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Knowing How to be Vicious

ABSTRACT: *It is widely held that an intellectual or epistemic vice is characterized by its negative relationship to epistemic goods. But which epistemic goods, exactly? The main answers in the vice-epistemological literature are (i) the truth and (ii) propositional knowledge. In this article, I demonstrate the need to expand vice epistemology's axiology beyond these epistemic goods. In particular, I argue that vice epistemologists need to include* knowledge-how *in their theorizing if they are to provide us with a full account of the nature and development of some putative epistemic vices. First, I show that this species of knowledge can be embedded in the manifestation and development of some vices, such that agents acquire this species of knowledge in virtue of either exercising or acquiring these epistemic vices. Second, I claim that the inclusion of knowledge-how in vice epistemology has important implications for its two main theoretical camps—motivationalism and obstructivism. I end by explaining how a less popular view in the literature can possibly vindicate the relationship between epistemic vices and knowledge-how.*

KEYWORDS: know-how, epistemic vice, vice epistemology, abilities

1. Introduction

Over the past fifteen years, the study of the intellectual or "epistemic" vices has become a hot topic in responsibilist virtue epistemology, giving rise to the aptly-named field of *vice epistemology* (Battaly, 2014; Cassam, 2019; Kidd et al., 2020; Tanesini, 2021). In this time, vice epistemologists have mostly focused on the question of what makes a character trait, attitude, or way of thinking an epistemic *vice*, with two opposing theoretical camps emerging. On the one hand, proponents of *motivationalism* ground intellectual vices in defective epistemic motivations (Baehr, 2020, 2025; Tanesini, 2021; Zagzebski, 1996); on the other hand, proponents of *obstructivism* take epistemic vices to systematically obstruct knowledge (Cassam, 2019).

Despite the differences between these camps, it is widely agreed by proponents of each that intellectual vices are characterized by their negative relationship to distinctly epistemic goods. But which epistemic goods, exactly? Linda Zagzebski's answer is an 'insufficiently strong motivation for knowledge' (1996: 208); Alessandra Tanesini's includes a motivation to 'avoid learning inconvenient truths' (2021: 141); Jason Baehr's is an 'insufficient identification with…true belief and knowledge' (2025: 225); and whilst Quassim Cassam claims that obstructivism is 'compatible with more than one view of knowledge' (2019: 10), his contention that vices get 'in the way of belief' reveals an exclusive concern with propositional knowledge (2019: 11). In short, the answer to the question above is truth and propositional knowledge.

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In this article, I demonstrate the need to expand vice epistemology's axiology beyond these epistemic goods. In addition to truth and propositional knowledge, I argue that vice epistemologists need to include *knowledge-how* in their theorizing if they are to provide us with a full account of the nature and development of some intellectual vices. After introducing this species of knowledge in more detail in section 2, I claim in section 3 that it is sometimes embedded in the manifestation of putative epistemic vices. In section 4, I extend this point to the development of those vices. The upshot is that some intellectually vicious agents acquire knowledge-how *in virtue of* manifesting or acquiring their vices. If this is right, then we should want our existing accounts of intellectual vice to reflect this datum. However, I argue in section 5 that the inclusion of knowledge-how into our vice-epistemological theorizing generates difficulties for obstructivism and a popular version of motivationalism. Nevertheless, I claim that a less popular version of motivationalism can possibly vindicate the relationship between epistemic vices and knowledge-how. I conclude in section 6.

2. Knowledge-How: A Primer

Before illustrating the role that knowledge-how plays in the manifestation and development of some putative intellectual vices, it will be good to first have a better understanding of this species of knowledge. When it comes to thinking about knowledge-how, epistemologists tend to fall into either of two theoretical camps. The first is *anti-intellectualism*, which roughly claims that knowledge-how involves possessing something non-propositional, namely, an ability or complex set of dispositions to successfully φ (Ryle, 1949; Nöe, 2005; Setiya, 2012; Fridland, 2015). The second is *intellectualism*, an influential version of which—often called *propositionalism*—claims that knowledge-how is *reducible* to propositional knowledge (Pavese, 2015; Stanley and Williamson, 2001; Stanley, 2011).[1]

In spite of their differences, anti-intellectualists and intellectualists agree on at least two things. The first is that knowledge-how entails the possession of an ability or disposition to successfully φ. Given that anti-intellectualists ground know-how in the possession of an ability or disposition, they can straightforwardly accommodate this point. For example, they hold that knowing how to cycle entails having the ability or disposition to successfully cycle. Of course, the precise nature of these abilities will depend on the account in question, but most anti-intellectualists would agree that they are modally robust capacities that dispose one to reliably succeed in normal, counterfactual conditions (Hawley, 2003; Noë, 2005).

Since intellectualists ground knowledge-how in the possession of propositional attitudes, by contrast, they cannot directly appeal to an agent's abilities or dispositions. Instead, they employ the notion of a 'practical mode of presentation' to show that knowledge-how *indirectly* entails the possession of an ability or

[1] There are also hybrid versions of anti-intellectualism and intellectualism, which either ground knowledge-how in something non-propositional without identifying it with an ability (Bengson and Moffett, 2011; Löwenstein, 2017), or which identify knowledge-how with something propositional but do not reduce it to propositional knowledge (Cath, 2015; Habgood-Coote, 2019).

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disposition to φ. On Stanley and Williamson's influential view (2001), this involves knowing that some proposition p is a contextually relevant way w for an agent to φ, such that the agent thinks about p in a first-person, practical way and this leads them to successfully φ. For example, the statement: "Hannah knows how to cycle" is true just in case Hannah knows that pushing the pedals in a circular fashion and holding the handlebars steady is a way for her to cycle, and she entertains these propositions in a practical, as opposed to a demonstrative, mode of presentation. Stanley and Williamson claim that this 'entails the possession of certain complex dispositions', the manifestation of which correspond to counterfactual success at φ-ing (2001: 429; Stanley, 2011: 126-127). Similarly, Carlotta Pavese takes practical modes of presentation to involve 'practical senses', the grasping of which 'entails the ability to *φ in a qualified sense*', namely, the ability to follow inferential rules about how to φ (2015: 16). In following these rules, one knows *that* some proposition is the next stage in φ-ing, and so on. Whilst practical modes of presentation remain contentious (Noë, 2005; Glick, 2015; Mosdell, 2018), they would provide intellectualists with a means of explaining the intuitive relationship between knowledge-how and action.

Although knowledge-how might entail an ability of some form to succesfully φ, such an ability is not sufficient for knowledge-how. Suppose I enjoy annoying my flatmate and believe that smoking does exactly this. Whenever I smoke, though, I also have a habit of tapping on the cigarette packet. Unbeknownst to me, it is this tapping that annoys my flatmate, not my smoking (Hawley, 2003). Despite having the ability to successfully annoy my flatmate, I clearly don't know how to annoy them. This is because I don't annoy them *intentionally*. To intentionally annoy my flatmate, I need to know how to do this. This is reflected in the Moorean nature of statements like: "I intentionally annoy my flatmate, but I don't know how to annoy my flatmate" (Habgood-Coote, 2018; Ryle, 1949: 33). More generally, this suggests that knowledge-how requires one to be acting intentionally. This is the second area of common ground between anti-intellectualists and intellectualists (Ryle, 1949; Hawley, 2003; Setiya, 2012; Pavese, 2015).

What does it mean to intentionally φ? This is a notoriously difficult question for action theorists, but at the very least we can say that an agent intentionally φ*s* only if their φ*-ing* is not lucky or accidental. This much is clear from the example above. Although I succeed at annoying my flatmate, my success is arguably accidental, and this precludes it from being intentional. But then how should we understand this non-accidental relationship? A popular answer in the literature is by reference to *control* (Carter and Shepherd, 2023; Gibbons, 2001; Mele and Moser, 1994). The reason why I only accidentally succeed at annoying my flatmate is because it is not under my control. According to a broadly causal tradition, control requires one's action to be caused in an appropriate way by one's intention, desire, or plan (Davidson, 1970). Since the act that actually annoys my flatmate (tapping on the cigarette packet) is not causally connected to my original intention or plan (to annoy my flatmate), it is not under my control, and hence not intentional. This rough characterization of control has been adopted by several anti-intellectualists (Carter and Shepherd, 2023; Shepherd, 2021). In contrast, some intellectualists adopt a more Anscombian view of control (1957), on which it requires knowing that one is φ*-ing*, and one's φ*-ing* be guided to success by one's knowledge of the means of φ*-ing* (Beddor and Pavese, 2021;

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Pavese and Beddor, 2023; Pavese, 2022). Given that I have a false belief about what annoys my flatmate, I do not know the means of annoying them. In turn, my success is not guided in the right way for control.

Together, the considerations above suggest the following, general thesis about knowledge-how:

> **Knowledge-How:** If *S* knows how to φ, then *S* has an ability to intentionally φ.

By combining features of knowledge-how that are agreed upon by anti-intellectualists and intellectualists alike, this rough characterization allows me to remain neutral with respect to these camps. Now, one might worry that this neutrality risks smuggling a tacit embrace of intellectualism into my arguments here. In remaining neutral, that is, I leave open the possibility that knowledge-how is reducible to propositional knowledge. But since some vice epistemologists already include propositional knowledge in their axiology, I would seemingly arrive at my conclusion (that it needs to expand to include knowledge-how) on the cheap.[2]

This worry operates on the basis that *propositionalist* or reductive intellectualism is true (Pavese, 2015; Stanley, 2011; Stanley and Williamson, 2001). However, this view has been attacked on several fronts, including its allegedly misplaced reliance on linguistic data (Ditter, 2016; Rumfitt, 2003), as well as concerns that the epistemic profiles of knowledge-how and propositional knowledge diverge in their resilience to luck (Carter and Pritchard, 2015a; Carter and Pritchard 2015b, Cath, 2015). As a result, intellectualists tend to retreat to weaker versions of the view that only identify knowledge-how with the possession of propositional attitudes, not propositional knowledge. If propositionalist intellectualism is false, then the worry above loses much of its force.

Crucially, the truth of propositionalist intellectualism would not undermine my argumentative strategy in this article. As I will argue in section 5, knowledge-how raises important implications for the two main views of intellectual vice in the literature, and these implications remain pressing even if knowledge-how is reducible to propositional knowledge. In light of this, vice epistemologists would still have independent reasons to include this species of knowledge in their theorizing. Thus, my decision to remain neutral on the nature of knowledge-how does not incur any costs to the arguments below.

3. Vicious Know-How

With a clearer picture of knowledge-how to hand, I will now argue that this species of knowledge can figure in the manifestation of some putative epistemic vices. In light of the discussion above, the success of this claim depends on these epistemic vices manifesting in the exercise of abilities to intentionally φ. I will start by motivating

[2] Thanks to an anonymous referee for raising this worry.

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and defending a more general way of appreciating this claim, before showing how it applies to a specific epistemic vice.

To begin, consider the following feature of many epistemic *virtues*. Generally-speaking, epistemic virtues manifest when we engage in various intellectual activities. For example, virtuous intellectual curiosity manifests in the activity of good questioning (Watson, 2015, 2018), open-mindedness in the activity of perspective-switching (Baehr, 2011, 2025), and intellectual humility in recognizing and owning one's cognitive limitations (Whitcomb et al., 2015). There are thus distinct, if not sometimes overlapping, activities through which epistemic virtues characteristically manifest. Following Jason Baehr (2015, 2020), call this the *competence dimension* of epistemic virtue. More precisely:

> **Competence Principle (CP):** For every intellectual virtue *V*, there is an activity or competence characteristic of *V* on the basis of which *V* can be distinguished from other intellectual virtues (2015, 116, 2020: 22).[3]

Although Baehr does not offer a detailed account of these competences, he does identify the *core* competence to consist of the 'skill or ability' to reliably engage in the activity characteristic of a given virtue (2025: 92). I want to suggest that a version of **CP** also applies to epistemic *vices*. At first glance, it might be difficult to see how it does. If anything, don't epistemic vices involve a *deficiency* of the competences associated with their corresponding virtues? Part of what makes an agent close-minded is that they are *incompetent* at perspective-switching. Likewise, an agent is intellectually arrogant partly in virtue of being incompetent at recognizing and owning their cognitive limitations. For argument's sake, suppose this is true. Even so, it does not follow that epistemic vices cannot manifest their *own*, characteristic competences. In fact, the existence of such 'vicious competences' is briefly discussed by Baehr (2020: 28, 2025: 199) and I have defended it at-length elsewhere (Matthews, 2025). In both cases, the idea is that some epistemic vices characteristically manifest in the exercise of their own *core* competences or abilities. More formally:

> **Vicious Competence Principle (VCP):** For some intellectual vices *V*, there are competences or abilities characteristic of *V*, the exercise of which either manifest these intellectual vices or contribute to their possession.

Unlike its corresponding principle above, **VCP** is not a general claim about all epistemic vices. Instead, it rests on the weaker, qualified claim that *some* epistemic vices exhibit a competence dimension as part of their formal structure. Of course, it might be the case that many epistemic vices are manifested via the exercise of characteristic competences, but I do not commit myself to that here. Moreover, **VCP** recognizes that there could be *clusters* of competences or abilities associated

[3] This is only a necessary condition for possessing an epistemic virtue. In addition, one must also have good epistemic motivations, take pleasure in the activity characteristic of the epistemic virtue, and have the good judgment as to when to deploy the competence (Baehr, 2015, 2025).

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with these epistemic vices. For ease of discussion, I will proceed as if these vices are indexed to a single competence or ability. Finally, **VCP** is neither necessary nor sufficient to possess an epistemic vice. That said, the development and exercise of these competences or abilities plausibly contributes to the possession of the associated epistemic vices. In this way, they function as *mechanisms* or *expressions* of vicious epistemic conduct.

To warm up to **VCP**, consider the sort of conduct expressive of various epistemic vices. A vivid illustration of intellectual dishonesty is the competent suppression and obfuscation of counter-evidence by Big Tabacco and Oil executives regarding the harms of smoking and climate change (Oreskes and Conway, 2012; Proctor, 2011). Equally, consider the "intellectual bully", whose epistemic arrogance manifests in their competence at intimidating and belittling their colleagues (Tanesini, 2021). Finally, consider the workplace "slacker", whose intellectual laziness manifests in their competence at time-wasting, phoning-it-in, or skipping steps in their inquiries (Battaly, 2020).[4] In each case, these agents may be succeeding at suppressing counter-evidence, intimidating others, or slacking off, while knowing what they are doing. Their success may also be causally connected to their plans or intentions. In other words, these agents may *intentionally* exercise their relevant competences or abilities. If that's right, then it follows from the discussion in section 2 that the intellectually dishonest executive *knows how* to obfuscate counter-evidence; that the intellectually arrogant bully *knows how* to intimidate his peers; and that the intellectually lazy slacker *knows how* to time-waste or phone it in. The upshot is that knowledge-how can figure in the manifestation of putative epistemic vices.

Let me illustrate **VCP** in more detail by considering the vice of 'epistemic insouciance' (Cassam, 2019). This is 'an attitude of indifference to the truth or falsity of one's utterances', which characteristically manifests in bullshitting (2019: 81). According to Harry Frankfurt, the reason why bullshitters tends to be indifferent to the truth is because they have a more general intention of getting away with what they say (2005: 54). Thus, whatever is conducive to this intention is what the bullshitter will say. In an effort to create their desired narrative, then, the bullshitter ends up 'misrepresent[ing] their intentions to their interlocutors' (*ibid*, 54). If a bullshitter is to effectively bring about their 'practical interest' of saying what they like, however, they are going to need to take the means necessary to this end. The more suitable or effective those means are, the more *instrumental reasons* they have to pursue them (Broome 1999; Brunero, 2020; Kolodny, 2018). Since having an ability or competence makes one more likely to be successful, the bullshitter has instrumental reasons to develop the ability or competence to misrepresent his intentions to his interlocutors. This is supported by Frankfurt's observation that some bullshitters are 'exquisitely sophisticated *craftsman*' (2005: 23), implying that they are skilled at doing just this. Indeed, the two bullshitters that Cassam uses as illustrations of epistemic insouciance—Boris Johnson and Michael Gove—were

[4] Whilst Battaly seems to take slacking off to be a deficiency of virtuous intellectual perseverance, she also claims that I 'might slack off *because* I am lazy' and that 'the virtue of intellectual perseverance is the best way to correct vicious…slacking off that *results from* laziness' (2020: 184, 185, my emphasis). This suggests that intellectual laziness is more fundamental than slacking off, such that engaging in the latter manifests the former.

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arguably very sophisticated craftsmen in this respect (2019: 78-80). They either knew what they were doing whilst campaigning for Brexit, or their bullshitting was causally connected to their desire of winning the Brexit referendum. As such, they had the ability to *intentionally* misrepresent their intentions to their audience. Thus, it follows that they *knew how* to bullshit.

The discussion above reveals a more general point about **VCP**, which is that an agent's instrumental reasons play an important role in the development of their relevant abilities or competences. This applies to the epistemic vices mentioned earlier. The intellectually dishonest oil executive plausibly develops the ability or competence to effectively suppress or obfuscate evidence about climate change because it prevents such evidence from jeopardizing business; the arrogant bully develops the ability or competence to intimidate his epistemic peers because it is an effective means of defending his ego from threats (Tanesini, 2021); and the intellectually lazy slacker develops the ability or competence to phone-it-in or time-waste because it enables them to avoid doing intellectual work (Battaly, 2020). In each case, the vicious agent develops and exercises the relevant ability or competence *because* it is an effective way of realizing some further, practical interest.

Of course, just because an agent has instrumental reasons to develop one or more of these vicious competences or abilities, it does not follow that they will actually acquire these capacities. For example, suppose that our dishonest oil executive is incompetent at suppressing and obfuscating counter-evidence. Arguably, this fact about them does not make them any less intellectually dishonest. In response, recall that **VCP** does not make the possession or exercise of these competences or abilities necessary for epistemic vice. Instead, it merely stipulates that they are expressions or mechanisms of epistemically vicious conduct. As such, the executive might still exhibit the vice of intellectual dishonesty despite their incompetence at suppressing counter-evidence. Second, abilities and competences come in degrees, and those related to epistemic vices are no different. Since those who exhibit the vices above are disposed to engage in the relevant activity, they will have ample opportunities to gradually refine and develop the respective abilities and competences, particularly in light of their instrumental reasons. And depending on the quality of these capacities, they will come to know more or less how to obfuscate counter-evidence, intimidate their epistemic peers, slack off, or bullshit, *in virtue of* developing and acquiring the competence or ability to do these things. In this way, **VCP** allows us to see the way in which knowledge-how can figure in the manifestation of putative epistemic vices.

4. Learning How to be Vicious

In the previous section, I argued that knowledge-how can figure in the manifestation of putative epistemic vices. Before we're in a position to know how to φ, though, we would first need to *learn how to* φ. Using this insight, this section argues that knowledge-how can also play an important role in the development or *aetiology* of some epistemic vices.

To set this up, note that virtue epistemologists widely take the development of intellectual skills to facilitate the cultivation of various epistemic virtues (Baehr, 2013; Battaly, 2016; Pritchard, 2023). For instance, Lani Watson argues that

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environments which encourage people to develop the 'skill of good questioning' can help inculcate virtuous intellectual curiosity and inquisitiveness (2015, 2018). By promoting the cultivation of epistemic virtues in this way, these environments are *epistemically edifying* (Kidd, 2019: 226). However, when an environment either (i) facilitates the 'erosion of conditions that encourage the cultivation and exercise of epistemic virtues' or (ii) 'encourages, legitimates, promotes, or provides conditions' for people to develop epistemic vices, it is what Kidd equally calls *epistemically corrupting* (2019: 131, 2020: 72). Just as edifying environments facilitate the cultivation of epistemic virtues by first encouraging people to develop the corresponding intellectual skill, I want to suggest that some corrupting environments facilitate the development of epistemic vices by first encouraging people to develop the ability or competence through which those vices manifest.

I will use intellectual laziness as an example. Above, I noted that this vice characteristically manifests in the activity of 'slacking off' (Battaly, 2020). For Battaly, this involves 'intentionally taking an easy path in pursuit of one's intellectual goals, knowing (or at least truly believing) that one's work will suffer' (2020: 181). These paths range from time-wasting, phoning it in, skipping steps in inquiries, and free-riding off others' intellectual labor (2020: 182-183). In her view, slacking off also requires '*succeeding* in taking an easy path and *actually reducing* the quality or rate of one's work' (2020: 182, emphasis original). After all, if a person intended to skip steps in their inquiries, but ended up not doing this, it would be unclear how they would be slacking off. In this way, Battaly incorporates a success condition into her account of slacking off.

For my purposes, we needn't look far to find environments that encourage slacking off. Consider what has recently been termed *task-masking* (Demopoulos, 2025; Royle, 2025). This is the name for a popular trend, but it reflects a very familiar sort of behavior: pretending to work, whilst hardly working at all. Those who task-mask tend to walk hurriedly with laptops under their arms, stare intensely at their computer screens, and schedule unnecessary meetings throughout the working day, amongst other things. In Battaly's terms, they are people who intentionally time-waste and phone it in, knowing (or truly believing) that their intellectual work will suffer. As one commentator notes, the reason why people increasingly task-mask is 'because the work environment encourages it' (Cook, 2025).

If we grant that people who develop and exercise the abilities to intentionally time-waste and phone-it-in engage in acts of intellectual laziness, then broken workplace environments that incentivise this behavior are encouraging them to repeatedly act in intellectually lazy ways. And if Aristotle was right that 'states of character arise out of like activities' and that 'it is from playing the lyre that both good and *bad* lyre-players are produced' (Aristotle 1998, *NE*, Bk. II, 1103b10-20, emphasis added), then it's reasonable to think that people can habituate intellectually lazy tendencies from acts of slacking off in the workplace.

Although a token environment like the workplace can incentivise people to develop and exercise the abilities to intentionally time-waste and phone it in whilst they are at work, this does not yet tell us that this environment facilitates the development of intellectual laziness outside of work and across domains. At most, one might think that these environments encourage people to engage in *acts* of

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intellectual laziness, given that the abilities to time-waste and phone it in are forms of slacking off, and intellectual laziness characteristically manifests in this activity. For these environments to facilitate the acquisition of global laziness, though, they would need to lead people to develop and exercise these abilities across similar types of situations. After all, the possession of a character vice like intellectual laziness requires cross-situational consistency in how it manifests (Miller, 2013).[5]

I grant that intellectual laziness might be restricted to a domain like the workplace. That said, the abilities to time-waste and phone-it-in that one might develop in the workplace are, like abilities more generally, *flexible* and *transferable* because they allow their possessor to adapt to changing environments and to transfer their know-how from one domain to another. This makes it easier for agents to deploy their abilities across domains. That is, these abilities risk spilling out to different domains of intellectual conduct if the opportunity to slack off arises. For example, consider the case of *weaponized incompetence*. This refers to the intentional poor performance of some task, so that others (usually women) have to take it upon themselves to complete it (Kecmanovic, 2025). Thus, suppose Fred is asked by his partner to complete various long and arduous financial documents. Having already developed and exercised the abilities to time waste and phone it in at work, he adapts these abilities and deploys them to drag out this task as much as possible. As a result, Fred's partner takes over and completes the forms. Upon realizing that he can effectively avoid doing this sort of intellectual labor at home, Fred begins finding more opportunities to time-waste and phone it in, adapting his abilities accordingly. Each time, the exercise of these abilities further strengthens Fred's intellectually lazy tendencies, allowing them to take further root in this domain of his epistemic conduct. Over time, as he exercises these abilities across more and more domains, Fred's initially localized tendencies will become cross-situationally consistent. The upshot is that he comes to possess the vice of intellectual laziness.

If this is right, then we can appreciate how the abilities to intentionally time-waste and phone it in might facilitate the development of an epistemic vice like intellectual laziness within a particular domain and perhaps also across domains. For insofar as these abilities entail knowledge-how, and their exercise promotes the development of intellectual laziness, agents like Fred can learn how to time-waste and phone it in as they adapt and deploy these abilities across domains of their epistemic conduct. This not only allows us to see the role that knowledge-how can play in the development of this epistemic vice across domains, but it also provides a more general insight into how we might initially develop or acquire epistemic vices. In this way, knowledge-how can inform our very understanding of the nature of epistemic vice.

5. Know-How and Vice Epistemology

At the beginning of this article, I said that vice epistemologists have said little about knowledge-how. Having seen that this species of knowledge can figure in the manifestation and development of some putative epistemic vices, I now want to

[5] Thanks to an anonymous referee for requesting more clarity on this point.

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consider the implications that these findings have for the two main views in the literature.

5.1. Obstructivism

Let's start with obstructivism. According to this view, epistemic vices are character traits, attitudes, or ways of thinking that 'systematically obstruct the gaining, keeping, or sharing of knowledge' (Cassam, 2019: 12). As I noted in the introduction, this knowledge is propositional in nature. To make sense of the relationship that some vices bear to knowledge-how, then, obstructivism must expand its remit to include this species of knowledge. However, this task is not so straightforward.

First, obstructivism identifies epistemic vices with the systematic *obstruction* of knowledge. Would this include the obstruction of knowledge-how? That cannot be the case. After all, even the most dogmatic or arrogant people know how to do a range of ordinary things (like driving), so they clearly have an abundance of knowledge-how at their disposal.

Cassam recognizes that a similar worry arises in connection with perceptual knowledge. If a necessary condition for epistemic vice is the systematic obstruction of propositional knowledge, how do dogmatic or intellectually lazy people have so much knowledge from things like perception? As he puts it, 'how can I be prevented by an epistemic vice from knowing that it is raining?' (2019: 8). His solution is to point out that the systematic obstruction of this knowledge has little to do with our character traits, attitudes, or ways of thinking (2019: 8). Rather, it is more a matter of having defective perceptual faculties. Since obstructivism doesn't count defective faculties amongst its candidates for epistemic vice, it can sidestep this worry. Instead, it can focus on the knowledge that *is* impacted by our traits, attitudes, or ways of thinking, which is why Cassam specifies that epistemic vices obstruct knowledge by 'impeding effective inquiry' (2019: 7).

This looks like a promising way of addressing the worry above. If asked: "how can we be prevented by an epistemic vice from knowing how to cycle or drive?", the obstructivist can say that this knowledge-how has little to do with the qualities that constitute epistemic vices and more to do with our physical capacities. Obstructivists can then focus on the know-how that our epistemic vices do tend to obstruct, which might come from something like our *practical inquiries*.

Although this strategy might give the obstructivist a principled response to the worry above, it brings a second challenge in its wake. According to **VCP**, recall, some epistemic vices can manifest in the exercise of abilities to intentionally φ. Since the development of such abilities would be gradual, and since these abilities would entail knowledge-how, it follows that these agents would acquire the corresponding know-how in a gradual fashion. But if some epistemic vices *abet* a source of knowledge-how and obstructivism claims that epistemic vices obstruct the knowledge-how from our effective practical inquiries, then it needs to explain why these two claims are not in tension.

This worry is compounded by another. In particular, the know-how that some epistemic vices abet relates to what Cassam terms the 'project of vice reduction'

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(2019: 186). This is the project of identifying and ameliorating our epistemic vices. To effectively do this, it helps if we can first identify the source of our vices. I have argued above that knowledge-how can contribute to the development of our vices; e.g., learning how to slack off can contribute to the acquisition of the vice of intellectual laziness. Not only does knowledge-how allow us to pinpoint how and why these people might have developed this epistemic vice, but it can also help us devise strategies for ameliorating this vice. Therefore, it is in the best interests of those engaged in the project of vice reduction to consider the know-how that epistemic vices can abet.

5.2. The Absence Conception

The other main account of intellectual vice in the literature is *motivationalism*. In contrast to obstructivism, it identifies intellectual vices with defective epistemic motivations. Arguably, the most popular interpretation of this view is that defective epistemic motivations imply an absence of good epistemic motivations. That is to say, intellectual vices reflect a 'lack of motivation for knowledge' (Zagzebski, 1996: 207), a 'characteristic failure to attend to truth or truth-related considerations' (Montmarquet, 2000: 138), or an 'insufficient identification with epistemic goods like true belief and knowledge' (Baehr, 2025: 225). Following Crerar (2018), call this the *absence conception* of motivationalism. What might this conception have to say about the relationship between epistemic vice and knowledge-how?

As the statements above might suggest, proponents of this conception have said little about knowledge-how in their theorizing. That said, one proponent has offered some suggestive remarks about its relationship to epistemic *virtue*. On Linda Zagzebski's view, epistemic virtues are underpinned by an ultimate or final 'motivation for knowledge' or cognitive contact with reality (1996: 167). Interestingly, Zagzebski clarifies that this motivation need not 'solely arise from the motivation to have propositional knowledge'; often, she notes, the ultimate end of this motivation will be 'something practical: creating an artistically superior sonnet, making a fine violin, winning a chess game' (1996: 179). In these cases, Zagzebski recognizes that the motivation for knowledge characteristic of epistemic virtue will involve a 'desire for the practical end' and be 'more a matter of knowing how rather than knowing that' (1996: 179).

These remarks allow us to see what Zagzebski's version of the absence conception might have to say about knowledge-how. Insofar as epistemic vices reflect a 'lack of motivation for knowledge' or an 'insufficiently strong motivation for knowledge' (1996: 207-208), or a lack of motivation for epistemic goods, that might include having an insufficiently strong motivation for knowledge-how. Now, this doesn't imply that epistemically vicious agents are insufficiently motivated to attain knowledge-how *in general*. But the absence conception would partly ground the viciousness of close-minded, incurious, or intellectually arrogant agents in their being insufficiently motivated to attain the know-how involved in perspective-switching, asking good questions, or identifying and owning their cognitive limitations, etc. Since knowing how to do these things implies having the relevant ability, moreover,

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the failure to be sufficiently motivated to attain this knowledge-how would also help explain why those who exhibit these vices lack the abilities characteristic of their virtuous counterparts.[6]

Despite this, it's unclear whether the absence conception could explain why some vicious agents end up developing and exercising the abilities captured in **VCP**. To see this, recall that the development and exercise of these abilities is closely connected to an agent's instrumental reasons. On reflection, they are the reasons for which, or in light of which, these agents act. That is, their instrumental reasons are also their *motivating reasons* (Alvarez, 2010; Müller, 2025).[7] However, by focusing solely on the vicious agent's *deficit* of good epistemic motivations—their being insufficiently motivated to attain the sort of knowledge-how just mentioned—the absence conception risks neglecting the *presence* of these motivating reasons, and the accompanying motivations to acquire and exercise the abilities discussed here. Since these abilities entail knowledge-how, this conception would struggle to fully account for the role that this species of knowledge plays in connection with the manifestation and development of some epistemic vices.[8]

5.3. The Presence Conception

Although the absence conception is arguably the most popular version of motivationalism, it is not the only version available in the literature. In addition, there is a less popular version of the view that takes epistemic vices to be constituted by the presence of bad epistemic motivations, such as being motivated to 'ignore', 'avoid', or 'frustrate' epistemic goods in various ways (Battaly, 2014, 2017; Tanesini, 2021: 45). Call this the *presence conception* (Crerar, 2018).

If intellectual vices are constituted by bad epistemic motivations, what accounts for the presence of these motivations in the first place? The answer to this question is found in a yet deeper source of motivation. According to Alessandra Tanesini—the presence conception's most explicit defender—vicious epistemic motivations are 'themselves derivative of other motivations that often concern ego-defence or impression management' (2021: 21, fn. 3). Notice that these are distinctly *practical* ends. For Tanesini, these ends give rise to non-epistemic motivations that bias an agent's cognition in such a way that they avoid truths or evidence that potentially jeopardize their sense of self. Thus, she claims that intellectually arrogant people are motivated away from epistemic goods *because* they are ultimately motivated to defend their egos from (imagined) threats (2021: 109). In this

[6] Baehr makes a similar observation when considering whether 'defective ability' can be explained by reference to an agent's motivational deficit (2025: 198-199), though he does not couch the point in terms of knowledge-how as I do here.

[7] There is debate about whether motivating reasons are non-factive, causally efficacious *mental states* (Smith, 1987; Wallace, 2003; Pryor, 2007), or whether they are the *non-mental* entities like propositions (Dancy, 2000; Schroeder, 2007) or facts (Alvarez, 2010). Nothing in the discussion above hangs on this.

[8] This conclusion is the same if knowledge-how is reducible to propositional knowledge. For the absence conception would imply that epistemic vices are underpinned by insufficiently strong motivations for knowledge-that. Yet this exclusive focus on deficient epistemic motivations would still risk overlooking the presence of the motivating reasons that can lead agents to develop the sort of abilities captured by **VCP**.

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respect, the bad epistemic motivations constitutive of intellectual vice are themselves underpinned by deeper, instrumental motivations.[9]

If this is right, then the presence conception looks well-placed to vindicate the arguments I have made. As I've argued, those who exhibit certain epistemic vices have practical ends they desire to bring about. But insofar as bad epistemic motivations are rooted in an agent's instrumental motivations, this could help explain *why* the epistemically insouciant bullshitter or the intellectually lazy slacker is averse to epistemic goods: because these goods are inconsistent with their respective practical ends. And since having an ability or competence makes one more likely to be successful in some endeavor, the presence conception could account for the motivating reasons that can lead vicious agent to develop the abilities or competences captured by **VCP**. Given that these abilities or competences entail knowledge-how, the presence conception would thereby make better sense of the relationship between epistemic vices and knowledge-how than either obstructivism or the absence conception. As a result, it merits more consideration from vice epistemologists than it has thus far enjoyed.

6. Conclusion

I have argued that vice epistemologists need to expand their axiology to include knowledge-how if they are to provide us with a full understanding of the nature and development of some epistemic vices. Along the way, I have also argued that this species of knowledge has important implications for our existing accounts of epistemic vice.[10]

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[9] Although vicious motivations might be instrumental at root, Tanesini maintains that they are still *intrinsically* disvaluable from an epistemic perspective because they involve being motivated away from things of final epistemic value, namely, truth and knowledge (2021: 43).

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