# EPISTEMIC CORRUPTION AND EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

This paper introduces the concept of 'epistemic corruption' and applies it to current debates about the negative effects of education on the epistemic character of students. Epistemic corruption occurs when an agent comes to develop or exercise one or more epistemic vices due their interaction with a social environment. The phenomenon of epistemic corruption is especially important given modern enthusiasm, among virtue epistemologists and others, for the claim that education should aim to enhance the epistemic character of students by cultivating their epistemic virtues. After presenting a working account of the concept of epistemic corruption, three case studies are offered that document epistemically corrupting educational practices and policies. I conclude that study of the forms, practices, and effects of epistemic corruption should be an important dimension of virtue and vice epistemology.

## 1. EDUCATION AND EPISTEMIC CHARACTER

According to a venerable tradition, education ought to aim to have positive effects on the epistemic character of students. Plato, Aristotle, and Locke, among others, all defend versions of this claim, although nowadays its most vigorous defenders are to be found within virtue epistemology. Succinctly put, education ought to provide opportunities for students to cultivate and exercise what Linda Zagzebski (1996) called the 'virtues of the mind'. By cultivating such virtues, one's epistemic character is thereby enhanced. Naturally, different advocates develop this curt claim in different ways. Some make local claims about the promotion of a specific virtue, while others offer more global proposals to the effect that epistemic character ought to be central to the educational enterprise. Such claims are consistently communicated using a rich rhetoric of 'teaching for virtue', 'enhancing character', or cultivating excellent thinkers, where 'excellence' is articulated in aretaic terms.[1]

Such enthusiasm for virtue-centric accounts of the aims and nature of education has, quite naturally, invited challenge from various quarters. Aside from obvious questions about the philosophical and pedagogical details, the literature offers several influential lines of critique. Perhaps most popular at present are the situationist criticisms, inspired by the work of John Doris and others, who argue on empirical grounds that there is no psychological warrant for talk of virtue and character. Given the radical sensitivity of our behaviour to situational factors, the conception of character that is operative in philosophical virtue theory is bankrupt. In the case of education, the aim cannot be to cultivate

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1    See the chapters in Baehr (2015).

virtue or to enhance character, if these cannot be genuine foci of educative practice.[2] But my focus is upon a different critique of virtue-centric accounts of education; one that accepts the reality of traits of character and that sits within a long tradition of philosophical discourse about education.

Call it the *corruption criticism*. It accepts the existence of epistemic character, taken to consist of virtues and vices and, in most of its forms, also accepts the claim that education ought to cultivate virtue and enhance character. Its distinctive feature is its focus on the concern that education can and often does *damage* or *erode* character. Its general form is that, although education should have positive effects on students' epistemic character, it is often actually damaging, having bad effects. Rather than cultivating virtues of the mind, certain forms of education lead to the development of the vices of the mind. If it is possible to educate students in ways that enhance their epistemic character, then other ways might, regrettably, damage or erode it. Education of certain sorts can erode or fail to nourish virtues, and encourage or incentivise a set of vices, or both.

The corruption criticism is not an abstract worry, since versions of it run through historical and contemporary critical discourse about education. Champions of virtue-based accounts of education are often motivated, at least to some degree, by latent worries about the corrupting effects of education. Perhaps the most famous example is Plato's criticisms of literature and his call for the banishment of artists from the ideal state. Each reflected his concern with their negative effects on the character and ethical formation of young Athenians, not least by promoting as exemplars for emulation 'people' that are 'mean-spirited or otherwise contemptible' (*Republic* 395).

The early modern period is a rich source for corruptionist critics of education who use a latent conception of intellectual virtue and vice. John Locke explained that his interests in education were inspired by a realisation of the 'early corruption of youth', which he attributed to various 'errors in education' ([1693] 1996: 8). Despite their best intentions, many educators relied on styles of teaching, such as rote memorisation, that dampened their students' enthusiasm and encouraged in them bad intellectual habits. Locke's analysis of these bad habits takes on a strikingly vice-epistemological dimension in his 1706 educational essay, 'Of the Conduct of the Understanding', which catalogues a variety of vices of the mind. They include *despondency*, a specific form of laziness that consists of a disposition to abandon enquiry in the face of difficulties, and *resignation*, a failure of intellectual autonomy that manifests as a disposition to submit to the last opinion or belief to which one was exposed ([1706] 1996: §§39, 27). Locke emerges as a corruptionist critic of education because he explores the ways that certain educational practices can tend to encourage the development in students of these and other vices of the mind.[3]

Sensitivity to the negative effects on students of educational and social arrangements is also a theme of the educational remarks of Mary Astell. A theme of her 1694 book, *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies*, is systematic deficiencies in the education then available to (at least certain) women: stifling curricula focused on 'froth and trifles', devoid of opportunities to contemplate 'noble and sublime Truths' encourage the growth of passivity, insensibility and other 'Feminine Vices', such that women's characters become

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2  A rich discussion of situationism as it relates to education is given by Carter and Pritchard (2017).
3  The virtue-theoretic framing of Locke's educational epistemology is described in Yolton (1998).

'degenerated and corrupted' (Astell [1694] 2002: 81, 62). Writing a century later, Mary Wollstonecraft continues the study of the gendered dimension of education and its differential effects on the ethical and epistemic formation of men and women.4 According to her contemporary social and educational norms, women are 'not to be contradicted in company' and expected only to develop what she calls 'the negative virtues', such as docility and flexibility, that are 'incompatible with any vigorous exertion of the intellect' (Wollstonecraft [1792] 1995: 133). Since having one's claims and beliefs subjected to reasoned critical disputation is crucial to the development of a set of intellectual virtues and dialectical capacities, a prohibition on 'contradiction' will, argues Wollstonecraft, tend in practice to fail to develop women's epistemic virtues and entrench their vices. Depriving a person of the experiences and activities required for robust epistemic self-formation is a mode of corruption, especially if sustained and prolonged and enforced by the surrounding culture – 'everything conspires to render the cultivation of the understanding more difficult in the female than the male world' (Wollstonecraft [1792] 1995: 129).5

Describing the negative effects on women of these norms, Wollstonecraft offers a stirring statement of corruptionist concerns:

> Is it possible that a human creature could have become such a weak and depraved being, if, like the Sybarites, dissolved in luxury, every thing like virtue had not been worn away, or never impressed by precept, a poor substitute, it is true, for cultivation of mind, though it serves as a fence against vice? (Wollstonecraft [1792] 1995: 116)

Locke, Astell, and Wollstonecraft are just a few historical examples of corruptionist critics in philosophical educational discourse in the Western tradition. Each has a concern with the negative effects of educational and social norms and practices on the epistemic and ethical character of students, articulable in terms of virtues and vices. A concern with the corruption of character is, of course, not their sole concern, but it does sit within the central economy of their concerns.6

This paper sketches two concepts that can organise the range of claims that are made about the effects of education on the epistemic characters of students. First, *edification*: the idea that education ought to provide appropriate conditions for the cultivation and exercise of epistemic virtues, thereby building epistemic character. Under this label should be gathered the rhetoric of 'teaching of virtue', 'enhancing character', and so on. Contemporary advocates of edification in education – like Jason Baehr, Heather Battaly, Duncan Pritchard, and Lani Watson – argue for some version of the claim that education ought to develop epistemic character by enabling students to develop epistemic virtues.7 Second, *corruption*: education is corrupting when it tends to encourage the development and exercise of epistemic vices. It plays on everyday uses of the verb 'corrupt' to mean degrading the positive or essential qualities of a person or thing. When educational experiences draw out, feed, or reward the vices of the mind, then they are corrupting.

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4   It is unclear whether Wollstonecraft knew or read Astell's work: there is no clear evidence that she did, despite the shared themes, and there are significant differences between their philosophies.

5   Wollstonecraft's conception of gendered virtues is discussed in Bergès (2013), chapter 4.

6   Other educational phenomena – like indoctrination – could also be considered in terms of epistemic vice and corruption.

7   See, *inter alia*, Baehr (2015), Battaly (2015), Pritchard (2015), Watson (2015).

Before developing the concepts of edification and corruption, two general comments are in order. The first is that they are not confined to *epistemic* virtues and vices, although that is the focus of this paper. Edification and corruption can be applied to ethical, civic, or other forms of virtue and vice. The second comment is that there is a third way to assess the effects of education on character: *akrasia*. An educational system could produce students with a proper sense of the nature and significance of the epistemic virtues, but fail to instil a further commitment to be epistemically virtuous. Such students are *akratic*, knowing the good, but not yet disposed to pursue or manifest it, being instead too weak of will. Education, then, can result in edification or *akrasia* or corruption, which are increasingly worse as outcomes. It is better to be edified than *akratic*, and *akratic* better than corrupted. A study of the characterological effects of education should include all three options. The focus of this paper is, however, epistemic corruption and the many ways that education can be epistemically corrupting.

## 2. EPISTEMIC CORRUPTION AND CRITICAL DISCOURSES OF EDUCATION

A shared conviction of both edification and corruption is that epistemic character can change both spontaneously and through systematic influence. Education can lead to changes in character in both ways, although, for edificationists, the influence is ideally a result of careful design rather than happy accidents. Yet what can be done well can also be done badly and even well-designed systems can go wrong, as with the 'errors in education' that so troubled Locke.

A rhetoric of corruption is a striking feature of the writings of influential modern commentators on education. Martha Nussbaum has argued vigorously that rote learning and memorisation of prescribed outcomes is tending to 'corrupt the mission of humanistic scholarship' (Nussbaum 2010: 130). Under such regimes, the noble task of cultivating critically capable and morally sophisticated students inevitably becomes increasingly difficult. Stefan Collini shares similar concerns in his spirited defence of universities, this time against the philistinism bred by narrow zeal for economic goods. Inability to value other sorts of goods, he writes, risks the 'corruption' of scholars' role as 'custodians' of our 'complex intellectual inheritance' – of the ways of living, thinking, and feeling bequeathed by our predecessors (Collini 2012: 199). These elevated roles of preserving, transmitting, appreciating, and understanding that inheritance is threatened by an unapologetic philistinism and callow instrumentalism. Michael Sandel also echoes such causes and costs of corruption. Restless zeal for grading, testing, and quantifiable performative goals are tending to 'erode, or crowd out, or corrupt' what really matters – the 'love of reading', learning, and education for its own sake (Sandel 2012: 61).

Similar rhetorics of corruption run through the whole stream of academic, professional, and popular discourses on education. Despite its potency, however, the term 'corruption' needs careful handling. The examples just given refer to distinctively epistemic forms of corruption, rather than more overtly financial and moral sorts relevant to cases like selling degrees or accepting donations from Big Tobacco. But, still, the examples face two related problems. First, the critics do not *define* the term 'corruption'. Instead they rely on its idiomatic sense, but not explaining or unpacking it. Second, their usage does not specifically relate corruption to epistemic vice and character, of a sort apt to connect it to wider worries about edification. Sandel is a partial exception: he suggests that to

*corrupt* something is to evaluate it according to lower standards than are appropriate to it (Sandel 2012: 34). So, corrupting students could mean evaluating them not in the rich terms offered by Nussbaum and Collini, but in terms of their mastery of the skills attractive to future employers, say. Interesting as this definition is, though, it has no specifically *epistemic* sense: granted, the standards in question might be epistemic ones, but, again, they might not. Without a definition of 'corruption' that can connect it, clearly and explicitly, with epistemic vice, the worry about damage to students' epistemic characters cannot be cashed out. And in that case, criticisms that invoke characterological worries – Locke's say – can be too easily dismissed as mere rhetoric, such that the specific concerns they track are occluded.

Although epistemic corruption doubtless takes many forms, some of these will be reasonably definable in the terms of *vice epistemology*. Recently named by Quassim Cassam (2016), this is the study of the nature, forms, and effects of the various 'vices of the mind'. Typical examples will include arrogance, dogmatism, and inflexibility, alongside other less obvious, more esoteric vices, like epistemic self-indulgence or epistemic malevolence.[8] Alongside analyses of the concept of epistemic vice and studies of specific vices, it is also crucial to attend to the variety of ways that agents come to develop and retain the vices of the mind – to attend to the ways that an epistemic subject can be subjected to epistemically corrupting influences, of the sort I suggest we see underlying the critical discourses of education cited earlier. By *epistemic corruption*, we can say that:

> An educational system is epistemically corrupting insofar as it tends to create conditions that are conducive to the development and exercise of epistemic vice(s) by agents whose formation and agency is shaped by those conditions.

Epistemic corruption is a dynamic process – or a set of processes – by which the interaction of a set of personal, contextual, and structural factors tends to encourage, exacerbate, or entrench one or more epistemic vices. Obviously one's experiences and encounter within educational contexts are only one of the many things that may play a part in the corruption of an agent's epistemic character. Corruptionist critics often acknowledge the complexity of our epistemic socialisation, which is why their critical educational discourses are often embedded within wider projects of social and political critique, as with Plato and Wollstonecraft.

Some remarks on the definition of epistemic corruption. First, it has no *intentionality condition*. A system can be corrupting without that being an aim of its design or practice, so we ought to distinguish between systems that are *intentionally* and *inadvertently* corrupting. The distinction isn't rigid, not least since few systems of education are solely the result of careful design and deliberation, such that *all* of its features are plausibly describable as intentional features. A good example of inadvertent corruption is Wittgenstein's effect on many of his Cambridge students, as recalled by Norman Malcolm. Students were prone to imitate his ways of speaking and talking, slavishly repeating his remarks. Overwhelmed by Wittgenstein's charisma, they became servile, fawning and as such were *badly* affected by his teaching – indeed, such experiences were, says Malcolm, 'deeply harmful' to those students. Since Wittgenstein prized

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8 For these vices, see Baehr (2010) and Battaly (2010), respectively.

independence of mind, he was deeply distressed by these effects. His corrupting effects were therefore inadvertent and regretted – a main reason, in fact, why he eventually resigned his teaching duties (Malcolm 2001: 53). But other educational systems can be intentionally corrupting. Imagine a totalitarian state whose entire educational apparatus is designed to create intellectually docile and closed-minded citizens.

Second, the definition does not include a *success condition*. A system can be corrupting even if, as a matter of fact, it fails to corrupt some of its members. The corrupting tendencies may be genuine – it's just that some students, say, are lucky enough not to be affected by them. We should therefore distinguish *strongly* and *weakly* corrupting systems, as measured along three axes: *vices*, *agents*, *domains*.[9] Weakly corrupting systems tends to entrench *some* vices in *some* of its members, even if they are confined to certain aspects of their character – they are dogmatic about political issues, say, but not musical tastes. Strongly corrupting systems will tend to entrench *many* vices in *many* of their members, to the extent that their entire character is corrupted – the dogmatising schools of a repressive state, say.

The strength of corrupting tendencies will depend on at least two factors. First up, the psychosocial profile of particular agents. Some students will have sufficient awareness and strength of mind to recognise and resist the corrupting tendencies of their schooling. Others might be natural-born Aristotelians, determined to develop their virtues and relishing the struggle to do so as a means to do better. Second, the structures and norms of an educational system will affect the strength of its corrupting tendencies. Some universities might have active dissident currents that successfully weaken dogmatising institutional tendencies. Some teachers will act with profound integrity, subverting the corrupting effects of brutalised curricula. But we can imagine other educational systems that are profoundly corrupting – ones where a repressive political class dictates curricular content, ruthlessly imposes 'acceptable' teaching styles, and so on.

A third remark on the definition concerns the term 'educational system'. It is deliberately broad, being intended to encompass, among other things, educational aims, practices, educators, institutional arrangements, cultures, and climates. Indeed, at its broadest, a 'system' can refer to the entire complex within which these are integrated. The term therefore has a flexible referent. Sometimes what is corrupting might be a specific local aspect of a system; at other times, the entire system itself. The same is true of the *corrupting conditions*. These could be practical (punishing schedules, lack of time), social ('chilly climates', hostile cultures), or psychological (acute stress, poor morale) or some or all of these in combination. Identifying the corrupting conditions will, of course, often be an effective way of specifying the referent of 'educational system'.

Fourth, the definition refers to 'agents' whose epistemic character is being damaged. These are the *corruptees* and in most cases, they will be students, given the nascence of their epistemic character, but there are other potential corruptees within educational systems. Not only teachers and other epistemic agents, but also more abstract objects – ideals, like that of a liberal education, say, or 'the mission of humanistic scholarship' praised by Nussbaum. It is possible to corrupt people by corrupting the ideals by which they live and work. Talk of corruptees will also point, in some cases, to *corruptors*: the person or things responsible for corrupting tendencies. They, too, will often be individual or collective agents, but they can be more 'abstract' objects, such as policies, of which examples are offered below.

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9    I am grateful to Casey Johnson for the point about domains.

But 'students' are not a homogeneous group. Critics of epistemic corruption should be alert to students' diverse social profiles and epistemic sensibilities. Not only is this a mark of empirical sensitivity, it also has special significance to edification and corruption.

The empirical complexities of corruption within education gather around the point that an educational system that edifies one group might corrupt another. The differential effect of educational experiences and encounters on students with different psychosocial profiles is an important challenge for character-epistemic epistemologies of education. Some students may need tough-minded, muscular Promethean epistemic virtues, such as autonomy and confidence, such that their characters would be enhanced through experiences and activities that promote those traits. But for some other students, promoting those qualities could backfire – think of students who by virtue of their privileged social backgrounds are already disposed to confidence, such that *promoting* that quality in *them* would tend to foster vices such as arrogance (cf. Medina 2012: §1.1).[10] Perhaps the development of their epistemic characters would be better served if they were encouraged to develop what Richard Smith (2006) dubs the 'virtues of diffidence', such as cautiousness, modesty, and reticence – even if, again, the promotion of these sorts of qualities in *underprivileged* students would lead them to manifest as epistemic vices, such as servility or self-abasement (cf. Tanesini 2016).

The upshot of these possibilities is that assessment of the edifying or corrupting effects of educational systems will require an empirically detailed sensitivity to the socially textured epistemic characters of the effected agents. A single educational practice applied to a range of agents from different groups might edify some, corrupt others, while leave others *akratic* depending on the complex interplay of personal, contextual, and structural factors in educational environments. Processes and effects of epistemic corruption are therefore complex and require careful analysis, of a sort that will blend character and social epistemology, psychology, sociology, and educational research. Such research is in its infancy, but a promising approach is the idea of *epistemic engineering*, efforts to deliberately restructure social and epistemic environments promote the cultivation of epistemic virtues and the rehabilitation of epistemic vices, to create what I call an *edifying* environment (cf. Battaly 2016).

With the definition of epistemic corruption in place, we can now develop a framework for *corruptionist criticisms* of educational systems.

## 3. CORRUPTION, EDIFICATION, AND EDUCATION

Epistemologically textured criticisms of educational systems can take many forms. Since not all of these need invoke vice epistemology, it is useful to indicate two desiderata for a genuinely vice-epistemic corruptionist criticism. First, such criticisms must be genuinely concerned, to a significant degree, with damage to epistemic character, of a sort vice epistemology is apt to articulate. Second, employment of vice epistemology ought to add something distinctive to a criticism rather than just rephrase other sorts of worries. If these desiderata are not met, a vice-epistemic account of corruption is redundant.

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10   Incidentally, Medina (2012, 30) uses the term 'corruption', describing epistemic vices as 'corrupted attitudes and dispositions that get in the way of knowledge.' But this is different from my use of the term: whereas, for Medina, corruption is part of the *definition* of vice, whereas for me it is part of the *aetiology* of vice.

Although these desiderata are fundamental, there are several other things that effective corruptionist criticisms should do. These concern the content of the criticisms, rather than justification of the vice-epistemic framework. There are five that stand out. One, specification of the *corruptor(s)* and *corruptee(s)*: to identify who or what is doing the corrupting, and who or what is being subjected to corruption. Two, to specify the *epistemic vices* that are being promoted or inculcated. These might be vices of a reliabilist or a responsibilist sort, or some hybrid type: corruptionism is neutral with reference to these concepts of vice.[11] Since there are many candidate vices, this is no mean feat: some are familiar, others are not, so it is not always obvious what forms corruption is taking. Most of us have some sense of what the vice of arrogance looks and sounds like, but this might not be true of more esoteric vices like epistemic self-indulgence or epistemic malevolence.

A third feature of an effective corruptionist criticism is that it describes the *corrupting conditions* and assesses their *strength*. Often it will be relatively easy to pinpoint what the corrupting features of a system are, and connect them to some set of vices. Subjecting people to experiences of intimidation, for instance, is a way to induce the vice of epistemic timidity. Providing incentives for dishonesty is a way of crowding out the virtue of truthfulness – and so on. A crucial task for critics of epistemic corruption is to provide theoretically robust accounts of the vices and giving empirically robust accounts of the practices by which they can be instilled. In practice, this will typically require close contact between psychology, sociology, education, and vice epistemology.[12]

A corruptionist criticism should also have ameliorative functions. It can do this by making *conditionality claims* and *corrective claims*. The former describe the conditions that have to be in place for corrupting tendencies to become possible. These might be certain aims or practices or cultures that enable, incentivise, or in some other way encourage the development and exercise of vices. If these can be removed, then that system is *contingently corrupting* – for it has come to acquire features that promote vice or has gradually come to lose features that encourage virtue. But it is possible that some corrupting conditions are too integral to the system to be removed, and this would be an *intrinsically corrupting* system. Such systems could only cease to corrupt if they were dismantled. Once conditionality conditions are specified, of course, one can issue *corrective claims* – one describes the corrupting features that need removing or modifying, and edifying features that need building in or enhancing. The hope is that knowing the causes of corruption can point to solutions.

In sum, an effective corruptionist criticism will, ideally, specify and explain, for each case:

1. *Corruptor(s)* and *corruptee(s)*
2. *Epistemic vice(s)*
3. *Corrupting condition(s)*
4. *Conditionality* and *corrective claim(s)*

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11   The varieties of epistemic vice are detailed by Battaly (2014).
12   A good example is Chubb and Watermeyer (2016), two sociologists of education, who argue that the hyper-competitiveness of the REF is leading to 'the corruption of academics as custodians of truth'. Another is the critique of assessment systems developed by Davis (1999), though he does not use the term 'corruption'.

Using these desiderata, we can evaluate existing corruptionist criticisms and also develop new and sophisticated ones. The remainder of the paper is devoted to the former task: examining examples of criticisms of educational systems that are corrupting to see what sorts of methods, approaches, and examples they use. The first example – in the remainder of this section – is of a 'general' corruptionist criticism: one that invokes corruption, but does not specify the vices being promoted. The following sections go on to consider 'specific' criticisms.

An example of a general corruptionist criticism is Duncan Pritchard's (2015) argument that increasing reliance on technology in education is in *prima facie* tension with a modest form of edificationism. The cultivation of epistemic virtue requires students to undertake and perform certain cognitive tasks, in the process of which they can develop qualities like attentiveness or diligence. But technology enables students to 'off-load' this cognitive work onto external devices, thereby in effect foregoing opportunities for edification. Why bother to develop virtues like attentiveness or insightfulness if Googling can remember and explain for you?

Pritchard criticises such 'technomanic' tendencies for the reason that their effects are to erode the possibility conditions for the cultivation of epistemic virtues. The 'off-loading' of cognitive work is apt to reduce edifying opportunities while, at the same time, creating conditions conducive to vices, such as epistemic laziness. We see here the concern for damage to epistemic character constitutive of corruption, alongside two conditionality claims. First, Pritchard identifies conditions that are prone to generate and amplify corrupting tendencies: *technomania*, an attitude of unreflectively zealous enthusiasm for promoting and entrenching educational use of technology in ways resisting to criteria like pedagogic relevance or efficacy; and *epistemic individualism*, the idea that epistemic agency is ultimately individual, not premised on collective activity. Such individualism is suspect, since certain virtues can only be cultivated through cooperative epistemic endeavour – humility, say (cf. Kidd 2015). If so, cognitive 'off-loading' in classrooms deprives students of the opportunities for collective epistemic activity that are essential to edification. Educational systems characterised by technomania and epistemic individualism are therefore likely to be corrupting – not least because those features naturally pull together. Why work with other agents, when some electronic device can do the work faster?

As predicted, Pritchard's conditionality claims naturally point to corrective claims. One is that students can be encouraged to take 'cognitive ownership' when they are deliberating about when and why to 'off-load' cognitive work. Another is to embrace a form of 'extended virtue epistemology' that recognises the ways that epistemic agency extends beyond 'skull and skin'. Such extended conceptions will affirm the need for collective epistemic activity, safeguarding a sense of the need for its distinctive edifying opportunities. The virtues at risk of being eroded by this technomanic individualism can be protected, while the vices it is liable to feed can be cut off at the roots. But, unfortunately, the identity of those virtues and vices is not given, making this a generalist corruption criticism.

This has several costs. To start with, the absence of a specific vice means the criticism lacks the conceptual and empirical specificity it might otherwise have. This can, at times, be liable to limit its persuasive power and evidential force, at least to those who may defend technomania and individualism. A related worry is that it will be harder to respond to cases where a corruptionist criticism is challenged or contested. Those accused of using teaching styles judged to be dogmatising may reject that charge; without a definition of that vice, such contestations will be difficult to adjudicate. If a vice is carefully detailed,

then it should be easier to demonstrate that a system is apt to encourage its development. Still, one might reply that *most* of the vices of the mind are familiar enough not to need such treatment. But that may be an idle hope.

The third and final cost of a general criticism is that it likely cannot deal well with cases where an educational system is promoting some *unfamiliar* vice of the mind. Many of the epistemic vices belong to a familiar inherited vocabulary – arrogance, dogmatism, and so on, shaped by the contingencies of our history. But many other vices are less rooted in our history. Most people could envision a dogmatising way of educating children. Not so for the vice of epistemic self-indulgence, which is less familiar, but no less legitimate. If we stick to general criticisms, we risk inadvertently confining our critical imaginations to a 'table of the vices' that is both narrow and historically contingent.

For these reasons, corruptionist critics should aspire to be specific about the range of epistemic vices they perceive in educational systems. This should help us to avoid interminable disputation and to add empirical and conceptual detail to our critical discourses about education. It can also open our minds to less obvious sorts of epistemically vicious behaviour and deepen our insights into the ways that our table of the vices has developed. If done well, we can start to look for epistemic vices that are currently unarticulated and so actively enrich our capacity to chart the diversity of epistemically corrupting tendencies that may be lurking within our educational systems. In the process, we expand our educational imaginations and gain a more perspicuous view of the whole range of forms of epistemic depravity of which human beings are capable.

With the merits of specific corruptionist criticisms made clear, we can now go on to consider two examples.

## 4. INSENSIBILITY AND CORRUPTING POLICIES

We can distinguish different *modes* of epistemic corruption: distinct ways that the development and exercise of epistemic vices can be encouraged and enabled. Some modes are *passive*: they fail to adequately facilitate or properly encourage the exercise of virtues. Other modes are *active*: they promote, fuel, or reward the exercise of vices. This section offers an example of *active epistemic corruption*.

Central to vice epistemology is a concern with the effects on our epistemic character of the structures, norms, and cultures that shape our collective agency. Agents and structures matter, of course, but so do the *policies* that organise them. Certain policies may be edifying, but others can be corrupting – or, at least, that is a possibility of obvious interest to vice epistemologists. It led Heather Battaly (2013) to argue that certain *higher education policies* can be epistemically corrupting – in the specific sense that they can promote a vice she calls *epistemic insensibility*. Her work is, for this reason, a case study in how to study epistemic corruption in education, and is all the better for being grounded explicitly in the terms of virtue and vice epistemology.

Insensibility is a vice that marks a specific type of deficiency in a person's epistemic appetites. The virtue that marks its mean is epistemic temperance.[13] An insensible person,

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13  An account of the virtue of epistemic temperance, somewhat related to Battaly's, is developed by Bloomfield (Forthcoming).

says Battaly, 'consistently fails to desire, consume, engage in, or enjoy appropriate epistemic objects; on appropriate occasions; at appropriately frequent intervals' (Battaly 2013: 268). Perhaps they regularly ignore or fail to create opportunities to improve their knowledge or deepen their understanding of an important topic. The topic must, continues Battaly, be a genuine epistemic good, not a trivial topic, ignorance of which would not elicit informed concern. The vicious status of insensibility as an epistemic character trait can therefore be articulated in either reliabilist or responsibilist terms. Insensibility can lead to *bad effects*, or reflect a *bad psychology*, namely, a false or deficient conception of the epistemic good, or, indeed, both.

After describing the vice of epistemic insensibility, Battaly argues that it can be manifested by individual or collective agents, but also by higher education policies. A policy can be insensible, with her examples being the Seven Solutions, proposed some years ago by the Republican Party in Texas, and the last iteration of the Research Excellence Framework (REF) in the UK (see Battaly 2013: §3). These are insensible because each narrowly defines the epistemic good in instrumentalist terms: something is good to know, and worthy of research, if and only if it is likely to contribute to such practical concerns as economic growth or national security. These policies are insensible, says Battaly, because each 'promotes a failure to desire, consume, and enjoy some true beliefs that it is appropriate to desire, consume, and enjoy; and does so because it employs a false conception of the epistemic good' (Battaly 2013: 272). Since the policies promote insensibility, they are vicious, and where they substantially shape the agenda and practices of higher education, they are epistemically corrupting.

The claim that a policy can be epistemically vicious invites two comments. The first is that Battaly's claim is not that the *creators* of a policy are or must be epistemically insensible. A vicious policy can, but need not, be the product of vicious agents. It is well established that a collective of agents can manifest virtues at the group level, ones possessed by none of their members, and in the products of their collective agency.[14] An insensible policy can but need not be the product of insensible policymakers. The second is that describing abstract objects such as *policies* as vicious is liable to be rejected as a category mistake. *Policies* are not persons and so cannot be bearers of virtues or vices, and therefore it makes no sense to describe them as virtuous or vicious. Maybe the *policymakers* are insensible, but the *policy* is not. If so, concludes the critic, Battaly's criticism is misdirected.

The 'category mistake' objection to talk of vicious policies fails on two counts. First, we do comfortably describe abstract objects, such as policies, laws, and institutions, as vicious – as, say, cruel or unjust. Such talk can, sometimes, be merely rhetorical, but at other times, it can be quite appropriate. A policy is cruel or an institution unjust if they promote those vices: slavery is cruel and unjust for the reason that it promotes vices like cruelty and injustice. Similarly, Battaly argues that higher education policies are insensible insofar as they *promote* the vice of insensibility. But there are, at the least, two other ways that make sense of talk of vicious policies. A second is that a policy can require the *exercise* of a vice: slavery is cruel, in part, because it requires slave-owners to exercise the vice of cruelty. So, too, the REF is insensible because, unless resisted, it encourages UK academics to *exercise* the vice of insensibility, for instance, when designing their research projects. Third, a policy will be vicious if one must be vicious, to some degree, to find it as *attractive*

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14    For defences of the idea of collective epistemic virtue, see Fricker (2010) and Lahroodi (2007).

– as compelling, worthy of serious consideration, or as anything other than ghastly. The person who regards slavery as a worthwhile possibility – something to have 'on the table', as a live option – must have at least *some* latent disposition to a vice like cruelty (or, hardly better, be radically ignorant or *naïve*). Likewise, academic researchers who contemplate a research culture focused on money rather than truth or knowledge for its own sake is insensible, or at least drifting that way. So a policy can be vicious in several ways, including those we might call 'promotion', 'exercise', and 'attraction'.

A second reply to the category mistake objection, developed by Battaly, involves a qualification of the content of her claim about vicious policies (Battaly 2013: 272-3f). The claim is not that a vicious policy has *all* of the features of a vicious agent. That is obviously false, since agents have features – like perceptual habits – that abstract objects like policies do not. But a policy need not possess all of the features of a vice, only its definitive, fundamental features. Battaly argues that, for the vice of insensibility, the crucial features are that a policy should (i) promote a failure to desire, consume, and enjoy appropriate epistemic goods, and do so because it (ii) employs a deficient conception of the epistemic good. Both of these features are evident in the Seven Solutions and the REF, they are epistemically insensible. But they are not only *vicious*, but also *corrupting*, since their enactment within higher education systems will tend to create conditions that will conduce the relevant agents – researchers – to develop and exercise the vice of insensibility. This is a case of *active corruption*, since a vice is being encouraged, rather than just a failure to facilitate a virtue.

## 5. TRUTHFULNESS AND PROFESSIONAL VIRTUE

The passive mode of epistemic corruption involves the erosion of conditions that encourage the cultivation and exercise of epistemic virtues. Although this does not *prevent* the relevant agents from becoming and acting virtuously, it certainly increases the risk of their failing to. Within educational discourses, concerns about passive corruption often invoke the concept of professional virtues of teachers. The most explicit example is Michael Oakeshott's powerful account of, and attack on, what he famously called the 'frustration of education' (Oakeshott 1971). Like other critics, he uses a rhetoric of corruption, but unlike most, he offers a definition: to corrupt something is to treat it in ways that tend to deprive it of its character, its essential or defining features – a tacit assumption of this being that the relevant characteristics ought to be positive ones (Oakeshott 1971: 57).

Although Oakeshott does not specify what 'character' is, one can plausibly articulate it in aretaic terms. The essential characteristics of teachers will be specifiable in terms of their professional virtues, those cultivated qualities of character with special significance to the activities constitutive of teaching. Agential corruption can take the form of treating teachers in ways that erode or deprive them of opportunities to exercise or develop their professional virtues. To corrupt a teacher, one can interfere with their ability to manifest the virtues constitutive of their professional character. It is, however, a mode of corruption that presupposes commitment to the very idea of professional virtues. Luckily, the idea that certain virtues have a special role in certain professions is enjoying a modest renaissance.[15] Courage as a virtue may be incumbent upon all persons, but particularly so for

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15  Two good examples are Oakley and Cocking (2001) and Walker and Ivanhoe (2009).

those whose professional roles are apt to require the performance of certain actions despite serious risk of harm (military and emergency service personnel, say, rather than baristas and bakers). If so, courage is a generic virtue, but a special professional virtue of soldiers and first-responder emergency personnel, and perhaps also investigative reporters and others whose research exposes them to harms (see Kidd 2018).

Truthfulness is often nominated as a professional virtue of teachers, most recently by David E. Cooper (2008), who draws on precedents that include Oakeshott. That virtue is characterised, following Bernard Williams, as a set of dispositions – 'virtues of truth' – that are 'displayed in wanting to know the truth, in finding it out, and in telling it to other people' (Williams 2002: 7). These include Accuracy and Sincerity, that involve, roughly, being disposed to take care that one's beliefs are warranted and 'to come out with what one believes', respectively (Williams 2002: 127, 45).

Cooper adds two further virtues of truth, at least as concerns teachers. To be truthful, a teacher must, first, be 'Transparent', having no agenda or motives hidden from their students. A teacher who adds more women to their syllabi to covertly test their students' reactions is not being truthful, even if their utterances are accurate and sincere, since they are concealing a factor that is shaping the students' education. Second, a teacher must show 'Fidelity' to a given topic, honouring their sense of its really salient, important aspects (Cooper 2008: 82). Cooper offers as an example a literature tutor who, under pressure from colleagues, focuses on what a poem tells us about Victorian gender bias, rather than what, for them, really *matters*, such as its style or religious significance. Even if what the tutor says is accurate and sincere, they are not being Truthful, since they are neglecting their informed sense of what the students really ought to understand and appreciate about the poem.

Cooper's defence of truthfulness as a virtue of teachers is motivated by a concern with what was earlier dubbed the passive mode of corruption. Attention is called to an influential set of contemporary conceptions of the aims and nature of education. Although diverse, each, in its own way, 'marginalizes, demotes, or impugns the value' in and for teaching of the virtue of truthfulness (Cooper 2008: 81). Although no educationalist would openly *deny* its value, the educational aims they endorse do tend to put pressure on efforts by teachers to exercise truthfulness. Cooper gives three examples of such passively corrupting conceptions: each prescribes ends of education whose pursuit or realisation would effect an erosion of conditions for truthfulness.

To start with, there are performative conceptions, which largely foreclose on the ends of education, in favour of quantifiable criteria of performance – pass rates, graduate employability, and so on. Such conceptions, argues Cooper, tend to occlude truthfulness, which is 'not so much challenged as side-lined', since it fails to show up as a pertinent performative criterion (Cooper 2008: 80). Next, there are the varieties of instrumentalist conceptions, for which the ends of education are whatever skills and bodies of knowledge are deemed 'relevant' to economic or societal interests. The value of truthfulness to teaching is made contingent on its contribution – actual or anticipated – to those 'useful' ends. Perhaps the business leaders of tomorrow will be more successful if their teachers are not truthful about the environmental and social costs of consumer capitalism. Making the value of truthfulness contingent in this way does not guarantee it a special role in teaching: indeed, in many cases, truthful teaching will likely conflict with promotion of those instrumental ends and fail to win out when it does.

A further set of conceptions of education hostile to truthfulness are those that Cooper reasonably labels as 'politically correct'. Common to these are promotion of the 'inclusion' and 'self-esteem' of students from marginalised social groups, to the further end of their 'empowerment'. Such aims, in turn and together, not only fail to ensure that teachers ought to exercise truthfulness, but could also create situations that compromise that virtue. It is easy to imagine cases where truthful teaching would inevitably challenge the self-esteem or sense of inclusion of some groups of students. An accurate account of the origins of life, sincerely delivered by a science teacher, will unavoidably distress religiously traditionalist students. Educational cultures that insist on a stance of neutrality between religious and scientific perspectives on human origins – on 'teaching the controversy', say – will place significant strain on the possibility of truthful teaching.

Such educational conceptions are passively corrupting because they tend to erode the conditions conducive to the exercise of truthfulness. Since the virtues of truth have a general role in human life, that is harm enough; but if they enjoy a special status as professional virtues of teachers, that is a further and more acute harm. Indeed, it may be what Oakeshott had in mind when defining corruption in terms of ways of treating people – teachers, say – that deprive them of their essential character. If that latter term can be articulated in terms of professional virtues, then this is a mode of epistemic corruption in the passive mode.

Cooper and Battaly are both engaged in specific corruptionist criticisms of education, defined according to the set of desiderata offered earlier. They specify *corruptors*, *corruptees*, and *vices* and identify *corrupting conditions* and, finally, make *conditionality* and *corrective* claims. They offer us instruction in how to identify and criticise epistemically corrupting educational systems. Champions of edificationist conceptions of education ought to attend carefully to them.

## 6. CONCLUSIONS

This paper argued that philosophers ought to attend more closely to the variety of epistemic corruptions that can occur within education. This requires a concept of *epistemic corruption* and an articulation of its various dimensions, of the sort I have offered. The positive hope is, of course, that thinking about corruption gives us a way of thinking about edification, too, consistent with the ideal of education as a means for enhancing the virtues and characters of students. This paper offers a broad framework for thinking about the different ways that different aspects of education can be epistemically corrupting.

An obvious focus for future studies is a close analysis of specific vices and specific components of education – curricula, say, or practices. Such work can and should build upon cognate debates within education studies – for instance, can we think about indoctrination as a means of promoting vices like dogmatism and closed-mindedness? Battaly and Cooper give us useful examples of what such studies would be like, by coupling specific vices to specific practices and policies.

Whatever the outcome of such studies, it should at least be clear that philosophical reflection on education should take seriously the possibility – if not the reality – that education can have negative effects on the epistemic characters of students. Whatever one thinks about the ideal of edifying education, its corrupting possibilities need to be

acknowledged. My hope is that the concept of epistemic corruption can be deployed in critical discourses that aim to identify and correct such corrupting tendencies.[16]

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