**Epistemic myopia**

*Epistemic virtues and vices in a non-ideal world, Nottingham, 2/6/23*

1. **Epistemic myopia**.

**Myopia**: an artificially limited or confined outlook and understanding of a certain topic which is epistemically and practically problematic – cf. everyday senses, ‘blinkered’, ‘narrowminded’

Dimensions:

* **narrowness** lack of kinds of *breadth*
* **shallowness** lack of kinds of *depth*

Myopia limits the range and kinds of epistemic possibilities a person can experience and their ways of responding to those possibilities.

Example: philosophers locked into aggressively adversarial epistemic stances (Kidd on the martial virtues and vices). An aggressive adversarialist is doubly myopic:

* can only experience interpersonal ep possibilities in terms of narrow categories (*win* or *dominate* etc.) – occluding a wider range of alternative interactional possibilities
* a shallow conception of the value/meaning of philosophical activity (chess analogy)

Proposal: epistemic myopia is an overall epistemic outlook: it is a *stance* consisting of different attitudes, assumptions, character traits, behaviours various beliefs (cf. van Fraassen). We should think about epistemic vices as components of stances, not free-floating things.

Example: **Steven Pinker’s stance of technocratic optimistic progressivism**: his account of human political and moral history reflects and is sustained by an epistemic stance:

Pinker’s stance is multiply myopic – cf. Aronson:

* shallow explanations of moral progress (eg ‘Rights Revolution’)
* shallow conception of ‘humanism’
* narrow conception of the Enlightenment
* narrow definition of moral progress (liberty equality / interpersonal violence)
* empirically narrow (eg treatment of animals)

Diagnosing the myopia: technocratic-scientism, ideological conception of the state as sole engine of positive social change, rigid belief in ‘progress’, anti-humanities.

Note various supporting epistemic vices – *closedmindedness* (Battaly) and *selective epistemic insouciance* (Cassam) and *hubris* (Kidd). But distinguish different *roles* these vices are playing – cf. Baehr’s *enquiry-relevant challenges*:

* *initial motivation* is *hubristic*
* *ways of enduring* with the claims are *closedminded*
* *evaluation* of epistemic resources (eg history) is *insouciant*

Analyses of epistemic vices should attend to their overall effects on our epistemic outlook and many vices of the mind will create and sustain kinds of epistemic myopia.

1. **Explaining myopia.**

Two bad assumptions: (a) ‘most people do not want to be myopic!’ and (b) ‘only the bad guys are myopic!’ – the former **naïve** and the latter **self-serving**.

Correctives: take seriously the functions and attractions of epistemic myopia – the ways that it can serve our interpersonal and practical interests. Commitment to virtue is often *conditional*.

1. **The naïve assumption.**

Being myopic has many *functions* and *attractions* – distinguish two aspects:

1. **Individual:**

* a simplistic understanding of the world encourages a sense of epistemic confidence
* narrow and/or shallow outlooks can reduce the *quality* and *kinds* of epistemic work one feels compelled to undertake
* a broader, deeper understanding enriches the epistemic texture of one’s world - adds nuance, detail, complexity – all of which increase the *exercise costs* of virtues
* overcoming myopia requires sustained exercises of various virtues (incl. procedural epistemic virtues – a set of neglected, dull virtues)

1. **Interpersonal**:

* groups often defined by myopic outlooks: membership entails that one accepts, and does not challenge, their group-defining myopia – ‘entry costs’
* groups are often sustained by kinds of myopia and the behaviours it licensees:
  + moral Manicheanism
  + collective self-aggrandisement
  + stereotyping and patterns of prejudice integral to group identity
* calling out others’ myopia:
  + is rarely rewarded and is typically punished
  + requires courage and other virtues
  + opens one up to vice-charges
* collective activities often require participating in practices and pursing ambitions based on an understanding of things one recognises to be narrow and shallow – this generates feelings of frustration, guilt, inauthenticity, etc.

So being and becoming myopic – even in ‘bad faith’ ways – is often functional and attractive (cf. comfort, convenience, laziness, social-belonging etc.)

Moreover, kinds of myopia can become entrenched and institutionalised – sustained by the wider collective patterns of shallowness and narrowness integral to a *Weltbild*.

We should also note other attractions of viciousness – eg pleasure (the **hedonic taboo**).

1. **The self-serving assumption.**

**Self-serving** **assumption**: ‘only 'bad people – our moral/political/epistemic Others – are and can be myopic. ‘All virtue and rationality is on *our* side, all vice and irrationality on *their* side.’

General human tendency: we readily perceive and attribute vices to Others/out-groups/etc. but are far more reluctant to do the same to our own kind – ‘tribalism’

Proposal: epistemic myopia can be a feature of many (any?) moral and political outlooks, even those we regard as positive/correct etc. (cf. political epistemology – eg Joshi).

Example: **environmental pessimism and quietism**: a loose community of environmental writers and activists who charge contemporary ‘neo-environmentalism’ with motivated myopia

Neo-environmentalism: a stance of optimism, ‘…if we just act now!’, fixated on large-scale technological solutions, denialistic about inevitability of severe climate change, and in hock to Big Business. It is ‘an entirely human-centred piece of politicking’ (Kingsnorth).

Pessimistic/quietists accuse neo-environmentalism of myopia:

* **narrow**:
  + focus on ‘carbon and climate’, occluding alternative environmental issues
  + focus on radical strategies that are:
    - absurd/fantasy (eg mass abandonment of ‘petro-consumerism’)
    - (ironically) environmentally destructive
  + focus on optimistic scenarios, ‘hope’, thereby excluding:
    - more pessimistic scenarios – cf. Read, *This Civilization is Finished*
    - alternative quietist possibilities
* **shallow**
  + diagnosis of environmental crisis – as ‘engineering problems’ – triumph of ‘shallow ecology’ (Naess) – ‘a terrible hollowness to it all’ (Kingsnorth)
  + no seriously questioning ‘the framework of our current cultural assumptions (Kingsnorth) – entrenchment of ‘ecosystems services’ model (James).
  + no deeper feelings, love, attachments – a movement of ‘environmentalists with no attachment to any actual environment’ (Kingsnorth)

Diagnosing the myopia: technocratic-scientism, fixation on ‘big’ and interventionist kinds of action, a sort of ‘regulatory capture’ of environmentalism by Big Business, and dispositions to deny realities if the responses mean giving up comforts and conveniences.

Note various supporting epistemic vices –

* **dogmatism** - alternative pessimistic scenarios are dismissed or derogated
* **closedmindedness** - refusals to engage with salient ep possibilities, or even to acknowledge certain possibilities *as* salient – TINA principle
* **hubris/fantasy** - ‘tissue of self-aggrandising and consoling wishes and dreams which prevents one from seeing what is there outside one’ (Murdoch) – overt in Franzen’s *What If We Stopped Pretending*?

Such vices are only fully intelligible if perceived as integrated parts of a myopic stance, one rooted in a complex historical-cultural-political structure (cf. Kidd on ‘deep epistemic vices’).

1. **Summary.**

*Epistemic myopia* can be a useful concept for thinking about the functions and attractions of epistemic vices in our non-ideal world. Doubtless most of us are myopic in some way and to some degree. However only certain kinds of myopia are problematic – epistemically, morally, practically (eg Cassam on counterterrorism).

We should reserve special worry for cases where kinds of myopia are (or are becoming) *entrenched* and *ubiquitous* – eg neo-environmentalism as a sort of *collective myopia* insofar as it dominates our collective moral thinking about the environment and occludes alternatives.

Appreciating that much (most?) myopia is *motivated* *myopia* makes the task of resisting and overcoming it all the more difficult. Myopia has more rewards and attractions than virtue.

IJK

**References**

Aronson, Ronald (2013) ‘Pinker and Progress’, *History and Theory* 52: 246-264.

Baehr, Jason (2011) *The Inquiring Mind: An Essay on Intellectual Virtues and Virtue Epistemology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).

Battaly, Heather (2018) ‘Closed-mindedness and Dogmatism’, *Episteme* 15.3: 261–282.

Cassam, Quassim (2019) *Vices of the Mind: From the Individual to the Political* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).

Cassam, Quassim (2018) ‘The Epistemology of Terrorism and Radicalisation’, *Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplement* 84: 187-209.

Franzen, Jonathan (2021) *What If We Stopped Pretending*? (New York: Fourth Estate).

James, Simon P. (2022) *How Nature Matters: Culture, Identity, and Environmental Value* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).

Joshi, Hrishikesh (2020) ‘What Are the Chances You’re Right About Everything? An Epistemic Challenge for Modern Partisanship’, *Politics, Philosophy & Economics* 19(1): 36-61.

Kidd, Ian James (2018) ‘Deep Epistemic Vices’, *Journal of Philosophical Research* 43: 43-67.

Kidd, Ian James (2021) ‘Martial Metaphors and Argumentative Virtues and Vices’, in Michael Lynch and Alessandra Tanesini (eds.) *Polarization, Arrogance, and Dogmatism in Debate: Philosophical Perspectives* (London: Routledge), 25-38.

Kingsnorth, Paul (2017) *Confessions of a Recovering Environmentalist* (London: Faber & Faber).

Murdoch, Iris (1997) *Existentialists and Mystics: Writings on Philosophy and Literature*, edited by Peter Conradi (London: Penguin).

Naess, Arne (1973) ‘The Shallow and the Deep, Long-range Ecological Movement’, *Inquiry* 16: 95–100.

Pinker, Steven (2011) *The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined* (New York: Viking).

Pinker, Steven (2018) *Enlightenment Now: The Case for Reason, Science, Humanism, and Progress* (New York: Viking).

Read, Rupert and Alexander Samuel (2019) *This Civilisation Is Finished: Conversations on the End of Empire – and What Lies Beyond* (London: The Simplicity Institute).

van Fraassen, Bas C. (2002). *The Empirical Stance* (New Haven: Yale University Press).