**Should we really be “charging others with epistemic vice”?**

*New Directions in Virtue and Vice Epistemology, 12/9/23*

1. **Preliminaries.**

In ‘Charging Others with Epistemic Vice’ (Kidd 2016), I defended the critical practice of *vice-charging* and elaborated this with subsequent case studies. My downbeat conclusion was that vice-charging is ‘possible in principle, but very difficult in practice’ (Kidd 2016: 183).

However much has subsequently happened in vice epistemology, including significant revisions to my own understanding of epistemic vices. I am now *more* downbeat.

1. **The original account.**

I noted that in everyday discourse do charge others with epistemic vices – ‘He’s so dogmatic’, ‘She’s so closed-minded!’, ‘They’re don’t give a damn about the truth!’ I also suggested there are good reasons to want to retain, endorse, and refine this practice.

*Epistemic vice-charging*: the practice of attributing epistemic vices to a defined individual or collective agent.

Distinctions:

* **rhetorical** and **robust** vice-charges
* **explicit** and **implicit** vice-charges

The practice has **evaluative** and **explanatory** components: ‘one agent charges another with possessing some stable disposition to negative epistemic conduct … then explains the conduct by imputing to them an epistemic vice’ (Kidd 2016: 181-182): a **vice-explanation** (Cassam).

The target of a vice-charge can be an **individual agent** or a **collective agent**.

Structure of the practice: a robust epistemic vice-charge requires robust accounts of (a)

the vice/s and (b) the behaviour/s of the target and (c) the relation between the two. An EVC needs robust accounts of all three to be really effective—a high bar!

I would now want to add further points:

1. distinguish **vice-attributions** and **vice-charges**.
2. say more about rhetorical – or **communicative** – kinds of vice-charge.
3. epistemic vice-charges can be connected to idea of **professional epistemic vices**.
4. epistemic vice-charging needs more practical detail – selecting targets, evidencing charges and so on.

I then described two main problems for the practice of epistemic vice-charging:

The ***Problem of Responsibility*** and the ***Problem of Consensus*.**

In what follows I want to restate these problems in new and much stronger forms and then add some further concerns.

1. **The problem of responsibility.**
2. **The problem of responsibility** starts with the claims that (i) epistemic character traits are to some significant degree mutable not fixed and (ii) epistemic character develops under the influence of diverse and dynamic conditions. Few people enjoy anything like optimal conditions for the development of a virtuous epistemic character.

Therefore: the practice of epistemic vice-charging should be tempered by sensitivity to the **aetiology of epistemic vice**—after all, many epistemic vices are plausibly effects of subjection to **epistemically corrupting conditions**:

[T]he practice of vice-charging ought to be conducted in a way that evinces an aetiological sensitivity to the contextual and social realities of the target. We can acknowledge that many vicious agents are products of socialisation within social contexts that afford suboptimal conditions for the cultivation of virtuous characters. But this should not come at the cost of issuing exculpatory ‘get-out-of-jail-free’ cards for the epistemically vicious, not least given the encouraging fact of agents who were socialised in corrupting contexts but still emerged as responsible and virtuous. (Kidd 2016: 191)

Updates:

1. I invoked Lorraine Code’s idea of **ecological sensitivity** without properly emphasizing that many epistemic environments are deeply **polluted** and **toxic** (Battaly 2021, Tirell).
2. epistemic vice-charging must be understood against a perception of the world as thoroughly **epistemically corrupting** (a concept developed in Kidd 2019, 2020).
3. distinguish **acquisition-responsibility** and **retention-responsibility**.

Subsequent worry:

* **Targeting worry**: directing epistemic vice-charges at individual and collective agents means aiming at the wrong target – criticising those who have been corrupted rather than the corruptors (a sort of **individualist bias**?)

General response: appeals to epistemic corruption are not a Get Out Of Jail Free Card!

1. we can criticise corrupting conditions *and* corrupted agents – there is no Either/Or.
2. individual agents are often complicit in **epistemic** **self-corruption**.
3. individual agents are responsible for **self-vigilance**.
4. individual agents are responsible for taking seriously the warnings of others.

Some closing thoughts on the problem of responsibility:

1. It’s a mistake to think that aetiological sensitivity will automatically deliver exculpating stories which depict individual epistemic vices as products of irresistibly epistemically corrupting conditions (cf. Battaly 2019).
2. A further pessimistic-misanthropic conviction: the human world as it has come to be is deeply epistemically corrupting – and opportunities for epistemic edification and self-repair are rare, weak and constantly under jeopardy (Kidd 2021 on **misanthropy**).

Onto the problem of consensus!

1. **The problem of consensus.**
2. **The problem of consensus** starts with the claims that the efficacy of a vice-charge will depend on consensus among critic and target on (i) the **definition** of the relevant vice and (ii) the **exemplification** of that vice by the target.

Also note **deep epistemic vices –** preclude **deep consensus**.

I worried that ‘vice-charges are most needed when they are least likely to find the consensus upon which their efficacy depends’ (Kidd 2016: 193).

Updates:

1. I did not properly emphasise the abuses of epistemic vice-charges within systems of oppression – rectified in Kidd (2018: 45-48 – cf. Dillon).
2. phenomena described in subsequent work in political epistemology suggests that the prospects for achieving and sustaining such consensus increasingly remote (Lynch).
3. certain epistemic vices belong to wider cultures, ones intrinsically hostile to the ideal of consensus needed for the practice of EVC – **cultures of insouciance** (Williams).

If an epistemic agent is **self-insouciant**, then they won’t **care** about vice-charges (Cassam).

1. **bad** **faith denials** of consensus – failing to publicly accept consensus even where one privately accepts it.

New problem: the very idea of consensus on the definition and exemplification of epistemic vices is challenged if we adopt **normative contextualism**: the contextual-particularism of NC is in tension with the generality required for consensus (Monypenny).

Upshot: the definitional and exemplification consensus required for effective epistemic vice-charging will **rarely** **obtain** – and, even if it does, it risks being very **local** and very **fragile** – and vulnerable to **insouciant indifference** and **bad faith** **denialism** ☹

Onto some further worries about the practice of epistemic vice-charging.

1. **Some further worries about the practice of epistemic vice-charigng.**

Some further worries: **backfiring**, **detectability**, and **abuse**.

1. **The problem of backfiring**: epistemic vice-charges can worsen the conditions they aim to ameliorate:
2. vice-charges can be **factive** (cf. Alfano, Tanesini)
3. vice-charges may erode the interpersonal conditions integral to the project of effective epistemic self-improvement (**short term gains** vs. **long-term costs**).
4. **The problem of detectability**: one can only charge an agent with epistemic vices if one knows they in fact possess a vice—however:
5. the idea of **inner vices** without external behavioural signs (Bommarito).
6. some vicious agents are skilled at concealing their vices or disguising their vices as virtues – **skilful viciousness** (cf. Taylor Matthews’ work).
7. some epistemic vices are **self-cloaking**: they conceal their presence from other epistemic agents (compare Cassam on **stealthy vices**). Examples might include **deceptiveness** and **manipulativeness** – no **public-performative** behaviours.
8. **The problem of abuse**: the practice of epistemic vice-charging is highly abusable**:**
9. **self-serving definitions** of epistemic vices and epistemically vicious conduct
10. many deployments of vice-charging are highly **partisan**, not impartial.
11. many vice-charging practices are **implicitly** **conditional** (cf. Kidd on cynicism).
12. **Conclusions**.

I am now far more pessimistic than I was in 2016 about the prospects for effective epistemic vice-charging. At best it works in small communities with well-defined epistemic standards in cases where there are effective systems for articulating and evaluating vice-charges. At worst it exacerbates existing interpersonal and socio-epistemic problems.

Perhaps a better response – at least concerning epistemic vice-charging in political life – is a sort of **quietism** (Hannon and Kidd).

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