various vices, rather than on the issue of what is most fundamental.

In Chapter 5 Cassam discusses dogmatism and Kripke's paradox. While dogmatism might look like a paradigm intellectual vice, one might think that a dogmatic attitude might help you to keep hold of some knowledge you have. Imagine I know that *p*. One way in which I could keep hold of my knowledge that *p* is by refusing to expose myself to any evidence against *p*. If this is right, then it is not so clear that dogmatism is a vice. After all, far from obstructing knowledge, it can often help you retain it. Cassam seeks to avoid this problem by denying that you can retain knowledge by adopting a dogmatic attitude. His basic thought is that, while you can retain your confidence that you are right by adopting a dogmatic attitude towards your beliefs, in doing so you forfeit your *right* to be confident, and knowledge requires the right to be confident. He holds that:

‘if I have encountered what purports to be conclusive evidence against P, and I have no idea how to refute that evidence, then it seems that I no longer have the right to be confident that p [and if] I no longer have the right to be confident that P, then I no longer know P’ (116).

This approach puts certain demands on us as knowers. Take me, for example. I take myself to know that the 9/11 attacks were carried out by Al Qaeda, not the US government. But I am aware that there are conspiracy theorists who purport to have conclusive evidence that the attacks were carried out by the US government. On Cassam’s account, in order to ‘salvage’ my knowledge, I need to be able to refute that evidence. What are my prospects of doing this?

Cassam is sanguine. He tells us:

‘Knowers have responsibilities, including the responsibility not to dismiss challenges to their beliefs without good reason. In many cases the amount of time and effort required to discharge this epistemic obligation is not great, and certainly not beyond the reach of anyone with access to the internet and an attention span of more than five minutes’ (119).

I return to this theme below.

In Chapter 6 Cassam addresses the extent to which we are responsible for our vices. His basic view is that, while one’s intellectual vices always ‘reflect badly’ on one, we need to distinguish between vices for which we are responsible and vices for which we aren’t. Foolishness reflects badly on one, but it may well be that one isn’t responsible for one’s foolishness. Put roughly, Cassam holds that we are responsible for our vices to the extent that we can exert *control* over them. We can (sometimes) exert control over our vices. For example, I may recognise that I am intellectually careless, and then take steps to become less intellectually careless.

Chapter 7 discusses a class of vices that pose a particular problem here: what Cassam calls ‘stealthy vices’. Stealthy vices are vices that they put obstacles in the way of those who have them coming to recognise that they have them. For example, someone who is arrogant is likely going to arrogantly dismiss any evidence that they are arrogant. (In contrast, there is no reason to think being intellectually careless puts any particular obstacles in the way of recognising that one is careless). I found Cassam’s discussion of stealthy vices fascinating, and agreed with his conclusion that the mere fact that one’s vicious nature renders one incapable of recognising one’s vicious nature in no way reduces one’s culpability for one’s viciousness.

(I won’t offer a summary of Chapter 8 because it concerns the prospects for eradicating our vices, which comes up below).

I now want to highlight three criticisms of Cassam’s approach. The first is that it is overly individualistic. We don’t hear much about how the intellectually vicious become vicious. One might, for instance, think that certain kinds of people (e.g. those who are privileged) are more likely to form certain intellectual vices than others (e.g. arrogance). We also don’t hear much about the broader structural explanations for intellectually vicious behaviour. This is not to say that Cassam rejects anti-individualistic approaches; he just prefers not to focus on them (see his discussion of structural explanations in Chapter 2). In my view this is a missed opportunity. As his occasional engagement with José Medina’s work (see Medina 2012) on intellectual virtues and vices demonstrates, there are a host of interesting questions here. Future work on vice epistemology would do well to take them up.

Second, in the virtue ethics literature a lot has been written about the ‘situationist challenge’. This challenge is based on the influence situational factors seem to have on our behaviour. In one study, it was found that theology students who were on their way to lecture on the parable of the

Good Samaritans were willing to stop to help someone on the street when they had plenty of time, but not when they were in a hurry (43). This, says the situationists, leads to a challenge to the virtue ethicist: they either need to hold that, in view of the situational influences on human behaviour, most of us aren't really virtuous, or that the virtues are situation-specific rather than underlying character traits. Cassam argues (in Chapter 2) that the vice epistemologist doesn't face an analogous challenge. The basic reason seems to be that, for the virtue ethicist, the moral virtues are 'high fidelity' (the morally virtuous are generally virtuous), whereas, for the vice epistemologist, (most of) the intellectual vices are 'low fidelity' (the intellectually vicious aren't generally vicious, but they are in important situations).

While there is a genuine difference here, I am concerned that the situationist challenge arises for the vice epistemologist in a somewhat different form. There is ample evidence that situational factors have a serious impact on our cognitive behaviour too (Alfano, 2012). We are all subject to various biases, and these biases can be triggered by aspects of the situations in which we find ourselves. For instance, most of us tend to engage in 'identity-protective cognition': we are resistant to evidence that challenges beliefs we regard as being central to our social and cultural identities (Jost, Hennes, and Lavine, 2013; Molden and Higgins, 2012; Taber and Lodge, 2006). Does this mean we are all closed-minded? This is where something like the situationist challenge arises. The vice epistemologist either needs to accept that most of us are intellectually vicious, at least in some respects (e.g. we are closed-minded), or that the intellectual vices are situation-specific rather than underlying character traits, attitudes, or thinking styles. While I can imagine several responses Cassam might make here, I lack the space to explore them. But I do think this issue is worth taking up at greater length.

Third, and finally, I want to return to Cassam's clarion call for us to 'do our own research' and fulfil our epistemic obligations rather than dogmatically supposing we have no need to deal with challenges to our beliefs. Cassam's view is that, while fulfilling our obligations may not be a simple task, it is well within most of our capabilities. This underwrites his defence of the possibility of 'self-improvement' in Chapter 8. Recognising that one is intellectually vicious in certain respects is the first step to improving one's intellectual characters, attitudes and styles of thinking. While his optimism is admirable, I am concerned that isn't particularly well-founded.

Take the typical 9/11-truther. Why is supplying them with more and more evidence that their conspiracy theory is groundless not generally an effective way of changing their mind? Work on identity-protective cognition (see the references above) supplies a large part of the answer: according to this work, the 9/11-truther doesn't 'stand back' from their existing beliefs when it comes to assessing the evidence they are supplied with. They rather use their existing beliefs in deciding what to make of it. As a result, the 9/11-truther will tend to reject this evidence. If this is a form of dogmatism or closed-mindedness—and I think it is arguable that it is—then it is particularly hard to tackle. The 9/11-truther doesn't see themselves as just ignoring this evidence. They see themselves as rationally responding to it. This relates to Cassam's discussion of 'stealthy vices' (vices such that possessing them places obstacles to recognising that one possesses them). But Cassam tends to focus on the ways in which having a particular vice can hamper your ability to overcome that vice rather than the ways in which the complexes of vices that make up parts of our characters (or our deeply-held attitudes and common thinking-styles) can hamper our efforts at self-improvement more generally. As such, I suspect the problem is orders of magnitude more intractable than Cassam supposes.

In closing, I want to re-iterate that I think this book will set the terms of debate in vice epistemology for years to come. Those who are inclined to agree with the basic ideas and views Cassam seeks to develop will find his development of these ideas and views detailed and impressive; those who are inclined to disagree with him on some points will welcome the opportunity to engage with a sophisticated opponent.

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