Charging Others with Epistemic Vice

Ian James Kidd*

ABSTRACT

This paper offers an analysis of the structure of epistemic vice-charging, the critical practice of charging other persons with epistemic vice. Several desiderata for a robust vice-charge are offered and two deep obstacles to the practice of epistemic vice-charging are then identified and discussed. The problem of responsibility is that few of us enjoy conditions that are required for effective socialisation as responsible epistemic agents. The problem of consensus is that the efficacy of a vice-charge is contingent upon a degree of consensus between critic and target that is unlikely or impossible where vice-charging is most likely to be provoked. It emerges that a robust critical practice of vice-charging is possible in principle, but very difficult in practice.

1. INTRODUCTION

A striking feature of everyday social life is that we charge others with vices. We complain often and easily about arrogant celebrities, dogmatic politicians, greedy bankers, and cruel tyrants. Many of the vices invoked are recognisably epistemic in character, concerning practices and concepts relating to knowledge, understanding, certainty, belief, doubt. We criticise people who never listen, who can’t see things from others’ points of view, who won’t admit when they are wrong, who cannot justify the confidence they invest in their convictions, and so on. The targets of such charges can be individuals or collectives—colleagues, friends, social peers, public figures, historical or fictional personages, or members of religious denominations, political parties, or social movements. The vicious epistemic attitudes, actions, and conduct of these diverse agents are a source of anger, upset, and frustration, for such epistemic failures can have negative practical and social effects.

Invocation of such epistemic vices is a ubiquitous feature of our everyday and specialised social intercourse. It serves many purposes—‘calling out’ failures of epistemic responsibility, challenging claims to epistemic authority, educating peers. I propose that we call this practice epistemic vice-charging and offer a schematic analysis of its structure. My aim is to show that this practice can, if done well, contribute to the ameliorative task of improving both our epistemic characters and the epistemic dynamics of our communities. Indeed, this is evident in the typical structure of most vice-charges. There is an evaluative and an explanatory aspect—one agent charges
another with possessing some stable disposition to negative epistemic conduct (such as ignoring counterevidence to their beliefs) and then explains the conduct by imputing to them an epistemic vice (which, in the case of evidential insensibility might be *epistemic arrogance* or *epistemic dogmatism*).

A rich contemporary example of the use of vice-charging in public, political, and academic debate on a topic of enormous practical and social importance is discourse concerning anthropogenic climate change. Consider the following news headlines:

India “arrogant” to deny global warming link to melting glaciers. (*The Guardian* 9 Nov. 2009)


Exxon Mobil’s response to climate change is consummate arrogance. (*The Guardian* 3 Apr. 2014)

GOP Rep Todd Rokita: connecting climate change to humans is “arrogant.” (*Huffington Post* 26 Aug. 2013)

The epistemic vices being invoked in these cases are *arrogance* and *dogmatism*, defined by Bob Roberts and Jay Wood as, roughly, dispositions to unreasonably resist efforts by others at epistemic engagement—when, say, a denier refuses to reconsider the confidence of their beliefs about the reality of climate change in the face of the scientific consensus (*Roberts and Wood 2007*, chs. 7 and 9).

These few examples allow a few initial observations about the practice. First, vice-charging is used by a very diverse range of agents—bloggers, editors, academics, journalists, environmentalists, political figures, and religious leaders. Second, it is employed by persons along all points of the spectrum of views on climate change—religious or secular, liberal or conservative—and so is not the preserve of any specific group. Third, vice-charging can and typically is directed at both individuals and collectives, including formal and informal groups and corporate, religious, political, and scientific institutions. Interestingly, some critics also direct epistemic vice-charges at abstract objects such as attitudes, beliefs, or doctrines, such as racism, sexism, scientism, humanism, or scientific realism. The practice therefore emerges as a complex and ubiquitous critical practice featuring centrally in social and political life on a range of topics of great practical and moral urgency.

But if epistemic vice-charging is ubiquitous, it is also problematic. Alongside the complexities that attend specific topics, the practice itself raises certain questions. What is an epistemic vice? How many are there? What is the critical force of charging an agent with a vice? Can the target of a vice-charge contest it, and, if so, what ought to be the proper procedure for their doing so? Can vice-charges really be directed at institutions as well as individuals? Are agents really responsible for their vicious status, given the complexities of personal history and the nonideal status of the social world? Such questions are difficult and complexly interrelated—for instance, if
individual epistemic agency is structured by social and institutional factors, then it is going to be difficult to make fair judgments of individual versus collective epistemic responsibility.²

A critic might also want to raise objections to the practice itself. They might first protest that charging an agent with vices is a form of *ad hominem* attack, which is standardly classified as a fallacy. If so, vice-charging is a fallacy to avoid, not a critical strategy to employ. But the relevance of this objection is uncertain, given several recent virtue-based defences of the legitimacy of ‘agent-based appraisals’ (Aberdein 2014; Battaly 2010a; Gascón forthcoming). Second, the critic might go on to evince genuine scepticism about the very existence of epistemic character traits. If so, the vices with which to charge people do not exist. But although many critics urge scepticism about epistemic character traits, there is also a growing body of work on ‘vice epistemology’ that challenges it (Battaly 2014; Quassam 2016).

I want to try to resolve some of these obscurities by showing that certain forms of vice-charge are critically legitimate. My conclusion is that a critically robust practice of vice-charging is possible in principle, but very difficult in practice. I propose three criteria that a robust epistemic vice-charge ought to fulfil to offer a way of charging agents with vices in an appropriately principled, procedural way. It then emerges that the real obstacles to vice-charging lie in a deeper set of social-epistemological issues to which the budding critic ought be sensitive.

I end by suggesting that the suboptimal epistemic conditions of modern societies that typically provoke people to engage in vice-charging also limit the efficacy of the charges. If so, then there is real need in our nonideal world for what is nowadays called ‘applied’ or ‘ameliorative’ epistemology (Coady 2012; Coady and Fricker forthcoming).

### 2. VICE-CHARGES, RHETORICAL AND ROBUST

The fact that epistemic vice-charging is ubiquitous does not indicate that all such charges will or should enjoy equal status. We ought therefore to distinguish, roughly but usefully, between two *types* of vice-charge: rhetorical complaints and robust charges, where only the latter qualify as legitimate modes of criticism.

A *rhetorical vice-charge* involves an agent expressing a negative attitude, opinion, or evaluation of some other agent, whether expression is oral, literary, or bodily—a curt tweet, audible groan, eye-rolling, and so on. But, crucially, that agent could not elaborate or ‘unpack’ the charge if asked to, for instance by explaining the reasoning that supports the negative judgment. Rhetorical charges involve reportage of one’s negative judgments, but not the presentation of any reasons, evidence, or feelings in support of them, so they do not do any real critical work—they might simply let off steam, vent frustration, or register disapproval.

Suppose I am watching Fox News and grumble angrily about the dogmatism of climate change deniers. Left at that, my grumble is a rhetorical charge, for its purpose is to signify certain of my allegiances, sympathies, values, rather than to try to compel anyone else to adopt them. But if, when challenged, I can go on to offer evidence, reasons, appeals, or examples to support the grumble, then it begins to develop into something more robust.³ Indeed, a dialectical process has begun: what was or

---

² See Aberdein (2014) for a recent virtue-based defence of ‘agent-based appraisals’.
³ A dialectical process has begun: what was or
seemed to be merely rhetorical is now becoming robust—although, of course, such dialectical processes are not always either initiated or continued. Indeed, many rhetorical charges will remain just that, owing to an inability or unwillingness on the part of the critic to develop them. Such charges are merely rhetorical.

A robust charge involves primarily an active and intentional attempt to persuade others for the ultimately ameliorative reason of making things better. Its intended beneficiary is likely to be the target, but sometimes they might be too vicious to be persuaded—too indelibly dogmatic, say. In such cases, the charge might still affect positively some other agent, such as a spectator or audience member, who may be provoked into reflecting on their own character, even if the target is not. So there are three relata in a vice-charge—critic, target, and audience—all of whom could be the beneficiaries of a charge, even if only some are. ⁴

Such robust charges can use a variety of persuasive strategies to present and secure the charge of epistemic vice, including careful argumentation, offering evidence, or a careful appeal to the target’s values. An astute critic will be sensitive to the social and psychological profile of the target and the audience, customising the charge in a way that maximises the potential for critical dialectical interaction. (I say more about the interpenetration of epistemic agency and social positionality in sections 5 and 6.⁵)

It is worth noting that a critic might be uncertain about the status of a vice-charge when they make it. Perhaps a liberal vocally asserts the dogmatism of celebrants of neoliberalism in the hope of securing agreement from their peers, but when pushed to cash out the claim, quickly downgrades it to the status of ‘mere rhetoric’. Or the critic might think that their evaluation of the viciousness of the target is legitimate, even if they cannot, at that moment, actually justify it. Such ambiguity in the status of vice-charges has a tactical value for the critic. If their audience uncritically accepts the charge, they score a point, but if they reject or challenge it, the critic can simply reply that it was an off-the-cuff remark—in which case, they neither gain, nor lose, anything.⁶

It is true that rhetorical charges can have an ameliorative effect on people. A terse remark about the dogmatism of Donald Trump could have a revelatory effect on one of his naive supporters. But the provision of persuasive reasons that is definitive of robust charges protects the practice of vice-charging. It stops vice-charging from descending into interminable exchanges of charge and countercharge, a situation that has few if any gains, and may itself offer a rich breeding ground for vices. Such epistemic backbiting is not only tedious and potentially corrupting, but unacceptable for three further reasons related to the social roles of the practice of vice-charging.

First, a general strategic worry. A very effective way to weaken, deflect, or nullify a vice-charge is to demand of the critic that they explain and ‘cash out’ the charge. Suppose I charge you with dogmatism, only to find that you request, politely or not, clarification of the charge—perhaps by soliciting a definition of that virtue. If I cannot provide a decent definition, you would be quite right to reject the charge as it stands. Indeed, my failure would invite an obvious tu quoque that either collapses the charge or rebounds it back onto the critic.
Second, a principled means of identifying robust charges is important to properly procedural epistemic conduct. Good critics strive to ensure that their criticisms are fair, reasoned, and as transparent as possible, especially when they are voiced in the public domain. If a critic wants their vice-charges to be taken seriously as reasoned contributions to personal, public, or political debate, they ought to take care to set out their charge, explain its aspects, offer supporting evidence, and so on. We find precedents in our legal practices for formally charging a person with a crime, as well as in various philosophical accounts of good social and political conduct. Think of John Rawls’ “duty of civility” enjoining us to “make our case” for our publicly stated beliefs (Rawls 1985, 90), or José Medina’s call for “responsivity” to gendered and racialised power structures during our socio-epistemic “transactions” with others (Medina 2013, 52).

Third, robust vice-charging is related to agential responsibility. It is plausible that only robust charges will fulfil even basic conditions for socially responsible epistemic citizenship. A vice-charge that is ill-formed, poorly-reasoned, or evidentially empty not only lacks critical efficacy, but also reflects badly on the critic, especially if they are claiming the moral or epistemic high ground, as will often be the case. It may also be possible that certain critics are obliged to engage only in robust vice-charging due to their occupation of certain social and institutional roles. Scientists or academics could or should be held to higher epistemic standards and so be expected to forswear the use of cheap and easy rhetorical vice-charges.

A good example is the “Climategate” scandal. In late 2009, hackers stole and then published thousands of private emails and files from the Climatic Research Unit at the University of East Anglia in the UK. The leak was timed to coincide with a high profile climate change mitigation meeting at Copenhagen. Climate contrarians were quick to call attention to certain phrases used in the correspondence, which had been filtered before publication. Much attention was given to a reference, by one scientist, to “Mike’s Nature trick,” a reference to a modelling device—or “trick of the trade”—that was developed by the climatologist Michael Mann. Although the use of such heuristics and devices is entirely benign, a well-choreographed group of contrarians began to decry what they claimed was ideologically manipulation of climate science. They delightedly ‘outed’ climate scientists for secretly and knowingly violating the epistemic standards constitutive of their professional integrity and authority. In effect, those contrarians appealed to the idea that members of certain communities have a special epistemic responsibility to engage only in robust vice-charging, even if their own motivations for doing so were mendacious and partisan.

With these points in place, we can ask an important practical question: how can we upgrade a rhetorical complaint into a robust charge? Since this is a large, neglected topic, I will confine myself to proposing three desiderata, which, if fulfilled, make a vice-charge robust. Two caveats are in order, given that this is a preliminary exercise. First, that these desiderata are neither exhaustive nor definitive. Second, I leave other jobs—such as identifying and weighting additional desiderata—for another time.

An epistemic vice-charge should be classified as robust if, either as it stands or after reflective appraisal, it includes robust accounts of at least three things:
1. The critical practice of vice-charging.
2. The vice(s) that are being invoked in the charge at hand (their structure, psychology, and so on)
3. An empirically adequate causal and explanatory account of the relationship of the targets’ vice(s) and the negative act(s) that provoked the charge.

Perfect vice-charges would not only fulfil these desiderata. But such perfect charges will rarely be realised, not least because many critics who employ vice-charging are part of organisations with limited time, abilities, or resources—charities, social activists, patient advocates, and so on. A perfectionist tendency that effectively removes critical resources from people with obvious need of them should be avoided. We do better to think in terms of a division of critical labour—activists, advocates, and others can engage in vice-charging, leaving the further intellectual work of investigating and securing their robust status to other agents with relevant training and resources, many of whom will be academics.\textsuperscript{11}

The division of critical labour could see epistemologists, psychologists, and others cooperating in appraising and, where necessary, upgrading epistemic vice-charges. It is part of an ‘applied’ or ‘ameliorative’ conception of epistemology that restores to it two functions it has historically served. First, a critical task of identifying and exposing the epistemic deficiencies of agents, collectives, and institutions—think of Socrates’ castigation of the Sophists or Bacon’s diagnoses of the ‘Idols of the Mind’. Second, a correspondingly constructive role of designing and, if possible, helping identify and establish epistemically optimal conditions for social life—think of the Confucian commitment to ‘the Rectification of Names’ or the efforts by feminist philosophers of science to nullify gendered biases in science.\textsuperscript{12}

Many urgent practical and social problems have overt epistemological aspects, such as sophistry, economic illiteracy, racial injustice, gender bias, climate contrarianism, ‘doubt-mongering’, among many others. Indeed, the practice of vice-charging almost certainly evolved as a response to such problems, which is why giving a robust account of that practice is so important. One step towards that account is to give a robust account of the practice of vice-charging, which I have done by distinguishing rhetorical and robust types of charge.

In the next section, I turn to the concept of epistemic vice.

3. THE CONCEPT OF EPISTEMIC VICE

The second desideratum for a robust charge is an account of epistemic vice. Ideally a critic ought to give robust accounts of both a general concept of epistemic vice—the topic of this section—and of the specific vice they are invoking. The ubiquity of vice-charging plausibly reflects the fact that epistemic viciousness is a familiar feature of our social world. Certainly some charges of vice will be unfair, due perhaps to failures of perception, judgment, or definition. We often see vice where none exists. But, still, there is a lot of vice out there and we often judge people to evince a vicious character or epistemic pathology—a hardened dogmatic racist, say. I do not engage here with the empirical question of the distribution or frequency of epistemic vice, nor with ‘situationist’ critiques of the very idea of stable epistemic character traits.\textsuperscript{13} Instead I
focus on the more abstract question of what a robust concept of epistemic vice might be, so as to fill out the second desiderata.

Although the concept of epistemic vice has a long prehistory, it was neglected for much of the last century until the emergence, during the last thirty years, of virtue epistemology. Yet still, interest has mainly focused on what Linda Zagzebski called the “virtues of the mind,” such that it is only lately that philosophers have considered the associated vices of the mind (Zagzebski 1996). Happily there is now a growing literature on vice epistemology devoted to analysis of both the concept of epistemic vice and of specific vices. Many recent works also explore epistemic vices in a range of social, practical, and epistemic contexts, such as education, healthcare, and political activism.

I will focus on a recent analysis of the two main concept of epistemic vice identified by Heather Battaly—reliabilist and responsibilist—since they reflect the two main ‘schools’ of contemporary virtue epistemology. I think vice-charging as a practice can be sustained using either a reliabilist or a responsibilist conception of vice. But the two concepts differ in their accounts of what fixes the normative status of epistemic character traits, affecting the content and force of the vice-charges they can sustain.

A reliabilist is interested in those stable qualities of epistemic agents that are conducive to the reliable acquisition of epistemic goods, like truths. The virtues they esteem therefore tend to have an overt cognitive or perceptual character—focus, attentiveness, concentration, and so on. A reliabilist virtue is, as Ernest Sosa puts it, “a quality bound to help maximise one’s surplus of truth over error” (Sosa 1991, 225). Since being attentive and focused makes it more likely that one will identify truths about the world—like how many birds are nesting in a tree—those qualities are desirable and attractive epistemically, and so classified as virtues.

By contrast, a responsibilist is primarily concerned with achieving and maintaining a responsible epistemic character. As a result, the responsibilist virtues have a more moral ring to them and include epistemic forms of courage, justice, and humility. Such virtues reflect what Zagzebski calls “a deep and enduring acquired excellence of a person” (Zagzebski 1996, 137). Since the acquisition of virtues is partly a matter of having the right concerns and desires, responsibilists make motivation central to the possession of virtues in a way that reliabilists tend not to. Although both reliabilism and responsibilism explore the characteristic qualities of a good epistemic agent, the differences between them are genuine and the subject of vigorous debate.

Battaly develops her two concepts of vice against the background of reliabilism and responsibilism. A reliabilist concept construes vice as a stable quality of an epistemic agent that reliably produces bad effects of a broadly epistemic kind—ignoring evidence, forgetting relevant facts, and so on. An inattentive detective will reliably miss certain features of a crime scene and risks missing potentially crucial evidence. A responsibilist concept construes vice as a stable quality of an agent that reflects a blameworthy psychology or bad epistemic character—a lack of courage to challenge inflammatory political claims that one knows to be false, say, or failing to correct for prejudices that unfairly deflate the credibility of socially marginalized groups.

Epistemic vice-charges can be articulated using either a reliabilist or a responsibilist concept of vice. We can follow Battaly in conceiving of vices in terms of bad
effects or bad psychologies or adopt some form of hybridized model. Since the practice of vice-charging is neutral with regard to the particular concept of vice, there is no need for stipulation at this point. But it is worth noting that responsibilism captures a very important dimension of epistemic life, which is that, as social creatures, we naturally want more from our peers than just that they reliably come up with the epistemic goods. If so, we ought attend carefully to the characters of epistemic agents, of our social peers, for neglect of them means that we are—as one responsibilist puts it—left “unable to account for much of [what] we as human beings care about most” (Baehr 2011, 48). (As an aside, if talk of the ‘psychology’ of collectives or institutions sounds odd, switch to the term ‘character’. We naturally speak of the character of institutions, like a ‘friendly department’ [Anderson 2012; Fricker 2010; Lahroodi 2007]).

The fact that a reflective vice-charger can use different concepts of vice should not disguise the fact that there is a real choice to be made. For there are at least three important differences between reliabilist and responsibilist forms of vice-charge.

First, they reflect contrasting normative expectations of the qualities or characters that epistemic agents ought to have. It is one thing to expect an agent to avoid acting in ways that produce bad effects, if that means honing their faculties, say. But it’s quite another to expect that same agent to cultivate a virtuous character, where that includes, but is not exhausted by, properly functioning faculties. It is one thing to expect an agent to have good memory and concentration, but another to expect them to have a good ‘soul’.

Second, the reliabilist and responsibilist concepts encourage different ideas about the sorts of corrective proposals relevant to the interdiction of epistemic vice. Reliabilists worried about bad effects might naturally focus on redeveloping social norms and practices so that they do not, for instance, incentivise bad epistemic traits—establishing ‘blame and shame’ policies, say. But responsibilists might protect that this does not go far enough, for it neglects the further, deeper ameliorative task of improving the epistemic character of agents—purging them of bad desires, urges, and ambitions, rather than just removing the structures that allow them to manifest. Such alternative visions of the nature of epistemic amelioration clearly differ in their practical, moral, and sociopolitical feasibility, and so often arouse controversy. When a philosopher suggested that dogmatic acts of wilful scientific misinformation could be classed as acts of criminal negligence and punitively treated accordingly, many critics immediately and unfairly blasted him for trying to “criminalise dissent” on behalf of a “global warming Gestapo.”

Third, different concepts of epistemic vice might entail different estimations of agential responsibility for their vices. Since responsibility is the topic of section 5, I suspend discussion of it for now and instead go on to identify a further consideration relevant to the second desideratum—the form of a vice-charge.

4. IMPLICIT AND EXPLICIT VICE-CHARGES

There is a rough but useful distinction to be drawn between an implicit and an explicit vice-charge. An explicit charge is one that names or specifies the particular vice(s) that the critic wishes to invoke—as when one says, “Climate sceptics are so
dogmatic!” By contrast, an implicit charge imputes certain vices to the target by describing their conduct or character in ways that naturally invite articulation in terms of vices. So if I say that biblical literalists do not even understand the science they are disputing, that is an implicit charge of arrogance or dogmatism. Indeed, if I did say that, many would naturally reply, “I know—they’re so dogmatic!”

Clearly the implicit-explicit distinction is not a rigid one, nor could it be given the complexity of natural language. A whole continuum of forms of vice-charge could be described that accommodates group-specific rhetorical tropes, ambiguity, metaphor, and communicative phenomena such as dogwhistling. If I describe a seminar talk as “lively,” that may be a coded way of saying that I found it all style, no substance. The distinction is, however, useful for two reasons. The first is that the act of explicitly attributing a vice to a person has a normative force and rhetorical power that more implicit attributions might lack. If I accuse you of dogmatism, that is a stronger and less ambiguous evaluation of your character than if I said that you tend to overlook evidence. An explicit vice-charge is a direct criticism of a person qua epistemic agent, an attribution not only of fault or folly, but of vice. To adapt a point made by Rosalind Hursthouse, if a vice is a ‘prohibition’ of a certain character trait, then it can also be a proscription of certain types of people—the dogmatic, the arrogant—which naturally will include some of one’s friends, colleagues, or peers (Hursthouse 1999, 17).

The second reason for drawing the implicit-explicit distinction is that a perfect vice-charge would include a full account of how it fulfils the three desiderata. Although in practice few do, the ideal is that most would. A single charge may after all have both implicit and explicit components. If I say, “You’re arrogant!”, the vice being invoked is explicit, but the precise meanings and reasons for the charge are not, even if the target or audience might be able to infer them—from situational factors, say. In some cases, though, the full depth and complexity of a vice-charge may be unrealised unless and until there is a division of critical labour, of the sort described earlier.²⁰

With these remarks in place, the next obvious step in my analysis may seem to be to say something about specific vices, and then go on to construct a robust charge. I could sketch a hybrid concept of the vice of epistemic dogmatism and ask whether climate contrarians really are guilty of it, as many of their critics maintain. Although that would be a worthwhile project, I want to argue that it would be premature as it stands. Even if we had a robust account of the practice of epistemic vice-charging that does fulfil the desiderata, there would remain a set of deeper epistemological obstacles to the practice. These obstacles reflect the general fact that vice-charging is employed in a nonideal and unjust social world that is marked by intense epistemological disagreement—a fact that complicates vice-charging’s status as a critical practice.

I will call these the problems of responsibility and of consensus.

5. THE PROBLEM OF RESPONSIBILITY
The problem of responsibility gathers around the question of agential responsibility for their epistemic vices. It starts with two general claims about epistemic character traits. The first is that they are not fixed but are the active products of what Miranda Fricker calls processes of “epistemic socialisation,” of experience, reflection, and
interaction with others (Fricker 2007, 82f and 94f). The second claim is that the possibility and efficacy of epistemic socialisation is always contingent upon a complex background structure of material, social, and epistemic conditions—educational opportunities, cultures of debate, and so on. But the problem is that such conditions do not always obtain—whether optimally, sufficiently, or even minimally; and even where they do they are not always equally available the members of all social groups. This point has been well made by several generations of Marxist, feminist, and postcolonial critics and, from there, taken up into standpoint and social epistemology.

The problem of responsibility arises from the fact that few, if any, of us enjoy the conditions necessary for effective socialisation as responsible epistemic agents—a point made in recent influential works in social and virtue epistemology. It is a sad truth that our epistemic socialisation is shaped by entrenched injustices, invidious stereotypes, and disruptive biases. Moreover, such epistemically desocialising factors ramify within contexts of oppression, traditions of epistemic and social inequality, and structures of socially produced ignorance, even if different groups are affected in different ways to different extents. Sociological studies from the United States show that climate change scepticism and denial is strongly correlated with religiously and politically conservative communities. That being so, the dogmatism of those agents is plausibly a consequence of the contingencies of their epistemic socialisation. Medina argues that such factors require a sensitivity to context and social positionality that complicates, but by no means nullifies, agential responsibility (Medina 2013, 120). It calls for what I will call sensitivity to the aetiology of epistemic vice.

A critic might query the call for attention to aetiologies of epistemic vice, proposing instead that we focus simply on the correction of epistemic vice where we find it. There are two reasons why aetiology matters. First, the aetiology of vice is often an important part of that broader ameliorative task, just as in medicine a patient’s case history is often crucial to their diagnosis and care. Second, aetiological sensitivity is often important, if not sometimes essential, to the diagnostic task of identifying social and psychological structures that are epistemically corrupting—that is, conducive to the cultivation and exercise of vices.

A good example of the problem is a recent debate about agential responsibility for the vice of epistemic injustice. Fricker argued that certain epistemic injustices arise owing to “gaps” at the group level in what she calls hermeneutical resources, of concepts essential to interpreting certain social experiences (Fricker 2007, ch. 7). Kristie Dotson objected that certain unjust agents could exploit this account (Dotson 2012). Confronted with a charge of injustice, they could protest that the relevant resources were not available to them, but—crucially—not due to any fault on their part. The aetiological sensitivity to the contingencies of context and positionality that Medina urges allows us to tell a richer story about the responsibility of epistemically unjust agents in cases like this. It may be true that white men socialised in the southern United States during the 1950s are not culpable for their racialised epistemically unjust characters. But they may still be epistemically responsible for them, perhaps due to their failure to attend to and take seriously contemporary calls upon them to acknowledge and reform their socially inherited and epistemically distorting racial biases (Medina 2013, §4.2.1).
I suggest the 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. Many Americans class themselves as “red state miracles,” who, despite being epistemically socialised in god-fearing, science-hating, ultraconservative social communities still emerged as responsible agents. Such “miracles” typically had the will and initiative to do the epistemic work to access alternative sources of information, question inherited convictions, and so on. As a result, they are right to expect credit for achieving their good epistemic characters, if not special praise for doing so despite the suboptimal conditions of their socialisation.24

The call for aetiological sensitivity to the conditions that shape the formation of agential epistemic character is reflected in the concept of “ecologies” as developed by Lorrane Code (Code 2006). She calls for sensitivity to the “ecologies” that shape and structure our epistemic lives, where these are defined as the dynamic material-social-epistemic spaces that affect the objects, practices, and structures of knowing. Code in fact remarks that such “ecological sensitivity” is an important self-reflexive response to her earlier works, in the 1980s, on epistemic responsibility, an early and important venture into virtue epistemology (Code 1987). Code warns us against presuming an “excessively benign” conception of our social-epistemic ecologies—as, say, offering “space for and uniform access to open debate” that are uncluttered by “hidden agendas...searing disputes [or] tyrannical oppressions” (Code 2006, vii). Such ecologies sound idyllic, but alas none exist in our messy, unjust, nonideal world, which is afflicted with systemic problems of access, inclusion, and participation of the sort described by Fricker, Medina, and others. Code proposes that judgements of agential epistemic responsibility should therefore evince “ecological sensitivity,” including to the particular “intellectual and moral character ideals” to which agents within those ecological communities are exposed (Code 2006, 30–31).

A robust vice-charge should be sensitive to the aetiology of vice and the ecological conditions of epistemic socialisation. To be sure, this makes for hard work, and so underscores the need for a division of critical labour. Responsible critics appreciate that epistemic responsibility has individual and collective aspects that ought to be balanced against one another, and are alert to the complexities and contingencies of context and history. If this seems to place the bar too high, forcing critics to refrain from issuing legitimate charges of vice, then it is useful to bear two points in mind. First, vice-charging is a social practice that can involve a division of labour. The work can be shared with others as part of a critical community. Second, responsible and robust vice-charges can be informed by a growing history of charges—of successful and failed charges, tried-and-tested strategies, and so on. Such cooperative critical communities could be thought of as the positive counterpoint to the agnotogenic agencies that work hard to create and maintain epistemically corrupting cultures.25
I suggest that a sense of aetiological sensitivity can provide critics with the rich concept of epistemic responsibility that is needed for robust vice-charges.

6. THE PROBLEM OF CONSENSUS

The practice of vice-charging should ultimately be ameliorative, aiming to make things better—to try to improve the conduct of a vicious colleague, perhaps. But if a vice-charge is to be effective, at least in cases where the target is the intended beneficiary, then there must be a degree of consensus between critic and target. But there are good reasons to worry that such consensus is likely to be absent or difficult precisely in the cases where a vice-charge is most likely to be provoked—and where amelioration is most strongly felt to be needed.

This worry sets up the problem of consensus, which begins with the point that the efficacy of a vice-charge is contingent on consensus between critic and target. There must be consensus, first, on the definition of the vice being invoked—dogmatism, say, or hubris—and, second, on whether the target does in fact exemplify that vice. One can imagine a situation where the critic and target both agree on what dogmatism is, but disagree about whether it is exemplified by the target—who, naturally, denies it. Such lack of consensus on exemplification is an important problem for the practice of vice-charging. To a degree it could be addressed if the critic and target engaged in a first-order debate about the definition of dogmatism, of the sort offered in section 3. (Of course, this rarely happens). But my focus is upon those cases where there is a lack of consensus about the definition of vice, since that is a more fundamental issue, and a deeper problem.26

Any definition of any epistemic vice is likely to be grounded in a wider set of epistemological commitments. After all, many vices are defined in terms of failures to accept or conform to those commitments, such as the dogmatic person who fails to adhere to established norms of doxastic revision, say. But the worry is that this sort of agreement or consensus is likely to be lacking in precisely the cases where a critic feels greatest need to deploy a vice-charge.

A good example of the problem of consensus concerning the definition of vices can be found in the recent work of the philosopher of science, Philip Kitcher. Its central theme is contemporary disagreement on the epistemic authority of science in modern democratic societies.27 Such societies are characterised by what he calls “chimeric” or “hybrid” epistemologies, defined in terms of tendencies to defer inconsistently to the authority of science. Citizens in the grip of a chimeric epistemology are prone to selectively resist the results of biology or cosmology to protect the religious doctrines that they are perceived to contradict. Many conservative religious communities in the United States are epistemically chimeric and so are our distant epistemic peers. A consequence of this is that the consensus on which effective public policy depends is eroded.28 In response to this problem, Kitcher proposes the adoption of a “shared notion of public reason,” but one that explicitly builds in an “insistence on the priority of science” (Kitcher 2008, 15). If a secular notion of public reason were adopted, the epistemic chimerism of those religious conservatives is liable to be perceived as epistemic vice by secularists. At this point, the problem of consensus appears.29
Suppose a secularist formally charges the conservative with the vice of epistemic dogmatism, citing as evidence their resistance to the deliverances of science. In so doing, they effectively define dogmatism—at least in its operative form—in terms of resistance to the authority of science. But, of course, the conservative was initially subjected to the charge precisely because of their dissenting estimation of science’s authority. That being so, they are unlikely to accept the operative definition of vice, for doing so effectively endorses the charge of dogmatism against them. Instead they will regard the proffered definition as blatant dice loading. We might say that their general scepticism about the epistemic authority of science recapitulates as at the level of resistance to certain definitions of epistemic vice.

The problem of consensus can now be restated. A vice-charge is only critically effective if the target accepts the operative definition of the vice invoked. That in turn requires a further degree of agreement on the wider set of epistemological—perhaps even metaphysical—commitments in which that definition is embedded. Yet of course many vice-charges are provoked precisely because of fundamental epistemological disagreements—concerning the authority of science, say. We might worry that vice-charges are most needed when they are least likely to find the consensus upon which their efficacy depends. Perhaps facing such dissensus head on might serve to start a process of engagement that might enable more productive engagement. But, even so, such hope is badly supported by ‘real-world’ examples of debates about climate change and other topics that mark ‘fundamental epistemological disagreement’.

At the least, certain agents might feel special epistemic responsibilities to attempt such engagement with those they regard as being at serious epistemic fault. Indeed, a willingness to do so is a mark of those people—academics or not—who do attempt to engage with the epistemically dysfunctional. Many contemporary philosophers of science, for instance, promote and practice what is variously called “socially relevant philosophy of science” and “philosophy of science in society.” This is a revival of an older conception of the nature of the discipline of philosophy of science that honours the ameliorative ambitions of epistemology—indeed, of philosophy—I described and endorsed earlier.30

I do not have a solution to the problem of consensus, but can offer two general remarks. First, critics who want to develop and deploy robust vice-charges should be sensitive to the deep complexities of epistemic responsibility and consensus. It may be difficult to direct robust vice-charges against our distant epistemic peers, but it is not impossible. Any sensible critic knows that high standards make for hard work. Second, it may be useful to consider richer concepts of epistemic vice—ones sensitive not only to the dispositions and behaviour of individual and collective agents, but to the socio-historical contingencies—the ‘ecologies’ and aetiologies—that shape them. I might even suggest that certain epistemic vices may be rooted in something even deeper—certain ‘worldviews’, say, or metaphysical visions—but that is a task for another time (Cooper 2002; Kidd 2015, 2016).

It is at least clear that the accounts of epistemic vice that would emerge from such studies will be messier than philosophers might prefer. But they will better reflect the messiness of our world and, for that reason, better contribute to its amelioration.
7. CONCLUSIONS

I have offered a preliminary study of the critical practice of epistemic vice-charging. A robust charge fulfils certain desiderata, of which I identified three, that serve to distinguish it from a rhetorical complaint. Such robust charges are therefore complex and might best be developed through a division of critical labour. But there are also two deeper obstacles to the practice—the problems of responsibility and of consensus—which together point to the really hard work in the practice of vice-charging. Robust charges must build in a suitably complex account of agential epistemic responsibility and identify ways to secure the epistemic consensus upon which the efficacy of vice-charges depends. I conclude that a robust critical practice of epistemic vice-charging is possible in principle, but very difficult in practice. But as long as vicious conduct is a feature of human social life it will be important to have effective critical practices to expose and challenge it. Developing that practice will require the combined efforts of philosophers, sociologists, psychologists, and others. A central task for those scholars will be the identification of the sorts of social-epistemic conditions that facilitate robust epistemic vice-charging in a way consistent with the demands of epistemic and ethico-political responsibility.31

NOTES

2. The question of agential and collective epistemic responsibility is given a full and sophisticated discussion by Medina (2013, ch. 4).
3. The role of emotions and feelings in rational and moral persuasion in contexts of public and political debate is developed in Nussbaum (2013). The differential efficacy of strategies for persuading diverse communities and publics of the reality and risks of climate change is addressed in Moser and Dilling (2008). An engaging discussion of the integration of rational and emotional sensibilities in rhetorical persuasion is offered by Crosswhite (2013).
4. I am grateful to two anonymous referees for urging me to distinguish the different potential beneficiaries of a vice-charge.
5. The influence of social positionality on epistemic attitudes to climate change is made clear in sociological studies by McCright and Dunlap (2011) and McCright and Xiao (2014).
7. I develop an account of procedural impeccability in the context of science in Kidd (2013a) and Kidd (forthcoming a).
8. The importance of social and institutional conventions and roles to ‘discursive context’ is emphasized by Gerken (2012) and Wright (2011).
9. The history and fallout of “Climategate” is discussed in Anderson (2014) and Maibach et al. (2012).
10. See, for example, Akin and Harbour (2010) and Torcello (2011). I indicate my enthusiasm for the idea of professional epistemic virtues in Kidd (2014a).
11. I am grateful to José Medina for emphasising the overly demanding nature of my initial account of the fulfilment of these desiderata.
12. Historians of epistemology such as Corneau (2011) and Wolterstorff (1996) make these sorts of points. I fill in the metaphilosophical rationale for a division of critical labour in Kidd (2012).
A useful introduction to these two ‘schools’ is Baehr (2004).

See Baehr (2011, ch. 1) and Zagzebski (1996).

Torcello (2014). The term “global warming Gestapo” is popular among right-wing climate denialists, and dates back to at least 2005.

A critic who fails to realise the full depth and complexity of a vice-charge might suffer from a lack of critical resources, a point that recalls Fricker’s account of the ways that certain communities lack the “hermeneutical resources” they need to understand their social experiences (Fricker, 2007, ch. 7). I thank Sarah Wieten for this point.

My account is mainly inspired by Fricker (2007) and Medina (2013).

I say more about the concept of ‘epistemic corruption’ in Kidd (forthcoming c).

I thank Sarah Wieten for emphasising this point.

The outstanding study is Oreskes and Conway (2010). The philosophical context is detailed in Gross and McGoey (2015).

A critic who fails to realise the full depth and complexity of a vice-charge might suffer from a lack of critical resources, a point that recalls Fricker’s account of the ways that certain communities lack the “hermeneutical resources” they need to understand their social experiences (Fricker, 2007, ch. 7). I thank Sarah Wieten for this point.

A critic who fails to realise the full depth and complexity of a vice-charge might suffer from a lack of critical resources, a point that recalls Fricker’s account of the ways that certain communities lack the “hermeneutical resources” they need to understand their social experiences (Fricker, 2007, ch. 7). I thank Sarah Wieten for this point.

My account is mainly inspired by Fricker (2007) and Medina (2013).

I say more about the concept of ‘epistemic corruption’ in Kidd (forthcoming c).

I thank Sarah Wieten for emphasising this point.

The outstanding study is Oreskes and Conway (2010). The philosophical context is detailed in Gross and McGoey (2015).

I thank an anonymous referee for raising these points about lack of consensus on definition and on exemplification.

A good starting point would be Kitcher (2008), or, for a fuller statement, Kitcher (2012), especially ch. 1. I say more about these points in Kidd (2013b) and Kidd (2014b).

A good introduction to the idea of ‘epistemic peers’ is Gelfert (2011).

I am working with a fairly minimalist account of the scope of epistemic consensus—for example, a shared commitment to continue to try to work out epistemic differences, rather than a more substantive agreement on certain epistemic norms. But, as Kitcher emphasises, even this minimal consensus does not always obtain.

See Fehr and Plaisance (2010), Kitcher (2012). I have defended a similar conception of the discipline of philosophy of science in Kidd (2013c).

I am grateful to audiences at Durham and Sheffield and to José Medina and to two anonymous referees for their comments, criticisms, and encouragement.

REFERENCES


Fehr, Carla and Kathryn S. Plaisance, eds. 2010. “Socially Relevant Philosophy of Science”, *Synthese* 177.
Gascón, José Ángel forthcoming. "Virtue and Arguers," *Topoi*.