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# Vice, Skill, and the Non-Ideal

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## ABSTRACT

A central aim of non-epistemology is to eschew idealisations that tend to distort our epistemological theorising. In this paper, I use the resources of non-ideal epistemology to shed light on a perceived asymmetry between the structure of epistemic virtues and vices. On the one hand, epistemic virtues are widely held to exhibit a skill-component as part of their formal structure. On the other hand, epistemic vices are taken to lack this component. I cast doubt on this asymmetry by demonstrating that it is sustained by two idealisations virtue epistemologists have tended to employ in their theorising of epistemic vice and the environments in which agents develop epistemic virtues. In doing so, I argue that this asymmetry has problematically obscured from view what I call ‘vice-indexed skills’ – distinctive skills associated with epistemic vices. The existence of these skills not only reveals an important structural symmetry between the epistemic virtues and vices, but it is something that comes to light by applying the tools of non-ideal epistemology to vice epistemology.

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‘In the humanities, it is distinctive uniquely of philosophy that it is centrally concerned with rational idealisations of human beings and their activities’.

Miranda Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice*, (2007: vii)

## Introductory Remarks

In the epigraph above, Miranda Fricker is expanding on an earlier observation by Judith Shklar (1990), who pointed out that moral philosophy has had a great deal to say about justice, but relatively little about injustice. Echoing Shklar, Fricker claims that this imbalance has incurred two costs to our theorising. First, that it has led to a mistaken impression that justice is the norm, whereas injustice is an aberration. Second, that it has helped entrench a further impression that our understanding of injustice is derivative of our antecedent understanding of justice. If we want to understand injustice, that

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is, we need only look at what justice involves. In Fricker's view, justice is but one 'rational ideal' with which moral philosophers have been centrally concerned (Fricker 2007, vii).

It is not just moral philosophy that has traded in rational ideals. As is well known, Fricker's concerns were also importantly aimed at epistemology. Indeed, her seminal *Epistemic Injustice* was an early form of what Robin McKenna terms 'non-ideal virtue epistemology' (McKenna 2023, 135).<sup>1</sup> Non-ideal virtue epistemology is a species of what McKenna refers to more broadly as *non-ideal epistemology*, which he takes to be a methodological approach to our epistemological theorising that tends to eschew, rather than endorse, rational idealisations about knowers and their activities. More specifically, non-ideal epistemologists reject idealisations that tend to obscure epistemologically interesting phenomena, and thus risk 'distorting' our analyses (McKenna 2023, 3, 20).<sup>2</sup> By starting their theorising with a 'rational ideal' like justice, Fricker argues that philosophers have obscured from view two important and distinctly epistemic kinds of injustice.

In this paper, I use the tools of non-ideal epistemology for purposes similar to Fricker's. While she is concerned with the more general neglect of injustice within philosophy, I take specific issue with the treatment of epistemic vice by virtue epistemologists.<sup>3</sup> Just as Fricker sheds light on two obscure forms of epistemic injustice, so I draw attention to an overlooked aspect of epistemic vice. I argue that this aspect has been obscured because of a misleading impression that virtue epistemologists have left us about the structure of epistemic virtue and vice: that the former exhibits a skill-component as part of its formal structure, whereas the latter lacks any such component (Baehr 2016, 2020; Watson 2018a, 2018b, 2020; Zagzebski 1996). I contend that this structural asymmetry is the product of two particular idealisations that virtue epistemologists have tended to employ when theorising the nature of vice and the epistemic environments that agents inhabit. Not only does this structural asymmetry vanish once we eschew these idealisations, I argue, but their departure reveals the existence of what I shall call *vice-indexed skills*.

The paper is set out as follows. In Section "The Asymmetry Between Virtue And Vice", I unpack the perceived structural asymmetry that currently exists between the epistemic virtues and vices. In Section "Inversion, Edification And Corruption", I discuss the two idealisations that I take to be partially responsible for sustaining this structural asymmetry: what Charlie Crerar has termed the *inversion thesis* (2018) and what Ian James Kidd refers to as the ideal of *epistemic edification* (Kidd 2018, 2019). I show that these idealisations trade on various assumptions about the nature of vice and its relation to virtue, as well as the quality of our epistemic environments. Once we refrain from these idealisations, two things come to light. First, we see that our understanding of the structure of epistemic vice is not

straightforwardly derivative of that of epistemic virtue's. Second, that our *actual* epistemic environments tend to render us susceptible to *epistemic corruption* (Kidd 2019, 2020). Together, I argue that these considerations lend support for thinking that epistemic vices also exhibit a skill-component of their own. I demonstrate this possibility in Section "Vice-Indexed Skills" by discussing what I referred to above as *vice-indexed skills*. The existence of these skills not only reveals a structural *symmetry* between epistemic virtues and vices, but it raises new and interesting questions about the relationship between vices and skills.

## The Asymmetry Between Virtue and Vice

Let me begin by establishing what one might perceive as a structural asymmetry between epistemic virtues and vices. A good place to start is with Linda Zagzebski (1996). In her *Virtues of the Mind*, Zagzebski claims that all epistemic virtues are underpinned by the same ultimate motivation: a motivation for knowledge, or what she terms 'cognitive contact with reality' (1996, 136–137). However, Zagzebski is clear that this motivation is insufficient for epistemic virtue. In addition to being correctly motivated by knowledge, she contends that agents must also be reliably successful at carrying out this motivation in practice. What does this amount to? To be reliably successful, Zagzebski claims that virtuously motivated agents will have recourse to develop certain skills. As she puts it:

Effectiveness in action requires skills, and to the extent that a virtuous person is motivated to produce external consequences desirable from the point of view of the virtue, he would also be *motivated to acquire the skills* that are associated with such effectiveness in action. (1996: 115, my italics)

To reliably succeed in the sense relevant to the epistemic virtues, then, an agent will also be motivated to develop and exercise distinctly *intellectual skills*. For Zagzebski, these include things like 'perceptual acuity skills', 'skills of speaking and writing', and 'logical skills', amongst other things (1996: 114). On her view, these skills are 'needed for effectiveness in the pursuit of knowledge' and are 'sets of truth-conducive procedures' (1996, 116, 177). As Zagzebski sees it, an agent with perceptual acuity skills will reliably succeed at manifesting the virtue of intellectual attentiveness. Equally, the virtue of intellectual care helps improve the reliability of one's logical skills, such that the agent is disposed to reason carefully. In both cases, the virtues and skills work together to help agents effectively acquire knowledge or true beliefs. As Zagzebski puts it, 'intellectually virtuous motivations lead to particular skills suited to the acquisition of knowledge', which in turn 'serve virtues' by enabling virtuously motivated agents to reliably succeed in their epistemic affairs (116, 237).

The motivation for knowledge clearly forges the connection between epistemic virtues, on the one hand, and intellectual skills, on the other. It is this motivation, Zagzebski contends, that ‘leads people to follow rules and belief-forming procedures that are truth-conducive’ (167). In light of this, she takes epistemic *vices* to involve a ‘lack of motivation for knowledge’ (207). Accordingly, she claims that those who possess epistemic vices tend to adopt ‘unreliable belief-forming procedures’ (207). Now, while ‘belief-forming procedures’ might not immediately sound like intellectual skills, it is worth noting that Zagzebski frequently describes the latter in terms of the former. For example, she writes that intellectual skills are ‘sets of truth-conducive *procedures*’ and ‘*techniques* needed for effectively pursuing knowledge’ (177–178). Of course, if epistemic vices are characterised by a deficit of epistemic motivations, as Zagzebski thinks, and these motivations lead to the sort of skills that make for reliable success, then it would follow that epistemic vices lead to epistemic unreliability due to a corresponding deficit of these skills. Indeed, she says that epistemic vices leave us with ‘anti-skills’ that reliably frustrate our epistemic conduct (112, fn. 21).<sup>4</sup>

We find a more specific articulation of this claim in Lani Watson’s work on the epistemic practice of questioning (Watson 2015, 2018a, 2018b, 2020). According to Watson, the skill of *good questioning* is a necessary (though, not sufficient) condition of virtuous inquisitiveness, and at least constitutive of virtuous intellectual autonomy, attentiveness, curiosity, and courage (Watson 2015, 2018a, 2018b).<sup>5</sup> Watson stipulates that there are two components to this skill. First, one’s question must be asked *competently*, that is, elicit information because the questioner correctly judges ‘who, when, where, and how’ to ask their question (2018a, 355). Asking a toddler where I left my car keys would count as an incompetently asked question because I fail to correctly judge whom to ask about such a matter. Second, good questioning elicits information that is *worthwhile*, which involves judging ‘what information to elicit’ (2018a, 354–355).<sup>6</sup> If I am interested in finding out the murder suspect in an investigation, then asking what the lead detective ate for lunch would fail to elicit worthwhile information because it reflects a failure to judge that this question would not elicit the information I am after (Watson 2015, 2018a, 2018b, 358). Together, these components make for good questioning, which Watson takes to be an intellectual skill that manifests in (and sometimes partially constitutes) epistemically virtuous conduct.

On the basis of this, Watson claims that the correlative failing of good questioning – *bad questioning* – is ‘found in the exercise of many of the intellectual vices’, that it will be a feature of ‘many, if not all, the intellectual vices’, and is a ‘feature of intellectually vicious behaviour’ (Watson 2020, 243, 256). Whereas the skill of good questioning involves competently eliciting worthwhile information, she describes bad questioning as a failing that ‘prevents or impedes the elicitation of worthwhile information’ because the

questioner either ‘asks the wrong thing, or in the wrong way, or at the wrong time, or place, or the wrong source’ (Crerar 2020, 243). Though Watson is clear that bad questioning is neither necessary nor sufficient to possess an epistemic vice, she is clear that it will often function as a ‘mechanism’ or ‘expression’ of vicious conduct (2020, 256). Thus, epistemic virtues are characterised by the skill of good questioning, but epistemic vices are characterised by an incompetence in the practice of questioning.

More generally, Jason Baehr (2016, 2020) has articulated a ‘four-dimensional’ account of the structure of intellectual virtues. Amongst these dimensions is what he terms a *competence dimension* (2016, 92). On Baehr’s view, this dimension trades on the cognitive or intellectual skills or ‘competences’ characteristic of particular intellectual virtues. For instance, he considers taking up alternative cognitive standpoints to one’s own to be the competence associated with open-mindedness, noticing and attending to important details as a skill proper to intellectual attentiveness, and asking thoughtful and insightful questions to be the characteristic competence of intellectual curiosity (2016). Accordingly, Baehr claims that ‘an open-minded person is competent or skilled at one type of virtue-relevant activity’, an attentive person is ‘skilled at a different type of activity, and the curious person at yet a different type’ (2016, 93). In this way, the exercise of an epistemic virtue is taken to involve a particular ‘virtue-related’ competence or skill.

Just as Baehr takes epistemic virtues to involve a variety of characteristic competences or skills, so he claims that ‘defective competence’ or ‘a mere lack of virtue-relevant skill can be sufficient for the possession of a vice’ (2020, 27–28). For this to be the case, he stipulates that agents must lack the competence or skill despite being properly motivated and having good judgement as to when to manifest the competence. However, he finds such a scenario to be a ‘psychological implausibility’ (Baehr 2020, 27). If an agent is motivated by epistemic goods and has good judgement, he remarks, why would they not possess the skill or competence associated with that virtue? This suggests a *prima facie* reason for thinking that ‘defective competence’ is not characteristic of intellectual vice. On closer inspection, though, the defect in competence is ultimately attributed to a motivational defect on the part of the agent, which then leads to defective competence. This is clear from Baehr’s contention that a ‘motivational deficiency underlies the sorts of *failure* in judgement and *competence* which in turn contribute to the possession of an intellectual vice’ (2020, 31, my emphasis). In his view, the deficit of virtue-relevant competence is a result of epistemic vices being characterised by a more general ‘lack of motivation for knowledge’ (Baehr 2010, 2020). Again, then, a ‘competence dimension’ is present in the structure of epistemic virtues but absent from the structure of epistemic vices.<sup>7</sup>

## Inversion, Edification and Corruption

We have just seen how virtue epistemologists take a range of skills to flank epistemic virtues. Equally important, though, are a set of concomitant observations. The first is that virtue epistemologists clearly take epistemic vices to involve either a deficit of the skills characteristic of epistemic virtues, or some form of epistemic incompetence. This helps to create the impression that there is an asymmetry between the structure of epistemic virtues and vices. The second is that, even if we grant the above, it does not follow that epistemic vices cannot exhibit characteristic skills of their *own*. Unfortunately, the paucity of discussion in the vice-epistemological literature regarding this possibility only adds to the impression that there is a structural asymmetry between the epistemic virtues and vices.

What accounts for this lack of interest in the idea that epistemic vices might exhibit their own skills and, by extension, the maintenance of this structural asymmetry? In this section, I discuss two idealisations that I take to be partially responsible for this state of affairs. Before introducing these idealisations, it will help to briefly reconsider how McKenna draws the distinction between ideal and non-ideal epistemology. At a general level, he claims that an ideal epistemology is one that tends to trade on certain idealisations, whereas a non-ideal epistemology is one that tends to eschew such idealisations. To make this distinction more informative, McKenna builds on several idealisations that Charles Mills (2005, 2007) identifies in his critique of ideal theory in moral and political philosophy. When extended to epistemology, these include:

- (1) Idealisations about the nature and psychology of epistemic agents. (e.g. about their cognitive capacities, epistemic virtues and vices, etc.)
- (2) Idealisations about the interactions between inquirers. (e.g. about the extent to which they are influenced by social power differentials)
- (3) Idealisations about social institutions. (e.g. about their capacity to produce and disseminate knowledge) (2023, 5–6, 31)
- (4) Idealisations about the environments in which inquirers are embedded. (e.g. about the prevalence of information over misinformation)

The first idealisation that I wish to discuss falls largely within the remit of 1 above, since it involves idealising the nature of epistemic vice and vicious agents. More specifically, this idealisation turns on an ontological and methodological assumption that Charlie Crerar (2018) has called the *inversion thesis*. According to the inversion thesis, virtue and vice are mirror images of each other, such that they are characterised by the same, if opposing, features (2018, 764). As Crerar is quick to explain, there is a trivial sense in which

virtue and vice are opposites, but the inversion thesis posits something stronger than this. In particular, it holds that ‘for any given feature of virtue, vice can be assumed to involve either the evaluative opposite of that feature, or else its absence’ (2018, 764). So, if we assume that something like the inversion thesis is true, then, as mirror images of each other, a ‘theory of vice would neatly fall out of a theory of virtue’ (2018, 764). In short, there would be no need for independent analyses of vice. For Crerar, this kind of reasoning not only explains why virtue epistemologists have tended to malign the epistemic vices, but he also thinks that it accounts for the more general paucity of discussions of vice in virtue theory.<sup>8</sup>

Although Crerar’s claims about epistemic vice are no longer true, I do think that his general criticism of the inversion thesis is valid. At least for my purposes here, I believe the inversion thesis goes some way to explaining why virtue epistemologists have taken there to be a structural asymmetry between the epistemic virtues and vices, as well as why they have not seriously discussed the possibility that epistemic vices might exhibit their own characteristic skills. For if we employ the assumption central to the inversion thesis in our theorising of epistemic vice, then we arrive at the following line of reasoning:

- P1.** The structure of epistemic virtue is characterised by the presence of a skill-component.
- P2.** Epistemic vices are the mirror image of epistemic virtues (inversion thesis).
- P3.** If the structure of epistemic virtue is characterised by the presence of a skill-component, then the structure of epistemic vice is characterised by absence of this component.
- C:** Therefore, the structure of epistemic vice is characterised by lack or deficit of a skill-component.

While valid, the sort of reasoning above involves a problematic inference that is nicely captured by Mills (2005). For Mills, a problem with ideal theory is that it ‘tacitly represents the actual as a simple deviation from the ideal, not worth theorising in its own right’ (2005, 168). In other words, if we simply assume that the non-ideal is derivative of our understanding of the ideal, then it makes sense to expect the latter to provide us with an informative account of the former. As such, there is no need to independently inquire into the ‘actual’. Accordingly, if we assume that our understanding of epistemic vice can be derived from our antecedent understanding of epistemic virtue, and the structure of epistemic virtue is taken to contain a skill-component, then there is no issue in assuming that the structure of epistemic vice lacks this component. By simply inverting the structure of epistemic virtue, we automatically get the structure of epistemic vice. Hence, Watson’s



(2020, 242) contention that bad questioning is found in the exercise of intellectual vices, ‘in much the same way’ that good questioning is found in the exercise of intellectual virtues; Miranda Fricker’s (2010, 244) claim that vice ‘mirrors virtue in requiring that the bad action be done because of the bad motive or deficit of skill’; or Baehr’s decision to invert the competence-dimension of epistemic virtue to arrive at the competence-dimension of epistemic vice.

Insofar as virtue epistemologists employ a strategy like this, they are tacitly endorsing the inversion thesis. In doing so, they are implicitly smuggling an idealisation about the nature of epistemic vice and vicious agents into their theorising. Not only does this give them little reason to consider the prospect that the structure of epistemic vice might deviate in some way from what this ideal entails, but it also means that they will tend to keep the structural asymmetry from above in place. If we were to eschew the inversion thesis, however, then it would be entirely possible that the structure of epistemic vice could deviate from the one it entails. Much like the epistemic virtues, that is, it would be possible that epistemic vices also exhibited their own skill-component. As I will argue in the next section, this is precisely what we find.

The inversion thesis is one idealisation that I take to have contributed to the paucity of discussion around epistemic vices and skills. Another emerges from what Ian James Kidd (2019, 233) calls the ‘ideal of an edifying education’. On Kidd’s view, an edifying education refers to an educational system or environment that encourages or promotes the cultivation of epistemic virtues in students and rehabilitates their epistemic Kidd (2019, 226). In this way, it is a token of a more general type of environment that Kidd refers to as epistemically edifying. This is an epistemic environment that ‘promotes the cultivation of epistemic virtues and the rehabilitation of epistemic vices’ (2019, 226).<sup>9</sup> When agents find themselves in such an environment, they are the beneficiaries of what Kidd terms *epistemic edification*. Epistemic edification qualifies as one of the idealisations McKenna’s identifies insofar as it trades on an assumption about the environments in which inquirers are embedded. Specifically, it assumes that these environments are in good working order, such that they contain the necessary resources and structures for agents to cultivate epistemic virtues and rehabilitate epistemic vices. Framed this way, epistemic edification is something aspirational.

At least a number of prominent virtue epistemologists tend to employ this idealisation like an when discussing the sort of epistemic environments in which agents develop intellectual skills or cultivate epistemic virtues. Consider, for example, Lani Watson’s contention that the relationship between the skill of good questioning and the epistemic virtues is ‘particularly clear in the classroom’ (2018a, 365, 366). When it comes to describing these classrooms, Watson assumes that they are highly congenial to developing this skill. In particular, she writes that the good

questioner will find herself ‘drawing on a range of intellectual, prudential, and moral resources’, including teachers who ‘encourage’ and ‘invite’ students to ask questions, as well as having people at their disposal who ‘will be more likely to provide her with the information she needs’ (Watson 2018b, 356). Such an environment presupposes that the kind of resources above are available to students, that they have access to teachers who are willing to aid the development of their good questioning skills, and that students can easily rely on their peers for information.

Similarly, when it comes to cultivating epistemic virtues, Jason Baehr takes it that agents will have ‘supportive institutional cultures’ in place, ‘opportunities to practice the actions characteristic of intellectual virtue’, as well as ‘the natural and authentic modelling of intellectual virtues’ (2013: 256, 258, 259). This last measure – the need for virtuous role-models or *exemplars* – is taken up further by Duncan Pritchard (2016, 2023), who claims that people will often have to ‘emulate exemplars who are *already* intellectually virtuous’ (2023: 3, my emphasis).<sup>10</sup> Again, these various measures take it as a given that the agent’s epistemic environment contains the resources, structures, or agents needed to cultivate epistemic virtues.

By proceeding on the basis that an agent’s epistemic environment is healthy and conducive to cultivating epistemic virtues or developing intellectual skills, the kind of environments described above operate according to an idealisation like epistemic edification. Insofar as virtue epistemologists are concerned with agents cultivating epistemic virtues or developing intellectual skills, it makes sense for them to focus their attention on epistemically edifying environments. While there is nothing wrong with this focus *per se*, it has meant that virtue epistemologists tend to say far less about the *opposite* kinds of environments, that is, those which undermine the cultivation of epistemic virtues or encourage the development of epistemic vices. This is problematic in at least two ways.

First, it gives off the impression that these sorts of environments are mere deviations from the ideal of epistemic edification, something unusual or exceptional. In turn, it has tended to leave virtue epistemologists with little reason to independently investigate the environments that fall short of this ideal. Of course, there are a number of important exceptions to this tendency, including Battaly (2013), Forstenzer (2018), and Kidd (2019, 2020). But even when these theorists discuss environments that erode virtues or encourage vices, they do *not* discuss the possibility that the agents within them could develop certain skills related to their epistemic vices. In this way, a focus on edifying environments has helped stymie discussion of the environments that could plausibly lead vicious agents to develop and exercise certain skills. In turn, it has helped sustain the structural asymmetry from above.

The second reason why this idealisation is problematic is because it distorts the reality of our *actual* epistemic environments. Not only are these less populated with the kind of edifying features above, but they are often characterised by the exact *opposite*: they contain widespread disparities in the resources available to agents, where these disparities tend to arise in connection with one's social position. Furthermore, they are increasingly populated by 'pollutants' like misinformation, conspiracy theories, echo-chambers, and structures that seek to gamify and 'capture' our epistemic and practical values (Battaly 2018; Levy 2021; Nguyen (2020)). In reality, our actual epistemic environments contain far fewer resources or structures than those assumed by an idealisation like epistemic edification. If anything, they seem far more liable to erode or undermine our epistemic virtues or intellectual skills. Once we eschew this idealisation, we see that our environments render us more susceptible to what Kidd equally calls *epistemic corruption* (Kidd 2018, 2019, 2020).

Epistemic corruption can occur when an agent's epistemic environment facilitates the 'erosion of conditions that encourage the cultivation and exercise of epistemic virtues' (2019: 231) or where there is a 'deterioration of the pre-existing virtues and integrity' present in the subject's character (2020: 71). These environments are characteristic of what Kidd refers to as *passive* epistemic corruption. It is passive in the sense that it represents a drift from virtue; either the environment facilitates the loss of an agent's epistemic virtues, or it makes it difficult for them to initially cultivate those virtues. Amongst other things, passively corrupting environments can emerge when virtuous exemplars are suppressed or undermined, when the exercise of epistemically virtuous conduct is made difficult or costly (2020: 75), and, as I will now argue, when an environment frustrates the development or exercise of an agent's intellectual skills. This brings into focus just how precarious the relationship between epistemic virtues and intellectual skills is, in a way that an idealisation like epistemic edification obscures.

To see this, consider a virtue like inquisitiveness. If we work on the basis that this epistemic virtue manifests when exercising the skill of good questioning, then an edifying environment will contain the resources and structures conducive to develop and exercise this skill, as we saw with Watson's classroom above. But if we instead focus on the kind of features that tend to characterise our actual environments, then it will probably be harder for agents to develop and refine this skill because these environments do not contain (or contain far less of) the resources and structures conducive to this. If it becomes harder for agents to develop and exercise the skill of good questioning, then it also becomes more difficult for them to exercise virtuous inquisitiveness. And insofar as these agents struggle to exercise this virtue in practice, question marks begin to hang over the extent to which they still count as *virtuously* inquisitive. By undermining the potential for agents to

exercise their epistemic virtues, these environments are passively corrupting. In these environments, an agent's epistemic virtue is dependent on their ability to exercise its associated intellectual skill. Once the latter is made difficult, so too is the former.

There is another way to bring out this point that is not immediately accommodated by Kidd's view as it stands. In the passively corrupting environment above, the agent *already* possesses the epistemic virtue and intellectual skill, but they are then eroded. According to Kidd, though, passively corrupting environments can also affect agents *prior* to their possessing any epistemic virtues. These environments are passively corrupting because they make it harder for agents to simply cultivate any epistemic virtues. As we have seen, though, an important way of cultivating epistemic virtues is by developing, refining, and exercising various intellectual skills. What this suggests is that an environment can be passively corrupting simply in virtue of undermining or frustrating the development and exercise of the intellectual skills associated with epistemic virtues.

One might question whether these environments would count as passively corrupting. After all, Kidd's motivation for introducing this phenomenon is to attend to the ways in which our social environments can 'erode' or 'damage' *character* (Kidd 2018, 2019). But since skills are not strictly aspects of character, one might claim, they are not suitable qualities to be included in an account of passive corruption. However, this objection is misguided for at least two reasons. First, Kidd claims that the sense of 'corruption' with which he is concerned trades on the 'everyday' use of the term, by which he means 'degrading the positive or essential qualities of a person or thing' (2019: 222). Yet, the skills or competences characteristic of epistemic virtues fit this bill: an agent who develops and refines her questioning abilities, or her ability to transcend her own cognitive standpoint is *prima facie* more admirable than an agent who neglects to do this. Since these qualities can be developed or refined, moreover, they can be better or worse. This, in turn, implies that they are susceptible to degradation.

Second, even if we accept that skills are not aspects of character, it does not follow from this that the former cannot affect the latter. This is clear by considering a claim popular amongst virtue epistemologists that education should aim to foster epistemic virtues in students (Baehr 2013; Watson 2018a; Pritchard 2023). In order to do this, theorists often place emphasis on the development and exercise of skills relevant to particular virtues. With this in mind, suppose that an institution places restrictions on the practice of asking questions. Whenever an agent tries to ask questions within this institutional environment, they are shut down or ostracised. Since the ability to ask questions is made so arduous, not only does it seem plausible that the agent would eventually give up engaging in this practice altogether, but it also would not be surprising if they found the epistemic motivations

underpinning their inquisitiveness equally fading away. By creating conditions that directly frustrate the development and exercise of the skill(s) associated with a given virtue, an environment is capable of indirectly eroding an agent's intellectual character. In these cases, the very cultivation of an agent's epistemic virtues is dependent on their being able to develop and exercise an intellectual skill. Where an environment undermines this possibility, so too does it undermine their chances of cultivating the relevant epistemic virtue. Thus, while skills might not be aspects of character, it is too quick to suggest that they have no bearing on its (mal)development.

In this section, I have argued that two different idealisations – the *inversion thesis* and *epistemic edification* – are partially responsible for the structural asymmetry that virtue epistemologists take to exist between the epistemic virtues and vices. Once we eschew these idealisations, we not only see that there is no reason why the structure of epistemic vice needs to mirror that of epistemic virtue, but that our actual epistemic environments tend to undermine, rather than encourage, the development of epistemic virtues and intellectual skills. Together, these considerations allow us to make the case below for what I call vice-indexed skills.

## Vice-Indexed Skills

In this final section, I demonstrate how our actual epistemic environments do not simply tend to undermine the development of epistemic virtues and intellectual skills, but that they also encourage agents to develop certain skills associated with epistemic vices – what I have been referring to as vice-indexed skills. By shedding light on these skills, we see that there is in fact a structural *symmetry* between the epistemic virtues and vices.

To begin motivating the case for these skills, let us first think about the environments that virtue epistemologists take to be conducive to the development of an agent's *intellectual skills*. As we saw above, these often contain the resources, structures, and agents that help encourage or facilitate the development, refinement, and exercise of those skills. This makes them epistemically edifying. As we equally saw, though, our actual epistemic environments tend to fall short of this ideal. Not only do they tend to lack these resources and structures, but they often undermine the development of the intellectual skills associated with epistemic virtues. These environments, I argued, qualify as passively corrupting in Kidd's sense. Now, if there are environments that can do this, are there environments that can encourage agents to develop skills associated with epistemic vices? This brings me to what Kidd refers to as *active epistemic corruption* (2019; 2020). Whereas passive epistemic corruption turns on those environments which erode an agent's epistemic virtues or intellectual skills, active epistemic corruption occurs when environments 'promote the development of epistemic vices'

(2018: 48), ‘promote the development and exercise of epistemic vices’ (2019: 229) or ‘promote, fuel, or reward the exercise of vices’ (2020: 71). In each case, what matters is that the environment is such that it facilitates the development and exercise of epistemic vices – an active drive to vice, as it were.<sup>11</sup>

Insofar as actively corrupting environments turn on the development and exercise of epistemic vices, it is important that we understand just how these environments might do this in practice. On this score, Kidd provides us with a non-exhaustive list of what he calls ‘modes’ of active epistemic corruption, which range from conditions that facilitate the ‘acquisition’ of novel vices, the ‘activation’ of latent ones, the ‘propagation’ of a vice’s impact throughout wider dimensions of one’s epistemic conduct, the ‘stabilisation’ of vices within one’s intellectual character, and the ‘intensification’ of a vice by increasing its strength (2020: 72–73). While these ‘modes’ shed some light on the way actively corrupting environments might facilitate the development of an agent’s epistemic vices, they tell us little about how agents might exercise those vices once acquired, activated, propagated, etc. In this respect, Kidd’s account is only able to offer us a partial sketch of actively corrupting environments.<sup>12</sup> To complete the picture, we need to see whether there are activities characteristic of particular epistemic vices that agents might engage in. I think there certainly are. Consider the following case:

**Internship:** While interning at a reputable company, Samantha’s boss overhears that it’s her dream workplace. Upon learning this, he begins exploiting Samantha’s willingness to take orders by tasking her with hiding evidence of the company’s on-going malpractice. At first, Samantha refuses but he quickly reminds her that the internship is highly prestigious, and that he could quite easily replace her. Under threat of losing the internship, Samantha obliges, and at first, she does so begrudgingly. However, as she is coerced into engaging in this activity over time, she not only learns how to dispose of the company’s evidence of malpractice in increasingly effective ways, but her conduct is widely praised by her colleagues. Equally impressed is Samantha’s boss, who offers her a job at the company.

Obfuscating evidence is not an epistemic vice *per se*, but it certainly looks like a means of manifesting one. At the least, it is characteristic of intellectual dishonesty; at worst, it reflects a kind of ‘epistemic malevolence’ – an ‘opposition to another’s share of epistemic goods’ and their ‘epistemic well-being’ (Baehr 2010, 204).<sup>13</sup> If one succeeds at obfuscating evidence, one deprives others of the chance to acquire the corresponding truths. The more one engages in an activity like this, though, the more one is at risk of developing the motivations, dispositions, and so on consistent with intellectual dishonesty or epistemic malevolence. In Samantha’s case, her initial hesitation to obfuscate the evidence implies that she had no prior dispositions to these vices. Through a mixture of manipulation and encouragement, we

can stipulate that she gradually comes to acquire these epistemic vices. In this way, the company is an actively (and oppressive, we might add) corrupting environment.

However, an important reason why Samantha comes to develop these vices is not just because she engages in an activity characteristic of them. It is because her epistemic environment provides the scaffolding for her to develop and exercise a *skill* at obfuscating evidence of the company's malpractice.<sup>14</sup>

Of course, it is worth noting that an agent need not develop a skill at this activity to count as viciously dishonest or epistemically malevolent. After all, we can quite easily imagine a different intern who engages in this sort of activity but does so with far less effectiveness. Despite only being reliable some of the time, this intern still strikes me as at least exhibiting intellectually vicious motivations, that is, their conduct either reflects a failure to care sufficiently about epistemic goods, or it reflects an outright motivation to avoid, frustrate, antagonise those goods (Baehr 2010; Tanesini 2021). This suggests that being skilled at obfuscating evidence is not necessary for agents to possess the intellectual vices with which this activity is associated.

Furthermore, it is entirely possible that agents could develop the sort of skill above without inhabiting an actively corrupting environment. Instead of Samantha developing a skill at obfuscating evidence, suppose that it is her boss, Samuel. Whereas Samantha is subjected to external pressures and institutional incentives to develop this skill, Samuel is not. Nevertheless, he still becomes skilled at obfuscating evidence, and this leads him to develop the same epistemic vices as Samantha. This variation of the case tells us that it is also not necessary for agents to inhabit actively corrupting environments in order to develop a skill in the activity characteristic of an epistemic vice.<sup>15</sup>

What seems true, regardless, is that agents who do develop a skill at this activity are doing worse, epistemically-speaking, than agents who do not develop such a skill. This is because developing a skill at obfuscating evidence, much like skills more generally, requires a level of motivation and commitment to pull off. Matt Stichter (2018) emphasises this aspect of skill-acquisition when developing his account of virtue. As a proponent of the 'skill-analogy', Stichter claims that virtues are best modelled on skills.<sup>16</sup> In this connection, Stichter's account starts with the idea that moral agency is a form of human agency more generally. Just as skills enable us to regulate our human agency, so too does he think that they aid our moral self-regulation. For Stichter, this involves regulating the specific ethical standards we adopt for ourselves, as well as the specific strategies that can make us better or worse at implementing these standards (2018: 59). Accordingly, Stichter takes virtues to be skills for moral (and epistemic) self-regulation.

As with skills more generally, Stichter observes that acquiring and maintaining these particular skills requires regular practice if they are to be



effective. This, in turn, requires ‘a level of motivation’ so that agents can act skilfully, and thus virtuously (2018: 97). In particular, the more an agent values the ethical goals or standards they have set themselves, the stronger their motivation will be to develop and refine the skills that enable them to achieve these ends. Conversely, the less valued they are, the weaker the motivation. In much the same way that virtuous agents are motivated to act well, then, Stichter argues that the motivation involved in developing and maintaining a skill often makes skilled performers ‘committed’ to the ends of a given practice or activity (2018: 94).

Although I am not suggesting that we model epistemic vices on skills, I do think there is a similarly close connection between the development and maintenance of an agent’s skill at obfuscating evidence and their epistemic (and non-epistemic) motivations. In Samantha’s case, securing a job at the company is what she ultimately desires. Well aware of this, Samantha’s boss and others manipulate and incentivise her to obfuscate evidence. Since she values a potential job at the company very highly, the more motivated she will be to develop and maintain a skill at this activity, especially if it gives her a good chance of securing the job. But notice that this instrumental motivation comes at the cost of any good epistemic motivations she might have had. After all, when she started, she refused to hide the relevant evidence. If she cared sufficiently about epistemic goods, though, she would not have engaged in this activity. So, while the motivation underpinning Samantha’s skill is primarily instrumental, it is importantly abetted by a gradual failure to care about epistemic goods.

Motivations also play a role in the development and maintenance of Samuel’s skill at obfuscating evidence. In his case, recall, there are no environmental pressures or incentives for bearing down on him. As such, we can stipulate that his motivation for developing and acquiring this skill will probably not be primarily instrumental in the way that it is for Samantha. What ultimately motivates Samuel, rather, might simply be a desire to antagonise, frustrate, or avoid epistemic goods altogether (Tanesini 2021). In Heather Battaly’s terms, Samuel would count as ‘epistemic rebel’ (Battaly 2014, 73).<sup>17</sup>

From an epistemic perspective, both agents above are doing worse because the motivations (or lack thereof) involved in their acquiring and exercising a skill at obfuscating evidence are intellectually vicious. It is Samantha’s failure to be motivated and care sufficiently about epistemic goods that abets her skill-acquisition, while it is the presence of bad epistemic motivations that underpins Samuel’s. By exercising their respective skills, both come to manifest intellectual dishonesty or epistemic malevolence. Understood so, skilfully obfuscating evidence plays precisely the *same* sort of role in connection with these epistemic vices, as do the intellectual skills or competences associated with epistemic virtues. In both cases, the



development and exercise of these skills is not necessary to possess the epistemic virtue or vice. Rather, it is a means of instantiating the relevant qualities.<sup>18</sup>

Furthermore, just as agents who find themselves in epistemically edifying environments are well-placed to develop and exercise the intellectual skills associated with epistemic virtues, so too have we seen that agents who inhabit actively corrupting environments are especially susceptible to developing skills associated with epistemic vices. Again, this is not to say that those who find themselves in these respective environments will categorically develop the skills associated with each quality; instead, it is to say that they are more prone to developing these skills, given the resources and structures that feed into the motivations often underpinning these skills. If this is right, then the considerations in favour of thinking that epistemic virtues exhibit a skill-component equally lend support for thinking that epistemic vices can, too. We can refer to these as *vice-indexed skills*.

The idea that some epistemic vices exhibit their own class of skills is not entirely original. While I noted above that Baehr (2020) takes ‘defective competence’ to be part of the formal structure of epistemic vices, he does briefly consider whether there might be any epistemic vices such that to possess them ‘fully’ one must *possess certain skills or competences proper to these vices* (2020: 29, my emphasis). The examples Baehr offers include ‘keeping evidence at bay’ and intellectual dishonesty and ‘misrepresenting opposing viewpoints’ with closed-mindedness (2020, 29). His suggestion is that an agent who develops and exercises these ‘characteristic competences’, as he calls them, is *more* intellectually dishonest or close-minded than an agent who is similarly disposed but lacks these competences (2020, 29).<sup>19</sup>

Though innovative, Baehr’s proposal invites further elaboration. For one, he says nothing about how agents might come to acquire these competences or skills. Fortunately, the discussion above helps us to address this issue. As I have suggested, agents are particularly susceptible to acquiring these sorts of skills within actively corrupting environments. Indeed, reflecting on our cases of Samantha and Samuel allows us to develop Baehr’s suggestion that vice-indexed skills can contribute in some way to the epistemic viciousness of an agent. Just as skilful performances accrue more credit or value to an agent than do lucky performances, so there seems to be something *more* epistemically dis-valuable or discreditable about Samantha and Samuel’s epistemic conduct precisely because it manifests their respective skills at obfuscating evidence.<sup>20</sup>

Another point to add to Baehr’s proposal is the precise relationship these skills bear to epistemic vices. Reflecting on our example above is helpful. Prior to starting her internship, suppose Samantha had no tendencies towards intellectual dishonesty or epistemic malevolence. In light of this, the company’s actively corrupting environment gradually leads her to

acquire these vices. Again, though, a salient factor in Samantha coming to acquire these vices is that her epistemic environment was one that first facilitated or encouraged the development of her skill at obfuscating evidence. Framed this way, her fully-fledged epistemic vices result from the gradual development and exercise of this vice-indexed skill. More generally, we can represent this relationship as follows:

Vice-indexed Skill → Epistemic Vice.

Again, this is not to suggest that an epistemic environment is actively corrupting only insofar as the vices that an agent develops arise in connection with their developing and exercising a vice-indexed skill. As I mentioned above, these skills are not necessary for the possession of an epistemic vice. In fact, their possession might not be entirely sufficient, for as long as an agent has the ability to engage in the activity characteristic of an epistemic vice and their engaging in this activity exhibits their defective epistemic motivations, then they will count as possessing an epistemic vice, at least on several analyses (Baehr 2020; Tanesini 2021). However, as I also noted above, the presence of defective epistemic motivations will either abet or underpin the development of any ability associated with the vice-indexed skill. Thus, if an agent has this ability, then I suspect that actively corrupting environments will provide fertile ground for them to go on to develop and exercise the vice-indexed skill, as in Samantha's case. Indeed, we can see how this very dynamic might play out by considering a scenario that mirrors the discussion from the previous section. Just as I identified how passively corrupting environments can frustrate the cultivation of epistemic virtues *prior* to an agent possessing any such virtues, so too can we distinguish actively corrupting environments that facilitate the development and exercise of vice-indexed skills *after* an agent has already acquired one or more epistemic vices. In these cases, the relationship above operates in the reverse direction. We can illustrate this with an epistemic vice that Quassim Cassam calls 'epistemic insouciance' (2019, 81).

According to Cassam, epistemic insouciance is roughly an attitude of indifference to the truth or falsity of one's utterances. Important for my purposes is the connection Cassam draws between this vice and Harry Frankfurt's notion of bullshit (2005). As he sees it, 'epistemic insouciance leads to bullshit' and 'bullshit is the primary product of epistemic insouciance' (2019: 80–81, fn. 6). If Cassam is right, then it would suggest that *bullshitting* is an activity typically engaged in by the epistemically insouciant. My suggestion is that actively corrupting environments facilitate the development of an agent's bullshitting skills.<sup>21</sup>

On the face of it, this suggestion might strike one as incoherent. If bullshit is the product of epistemic insouciance, and this vice is fundamentally an

attitude of *indifference* to the truth, why should we think that a bullshitter would be concerned with learning how to develop any sort of skill at this activity? In fact, Frankfurt picks up on a similar concern when comparing bullshit to ‘carelessly made, shoddy goods’ (2005, 21). Just as there is something paradoxical to the idea of carefully crafted, shoddy goods, he says, so there is an ‘inner strain’ to the notion of ‘carefully wrought bullshit’ (2005: 22):

Thoughtful attention to detail requires discipline and objectivity. It entails accepting standards and limitations that forbid the indulgence of impulse or whim. It is this selflessness that, in connection with bullshit, strikes us as inapposite. (2005: 22)

Since the bullshitter is indifferent to the truth-value of their assertions, it seems unlikely that they would care about the sort of details and standards that could lead them to craft ‘carefully wrought bullshit’ in the first place. So, the notion of a skilled bullshitter is seemingly out of the picture.. However, this worry assumes that bullshitting involves a global indifference to the truth, which is not the case. For while the bullshitter certainly makes assertions without paying attention to the truth, they are ultimately in the business of deceiving their interlocutors about what they are up to (Frankfurt 2005, 54). To do this effectively, though, they must attend to ‘what it suits one to say’ (2005: 60). This, of course, changes depending on the bullshitter’s context. For instance, it might suit a bullshitter to say one thing in a particular context, which in another context would not suit their end of misrepresenting their intentions. Therefore, the bullshitter clearly has to be attentive to *at least* some truths: those which enable them to deceive others of their enterprise. And as with activities more generally, some people will be better at doing this than others, as Frankfurt acknowledges:

[T]here are exquisitely *sophisticated craftsmen* who – with the help of advanced and demanding techniques of market research, of public opinion polling, of psychological testing and so forth – dedicate themselves tirelessly to getting every word and image they produce exactly right. (2005: 23, my emphasis)

The ‘sophisticated craftsmen’ that Frankfurt talks of are clearly skilled bullshitters; they have learned how to effectively keep their audiences in the dark about their intentions. Before they became ‘sophisticated craftsmen’, though, it is plausible to think that these agents in question were already guilty of being epistemically insouciant to some degree. Indeed, it is difficult to imagine how anyone could come become skilled at this bullshitting without first being epistemically insouciant themselves. But insofar as an environment provides these agents with the right resources – for example, by supplying them with the necessary data, strategies, and techniques – that environment is able to facilitate the development of their bullshitting

skills. On this way of seeing things, the environment is actively corrupting because it encourages already vicious agents to develop a vice-indexed skill. More generally:

Epistemic Vice  $\rightarrow$  Vice-indexed Skill.

In reality, I suspect the relationship between epistemic vices and vice-indexed skills will be far more overlapping. On the one hand, the maintenance or refinement of a vice-indexed skill will partially turn on engaging in the activity characteristic of the epistemic vice. In Samantha's case, for example, the more the company's environment facilitates the development and exercise of her obfuscatory skills, the more recourse she will have to engage in the activity of hiding evidence. As she increasingly engages in this activity, of course, the more entrenched the dispositions and motivations consistent with intellectual dishonesty or epistemic malevolence will become. In turn, these dispositions and motivations will loop back in maintaining or refining the skill. On the other hand, where an environment encourages an already vicious agent to develop and exercise a vice-indexed skill, the agent will have to continually exhibit the vice in order to refine it.<sup>22</sup> For instance, the more one exhibits epistemic insouciance, the more one will engage in bullshitting. But the more one engages in this activity, the more opportunities it presents to polish one's craft. In the end, then, the relationship between epistemic vices and vice-indexed skills will probably be mutually sustaining as follows:

Epistemic Vice  $\rightleftharpoons$  Vice-Indexed Skill.<sup>23</sup>

As actively corrupting environments encourage epistemically vicious behaviour, that is, they provide opportunities for agents to develop particular vice-indexed skills; but as an agent develops and exercises these skills, the more opportunity they have to engage in epistemically vicious conduct. Within actively corrupting environments, then, there is room for a symbiotic relationship between epistemic vices and vice-indexed skills to develop, as denoted by the equilibrium symbol above. At the least, the discussion above reveals that epistemic vices can exhibit a skill-component. If this is correct, then there is a symmetry between the structure of epistemic virtues and vices after all.

## Conclusion

My aim in this paper was to use the resources of non-ideal epistemology to draw attention to an overlooked feature of epistemic vice – what I have called 'vice-indexed skills'. In doing so, I have sought to cast doubt on a structural asymmetry that is taken to exist between the epistemic virtues and vices,

namely that the former exhibit a skill-component as part of their formal structure, whereas the latter do not. I argued that two idealisations in the inversion thesis and epistemic edification go some way to explaining why this misleading asymmetry has existed, as well as why the notion of a vice-indexed skill has been obscured from view. By eschewing these idealisations, we can now begin exploring the relationship between epistemic vices and skills anew.

## Notes

1. Like Fricker and McKenna, my interests in this paper are with character-based or *responsibilist* virtue epistemology (Baehr 2011; Battaly 2008; Zagzebski 1996), as opposed to *reliabilist* virtue epistemology (Greco 2010; Pritchard 2012; Sosa 2007, 2015). I use the terms ‘virtue’ and ‘vice’ to mean *epistemic* virtues and vices. I also use ‘epistemic’ and ‘intellectual’ interchangeably.
2. This reflects what McKenna calls the ‘third face’ of non-ideal epistemology (McKenna 2023, 9–10).
3. For seminal discussions of epistemic vice, see Battaly (2014), Cassam (2019), Kidd (2020), and Tanesini (2021), I sometimes use ‘vice epistemology’ interchangeably with ‘virtue epistemology’ as intended in the footnote 1.
4. Zagzebski’s example of an anti-skill is ‘playing the violin very badly’. Whether ‘skill’ is the correct term to use here, I think the point she wishes to make is that the violin player’s *incompetence* is so acute that it disposes them to reliably perform terribly.
5. In addition, an agent must be correctly motivated by epistemic goods and have good judgement as to when to ask certain questions.
6. Watson emphasises that one can competently ask a question but still fail to elicit information. This does not detract from the goodness of the question, since good questioning does not always require success in actually acquiring information (2018: 355, 2020, 240).
7. Though Baehr takes intellectual vices to lack the kind of competence dimension characteristic of intellectual virtues, he does gesture at a different possibility to which I will return in Section “Vice-Indexed Skills” below.
8. For further discussion on this point, see Dillon (2012).
9. For further discussion of epistemic edification, see Kidd (2016) and Cooper (2010).
10. For discussion of exemplars, see Battaly (2016), Dunne and Kotsonis (2024), and Zagzebski (1996, 150). Zagzebski (2017) has developed a more general ‘exemplarist’ moral theory that takes the idea of exemplarism to be foundational to moral development.
11. ‘Facilitate’ is meant to be deliberately broad, so as to include environments that ‘encourage, legitimate, motivate, promote, provide conditions for’, and so on (Kidd 2020, 72). For examples and discussions of actively corrupting environments, see Battaly (2013), Kidd, Chubb, and Forstenzer (2021), and Oreskes and Conway (2012).
12. In fairness to Kidd, his concern with epistemic corruption is to help us understand the *aetiology* of epistemic vices, that is, how agents come to develop them, rather than how agents exercise those vices once developed

(Kidd 2016). That said, the two concerns are not mutually exclusive, so an interest in vice-aetiology should also prompt an interest in vice-exercise.

13. Strictly speaking, this counts as what Baehr refers to as ‘personal’ epistemic malevolence, since the malevolence is directed at *others’* epistemic well-being and share of the epistemic good, as opposed to the epistemic good in a general sense (2010, 193). Baehr keeps open the possibility that epistemic malevolence might not always be an epistemic vice (2010:190, fn. 2). I assume for my purposes here that it is.
14. Here, we might distinguish skills for (i) *doing* epistemically bad things and (ii) skills for *getting away* with those deeds. Somebody in a similar situation to Samantha might develop the latter skills because they lack the power to get away with their epistemic misdeeds. Contrast this with a powerful executive, who can openly and brazenly do epistemically bad things since nobody can stop them. Thanks to Ian Kidd for raising this point.
15. I thank an anonymous referee for urging me to address this possibility here.
16. Though often associated with the Ancient Greek tradition, especially Plato (*Gorgias*, 449d-458c), the skill-analogy also finds some uptake in classical Chinese and Roman philosophy. For discussion, see Stalnaker (2010), Yao (2012), and Klein (2014). See, also, Annas (2011) for a contemporary discussion.
17. Thanks to an anonymous referee for helping me see the connection to Stichter’s account here.
18. Of course, there might be cases where obfuscating evidence is done in the service of morally good (or so-called ‘liberatory’) ends like disrupting an oppressive regime, etc. In such cases, it would be unclear if skilfully obfuscating evidence is an expression of an intellectual vice. However, in cases like Samantha’s, this is not what is at stake, so we can set this complication aside.
19. It is not entirely clear how Baehr is using the term ‘characteristic *competence*’. If he means it to be a disposition to reliably perform aim-related tasks associated with epistemic vices, then it is hard to see how an agent could be ‘competent’ at self-deception, since this is not typically (if ever) something at which one explicitly aims. For this reason, I prefer my term vice-indexed *skill* over Baehr’s terminology.
20. Compare this with two cases of torture. In one case, the torturer gets the victim to reveal information because of their skill at torturing people. In another case, the torturer achieves the same result through sheer luck. While both are morally heinous, it seems that that the former is *more* morally disvaluable because the torturer has devoted the time to develop their torturing skills.
21. As with the case of Samantha, it is entirely consistent to think that an actively corrupting environment, which facilitates the development of an agent’s bullshitting skills, might do so prior to their becoming epistemically insouciant. I return to this dynamic shortly.
22. This is plausibly due to bullshitting being a ‘high-fidelity’ activity, in Alfano’s (2013, 31–32) terms. In order to effectively disregard the truth through bullshitting, that it, one will have to engage in this activity fairly regularly and this will often involve practicing or refining one’s bullshitting abilities. We can contrast this with a ‘low-fidelity’ activity such as riding a bicycle or swimming, which requires far less exercise to remain competent at.

23. To avoid confusion, I use the  $\rightleftharpoons$  symbol, not to represent a bi-conditional, but rather to denote its scientific connotations, where a reaction is reversible and consequently has the potential to reach a state of equilibrium. The idea is that actively corrupting conditions make it such that the vice-side of the relationship contributes to the skill-side, which then feeds back, and so on, reaching equilibrium.

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