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ECHO CHAMBERS AND COLLECTIVE EPISTEMIC VICE

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ABSTRACT: Echo chambers are a recently popularised subject for discussion in terms of their presenting or not presenting an epistemic problem. One common assumption about echo chambers is that they are bad for the overall epistemic climate. Also in recent upswing in popularity is the discussion of epistemic vices, which attempts to explain some types of epistemically bad or problematic phenomena in terms of flaws in epistemic character. A recent account by C. Thi Nguyen argues that echo chambers are self-isolating epistemic structures that sustain their epistemic isolation through epistemically unwarranted mechanisms that give increased credibility to the testimony of in-group-members and decreased credibility to that from outside the group. This does not mean that the members adhering to this behaviour are necessarily epistemically vicious, however, but that the socioepistemic structure itself is. In this work, I aim to make clear whether the interpretation of echo chambers as collectively but not individually epistemically vicious is viable through the lens of a responsibilist perspective on collective epistemic vice. I do this through setting up desiderata that a theory of collective epistemic vice would optimally meet in order to explain echo chambers as collectively epistemically vicious and then evaluating extant accounts of collective epistemic vice and some on collective virtue against these. No account analysed is a perfect fit, but the evaluation I give of these might present an indication of what to take into account going forward. Elsewise, if one is so inclined, the present theoretical inability to explain echo chambers in this way might constitute a reason to examine whether echo chambers might be better explained in terms of individual epistemic vice, or to pursue other avenues of explanation altogether.

1. Introduction

One recently popularised way of explaining polarisation and the informational self-isolation of some communities, is through the concept of *echo chambers*. In Kathleen Hall Jamieson and Joseph N. Cappella's 2008 media study *Echo Chamber: Rush Limbaugh and the Conservative Media Establishment*, the term echo chamber is used to describe how certain media outlets in the United States disproportionately spread and amplify in-group perspectives while also distorting, discrediting, or outright blocking out-group perspectives.¹ Some recent scholarship in epistemology has adopted the term to describe epistemically self-isolating communities, where the epistemic isolation functions either through omission or automatic rejection of information that is incongruent with the worldviews accepted by the group. One worry is that if we value the free flow of information as epistemically beneficial, echo chambers present a problematic hindrance to that free flow of information and the possibility of proper evaluation of available evidence.

Not necessarily connected to any particular type of approved views, examples of echo chambers could include everything from anti-vaccine-movements, climate change deniers, or conspiracy theories, to proponents of certain types of diets or exercise.² These are examples of groups that have been said to reject or avoid to engage with evidence pertaining to their core topics based on the informational content aligning or not aligning with the approved beliefs and values of the group, without regard to whether this is an epistemically sound (or merited) thing to do.

¹ Their definition is also used as a basis for the more precise definitions I introduce later on; Kathleen Hall Jamieson & Joseph N. Cappella, *Echo Chamber: Rush Limbaugh and the Conservative Media Establishment*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008.

² The question of whether or not the description is true of these groups is empirical: I will not be able to address it here. I will follow others in the philosophical discussion on the topic in assuming that there are groups of people that fulfil the description, however, be they the groups listed or others. The examples listed here are for illustrative purposes, borrowed from C. Thi Nguyen and Meredith Sheeks: C. Thi Nguyen, "Echo Chambers an Epistemic Bubbles", *Episteme*, Vol. 17, No. 2, 2020, New York: Cambridge University Press, pp. 141–161; Meredith Sheeks, "The Myth of the Good Epistemic Bubble", *Episteme*, 2022, pp. 1–16, p. 7.

Echo chambers conceived in this way seem to lend themselves naturally to an analysis in terms of epistemic vice. Sprung from the field of virtue epistemology, epistemic vice is one way of explaining how some ways of exercising epistemic agency, or refraining from doing so, on some views due to a blameworthy psychology, might be detrimental to the spread, retention, or acquisition of knowledge.³ Given that some examples of epistemic vices are unwarranted cynicism, prejudice, closed-mindedness, wishful thinking, and conformity, it seems *prima facie* warranted to connect echo chambers to epistemic vice; rejection of evidence based on its alignment with already established views and beliefs and not on its own merit might plausibly be described as part of the characteristic behaviour associated with any of the epistemic vices listed.⁴ Also, epistemic vice seems to have at least some influence over individuals' tendency to believe misinformation, as suggested by a recent empirical study by Meyer et al.⁵ As such tendencies are often associated with some of the groups mentioned as example echo chambers, as well as with epistemic vice, it would not be wild to at least initially suppose a connection between epistemic vice and echo chambers' tendency to amplify or hinder information solely due to its source or content being from within or without a specific social group: this arguably both hinders the spread, acquisition, and retention of knowledge.⁶

Nevertheless, there is disagreement about what kind of epistemic problem, if any at all, echo chambers might pose. Some argue that there is a theoretical possibility of epistemically 'good' echo chambers, with the implication that echo chambers are not at all inherently connected to epistemic vice.⁷ Another account suggests that echo chambers are inherently epistemically bad because there is no possibility of making a rational evaluation of one's epistemic situation from within an echo chamber.⁸ Yet others argue that while not inherently so, echo chambers are often utilised in epistemically harmful ways.⁹ With reservation for the fact that epistemic virtue and vice is not always in perfect alignment with what is epistemically good or bad, and that the mentioned accounts do not explicitly connect echo chambers to epistemic virtue or vice, the above provides an example of the width of interpretations of echo chambers as epistemic problems.¹⁰

³ Quassim Cassam, *Vices of the Mind. From the intellectual to the Political*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019, p. 7ff; Heather Battaly, "Varieties of Epistemic Vice", *The Ethics of Belief*, ed. Jonathan Matheson & Rico Vitz, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014, *passim*.

⁴ Examples from Quassim Cassam and Linda Zagzebski; Quassim Cassam, "Vice Epistemology", *The Monist*, Vol. 99, No. 2, 2016, pp. 159–180; Linda Zagzebski, *Virtues of the Mind. An inquiry into the nature of virtue and the ethical foundations of knowledge*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996, p. 152.

⁵ Marco Meyer et al., "Epistemic vice predicts acceptance of Covid-19 misinformation", *Episteme*, 2021, pp. 1–22.

⁶ The tendency to believe misinformation could be congruent with the description of several common epistemic vices, such as e.g. gullibility, wishful thinking, or prejudice. While the actual link between echo chambers and belief in misinformation is an empirical question, there is a strong intuitive connection between the two. This makes the investigation of such a connection at minimum an interesting and viable avenue for exploration in terms of investigating echo chambers in relation to epistemic vice; see e.g. Cassam 2019, ch. 6, "Vice and Responsibility" for some discussion of the connection between believing false information and gullibility and/or wishful thinking as an epistemic vice.

⁷ See Jennifer Lackey "Echo Chambers, Fake News, and Social Epistemology", *The Epistemology of Fake News*, ed. Sven Bernecker, Amy K. Flowerree, & Thomas Grundmann, Oxford University Press, 2021, pp. 206–227; Jeremy Fantl, "Fake News vs. Echo Chambers", *Social Epistemology*, Vol. 35, No. 6, 2021, pp. 645–659.

⁸ Sheeks 2022.

⁹ Breno R. G. Santos, "Echo Chambers, Ignorance and Domination", *Social Epistemology*, Vol. 35, No. 2, 2021, pp. 109–119.

¹⁰ Aligning epistemic virtue and vice with epistemic good and bad adheres more to the reliabilist school of epistemic virtue theory than the responsibilist. The differences between reliabilism and responsibilism on epistemic virtue and vice will be detailed in section 2.

While the field is sparse as pertains specifically to connecting epistemic virtue and vice to echo chambers, a prominent account detailing echo chambers put forth by C. Thi Nguyen, suggests that individuals in echo chambers are not inherently guilty of epistemic vice, and that the epistemic vice in question is only attributable as inherent to echo chambers on a collective level, and not to its individual members.¹¹ The thesis is that echo chambers are per definition inherently epistemically vicious due to properties the community constituting the echo chamber has as a collective, rather than as a result of its individual members per definition being epistemically vicious. As this is the one extant account making a connection between epistemic vice and echo chambers, I have chosen to use Nguyen's account as a baseline for the analysis of epistemic vice in relation to echo chambers.

My aspiration is to make some headway in clarifying if, how, and why echo chambers might be called collectively epistemically vicious. This kind of analysis of the echo chamber is important as it might provide indication as to where it is reasonable to place the 'blame' for the epistemic problems caused by echo chambers – and thus, where and how to direct countermeasures to avoid such epistemic problems. The first step I take in this direction is the introduction of responsibilist epistemic virtue and vice, the second is an overview of the kind of echo chamber that will be analysed. Third, I set up desiderata that a theory of collective epistemic vice would optimally answer to in order to explain echo chambers in such a way. I then proceed to evaluate the available literature on collective epistemic vice, and some on collective virtue against these. An interpretation of the epistemic vice of echo chambers as exclusively collective requires, as I will argue, theoretical tools not yet adequately represented in the extant arsenal of vice epistemology.

The primary aim of my project here is to thus assess the viability of an analysis of echo chambers as collectively epistemically vicious against current work on vice epistemology and on collective virtues and vices. An analysis of this kind contributes not only a first attempt at laying the groundwork for further exploration in areas that are hitherto fairly unexplored, but it will to my knowledge also constitute one of the first attempt to examine the viability of collective vice analysis in relation to a real-world epistemic problem.¹² As such, the results will by extension constitute both a preliminary evaluation of the prospects for the nascent field of collective vice epistemology, as well a contribution to the discussion of echo chambers as epistemic problems.

Another choice that I have made is to attempt to analyse collective vice specifically in terms of the challenges it poses for a responsibilist framework of epistemic vice.¹³ This because, as I will return to later on, should such a responsibilist theory of collective vice be successful, it would yield more detailed explanations of the source of the epistemic problem that the epistemic vice in question presents than would a competing reliabilist account.

Further, while taking the approach to analyse echo chambers specifically in terms of collective epistemic vice does entail venturing into largely unknown territory, if successful, such an account would have significant implications on the field of vice epistemology. Not only is Nguyen's suggestion of echo chamber as inherently collectively epistemically vicious without this vice being related to the epistemic vice of individuals the only extant account suggesting a link between echo chambers and epistemic vice, but it is also a view that if

¹¹ Nguyen 2020, p. 154ff.

¹² The only other one to my knowledge available is the account of collective epistemic vice from Miranda Fricker that will be introduced later on in this work; Miranda Fricker, "Institutional epistemic vices. The case of inferential inertia.", *Vice Epistemology*, ed. Ian James Kidd, Heather Battaly, & Quassim Cassam. London/New York: Routledge, 2021, pp. 89–107.

¹³ Again, more in-depth description of the reliabilist contra responsibilist schools of virtue and vice epistemology will follow in section 2.

convincingly argued could have large implications for the study of epistemic vice and virtue overall. This as it would imply that at least some social phenomena give rise to epistemic vice without this being rooted in directly in the behaviour of epistemic agents in virtue of themselves but in virtue of some quality of the social nature of the phenomenon.

Especially if such an analysis could be made on responsibilist terms: it would then imply that there are factors outside individual agential epistemic responsibility that make agents behave in a way that would otherwise be characterised as flaws in their epistemic character, but that in these cases are instead systematic flaws. Even should the result be negative in terms of the viability of responsibilist collective epistemic vice, this result would indicate that the proper placement of blame for epistemic vices even appearing on a larger scale has its roots in individual agential behaviour. Again, while the results I present here are largely inconclusive on this point, and thus a fairly modest contribution in the directions specified, they provide a wide foundation for the further exploration of these questions.

2. Epistemic Virtue and Vice

To begin conducting an analysis of the suggested collective epistemic vice of echo chambers, we first need a grasp of both epistemic vice and echo chambers. This section will be dedicated to the former, and section 3 to the latter.

2.1 Virtue

As vice epistemology springs from the field of virtue epistemology, we shall begin with epistemic virtue. Virtue epistemology concerns the sort of qualities in an agent that promote their acquisition of knowledge – qualities that make an agent a “good thinker”.¹⁴ As such, epistemic virtue is usually tied to epistemic goods and the sorts of behaviours that promote them. A theory of epistemic virtue might have a pluralist or monist view of epistemic good, but where there are several epistemic goods, knowledge, truth, understanding, wisdom, judgement, or even justice on some accounts, are such that figure among them.¹⁵ Knowledge or truth is usually seen as the ultimate epistemic good however, in the sense that the value of the others might be explained in terms of the value of them.¹⁶ Epistemically virtuous behaviour according to a virtue epistemologist might be conceived of as behaviour conducive to epistemic good.

Commonly, theories of epistemic virtue are divided into reliabilist and responsibilist theories. Reliabilist accounts view epistemic virtue as instrumental: they count as an epistemic virtue any quality that is reliably conducive to epistemic good.¹⁷ This might include personal traits such as open-mindedness but also faculties such as good eyesight, which both might be conceived of as qualities that reliably aid the acquisition of knowledge. In this sense, reliabilist epistemic virtue corresponds to *any quality* in an agent that is conducive to epistemic good, whatever that quality might be.

In a broad sense, responsibilist accounts of epistemic virtue are separated from reliabilist accounts in that they require something more of agents in order for them to count as virtuous.

¹⁴ Heather Battaly, “Virtue Epistemology”, *Philosophy Compass*, vol. 3, no. 4, 2008, pp. 639–663, p. 639.

¹⁵ See e.g., Jason Baehr, “The Structure of Intellectual Vice”, *Vice Epistemology*, ed. Ian James Kidd, Heather Battaly, & Quassim Cassam, London/New York: Routledge, 2021, p. 17ff.; Zagzebski 1996, p. 167, 174, 181, 220ff., 230, 269ff.; understanding & wisdom & knowledge as cognitive contact with reality, Battaly 2014, p. 52f.; Miranda Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice. Power & the Ethics of Knowing*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007, esp. ch. 5: “The Genealogy of Testimonial Justice” pp.109–129.

¹⁶ As a sidenote, there is within the field of virtue epistemology some debate as to whether, and if so, how, epistemic good might be linked to moral good, or to the concept of goodness in general. This question is not relevant for present purposes.

¹⁷ Battaly 2008, p. 644 ff., Battaly 2014 p. 52ff.

It does not suffice for an agent to be prone to produce knowledge: they need to act intentionally virtuously, and to do so with a motivation for epistemic good guiding them.¹⁸ Responsibilist virtues thus pertain to ways in which epistemic agents use their *epistemic agency* in the pursuit of knowledge.¹⁹ A virtuous epistemic agent in the responsibilist sense might have traits such as being fair in weighing their sources, being open-minded, intellectually courageous, or curious.²⁰ Additionally, virtuous qualities, to count as such, need to have a certain degree of stability in an agent to qualify. An agent is not epistemically virtuous for one-off instances of virtuous behaviour in fleeting pursuit of epistemic good; agents need to behave in accordance with motivations for epistemic good habitually or reliably, and motivations for truth need to be stable enough to count as part of their personal character.²¹ In sum, responsibilist epistemic virtue requires the epistemic agent to have some kind of motivation for epistemic good, such as truth or knowledge, involved in guiding how, and how reliably, they deploy their epistemic agency to this end.²² What separates reliabilist and responsibilist accounts of epistemic virtue is thus that where reliabilist virtue is instrumental and directly aligned with what is conducive to epistemic good, whatever quality that might be, responsibilist accounts single out as epistemic virtues as those qualities in an agent that not only are conducive to epistemic good but deliberately so.

2.2 Vice

In a similar way to epistemic virtue, epistemic vice might be conceived of both in reliabilist and in responsibilist terms. Reliabilist epistemic vice is like its virtue counterpart tied to any qualities in an agent that are epistemically bad, or that have epistemically bad effects. A reliabilist epistemic vice could thus both be a character trait, such as dogmatism, or related to an agent's cognitive faculties, such as poor vision.²³ It might be interesting to look at echo chambers from a reliabilist perspective as to whether they are inherently conducive to produce epistemically bad effects, but this is not what I will aim to do in this project. This is because a reliabilist account does not differentiate between factors within or without an epistemic agent's control. Instead, a reliabilist vice analysis would yield results that give indication *if* a phenomenon is a hindrance to knowledge, but not necessarily how or why. I wish to examine the supposed collective vice of echo chambers from the perspective of this vice resulting from factors within epistemic agents' control, and thus supposedly within their control also to change for the better. I believe therefore that a responsibilist account of epistemic vice has a theoretical advantage over a reliabilist one, and thus is the one best suited for my purpose here. It has the advantage that it provides more information that might be instrumental should one aim to counteract the epistemic problem investigated, should it be found to fit the mould of epistemic vice. Thus, this choice is purely methodical and strategic, to be able to provide a more in-depth analysis in terms of epistemic vice.

¹⁸ Some accounts require more than this to qualify for epistemic virtue, but that discussion is both lengthy and of little significance to the project of this work; Battaly 2008, p. 648 ff.; Battaly 2014, p. 55.

¹⁹ This take on responsibilist accounts of virtue is deliberately wide: I leave to be discussed elsewhere questions as to whether a virtue is a character trait or a disposition to behave in a certain way due to motivations, or even an attitude, or all of these combined, along with the question of what the right sort of motivation for epistemic virtue might look like aside from being oriented towards epistemic good. In this the conception of virtue I will be working with is similar to that of Miranda Fricker; Fricker 2021, p. 92.

²⁰ Jason Baehr, *The Inquiring Mind*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011, ch. 8, "Open-Mindedness", pp. 140–163, ch. 9, "Intellectual Courage" pp. 163–190; Zagzebski 1996, p. 134f., 148.

²¹ See e.g., Battaly 2008, p. 648, 650; Zagzebski 1996, p. 134ff.

²² Battaly 2008, p. 648.

²³ Battaly 2014, p. 56f.

Consequently, my analysis will focus on responsibilist epistemic vice. Just like with responsibilist accounts of epistemic virtue, responsibilist accounts of epistemic vice paint epistemic vice as stable qualities that tie into features of agential epistemic motivation and agency. To paint a picture, some examples of responsibilist epistemic vices include epistemic cowardice, closed-mindedness, dogmatism, prejudice, and epistemic laziness.²⁴

Above, I mentioned that responsibilist epistemic virtue might be conceived as deliberately epistemically good motivations and behaviour. Although deliberately bad ditto counts as responsibilist epistemic vice, a better description of responsibilist epistemic vice is as displaying bad or otherwise insufficient epistemic motivations or behaviour in cases when one *ought* to have better epistemic motivations and/or behaviour.²⁵ That is: while responsibilist virtue hinges on the deliberately virtuous motivation and behaviour of an agent, responsibilist epistemic vice hinges on the agent behaving in a bad epistemic way due to some blameworthy insufficiency of epistemic motivation, be it deliberate or merely blameworthily insufficient. It is therefore not necessary for an agent to be epistemically malicious, such as having a motivation for epistemic bad and therefore behaving in an epistemically bad way (an example might be knowingly spreading misinformation due to the desire to hinder others' knowledge acquisition), in order for them to be epistemically vicious.²⁶

As pertains to vices of otherwise insufficient motivation, this might express itself through an agent not caring enough about epistemic good as to be unaware and uncaring that they are consistently behaving in an epistemically bad way. Heather Battaly takes for example normally functioning adults that believe in horoscopes because they have never cared enough about the truth to reflect over questions of what sort of sources of information might be more or less likely to give them knowledge. She lists epistemic vices of this kind to be epistemic apathy, laziness, and conformity.²⁷ These are examples of where a blameworthy lack of care for the epistemic good give rise to an insufficient epistemic motivation that in turn accounts for the absence of epistemically good behaviour. The lack of regard for epistemic good is blameworthy because there is no exonerating reason behind the carelessness displayed; agents both could and ought to do better.²⁸ Given that it is possible to be epistemically vicious through carelessness or neglect of the epistemic good in this way, this makes it is possible for an agent to be epistemically vicious without being aware of it themselves.²⁹

Aside from having a bad or insufficient epistemic motivation resulting in epistemically bad behaviour, Miranda Fricker argues that it is also epistemically vicious to behave in a way that has epistemically bad consequences, in a way that contradicts motivations for epistemic good.³⁰ Take for example a history student committing to being diligent in fact-checking their statements when presenting explanations of historic events in their examinations due to a motivation of representing events truthfully. Imagine them then failing to do so (through no fault besides their own) in practice. The student is then epistemically vicious in their failure to live up to their commitment to virtue in the sense that Fricker describes. Perhaps this latter vice might be an example of simply performance-wise, rather than both motivation-wise and performance-wise as above, epistemic laziness. Responsibilist epistemic vice might thus

²⁴ Baehr 2021, p.21; Battaly 2014, p. 52; Battaly 2019, p. 31.

²⁵ This view is present in Battaly 2014, p. 65–75; Baehr 2021, p. 25, 26, 29ff.; and Fricker 2021, p. 99.

²⁶ Battaly 2014, p. 70ff.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 52, 74.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 73f.

²⁹ Negligent vices of this kind might in a sense be seen as more weakly vicious compared to epistemic vices that entail a motivation for what is known to be epistemically bad – this distinction comes down to whether one thinks it more vicious to have a truthful conception of epistemic good and bad and choosing to behave in accordance with the bad, compared to simply not caring enough to have a conception of epistemic good or bad at all.

³⁰ Fricker 2021, p. 99–101.

present itself both through an agent's insufficient motivation either through directly bad or negligent epistemic motivations that in turn result in bad or negligent epistemic behaviour, or through an agent's blameworthy lack of follow-through on good epistemic motivations.

What sets responsibilist epistemic vice apart from reliabilist epistemic vice is thus that on the one hand, factors outside an agent's control such as bad vision, do not constitute epistemic vices.³¹ On the other hand, it is not enough that agents display bad epistemic behaviour – it also has to do with the motivations behind that epistemically bad behaviour, and in both kinds of cases the lapse needs to be bad or insufficient in a blameworthy way.³² If an agent has epistemically bad or insufficient epistemic motives or behaves in epistemically bad or negligent ways, they are only vicious on this view if they are at fault for having those qualities. We might for instance differentiate between an agent that spreads misinformation that they believe to be true after having fact-checked it to the best of their ability, and an agent that simply does not care to investigate or evaluate but spreads misinformation due to wishful thinking. The latter ought to know better, and is therefore epistemically vicious, while the former has done what they could, and therefore is not.

Quassim Cassam's account of epistemic vice differs from (what we might call) the motivational responsibilist view in that for him, individual epistemic motivations are not that significant in accounting for epistemic vice. Cassam's account includes any behaviour that both systematically obstructs knowledge and is within an agent's responsibility. According to Cassam's view all blameworthy epistemic behaviour is reprehensible, but not all reprehensible epistemic behaviour is blameworthy.³³

Reprehensibility in Cassam's sense identifies epistemic behaviour that is open for criticism.³⁴ This includes blameworthy epistemic behaviour, but what is reprehensible need not be blameworthy. He uses the example of a young Taliban recruit as being reprehensible for being dogmatic to illustrate this, even though the recruit might not himself have had control over the factors that made him so.³⁵ Even if he has been indoctrinated to have the epistemic vice of being dogmatic, and thus is not blameworthy for having this character trait, his dogmatism still makes him open for criticism. This because he has qualities that indicate some fault in his epistemic character, in this case his dogmatic faith in certain ideas without regard for their relation to truth.³⁶ His behaviour is thus reprehensible in that it is epistemically bad and reflects badly upon his epistemic character, but not blameworthy because he had no control over having acquired it.

Cassam is able to call the Taliban recruit responsible for his epistemic behaviour and therefore epistemically vicious due to making a distinction between two different kinds of responsibility for epistemic vice, *acquisition* responsibility and *revision* responsibility. An agent has acquisition responsibility for an epistemic vice if it is their own actions and decisions that have led to them having the vice in question, similar to how a lack of proper epistemic

³¹ E.g., Battaly 2014, p. 62.

³² Ibid.

³³ Cassam 2019, p. 17ff., 22ff, 134.

³⁴ I have been made aware that the being 'open for criticism' might also entail having the rather virtuous epistemic attitude of being receptive to suggestions of improvement. This is not the way in which I employ the term here. Rather, I use it in the same way Cassam does as identifying qualities in an agent that merit justified criticism and reproach; Ibid., p. 21.

³⁵ The Taliban recruit example here used by Cassam originally stems from an article by Heather Battaly, "Epistemic Virtue and Vice: Reliabilism, Responsibilism, and Personalism", *Moral and Intellectual Virtues in Western and Chinese Philosophy*, ed. Chienkuo Mi, Michael Slote, & Ernest Sosa. New York: Routledge, 2016, pp. 99–120; Cassam 2019, p. 144 (e.n. 14). The example is also discussed in Heather Battaly, "Vice Epistemology has a Responsibility Problem", *Philosophical Issues*, Vol. 29, No. 1, 2019, pp 24–36.

³⁶ Cassam 2019, p. 19ff., 97, 131ff.

motivation in a motivational account might lead to bad epistemic behaviour. An agent is revision responsible and thus epistemically vicious for a quality if they ought to realise that it makes them behave in a way that is epistemically bad and aim to revise their behaviour accordingly.³⁷ If we grant that he ought to see that his behaviour is epistemically bad and aim to rectify it, the Taliban recruit is *revision* responsible for his dogmatic qualities and thus epistemically vicious.

This enables Cassam to identify as epistemically vicious also agents who might not have had control and therefore not be blameworthy for their acquisition of an epistemic vice, but still behave in a way that is reprehensible and that prevents knowledge from spreading, being retained, or created.³⁸ What this amounts to is an account where more types of bad epistemic behaviour would classify as epistemically vicious: while an agent such as the indoctrinated Taliban recruit might not count as vicious on a more motivation-based responsibilist view, they are epistemically vicious on Cassam's view. What both types of accounts have in common is that they tie epistemic vice to agential responsibility in cases where they exemplify epistemically bad qualities when they ought not to.

A problem that arises for both kinds of responsibilist accounts of epistemic vice is where to draw the line between bad epistemic behaviour that an agent might be reasonably held responsible for and that for which they might not, as Heather Battaly points out.³⁹ Much simplified, the gist of it comes down to that even on a wider account such as Cassam's, there is a point where agents might behave in a way that is epistemically bad, but neither driven by epistemically bad or insufficient motivations, nor being directly reprehensible, but without the behaviour being the result of a direct cognitive deficiency either. This without being able to realise it themselves due to the bad epistemic behaviour being ingrained in their social context to the point of it being invisible even to one who desires for the sake of epistemic good to not behave in such a way.⁴⁰ It is similar to the case of the Taliban recruit in that it entails a context where epistemically bad behaviour is culturally engrained to the point of it being the 'normal' of the situation. The difference is that where it might be said that the Taliban recruit ought to be motivated to care enough for the epistemic good to realise the epistemic badness of his dogmatism, the agent in Battaly's example is unable to see fault in their behaviour despite being motivated to do so.⁴¹ Whatever one's opinion on whether the Taliban case is truly different from the one Battaly aims to contrast it with, I think that her objection is one that is good to bear in mind; on a responsibilist account of epistemic vice, there comes a point where one is driven to hair-splitting when differentiating between what types of bad epistemic behaviour an agent might be held responsible for. Her argumentation at the very least highlights that there might be a point where the line between reasonable ascriptions of responsibility for epistemic vice is unclear. This problem is not one to be solved in this work, but important to bear in mind as one faced by all responsibilist accounts of epistemic vice.

Moreover, it is also important to emphasise the alignment between responsibilist epistemic vice and responsibility: on both a motivational and obstructivist account, if something is an epistemic vice, this implies that the agent that has that quality is responsible for it. But the same does quite obviously not go the other way around, for not just any kind of behaviour that an agent might be held responsible for is an epistemic vice. It might, for one, be an epistemic virtue, or neither. What matters for responsibilist epistemic vice is that the motivation or behaviour is within an agent's control and that it is reprehensible or otherwise blameworthy

³⁷ Cassam 2019, p. 18ff., 124.

³⁸ Ibid., p. 7ff.

³⁹ Battaly 2019.

⁴⁰ Ibid. p. 29f.

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 29.

with respect to epistemic good.⁴² Fulfilment of the former suffices to imply epistemic responsibility, fulfilment of both is sufficient and necessary to imply epistemic vice. Epistemic behaviour that might properly be called reprehensible and that constitutes an exercise of epistemic agency might therefore be seen as a minimally sufficient for obstructivist epistemic vice. For motivational responsibilist epistemic vice, the minimal requirement for epistemic vice in an agent is the somewhat narrower requirement that they display insufficiencies in epistemic motivation and/or behaviour in a blameworthy way when they ought to know or perform better.

Despite the mentioned uncertainty that might arise for responsibilist accounts about when it is proper to deem an agent responsible for vicious behaviour, there are still many ways in which an agent might be epistemically vicious on a responsibilist account. Many of these might be thought to fit the bill of describing the epistemic climate created in and by echo chambers and their members. Before a vice-oriented analysis of echo chambers, though, a clarification of what kind of definition of echo chamber we will be working with is in order.

3. The Echo Chamber

Although the use of the term has been wide and broad in recent years' public and academic discussion of the social, political, and medial climate, the scholarship on echo chambers does not contain an abundance of definitions of it. Here, I shall introduce two ways of describing echo chambers both based upon the work by Jamieson and Cappella mentioned above, as well as motivate my choice of one of these rather than the other.⁴³ The difference between the two lies in that while both kinds of accounts agree that echo chambers are a form of epistemically self-isolating groups, they disagree on how this isolation is enforced: through either the *omission* of outside evidence, or through the *rejection* of (and thus effective *resistance* to) it. Distinguishing between different kinds of echo chambers discussed in epistemic analysis is useful for determining exactly where, if there is any, epistemic problems arise when it comes to echo chambers.⁴⁴ This will be evinced in the discussion below.

Jon Robson, as well as Jennifer Lackey who utilises the criteria proposed by Robson, adhere to the first kind of account of echo chambers, where they are characterised as omitting or avoiding exposure to information, testimony, or perspectives not in line with the sanctioned views of the group.⁴⁵ They subscribe to the view that echo chambers have the following characteristics proposed by Robson: that an echo chamber is (i) a social grouping determined by some form of enclosure, where (ii) any perspectives contrary to the ones accepted by the group are blocked through omission or "drowning out", or simply ignored, while the accepted views are (iii) more frequently repeated as well as (iv) "amplified" in respects other than mere repetition.⁴⁶ That they omit or avoid to engage with contrary evidence, testimony, or views is a

⁴² Similarly to with epistemic virtue, the stability of an agent's behaviour and motivations also matter. A temporary lapse in epistemic motivations or behaviour is not enough to constitute that agent *having* an epistemic vice, not is it enough to 'remove' the epistemic virtue from an otherwise stably epistemically virtuous agent.

⁴³ Jon Robson, "A social epistemology of aesthetics: belief polarization, echo chambers and aesthetic judgement", *Synthese*, Vol 191, No. 11, 2014, pp. 2513–2528, p. 2520ff.; Lackey 2021, p. 207; Nguyen 2020, p. 145ff.

⁴⁴ I believe the first account to separate analyses of echo chambers along these lines is Nguyen's "Echo Chambers and Epistemic Bubbles", and although Jennifer Lackey call this division "unorthodox", this is also done by Meredith Sheeks in "The Myth of the Good Epistemic Bubble"; others have also argued for the need for such a separation on empiric grounds as in Giacomo Figà Talamanca & Selene Arfini "Through the Newsfeed Glass: Rethinking Filter Bubbles and Echo Chambers", *Philosophy & Technology*, Vol. 35, No. 1, 2022; Nguyen 2020; Lackey 2021, p. 207; Sheeks 2022;

⁴⁵ Robson 2014; Lackey 2021.

⁴⁶ I have separated the repetition of accepted views and the blocking of contrary ones for reasons of clarity of comparison; Robson, p. 2520; also quoted in Lackey 2021, p. 207.

defining characteristic of the kind of echo chamber that Robson and Lackey respectively build their analyses around.⁴⁷ Hence, this is what defines an *omissive* echo chamber.⁴⁸

Against such accounts of echo chambers, C. Thi Nguyen makes a case for echo chambers being *resistant* to, rather than omitting, contrary evidence or testimony. He instead defines echo chambers as operating by inflation and deflation of credibility judgements due to belief-based group membership. An echo chamber, in his words, is:

“... an epistemic community which creates a significant disparity in trust between members and non-members. This disparity is created by excluding non-members through epistemic discrediting while simultaneously amplifying members’ epistemic credentials. Finally, echo chambers are such that general agreement with some set of core beliefs is a prerequisite for membership, where those core beliefs include beliefs that support that disparity in trust.”⁴⁹ [original italics]

As such, Nguyen’s version of the echo chamber is not contingent on the echo chamber omitting contrary views. Rather, by way of the mechanism of credibility assignments he describes, echo chambers (and the views they support) are both sustained and reinforced by exposure to contrary views.

As basis for his description of echo chambers’ credibility mechanism, Nguyen cites the work of Endre Begby on *epistemic inoculation*, constructing a spoof example where he, a cult leader, tells his followers that there are alien ghosts out to get the members of the group for knowing of their existence, these alien ghosts taking every chance they can to discredit cult members by calling them ‘crazy cult members’. Should a cult member then encounter someone calling them a crazy cult member, or someone denying the existence of evil alien ghosts, they have then received affirmation of Nguyen-the-cult-leader’s testimony, confirming that outside sources are not to be trusted, and that Nguyen-the-cult-leader is a verified source of ‘accurate’ information.⁵⁰ In this way, contrary evidence, on Nguyen’s account, reinforces the echo chamber, and its members are not shielded from it in any other way than through this mechanism that preys on their trust in in-group members to negatively influence their trust in out-group sources.

Additionally, if Nguyen’s assessment of the case is correct, the omissive kind of echo chamber is more brittle, ‘breakable’ by means of introducing the members to contrary evidence.⁵¹ The omissive kind of echo chamber can be dismantled simply through exposure to outside evidence.⁵² It seems that the resistant kind of echo chambers provide a more complex epistemic problem as they cannot be ‘solved’ by simple exposure to a wider range of sources of information.

If we grant that the omissive kind of echo chamber is more easily breakable, the resistant kind presents us with a more problematic epistemic situation. Furthermore, Lackey argues that echo chambers of the omissive kind might even be epistemically ‘good’ in the sense of being

⁴⁷ Lackey 2021, p. 207.

⁴⁸ Jeremy Fantl has made a similar observation about Lackey’s discussion of echo chambers; Jeremy Fantl, “Fake News vs. Echo Chambers”, *Social Epistemology*, Vol. 35, No. 6, 2021, p. 646.

⁴⁹ Nguyen 2020, p. 146.

⁵⁰ Nguyen 2020, p. 147; Nguyen cites a presentation given by Begby: Endre Begby, “Evidential Pre-emption”, presented at the American Philosophical Association Pacific Division 2017 Meeting, 2017. Begby has since published on the subject, and from Nguyen’s description the following article seems to present the same ideas as the presentation cited: Endre Begby, “Evidential preemption”, *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, vol. 102, no. 3, 2021, pp. 515–530.

⁵¹ Nguyen 2020, p. 143ff.

⁵² Nguyen refers to the omissive kind of echo chambers as epistemic bubbles; Nguyen 2020.

truth-conducive should they be so configured as to omit only false information.⁵³ Even if ignoring evidence contrary to one's own beliefs on this basis is generally to be considered epistemically vicious on the kind of account of epistemic vice I employ in this work, if it can be countermanded simply by exposure to the kind of evidence an agent is avoiding, it is not likely to be a stable enough quality in the agent to count as an epistemic vice.⁵⁴

In resistant echo chambers however, the rejection of contrary evidence or testimony is part of how the echo chamber functions; the distrust of outside evidence *qua* outside evidence is an inherent characteristic of any resistant echo chamber (and ditto trust in inside testimony *qua* inside testimony). This I think presents a more apt candidate for analysis in terms of epistemic vice due to the stable nature of the crediting/discrediting function, and its way of maintaining the group's epistemic insulation against contrary evidence or testimony. Therefore, I have chosen the resistant kind as my focus going forward, and in what follows I will be referring to resistant ones unless stated otherwise.

3.1 Creation, continuation, and membership of echo chambers

Membership in an echo chamber is not purely accidental. As seen in Nguyen's definition above, it comes from a set of shared core beliefs and values that the group members from the start subscribe to.⁵⁵ The shared core beliefs and values might be epistemically oriented, but they need not be so.⁵⁶ These shared core beliefs creates a base of trust in other group members, a base of trust instrumental for the epistemic inoculation through the credit/discredit mechanism to function; without an initial base of trust, there is no initial higher level of trust in comparison with other sources that can act as a base for increased trust in the 'approved' scepticism towards other views as detailed in the example of epistemic inoculation.

The creation of an echo chamber may be accidental: but according to Nguyen, it is often not. As he says, "... the most plausible explanation for the particular features of echo chambers is something more malicious" and they might often be set up to intentionally use the automatic epistemic discrediting of outsiders as tools to control epistemic situations for the benefit of the instigator(s).⁵⁷ This sentiment is echoed by Breno Santos who argues that this maliciously formed type of echo chamber, while not necessarily the only kind, is the one most importantly in need of study.⁵⁸ So while echo chambers are not necessarily tools for vying for political power or manipulating large groups of people through controlling their epistemic landscape, they may be, and probably are, used in such ways.⁵⁹ Such epistemic maliciousness is an obvious

⁵³ However, if we count the ability to rationally assess one's epistemic climate objectively, this is still not possible from within an omissive kind of echo chamber, as one would have to per definition step outside the echo chamber in order to assess the information omitted even should it all then be proven to be false, as Meredith Sheeks argues; Lackey 2021; Sheeks 2022, p. 9ff.

⁵⁴ Omitting from evaluation or ignoring contrary evidence in such a way as described might fit several of the epistemic vices mentioned in section 2.2, from dogmatism to epistemic laziness.

⁵⁵ Additionally, Nguyen holds that echo chambers are often, but need not necessarily be, formed intentionally on this kind of basis; Nguyen 2020, p. 146, 149, 154.

⁵⁶ A group might form around e.g., the belief that the best way of finding out the truth in any matter is through reading religious scriptures, or quite oppositely that comparison with religious scripture is not a good way of finding the truth, and that truth might only be found through repeatedly corroborated inductions and deductions based on empirical data. Both of these constitute values and beliefs that are epistemically oriented, and around which a group might plausibly form. This example is similar to one Paul Boghossian uses to argue that different communities might have different 'epistemic principles' that are differently conducive to truth; see Paul Boghossian, *Fear of Knowledge: Against Relativism and Constructionism*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006.

⁵⁷ Nguyen 2020, p. 149.

⁵⁸ Breno R. G. Santos 2021, p. 117.

⁵⁹ See e.g., Santos' example of how the Brazilian former president Jair Bolsonaro used children's books on body awareness as examples of how leftists want all kindergarten teachers to educate children on sex positions and

example of epistemic vice in the individuals that so create echo chambers, and will therefore not be further discussed in this work. Again, note that formation with malicious purpose is not a necessary feature of echo chambers. Therefore, if we are looking for a way in which echo chambers might be *inherently* epistemically vicious, we need to look elsewhere.

The minimum requirement for membership in an echo chamber is sharing the core set of beliefs and values that the echo chamber is formed around. This is seemingly also the minimum requirement for maintaining membership in an echo chamber. It is made clear by Nguyen's example using the Pizzagate conspiracy: Nguyen provides the example of the online conspiracy that has come to be called 'Pizzagate', where a Washington DC pizzeria was rumoured to be a front for a child sex trafficking league run by Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama. When a member of this online community showed up on location ready to forcefully stop the rumoured operations, and found that the place was just an ordinary pizza restaurant, he was not believed by the online community despite being a member of the community himself. It is thus not the social position of the speaker as being from within or without the group that determines whether the account is to be accepted or not; it might be that some evidence or testimony is rejected regardless of the speaker's social position in relation to the group on the basis of its content, should this conflict with the core views and beliefs of the echo chamber.⁶⁰ Membership therefore appears conditioned on the sustained adherence to the core values and beliefs the echo chamber is formed around.⁶¹ This is supported also by Nguyen's argument that the only way of leaving an echo chamber is by forming relations of trust and thus adopt other standards for credibility than those that exist within an echo chamber.⁶² Meredith Sheeks makes a similar analysis of the omissive kind of echo chambers that by extension also applies to the resistant kind: it is only possible to exit them by viewing them critically from an 'outside' perspective.⁶³

Thus, membership in echo chambers is on this view contingent on initial and continued subscription to the shared beliefs and values that form the grounds for the echo chamber's inception. Or, I would suppose, as they have evolved over time from these – it would be strange to assume that the core of beliefs and values in an echo chamber are never the subject to gradual change, especially in such cases as discussed above of echo chambers used as tools of epistemic manipulation. Important is that there are some beliefs that are sanctioned, and some that are not, and adherence to the sanctioned beliefs and values is necessary to be counted as a member of the echo chamber.

3.2 Degrees of echo chambers

As Sheeks notes, it is important to remember that echo chambers might come in degrees, which is also implicit in Nguyen's maintaining that echo chambers may be formed around less contentious or all-encompassing topics such as diet or exercise methods.⁶⁴ Therefore I shall here present two example echo chambers that we might use as anchors for our discussion of echo chambers of different degrees of isolation later.

gender ideology, which is provably false, but which was not picked up upon by his supporters or by the TV company that aired the interview where Bolsonaro made these claims; *Ibid.*, p. 116.

⁶⁰ For more on the rejection of testimony based on informational content, see Robin Dembroff and Dennis Whitcomb's analysis in Dembroff & Whitcomb, "Content-Focused Epistemic Injustice", *Oxford Studies in Epistemology Volume 7*, ed. Tamar Szabó Gendler, John Hawthorne, & Julianne Chung, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023, pp. 48–70.

⁶¹ Nguyen 2020, p. 148.

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 156ff.

⁶³ Sheeks 2022, p. 10f.

⁶⁴ Sheeks 2022, p. 4; Nguyen 2020, p.

An echo chamber in the strongest possible sense would be that of a cult, as in Nguyen's example of epistemic inoculation above. In this strongly isolated echo chamber, the members' entire epistemic landscape might be occupied by the echo chamber. A child might grow up without ever being exposed another epistemic climate than the one inside the echo chamber, leaving them completely indoctrinated as adults, only able to see information from without the echo chamber as proof that the views of the echo chamber are truthful.⁶⁵ There is close to no, or none whatsoever, epistemic interaction with the outside that is not skewed by the credibility manipulating mechanism of the echo chamber. No part of how the echo chamber is defined prevents this person from having virtuous epistemic motivations or behaving in accordance with epistemic virtue.⁶⁶

For an example of a weaker echo chamber, we might take a hypothetical but plausible example of a niche online community. Say that there is an internet forum voraciously dedicated to the view that the Blu-ray editions of the *Lord of the Rings*-films are superior to any other edition of the films.⁶⁷ Technically, this might fulfil the criteria set up to define echo chambers and be formed around this set of core beliefs and values about these movies, and have the requisite function of giving sanctioned views of the Blu-ray editions superiority increased credibility over, say, those that prefer the 4K editions. My point is that this kind of echo chamber does not seem to occupy a large, or maybe even significant, part of its members' epistemic landscape; many members might have perfectly well-functioning epistemic credibility processes as pertains to all other possible areas of knowledge except for this one blind spot. It is fully possible to be a member of this kind of echo chamber due to some epistemic vice such as epistemic laziness or carelessness, but it is equally possible to be otherwise epistemically virtuous.

I trust that these examples give a clear enough view that intermediate level varieties of echo chambers are readily imaginable. As such, the examples illustrate the range of isolation from the outside which an echo chamber might create. They demonstrate also that it is not a requisite of echo chambers that members are epistemically vicious independently of being echo chamber members; if epistemic vice is to be connected to echo chambers, it is not through them forming due to epistemically vicious individuals coming together in a therefore epistemically vicious group constellation, something we will return to in section 4.

What these examples also illustrate, together with the minimal membership conditions delineated above, is that the resistant kind of echo chamber does not have any kind of inherent internal social structure, apart from the credibility manipulating mechanism. This will also be relevant for the analysis in section 4.

3.3 Echo chambers and inherent epistemic vice

We now have basic characteristics of echo chambers and how they are formed and maintained. We also have examples of how echo chambers might be strongly or weakly isolated, and occupy a larger or smaller part of a member's total epistemic landscape. Several avenues of pursuit might seem reasonable as it comes to identifying epistemic vice in echo chambers, but here we

⁶⁵ Nguyen 2020, p. 154f.

⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 154f.

⁶⁷ I have no opinion on this matter (allegedly, the Blu-ray version of *Lord of the Rings* has a greenish tinge to it that no other version has), but in my experience, there does seem to exist niche communities of this or sufficiently similar kind on the internet to make it a viable toy example. Further, Nguyen almost exclusively utilises examples of the strongly isolated kind of echo chamber in his argumentation – I think it is important to also consider more weakly isolated ones to understand the breadth of the echo chamber phenomenon. Arguably, it is likely that if there are such empirical phenomena that fit the description of echo chambers, which I have assumed that there is, many might fall between the strongly and weakly isolated echo chamber in terms of isolation.

shall follow just one. According to Nguyen, two factors make resistant echo chambers inherently epistemically vicious on a collective scale while individual echo chamber members are not. First, echo chambers are to be considered collectively epistemically vicious because they per definition make their members to engage in behaviour that obstructs epistemic good, as per the skewed credibility judgements entailed by the credibility mechanism discussed above. Second, echo chambers encourage their members to make credibility judgement based on how well any given piece of evidence or testimony fits within the views approved by the echo chambers, and not based on considerations of truth.

Nguyen argues that while this is objectively epistemically bad behaviour, this does not prevent members of echo chambers from being interested in truth or imply that they have bad epistemic motivations. They might have a strong desire for truth, but be stumped in their efforts of reaching it by the mechanism of discrediting that the echo chamber involves.⁶⁸ In the language of epistemic vice: echo chambers do not seem to necessarily negatively affect members' motivation for epistemic good. Moreover, he also argues that the likeliness of someone escaping an echo chamber is slim, as an escape would require what he calls a "social epistemic reboot" through forming bonds of trust outside the echo chamber and by doing so circumventing the credibility manipulating mechanism; that someone is not able to do so should not be something that they are held responsible for.⁶⁹ Since individual members of echo chambers, the argument goes, cannot be justifiably held responsible for their inability to escape, and/or also have virtuous epistemic motivations, they are not epistemically vicious for not exercising their epistemic agency to do so.⁷⁰

Instead, as I mentioned in the introduction, Nguyen argues that echo chambers are inherently epistemically vicious, but solely on a collective level. The epistemic vice, as I interpret his argument, lies on the collective level because the epistemically harmful credibility manipulating mechanism is a feature of the group's "social structure" or "social context" and not of individual members or their adherence to it.⁷¹ As I will show in the next section, explaining the epistemic vice of echo chambers as inherent on a collective level but not an individual one presents a challenge for accounts of collective epistemic vice.

⁶⁸ Nguyen 2020, p. 151, 155.

⁶⁹ Note also that this intuitively seems more difficult for people in strongly isolated echo chambers and less so for people in weakly isolated ones; Nguyen 2020, p. 157f.

⁷⁰ Nguyen does admit that willingly entering an echo chamber might be behaviour indicative of epistemic vice, as he says, "For agent in full possession of a wide range of informational sources, to abandon most of them and place their trust in an echo chamber for, say, an increased sense of comfort and security, is surely some form of epistemic vice". However, as I am concerned with the question of whether there is any *inherent* epistemic vice to be found in echo chambers, and that membership in echo chambers does not require one to have actively or neglectfully become a member (but one might also say, be born into one), the epistemic vice of those who become members in such a way is not necessary for an echo chamber to exist. At least from how I interpret Nguyen's account; Nguyen 2020, p. 154f.

⁷¹ Nguyen uses "social context" and "social structure" in what I take to be roughly equivalent ways. I take him to mean that the credibility manipulating mechanism is part of this social structure or context; *Ibid.*, e.g., p. 141, 142, 155.

4. Explaining Echo chambers in terms of Collective Epistemic Vice

So far, we have the following on epistemic vice:

- An agent has a motivational responsibilist epistemic vice when they have a bad or otherwise insufficient epistemic motivation and/or behaviour consistent enough to constitute a character flaw when they *should* know better.
- An agent has an obstructive epistemic vice when they have an epistemic character flaw that obstructs the spread, retention, or creation of knowledge while being reprehensible or otherwise blameworthy for having said flaw.
- Both tie epistemic vice to wrongful or negligent exercises of epistemic agency and thus responsibility.

Of echo chambers, we have that:

- They are an enclosed socioepistemic community formed and sustained on the basis of shared beliefs and values.
- They exist on a spectrum from weakly isolated and 'local' to more strongly isolated and all-encompassing with respect to members' epistemic landscapes.
- They may be formed spontaneously or with the purpose of being utilised for its capacity to control its internal epistemic environment.
- The epistemic enclosure of the group is maintained and reinforced by process of credibility manipulations through epistemic inoculation that make members highly resistant to testimony with the 'wrong' source and/or content.
- Other than this, there is no internal socioepistemic structure inherent to echo chambers.
- They are, on Nguyen's view, vicious on a collective scale due to the sustaining function of credibility manipulation.
- They are not vicious on an individual scale as individual members' epistemic motivations are not affected by the mechanism that sustains the echo chamber: members are making wrongful credibility assessments due to the inherent credibility manipulating function of the echo chamber, and not any flaw located in their own epistemic character.

Before we proceed, I wish to note that most of the available literature on epistemic vice (and virtue) concerns traits that might be had by individual epistemic agents, as evinced by my summary above. The field regarding collective epistemic vices is sparse, even when including work on collective virtues in general.⁷² I aim therefore to present some criteria that an account of collective epistemic vice would need to meet to explain echo chambers as inherently epistemically vicious on a collective but not individual scale.

In addition, I will be using the notions of epistemically virtuous and vicious individuals quite vaguely. It is intuitively relevant what kind of vice or virtue an individual has in relation to the overall epistemic virtue or vice that a group they are members of might have. There is regrettably no space here to make detailed analysis of the interactions of specific epistemic virtues and vices in relation to overall group epistemic virtue or vice. I hope that my analysis might at least prove useful as a starting point for further studies in this area.

⁷² I have due to the limited scope of this work chosen not to look elsewhere (say, in the fields of more general collective epistemology or collective responsibility).

4.1 Three questions for accounts of collective epistemic vice

There are at least three questions an account of collective epistemic vice that purport to explain echo chambers needs to be able to answer:

- 4.1.1. How can a group have a trait without its members having it as well? (**TRAIT**)
- 4.1.2. How can a group have a motivational or dispositional character trait in such a way that it comprises a feature of the group's epistemic agency? (**AGENCY**)
- 4.1.3. How can the group be jointly blameworthy or reprehensible for having such a trait, without its members also being so? (**BLAME**)⁷³

The first question, *TRAIT*, narrows our search for suitable theories. Briefly, an account of collective properties might be either summative or non-summative. Summative accounts hold that the group can only have properties as a result of the individual members of the group having this property.⁷⁴ Such accounts are directly incompatible with our wish to place the vice of echo chambers on the collective level, rather than on its individual members. We shall therefore not explore these further; what is needed is a non-summative account of collective properties. Non-summative accounts of group properties hold that a group of individuals may have properties that only some or none of its individual members have.⁷⁵ Therefore, a theory of collective epistemic vice must be non-summative to be able to explain the epistemic vice of echo chambers without it being rooted in properties of the individual group members.

The accounts I shall introduce below are all non-summative accounts of collective vice and virtue. There are two ways in which an account may be non-summative: through positing group properties that *none* of the group's members have individually (emergent collective property), or through positing properties that the group members have *in virtue of being group members* rather than independently of the group (summation of group-contingent individual properties). The latter view implies that contrafactually, the individual group members would not have the virtuous or vicious property without being members of that specific group; the virtue or vice in question comes from the group, and not the individual members. Both kinds will be represented below.⁷⁶

The second question, *AGENCY*, deals with how an account of collective vice might be compatible with responsibilistic theories of epistemic vice. Recall that individual epistemic vice is a feature of individuals' epistemic agency: a character trait may only be an epistemic vice if it is epistemically reprehensible *and* due to lapses in an agent's deployment of their epistemic agency. Without some explanation of how the collective may have epistemic motivations and agency, or something analogous, it is difficult to see how an analysis of collective epistemic vice might be made in responsibilist terms. An account of collective epistemic vice must therefore either provide some account of a group-level analogue to individual motivations, dispositions, and/or agency in order to make it a responsibilist account of epistemic vice, or at minimum explain why if there is a difference in these elements when it comes to epistemic vice on the collective level.

⁷³ I thank my supervisor Ylwa Sjölin Wirling for the name suggestions.

⁷⁴ Fricker 2021, p. 93; Reza Lahroodi, "Virtue Epistemology and Collective Epistemology", *The Routledge Handbook of Virtue Epistemology*, ed. H. Battaly, New York/Oxford: Routledge, 2019, p. 411.

⁷⁵ Lahroodi 2019, p. 411.

⁷⁶ T. Ryan Byerly & Meghan Byerly, "Collective Virtue", *Journal of Value Inquiry*, Vol. 50, No. 1, 2016, Dordrecht: Springer Netherlands, p. 34, 44; also in Jeroen de Ridder, "Three Models for Collective Epistemic Virtue", *Social Virtue Epistemology*, ed. Mark Alfano, Colin Klein, Jeroen de Ridder, New York: Routledge, 2022, p. 377.

The third question, *BLAME*, arises from the fact that it is one thing to argue that a group may have properties that none of its members have, but another to argue that the group has blameworthy or reprehensible properties due to features of group motivation or agency and that this is not due to blameworthy or reprehensible exercises of epistemic agency on part of its members. The epistemic blameworthiness or reprehensibility of a group's epistemic vice does not necessarily need to track to the level of individual group members. But an additional explanation of why the blameworthiness or reprehensibility of that property of the group does not track to individual level, in addition to how the group might have properties that its members do not have, needs to be made.

Additionally, there is a difference between demanding an account of collective epistemic vice to be accommodating for socioepistemic structures where none of the members are epistemically vicious, or a structure where simply many or most members lack the relevant epistemic vice. I think that what kind of demands echo chambers place upon accounts of collective virtue is down to the internal epistemic structure of the group: whether echo chambers *could* be homogeneously constituted of epistemically virtuous individuals or not. Nguyen's theory is vague at this point. But given that we have that echo chambers might form spontaneously and without any particular leader or purpose behind the group's formation, and that it seems to be theoretically possible for all members of an echo chamber to at least have motivations for epistemic good and many epistemically virtuous behaviours, I think we might look firstly for accounts to explain the first variety of collective epistemic vice. That is, the one where no members are epistemically vicious in the sense that it is their individual vices that are the reason behind the group having an epistemic vice.⁷⁷ This as it would have the explanatory advantage of being able to accommodate all kinds of echo chambers.

In 4.2, I will begin with an examination of Paul Smart's so-called Mandevillian account of how collective epistemic virtue might result from individual epistemic vice, as well as Jeroen de Ridder's related ideas on structural/cultural collective epistemic virtue.⁷⁸ I shall then in 4.3 look at Jules Holroyd's account of emergent collective epistemic vice, to follow with Miranda Fricker's account of institutional epistemic vice as a feature of a group agent's agency in 4.4.⁷⁹ In 4.5, I will look at Byerly and Byerly on collectives' potential of masking dispositions of group members. Lastly, in 4.6, I conclude by discussing where this analysis leaves us going forward.

⁷⁷ On the topic of whether epistemically virtuous behaviour regardless of motivation for ultimate epistemic goods such as knowledge or truth in general, as opposed to knowledge or truth regarding e.g., a specific topic, or opposed to mediate epistemic goals such as fact-checking or perseverance, there is some dispute. Here, I do not mean to take a definitive stance toward either side; See e.g., Charlie Crerar "Must we love epistemic goods?", *The Philosophical Quarterly*, Vol. 71, No. 4, 2021, pp. 886–997; Fricker 2021, p. 93, 99f.; Zagzebski 1996, e.g., p. 168ff., 185, 201, 273.

⁷⁸ Paul R. Smart, "Mandevillian Intelligence", *Synthese*, Vol. 195, No. 9, 2018, pp. 4169–4200; de Ridder 2022.

⁷⁹ Miranda Fricker, "Institutional epistemic vices. The case of inferential inertia.", *Vice Epistemology*, ed. I. J. Kidd, H. Battaly, & Q. Cassam. London/New York: Routledge, 2021, pp. 89–107; Jules Holroyd, "Implicit bias and epistemic vice", *Vice Epistemology*, ed. I. J. Kidd, H. Battaly, & Q. Cassam. London/New York: Routledge, 2021, pp. 126–147.

4.2 Collective epistemic vice as a result of group structure or culture

Smart proposes, that in some cases, the epistemic vices of individual members in a group might compound structurally in a way that makes the group epistemically virtuous.⁸⁰ This concept of collective virtue hinges on empirical evidence suggesting that a group of individuals with a diverse allotment of epistemic virtues and vices might in some cases be more efficient in problem-solving or inquiry than a group consisting of only virtuous individuals, in terms of the accuracy of the result yielded. This due to the epistemic vices (such as distrust due to dogmatism or closed-mindedness) of some of the individuals in the group slowing down the flow of information within the group in such a way that the communal solving of problems is given more time than in groups consisting solely of epistemically virtuous agents. According to Smart, there is support for that some structures of information flow within groups might, when ineffective in terms of speed, make the group as a whole more likely to solve complex problems.⁸¹ Whether or not the individual vices of members or an 'ineffective' flow of information between individuals in a group makes the group more likely to reach solutions to a problem is determined by the nature of the problem the group is faced with. The effect that turns individual vice into collective virtue, when an 'inefficient' information flow is beneficial, is localised to specific and non-urgent problem-solving situations. Smart dubs this type of structure the "Mandevillian Intelligence", inspired by the philosopher Bernard Mandeville's suggestion that individual economically vicious behaviour might be of economic benefit for the greater community.⁸²

Nguyen's suggestion is that echo chambers present an example of a Mandevillian intelligence in reverse: where the virtue of individuals in the group compound and interact with the virtues and vices of other members in such a way that results in the collective being epistemically vicious.⁸³ A reverse of the Mandevillian intelligence would then be that in some situations, the presence of virtuous individuals in a group might make that group less efficient at problem-solving or less likely to reach the truth. Moreover, it is in groups with a diverse distribution of epistemic virtue and vice that the Mandevillian intelligence presents, through the suggestion that epistemically diverse groups might perform better at epistemic tasks than homogeneously virtuous ones. Therefore, one might think of a reverse Mandevillian intelligence as similarly diverse, as in, (a) the presence of both virtuous and vicious individuals in a group might make the group more epistemically vicious than should the group members be all epistemically vicious. Otherwise, one might think of a reverse Mandevillian intelligence as (b) a non-diverse one, where the presence of only virtuous individuals in a group makes the group collectively vicious.

Both might comply with our definition of the echo chamber, but stated in 4.1, there is increased explanatory value in a theory of collective epistemic vice that accommodates (b) scenarios when explaining echo chambers. An account that aims to explain echo chambers as reverse Mandevillian intelligences would therefore ideally explain situations where all individuals in a group are epistemically virtuous, in order to explain how epistemic virtue might be turned into collective epistemic vice in all varieties of echo chambers.

An initial problem with this kind of account relative to our aims is that the kind of virtue that Smart suggests as resulting from the individual vices of group members is framed in terms of reliabilistic epistemic virtue and vice. Even if there might be some ambiguity as to whether

⁸⁰ I also take de Ridder's concept of *structural collective epistemic vice* to be sufficiently similar to the thesis Smart puts forward so that my points about Smart's suggestion will be applicable also to de Ridder's for the most part; de Ridder 2022, p. 371ff.

⁸¹ Smart 2018, p. 4176ff., 4178, 4142ff.

⁸² Ibid., p. 4172.

⁸³ Nguyen 2020, p. 155,

the epistemic vice of the individual members of the group might be responsibilist or reliabilist (some vices could be both, as seen in section 2), the resultant epistemic virtue of the group is defined in terms of efficiency of problem-solving and/or the accuracy of the result produced.⁸⁴ It is unclear whether this might be translated into a reverse analogue resulting in specifically responsibilist epistemic vice.⁸⁵ If we grant, however, that the echo chamber is collectively responsible due to it being reprehensible for its effect of epistemically inoculating its members against outside testimony, then we might at least consider it collectively epistemically vicious on an obstructivist account.

A reverse-Mandevillian account would nevertheless need to explain how there might exist some analogy of individual epistemic motivation on a collective level, or why the collective level would not have a motivation-analogous property but still be able to be epistemically virtuous or vicious. This in order to explain echo chambers in terms of collective motivational responsibilist virtue and vice. Moreover, there is in the reverse-Mandevillian account no factor that might explain why the group might be collectively reprehensible or blameworthy for having an epistemic vice without this tracking to the group's members also being reprehensible or blameworthy for this property of the group, regardless of whether they themselves have the epistemic vice in question. As such, we can see that while the reverse-Mandevillian account can plausibly explain the collective epistemic vice of echo chambers in terms of *TRAIT*, it in its present state struggles in providing answers to *AGENCY* and *BLAME*.

Moreover, the Mandevillian intelligence, and thus its reverse, is highly contingent on features of group structure. In the Mandevillian intelligence, it is features of how diversity of virtue and vice interact with each other structurally, to influence the flow of information between persons in the network, that result in the collective virtue. As we know from section 3.1, echo chambers have no inherent epistemic structure between members – there might be echo chambers that have specific individuals as leaders, but they might also not have these. As such, there are no inherent structural features of the flow of information between members within the echo chamber. While the Mandevillian intelligence relies on there being a specific structure of the flow of information to give rise to collective virtue or vice, this is not comparable to how collective epistemic virtue or vice might arise *inherently* in echo chambers, as echo chambers have no particular inherent structure that directs information flow between members.

Another account that argues that a group might be collectively epistemically virtuous due to features of group culture is suggested by de Ridder. He proposes that a group might have an internal culture specific to the group that encourages certain behaviours in its members that they would not have otherwise.⁸⁶ Ergo, the group has some cultural quality that makes its members have group-contingent properties, or behave in ways that they would not, were they not members of this specific group. I think Miranda Fricker's example of Herbert Greenleaf's testimonial injustice towards Marge Sherwood in *The Talented Mr Ripley* illustrates an instance of what de Ridder means with cultural collective epistemic vice.⁸⁷ In Fricker's example, Herbert Greenleaf fails to give proper credibility to Marge Sherwood when she voices her suspicions about Herbert's son's, Dickie Greenleaf's, disappearance. Fricker argues that this is an instance where the epistemic vice of testimonial injustice is not blameworthy in the individual, but only

⁸⁴ Smart 2018, *passim*.

⁸⁵ A brief example of how individual virtues might inhibit group problem solving might be found in Smart 2018, p. 4190.

⁸⁶ De Ridder 2022, p. 374ff.

⁸⁷ Fricker's analysis is based on the screenplay of *The Talented Mr Ripley* by Anthony Minghella, and not the novel by Patricia Highsmith; Fricker 2007, p. 86ff, 100ff., 108 (e.n. 1); Anthony Minghella, *The Talented Mr Ripley. Based on Patricia Highsmith's Novel*, London: Methuen Drama, 2000.

on a collective scale. This because Herbert Greenleaf can be said to be a member of a (1950's white upper-class American) culture where the epistemic discrediting of women is customary. Herbert, it is argued, is not blameworthy or reprehensible for following the cultural norms of his own sociotemporal context, even though this norm and context is highly epistemically discriminatory towards women testifiers.⁸⁸ Fricker argues that Herbert, due to the *epistemic bad luck* of being a man in the fifties, is blocked from accessing any reason he has to believe Marge due to general stereotypes about the irrationality of women and the superior rationality of men being pervasive at this time.⁸⁹ Herbert's epistemic bad luck might be compared to being born into the strong echo chamber scenario from 3.2. The idea is that the reason behind Herbert's epistemically bad behaviour are factors that are without the realm of his personal epistemic control to the extent that it surpasses what might be reasonably expected of him as an epistemic agent. At most, according to Fricker, Herbert's behaviour might be called disappointing. And disappointing epistemic behaviour is arguably not enough alone to merit calling someone epistemically vicious.⁹⁰ As such, cultural accounts of collective epistemic vice might be said to answer both *TRAIT* and *BLAME*, of how a group might have a property its members do not, and how an individual in a group might not be reprehensible for being part of a group that encourages epistemically vicious behaviour.

Admittedly, using the general sociotemporal context and its culture as the collective or group in this example might be stretching what is meant by group, but it nevertheless provides an example of when the argument is that the individual is not blameworthy or reprehensible for epistemically bad behaviour, but the greater social context is. What this kind of account would need to address, then, is *AGENCY*; what makes this collective epistemic vice a feature of a collective epistemic agency, or why there would be no such thing at a collective level. Without doing so, the account would leave blank an important aspect of what makes something a responsibilist epistemic vice.

Perhaps more damningly, the answer that the cultural account of collective epistemic vice gives to *BLAME* does not apply to all kinds of echo chambers. It provides a suitable analogue to the situation of epistemic agents trapped in the strongly isolated kinds of echo chambers from section 3.2, and how they might reasonably be excused from reprehensibility for bad epistemic behaviour because of the all-encompassing aspect of the echo chamber that they are in. It does not, however, account for the weakly isolated kind of echo chamber. Imagine that a person, call him Sherbert Bluetree, is a member of the Blu-ray *LoTR* echo chamber. Consequently, he consistently gives unwarrantedly low credibility assessments to testimony that argues that the 4K-version of the movies is superior. The Blu-ray echo chamber comprises but a small part of Sherbert's epistemic landscape however, as he has a fairly average life of having gone through school and having a job and other hobbies, he is often exposed to and partakes in epistemic milieus that are not epistemically vicious. He has many examples of good epistemic behaviour readily available to him in other spheres of his life. This makes Sherbert's epistemic behaviour as pertains to the Blu-ray echo chamber reprehensible and thus epistemically vicious, because contrary to Herbert Greenleaf, Sherbert *should know better*.⁹¹ And as such, it seems that the

⁸⁸ Fricker 2007, p. 86ff, 100ff.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 101f.

⁹⁰ Even though disappointment in an agent's epistemic behaviour might be seen as *close* to Cassam's requisite for epistemic vice of epistemic behaviour to be worthy of criticism, it is not the same. Perhaps the difference might be explored in relation to the problem of responsibilist responsibility formulated by Battaly that is mentioned in section 2.

⁹¹ He might still be epistemically virtuous in other areas, perhaps he only has something of a blind spot when it comes to (allegedly) green-tinged movies. His blind spot in one area of his life alone is not sufficient to make him epistemically vicious in a stable enough sense to argue that he is an epistemically vicious person.

culture explanation of collective epistemic vice is not sufficient to answer *BLAME* for weakly isolated echo chambers, nor for such echo chambers that exist in degrees between weakly and strongly isolated echo chambers, as long as it is arguable that the echo chamber members should know better.

Additionally, it seems that the size of the echo chamber would have to be permitted to be very large in terms of membership count, in order for this to work. Even though there is no limitation to how large an echo chamber might theoretically be, I think that one might reasonably assume that some countering perspective to the echo chambers foundational beliefs and values needs to be prevalent in close proximity to the echo chamber for it to be an echo chamber at all. If not, there would not be a significant enough amount examples of countering perspectives for the echo chamber for the epistemic inoculation to function in such a way that it gives increased and decreased credibility to testifiers in accordance with the credibility mechanism described in 3. The exposure to 'outside' information is necessary for the group to be an echo chamber on our account.⁹²

Of course, a group, however large, might have an internal epistemic culture. It might be that what makes the collective epistemic vice of echo chambers is the internal culture. But a cultural account of non-summative collective epistemic vice needs to be developed to address *AGENCY* and *BLAME* in a way that accounts for the epistemic vice of both weakly and strongly isolated echo chambers in order to successfully explain the collective epistemic vice of echo chambers.

4.3 Emergent collective epistemic vice

Holroyd's account of an emergent collective epistemic vice focuses on the implicit bias of groups. According to Holroyd's account, a group might be guilty of the collective epistemic vice of implicit bias due to an overall tendency in a group to be biased.⁹³ This behavioural pattern is only stable on a group level however, and not in the individuals that make up the group, where biased epistemic behaviour is only incidental and cannot be stably tracked.⁹⁴ The epistemic vice that she concludes that group implicit bias is, is a group level bias on her account *because* it is not reliably predictable in individuals, only in groups. The kind of collective epistemic vice Holroyd describes is therefore an emergent property of the group, existing only at the level of the collective.

This kind of emergent vice is not comparable to the collective epistemic vice of echo chambers, however. Remember, the existence of an echo chamber is contingent on members' adherence to the shared values and beliefs of the group, in the systematic epistemic discrediting of outside testimony. Thus, our definition of echo chambers implies that the behaviour of individual members, in terms of it being epistemically bad, *is* stable per definition.⁹⁵ Rather, it is the reprehensibility of the bad epistemic behaviour that supposedly does not track to the individual level when it comes to echo chambers. As such, the emergence of collective epistemic vice on Holroyd's account is dissimilar from the behaviour exhibited by members of echo chambers. At the very least, we might say that if the collective epistemic vice of echo chambers is emergent, it is not so for the same reasons as Holroyd's implicit bias is, as echo chamber members are per definition expected to adhere to the epistemic behaviour entailed by the credibility manipulating mechanism. It seems that an account suited to describe the collective epistemic vice of echo chambers demands further explanation than the epistemic vice

⁹² It might suffice for something to be an echo chamber of the brittle kind detailed in section 3, or an epistemic bubble, but this type of phenomenon is not what is relevant here.

⁹³ Holroyd 2021, p. 140.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 130ff.

⁹⁵ Of course, the *actual* behaviour of members in echo chambers is an empirical question.

described by Holroyd. As such the emergent account of collective vice does not answer *TRAIT* satisfactorily.

Additionally, emergence on Holroyd's take is a tool apt for explaining collective epistemic vice in loosely defined groups, like say, a population. As echo chambers are formed based on membership requirements (the core beliefs and values), echo chambers are more clearly demarcated than that.⁹⁶

Attempting to explain the collective epistemic vice of echo chambers as emergent using Holroyd's account therefore leaves us none the wiser with regards to *AGENCY* and *BLAME*, as it does not rely upon stable motivations or epistemic agency, but rather on the measurement of behaviour that is only stable on the collective scale. As such, it is not presently capable of explaining responsibilist collective epistemic vice but suited more to explaining collective epistemic vice in reliabilist terms. Additionally, while it is an account of non-summative collective epistemic vice, it does not answer *TRAIT* in a way that might explain collective epistemic vice as it presents in echo chambers.

4.4 Collective agent-based collective vice

Fricker builds her account of collective epistemic vice in analogy with motivational responsibilist accounts of individual epistemic vice.⁹⁷ Fricker uses Margaret Gilbert's theory of how the joint commitment of group members might make a group level collective agent, where this collective agent is directly analogous to the individual epistemic agent of responsibilist virtue epistemology. On this account, the collective agent has an *ethos* – a core set of beliefs and principles that guide and explain the actions of the collective agent – analogous to the motivations and dispositions of individual epistemic agents that together comprise their epistemic *character*, described in section 2.⁹⁸ As an analogue to individual epistemic character, the group ethos is key to it being capable of having properties of epistemic virtue or vice. Much as with individual responsibilist epistemic vice, the group might be epistemically vicious through having bad or insufficient epistemic goals, or through consistently failing to adhere to set goals of epistemic good in its behaviour.⁹⁹

A group ethos is established through the members of a group jointly committing to act according to a group ethos within group-relevant contexts.¹⁰⁰ This type of account is then non-summative in the sense of postulating that group members to have group-contingent values and behaviours that they would not have, were they not members of this specific group, and that they do not need to have outside of the group context. As such, persons in a group might commit to act in accordance with an epistemic motivation *of the group* when acting in the role of group member.¹⁰¹ As an example, take journalists of a well-reputed news agency as part of their employment being required to commit to e.g., diligently scrutinise their sources for credibility, similar to how medical doctors in many countries are required to swear an oath to follow ethical principles. This despite the journalists perhaps not caring for or doing so outside of the context of their journalistic work, thus allowing the group, in this context their news agency, to have

⁹⁶ Perhaps an account of emergent vice might be fruitfully applied in tandem with the cultural account of collective epistemic vice seen in 4.2 to explain epistemic vices like that of Herbert Greenleaf in Fricker's example. This is beside the point of this project, though.

⁹⁷ As such, Fricker's account of collective epistemic vice is the sole one that has an explicitly responsibilist view of epistemic vice. Additionally, Fricker's account deals with specifically *institutional* epistemic vice. One might argue that this is something different from *collective* epistemic vice, but here I interpret it as similar enough that her "institutional" account might be used to describe "collective" epistemic vices without any major consequences.

⁹⁸ Fricker 2021, p. 90f., 93ff.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 93ff, 98f.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 93ff.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, p. 93ff.

epistemic virtue without its members necessarily being virtuous outside the context of the group.

Commitment to a group's ethos might be ascertained minimally by an agent's *failure to object* to the group's ethos.¹⁰² The ethos, moreover, does not have to be formally defined, but might also, as I interpret Fricker, be made apparent through an institution's attitudes and disposition to behave. Thus, even echo chambers formed spontaneously or without explicit purpose might be said to have an ethos of this kind. This passive variety of committing to a group ethos would allow for the level of organisational informality of the least formally organised echo chambers, while still allowing that it might be possible for echo chambers to have ethos also through active commitment.

Further, we already saw that echo chambers form around some core set of shared values or beliefs in section 3 – these may meet the criteria of joint commitment posed by Fricker, as commitment to the group's sanctioned beliefs is the foundational requisite for membership.¹⁰³ We might thus consider the average member of an echo chamber as being at least minimally jointly committed to a shared group ethos, where the shared values and beliefs of the echo chamber might constitute the analogue of individual motivation. Suppose that an echo chamber forms around some topic by members motivated to find the truth about it but that are all aggressively misinformed about it – this would then be an example of a group with a virtuous ethos that might fail to fulfil it in practice due to their inability to make proper credibility assessments, their initial misinformation making them more likely to award credibility to the misinformed in-group-accounts. Similarly, if the echo chamber's core values and beliefs are not epistemic in nature, this might be explained by use of analogue to an individual epistemically careless or lazy agent, also in correspondence with the description of epistemic vice in section 2. As Fricker says, “a motivational and/or performative lapse that is bad enough to warrant blame is bad enough to warrant the label ‘vice’” – this in the same ways for both individual and collective agents. In this sense, Fricker's account seems to be able to answer *TRAIT* and *AGENCY*: it is non-summative, and it accounts for group epistemic vice in terms of blameworthy or reprehensible exercises of group epistemic motivations and behaviour (or lapses in these).

A problem arises, however, in terms of *BLAME*: this type of account does not give an answer as to why the accountability for the group's epistemic behaviour would fail to track to the level of its individual members in the case of echo chambers. For even though they might not have epistemically vicious behaviour outside the context of the group, or even for the most part be epistemically virtuous, this type of account still requires the members to *commit* (passively or actively) to behave in accordance with the group ethos, or to fail to do so.¹⁰⁴ Both indicate that the group agency is contingent on the individual members' affirming it. That is, what makes the epistemic vice of the group blameworthy is ultimately on this account exercises of members' individual agency.

I have already noted that this is similar to how membership in echo chambers depends on adherence to the in-group sanctioned beliefs and values. In this case, we would then either have that the individual agents are passively or actively committed, even if just in their roles as group members, to an ethos analogous with a virtuous or vicious individual epistemic motivation. In both cases, harkening back to 2.2, the commitment to ethos represents a display of either lack of exercise of epistemic agency, in cases of passive commitment, or an outright exercise of epistemic agency in making an active commitment to the group ethos. If they are committed to

¹⁰² Fricker 2021, p. 96f.

¹⁰³ Nguyen 2020, p. 146.

¹⁰⁴ Fricker 2021, p. 93f.

a vicious ethos, their individual vice is obvious as it relies on an exercise of epistemic agency.¹⁰⁵ The challenge for collective agent-type accounts like Fricker's then, is to explain how echo chambers might be collectively epistemically vicious without its members being culpable/answerable for its epistemic vice, even granting that the epistemic vice is group-dependent. It seems as of now that the postulation of adherence to an ethos might implicate group members on an individual level as epistemically reprehensible for committing, passively or actively, to the group's epistemic vice, and as such Fricker's account as it stands is unable to account fully for *BLAME*.

We thus have that on Fricker's account, even though it allows for non-summative epistemic vices in collectives as well as exercises of collective epistemic agency, it does not seem to do so for the specific case of echo chambers. To fully explain the epistemic vice of echo chambers as collectively but not individually epistemically vicious, some explanation of why the joint commitment criterion should not entail that members are culpably *accountable* for the group's epistemic vice through their commitment to it, even should it not be in line with their own character otherwise.

4.5 Masked dispositions

In their account of collective virtue, Byerly and Byerly argue that there is a sense in which membership in a group might mask the members' true dispositions, which might be virtuous or vicious or neither, as to make them behave in a way that makes the group collectively virtuous.¹⁰⁶ In this sense, it is an account of non-summative collective properties where group members have properties in virtue of being group members.

Much of their account is contingent on taking a dispositional view of virtue, as opposed to one that judges virtues partly on some reliable level of adherence to virtuous behaviour. A disposition might be masked, they say, as in when a magician repeatedly drops a glass, enchanting it so it survives the drop without shattering. The enchantment does not remove the glass' disposition to shatter when dropped – it simply masks it.¹⁰⁷ In a similar way they argue that some kinds of group memberships might mask the members true dispositions, making them seem to be disposed to behave in a way they only behave in when in the group setting. The masked dispositions account would not adequately describe virtues or vices if there is a criterion of reliably virtue- or vice-adherent behaviour for a trait to qualify as a virtue or vice, because on this explanation, behaviour is not always indicative of the underlying character, as this might be masked. The masked dispositions account is therefore contingent on virtue and vice being defined solely through the 'true' psychological nature of individuals, regardless of their behaviour in practice. Their behaviour might be explained by these underlying psychological factors of disposition, but not always, and not the other way round.¹⁰⁸

I take it we could make an analogous case using Byerly and Byerly's idea of masked dispositions due to group membership as one way of explaining the collective vice of echo

¹⁰⁵ This might be the case in echo chambers where some individuals are more in control of the information flow than others, and that are using this to further their own agendas rather than spread true information. An example of this might be the recent report of Fox News' reporters who allegedly knowingly spread information they knew to be untrue, despite not agreeing with it themselves; Bernd Debusman Jr & Anthony Zurcher, "Tucker Carlson leaves Fox News", *BBC News*, 2023-04-25, accessed via <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-65379340>, on 2023-05-25.

¹⁰⁶ Byerly and Byerly's account is of collective virtue in general, including both epistemic and moral virtues. They give several accounts of different types of non-summative collective virtue; I have chosen to include only the one on masked dispositions as I believe it is the one most suited to describe the epistemic vice of echo chambers according to the terms we have set out.

¹⁰⁷ Byerly & Byerly 2016, p. 44.

¹⁰⁸ Byerly & Byerly 2016, p. 41ff.

chambers non-summatively. Then there is some inherent feature of the echo chamber that performs the task of the magician, masking the true (possibly virtuous) dispositions of the individual members and making them behave in accordance with epistemic vice. An apt suggestion of what from our definition of the echo chamber in section 3 that might play this role is perhaps the credit-discredit mechanism. By this definition, this mechanism makes the echo chamber members predisposed to give higher credibility to testimony sanctioned by the group while simultaneously distrusting outside testimony, regardless of their potentially virtuous epistemic characters. The placement of this 'magician' feature on the group level means that requiring any kind of joint commitment akin to the one required by Fricker's account in explaining non-summative collective properties is avoided, according to Byerly and Byerly.¹⁰⁹ In this sense the masked dispositions account gives answers to both *TRAIT* and *BLAME*.

An initial problem with this kind of account is that Byerly and Byerly's account relies on construing virtue as dispositional in the sense that what makes it true that an individual has a disposition is not their behaviour (which might be explained by them having a certain disposition but not vice versa) but by some fact about individual psychological constitution.¹¹⁰ Positing that such kinds of psychological facts about individuals are not evidenced by their behaviour makes them unverifiable. There is no way of knowing an individual agent's motivations or their adherence to them (as per our definitions of epistemic virtue and vice in 2) if we cannot make some reference to their behaviour.¹¹¹ Moreover, on an obstructivist account such as Cassam's, the individual agents would be regarded as epistemically vicious for displaying vicious behaviour because regardless of their 'true' disposition to behave in other ways, the fact remains that they are behaving in reprehensible and epistemically vicious ways. Perhaps, one might argue that a person, such as Sherbert Bluetree in the Blu-ray echo chamber, might be thought of as truly virtuous if he only displays vicious epistemic behaviours within the context of the Blu-ray echo chambers. But on the dispositional account, behaviour is not an indicator of true dispositions: it is theoretically possible that Sherbert Bluetree is truly epistemically vicious by being disposed to make unfair credibility judgements, but his dispositions are masked in all other contexts.¹¹²

As such, this kind of conceptualisation of virtue and vice as dispositional is incompatible with the kinds of responsibilist accounts of epistemic virtue and vice that were our starting point above. It seems largely pointless to discuss epistemic vice in terms of exercises of epistemic agency if behaviour is *not* to be seen as an indicator of such. Barring omniscience, there is no way, on a purely dispositional account such as Byerly and Byerly's, to know agents' true dispositions and thus whether they are epistemically virtuously or viciously disposed.

Further, Byerly and Byerly's avoidance of joint-commitment-like or collective agent-based accounts of epistemic virtue and vice makes it unsuitable to answer *AGENCY*. We might say that a group such as an echo chamber has an epistemic vice through a collective disposition in terms of the group-members behaving in epistemically vicious ways only within group contexts, but it would seem that whether a group has an epistemic vice would have to be judged

¹⁰⁹ Byerly & Byerly 2016, p. 42ff.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 46.

¹¹¹ As one observant reader noted, this argument is contingent on there being no other way of knowing an agent's true dispositions barring their behaviour, such as somehow being able to scan agents' brains to find out their true dispositions. I agree that this might in theory be a way of verifying the true dispositions of individual agents, but since this type of technology at present seems far from available, we shall have to make do with agents' dispositions being unverifiable by other means than in comparison to their behaviour.s

¹¹² This might seem an unintuitive example, but it shows that the dispositional account of epistemic vice that is not linked to behaviour is ultimately unverifiable, and therefore, not very helpful in explaining the behaviour of groups or individuals in terms of epistemic vice.

on a behavioural basis then, and not as an analogue to individual epistemic vice. Granted, this does avoid positing potentially ontologically strange collective agents (as in Fricker's account), but at the theoretically inelegant cost of neither being able to assess epistemic virtues and vices of groups and collectives analogously, and by giving an account of individual epistemic virtues and vices as unverifiable.¹¹³ We might therefore conclude that the masked dispositions is not a suitable way of explaining the collective epistemic vice of echo chambers, as the answers it gives to *TRAIT*, *AGENCY*, and *BLAME* are unsatisfactory.

4.6 The future for explaining echo chambers in terms of collective epistemic vice

While I have looked at several accounts of non-summative collective epistemic vice above, none of them is completely suited to describe the collective epistemic vice of echo chambers specifically. To summarize, in 4.2, I argued that the between the Mandevillian and the cultural account, neither answer *AGENCY* in a way that explains the relation between individual responsibility vice and collective vice, and that the Mandevillian account does not answer *BLAME* of how the reprehensibility of behaviour that makes something an epistemic vice on a collective scale does not also apply to the individuals that partake in the behaviour as part of the group. I argued in 4.3 that the emergent collective epistemic vice detailed by Holroyd answers neither of the three questions in a way that would explain the collective epistemic vice of echo chambers. In 4.4, I showed that while Fricker's account does give answers to *TRAIT* and *AGENCY*, it does not answer *BLAME* as the account ultimately places the basis for group ethos in the commitment of group members. Finally, in 4.5, I relayed Byerly and Byerly's account of collective virtue (here adapted in terms of epistemic vice) through masking the dispositions of group members. Here, I argued that while it does give answers to *TRAIT* and *BLAME*, the answers it gives on none of the questions is suitable to explain echo chambers according to the terms set out. No account considered thus gives a satisfactory answer to all three fundamental questions that need to be answered about collective epistemic vice in order to explain that of echo chambers.

This might be due to several potential factors: firstly, there are either simply not that many accounts available on collective virtue and vice, and varieties of the ones analysed here might very well be capable of describing the collective epistemic vice on the terms we set out, given that they are expanded to address the issues I have laid forward. Likewise, nothing prevents a 'new' account of collective epistemic vice unlike the ones discussed here that explains the collective epistemic vice of echo chambers satisfactorily in terms of the demands of *TRAIT*, *AGENCY*, and *BLAME*.

Elsewise, it might be problematic to expect an account of collective epistemic vice to be made on responsibility terms at all, at least in a way that would make echo chambers collectively vicious but not its members. We have seen in sections 4.2 and 4.3 that the structural, cultural, and emergent accounts of collective epistemic vice seem to function fairly well as *reliabilistic* accounts of collective vice. Of course, then, the question of epistemic vice becomes a question of more general epistemic badness, rather than epistemic badness due to blameworthy or reprehensible exercises of epistemic agency. It is, however, beneficial to a theory if it is able to explain epistemic vice in responsibility terms, as I have argued above, as this gives a more clear starting point for countermeasures.

As a third alternative, another option is that the reason why none of the analysed accounts are suitable for describing echo chambers as inherently epistemically vicious is that they are not. Here I am thinking of the respective accounts by Lackey and Fantl mentioned in the

¹¹³ Byerly and Byerly list wanting to avoid positing "some kind of 'spooky' group mind" as a reason to prefer as dispositional account of collective virtue and vice; Byerly & Byerly 2016, p. 43.

introduction, where both argue that there are no qualities of an echo chamber that make them *inherently* epistemically bad. Perhaps, echo chambers are, as they, not inherently epistemically vicious at all.¹¹⁴ Of course, both their accounts are as I interpret them mostly concerned with the overall epistemic effects of echo chambers, akin to a reliabilistic view of epistemic virtue and vice. A question that remains to be answered in following this line of argument is then why it is interesting to make an analysis of echo chambers in terms of their overall epistemic effects rather than their blameworthy epistemic effects, which a responsibilist analysis would be more apt to provide. Of course, at least Lackey's account of echo chambers corresponds as mentioned to the kind of echo chamber described as an *omissive* one in section 3. It would be interesting if an argument similar to Lackey's could be made about *resistant* ones. Still, it remains a question, given that no account succeeds in fully explaining collective epistemic vice in accordance with the terms set out: do we *need* to explain echo chambers in terms of epistemic vice? I think that given an account of echo chambers as resistant, the very least a challenge to the view of these as epistemically vicious needs to do is to explain why the automatic and unwarranted epistemic discrediting of outside testimony is *not* epistemically vicious. Given the view of epistemic vice relayed in section 2, I think that this would pose a significant challenge to such a project, according to both the reliabilist and the responsibilist view of epistemic vice.

I think the most fruitful next step from here would be to explore whether an analysis of echo chambers in terms of individual vice would yield more comprehensive results: the problem might lie in expecting the epistemic vice of echo chambers to be non-summatively collective in the first place. Given my findings here, echo chambers might potentially be better explained either as the result of summative epistemic vice or through pre-existing epistemic vices in the echo chamber members. Both of these would however require tweaking the reasons of why we here characterise echo chambers as epistemically vicious in the first place, as the credibility manipulating mechanism would need to be created or put in place due to features of the echo chamber members that predate the formation of the echo chamber.

Nevertheless, as I stated in the introduction, a viable analysis of non-summative responsibilist epistemic vice might be the most interesting avenue to explore given that it would have interesting consequences for accounts both of virtue and vice epistemology and maybe even for group epistemology as well. In this case, my project here is useful as an overview of problems faced by extant accounts of responsibilist collective epistemic vice. Especially interesting in this case are I think my analyses of De Ridder's cultural account and Fricker's collective agent-account, as these I think were the closest to give satisfactory answers to the questions that I set up. Such a line of investigation would nevertheless be best supported if also accompanied with an investigation of also the potential individual epistemic vice that might be conceived as of related to echo chambers given that, as I have said, the extant theories on collective epistemic virtue and vice are found to be somewhat lacking.

That is not to say that should the analysis of echo chambers as a collectively but not individually epistemically vicious social phenomenon prove viable in future iterations, that this would not be a challenge to the fields of virtue and vice epistemology both. Because then this would support an interpretation of epistemic vices (and perhaps then also virtues) that result from factors other than individual agency, but that still might not properly be called faculty virtues. Who would bear responsibility for a group phenomenon of that kind?

Further investigation along these outlined tracks might tell. My work here provides a potential starting point for all of them.

¹¹⁴ Such as e.g., Lackey and Fantl respectively argue; Lackey 2021; Fantl 2021.

5. Conclusion

In this work, I have used a responsibilist view of epistemic virtue and vice in combination with an account of resistant echo chambers and accounts of collective epistemic vice and virtue to try and highlight how they might be used to explain the supposedly inherent collective epistemic vice of echo chambers. In doing so, I outlined three questions a responsibilist account of non-summative collective epistemic vice needs to address. While no extant account might explain the collective epistemic vice of echo chambers on these terms, my analysis highlights some avenues that might be fruitful directions of future endeavours to do so.

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