Episteme (2026), 1–24
doi:10.1017/epi.2026.10149

episteme

ARTICLE

Ameliorating Obstructivism: Low-Grade Knowledge and Motivated Ignorance

Gerry Dunne[1,2]

[1]Marino Institute of Education, Ireland and [2]Trinity College Dublin, Ireland
Email: gerard.dunne@mie.ie

(Received 7 July 2026 UTC; revised 17 August 2026 UTC; accepted 23 August 2026 UTC)

Abstract

Quassim Cassam's obstructivism characterises epistemic vice as any blameworthy or otherwise reprehensible character trait, attitude, or way of thinking that systematically obstructs the acquisition, retention, or dissemination of knowledge. I argue, contra a defensible common-sense reading of obstructivism, that the view, as stated, is committed to treating all systematic knowledge-obstructions as vice-relevant regardless of the value of the knowledge obstructed, a commitment which yields clear counterexamples. The paper does not attribute this commitment to Cassam as his fully settled position. Rather, I take his official definition at face value and show that it is in tension with several scattered passages in which he himself, without theorising it, relies on an unanalysed value-tiering of knowledge. I propose two friendly amendments. First, I distinguish weighty from insignificant knowledge along Pritchard's lines, grounding the distinction in the criterion of substantive cognitive contact with reality. Second, I refine the systematicity condition. A trait systematically obstructs knowledge only if it reliably does so across the normal range of epistemic environments at the level of the trait rather than at the level of outcomes in pathological conditions. With these two refinements in place, dispositions towards motivated ignorance, properly characterised as stable traits or attitudes rather than isolated choices, can be epistemically neutral or beneficial when they obstruct only insignificant knowledge while preserving the agent's capacity for weighty knowledge. The second refinement is underpinned by a teleological-functional criterion of environmental normality, anchored in Sosa's competence-as-disposition framing. I conclude by offering a refined statement of obstructivism that accommodates these distinctions while preserving Cassam's core insight.

Keywords: Epistemic vice; obstructivism; motivated ignorance; weighty truths; cognitive contact with reality; systematicity

1. Introduction

Recent literature on epistemic vice has been shaped by two competing pictures. Motivationalists in the responsibilist tradition (Baehr 2010; Tanesini 2018, 2021) hold

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that an epistemic vice is constituted in part by an imperfect motivational state directed at epistemic goods. Obstructivists, following Cassam (2016, 2019), hold instead that a trait, attitude, or way of thinking is an epistemic vice in virtue of its consequences for knowledge. The two views reach different verdicts in cases like Cassam's, the gullible conspiracy theorist who has impeccable epistemic motivations but ends up with absurd beliefs. Obstructivism handles such cases more comfortably than motivationalism, and that is one of its principal attractions.

I do not seek to adjudicate that debate. My concern is internal to obstructivism. I argue that the view as formally stated by Cassam (2019: 23) generates an unattractive implication. It treats all systematic knowledge-obstructions arising from blameworthy or otherwise reprehensible traits, attitudes, or ways of thinking as epistemically vicious regardless of the value of the knowledge obstructed. The implication is mistaken since there are clear counterexamples. Plenty of stable dispositions systematically obstruct some knowledge while leaving the agent's capacity to acquire knowledge of significant matters intact, or indeed enhancing it. Several such counterexamples motivate the refinements I develop below.

I do not claim that Cassam himself holds the view under scrutiny. On this, I must be clear. The view I criticise is what the canonical statement of obstructivism, which I label (OBS) and reproduce in full at the start of Section 2, yields when read literally, without any supplementary value-tiering of the knowledge whose obstruction counts. Cassam's stated position is simply (OBS). What Cassam does throughout *Vices of the Mind* is different and more interesting. He repeatedly relies, in passing, on an unanalysed value-tiering of knowledge that (OBS) does not contain. He speaks of 'useless knowledge' (2019: 10), distinguishes 'trivial' from 'momentous' inquiry (2019: 7), characterises epistemic insouciance as indifference to matters that ought to concern a conscientious truth-seeker (2019: 85), and treats Holocaust-related propositions as paradigmatically important to know (2019: 118). None of this normative weighting is theorised, and none of it is built into (OBS). The amelioration I propose here is best read not as a refutation of Cassam but as a friendly amendment that brings (OBS) into reflective equilibrium with the value-tiering that Cassam himself deploys when he is not in the business of stating his definition.

Let's scope the limits more precisely. I am not arguing that obstructivism is the correct theory of epistemic vice. I am not arguing that motivationalism is incorrect. Likewise, I am not arguing that the counterexamples that follow defeat obstructivism's core commitments, only that they are sound objections to (OBS) as currently formulated. My claim is internal to obstructivism. If the refinements I propose are accepted, the counterexamples developed in Sections 4 and 5, in which a trait systematically obstructs knowledge without being a vice, lose their traction against obstructivism. Dolin (2026) and Kotsonis (2022) press counterexamples of the opposite shape, vices that obstruct no knowledge. I answer Dolin's central version, the argument from epistemic helplessness, in Section 6.4, where I also place his further case of obstruction without vice, which targets the evaluative condition of (OBS) rather than my amendments. The vices Kotsonis describes abet knowledge and turn on epistemic harm to others rather than on obstruction; they lie outside a paper concerned with which obstructions ground vice. Whether obstructivism, so refined, defeats motivationalism is a question I do not engage with here.

The argument proceeds in two stages. The first concerns the value of knowledge whose obstruction counts; the second concerns the structure of the systematicity condition itself. The initial part responds to an existing question. Dolin (2026: 347)

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suggests that Cassam could improve the theory by adopting a more comprehensive epistemic axiology, though he admits uncertainty about its implementation. He also suggests that intellectual vices could systematically obstruct valuable knowledge. Section 3 fills in what he leaves unspecified, while Section 4 applies these ideas in practice. The second stage addresses aspects that Dolin's argument does not account for, and Section 6.4 leverages this to counter his objection regarding the necessity of knowledge-obstruction.

First, I adopt Pritchard's (2014, 2016, 2021) account of what makes some truths weighty and others insignificant. Pritchard's criterion is substantive cognitive contact with reality, and it is an explicitly epistemic criterion. This blocks the worry that any distinction between weighty and insignificant knowledge collapses into a prudential or practical distinction in epistemic clothing. Second, I refine the systematicity condition in (OBS) so that *a trait T systematically obstructs knowledge only if it reliably obstructs knowledge across the normal range of epistemic environments and at the level of the trait, rather than at the level of its outcomes in pathological conditions*. The refinement disarms a family of counterexamples in which a virtue (intellectual humility, for example) ends up obstructing knowledge in a pathological environment.

Section 2 shows that Cassam's own practice of vice-attribution already relies on a value-tiering that (OBS) does not contain. Section 3.1 grounds the weighty-insignificant distinction in Pritchard's substantive-cognitive-contact criterion. Section 4 examines dispositions toward motivated ignorance and distinguishes them from isolated choices. Section 5 refines the systematicity condition and states the refined definition. Section 6 draws out the implications and answers objections. Section 7 concludes.

2. Obstructivism and what (OBS) does not contain

Cassam (2019) frames his definition as follows:

> (OBS) An epistemic vice is a blameworthy or otherwise reprehensible character trait, attitude, or way of thinking that systematically obstructs the gaining, keeping, or sharing of knowledge (23).

Four features of (OBS) are worth emphasising at the outset. First, the ontological inventory. Epistemic vices come in three kinds. They are character traits (closed-mindedness), attitudes (prejudice, epistemic insouciance), and ways of thinking (wishful thinking) (Cassam 2019: 9). Second, the evaluative condition. A vice must be either blameworthy or, where blame is inappropriate, at least open to criticism (Cassam 2019: 21). Third, the consequentialist commitment. Vices are vices in virtue of their effects on knowledge, not their motivations (Cassam 2019: 16). Fourth, the systematicity condition. The obstruction must be reliable rather than accidental, on balance and across the normal course of events (Cassam 2019: 11, n. 24, and 75; cf. Driver 2001: 82–83).

I accept all four features. The friendly amendment I propose concerns what (OBS) leaves unspecified, namely the value of the knowledge whose obstruction counts toward vice-attribution.

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2.1. What (OBS) says about knowledge

(OBS) refers to 'knowledge' without restriction. The natural reading is that any blameworthy or otherwise reprehensible character trait, attitude, or way of thinking that systematically obstructs knowledge of any kind is sufficient to be adjudged an epistemic vice via a blameworthy or reprehensible trait, attitude, or way of thinking is sufficient to be adjudged an epistemic vice. Cassam does not impose any restrictions in the definition. In chapter 1, he treats knowledge as a unified target. Knowledge is something we can gain, keep, and share; effective inquiry, as a paradigmatic source of knowledge, is what epistemic vices impede (Cassam 2019: 7).

(OBS) is compatible with more than one view of knowledge, as Cassam emphasises (2019: 10). On a natural reading, it imposes no restriction on which knowledge counts. If the systematic obstruction of trivial knowledge is sufficient for vice-attribution, then obstructivism is committed to verdicts that, I will argue, are difficult to defend.

2.2. Where Cassam himself relies on value-tiering

Cassam's own practice of vice-attribution does not, however, treat all knowledge as on a par. Six instances across the book, distributed and unremarkable, all draw on a value distinction that (OBS) does not contain.

Consider first how Cassam handles forgetfulness. Discussing whether it is an epistemic vice, he observes that 'much of the knowledge that is lost by forgetting is useless knowledge. Forgetting is only problematic in cases where a person forgets what they really need to remember or ought to remember' (Cassam 2019: 10). The remark does explicit work in his argument. Forgetfulness is not a vice because it does not systematically obstruct knowledge that *matters*. But Cassam never theorises the distinction between useless knowledge and knowledge one ought to remember. He simply uses it. The second instance appears in his treatment of inquiry. Defining it, he offers a typology of questions ranging 'from the trivial ("Where are my socks?") to the momentous ("What are the causes of global warming?")' (Cassam 2019: 7). The remark is offhand, but its implicit value-ranking is significant. Cassam's own examples of vice-driven inquiry (the Iraq invasion, the Yom Kippur war, the Birmingham Six) are momentous, not trivial. A third instance is the recurrence of the banal–momentous contrast, unremarked, in his chapter on epistemic insouciance, where inquiry again ranges 'from the utterly banal to the truly momentous' (Cassam 2019: 86). The value-ranking structures Cassam's treatment of vice across multiple chapters.

A fourth instance surfaces in the definition of insouciance itself. Cassam defines the vice as an attitude of indifference toward 'matters that ought to be of concern to a conscientious truth-seeker' (Cassam 2019: 85). The phrase 'ought to be of concern' is normatively loaded. Not all matters ought to concern a conscientious truth-seeker equally, and insouciance is a vice precisely when the indifference concerns matters that should concern her. Cassam invokes the same standard in the affirmative when discussing David Irving's Holocaust denial, citing Mr Justice Gray's judgement that Irving fell 'far short of the standard to be expected of a conscientious historian' (quoted in Cassam 2019: 107, n. 10). In chapter 5 he goes further: 'If it is important that people know that the Holocaust was no myth then it is important that they know why Irving is wrong' (Cassam 2019: 118). The argument turns on the conditional. Some propositions are important to know; some are not. The argument that dogmatism is a vice in this case proceeds via the antecedent, presupposing that epistemic importance is a real property that some propositions have and others lack. (OBS) does not theorise this property. Cassam's argument deploys it.

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Two further instances complete the picture. In the fifth, discussing Kruglanski's (2004) defence of closed-mindedness, Cassam distinguishes a 'proper sense of closure' from genuine closed-mindedness: 'a good investigator has a sense of when enough is enough and diminishing returns are setting in' (Cassam 2019: 36). The good investigator's strategic non-pursuit of further information is not a vice. This distinction concedes that not every obstruction of further knowledge-gathering is vicious; the question of which obstructions count is left open. This paper directly tackles this question. The sixth instance is Cassam's own treatment of the case where dogmatic refusal to engage astrological 'evidence' protects one's knowledge (Cassam 2019: 101–104). His resolution is to deny that the obstructions in such cases are systematic. I engage this move in Section 5. For now I note only that Cassam acknowledges, and works hard to neutralise, the phenomenon to which this paper draws attention.

A word about the evidential status of these instances. Taken individually, each admits of a deflationary reading. The remark about useless knowledge is in service of a separate point about forgetting. The trivial–momentous contrast is offhand. The insouciance definition could be read as concerning the *seriousness* of inquiry rather than the *value* of the knowledge sought. I grant that no single passage forces my reading. The argument operates at the level of the pattern. Six instances, running from forgetfulness through the typology of inquiry, the scope of insouciant indifference, the definition of insouciance and the Irving case, Kruglanski on closure, and the Kripke case, all drawing on a value-distinction (OBS) does not stipulate, suffice to make the point. A defender of unrestricted (OBS) is welcome to deflate each instance separately. What is harder is to deflate them all without conceding that some value-tiering is doing work in Cassam's actual practice of vice-attribution.

2.3. Interpretation and the deflationary reading

I take these passages to show that Cassam's settled view, as it operates in his actual practice of vice-attribution, presupposes some value-tiering of knowledge. (OBS), however, does not. Two plausible interpretations emerge and must be considered.

On the first reading, Cassam intends (OBS) to be the official statement of his view, and the value-tiering language is a heuristic shorthand that he assumes any sensible reader will supply. On this reading, the value-tiering is built into the background, and this paper merely articulates it. On the second reading, Cassam intends (OBS) to be the official statement and treats the value-tiering language as a stylistic accommodation rather than part of the theory. On this reading, (OBS) is committed to vice-attributions that Cassam himself would resist, and the right response is to amend (OBS).

I do not need to settle which interpretation is correct. On the first, this paper makes Cassam's tacit commitments explicit. On the second, it offers him an amendment that aligns his definition with his practice. Either way, the substantive contribution is important. I specify which knowledge-obstructions count and articulate the systematicity condition with sufficient precision to handle cases that obstructivism, as currently stated, mishandles.

A third interpretation should be addressed before I proceed. A defender of unrestricted (OBS) might argue that the value-tiering language in Cassam's text does no theoretical work in the definition because the blameworthiness condition already screens off the cases I worry about. Interpreted this way, obstructing trivia is technically vice-relevant under (OBS), but no agent is ever blameworthy or criticisable for obstructing trivia, so the verdict never gets delivered. (OBS) does the work without amendment.

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I submit that the deflationary reading fails on textual grounds. Cassam is explicit that the evaluative condition is permissive. A trait need not attract blame in the strict voluntarist sense; it is enough that the agent be 'open to criticism' (Cassam 2019: 21). The permissiveness is signalled at the start of the book. Cassam states that 'some intellectual vices are severely criticized', while others are 'only mildly reprehensible', and that no intellectual vice merits zero criticism (2019: 4). He clarifies in the same chapter that 'reprehensible' means 'deserving of some criticism', not strong criticism, and that '"Mildly reprehensible" is not an oxymoron' (2019: 4, n. 12). That bar is low. A filtering disposition that systematically obstructs the agent's acquisition of some knowledge may meet it, provided there is an independent reason why the agent deserves criticism. Disinterest in *The Great British Bake-Off* satisfies this condition trivially. So does the scholar's habitual refusal to read every preprint in the subfield. The blameworthiness condition is too coarse to block the unwanted verdicts.

The deflationary reading also fails on structural grounds. (OBS) is offered as a definition. A definition that delivers the correct verdict only because a separate condition silently absorbs the work of the disputed clause is a definition in name only. If the value of obstructed knowledge is doing the philosophical work, it should appear in the definition. My friendly amendment names what the deflationary reading delegates to unarticulated intuition, the value of the knowledge whose obstruction counts.

One further complication should be recorded. In work published after *Vices of the Mind*, Cassam (2023, 2024) cautions against excessive vice-charging and urges engagement with a putative vice-bearer's motives before an initial characterisation of her as vicious is allowed to stand, holding that only such engagement can call that characterisation into question (2024: 40). Dolin (2026: 354) asks whether this marks a shift toward a theory that counts bad motives among the vice-makers and concludes that it does not, since both papers open by reaffirming that intellectual vices are traits which systematically obstruct knowledge. I take the same view, and my amendment addresses the definition the later work reaffirms. Dolin then offers Cassam a choice (2026: 354–355). Cassam may restate the call for caution in obstructivist terms or keep it as it stands and incorporate bad motives into the theory; Dolin prefers the second. The first suffices. Engaging with an agent's motives is one way of establishing which trait a piece of conduct manifests, and whether that trait is of the kind that systematically obstructs weighty knowledge across normal environments; a vaccine-hesitant parent's caution, to take Cassam's own example, may be a different trait from gullibility, or no stable trait at all. That makes motive diagnostic rather than constitutive, a distinction Section 4.2 develops against the motivationalist. The diagnostic reading is available to unrefined obstructivism, though it comes more readily once the refinements below are in place.

3. Weighty and insignificant truths

My first amendment to (OBS) concerns the value of the knowledge whose obstruction counts. Following Pritchard (2014, 2016, 2021), I distinguish weighty from insignificant truths. The criterion of weightiness is substantive cognitive contact with reality. The criterion is explicitly epistemic.

3.1. The distinction

A truth is weighty when grasping it offers the inquirer substantive cognitive contact with reality; it is insignificant when it does not. The contrast is not a matter of subject matter

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alone. Grasping that $E = mc^2$ as an isolated formula, divorced from any understanding of the physics that makes it intelligible, would offer cognitive contact of a thin and superficial kind, if it offered contact with reality at all. Knowing that the population of one's hometown was approximately 12,000 thirty years ago, against a background of genuine engagement with regional demographic history, may be weighty in context. The criterion is not the proposition considered in isolation but the kind of cognitive grip on reality that possessing it affords.

Pritchard's own formulation gives the criterion its content. The intellectually virtuous inquirer values truth, and to value truth is to want 'a substantive cognitive contact with reality, which means that one's beliefs mesh up with the world in fundamental ways' (Pritchard 2021: 11). Trivial truths, on Pritchard's view, fail this test. They do not offer cognitive contact with reality of any depth. The number of grains of sand on a given beach is the canonical example (Pritchard 2021: 3, following Sosa 2003). No intellectually virtuous inquirer would prefer this knowledge over an alternative item of weighty knowledge, even when both are offered cost-free.

Two clarifications need to be made. First, the distinction is not a matter of practical utility. Pritchard insists on this point. Epistemic value is just one axis, and the unattractiveness of trivial truths persists even when the practical disvalue of pursuing them is bracketed (Pritchard 2021: 3). The intellectually virtuous inquirer would not prefer to receive trivial knowledge over weighty knowledge even if both were costless. Second, the distinction is not a matter of subject matter. Significant scientific propositions can be held in epistemically trivial ways (as isolated factoids), and apparently trivial propositions can constitute weighty knowledge when properly integrated. What matters is the kind of cognitive contact with reality the knowledge provides.

Pritchard's notion of substantive cognitive contact with reality has its critics. The concern is that the criterion is inexact in a way that risks circularity. Weighty truths are those an intellectually virtuous inquirer prefers, and the intellectually virtuous inquirer is the one who prefers weighty truths. I do not adjudicate this debate. My argument requires only that some defensible distinction between weighty and insignificant truths be available and that Pritchard's formulation is one such candidate. A reader who prefers a different formulation of the distinction (Sosa's account of epistemic perspective, Zagzebski's (1996) account of cognitive contact, or any account that grounds the distinction in something other than the agent's practical interests) can substitute it for Pritchard's, and the argument runs through unchanged. Pritchard's account is the most worked-out version currently available, and I adopt it for that reason, but the structural work is done by the distinction, not its specific Pritchardian gloss. What matters is that some defensible line can be drawn. Where exactly it falls is a further question, and one I set aside.

One line of resistance grants my premise and turns it against me. Treanor (2018) argues that more truth is not a matter of a greater number of truths (2018: 1057) and that epistemology has worked with the contrary picture without ever recognising it as a substantive claim (2018: 1065). He then presses a consequence. The familiar objection from trivial truths, which holds that inquiry cannot aim at truth because memorising phone numbers would otherwise serve as well as physics, is apt only on the assumption that every proposition carries the same amount of truth (2018: 1065–1066). Drop that assumption, and the significant truth may simply be more truth than the trivial one. The threat to my position is obvious. If weightiness reduces to quantity of truth, a sufficiently careful veritist absorbs my distinction rather than

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being embarrassed by it, and the refined definition I go on to propose adds nothing a well-stated (OBS) lacks.

The objection fails, however, on the following grounds. Treanor is explicit that he will not say what an amount of truth consists in, only what it does not consist in (2018: 1058). The magnitude he defends is a placeholder, and the question of which truths an inquirer has reason to prefer stays open on his account. Pritchard's criterion answers that question and answers it in epistemic terms. Substantive cognitive contact with reality is not propositional bulk under another name. Two agents can hold one and the same proposition, one as an isolated factoid and one integrated into a working understanding of the domain. The quantity of truth believed is identical. The proposition believed is identical, although the agents' cognitive contact with reality differs. The cognitive contact is not. My distinction cuts across Treanor's quantitative dimension rather than reducing to it. Pritchard (2014) makes the complementary point on his own account, allowing that a single proposition may carry a whole body of information compressed within it. Treanor and Pritchard reach the same negative conclusion by different routes, and that conclusion is the only premise I need. Truths are not epistemically interchangeable.

3.2. Grounding the distinction epistemically

A natural worry is that the distinction I draw, even on Pritchard's gloss, smuggles in non-epistemic considerations. After all, if some truths matter to inquiry and others do not, what determines what matters? If the answer is the inquirer's projects or interests, then the distinction is prudential, not epistemic.

Pritchard's response, which I adopt, is to take the intellectual virtues as primary in the order of epistemic axiology and to define epistemic value in their terms. The intellectually virtuous inquirer is not an arbitrary stipulation. She is the agent who values truth in the right way, which is to say a normative ideal rather than a psychological type. Section 4.2 draws out what follows from that. To value truth is to want substantive cognitive contact with reality. She therefore prefers weighty over insignificant truths, and the preference is epistemic. She may also care about practical utility, but her preference for weighty over insignificant truths is not grounded in that care. What grounds it is truth in the substantive sense.

Two clarifications are needed about the scope of this preference claim. First, the claim concerns preference-ordering, not prohibition. I do not say that the intellectually virtuous inquirer cannot pursue trivial truths. She can solve crosswords, play Wordle, count grains of sand, and learn the 1001st entry in the telephone book. None of these pursuits is itself a vice on the refined account, and none is forbidden by the virtuous inquirer's axiology. What the axiology fixes is that, when weighty and insignificant truths are offered in competition, the virtuous inquirer prefers the weighty. This is consistent with the virtuous inquirer pursuing trivial truths in non-competitive contexts, with engaging in playful inquiry for its own sake, and with valuing curiosity broadly. The axiology orders preferences in cases of competition; it does not prohibit interest in any class of truth.

Second, the resource-economy worry that drives some scepticism about the distinction has a limited scope. A critic might argue that if cognitive resources are limited and acquiring any knowledge consumes them, then, by parity, my axiology would forbid acquiring high-grade moral knowledge whenever those resources could be spent on high-grade non-moral knowledge. The argument trades on a quantitative reading of cognitive resources that I do not endorse. Substantive cognitive contact with reality is not a unit of capacity that high-grade moral knowledge and high-grade non-moral

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knowledge compete for in the way that two pieces of trivia compete for memory storage. The displacement that motivates the distinction occurs within a domain in which depth of engagement is bounded by the nature of the subject matter and the time available to the agent. The historian who declines low-yield Cambridge Platonist scholarship is not weighing the depth of moral understanding against the depth of historical understanding. She is weighing the depth of one kind of historical engagement against the breadth of another. Across domains, cognitive engagement does not aggregate or displace as it does within domains. The axiology fixes preferences over weighty versus insignificant truths within a structured field of inquiry, not across all possible fields at once.

A reader might press the worry further. Even granting Pritchard's account, isn't the criterion of substantive cognitive contact with reality itself nebulous? That is a fair point. And I grant the inexactness. What I do not grant is that inexactness disqualifies. The distinction between blameworthy and merely unfortunate intellectual failings is also unclear, and Cassam does not take this to disqualify (OBS). The distinction between traits and isolated choices is also imprecise, and Cassam does not take this to disqualify either. Conceptual distinctions in philosophy regularly admit of borderline cases without ceasing to do real work.

3.3. An example: ZZ Top and CPR

Consider a familiar contrast. Take the proposition that ZZ Top is a three-piece band, two members of which sport iconic long beards while the third is named Beard but is beardless. Take also the proposition that the compression-to-rescue-breath ratio in adult CPR performed with rescue breaths is thirty to two. When held as an isolated factoid, the first proposition is insignificant. Grasping it offers no substantive cognitive contact with reality. The second is, for almost any agent, weighty. Grasping it provides knowledge that bears on life-or-death practical reasoning and integrates with a broader understanding of cardiopulmonary function.

A reader may resist the description of the second proposition as offering substantive cognitive contact with reality on the grounds that it is 'merely' practical. The resistance trades on a disjunction between practical and theoretical knowledge that Pritchard's account does not recognise. Substantive cognitive contact with reality includes knowing how reality bears on action. Practical bearing is one route to such contact, not a disqualification from it.

3.4. Cassam reconstructed

With the distinction in hand, I return to Cassam. The reconstruction that follows is available on either of the interpretations distinguished in Section 2.3, so nothing here obliges me to choose between them. When Cassam says, of forgetting, that 'much of the knowledge that is lost by forgetting is useless knowledge' (Cassam, 2019: 10), what he is best read as meaning is that much of the knowledge lost by forgetting is insignificant in the sense just specified. When he distinguishes trivial from momentous inquiry (2019: 7), he is tracking the same distinction. When he defines insouciance as indifference to 'matters that ought to be of concern to a conscientious truth-seeker' (2019: 85), the conscientious truth-seeker is the intellectually virtuous inquirer, and the matters that ought to concern her are the weighty ones.

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If this is right, then Cassam's actual practice of vice-attribution already presupposes the weighty-insignificant distinction. My amendment brings (OBS) into line with that practice. The result is the following preliminary refinement:

> (OBS*) An epistemic vice is a blameworthy or otherwise reprehensible character trait, attitude, or way of thinking that systematically obstructs the gaining, keeping, or sharing of weighty knowledge, in the sense of knowledge that offers the agent substantive cognitive contact with reality.

(OBS*) needs a second refinement regarding the systematicity condition before it is ready for final statement. I return to this in Section 5.

4. Motivated ignorance as a stable disposition

The second strand of my argument concerns dispositions toward motivated ignorance. I use Williams's (2021) term throughout. 'Motivated ignorance' captures a class of stable dispositions in which an agent's standing tendency to avoid certain knowledge is itself rationally explicable in terms of the costs of possessing that knowledge. This is to be distinguished from 'rational ignorance' in Stigler's (1961) sense, which concerns the costs of acquiring knowledge. The distinction matters. Rational ignorance is about input costs; motivated ignorance is about possession costs.

The phenomenon is documented well beyond philosophy. Golman *et al.* (2017) survey a large experimental literature on information avoidance and find that agents routinely decline information that is free, accurate, and relevant to them when possessing it would be costly to bear. Two results sharpen the picture. Huck *et al.* (2015) find that subjects will accept lower pay rather than learn how their work bears on others, and Shen *et al.* (2015) find that uncertainty can sustain motivation in ways that resolving it does not. Hertwig and Engel (2021) assemble the interdisciplinary case for treating deliberate not-knowing as a stable and sometimes functional feature of human cognition rather than a defect in it. I take no view on the mechanisms. What this work supplies is the premise my argument needs, which is that stable avoidance dispositions are real, widespread, and not uniformly symptoms of epistemic malfunction.

4.1. Disposition, not choice

A preliminary distinction is necessary. Ignorance is not itself an attitude; it is a condition or state. The claim is not innocent. Whether ignorance is a mere absence of knowledge, an absence of true belief, or something the agent actively sustains remains contested (Peels 2023; Peels and Blaauw 2016). I need not settle that dispute, because what my argument needs is weaker than any of the competing accounts. On all of them ignorance is a state an agent is in rather than a stance she takes toward the world, and ignorance as such is not among the traits, attitudes, or ways of thinking over which (OBS) ranges. The kind of thing that could potentially fall under (OBS) is not ignorance itself but stable dispositions toward selective non-acquisition or non-attention. I am interested in such dispositions, that is, in settled tendencies to avoid certain classes of information, rather than in isolated choices to decline some particular piece of knowledge. Cassam himself insists on this point. (OBS) speaks of traits, attitudes, and ways of thinking, not of one-off decisions (Cassam 2019: 23). A single decision not to read an article is no candidate

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for vice-attribution. A stable disposition systematically to avoid a class of information might be.

My claim, then, is not that ignorance is sometimes virtuous. My claim is that dispositions toward strategic non-acquisition can, in some contexts, fail to be vices on the refined obstructivist account, even when they systematically obstruct *some* knowledge. The reason is that they do not systematically obstruct *weighty* knowledge and may indeed protect the agent's capacity to acquire it.

The trait-versus-choice distinction is not a stipulation of my refined account. It is built into (OBS) from the start. Cassam's ontological inventory of vice-bearers consists of character traits, attitudes, and ways of thinking; isolated decisions are not on the list. A single choice to decline a piece of information is no candidate for vice-attribution on any reading of obstructivism, refined or unrefined. What the refined account adds is not the trait-versus-choice distinction itself but the specification of which trait-level obstructions count as vice-grounding. The original obstructivist framework already restricts the field to stable dispositions of the agent. I am working within that restriction, not loosening it. The addition is a specification of evaluative scope. Among the trait-level obstructions (OBS) already required, only those that bear on weighty knowledge are vice-grounding.

4.2. Two contexts

I consider two contexts in which a stable disposition toward motivated ignorance, properly characterised, may be epistemically neutral or beneficial.

Context 1: Performance-enhancing dispositions.

Suppose an agent has a stable disposition to decline certain low-stakes informational inputs (clickbait news, anxiety-inducing but epistemically thin commentary, and items of curiosity that do not integrate with broader inquiry). The disposition systematically obstructs the agent's acquisition of certain truths. None of those truths offers substantive cognitive contact with reality, in Pritchard's sense. The disposition is therefore not, on (OBS*), a vice. It may indeed be beneficial. By protecting attentional resources, it preserves the agent's capacity to engage with weighty inquiry.

The scholarly inquirer offers a properly epistemic illustration. Consider a working historian of early modern philosophy whose research engages the Cambridge Platonists. The volume of contemporary scholarship in adjacent areas, of new editions, of secondary commentary across multiple languages, of conference papers and preprints uploaded weekly, is such that comprehensive coverage is no longer available to any individual. The historian adopts a stable disposition to decline most of what is published outside her core areas. She accepts that she will not read most of what is in principle relevant. She does not skim. She does not bookmark. She could read the material; she chooses not to because the costs of possession (attentional, integrative, and interpretive) would compromise her depth of engagement with her primary texts. The disposition systematically obstructs her acquisition of many truths she might otherwise have acquired.

A veritist with no value-tiering would have to count this as a systematic epistemic loss. The phenomenology of inquiry tells a different story. The disposition is what makes deep cognitive contact with the Cambridge Platonists possible at all. Without it, the historian's understanding would be flatter, more derivative, and less substantively connected to her primary texts. Her judgement about which interpretive disputes matter, which textual variants merit attention, which adjacent traditions repay genuine

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engagement, depends on a depth of immersion that comprehensive coverage would foreclose. Selective non-acquisition of insignificant truths is here a precondition of acquiring weightier ones. The veritist verdict that more true beliefs is always epistemically better does not survive the case. Treanor's (2018) argument, discussed in Section (The distinction), supplies an independent reason for resisting that verdict. If more truth is not a matter of more truths, counting the historian's forgone true beliefs measures nothing that bears on how much truth she holds.

Context 2: Cognitive-sustainability dispositions.

The infosphere of the early twenty-first century offers a structurally different version of the same phenomenon. The volume of mediated content competing for the individual's attention has expanded sharply within a single generation. Ofcom's Online Nation 2024 report finds UK adults spending an average of 4 hours 20 minutes online each day across smartphones, tablets, and computers, with 18–24-year-olds at 6 hours 1 minute, up roughly an hour and a half on the previous year (Ofcom 2024). The metric conflates many kinds of content, but the order of magnitude is not in serious dispute. Attention is now contested by a competitive ecosystem of stimuli, many of which are engineered for maximal capture (Crawford 2015; Lembke 2021). In this environment, agents who develop stable dispositions to filter out low-yield inputs protect not only their wellbeing but also their capacity for sustained attention to weighty matters.

The agent who declines to attend to an item of trivia fails to acquire a truth she might otherwise have acquired. On a literal reading of (OBS), this suffices for vice-attribution provided the disposition is blameworthy. The refined definition (OBS*) gets the verdict right. The obstruction is of insignificant knowledge, and the disposition that produces it preserves the agent's capacity for substantive cognitive contact with reality.

A limit on the argument should be stated plainly. Nothing said here licenses the thought that avoidance dispositions are generally benign. Woomer (2019) describes agents whose insensitivity to whole classes of evidence is sustained by social arrangements that make the not-knowing comfortable, and dispositions of that kind obstruct weighty knowledge by any measure. Consider the manager who has settled into a stable reluctance to attend to how her decisions land on the people they affect. She squarely satisfies (OBS**), the refined definition stated in full in Section 5.4, and nothing in my refinement shields her. What the refinement narrows is the class of vice-grounding obstructions. It does not empty that class. The cases it removes are those in which the knowledge obstructed makes no difference to the agent's contact with reality, and the manager's case is not one of them.

A motivationalist will object that this amendment costs obstructivism its distinctive identity. The objection runs as follows. Once weighty knowledge is defined as what an intellectually virtuous inquirer prefers, and once the intellectually virtuous inquirer is the agent who values truth in the right way, the amended definition has imported the motivational content the motivationalist always said was indispensable. (OBS**) is therefore not a refinement of obstructivism but a concession to motivationalism in obstructivist vocabulary. The objection is sharpest in the form Tanesini (2021) develops. Tanesini's general motivationalist commitment is that vices are individuated by their underlying mental states rather than by their consequences for knowledge. On that account, any view that anchors vice-relevant evaluation in the preferences of an idealised agent has imported the motivational content that motivationalism takes to be constitutive. The appeal to what a virtuous inquirer would value is, on this view, not innocent. It tracks precisely the kind of motivational structure motivationalism takes to ground vice in the first place.

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The objection misreads the modal status of the virtuous inquirer in my account. Pritchard's virtuous inquirer is a normative ideal, not a psychological type. She figures in the order of axiology as a fixed point, the agent who would, if she existed, prefer weighty over insignificant truths in the relevant sense. Her preferences are defined by the structure of substantive cognitive contact with reality, not by an empirical psychology of motivated cognition. Tanesini's motivationalism, by contrast, takes vice to be grounded in actual motivational states of actual agents, identifiable in psychological reality and individuated by attitude clusters in the social-psychological sense. The two appeals to motivation are not the same kind of appeal. A virtue-anchored axiology need not import a motivation-grounded diagnostic, because the virtuous inquirer is operating at a different level of abstraction. The Pritchardian appeal is to what an idealised epistemic agent would value, given the structure of epistemic value; the Tanesinian appeal is to what real agents motivationally do, given the psychology of self-evaluation. Conflating the two would force every consequentialist who appeals to the good epistemic agent into the motivationalist camp, which is plainly wrong. Vice-attribution under (OBS**) remains diagnostic, not motivational. The verdict follows from what the trait does to knowledge, not from the motivational profile of the agent who bears it.

The structural difference matters. Motivationalism makes motivation constitutive of vice. (OBS**) makes motivation evidentially relevant at best, never constitutive. It uses the figure of the virtuous inquirer to anchor an epistemic axiology, but the anchoring is theoretical, not diagnostic. The view remains consequentialist in the relevant sense. The gullible conspiracy theorist with impeccable motivations remains, on (OBS**), a vice-bearer in good standing. Crerar (2018) presses the underlying point independently. Motivational accounts struggle with vices whose bearers are motivationally impeccable, and the difficulty is structural rather than a matter of locating the right motivational state. My refinements leave that difficulty where they found it. They restrict which knowledge-obstructions ground vice. They do not smuggle motivation into the grounding relation.

4.3. Engaging the Bake-Off counterexample

The objection (raised in discussion of an earlier version of this paper) runs as follows. Suppose an agent has no interest in *The Great British Bake-Off*. Her disinterest is a stable disposition. It systematically obstructs her acquisition, retention, and sharing of knowledge about the show. On my refined account, this disposition is not a vice, since Bake-Off knowledge is insignificant for almost all agents. But now suppose she becomes romantically involved with someone who is passionate about the show. Knowledge of the show is now instrumentally valuable for her. Does her disinterest now become a vice?

The objection has real force. Let's now consider three responses.

The first response is that mere disinterest is not itself a stable trait or attitude in the sense required by (OBS). A merely passing lack of interest in Bake-Off is a state not a disposition with the appropriate kind of stability. Compare disinterest in football, which can range from a passing absence of attention to a settled hostility toward the activity. The kind of disposition that satisfies (OBS) requires more than an absence of attention; it requires a stable orientation of the agent. Pure disinterest may fail this test. The objection succeeds against unrestricted (OBS) only on a reading that allows mere absence of attention to count as a vice-relevant disposition, which is a reading I do not endorse.

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The second response is more interesting. Suppose disinterest in the Bake-Off does rise to the level of a stable disposition. The objection asks whether it becomes a vice when the agent's circumstances change. My answer is that vice-attributions are not automatically triggered by changes in the agent's instrumental situation. The systematicity condition, on my refinement, operates at the level of the trait's reliable functioning across the normal range of epistemic environments, not at the level of its outcomes in any particular agent-environment configuration. Section 5 develops this in detail. (OBS**) delivers the Bake-Off verdict directly. The agent's disinterest is not a trait that reliably obstructs weighty knowledge across normal environments, and it remains a non-vice across changes in her instrumental situation.

A third response addresses a separate concern that motivates the objection. A responsibilist might press that a purely instrumental orientation to knowledge is itself at odds with intellectual virtue, and that my handling of the Bake-Off case courts that orientation by allowing the disinterested agent to remain a non-vice-bearer even when knowledge of the show would be instrumentally useful to her. The concern misidentifies the target of my account. (OBS**) is a theory of vice-attribution, not of intellectual virtue. I do not claim that the disinterested agent is intellectually virtuous in respect of Bake-Off knowledge. I claim only that her disposition does not satisfy the conditions for being a vice on the refined account. The space between vice and virtue is wide enough to accommodate epistemically neutral dispositions, and that is the space in which the Bake-Off case sits. A responsibilist who wishes to add positive constraints on intellectual virtue can do so without disturbing (OBS**), which is silent on what makes a trait a virtue.

The three responses converge on a single point. The Bake-Off counterexample trades on a slide from 'this agent fails to acquire knowledge that would now be instrumentally useful' to 'this agent has a vice'. The slide goes through only if the obstructivist reads (OBS) as making the agent's instrumental situation constitutive of vice-attribution. (OBS**) does not. The next section develops the trait-level reading of systematicity that makes the verdict secure.

5. Refining the systematicity condition

The systematicity condition in (OBS) is doing too much work. A closely related family of counterexamples shows why. I refine it in two ways. First, I relativise systematicity to a normal range of epistemic environments. Second, I locate it at the level of the trait rather than its outcomes.

5.1. Counterexamples

Judy's case delineates the problem nicely. She is an intellectually humble philosopher who suspends judgement when faced with strong opposition to her well-grounded views. At philosophy conferences, she repeatedly encounters numerous prominent philosophers who sympathise with her opponents and press objections that, unbeknownst to her, are in fact weak. Given the discipline's sociological features, this is almost always what she encounters. She therefore systematically suspends her belief in her well-grounded thesis after conferences, losing weighty knowledge in the process. On a literal reading of (OBS), Judy's intellectual humility is an epistemic vice. Yet this is the wrong verdict.

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The Bake-Off case is structurally similar. Disinterest in the show systematically fails to produce Bake-Off knowledge. Whether this counts as a vice depends, on the unrefined reading, on a supplementary interpretation that makes the knowledge's instrumental importance decisive for the agent at the time of evalutation. This makes vice-attribution turn on contingent features of the agent-environment configuration in a way that is independently implausible.

Both cases share a structure. A trait T (humility, disinterest) produces knowledge-obstructing outcomes in some configuration of agent and environment. The literal application of (OBS) classifies T as a vice. The classification is intuitively wrong.

The two cases relate differently to my two amendments. The Bake-Off case engages both. Disinterest in the show obstructs only insignificant knowledge (the weighty-knowledge refinement it needs handles it) and the obstruction the objection presses arises only in the pathological configuration where the agent suddenly needs show-knowledge, not across the normal range of environments (the systematicity refinement handles it). Either refinement alone suffices to deliver the right verdict. The Judy case engages only the systematicity refinement. Knowledge about her well-grounded philosophical thesis is weighty by any account, so the weighty-knowledge refinement handles this does no work here. The systematicity refinement does all the work, reading the trait at the level of its reliable functioning across normal environments rather than its performance in the token case. The two amendments are independent in this sense. Each handles a distinct family of counterexamples, and the cases that engage both are over-determined.

5.2. The refinement

The diagnosis is that (OBS) operates on outcomes in particular configurations rather than on the reliable functioning of the trait across normal environments. A trait that obstructs knowledge in pathological conditions is not thereby a vice. Closed-mindedness obstructs knowledge in normal conditions and would still obstruct knowledge if normal conditions were preserved; it is a vice. Intellectual humility, properly characterised, produces knowledge in normal conditions and only obstructs it in pathological ones. This is the difference (OBS) needs to capture.

I propose the following refinement. The systematicity condition should be read at the level of the trait, not at the level of the agent-environment configuration in which the trait operates. A trait T systematically obstructs knowledge only if T's reliable cross-situational functioning, in the normal range of epistemic environments, produces knowledge-obstructing outcomes. Where T produces knowledge-obstructing outcomes only in pathological configurations (Judy's hostile-conference scenarios, the Bake-Off agent's sudden need for show-knowledge), the trait does not satisfy the refined systematicity condition.

This refinement is friendly to Cassam's existing framework. Cassam himself accepts that systematicity is to be cashed out as obstructing knowledge 'on balance and non-accidentally' (Cassam 2019: 11, n. 24; quoting Driver 2001: xviii) and as obstructing knowledge 'in the normal course of events' (Cassam 2019: 75). The normal course of events is precisely the range of normal epistemic environments. My refinement makes this explicit. Cassam also acknowledges that the trait-level reading goes through. Considering possible worlds in which closed-mindedness reliably conduces to knowledge, he concedes that in such worlds 'closed-mindedness would be an epistemic virtue and open-mindedness an epistemic vice' (2019: 12, n. 25). His concern in the book, he

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says, is with traits that 'actually get in the way of knowledge and are actually epistemic vices' (ibid., emphasis original). The systematicity refinement I propose simply makes this actuality-focused reading explicit at the level of the trait.

The refinement faces an immediate question. What makes an environment normal? The question is not mine to put first. Cassam puts it himself. Discussing whether examples like Kripke's (2011) dogmatist can be accommodated by obstructivism as 'unusual or exceptional' cases, Cassam observes that scenarios in which dogmatism 'is conducive to knowledge by aiding its retention' would need to be shown to be 'unusual or exceptional' and that 'it's not immediately apparent how to do that' (2019: 103). The lacuna is acknowledged but not filled. Cassam returns to the issue but does not give a general criterion of normality. My proposal supplies what his account flags as needed. The criterion I propose is not introduced by fiat. It follows from the same consequentialist commitment that structures (OBS) throughout. Vices are what they are in virtue of their reliable effects on knowledge, and reliability is indexed to the conditions under which a trait characteristically functions. Without a working criterion, (OBS**) merely relocates the indeterminacy it was meant to dispel. I propose a teleological-functional criterion. An epistemic environment is normal for a trait T when it falls within the range of conditions under which T reliably functions as the cognitive trait it is. Closed-mindedness is closed-mindedness in any environment, but its disposition-typical functioning, its reliable signature, shows up in environments where evidence is approximately reliable, and beliefs are not always well-grounded. Intellectual humility, by contrast, reliably issues well-calibrated suspensions of judgement in environments where opposition tracks evidential weight. Each trait has a functional niche, and the normal range is the range of environments that niche encompasses.

An immediate concern arises: tying normality to a trait's functional niche threatens to make the account vacuously true, since every trait would seem to have its proper niche by stipulation. I block this in two ways. First, the niche is not the niche the agent happens to occupy. It is the range of environments under which a trait of that kind reliably produces or obstructs knowledge for agents in general. Second, the niche need not be specified evolutionarily. Whether a trait was acquired through cultural transmission, deliberate cultivation, or evolved disposition makes no difference. What matters is the functional regularity, not its causal history. Sosa's framing of competence as a disposition 'that would in appropriately normal conditions ensure (or make highly likely) the success of any relevant performance issued by it' captures the idea (Sosa 2007: 29). Cassam supplies a parallel anchor. Closing his chapter on thinking vices, he insists that, while the environments in which we operate condition our cognitive functioning, there is no interesting sense in which vices are environment-relative. Vices, he says, are bad for us 'in just about any context' in which we are likely to find ourselves and 'in the world as it is' (Cassam 2019: 77). My refinement of the criterion of normality supplies exactly this Cassam-Sosa convergence. The normal range is specified functionally, rather than simply by the frequency with which an agent encounters a context likely to find ourselves, identified at the level of the trait's functional niche.

The teleological-functional criterion explains why the Judy case is pathological and the Kripke case exceptional. Both involve trait-environment mismatches. Judy's humility normally functions in a social environment where opposition correlates with evidential strength; her conference environment falls outside that niche in which it reliably tracks evidential weight, namely, in a sociology where opposition correlates with evidential strength. The Kripke dogmatist's refusal to engage astrological evidence is operating outside the niche in which dogmatism's signature, the closure of inquiry under

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inadequate evidence, makes it knowledge-obstructing. Each case is a case of niche departure. (OBS**) evaluates the trait at the level of the niche.

5.3. The Kripke case revisited

Cassam's own treatment of the Kripke case (2019: 101–104) is instructive. The dogmatist's refusal to engage with astrological 'evidence', in Kripke's example, does not obstruct knowledge; it protects it. Cassam's resolution is to deny that the obstructions in such cases are systematic. He proposes that the relevant cases are unusual or exceptional and that, on balance, dogmatism obstructs knowledge.

I agree with the structure of Cassam's response while noting that he does not pause to specify what makes a case unusual or exceptional. My refinement supplies the missing specification. The Kripke case features an agent whose dogmatism protects knowledge in a configuration where the available 'evidence' is unreliable and the agent's existing belief is well-grounded. In the normal range of epistemic environments, that is, environments in which evidence is approximately reliable and beliefs are not always well-grounded, dogmatism does obstruct knowledge. So the trait satisfies the refined systematicity condition. The Kripke case is exceptional in just the sense the refinement requires.

5.4. The refined definition

With both amendments in place, I propose:

> (OBS**) An epistemic vice is a blameworthy or otherwise reprehensible character trait, attitude, or way of thinking that, across the normal range of epistemic environments, systematically obstructs the gaining, keeping, or sharing of weighty knowledge, in the sense of knowledge that offers the agent substantive cognitive contact with reality.

(OBS**) preserves all four features of (OBS): the ontological inventory, the evaluative condition, the consequentialist commitment, and systematicity. It adds two specifications. The knowledge whose obstruction counts is weighty knowledge, and the systematicity condition is relativised to the normal range of epistemic environments and operates at the level of the trait.

From the four features of (OBS) enumerated at the start of Section 2, (OBS**) inherits the first three unchanged. The ontological inventory of character trait, attitude, and way of thinking is preserved. The evaluative condition of blameworthiness or reprehensibility is preserved. The consequentialist commitment to vice-as-effect-on-knowledge is preserved. What changes is the fourth feature, the systematicity condition, in two coordinated ways. The systematicity condition now operates at the level of the trait rather than its outcomes and only across the normal range of epistemic environments rather than across all possible configurations. Layered on top is the value-tier specification. Not all knowledge counts equally, and the relevant knowledge is the knowledge that offers substantive cognitive contact with reality. (OBS**) is therefore a refinement of one feature of (OBS) and a supplementation of its target, not a wholesale revision. Obstructivism remains obstructivism. The consequentialist commitment to grounding vice in effects on knowledge is what does the diagnostic work throughout. The refinements sharpen that diagnostic without displacing it.

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The remaining question is what (OBS**) rules in or out that (OBS) does not. A reader sceptical of the distance between the two definitions deserves a direct answer. Consider three families of cases. First, dispositions toward strategic filtering of low-yield content, which (OBS) reads as candidate vices because they systematically obstruct some knowledge, and which (OBS**) reads as non-vices because the obstruction is of insignificant knowledge and protects the agent's capacity for weighty knowledge. Second, the Judy case, which (OBS) reads as making intellectual humility a vice because it produces knowledge loss in the configuration the agent occupies, and which (OBS**) reads as not making humility a vice because the trait reliably produces knowledge across the normal range of environments. Third, the Bake-Off case engaged in Section 4.3, where (OBS) makes vice-attribution turn on contingent features of an agent's instrumental situation, and (OBS**) does not. These are not marginal differences. They are exactly the differences the counterexamples of Sections 4 and 5 press.

6. Implications and objections

*6.1. What (OBS**) gets right*

(OBS**) delivers the right verdict in each case that motivated the amendment. The Bake-Off-disinterested agent is not a vice-bearer. The obstruction is of insignificant knowledge, and the disinterest does not reliably obstruct weighty knowledge across normal environments. The performance-enhancing and cognitive-sustainability dispositions of Section 4 are not vices for the same reason, and their effect on the agent's capacity for weighty knowledge is typically positive. Judy is not a vice-bearer. Her humility produces knowledge in normal environments and obstructs it only in a pathological sociological configuration. The standard cases of vice are unaffected. Closed-mindedness, dogmatism, arrogance, gullibility, and insouciance each reliably obstruct substantive cognitive contact with reality across the normal range of environments. (OBS**) does not disturb a single one of those verdicts.

6.1.1. What the value-tier specification adds

It might be objected that the value-tier specification is dialectically unnecessary because the blameworthiness condition already excludes the marginal cases. The objection deserves a direct answer. Consider the cognitive-sustainability dispositions of Section 4.2. An agent who has cultivated a stable disposition to filter anxiety-inducing low-yield commentary could, in principle, expose herself to it. The decision to filter is hers. The cost of exposure is not prohibitive in the way the cost of comprehensive coverage was for the historian. The blameworthiness condition, therefore, admits her, on a permissive reading, as criticisable. On unrestricted (OBS), the disposition is vice-relevant, even with the blameworthiness condition in place.

The verdict is wrong. No intellectually virtuous inquirer regards a cognitive-sustainability disposition of this kind as a vice. The reason cannot be that the agent is not open to criticism. She is. The reason has to be that the knowledge she obstructs is not the right kind of knowledge to ground vice-attribution. That is just to say that the value-tier specification is doing work the blameworthiness condition cannot do.

The historian's case of Section 4.2 makes the same point in a slightly different register. There, the cost of exposure is real (the depth of engagement with primary texts would suffer), but it is not prohibitive, since the historian could in principle filter differently and would still acquire some weighty knowledge, only less of it. The

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blameworthiness condition therefore admits her, on the permissive reading, as criticisable. Only (OBS**), with its restriction to weighty knowledge, gets her case right. The value-tier specification is not redundant with the blameworthiness condition. They are doing different work. Blameworthiness picks out the deontic status of the agent's relationship to her trait. Value-tiering picks out which obstructions of knowledge are vice-grounding in the first place. The value-tier specification matters most at the margin, but at the margin it is decisive. Dolin (2026: 352) reaches the same separation from another direction. He argues that Cassam packs responsibility into his account of vice-making disvalue and thereby inverts the order of explanation. Being intellectually vicious makes an agent worthy of criticism because it is bad, not the other way about. If that is right, the blameworthiness condition cannot settle which knowledge-obstructions are vice-grounding, since it presupposes an answer to that question. The value-tier specification supplies the answer Dolin's ordering requires. What grounds the criticism is the systematic obstruction of weighty knowledge. Retaining the evaluative condition in (OBS**) is consistent with this. On my reading, it circumscribes the analysanda, keeping cognitive maladies out of view, a role Dolin himself allows it (2026: 352); it does not contribute to vice-making disvalue.

6.2. An objection about dispositions that track the distinction

A natural objection is that no actual dispositions track the weighty-insignificant distinction cleanly. Real human traits operate at a level of generality that ignores the value-tier of the knowledge they obstruct. A closed-minded agent is closed-minded across the board, not selectively closed-minded toward insignificant matters.

The objection is right about paradigmatic vices, which do operate at a level of generality. But this does not threaten (OBS**). The paradigmatic vices satisfy (OBS**) easily. They systematically obstruct weighty knowledge because they systematically obstruct knowledge tout court. The interest of the value-tier specification is not that it changes the verdict in standard cases. It changes the verdict in marginal cases. The marginal cases (the strategic-ignorance dispositions, the cognitive-sustainability dispositions) are precisely those that generate the counterexamples to unrestricted (OBS) in Section 4.

The objection might be pressed further. If no real disposition discriminates, then the value-tier specification is otiose. I disagree. The dispositions I discuss in Section 4 do discriminate. The agent who has developed a stable disposition to filter low-yield informational inputs is not closed-minded with respect to substantive inquiry. She is closed-minded, if at all, only toward inputs whose contents fail to offer substantive cognitive contact with reality. The discrimination is real, and its effects on vice-attribution are not trivial.

6.3. An objection about the inquirer's projects

A second objection is that if what counts as substantive cognitive contact with reality is in part a function of the inquirer's projects, then (OBS**) makes vice-attribution turn on the agent's projects, which is implausible.

Pritchard's account, which I follow, denies the antecedent. Substantive cognitive contact with reality is not project-relative. The number of grains of sand on a given beach does not offer substantive cognitive contact with reality even to the inquirer whose

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project happens to include counting them. The criterion is independent of project, even if particular weighty truths can in principle figure in projects of various kinds.

Weight may nonetheless be context-sensitive in a different sense. The sugar content of a particular microwaveable ready meal may be weighty knowledge for an inquirer managing diabetes and insignificant for an inquirer with no relevant medical condition. The context-sensitivity here is not project-relativity but ecological fit. Substantive cognitive contact with reality includes contact with the reality the agent occupies. This is consistent with Pritchard's framework and does not collapse the distinction into prudence.

The ecological-fit reading needs more pressure. The worry is that ecological fit is project-relativity wearing a different hat. If what counts as substantive cognitive contact with reality for an agent depends on the reality the agent occupies, and if the reality the agent occupies is partly constituted by her projects, then ecological fit reduces to project-relativity by another route.

The reduction does not go through. Consider two agents. Maya is a hospital nurse working in a paediatric ward. Owen is a hospital nurse working in palliative oncology. Both encounter the proposition that paracetamol doses for children are calculated by body weight, so that a dose safe for one child can be an overdose for a smaller one. For Maya, the proposition offers substantive cognitive contact with the reality she occupies. For Owen, it does not bear on his practice in the same way. The asymmetry is not project-relativity. Neither nurse's ward assignment functions, in the epistemic axiology, as a project that confers weight on truths it would otherwise lack. The truth about paediatric paracetamol dosing bears on Maya's reality whether or not she chose her ward; its relevance to each nurse's practice would track their clinical responsibilities, whether or not they had chosen those responsibilities it would still bear on her reality and bear on Owen's the moment he was reassigned to paediatrics. The asymmetry tracks the structure of the reality each inhabits as a working professional, not the agent's endorsement of that structure as a project.

The parallel with the diabetic case is instructive. The interest in sugar content of an inquirer managing diabetes arises from her medical condition, not of a project she has selected. The reality she inhabits is one in which sugar content has a particular cognitive bearing. Ecological fit is fit with the reality an agent occupies, where occupation is not chosen in the sense relevant to project-relativity. The distinction does not collapse. What it tracks is that substantive cognitive contact with reality is contact with reality as the agent encounters it, not with reality considered as a project-neutral abstraction.

6.4. Dolin's objection from epistemic helplessness

Dolin (2026) presses an objection that my first amendment cannot answer, but my second can. He allows that Cassam might repair the theory with a richer epistemic axiology, confesses that exactly how is unclear to him, then tentatively floats the restriction of vice-grounding obstructions to valuable knowledge as one candidate (2026: 347). His own case of epistemic self-indulgence is a vice on (OBS**) when, as in his description of it, devotion to trivia crowds out attention to weightier matters (2026: 346), and he allows that a value-restricted axiology handles it (2026: 347, 349). He then argues that the repair reaches only so far (347–349). It cannot handle cases of intellectual vice 'manifesting passively when knowledge is beyond reach' (2026: 346).

The cases are well chosen. An agent who must wait on others for information she cannot hasten is intellectually impatient, fuming at a delay she can do nothing about. An

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agent who confronts what she cannot know is wonderless, indifferent to a reality she has no prospect of grasping. Neither trait obstructs any knowledge, because in these configurations the trait has no purchase on what the agent comes to know. Both agents nonetheless merit criticism. Dolin adds that the two run in opposite directions with respect to the value of the epistemic object, impatience being, if anything, more criticisable when what is waited on is trivial and wonderlessness worse when what cannot be known is valuable. He concludes that knowledge-obstruction is not always required for intellectual vice, however the epistemic axiology is refined (2026: 349).

The conclusion does not follow, and the reason is my second amendment. Dolin's argument evaluates a trait by what it does in the configuration its bearer occupies. Epistemic helplessness is a configuration. Nothing turns on its rarity, and indeed, it is not rare; waiting on results and confronting the unknowable are perfectly ordinary epistemic situations. What matters is that a trait's profile is fixed across the range of environments, not at any point within it, so a trait may be a vice even when it produces no obstruction in a configuration that is entirely normal. On the trait-level reading defended in Section 5, a trait systematically obstructs knowledge when its reliable functioning across the normal range of epistemic environments obstructs weighty knowledge, not when it produces an obstruction here and now. Intellectual impatience meets that condition. Dolin allows that it 'certainly can get in the way of knowledge' (2026: 348), and the stronger claim is not in doubt. The impatient inquirer cuts inquiry short, takes the first answer that ends the wait, and skims where she should read closely. The profile is obstructive wherever inquiry takes time and effort, which is true of most targets of inquiry. Dolin sets the point aside on the grounds that in the waiting room the trait 'manifests precisely in the anger and frustration' of being unable to change one's epistemic standing (2026: 348). That is true and does not matter, since vice-status is fixed by the profile and not by the manifestation. Wonderlessness meets the condition too. Dolin himself notes that being disposed to wonder 'can help us explore possibilities and thereby help us acquire knowledge' (2026: 348); the disposition to wonder is among the engines of inquiry, and its absence reliably narrows what an agent comes to know. The asymmetry Dolin notes is a fact about the configurations, and on the trait-level reading it does not bear on whether either trait is a vice. It is nonetheless open to an obstructivist explanation, and one that runs in the same direction for both traits. The severity of a token manifestation is evidence of how pervasive the trait is, and pervasiveness fixes the profile. Impatience that fires over lunch information fires at trivial stakes, which marks a more general impatience and predicts wider obstruction; wonderlessness that persists where reality most calls for wonder marks a deeper deficit of the disposition and predicts wider narrowing of inquiry. In each case, the more criticisable token is the token of the more obstructive trait, which is what (OBS**) leads one to expect. Token severity is defeasible evidence of pervasiveness rather than a measure of it, and I claim no more for the reading than that. Both traits are vices on (OBS**), and they are vices in the helpless agent, whose impatience is the same trait in the waiting room as in the archive. The verdict Dolin wants falls out of obstructivism once systematicity is read at the level of the trait rather than the outcome.

Two concessions, however, are owed. The reply secures the extension and offers, without establishing, the explanation. It delivers the verdict that the helpless, impatient agent is vicious, and the pervasive reading shows that the knowledge-obstructing profile of her trait can account for the pattern of criticism as well; it does not show that this profile, rather than the motivational defect Dolin prefers, is what makes her vicious. That question belongs to the dispute I set aside in Section 1. The reply also applies only

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to traits with a knowledge-obstructing profile in normal environments. Were a trait produced that merits criticism and has no such profile anywhere, obstructivism would face Dolin's conclusion undiminished. Impatience and wonderlessness are not such traits. Nor are their narrowed forms, whether wonderlessness confined to what is 'evidently unknowable' (2026: 348) or impatience that fires only when the agent is helpless, since unknowability and helplessness are rarely evident in advance. A disposition to withhold wonder at the first appearance of unknowability shuts down inquiry into much that was knowable after all, and a disposition to fume at apparent helplessness fires where action was in fact available and displaces it. Both carry an obstructive profile in normal environments because the boundary that defines them is not transparent to the agent. Whether any trait of the required kind exists remains open, and the objection now depends on finding one.

Dolin also argues that knowledge-obstruction is insufficient for vice, since prematurely humble or prematurely autonomous thinkers obstruct knowledge without meriting criticism (2026: 349–351). That argument targets the evaluative condition, which I inherit from (OBS) unchanged. Where the bar of criticisability should sit is a question my amendments leave as they found it, and, as Section 6.1.1 argues, wherever it sits, it cannot do the work of the value-tier specification.

7. Conclusion

Obstructivism, as Cassam states it in (OBS), treats all systematic knowledge-obstructions as vice-relevant regardless of the value of the knowledge obstructed and regardless of the configuration of agent and environment in which the obstruction occurs. The commitment is in tension with Cassam's own practice of vice-attribution, which relies throughout *Vices of the Mind* on an unanalysed value-tiering of knowledge and a reliability intuition about systematicity that (OBS) does not articulate. I have proposed two friendly amendments. The first restricts the knowledge whose obstruction counts to weighty knowledge, in the sense of knowledge that offers the agent substantive cognitive contact with reality. The second relativises the systematicity condition to the normal range of epistemic environments and locates it at the level of the trait rather than at the level of its outcomes in pathological configurations. The resulting definition, (OBS**), preserves obstructivism's core commitments while handling the family of counterexamples that unrestricted (OBS) cannot. The amendment is best read as articulating commitments Cassam's existing practice already presupposes.

One consequence is worth registering. If vice-attribution is restricted to obstructions of weighty knowledge, the remedial task shifts with it. Rehabilitating a vicious inquirer is not a matter of making her indiscriminately more acquisitive of truth. It is a matter of restoring the discrimination that lets her track what bears on her contact with reality. Dunne and Kotsonis (2024) develop an exemplarist account of epistemic vice rehabilitation on which the capacity at stake is zetetic rather than merely doxastic, and the axiology defended here is the sort such an account requires. I do not pursue the connection further.

What this paper does not establish also needs stating. I have not vindicated obstructivism against motivationalism. What I have shown is that the objection from cases where systematic knowledge-obstruction seems intuitively non-vicious rests on an under-specified version of the view. It has bite against (OBS). It loses bite against (OBS**). The second amendment also answers the objection of the opposite shape that Dolin (2026) presses, that intellectual vice can manifest where there is no knowledge to

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obstruct (See Dolin's objection from epistemic helplessness). To the extent that vice-epistemologists have moved toward motivationalism because they took such cases to be decisive, my refinement alters the dialectic. It restores obstructivism to a position from which one family of objections can be answered without case-by-case stipulation. That family can no longer serve as grounds for preferring motivationalism over obstructivism. Whether any other reason can justify preferring motivationalism over obstructivism is a different matter and remains an open question.

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Gerry Dunne is a lecturer at the Marino Institute of Education and a Research Fellow in Trinity College Dublin. His work spans epistemology, ethics, and education. He has published widely on epistemic paternalism, exemplarism, virtue and vice, epistemic exploitation, expertise, phronesis, stress-testing competing conceptions of reasons, epistemic decolonising, ignorance, and teacher education. He is currently writing a book on embodied cognition and AI with Routledge.

Cite this article: Dunne G. (2026). "Ameliorating Obstructivism: Low-Grade Knowledge and Motivated Ignorance." *Episteme* 1–24. https://doi.org/10.1017/epi.2026.10149

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