

EPISTEMIC VICES, IDEOLOGIES AND FALSE CONSCIOUSNESS

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Abstract: A vice attribution is the judgement that another person has a specific epistemic vice. Such attributions are often intended as explanatory but vice explanations of recent political events are problematic in a number of ways. They tend to underestimate the significance of other factors, including class and ideology, 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. Vice explanations are themselves epistemically vicious to the extent that they make it harder for us to understand people whose lives, values and political preferences are very different from our own. Such explanations are also committed to a form of methodological individualism. Vice epistemology has its own ideology, and a failure to recognise its own ideological and methodological foundations can be described as a form of false consciousness.

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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. The 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.¹ 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.²

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A *vice attribution* is the judgement that another person has a specific epistemic vice.³ 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 where:

1. The assumption that the attributee's conduct is epistemically defective is open to question, especially in cases where this assumption is grounded in a difference of opinion or values rather than incontrovertible epistemic reality.
2. Even if the attributee's conduct is in some way epistemically defective, there may be better ways of explaining its defectiveness than by pinning it on an underlying epistemic vice.
3. Vice attributions 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 U.K and the election of President Trump in the U.S. 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.⁴ 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 group 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.⁵ 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.⁶ 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' (2018: 8). Dismissing another person's thinking as defective or explaining it by reference to their supposed epistemic vices hardly counts as empathizing 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 seem to imply that the person in question suffers from a type of false consciousness.⁷ 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 unacknowledged epistemic vices than with the good reasons that they take themselves they 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 *themselves* 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. The 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?

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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.⁸ 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 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*, the remedy for which is the introduction of the appropriate institutional safeguards.⁹ 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 U.S. and Brexit in the U.K. 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 what are clearly identifiable as a person's epistemological failings. It should not be, or give the impression of being, a way to attack one's political opponents.¹⁰

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 U.S. and Europe are those of *class* and *ideology*. Both play a key role in contrarian analyses by Thomas Frank, David Goodheart and Michael Lind.¹¹ 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 being easily manipulated 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.¹² 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).¹³ 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).¹⁴

In Goodheart’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.¹⁵ Against this background, it isn't hard to understand why Somewheres took the opportunities of the 2016 Brexit vote and U.S. 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 victory intelligible. Crucially, these analyses make Somewhere voting patterns intelligible without any suggestion that those who voted for Trump or Brexit were gullible or irrational or both. 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).¹⁶ 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, by reference to other factors.

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.¹⁷ In the last few years there has been a torrent columns and articles on the epistemic vices of populist politicians in the U.K. 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 political and electoral terms. This might show that epistemic vice is no barrier to political success, but there is also another possibility: that focusing on the epistemic vices of populist demagogues leaves one with no explanation of their political effectiveness. Effective political leaders simply 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. 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 plainly rely on experts – 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 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

A person is instrumentally rational insofar as ‘she adopts suitable means to her ends’ (Kolodny & 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 U.K. 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 either 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 attraction 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 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 to gain some traction. 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 common 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 can be said to have voted for the populist demagogue *because* they were gullible or naïve. On an alternative interpretation,

they voted for the demagogue because the demagogue spoke to their concerns. This was their reason for voting the way they voted, the consideration upon which they acted.¹⁸ 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 U.K's economic and political autonomy. In that case, Brexit was being sold on a false prospectus, and those who were 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 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 this question: 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 UK. 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 Brexiters '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 Brexiters 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 we now turn.

4

It was suggested above that vice explanations of a person's epistemic conduct imply that the person in question suffers from a type of false consciousness. Specifically, they imply that the person is mistaken about the basis of his own beliefs and choices. Much depends in this formulation 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 voting for 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 reason or that she was deluded about her own agential reasons. However, she might also have been motivated by other psychological factors, such as racial animus, of which she

might be ignorant. Although these psychological factors are not agential reasons they might explain why, for example, she believed that the candidate in question cared about people like her. Ignorance or misunderstanding of one's "true" motives is a form of false consciousness.

Suppose, next, that the candidate *doesn't* care about people like her and his policies are likely to be against the interests of people like her. Having an inaccurate conception of what is in one's own interests is another form of false consciousness. If it is obvious to any sensible observer that the candidate doesn't care about people like her then why does she think that he does? This is where epistemic vices like naivety and gullibility might play a part, though more charitable explanations of her mistake, such as lack of information, are also available. To the extent that her epistemic vices play a part in sustaining her positive view of the candidate, she is unlikely to aware of the part they play. If she thinks of herself as a well-informed and astute observer of the political scene then this is another form of false consciousness. Epistemic vices are *enablers* rather than motives. Being gullible or stupid does not motivate one to believe in the merits of a particular candidate. Nor is one's gullibility or stupidity one's 'real reason' for backing that candidate. Rather, the role of such vices is to make it possible for one to believe in that candidate's merits despite all the evidence to the contrary.

The notion that false consciousness is a matter of misperceiving, misinterpreting or misunderstanding one's motives or interests will be familiar to readers of Marx and Engels. As Denise Meyerson notes, the orthodox Marxist view is that both rulers and the ruled suffer from false consciousness. Rulers misinterpret their own motives, and provide rationalisations of their actions that misrepresent their motives to themselves and to other people. The ruled in capitalist societies 'have a poor perception of their interests' (Meyerson 1991: 7) and this explains their willingness to vote for candidates who do not have their best interests at heart. Frank makes this point in the course of criticising the American Democratic Party:

Democratic political strategy simply assumes that people know where their economic interest lies and that they will act on it by instinct.... The gigantic error in all this is that people *don't* spontaneously understand their situation in the great sweep of things. They don't automatically know the courses of action that are open to them, the organizations they must sign up with, or the measures they should be calling for (2004: 245).

However, there is no implication that these forms of ignorance are blameworthy or the result of epistemic vices. The ignorance here is *structural*.

To describe a form of ignorance as structural is to imply that it is rooted not in personal failings but in the politico-economic structure of society. The false consciousness that figures in Marxist analyses is sustained by a ruling ideology that can only be dislodged by a change in social arrangements. As Meyerson observes, 'mere exposure to counter-evidence will never be enough' (1991: 10), that is, will never be enough to overturn the ideology or the beliefs and personal choices that the ideology sustains. Such a structural explanation of false consciousness is very different from an explanation in terms of epistemic vices. How, then, are structural and vice explanations related? This is Alessandra Tanesini's view:

[V]ice and structural explanations are complementary rather than competitors. Often events are the result of individuals' actions. People exercise agency when engaging in these activities that are reflective of their characters. These actions take place in, and respond to, situations that are shaped by structural forces. Furthermore, the same forces, including structural power relations, shape people's psychologies including their vices and virtues (2019:).

Even if this is right, there is still the question where to place the emphasis in a given case. Where personal and structural factors are intermingled, as they often are, it is open to the theorist to emphasise the structural or the personal. Vice explanations emphasise the personal since epistemic vices are personal qualities for which a person can be blamed or criticised. By

highlighting the personal, vice explanations are in danger of detracting from structural factors in a way that is potentially misleading.

The question this raises is whether vice epistemology has its own ideology and whether, if so, this ideology is itself expressive of a form of false consciousness. Vice epistemology is an epistemological practice that focuses on supposedly defective epistemic conduct and tries to explain such conduct in personal terms, by reference to personal epistemic vices. More often than not, the examples used to illustrate defective epistemic conduct reflect liberal values and priorities. This is the source of the concern, mentioned above, that vice epistemology is not politically neutral when, in practice, the deficient epistemic conduct it chooses to analyse is almost invariably the deficient epistemic conduct of conservatives. Furthermore, the emphasis on explaining such conduct by reference to the epistemic vices of the individual implies a commitment to an unreflective form of methodological individualism. Insofar as these motives and commitments are not recognised by vice epistemologists they can be said to suffer from false consciousness.

Epistemic vices have been characterised here as personal qualities that get in the way of knowledge. 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 economically and politically 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.¹⁹

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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 2021.

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 See, for example, Wren-Lewis 2019. There are countless other examples of this style of liberal commentary.

⁵ This is the analysis of conspiracy theories given in Cassam 2019b.

⁶ 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).

⁷ For an exposition of the idea of false consciousness see Meyerson 1991.

⁸ See Bar-Joseph and Kruglanski 2003 and chapter 2 of Cassam 2019a for further discussion.

⁹ On institutional vices see Miranda Fricker’s contribution to Kidd, Battaly and Cassam 2021.

¹⁰ There is more than an element of this in Cassam 2019a. *Mea culpa*.

¹¹ Also relevant, and in a similar vein, is Eatwell and Goodwin 2018.

¹² This involves transferring industrial production from relatively high-wage countries to ones with lower labour costs.

¹³ 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 information, the world would be meaningless’ (Uscinski & Parent 2014: 12).

¹⁴ See Galbraith 2001.

¹⁵ See <https://www.theguardian.com/uk/2005/sep/27/labourconference.speeches> for a transcript of Blair’s speech.

¹⁶ According to John B. Judis, populism is ‘not an ideology, but a political logic – a way of thinking about politics’ (2016: 14). Why can’t it be both?

¹⁷ For example, Crace 2019 repeatedly describes Conservative politicians in the U.K as stupid. As a piece of political analysis this is startlingly simple-minded and condescending.

¹⁸ In the terminology of Sandis 2015, such reasons are ‘agential reasons’. There is more on Sandis below.

¹⁹ 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).