

PREFACE

In her book *Thinking to Some Purpose*, published in 1939, Susan Stebbing wrote ‘There is an urgent need today for the citizens of a democracy to think well. It is not enough to have freedom of the press and parliamentary institutions’. Our difficulties, she suggested, ‘are due partly to our own stupidity, partly to the exploitation of the stupidity, and partly to our own prejudices and personal desires’. Perhaps it didn’t need saying in 1939 which difficulties she was referring to. Her book is an attempt to encourage her readers to improve their thinking by alerting them to some of the varieties of flawed thinking to which we are prone. For example, there is what Stebbing calls ‘twisted thinking’. My thinking is twisted ‘when I believe I am thinking effectively and have discovered sound reasons for my conclusion but am mistaken in this belief’. Stebbing’s technique is to illustrate this and other types of flawed thinking with examples taken from the political debates of her day, and this gives her book a practical focus to which she obviously attached great importance.

It isn’t hard to understand why, writing on the eve of a world war, Stebbing thought it was important to identify the intellectual vices that contributed to the disasters of the 1930s. It would be naïve to suppose that improved thinking would have been enough to avert the rise of fascism but the idea that ‘our difficulties’ at that time were partly due to our intellectual defects and partly to the exploitation of those defects is one that will resonate with many readers today. It certainly resonated with me when I sat down to write this book in 2016. It would be fatuous to compare the historical significance of 2016 with that of 1939, though one might also take the view that it’s too early to tell. Nevertheless, from my perspective and I suspect the perspective of many readers of this book, 2016 was a very bad year, a true *annus horribilis* which saw the rise of extremism in Europe and America, the political disintegration of parts of the Middle East, the Brexit vote in the UK, and the election of Donald J. Trump as the 45th President of the United States.

Readers who are unconcerned about these developments will probably see no reason why they should be of any great philosophical, as distinct from political, interest. If, like me, you view these developments with dismay there is a pressing and obvious question: how on earth could such things have happened? The answer to this question is no doubt complex but – and this is in the spirit of Stebbing – it’s hard not to think that stupidity and the exploitation of that stupidity have something to do with it. Stupidity in this context means foolishness, not lack of intelligence. It is one of the intellectual vices that Stebbing identifies. Others include prejudice and closed-mindedness. Prejudice is an attitude whereas closed-mindedness is most naturally understood as a character trait. Intellectual vices come in several different varieties and are not confined to flawed thinking. The relationship between thinking styles, attitudes and character traits will come up several times in this book.

Intellectual vices or, as I prefer to call them ‘epistemic’ vices are systematically harmful ways of thinking, attitudes or character traits. Epistemic vices are, first and foremost, *epistemically* harmful and the other harms they cause – including political harms – are a consequence of their epistemic harms. Epistemic vices get in the way of knowledge. They obstruct the gaining, keeping and sharing of knowledge and it’s because they do that that they can have disastrous consequences in the political realm. The eight chapters that follow give examples of some of these consequences. Each chapter begins with a detailed description of a significant event or development – often a politically significant event or development – in the unfolding of which epistemic vices of one type or another appears to have played a not insignificant role. Like Stebbing, I use real world events to build an understanding of the nature of epistemic vices. Vice epistemology is the philosophical study of the nature, identity, and epistemological significance of epistemic vices. In these terms, this book is an exercise in vice epistemology, but not a purely abstract philosophical exercise. Understanding epistemic vices helps us to understand our world and ourselves.

Indeed, it was an interest in self-knowledge, rather than an interest in politics, that got me going on the topic of epistemic vice. In my last book, *Self-Knowledge for Humans* (2014), I made the point that we don't always know why we believe the things we believe. I gave the example of Oliver, a believer in outlandish conspiracy theories, who thinks he believes his conspiracy theories because he has good reasons to believe them. In reality, his bizarre beliefs are more a reflection of his intellectual vices, his gullibility for example, than his reasons. I quoted Linda Zagzebski's list of intellectual vices: 'intellectual pride, negligence, idleness, cowardice, conformity, carelessness, rigidity, prejudice, wishful thinking, closed-mindedness, insensitivity to detail, obtuseness, and lack of thoroughness'. I knew the study of intellectual or epistemic *virtues* was a thriving philosophical cottage industry and I assumed that those who had written so much about virtues of the mind would have quite a bit to say about vices of the mind. Not so. In comparison to the vast literature on epistemic virtue the philosophical literature on epistemic vice is miniscule, though it does include some distinguished contributions by Jason Baehr, Heather Battaly and Miranda Fricker.

The relative unpopularity of epistemic vice as a topic in philosophy came as a surprise as it seemed obvious to me that without a proper understanding of our epistemic vices there is little hope of a realistic understanding of how most humans actually think, reason and inquire. For example, finding answers to questions is a fundamental human activity that goes more or less well depending on the extent to which how we go about doing this is influenced by our epistemic vices. In chapter 1 I give the example of the disastrous attempts by senior members of the Bush administration to figure out how many troops would be needed after the invasion of Iraq in 2003. Arrogance and overconfidence were two of the factors that caused Donald Rumsfeld and his colleagues to go so badly wrong in their thinking and planning. Arrogance and overconfidence are epistemic vices and the Iraq fiasco is an object lesson in how vices of the mind can obstruct our attempts to know things.

I call my view of epistemic vice ‘obstructivism’ to emphasise the fact that epistemic vices get in the way of knowledge. But not everything that gets in the way of knowledge is an epistemic vice. Epistemic vices are *intellectual* defects that get in the way of knowledge, and the point of calling them *vices* is to suggest that they are blameworthy or in some other sense reprehensible. In these terms, the intellectual arrogance that contributed to the Iraq fiasco was an epistemic vice but insomnia is not even if chronic lack of sleep makes us worse at gaining or retaining knowledge. Insomnia is neither an intellectual defect nor, at least in most cases, blameworthy. Even in the case of epistemic vices for which blame doesn’t seem appropriate, there must be room for criticism. Intellectual flaws for which a person can be neither blamed nor criticised are mere defects rather than *vices*.

One of the dangers of using political examples to illustrate philosophical points is that it doesn’t take long for these examples to become outdated. One of Stebbing’s early examples is a speech given by the then British Foreign Secretary Austen Chamberlain in 1925. Reading Stebbing’s account today, she might as well have been describing events on Mars. Politics is best avoided if one is writing for posterity but I’m not doing that any more than Stebbing was. Another concern about trying to explain political or historical events by reference to the epistemic vices of particular individuals is that such explanations are too personal and neglect more important structural factors. Structuralists think that people occupy places in complex networks of social relations and this, rather than personal factors, explains their conduct. Another view is that flawed thinking has more to do with ‘sub-personal’ cognitive biases – the sort of thing described by Daniel Kahneman in his book *Thinking, Fast and Slow* – than with so-called epistemic vices.

I certainly don’t want to downplay the explanatory significance of structural factors or cognitive biases. Nor is it my intention to suggest that the events described in this book can be adequately understood just by reference to epistemic vices. Satisfying explanations of our

intellectual conduct are usually multidimensional, and structural and sub-personal factors are often a part of the explanatory story. But so, in many cases, are epistemic vices. There is more about this at the end of chapter 1. As I argue there, when our thinking goes wrong or our inquiries fail to uncover obvious truths the explanation *is* sometimes personal. Having said that, I should also say that the examples I give are for illustrative purposes only, and that readers who disagree with my reading of them should still be able to see their philosophical point. I can well imagine some readers detecting in my discussion some of the very same vices that I attribute to others. I don't claim to be free of the epistemic vices described below.

The plan for this book is very simple. Chapter 1 sketches the fundamental tenets of obstructivism. Chapter 2 is a study of the vice of closed-mindedness. I take this to be a character vice – an epistemic vice that takes the form of a character trait – and the example I give is the closed-mindedness that led intelligence officers in Israel to dismiss evidence of an impending attack by Egypt and Syria in 1973. Chapter 3 is about thinking vices, as illustrated by some judicial thinking in the case of the Birmingham Six, who were wrongly convicted for terrorist outrages in the 1970s. Chapter 4 focuses on epistemic vices that are attitudes rather than character traits. One such attitude, which was on display in the run up to Brexit, is epistemic insouciance, which is a kind of indifference to truth. Chapter 5 gives an account of knowledge and how epistemic vices get in the way of knowledge. A key question here is whether epistemic vices like dogmatism can protect our knowledge when it is under attack. I found it helpful to think about Holocaust denial in this connection. Chapter 6 asks whether our epistemic vices are blameworthy or otherwise reprehensible. Chapter 7 is about stealthy vices, epistemic vices that are inherently hard to detect. This stealthiness is what accounts for the difficulty that most of us have in knowing our epistemic vices. Finally, in chapter 8, I conclude with a moderately optimistic account of the prospects of self-improvement in respect of our epistemic vices.

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