

CYNICISM, EPISTEMIC INSOUCIANCE AND BORIS JOHNSON

Quassim Cassam

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In a recent *Guardian* article, the historian and journalist Max Hastings analyses the character of Conservative leadership candidate Boris Johnson. Hastings does not pull any punches. There is room for debate, he writes, about whether Johnson is a scoundrel or a mere rogue, “but not much about his moral bankruptcy, rooted in a contempt for truth”. The many Johnsonian failings that Hastings identifies include cowardice, “reflected in a willingness to tell any audience whatever he thinks most likely to please, heedless of the inevitability of its contradiction an hour later”. Johnson, Hastings writes, would not recognise the truth “if confronted by it in an identity parade”.

Let's set aside the question whether Hastings is right about Johnson. What is interesting from a philosophical standpoint is that Hastings justifies his claim that Johnson is unfit to be Prime Minister by cataloguing his many *vices*. Hastings conceives of vices as character traits and indeed describes Johnson as being of “weak character”, more Alan Partridge than Winston Churchill.

Virtues are beneficial personal qualities that, in Philippa Foot's words, a human being needs to have “for his own sake and that of his fellows”. Vices, then, are generally harmful personal qualities, harmful not only to the person whose vices they are but also to others. However, vices aren't just defects. They are also traits for which a person can justly be blamed or criticized, just as virtues are traits for which a person can justly be praised.

Some vices, such as cowardice, are moral failings. Others, such as foolishness, are primarily intellectual, though intellectual vices can also be moral vices. In these terms, the vices that Hastings attributes to Johnson are a mixture of moral and intellectual vices. Contempt for truth might be a moral failing but is also an intellectual failing.

Intellectual vices are intellectually harmful, but what exactly does that mean? Among our many intellectual endeavours is *inquiry*. It is by inquiring that we try to find answers to complex questions like “What impact will Brexit have on the British economy?”. To inquire is not just to ask questions but to carry out investigations designed to find answers. Inquiry is a basic source of knowledge or understanding of the world around us, and one way that intellectual vices are harmful to us is that they make us much less effective as inquirers.

Since knowledge is the ultimate aim of inquiry, another way of explaining why intellectual vices are harmful to us is to say that they are harmful to us as *knowers*. They get in the way of our attempts to acquire knowledge by inquiry. The fact that intellectual vices are obstacles to knowledge has led some to describe them as *epistemic* vices. Such vices include closed-mindedness, arrogance, prejudice, dogmatism, overconfidence, and wishful thinking.

Over at least the last forty years epistemologists have had a great deal to say about so-called “epistemic virtues” like open-mindedness and humility. Since the 2016 Brexit vote in the UK and the election of President Trump there has been a huge rise in interest in epistemic vices. This is not a coincidence. Philosophical research into epistemic vices has taken off and now has a name: vice epistemology. This can be defined as the philosophical study of the nature, identity and significance of epistemic vices. While epistemic vices are interesting in their own right, many vice epistemologists also see them as the key to recent political developments. So, it seems, does Hastings.

Although many epistemic vices are character traits, there are also epistemic vices that aren't. Wishful thinking is a way of thinking rather than a character trait. Being prone to wishful thinking might be a character trait but wishful thinking itself is not. There are also epistemic vices that are attitudes rather than character traits. Contempt is an attitude towards something or someone. Contempt for truth – one of the vices that Hastings attributes to Johnson – is one such attitude.

Contempt for truth is closely related to another politically significant epistemic vice: epistemic insouciance. To be epistemically insouciant is to be unconcerned or indifferent about whether one's claims have any evidential backing or are grounded in fact. Epistemic insouciance means not really caring very much about this. It means being excessively casual and nonchalant about finding answers to complex questions, partly as a result of a tendency to view such questions as less complex than they really are. Epistemic insouciance is a particular form of not giving a shit.

The primary product of epistemic insouciance is bullshit in Harry Frankfurt's sense. The bullshitter, Frankfurt argues, is neither on the side of the true nor on the side of the false. He does not care whether the things he says describe reality correctly. This lack of connection with a concern for the truth is, in Frankfurt's words, “the essence of bullshit”. It is also the essence of epistemic insouciance. In a conversation last year with Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, President Trump made claims about America's trade deficit with Canada and then boasted that he had no idea whether his claims were correct. Trump's boast was

an indication of his epistemic insouciance. By the same token, his claims about the trade deficit were, in a technical sense, total bullshit.

Contempt for truth and indifference for truth sound like two different things. Contempt has an emotional charge that indifference lacks. If this is right, then one question for Hastings is whether politicians like Johnson should be seen as contemptuous or indifferent. Is the fundamental problem with politics today that professional politicians have contempt for truth or that they don't care about the truth? The case for detecting epistemic insouciance in the conduct described by Hastings is a strong one. On the other hand, one might also think that not caring about something is a way of displaying contempt for it.

For any proposed epistemic vice, a key question is whether it is actually harmful to us as knowers. In the case of epistemic insouciance or contempt for truth it is not hard to see that they are harmful. An inquirer isn't just someone who is looking for answers to questions. What genuine inquirers are after is the *true* or *right* answer. One is much less likely to discover the truth in one's inquiries if one doesn't care about the truth or is contemptuous of it. Indeed, it's hard to see in what sense a person who doesn't care about the truth can be said to be engaged in anything recognizable as *inquiry*. Inquiry presupposes an interest in finding the truth.

The status of wishful thinking as an epistemic vice is equally straightforward. The problem with wishful thinking is that one is much less likely to arrive at the truth about a given topic if one's thinking about that topic is more heavily influenced by one's wishes than by the evidence. For the judgement that Brexit will be good for the economy to be justified it must be based on the economic evidence, not on what one would like to think.

The negative impact of other supposed epistemic vices is less clear. Saul Kripke famously argued that it is sometimes rational for knowers to be dogmatic. If I already know that a certain proposition is true, then an effective way for me to preserve my knowledge is to ignore any counter-evidence. For if I know the truth of the proposition in question – say that proposition that the Holocaust happened – then I also know that any contrary evidence is misleading. I lack the expertise to rebut the claims the Holocaust deniers but I am under no obligation to engage with them. In this case, my dogmatic refusal to get into a debate with people with a contrary viewpoint does me no harm at all.

Such cases also raise questions about the status of open-mindedness as a virtue and closed-mindedness as a vice. There are certain possibilities to which my mind is not open. My mind is not open to the possibility that the claims of Holocaust

deniers have any merit. If that makes me closed-minded then so be it. But why think of my closed-mindedness as an epistemic vice when it serves to protect my knowledge from being undermined by a bunch of charlatans?

In this case, what is actually protecting my knowledge is not dogmatism but tenacity. Being open-minded doesn't require one to abandon one's fundamental beliefs at the first sign of doubt or opposition. Beliefs are commitments and genuine commitments aren't abandoned at the drop of a hat. Dogmatism is an *irrational* commitment to a doctrine but my commitment to the reality of the Holocaust is not irrational. It is based on evidence and the testimony of reputable historians.

For a character trait, attitude or way of thinking to be an epistemic vice it isn't enough that it gets in the way of knowledge or harms us as inquirers. It also needs to be a failing for which one can be blamed or criticized. Insomnia might make one a less effective inquirer but isn't an epistemic vice because it isn't a condition for which blame or criticism are usually appropriate.

This is potentially a problem for vice epistemology because it isn't clear that we have the kind of control of our epistemic vices that is required for us to be truly responsible for them. And if we aren't truly responsible for them then how can we be blamed for them? Heather Battaly gives the example of a young man in the Swat valley whose dogmatism is largely the result of bad luck "including the bad luck of being indoctrinated by the Taliban". Is it really appropriate to blame the young man for his dogmatism?

The problem isn't just that the young man didn't become dogmatic as a result of his own decisions but that, in practice, there is very little he can do to change his character. If we lack control over our characters then how can we be blamed for them? Going back to Hastings' criticism of Johnson, should we really be blaming Johnson for his alleged intellectual cowardice if he can't help being that way?

The whole question of whether, and to what extent, we are responsible for our own characters is controversial. There is the view, expressed by Michele Moody-Adams, that "people can change or revise their characters". It's one thing for a person to be indoctrinated but intellectual cowardice isn't generally the result of indoctrination. Even in cases of indoctrination, where there is no possibility of change, criticism might still be in order. We might be reluctant to blame the young man in the Swat valley for his dogmatism but his dogmatism can still be criticised for the harms it causes. Blame is one thing, criticism is another.

It is also relevant that not all epistemic vices are character traits. Even if people can't change or revise their characters, it doesn't follow that they can't change

their attitudes or thinking. Attitudes aren't fixed and unalterable and there are things one can do to bring about a change in one's attitudes or ways of thinking. Entire therapies, such as CBT (Cognitive Behavioural Therapy) are predicated on the possibility of change. Responsibility for one's vices can't always be dodged by presenting oneself as their hapless victim.

Epistemic vices, then, are personal qualities (character traits, attitudes or ways of thinking) that are harmful to us as knowers and for which we can fairly be blamed or criticised. On this account, epistemic vices are defined by their consequences rather than by their motives. Foolishness is an epistemic vice but foolish people don't necessarily have bad motives. Some epistemic vices do have bad motives but this isn't essential to their being epistemic vices.

How useful are epistemic vices as tools of political analysis? Hastings' epistemic vice analysis of Johnson's conduct is by no means an isolated example. Much has been written about President Trump's epistemic vices as well as those of senior members of the Bush administration. In the UK, Johnson has been represented by critics as epistemically vicious but so has Jeremy Corbyn. The assumption is not just that these individuals *have* a range of epistemic vices but that their political conduct can, to a greater or lesser extent, be *explained* by their epistemic vices.

In some cases, such vice explanations are compelling. The Bush administration's disastrous Iraq policy was partly the result of overconfidence and that is clearly an epistemic vice. On the other hand, it is also tempting to explain the conduct of politicians with whom one disagrees by reference to their alleged epistemic vices when the real explanation has much more to do with political strategy or ideological differences. Is the conduct of politicians like Trump and Johnson the result of their supposed epistemic vices or a calculated attempt to say and do things that will appeal to their core supporters?

On the latter interpretation, talk of epistemic insouciance or contempt for truth is, at least to some extent, beside the point. What Hastings describes as Johnson's willingness to tell any audience whatever he thinks is most likely to please comes over not as epistemically insouciant but as utterly cynical. In one sense the cynic is perfectly respectful of the truth: he is respectful of the truth that telling people what they want to hear can be a highly effective means of securing their support. What he tells them might not be true and he doesn't care about that. But he does care about getting what he wants and doing whatever is necessary with that aim in mind. If he displays epistemic insouciance it is in the interests of manipulating his audience.

The dictionary definition of a cynic is “one who is disposed to deny and sneer at the sincerity or goodness of human motives and actions”. Cynicism isn’t, at least straightforwardly, an epistemic vice. It won’t necessarily be harmful to us as knowers to be cynical if our cynicism is justified. It is, in anything, a *moral* failing to be cynical but even that is open for debate. Cynics will ask how what they see as cold-eyed realism about human beings can be a moral failing.

The fact remains, however, that extreme cynicism is hard to admire and Hastings is right at least to this extent: regardless of whether they are strictly epistemic or moral vices, the traits he ascribes to Johnson are profoundly unappealing. It is easier to identify a politician’s epistemic vices once it is clear what they really think. Politicians say many false or misleading things for political gain, but it is when they believe their own propaganda that the search for their epistemic vices is well and truly on.

This is the fundamental problem facing attempts to explain and understand the conduct of politicians today by reference to their epistemic vices. In order to identify their epistemic vices, we need to know how they think and what they think. Not what they *say* they think but what they *actually* about questions of politics and economics. And that’s just the problem: it’s hard to say what is in their minds because their behaviour leaves open any number of interpretations. All one can say with a reasonable degree of confidence is that *something* has gone badly wrong.