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To cite this article: Mona Simion (2024) Tanesini on truth and epistemic vice, Inquiry, 67:2, 762-768, DOI: [10.1080/0020174X.2023.2167233](https://doi.org/10.1080/0020174X.2023.2167233)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/0020174X.2023.2167233>



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Published online: 09 Feb 2023.



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Tanesini on truth and epistemic vice

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ABSTRACT



Alessandra Tanesini's 'The Mismeasure of the Self' develops an internalist account of epistemic vice. On this view, epistemic vices are grounded in attitudes towards the self: fatalism, self-satisfaction, narcissistic infatuation, and self-abasement. The account is internalist insofar as it claims to ground both the nature and the normativity of vice within the subject's skull. In this paper, I argue against vice internalism: epistemic vices, I show, need a normative hook outside the skull to explain their vicious nature. In other words, the 'mis' in the 'mismeasure' of the self demands externalist unpacking.

ARTICLE HISTORY Received 19 October 2022; Accepted 8 January 2023

KEYWORDS Epistemic vice; reliabilism; responsibilism

1. Introduction

Tanesini's (2021) *The Mismeasure of the Self* (henceforth MS) is an excellent and very ambitious book; it offers the first systematic, comprehensive, thoroughly empirically informed picture of the nature and normativity of epistemic vice. The book is also aiming to carve out new methodological space in the epistemology of vice, beyond the reliabilist/responsibilist divide in virtue epistemology. Tanesini sees her project to be one in 'autonomous' epistemology: the ground of epistemic vice on this view is neither responsibility, nor reliability: it lies with psychological reality. Epistemic vices are taken to be essentially sourced in attitudes towards the self: fatalism, self-satisfaction, narcissistic infatuation, and self-abasement. The thought, roughly, is that some people have a self-infatuated stance towards their intellectual qualities which they therefore assess as superlative without pausing to consider their true epistemic worth. Others, in contrast, adopt a self-abasing and negative stance towards

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their intellectual abilities. Consequently, they become ashamed of their intellectual qualities which they perceive to be extremely limited.

Fatalism, self-satisfaction, narcissistic infatuation, and self-abasement are attitudes toward the self that ground epistemic vices of self-assessment. These are exemplified by those who do not have the measure of their intellectual abilities because they assess their epistemic worth using the wrong unit of measurement:

[F]or instance, those who are motivated to self-enhance tend to compare themselves for how they differ from less capable individuals so as to find further confirmation of their excellence. I use the metaphor of measuring oneself by the wrong unit to describe this phenomenon of biased selection of the yardstick (as represented by the relative ability of another person or group) by which to evaluate one's own performance. (MS, 15)

Since these evaluations are crucial in the setting of realistic epistemic goals, in the choices of methods and strategies to adopt in inquiry and in the process of epistemic self-improvement, those whose self-assessments are thus misguided are unlikely in ordinary circumstances to excel in their epistemic pursuits. That being said, on Tanesini's account, the presence of the vice is essentially connected to its being sourced in self-assessments that employ the wrong unit of measurement, and not to the falsity of its constitutive doxastic attitudes, nor its (likely) unfortunate epistemic consequences.

In what follows, I take issue with Tanesini's vice internalism: epistemic vices are vices, I argue, only if externalistically individuated. I'll focus on what Tanesini calls 'vices of self-satisfaction', like narcissism, and superbia. Nothing hinges on this – the worries I outline generalise neatly to the entire framework.

2. Tanesini's vice internalism

The presence of vice, on Tanesini's account, is independent of the accuracy of the vice-constitutive beliefs about oneself – I might be right that I am the smartest person in the world, but if this belief is sourced in bad self-assessment processes, it has the disposition to be vice-constitutive nevertheless. Furthermore, it may be that my narcissism is, *de facto*, extremely reliable, in that it mostly outputs true beliefs: it remains an epistemic vice on Tanesini's view nevertheless. For this, Tanesini takes vices to supervene on subjects' psychologies – i.e. on particular attitudes towards the self. Here is what Tanesini thinks about individuals who are in the grips of vices of self-satisfaction:

[These] individuals adopt a self-satisfied stance towards what they regard as their intellectual strengths. They believe that a great number of their intellectual features are impressive. These individuals are also often averse to working towards improvement. They adopt this stance because they believe that they are already great and thus have no need to improve. Hence, their mindset is [...] fixed since they judge themselves to be naturally talented and thus capable of effortless success. (MS 15)

Vices of self-satisfaction will be individuated by the corresponding attitude. Accuracy doesn't matter: my self-satisfied beliefs about myself may well be (luckily) true. What's crucial to vice presence is that they are not sourced in/based on evidence, but rather sourced in/based on mistaken self-directed attitudes (self-admiration, self-defence, etc). Here is Tanesini:

We should expect narcissistic and self-satisfied self-evaluations to be off the mark by underestimating shortcomings and overestimating strengths. However, in unusual circumstances, it is possible that such individuals may have impressive intellectual strengths and through sheer luck their self-assessments may prove to be largely accurate. [...] The person with narcissistic tendencies, for example, is disposed to bullshit even though he holds true beliefs about his capacities. What makes his claims about the self, among other things, bullshit is that he does not care whether they are true (MS 15).

One can distinguish between two truth-independence claims in Tanesini's view: first, the presence of the vice is compatible with it being (mostly) constituted by true beliefs about oneself. Second, the presence of the vice is also independent of its epistemic consequences: it might be that, in virtue of holding this attitude towards myself, I am highly successful in inquiry – in the sense that I am more likely to discover truths and avoid falsehoods. Here they are, just for simplicity of use:

Constitutive Truth Independence (CTI): Epistemic vices are compatible with the truth of their constitutive beliefs.

Consequence Valence Independence (CVI): Vices are compatible with a positive epistemic valence of their epistemic consequences.

Furthermore, Tanesini proposes that epistemic vice fully supervenes on one's psychology – both metaphysically and normatively. Let's formulate this claim for ease of use as well:

Tanesini's Vice Internalism (TVI): Epistemic vices supervene on the subject's psychological attitudes.

In what follows, I argue for three claims: first, that CTI and CVI do not suffice to support TVI, nor any other internalism about vice. Rather, CTI and CVI merely reinforce the already popular view that a simple, *de*

facto reliabilist view of epistemic normativity is wrong. Compatibly, I argue, epistemic vices might still require externalistic individuation of a different flavour.

Second, I argue that indeed, epistemic vice will need a hook in the world outwith one's skull if it is to be plausibly epistemically normatively problematic.

Finally, I consider a come-back on behalf of vice internalism: Even though, if I'm right, CTI and CVI do not do the analytic work the vice internalist needs them to do, they might still be useful for doing the social-psychological work: that is, while vice internalism need not follow from CTI and CVI, it might still be the case that, in the world we inhabit, and given the kinds of creatures that we are, it is paradigmatically the case that vices will survive truth and reliability. I will put forth some worries for this claim.

3. Against vice internalism

(1) Against vice *de facto* reliabilism

Tanesini is right about CTI and CVI: plausibly, epistemic vice can survive accuracy of constitutive beliefs and *de facto* reliability. That's hardly surprising, one would think: we already know from research on externalist theories of justification and the norm of belief that (1) plausibly, there's more to attributively good belief than truth, and (2) blunt, *de facto* reliabilism just won't do as a theory of epistemic justification (e.g. Norman the Clairvoyant has taught us as much). If so – i.e. if positive normative properties of beliefs don't supervene on either truth or *de facto* reliability – we should also expect that negative epistemic dispositional properties need not imply the lack thereof.

Luckily true beliefs based on, e.g. coin tosses don't make for (attributively) good beliefs: they don't make for good tokens of their type. If so, the fact that a particular attitude towards the self is grounded in true beliefs need not suggest it's not an (attributively) bad attitude. Vices can be grounded in true beliefs.

Wishful thinking is not a proper way to form beliefs, nor does it lead to good beliefs, even if it's reliable. If so, just because a way to form beliefs reliably results in true beliefs it does not follow it is not a bad way to form beliefs. Vices can be reliable.

That being said, CTI and CVI do not imply vice internalism, more than, e.g. the knowledge norm of belief is an internalist norm, or e.g. normal

worlds reliabilism is an internalist view of justification. Champions of both these views agree, respectively, that true beliefs are not good tokens of their type, and that its *de facto* reliability need not imply that a method of belief formation is a good way to form beliefs. Indeed, any externalism about epistemic normativity in general that denies these two claims will be perfectly compatible with CTI and CVI, while, at the same time, denying that epistemic normative categories are internalistically individuated. Knowledge normers, for instance, are free to claim that non-knowledgeable (albeit true) beliefs can constitute vice, and that dispositions or attitudes that reliably lead to truths – but not knowledge – can be epistemic vices. Non-de-facto reliabilists will agree that vices can be *de facto* reliable: they will just hold that they are incompatible with normal worlds reliability, or proper function, and so on.

(2) For vice externalism

CTI and CVI do not imply vice internalism, and thereby fail to offer support to TVI. But is TVI independently plausibly true? If yes, maybe CTI and CVI are mere symptoms of this reality.

I don't think so: vice internalism is false. To see this, let's ask the question: what is it that makes, e.g. narcissism and superbia into vices? On Tanesini's view, recall, it is the biased selection of the measuring unit used to measure oneself that explains the problematic nature of vices of self-assessment. But what is wrong with biased selection? What explains its negative epistemic valence, in virtue of which it grounds vice? Here are a few answers that are not available to internalism: self-measurements involving biased unit selection are epistemically problematic because they cannot lead to knowledge, because they don't have a tendency to get it right in normal conditions, or in normal worlds, because they were selected for biological rather than epistemic success etc. All these normative grounds are not available to the vice internalist because they lie outwith the skull's limits. In a nutshell, then, when Tanesini talks of vice being grounded in self-measurements that employ the wrong measuring unit – what is it that explains the relevant wrongness? More precisely, what is it, within the subject's skull, that explains it?

I conjecture vice internalism will have just as hard a time to answer this question as general internalism about epistemic normativity has historically had: what is wrong with beliefs based wishful thinking? Well, they are formed via a bad belief forming process. Why is wishful thinking bad? Because it's not the right kind of process for forming beliefs. What

is the right kind of process? Short of offering an ad hoc list, notoriously, the answer will have to appeal to something outwith the believer's skull.

(3) Against paradigmatic vice internalism

Maybe TVI was never intended as a dismantling analysis of epistemic vice – i.e. as offering necessary and sufficient conditions for its instantiation – but rather as a paradigm case analysis thereof: maybe, that is, the claim is rather that, paradigmatically, vices are independent of the truth of their constitutive beliefs, as well as of the valence of their epistemic consequences.

I worry about the plausibility of this take on the view: first, it seems to me as though it is both psychologically and epistemologically implausible that the exercise of epistemic vice will often and easily co-exist with accuracy. Consider: I believe I'm super good at maths due to self-admiration alone. Next thing, I do some maths. As it turns out, I'm getting things right all the time. I find it implausible, at this juncture, to think that the inductive evidence is not (at least part) of the basis of my belief. Implausibility is not impossibility, of course: it may be that I totally ignore this inductive evidence. It is, however, I submit, psychologically implausible, so it will not serve a paradigm-case analysis of the phenomenon we are looking at.

Second, the problem generalises: if whenever I believe (from self-mis-measuring) that I am good at *phi*-ing, I *phi* and get inductive evidence that I am good at *phi*-ing, it will be hard to see – and psychologically implausible – how it is that I am still instantiating narcissism or superbia, rather than a merely justified belief that I'm great, sourced in a solid inductive basis.

4. Conclusion

Tanesini's rich account teaches us a lot about the psychology and epistemology of vice: de facto lack of reliability does not matter, and false constitutive beliefs are not needed for vice. Compatibly, though, I have argued, Tanesini's self-mis-measuring attitudes need externalist normative grounding: the 'mis' in the 'mismeasure of the self' can't be restricted to the limits of the skull. Epistemic normativity – be it of virtue or of vice – is externalist normativity.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

This work was supported by HORIZON EUROPE European Research Council: [grant number 948356].

Reference

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