INTRODUCTION TO PART 5

Successful government of any kind requires knowledge. Reflection on democratic government in particular has tended to emphasize the need for both evidence-based political decisions and a well-informed citizenry. Citizens need to know facts about the natural world and society, they need to have knowledge of how government works, knowledge about laws, policy plans, the performance of politicians and other elected officials, and so on. Achieving this is far from easy and there are reasons for doubting that citizens generally do a good job, as the previous section has documented.

Even so, the democratic ideal of a well-informed citizenry is one worth striving for. This is where intellectual virtues enter the picture: being well-informed requires thinking well, and thinking well is thinking virtuously. Virtue epistemology has become widely popular and influential in epistemology in recent decades. A lot of effort has gone into analyzing the concept of virtue, addressing traditional problems in epistemology with the help of virtue theory, as well as analyzing more specific virtues such as intellectual humility, open-mindedness, epistemic justice, and many more. Virtue epistemological theorizing has also recently turned its gaze to the dark side by exploring intellectual vices, or qualities that make one a poor or bad cognizer, such as prejudice, arrogance, and closed-mindedness.

The chapters in this section focus on intellectual virtues and vices in politics and government. On the one hand, they use examples from those realms to elucidate the nature of virtues and vices, and, on the other, they chart the analytical and explanatory potential of virtue and vice theory for understanding the world of politics.

In a noticeable departure from his own earlier work on vice epistemology, Quassim Cassam’s chapter presents a critical take on vice explanations that are used to explain political behavior of individuals. According to him, such explanations tend to underestimate the significance of other factors, and are at odds with the principle that a democratic culture is one in which citizens assume that their fellow citizens have good reasons, or at any rate reasons, for acting as they do. Even worse, vice explanations can themselves be epistemically vicious to the extent that they make it harder to understand people whose lives, values, and political preferences are very different from our own. Vice explanations imply that the epistemically vicious suffer from a form of false consciousness.

Heather Battaly’s chapter has an ameliorative outlook and considers whether closed-mindedness, typically considered an intellectual vice, can actually be permissible, or even
salutary under certain circumstances. In particular, she argues that closed-minded engagement with one’s social media feeds is epistemically good when these feeds are ridden with misinformation and fake news. In situations like these, Battaly argues, we should dismiss and report false posts, advocate for structural reform of content algorithms, and flood the epistemic environment with truths and critical thinking. We should also be alive to opportunities where closed-minded engagement with people who believe the posts can produce good epistemic effects overall.

The next chapter, by Alessandra Tanesini, revisits oft-repeated pessimistic claims about people’s inability to change their minds in response to counter-evidence and arguments from the opposite side. Against this, she argues that motivation makes a significant difference to individuals’ ability to rationally evaluate information. Empirical work on group deliberation shows that the motivation to learn from others, as opposed to a desire to win arguments, promotes good quality group deliberation. This then leads to an overview of some epistemic virtues and vices crucial to the politico-epistemic activities of arguing, debating, and listening to a contrary point of view.

The final two chapters in the section explore the potential of virtue and vice theory at the level of collectives. José Medina analyzes the epistemic behavior of groups by contrasting the epistemic vices found in privileged groups with epistemic virtues found in the collective thinking of oppressed or mixed groups. The chapter discusses psychological, epistemic, and discursive models of epistemic bubbles and echo chambers, focusing on the epistemic vice of critical insensitivity as it appears in the group dynamics of homogeneous, racially privileged groups that become echo chambers. Medina’s analysis highlights the specifically collective form that the vice of critical insensitivity with respect to racial bias takes. The chapter also points the way to improvement by discussing how critical insensitivity can be resisted through the epistemic empowerment of oppressed groups and epistemic activism.

Institutions take center stage in Ian James Kidd’s contribution. His chapter explores the claim that political institutions can be bearers of epistemic vices. His inroad is a characterization of epistemic corruption and the various processes that can corrupt the epistemic ethoi of political institutions. The discussion then focuses on recent work by Miranda Fricker and select examples from recent British political experience. The chapter ends with suggestions for further work on the corruption and repair of the epistemic ethoi of political institutions.
EPISTEMIC VICES, IDEOLOGIES, AND FALSE CONSCIOUSNESS

Quassim Cassam

1 Introduction

Virtues are praiseworthy personal qualities that are beneficial to us and to our fellow human beings. Vices are blameworthy personal qualities that are harmful to us and to our fellow human beings. Among our virtues and vices are intellectual or epistemic virtues and vices. Their main impact is on our intellectual or epistemic flourishing. Open-mindedness, intellectual humility and sensitivity to evidence are epistemic virtues. Some corresponding epistemic vices are closed-mindedness, intellectual arrogance and imperviousness to evidence. Epistemic vices are character traits, attitudes or ways of thinking that systematically obstruct the gaining, keeping or sharing of knowledge. As long as we have the requisite degree of control over these qualities we can be blamed or criticised for them. Vice epistemology is the branch of philosophy that studies the nature, identity and significance of epistemic vices.

A vice attribution is the judgement that another person has a specific epistemic vice. The judgement that another person is closed-minded or dogmatic or has some other epistemic vice can serve a number of different purposes. It can be explanatory, evaluative or cautionary. We suppose that a person’s epistemic conduct can sometimes be explained by their epistemic vices. In attributing an epistemic vice to someone we are also implicitly evaluating them, and the implicit evaluation is negative. Finally, the judgement that someone is epistemically vicious can serve as a warning to others.

The focus here will be on the explanatory role of vice attributions. The point at which such attributions are made is the point at which an individual’s epistemic conduct is taken to be defective in some way, and the vice attributor seeks to explain the attributee’s supposedly defective conduct by reference to an underlying epistemic vice. This makes vice attributions potentially problematic in any of the following ways:

1. Their assumption that the attributee’s conduct is epistemically defective is open to question, especially in cases where this assumption is grounded in partisan political differences between the attributer and attributee.

2. Even if the attributee’s conduct is epistemically defective, there may be better ways of explaining its defectiveness than by pinning it on an underlying epistemic vice.
Vice attributions potentially underestimate the extent to which epistemically vicious thinking can nevertheless be rational. Even in epistemically vicious thinking there must be some semblance of cogency.

In this context, epistemic conduct includes judging or belief-formation, as well as reasoning or inferring.

The first two of these difficulties are illustrated by much commentary on the Brexit vote in the United Kingdom and the election of President Trump in the United States. The judgements that Brexit was best for Britain and that Donald Trump was a better candidate for President than Hillary Clinton were seen by many liberal commentators as deeply flawed. As a result, they took it for granted that the thinking or reasoning that led voters to these judgements must also have been defective. This defectiveness was explained in terms of a range of epistemic vices, including gullibility, imperviousness to evidence, wishful thinking and stupidity. On a different reading, however, the judgements in favour of Brexit and Trump were grounded in the values, life experiences and genuine preferences of the relevant groups of voters. The fact that another person’s political preferences are diametrically opposed to one’s own does not justify the assumption that the person in question must be epistemically vicious. However, the temptation to take political or ideological disagreements as a sign that one’s political opponents must be epistemically vicious is hard to resist.

Even in cases of conduct that is epistemically defective vice attributions can lead to a neglect of other potentially more relevant factors. For example, hardened conspiracy theorists who circulate anti-Semitic conspiracy theories are both ethically and epistemically defective but it is questionable whether conspiracy thinking is best explained by the epistemic vices of the thinker. What leads a person to subscribe to a particular conspiracy theory is usually their broader ideological commitments. This does not mean, of course, that epistemic vices do not also play a role. This raises a deeper question about the relationship between vice explanations – explanations of a person’s epistemic conduct by reference to their supposed epistemic vices – and explanations of their conduct by reference to their ideologies or values.

The issue of rationality is brought into focus by a remark of Jason Stanley’s. According to Stanley, ‘a democratic culture is one in which citizens assume that their fellow citizens have good reasons for acting as they do’ (2015: 104). When one citizen assumes that others could only have acted as they did as a result of their stupidity or some other epistemic vice, they are precisely not abiding by what might be called Stanley’s Principle of Charity. Is this principle sound? The assumption that other people generally have good reasons for acting as they do is over-optimistic. This does not mean that other people are irrational since, as Alan Millar notes, ‘rationality is compatible with a lot of bad thinking’ (2004: 7). However, even in such cases, ‘cogency, or at least some semblance of cogency, must be discernible’ (2004: 11). To the extent that vice explanations make it harder to detect a semblance of cogency in their thinking, they make other people harder to understand. Hannon argues that in order to understand others, ‘we need to empathize with their thinking’ (2019: 8). Dismissing another person’s thinking as defective or explaining it by reference to their supposed epistemic vices hardly counts as empathising with their thinking. The question this raises is whether, in some circumstances, vice explanations might themselves be epistemically vicious, by obstructing our knowledge or understanding of other perspectives.

Vice explanations of a person’s epistemic conduct might seem to imply that the person in question suffers from a type of false consciousness. A form of false consciousness is when a person is mistaken about the basis of his own beliefs and choices. Vice explanations might be thought to imply that people are mistaken in this way when their political beliefs and
choices have more to do with their epistemic vices than with the good reasons that they take themselves to have. In such cases, their ‘real reasons’ are different from the ones they take themselves to have. Yet this description of their predicament is open to challenge. It might even be argued that in many cases vice explanations of a person’s epistemic conduct can be regarded as embodying a form of false consciousness.

The following discussion is divided into three sections. The next section will focus on when it is, and when it is not, advisable to give vice explanations of other people’s epistemic conduct. Section 3 will have more to say about the Principle of Charity and the importance, even from a vice perspective, of seeing other people as having good reasons, or at least reasons, for their actions. Section 4 will return to the issue of false consciousness. Two key questions here are: do vice explanations imply that people are systematically deluded about their reasons, and are vice epistemologists themselves deluded in many cases about their own reasons and motives?

2 The limits of vice explanations

For an example in which a vice explanation seems appropriate, consider the following: on 6 October 1973, Egyptian and Syrian forces launched a surprise attack on Israel. Israel’s military was taken by surprise despite the availability of intelligence indicating an impending attack. A study by Uri Bar-Joseph and Arie Kruglanski blamed the intelligence failure on the closed-mindedness of Israel’s Director of Military Intelligence and his senior Egyptian Affairs specialist. The study concluded that these individuals had ignored evidence of an impending attack because they had a particularly high need for cognitive closure and had already made up their minds that Egypt and Syria would not attack. The ‘because’ in this formulation is causal and explanatory. Bar-Joseph and Kruglanski’s hypothesis is that attributing the epistemic vice of closed-mindedness to two senior intelligence officers explains their lapses.

It is useful to keep this case in mind when considering the circumstances in which vice explanations are appropriate. A vice explanation is appropriate in this case because it is hard to deny that the conduct of the two intelligence officers was epistemically defective and prevented them from knowing what they could and should have known – that Israel was going to be attacked. Furthermore, quite apart from the arguments presented by Bar-Joseph and Kruglanski, there is a strong intuitive case for conceptualising the explanatory epistemic vice in this case as the vice of closed-mindedness. This is not to deny the relevance of other factors. Closed-mindedness only led the two officials to ignore evidence of an attack because they had a prior commitment to a doctrine about the how Israel’s neighbours would proceed. In addition, the fact that the failings of the two officials had such a major influence on Israel’s planning and decision-making is indicative of institutional as well as personal failings. These institutional failings can be described as institutional vices, a remedy for which is the introduction of the appropriate institutional safeguards. Still, epistemic vices are clearly a significant part of the explanatory story.

When it comes to vice analyses of more recent and still controversial political events, matters are much more complicated. On the issue of whether the thinking or reasoning that led voters to back Trump in the United States and Brexit in the United Kingdom was defective, much will depend on the perceived merits and demerits of these political choices. For commentators who view Brexit as ‘utterly, utterly stupid’ (Wren-Lewis 2019), it will be hard not to regard the thinking that led people to vote for it as flawed in ways that call for a vice explanation. Yet, unlike the judgement that the decision-making in Israeli intelligence prior
to the Yom Kippur surprise was flawed, the judgement that a vote for Brexit or Trump was a vote for something utterly stupid is plainly political. By the same token, it is a partly political judgement to opt for a vice explanation of these political choices. This is problematic on the assumption that the primary concern of vice epistemology should be to provide a philosophical analysis of a person’s epistemological failings. It should not be, or give the impression of being, a way to attack one’s political opponents.¹²

Even politically motivated judgements can still be correct. Regardless of whether the judgement that certain voters were gullible or insensitive to evidence is politically motivated, it could still be true. However, this cannot be decided without testing vice explanations against other possible explanations. A number of the most compelling alternatives are a good deal more charitable than vice explanations. Two key notions in non-vice explanations of recent trends in the United States and Europe are those of *class* and *ideology*. Both play a key role in contrarian analyses by Thomas Frank, David Goodhart and Michael Lind.¹³ These analyses are contrary to the received wisdom and challenge the assumption that voters are ‘gullible dimwits who are easily manipulated by foreign propaganda or domestic demagogues’ (Lind 2020: 91). Gullibility and susceptibility to manipulation are epistemic vices but contrarians regard attempts to explain voter behaviour by reference to such vices as patronising and misguided.

For Lind, the Cold War has been followed by a transatlantic class war in many Western countries. This is a war between ‘elites based in the corporate, financial, government, media, and education sectors and disproportionately native working-class populists’ (2020: 1). The ideology of the ‘overclass’ of college-educated managers and professionals is *technocratic liberalism*. Its main tenets are a commitment to free market economics, cultural liberalism and labour arbitrage.¹⁴ It sees economic inequality as an inevitable consequence of differences in educational attainment. According to Lind, what we have been witnessing in recent years is a ‘populist counterrevolution from below’ against ‘minoritarian rule by enlightened technocrats’ who see themselves as ‘insulated from mass prejudice and ignorance’ (2020: 84).

Frank’s analysis focuses on what he sees as the ‘inherently undemocratic’ ideology of ‘professionalism’ (2016: 24).¹⁵ A basic tenet of this ideology is that ‘the successful deserve their rewards, that the people on top are there because they are the best’ (2016: 31). The dominance of this ideology has resulted in large-scale economic and social inequalities that have, in turn, opened the door to populist demagogues. *Technocracy* refers to the reign of professionalism in which important decisions are made in distant offices by unaccountable experts. Frank quotes J. K. Galbraith’s description of economists as having been ‘on the wrong side of every important policy issue, and not just recently but for decades’, and argues that those who succeed in a professional discipline are simply ‘those who best absorb and apply its master narrative’ (2016: 39).¹⁶

In Goodhart’s analysis, the two upsets of 2016 – Brexit and Trump – were a reflection of what he calls ‘the new value divisions in developed democracies’ (2017: vii). Specifically:

A large minority group of the highly educated and mobile – the Anywheres – who tend to value autonomy and openness and comfortably surf social change have recently come to dominate our society and politics. There is also a larger but less influential group – the Somewheres – who are more rooted and less well educated, who value security and familiarity and are more connected to group identities than Anywheres. Somewheres feel that their socially conservative intuitions have been excluded from the public space in recent years, which has destabilised our politics and led to the Brexit and Trump backlashes. (2017: vii)
Anywheres see themselves as the voice of reason and look down on Somewheres, who they regard as irrational and xenophobic. Anywheres are more socially tolerant than Somewheres but less politically tolerant. When Somewheres complain about the impact of globalisation and free trade on their jobs and communities, Anywheres respond, as Tony Blair did in 2005, that debating the merits of globalisation is like debating whether autumn should follow summer. Against this background, it isn’t hard to understand why Somewheres took the opportunities of the 2016 Brexit vote and US Presidential Election to send a message to Anywhere elites. Voting for Trump or Brexit was an exercise of political agency by people who ‘feel buffeted by external events with little political agency, social confidence or control over their destinies’ (2017: 7–8).

The point of these analyses is not to defend Trump or Brexit but to make their victories intelligible. Crucially, these analyses make Somewhere voting patterns intelligible without any suggestion that those who voted for Trump or Brexit were gullible or irrational. The question whether these analyses are correct cannot be settled here. What is clear is that the explanatory work in these analyses is done by class and ideology. The counterrevolution from below has its own ideology and the name of that ideology is populism, the ‘ideology of popular resentment against elites’ (Rovira Kaltwasser et al. 2017: 6). Vice and ideological explanations are not incompatible, but one should not assume that people must be irrational or otherwise epistemically vicious if their conduct can be explained without this assumption.

Those who give vice explanations of recent trends might object that the discussion so far misses their point. The focus has been on whether it is appropriate to accuse voters of being epistemically vicious but the targets of many vice analyses are leaders rather than the led. In the last few years there has been a torrent of columns and articles on the epistemic vices of populist politicians in the United Kingdom and America. These politicians have been described as arrogant, stupid, lacking any concern for truth and insensitive to evidence. Yet they have been successful in electoral terms. This might show that epistemic vice is no barrier to political success, but there is another possibility: focusing on the epistemic vices of demagogues leaves one with no explanation of their political effectiveness. Effective political leaders cannot afford to be insensitive to evidence in their political calculations or to lack a concern for truth when it comes to polling and other evidence of the most effective lines to take with voters.

The lesson is that if we are serious about wanting to understand the strategies and tactics of populist leaders it is unwise to assume that they are intellectually incompetent or irrational, though Trump might be special case. Their manifest ability to take on board polling information and adjust their methods in the light of such information does not support this assumption. For all the populist rhetoric about the supposed incompetence of experts, they themselves rely on experts, including experts at developing winning political strategies. They may talk about ‘alternative facts’ but the facts that count for them are hard facts: facts about what works for the people they represent and about what resonates with voters. Analysts who focus on their real or imagined epistemic vices risk underestimating them. The real story is about a group of populist demagogues who have won and, in some cases, held on to power. If we look to vice epistemology in its current evolving forms to explain their political successes, we are likely to be disappointed. Vice epistemology is feel-good political epistemology for liberals but a more hard-headed analysis is called for.

3 Acting for a reason

A person is instrumentally rational insofar as ‘she adopts suitable means to her ends’ (Kolody and Brunero 2020). In this context, ‘suitable’ means are efficacious, that is, means that deliver
desired end. If the end is to convince people to vote for Brexit, then describing it as a way for the United Kingdom to ‘take back control’ proved highly efficacious. In the same way, the promise that Trump would ‘drain the swamp’, that is, root out corruption in Washington, was highly efficacious in attracting voters to his cause. The issue is not whether Brexit would actually enable Britain to take back control or whether Trump had the intention or the capacity to drain the swamp but whether these promises would resonate with voters. It was anticipated by the relevant strategists that they would and they were right about this.

Why did these promises resonate with many voters? Did those making these promises have any serious intention of carrying them out, and did the voters to whom the promises were made believe them? If there is an explanatory role for vice attributions in connection with the twin political upsets of 2016 then one might hope to detect it in relation to one or more of these questions. In reality, the scope for vice explanations in relation to any of these questions is limited. The attractions of ‘take back control’ and ‘drain the swamp’ can be easily explained by reference to the contrarian analyses described above. It is easy to understand why those with little political agency should be attracted by the idea of taking control. In the same way, ‘drain the swamp’ exploited the ideology of popular resentment against elites. To the extent that this ideology was itself a response to inequality and the marginalisation, it was not irrational for politically and economically marginalised voters to favour candidates who at least ‘talked the talk’ about draining the swamp. If actually draining the swamp would mean the expulsion from Washington of highly paid political consultants and corrupt lobbyists then what’s not to like?

These are all ways of making the obvious point that those who voted for populist causes in 2016 had their reasons for doing so. It is less obvious that, in line with Stanley’s principle, they had good reasons for acting as they did, and this might conceivably create an opening for vice explanations. If economic inequality and a perceived lack of political agency were the considerations which led voters to act as they did, then it is relevant whether they had good reason to expect Brexit and a Trump presidency to tackle these problems. On the face of it, they did not. There was really never any prospect of political demagogues doing anything to address inequality and marginalisation, and one would have to be naïve or gullible or both to suppose otherwise. If the promises made by populist leaders were patently insincere then a failure to spot their insincerity can perhaps be explained in vice terms. Gullibility and naivety are, after all, epistemic vices. Wishful thinking is another epistemic vice that might have played a role in inducing the economically marginalised and powerless to vote for populist demagogues.

Even so, it is important to proceed with caution in proposing such an analysis. A point to bear in mind is that many votes are protest votes. The desire to express one’s unhappiness with the status quo is not just a reason but arguably a good reason to vote for anti-establishment candidates even if one has little faith that they have one’s best interests at heart. The function of such a vote is expressive, and expressive voting has its own rationale. There would be better grounds for attributing epistemic vices to voters who genuinely believed, in the face of all the evidence, that populist demagogues would make a positive difference to their lives. However, it is one thing to describe or evaluate such voters as epistemically vicious and another to explain their conduct by reference to such vices. Vice attributions are not necessarily vice explanations. It might be the case that voters must have been gullible or naïve to believe the promises made by a populist demagogue but it is a further question whether they voted for the demagogue because they were gullible or naïve. On an alternative interpretation, they voted as they did because the demagogue spoke to their concerns. This was their reason for voting the way their voted, the consideration upon which they acted.19
This is not a vice explanation even if it does not preclude a vice attribution; it does not preclude evaluating such voters as naïve or gullible. Despite such an evaluation, it is still possible to detect at least a semblance of cogency in their thinking.

What is the vice epistemological significance of the insincerity of populist leaders? For example, suppose that there was never any intention on Trump’s part to drain the swamp. This would make the promise to do so morally suspect but not epistemically vicious. Suppose that many pro-Brexit politicians were aware that Brexit would reduce rather than increase the UK’s economic and political autonomy. In that case, Brexit was sold on a false prospectus, and those doing the selling can be criticised for moral misconduct, but not necessarily for epistemic misconduct. A vice attribution is more plausible in the case of populist politicians who believed what they were saying. There is certainly no lack of evidence that things would not turn out as they promised. If they still believed their own words, were they not guilty of wishful thinking? Or of being too lazy to brief themselves properly, or too dogmatic to be swayed by evidence?

Wishful thinking, intellectual laziness, dogmatism and imperviousness to evidence are certainly epistemic vices. Bearing in mind the distinction between a vice attribution and a vice explanation, the real issue is not whether demagogues who believed their own predictions and propaganda can properly be described as epistemically vicious but whether they believed these things because they were epistemically vicious. A way to assess this is to ask: if they had not been epistemically vicious would they still have believed their own predictions? It is hard to be sure that the answer to this question is negative. Belief in the benefits of Brexit can also be explained by a person’s anti-EU ideology, in which EU bureaucrats are identified as the bad guys. Such an ideology might be misguided but it is a further question whether acceptance of a misguided ideology is a sure sign of epistemic vice.

Aside from any philosophical doubts about vice explanations of recent events there are also sound practical reasons for not insisting that large numbers of voters are, if not downright irrational, then at least epistemically vicious to some degree. The point has been well made by Michael Ignatieff in a review of a book by Nick Clegg, the pro-EU former leader of the Liberal Democrat party in the United Kingdom. Clegg’s description of Brexit as one of the greatest acts of national self-immolation in modern times leads Ignatieff to reflect on the tendency of liberals to regard themselves as ‘apostles of sweet reason, the clear quiet voice in a bar room of brawlers’. Yet Brexeters ‘had their reasons’, and ‘presenting yourself as the voice of reason isn’t smart politics. It’s elitist condescension’ (2016: 3–4). The parallel worry is that sitting in judgement on the supposed epistemic vices of Brexeters and Trump voters can just as easily come across as elitist condescension. This is not only inadvisable on political grounds but also brings into focus the possibility that vice epistemological political analyses are themselves epistemically vicious. It is to this possibility that I now turn.

4 False consciousness

A form of false consciousness is when a person is mistaken about the basis of his own beliefs and choices. Vice explanations might be thought to imply that people are mistaken in this way when their political beliefs and choices have more to do with their epistemic vices than with the good reasons that they take themselves they have. Consider the following case: Sally voted for Trump because, according to her, he cares about people like her. Let us suppose, also, that in fact he doesn’t care about people like her and that his policies favour people like him rather than people like her. By voting for Trump Sally is voting against her own economic interests. Marxists would regard Sally as suffering from false consciousness.
The Marxist view, as described by Denise Meyerson, is that both rulers and the ruled in capitalist societies suffer from this condition. Rulers misinterpret their own motives and provide rationalisations of their actions that misrepresent their motives to themselves and the people they rule. The ruled vote for people who do not have their best interests at heart because they have ‘a poor perception of their interests’ (1991: 7).

What, if anything, does vice epistemology have to add to this analysis? Sally’s poor perception of her own interests and failure to grasp that Trump doesn’t care about people like her are both cognitive failings. The more obvious it is that Trump really doesn’t care about people like her, the greater the cognitive failing. From a vice epistemological perspective, these failings call for an explanation, and the proposed explanation is in terms of Sally’s epistemic vices. For example, it might be suggested that she fails to see facts about Trump that are staring her in the face because of some combination of wishful thinking, gullibility, and intellectual naivety. If she were epistemically virtuous, she would be less likely to be conned by people like Donald Trump and would have a better grasp of her own interests. On this account, her false consciousness is explained, at least in part, by her epistemic vices, and the antidote is the cultivation of epistemic virtues that would enable her to arrive at a better understanding of her choices and interests.

This explanation of Sally’s false consciousness is individualistic in a way that Marxist analyses are not. The Marxist view is that false consciousness and the political ignorance that it produces have much more to do with the politico-economic structure of capitalism than with the epistemic vices of individuals. This is a structural explanation of Sally’s failings, the implication being that her false consciousness can only be dislodged by a change in the social structure. Epistemic virtues alone will not do the trick. However, as Alessandra Tanesini has pointed out, vice and structural explanations are complementary rather than competitors. People’s actions are shaped by structural forces and ‘the same forces, including structural power relations, shape people’s psychologies including their vices and virtues’ (2019: 8). There is another issue on which structural and vice explanations are in agreement: on both views, Sally can be said to suffer from a form of self-ignorance. She is either ignorant of the extent to which her thinking is shaped by structural factors or by her own epistemic vices. To put it crudely, she doesn’t grasp the real basis of her political beliefs and choices.

Much depends here on how the notion of a ‘basis’ is understood. Constantine Sandis defines an ‘agential reason’ as ‘any consideration upon which one actually acts or refrains from doing so’ (2015: 267). When a voter reports that her reason for choosing to support a certain candidate was, say, her belief that the candidate cares about people like her, there is no need to suppose that this was not her agential reason or that she is mistaken in this sense about the ‘basis’ of her choice. Her self-ignorance pertains not to her agential reasons but to other factors, both structural and psychological, by which her thinking is likely to have been influenced. There is a sense in which people like Sally do understand the basis of their own political choices and a sense in which they do not.

These conclusions flow from the premise that Sally has a poor perception of her own interests but is this premise correct? In his contribution to this volume, Keith Stanovich points out that the interests that people like Sally are assumed to misperceive are their own material interests. However, Trump voters are not necessarily voting against their interests if these are understood more broadly to include their values and worldviews. In much the same way, it is gratuitous to assume that working-class Brexit voters only voted for Brexit for narrowly self-interested reasons. Another hypothesis is that they voted the way they did because Brexit was an expression of their values. Stanovich correctly concludes that Trump voters in 2016 were not necessarily irrational. By the same token, these voters were not necessarily suffering
from false consciousness and should not be judged epistemically vicious for their political choices. In his contribution to this volume, Jeffrey Friedman criticises the propensity of psychologists to ascribe beliefs with which they disagree to the irrationality of those who hold them. By the same token, one might criticise the propensity of some vice epistemologists – myself, in the past, included – to ascribe political choices with which they disagree to the epistemic vices of those who make them. If Brexit is a stupid idea, or it is completely obvious to everyone that Trump does not care about the poor and marginalised, then how could the thinking that leads such people to vote to Trump or Brexit not be epistemically vicious?

This rhetorical question confirms the suspicion that vice explanations can all too easily become a way to attack one’s political opponents. It also draws attention to the false consciousness of vice epistemologists who see themselves as politically impartial while only ever focusing on the deficient epistemic conduct of conservatives. The point is not that vice epistemology has to have a liberal bias but that it very often does. The deeper problem with the tendency to offer vice explanations of political choices with which one disagrees is that such explanations can themselves be epistemically vicious. Epistemic vices are personal qualities that get in the way of knowledge, and one such quality is what José Medina calls ‘insensitivity’:

As I understand it, insensitivity involves being cognitively and affectively numbed to the lives of others: being inattentive to and unconcerned by their experiences, problems, and aspirations; and being unable to connect with them and understand their speech and action. (2013: xi)

There is no necessary connection between insensitivity, which might also be called lack of empathy, and the project of giving vice explanations of other people’s conduct. However, when the people concerned have been marginalised by technocratic liberalism, there is a serious risk of failing to connect with them and understand their speech and action. If the action is the action of backing right-wing demagogues, then vice explanations can get in the way of knowledge, knowledge of lives that are different from one’s own and that render intelligible choices that would otherwise be hard to understand. To put it another way, there is a real danger that a vice epistemological approach will be epistemically vicious in such cases by making it harder to gain a type of knowledge that is essential for a decent society: knowledge of other lives.20

Notes

1 See Cassam (2019a) for a defence of this view of epistemic vice.

2 For an overview of vice epistemology, see the introduction to Kidd, Battaly and Cassam (2020).

3 The practice of attributing epistemic vices to other people is closely related to what Ian James Kidd calls ‘vice-charging’, that is, ‘the critical practice of charging other persons with epistemic vice’ (2016: 181). However, ‘vice-charging’ sounds more heated and accusatory than merely judging that another person is epistemically vicious. Vice attributions are judgements. They have an evaluative dimension but needn’t be accusatory, especially when the individual concerned is dead, and so not in a position to hear the charge.

4 This is not intended as an exhaustive list of the functions of vice attributions. As noted by an anonymous referee, they can also serve to diminish the epistemic standing of the target. In addition, some vice attributions attribute epistemic vices to institutions or organisations. See note 10.

5 See, for example, Wren-Lewis (2019). There are countless other examples of this style of liberal commentary.
6 Or irrational. See the papers by Stanovich and Friedman in the present volume.
7 This is the analysis of conspiracy theories given in Cassam (2019b).
8 Abiding by this principle means ‘questioning one’s own perspective if one cannot make rational
sense out of the actions of one’s fellow citizens’ (Stanley 2015: 104).
9 For an exposition of the idea of false consciousness, see Meyerson (1991).
10 See Bar-Joseph and Kruglanski (2003) and chapter 2 of Cassam (2019a) for further discussion.
11 On institutional vices, see Miranda Fricker’s paper ‘Institutional Epistemic Vices: The case of
12 There is more than an element of this in Cassam (2019a). Mea culpa.
13 Also relevant, and in a similar vein, is Eatwell and Goodwin (2018).
14 This involves transferring industrial production from relatively high-wage countries to ones with
lower labour costs.
15 An ideology is

an interrelated set of beliefs that provide a way for people to understand the world. Ideologies
tell people what is important, who the good guys and bad guys are, what their goals are, and
how those goals should be reached. Without ideologies to help categorize and interpret informa-
tion, the world would be meaningless. (Uscinski & Parent 2014: 12)

17 See https://www.theguardian.com/uk/2005/sep/27/labourconference.speeches for a transcript of
Blair’s speech.
18 For example, Crace (2019) repeatedly describes Conservative politicians in the United Kingdom
as stupid. As a piece of political analysis this is startlingly simple-minded and condescending.
19 In the terminology of Sandis (2015), such reasons are ‘agential reasons’. There is more on Sandis
below.
20 For a serious attempt to engage with this problem and counteract the numbness described by
Medina, see Hochschild (2016). Her project is to understand what voters who cast their ballots for
Trump in 2016 were thinking and feeling. For Hochschild, empathy is the key to uncovering what
she calls their ‘deep story’ (2016: xi). What I mean by a decent society is what Avishai Margalit
means by a ‘civilized’ society: ‘one whose members do not humiliate one another’ (1996: 1).

References
Cassam, Quassim (2019a). Vices of the Mind: From the Intellectual to the Political (Oxford: Oxford Uni-
versity Press).
Crace, John (2019). Decline and Fail: Read in Case of Apocalypse (London: Faber and Faber).
Eatwell, Roger and Goodwin, Matthew (2018). National Populism: The Revolt against Liberal Democracy
Frank, Thomas (2016). Listen, Liberal or Whatever Happened to the Party of the People? (London &
Melbourne: Scribe).
Goodhart, David (2017). The Road to Somewhere: The New Tribes Shaping British Politics (London: Pen-
guin Books).
Hannon, Michael (2019). ‘Empathetic Understanding and Deliberative Democracy’, Philosophy and
Times, September 7, 2016.
Kidd, Ian James, Battaly, Heather and Cassam, Quassim, eds. (2021). Vice Epistemology (Abingdon:
Routledge).