

Quassim Cassam

Vices of the Mind

Oxford University Press 2019

By

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It is now a familiar idea that democracies are threatened by “post-truth” politics. One source of this anxiety is our apparently increased susceptibility to falsehood: anti-vaccination myths, conspiracy theories, political lies. We need to protect our democracies from liars and peddlers of disinformation, particularly in the light of the extraordinary power that technology allows these people to wield. One crucial question is one we can ask ourselves: how can I find good answers to important questions, and not fall for falsehoods? How can I do better as an inquirer? This is one of the central practical questions of epistemology, the philosophical study of knowledge. So-called “virtue” epistemologists approach this question by thinking about intellectual virtues: those qualities which make someone a good inquirer, like open-mindedness and humility.

In *Vices of the Mind*, Quassim Cassam turns from intellectual virtues to their sinister cousins – intellectual vices, like arrogance, closed-mindedness, and gullibility, which systematically obstruct knowledge. Cassam diagnoses various disastrous events – including the great political shocks of 2016 – as partly due to people’s intellectual vices, and argues that we should pay much more attention to them. He offers a philosophical theory and taxonomy of intellectual vices, and explores how we can be blamed and criticised for our vices, recognise them, and ultimately overcome them. In doing so he draws on a wide range of material in philosophy, psychology, and sociology.

Cassam’s central claim is that intellectual vices – he calls them *epistemic* vices – are defined in terms of their bad effects on knowledge, rather than in terms of the motives of people who have

them. Most of the vices considered by Cassam obstruct knowledge by making us less sensitive to the evidence for and against our views: they make us ignore, misuse, or overlook evidence, or even fail to look for it in the first place. Views that aren't properly based on evidence are likely to be false, and Cassam gives us many cautionary real-life examples of politicians, military leaders, judges, and journalists led to false beliefs and disaster by their vices. Cassam himself does not escape unscathed: he diagnoses his prediction of a Remain victory in 2016 as the result of wishful thinking, and discusses his active attempts to avoid such errors since.

Not all of our vices are fully under our control — we cannot switch them off at will. However, Cassam is optimistic about the possibility of self-improvement. This can only begin when we know about our own vices. Sometimes this is relatively straightforward. But some vices, which Cassam calls *stealthy* vices, actively prevent their owners from detecting them. In a fascinating discussion Cassam argues that the best hope for recognising our stealthy vices is through what he calls *transformational insight*, a kind of shock to the system brought on by a traumatic event — for instance a doctor losing a patient due to an overconfident or arrogant misdiagnosis — which offers us direct and radical insight into our intellectual failings.

Once we learn about our vices, Cassam thinks there are prospects for overcoming them, a process he calls *vice reduction*. This might involve dissecting one's previous intellectual failures, reading more widely — if you think you're so smart, Cassam says, try reading Kant or Darwin — or confronting one's prejudices about whose views to take seriously. Self-improvement is not easy, but it is possible, and where it is possible we must pursue it.

The most interesting vices Cassam discusses are what he calls epistemic malevolence and epistemic insouciance. Epistemic malevolence is the attempt to undermine and destroy others' knowledge, usually to further some goal. Cassam's example is the tobacco industry's attempts to cause confusion about the dangers of smoking. Epistemic insouciance is contempt for evidence, a tendency to form and promote views without caring to look for support — Cassam cites Michael Gove's casual dismissal of expert opinion on the economic effects of Brexit. Malevolence and

insouciance are difficult to distinguish in practice, partly because they lead to similar effects, namely the spread of views that are utterly disconnected from reality. This is bad for human knowledge, and the projects which depend on it; no doubt Cassam would point to Britain's recent political situation as a perfect example.

It's here that Cassam's optimism about vice reduction becomes less convincing. Epistemic malevolence is distinctive in that it primarily harms the knowledge of *others* rather than the epistemically malevolent themselves. Here what's important is not to reduce epistemic malevolence, but to protect ourselves from it. But a key driver of post-truth anxiety is that it has become extremely difficult to do this. The present age is one of distrust, polarisation, disinformation campaigns, and what James Williams calls the *attention economy*, the monetising of people's attention at the expense of everything else. The fear is that these things will simply bypass our better natures, and will both feed and feed off our intellectual vices, by making us unaware of these vices, or indifferent to them, or too lazy to fix them, or simply unable to find out the truth. Cassam is pessimistic about the ability of institutions to help us overcome our vices. But vice reduction will either be unsuccessful or rarely even *begin* unless we can ensure an environment which promotes intellectual virtue. We can only be as virtuous as our environment allows. In an environment which encourages and thrives on intellectual vice, without institutional intervention the prospects for self-improvement are dim.