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Vices of Distrust

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ABSTRACT

We explore a cluster of epistemic vices that lead us to refrain from trusting when we should.

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I

One of the first things that comes to mind when we think of the special issue's theme, 'Trust in a Social and Digital World' is the epidemic of 'fake news' and a cluster of trust-relevant vices we commonly associate with those who share it, click on it, and believe it.

Fake news consumers are, among other things, *gullible and naïve*. (How many times have you seen someone share the increasingly dated and non-binding Facebook [privacy message](#) hoax, or a meme that includes a dramatic picture and a powerful-looking statistic, but no *references* to that statistic?)

Many are also *dogmatic*: intellectually and/or emotionally tied to a viewpoint, and as a result, too quick to uncritically trust whatever aligns with it.¹ Gullibility, naivety, and dogmatism are all examples of vices that lead to us *trust when we shouldn't*. The effects of these kinds of vices can be dangerous. (So dangerous, in fact, that in August 2019, the United States F.B.I. for the first time [listed 'conspiracy theories' as among the top domestic terror threats](#).)

Our aim here, however, is to explore the other side of the coin: those character vices that lead us to *refrain from trusting when we should trust*. For ease of reference, call these *vices of distrust*.

Vices of distrust are dangerous in their own right, and in ways that often harm others along with oneself. The five vices of distrust we want to explore—with a particular focus on their manifestations online—are: *closed-mindedness*, *emulousness*, *capitulation*, *negligence*, and *arrogance*. Each contributes to vicious distrust in its own distinctive way.

II

According to Hobbes, trust is a passion proceeding from the belief of one from whom we hope something good, and *distrust* is 'diffidence or doubt that makes one try to find other means'. Hobbes here takes distrust to involve more than *merely* the absence of trust, but something in its own right, a kind of doubt.²

Perhaps there is a species of distrust that corresponds with *merely lacking* the kind of attitude or expectation we associate with trust, which is often thought to be an attitude of optimism that (put generally) the relevant trustee will take care of things as entrusted (e.g. Baier [1986](#); Jones [1996](#)),

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or—in cases of testimony via news—that the source is reliable or accurate. Individuals who manifest this species of distrust are simply unmoved and without affect, lacking trust but *also* lacking any suspicion or doubt—just thoroughly unperturbed.

Contemporary discussions of distrust align more closely with the kind of positive distrust Hobbes has in mind. When positive distrust (hereafter, distrust) is vicious, it is therefore not merely (i) a misplaced *absence* of trust but (ii) a misplaced *suspicion* or *doubt*.

One criterion with reference to which a suspicion can be misplaced concerns *risk*, a feature that all trust at least minimally implicates a vulnerability to.³ Vicious distrusters, at the very minimum, suspect there is more risk than there is.

But why? The English writer Samuel Johnson thought that overzealous distrust was fundamentally rooted in *cowardice*.⁴ Cowardice can explain some kinds of distrust, particularly the kind of distrust we sometimes have of ourselves and our own capacities, both to succeed and to handle our failures.⁵ But we all know it doesn't take a coward to give in to conspiratorial doubts about expert consensus, to deny global warming and the efficacy of vaccines, and to stand impervious to having such misplaced doubts fact-checked or otherwise set straight. Here some other vices are needed.

III

Aristotle attempts to defend his famous motto 'All men by nature desire to know'—which is the opening passage of Book I of his *Metaphysics*—by drawing attention to 'the delight we take in our senses'. When the senses give us immediate or basic knowledge, what results is a kind of epistemic 'immediate gratification', at least whenever our senses are successfully directed at some question of interest. But we have to work much harder for other knowledge, exercising senses multiple times, drawing careful inferences, weighing up disagreements, verifying sources, etc. And here is where frustration can set in.

Frustrated inquiry can be especially discomfiting when what's at issue is a question we have a vested interest in *settling* one way or another (perhaps because some other inquiries or practical goals depend on us doing so). In their well-known paper '[Motivated Closing of the Mind: "Seizing" and "Freezing"](#)', psychologists Arie Kruglanski and Donna Webster describe the need to get to a conclusion (one way or another) as a need for 'cognitive closure'. It is a common need, one that could be easily conflated with a simple Aristotelian desire to know.⁶

But the need for cognitive closure is more dangerous than a mere desire to know. In an examination of closed-mindedness in his recent book, *Vices of the Mind* (2019), Quassim Cassam notes that the need for cognitive closure is typically associated with a range of tendencies characteristic of 'closed-minded' thinking, which include (i) reluctance to consider novel information once a given conception has been adopted or 'frozen upon'; (ii) denial or reinterpretation of information that is inconsistent with one's prior conception; (iii) placing a premium on order and coherence in one's thinking⁷; and (iv) having a poor appreciation of different perspectives (Cassam 2019, 29).⁸ And as studies by Van Hiel and Mervielde (2003) have shown, the stronger the perceived need for closure, the stronger these tendencies.⁹

According to Cassam, open-minded individuals have a lower need for cognitive closure (even if the underlying desire to know remains fixed). *Closed-mindedness* by contrast puts the premium on the closure *itself* in a way that can (through the kinds of tendencies described) ultimately *obstruct* the knowledge goal.

Notice that the tendencies that line up with close-mindedness are exactly the sort that are likely to bring about vicious distrust. To take one example, consider the need for 'order' in one's thinking.

Suppose 'Sam' is a supporter of the U.S. National Rifle Association, a libertarian conservative, and a strong supporter of the 2nd Amendment. Sam, like most people, is distraught when he hears about gun deaths caused by children. He settles on an explanation for this that fits neatly with his support of the NRA: that violent video games, rather than lax gun laws, are the cause of most child gun accidents, an idea once popular in conservative circles.¹⁰ But then Sam – while scrolling through his

Twitter feed – runs into the landmark 2019 study by Andrew K. Przybylski and Netta Weinstein of the Oxford Internet Institute which debunks this idea entirely, and in doing so threatens the order of his thinking about guns more generally. Disposed to protect this order, Sam regards the Przybylski and Weinstein study with immediate suspicion. Do they have an agenda? Did they fiddle with the numbers? Do we know this wasn't just another study funded by George Soros? Is this *fake news*?

IV

After the New England Patriots defeated the Indianapolis Colts 45-7 in the AFC Playoffs on 28 January 2015, superstar Patriots quarterback Tom Brady was accused of illegally 'deflating' the teams' footballs prior to the game. The accusation, subsequent investigation, and eventual suspension of Brady (and the loss of two draft picks for the Patriots) is known widely as 'Deflategate'.

But did Brady and the Patriots really have a hand in deflating those balls? Could the balls have lost a bit of air naturally through cold weather? The [Wells Report](#), a 243-page document produced by New York attorney Ted Wells—hired by the National Football League to get to the bottom of things—turned out to be bad news for Brady and the Patriots. In short, the report found that several Patriots were responsible and Brady himself was in on it.

Was the report accurate? Patriots supporters were largely unconvinced of the report's findings, branding Wells 'corrupt' and shortly after setting up a 'Deflategate Truther' blog which challenges the math and science of deflating balls, discusses how they are affected by temperature and weather, and attributes the alleged bad science of the report to a wider conspiracy against the Patriots.

Distrust by many Patriots fans of the Wells report is predictable: social psychologists have shown that loyalty to a sports team (or player) corresponds with a tendency to attribute successes of that team or player to skill and failures to 'externalities' such as bad luck, unfair officiating, etc. (e.g. Hastorf and Cantril 1954; Wann et al. 2006) with inverse opinions of the successes/failures of perceived rivals.

Emulousness—a *motivation by a spirit of rivalry*—can lead to a distrust of solid evidence that has a bearing on politics in a way that closely resembles the Deflategate Truthers' response to the ball deflation science in the Wells Report.

Just consider a pair of 2011 studies by Dan Kahan and colleagues which shows how—in a two-party political system like the U.S.—unfounded distrust lines up on party lines when it comes to evidence about the environment.¹¹ Though it is uncontentious among scientists that global warming is real, and human activity is a central cause of it,¹² only 12% of the U.S. political right accept this (whereas 78% on the left do). The distrust of the scientific consensus by the political right is overwhelming (over 80%). By contrast, while there is scientific consensus that there *are* safe methods for burying nuclear waste, only 20% on the political left trust this evidence (with 80% distrusting the consensus), which the political right trusts nearly twice as much (37%).¹³

In sum: to the extent that individual-level emulousness leads to unearned distrust, it is epistemically vicious, a trait that obstructs knowledge, understanding, and other epistemic goods. Moreover, emulousness represents a vicious *source* of distrust that is conceptually distinct from close-mindedness. Emulous individuals needn't care about cognitive closure *per se*. Close-minded individuals needn't be motivated by a sense of rivalry. Both result in a failure to trust when one should.

V

Anatoly Dyatlov held a high-ranking position at the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant in Pripyat, Ukrainian SSR, where, on 26 April 1986, he was responsible for carrying out a safety test of Reactor 4.

The safety test did not go well. There were plenty of warning signs from the very beginning that it was not going to go well. But these warnings weren't given proper weight.

Dyatlov, depicted by Paul Ritter in the popular 2019 HBO mini-series "Chernobyl," was by many accounts a man with a high opinion of himself, and there was pressure from Moscow to confirm that

a safety test was conducted as soon as possible.¹⁴ Dyatlov's high opinion was seriously threatened when, at 01:23:40 in the morning, the reactor's core exploded, releasing ionizing radiation (i.e. strong enough to detach electrons from atoms) into the air along with chunks of nuclear graphite from the core on the reactor's roof and on the ground outside.

The evidence (e.g. verbal reports of graphite on the ground) immediately following the explosion indicated the worst, but these reports were first met with stubborn distrust, with Dyatlov and others continuing, initially at least, to assume the core must still be intact and to proceed (including in communications with Moscow) as though it were. It was much later than it should have been that Pripjat was evacuated.

We'll never know what Dyatlov was really thinking. His testimony at trial the following year conflicted with that of his colleagues.¹⁵ The interpretation expressed in "*Chernobyl*" (2019) was unambiguous: that Dyatlov's ego had first gotten in the way of a sober assessment of the risks, and then had prevented him (as well as some other senior Soviet officials) from accepting that an event that would ruin their careers had actually materialized.

The risks of distrusting evidence in Dyatlov's case were of course extreme. But the mechanisms by which Dyatlov ignored them are common.

According to Alessandra Tanesini (2018c), a characteristic human need—though one that can be managed in better and worse ways¹⁶—is to defend one's ego and to fit in with one's elective social group. An attitude (for Tanesini, a summary evaluation of an object that can be positive or negative) based on the need for ego-defence is an evaluation of an object with regard to how well the object will satisfy one's need to feel good about one's self. We accordingly have negative ego-defensive attitudes towards things which make us feel bad about ourselves and which we perceive as likely to do so.

Arrogance, on Tanesini's view, is a defensive attitude that suggest: may lead one to disproportionately perceive situations as threatening towards one's self-esteem and ego.¹⁷ Such perceptions then trigger arrogant responses in which one feels the need to defend oneself—even when there is no good epistemic basis for doing so—as a form of ego protection. Distrust, even against overwhelming evidence, can be a typical mechanism of ego-defence.

Compare, for example, Dyatlov's response to testimony from his subordinates that (if true) would be incompatible with the success of the Reactor 4 safety test he was overseeing, with the much more mundane distrust people often have of being fact-checked by a friend after they've posted a political news article online (and having claimed publicly that they agree with it).¹⁸

Dyatlov's esteem was invested in it being false that anything had gone seriously wrong in Reactor 4. Whenever we post political stories online, our esteem is invested in their accuracy. Fact checkers accordingly pose a threat to that esteem. Whereas intellectual humility can help us to manage this investment of esteem in a way that does not lead us away from the truth,¹⁹ arrogance leads us to (like Dyatlov—though with much less at stake) feel the need to defend ourselves against being fact-checked, where the fact-checking itself is a threat to our esteem, and regardless of the reliability of the fact-check itself. (Have you seen anyone respond 'you have your fact-checkers, I have mine'?)

The lengths some have gone to defend their ego against fact-checking include—as one can find in the bowels of the Internet—spreading lies about fact-checking sites themselves, such as that the founder of the Snopes fact-checking site, David Mikkelsen, was arrested for fraud and for running a pit bull ring. He was not.²⁰

VI

Speaking at the 2020 Munich Security Conference, the World Health Organisation (WHO) warned 'we're not just fighting a pandemic; we're fighting an infodemic' (Tedros 2020), which the WHO defines as 'an overabundance of information—some accurate and some not—that makes it hard for people to find trustworthy sources and reliable guidance when they need it'.²¹ With regards to the COVID-19 pandemic, the WHO was referring to the vast amount of news stories, social posts, and data sharing that massively increased since the pandemic's onset. For example, nearly

one third of social media users reported seeing false or misleading information about the coronavirus²² with Facebook alone reporting 40 million problematic posts related to COVID-19 on their platform.²³

Whilst the presence of disinformation can cause significant harm to our health (think vaccine conspiracies, fake cures and misleading statistics), the sheer *overabundance* of information invites what can oftentimes be exhausting labour for an epistemic agent in search of accurate information and trustworthy sources; when such labour is both necessary and potentially laborious in order to weed the good information from the bad, strengths of epistemic character become apparent, as do weaknesses.²⁴

This is where the vice of *epistemic capitulation* comes into play—the deficiency vice of intellectual perseverance. Agents in possession of this vice often fail to act when they encounter an obstacle or difficulty—e.g. they are too quick to quit a project or not re-take a test (Battaly 2017). Capitulation is rooted in a failure to exercise good judgment about one's goals. For example, an agent who capitulates or compromises in the face of difficulty fails to recognise that their goals are still attainable despite the apparent obstacle. Contrastingly, an agent in possession of the virtue of intellectual perseverance will withstand challenges and stick with their intellectual projects as they are aware of what intellectual goals are appropriate for them to pursue.

It is easy to see—especially in the context of informational excess—how an individual with the vice of epistemic capitulation may be led to vicious distrust. When presented with an abundance of COVID-19-related information (and misinformation), it can be hard work to reliably discern the reliable from unreliable sources, and to do the requisite legwork to gain the kind of competence necessary to make reliable assessments *about* the reliability of (competing) sources. The epistemic capitulator, unprepared to overcome such obstacles, might find a path of least resistance to be one of a wider distrust of COVID-19 information generally. Here, consider remarks such as 'No one really knows whether these vaccines work' or 'Everyone seems to disagree with each other, so who knows who is right!' Such lazy glosses, which often accompany generalised distrust of information in a complicated domain, are a natural extension of an unwillingness to do the relevant intellectual legwork in that domain—viz., to give up on one's intellectual goals too easily.

VII

In the early stages of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, one of the most salient questions posed in mainstream media and reiterated by epidemiologists and virologists was: 'Will there be a vaccine?'

After early-stage trials by AstraZeneca and Pfizer showed promising results, the question shifted to: 'When will there be a vaccine?' Following an unprecedented investment in research and more clinical trials, the answer to that question turned out to be in the vicinity of early 2021. As Director of the U.S. National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, Anthony Fauci pleaded in late February: 'I think people need to get vaccinated as quickly and as expeditiously as possible'.²⁵

But a lot of people didn't. In some cases, there are justifiable medical reasons, such as compromised immune systems. However, that explains only a very small portion of the population that has opted not to get vaccinated.

Take, for example, the United States, and in particular, states like Wyoming and West Virginia. As of writing (September 2021) there is no shortage of safe vaccines available in these states, nor has there been for a while. And yet, in these states, less than 60% of the population above age 18 is fully vaccinated. In West Virginia, less than 50% of the population above age 18 has had a single dose.

As a study by Dror et al. (2020) reports, some of the most common self-reported explanations for vaccine hesitancy are mistrust of the quality and potential side effects of COVID-19 vaccines, along with concern that the vaccines will cause COVID-19. This mistrust is, of course, misplaced.

Some small portion of this mistrust *might* be epistemically blameless; perhaps, for example, some individuals might simply lack the cognitive capacities to evaluate evidence (and to mistrust the basis

of such inevitable limitations in evidence-gathering), or they might be living off the grid completely. Let's set such minority cases aside.

A more powerful explanatory assessment of the situation is that much of the mistrust that lies at the heart of vaccine hesitancy is vicious mistrust, sourced in (for those whose mistrust is sincere) the epistemic vice of *negligence*, if not also in other epistemic vices. Negligence, as an epistemic vice, is a vice of inquiry that consists in a failure of epistemic *due diligence*. To be clear, if you have not, say, gathered evidence about nuanced particle physics, you aren't thereby epistemically negligent, at least on the assumption that there was no *cause* for due diligence on your part. If you are a particle physicist who has failed to gather this evidence, the situation is different.²⁶

Given the infectious nature of COVID-19, the bar for there being a cause for due diligence on our part to inform ourselves of the safety of vaccines is plausibly very low. Presuming we do clear this bar, then failing to gather the relevant evidence is viciously epistemically negligent.²⁷

In states like West Virginia, where mistrust of COVID-19 vaccine has been extraordinarily high, it is plausible that *in addition to vicious negligence*, there may be other vices at play that contribute to the widespread mistrust we see in these high rates of vaccine hesitancy. For our purposes, we want to emphasise that we take it that, *even in the absence of other vices operating in the background*, it is plausible that epistemically vicious negligence might well be enough to generate vicious mistrust, and we think that negligent evidence gathering among those who purport to mistrust the safety or efficacy of the COVID-19 vaccine makes for a case and point.

VIII

Not all vicious distrust is borne of negligence, just like not all vicious distrust is borne of closed-mindedness, emulousness, arrogance, or capitulation. But each of these vices, we've suggested, is independently sufficient for leading individuals to distrust reliable information online, and in ways that obstruct knowledge and understanding.

This suggests two ideas for further reflection, one negative and one positive. The first is that a propensity to vicious distrust will plausibly be greater when two or more of these vices of distrust are combined. We'll let the reader consider whether they can imagine a single thinker with all five of these vices.

More optimistically, if we're right that arrogance, close-mindedness, emulousness, arrogance, and capitulation each represent *distinctive* sources of vicious distrust, then this tells us something about how this kind of distrust might be combatted, by locating and targeting some of its sources in our own intellectual agency.

Notes

1. For a helpful discussion of dogmatism as an intellectual vice, see Roberts and Wood (2007), Cassam (2016), and Battaly (2018).
2. A similar view is defended by Jason D'Cruz (2019) when presenting an account of 'humble trust'. Whilst surveying the behaviours characteristic of trust and distrust, D'Cruz emphasises that not trusting a person is not equivalent to distrusting them, and that trust and distrust are mutually exclusive as opposed to jointly exhaustive.
3. For a recent discussion of the relationship between trusting well and managing risk, see Carter (2019).
4. See *Irene*, Act IV, scene 1, line 87.
5. Similarly, rashness may go some of the way in explaining kinds of distrust. For example, consider agents who carelessly skim the headlines of news articles before sharing the piece on social media.
6. Note that the need for cognitive closure, and the desire to know differ not only from each other, but also from the related but distinct claim that knowledge is the constitutive aim of inquiry. For a recent defence of this view, see Kelp (2018).
7. See also Van Hiel and Mervielde (2003).
8. This is an abbreviated version of the list that appears in Cassam (2019, 29), which he attributes to Bar-Joseph (2005, 251).

9. Additionally, Meyer, Alfano, and de Bruin (2024) have shown that epistemic vice is associated with susceptibility to COVID-19 misinformation. They found that people who possessed the behavioural characteristics of jumping to conclusions and an unwillingness to change their minds are especially likely to accept fake news, COVID-19 misinformation, and conspiracy theories.
10. Though this line of argument is making a comeback. Donald Trump's response to the 4 August 2019 shootings in Dayton, Ohio, was to blame 'gruesome and grisly' video games, a cause he also attributed to the preceding 2019 El Paso Shooting on 3 August.
11. For a more extended discussion of these cases and what ramifications this kind of thinking has in epistemology more generally, see Carter and McKenna (2019).
12. National Research Council Committee on Analysis of Global Change Assessments 2007.
13. National Research Council Board on Radioactive Waste Management 1990.
14. For discussion, see Higginbotham (2019).
15. Higginbotham (2019).
16. See also Tanesini (2018a).
17. The main statement of arrogance on Tanesini's view is her (2018a), though see also Tanesini (2016a, 2016b). For another account of arrogance and its relationship to distrust, see Lynch (2018). Cf., Maksym et al. (2016) on the relationship between arrogance and silence, as opposed to silencing.
18. It is contentious whether sharing a story on social media is a kind of assertion. According to a study by Gabielkov et al. (2016), 59% of links shared on Twitter were never originally clicked on before they were shared.
19. One mechanism whereby intellectual humility can achieve this result is by regulating our assessment of our own limitations, and how to respond to considerations that require that we recognise them. For some notable recent discussions of intellectual humility and its features, see e.g. Whitcomb et al. (2017), Priest (2017), Samuelson and Church (2015), Alfano et al. (2017) and Kallestrup and Pritchard (2017).
20. See Streitfield (2016).
21. WHO, as cited by UNESCO (2020, 2).
22. Reuters Institute (2020).
23. Rosen (2020) Figure accurate at the date of writing (October 2021).
24. Various studies have named 'informational excess' as one of the main factors contributing to the challenges of knowledge acquisition in an online environment. For example, finding and extracting credible information is more difficult in a fast-moving digital environment, as decision-making requires reflection which can be timely (Colvile 2016; Dahlgren 2018; Jackson 2009). Additionally, Dahlgren notes that our 'cognitive certainty' is also threatened by information excess, as we are more likely to be sceptical of information we're presented with online. Whilst a degree of scepticism and scrutiny is beneficial when it comes to disinformation, Dahlgren notes that the extent of competing 'versions' of knowledge creates an excess of doubt and misplaced scepticism.
25. <https://www.cnn.com/2021/02/28/fauci-all-three-covid-vaccines-highly-effective-urges-people-to-take-available-shot.html>.
26. For a similar expression of this idea, see Sanford Goldberg's (2017) 'Should Have Known', which defends the view that occupying certain institutional roles can carry with it epistemic duties.
27. For related recent discussion of evidence resistance, see Simion (2021).

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

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