

Intellectual Vices: Perhaps More is More? A Reply to Matheson

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Abstract

Jonathan Matheson's critique (2025) of my paper "*Epistemic Hubris*" (2025) hinges on the claim that the vice I describe is not novel, but rather a variation of familiar epistemic vices—namely, intellectual arrogance and hyper-autonomy. In what follows, I will explain in more detail why I chose to posit a new epistemic vice rather than rely on existing categories to explain the phenomenon of *improvised expertise*. In my response to Matheson, I will offer a more detailed account of why *epistemic hubris* is distinct from arrogance and hyper-autonomy. I will also suggest—without fully arguing for it—that in certain cases, the affective component of an epistemic vice or virtue cannot be altered or removed at will without compromising their conceptual integrity. In some instances, it is precisely the affective component (or its absence) that gives rise to specific behavioral expressions, and is thus both crucial and foundational.

Jonathan Matheson's critique (2025) of my paper "*Epistemic Hubris*" (2025) rests on a specific claim: what I describe as *epistemic hubris*, thereby positing the existence of a novel epistemic vice, is in fact nothing more than a variant of already known and well-documented vices—namely, intellectual arrogance and hyper-autonomy. According to Matheson, I too hastily dismiss these existing vices as "different" and inadequate to account for the epistemic phenomenon I aim to describe, namely that of *improvised expertise*. In his view, rather than proposing yet another—supposedly new—epistemic vice, at the risk of contributing to a proliferation of insufficiently distinct epistemic vices, I should have treated *improvised expertise* as a manifestation of already recognized vices.

To some extent, I do not disagree with Matheson: it would have been possible to proceed in either direction. Believe it or not, I have earlier drafts of the epistemic hubris paper in which the phenomenon was initially described as a form of hyper-autonomy. Indeed, there are epistemic phenomena that differ from one another only in subtle ways. What should we do with these cases? One option is to treat them as exceptional variants of known epistemic vices; another is to consider them as expressions of yet-untheorized vices and to name them accordingly. In this context, I do not subscribe to the "less is more" approach. Our intellectual lives are complex and rich in nuance and variation. I believe it is more fruitful to attempt to capture these nuances by introducing distinct names for distinct—if only slightly distinct—intellectual attitudes, rather than subsuming them under the umbrella of already familiar categories.

In my response to Matheson, I will explain in more detail why I chose to posit a new epistemic vice rather than rely on existing categories to explain the phenomenon of *improvised expertise*. For doing so, I will offer a more detailed account of why *epistemic hubris* is distinct from the other two vices analyzed in my study—namely, arrogance and hyper-autonomy. I will also suggest—without attempting a full demonstration—that in certain cases, the affective component of an intellectual trait cannot be altered or removed at will without

compromising the trait's conceptual integrity. In some instances, it is precisely the affective component (or its absence) that gives rise to specific behavioral expressions, and is thus both crucial and foundational.

Epistemic Hubris and Other Vices

I fully share Matheson's analysis when he argues that epistemic vices and virtues may involve different components, and that not all of them are necessarily present in every individual who exhibits them. As a result, the same vice or virtue may take on different forms in different individuals (13). This view is not in conflict with another important consideration: that there are certain core components that define a vice or a virtue, such that their absence reveals not merely a variant of the same one, but rather the presence of a distinct—albeit perhaps closely related—one. This was the starting point for my own reflections on what I later came to call epistemic hubris, which I have sought to distinguish from intellectual arrogance, hyper-autonomy, overconfidence, and contrarian thinking.

In order to respond to Matheson and justify the introduction of a new epistemic vice, I will attempt to answer the following questions: What are the defining components of epistemic hubris? And what are the defining components of intellectual arrogance and hyper-autonomy—those components that cannot be removed without fundamentally altering the nature of the vice in question, thereby resulting in the description of a different vice altogether?

Matheson identifies three components of epistemic vices and virtues: the cognitive, the behavioral, and the affective. How do we describe epistemic hubris across each of the three dimensions identified? Its cognitive dimension is characterized by the overestimation of one's intellectual capacities; and by the belief that expertise can be obtained simply by doing independent research. As for the behavior of individuals affected by this vice, they act as if experts; do one's own research; trust in self-discovered, at times non-official sources. The affective component, as Matheson justly observes, is less pronounced and does not necessarily involve any specific attitudes—an absence that is, in itself, an interesting feature.

Let us now examine which features epistemic hubris shares with arrogance and hyper-autonomy, in order to assess whether the differences that distinguish it from these two vices are sufficient to justify its theorization as a distinct epistemic vice.

Arrogance

The cognitive component of arrogance and epistemic hubris is undoubtedly similar, as both vices are typically found in individuals who tend to overestimate their intellectual abilities. This cognitive feature is also present in other epistemic vices, such as overconfidence, haughtiness, hyper-autonomy. Individuals afflicted by epistemic hubris hold another, crucial belief: they believe in their own capacity to replace experts through independent research. Arrogant individuals, by contrast, do not necessarily hold this belief. Does this suggest a first (albeit subtle) difference between intellectual arrogance and epistemic hubris? Maybe.

However, let us accept Tanesini's claim that a specific doxastic state is not necessary for classifying someone as arrogant or not. I believe that we may set aside the cognitive and doxastic component of both arrogance and epistemic hubris and acknowledge that if the cognitive dimension were shared, it would not necessarily follow that the two vices are identical. At the same time, even if they differ at this level, this alone is insufficient to establish that we are dealing with two distinct vices.

This brings us to the remaining two dimensions: the affective and the behavioral. Matheson contends that epistemic hubris is simply intellectual arrogance stripped of its affective component—specifically, the anger and hostility toward others that typically accompany the latter (14). In his view, the affective component is not a *sine qua non* of intellectual arrogance: it is possible for a person to be arrogant without manifesting these particular attitudes. This is a point on which I am not entirely convinced: it seems to me that stripping arrogance of its affective component amounts to distorting the nature of the vice itself.

Most of us, I believe, can readily bring to mind examples of arrogant individuals—those who are self-assured, dismissive of others, convinced they are always right, and eager to have the final word. This often—though not always—translates into aggression, especially when their views are challenged. The affective component of arrogance appears to be of considerable importance—so much so that, if we were to remove it, we would in some sense be altering the very nature of the vice. Indeed, it is the affective dimension of arrogance that seems to give rise to its behavioral expression. However, since this might well be just my view of arrogance, it may be worth examining this issue in greater depth.

Let us consider Tanesini's analysis of arrogance, a vice she has examined in considerable depth. Arrogance, she observes, can take various forms; there is no single way of being arrogant. She identifies two main types of arrogance, each corresponding to a distinct pattern of behavior. The first resembles haughtiness or superbia, serves a defensive function, and indeed manifests in aggressive and angry attitudes (Tanesini 2021, 98–99; 2018, 213; 2016, 513).

Individuals who are arrogant in this sense:

[T]end to put other people down; they are bullies who shout, intimidate and humiliate others. They may also condescend and belittle. A paradigmatic example of this kind of person is the powerful individual who dominates discussions, reacts angrily when criticised, and rudely interrupts other people when they are speaking. He (and it is most often a "he") also adopts a variety of intimidating and humiliating postures to induce others to self-silence and to become excessively deferential. [...] individuals of this kind [are] domineering and always a small step away from anger (Tanesini 2018, 213).

The haughty/arrogant person does not merely possess certain specific attitudes; they behave aggressively. The affective component is such that it has clear behavioral consequences.

Epistemic hubris is quite evidently different from this form of arrogance—on both an affective and a behavioral dimension.

Arrogance however can also manifest as a form of hyper-autonomy that is less closely associated with aggressive behavior, which Tanesini terms “intellectual” arrogance. Individuals exhibiting intellectual arrogance “behave as if they are totally epistemically self-reliant and as if they have no intellectually debts towards anybody else. Those who are arrogant in this way display the coolness and fearlessness typical of individuals who think of themselves as being so powerful to be invulnerable to threats” (Tanesini 2021, 106). According to Tanesini, the paradigmatic example of intellectual arrogance is the investment manager or banker who gambled and lost other people’s money before the 2008 financial crisis: such individuals consider themselves invulnerable and refuse to trust any other epistemic agents (Tanesini 2018, 213; 2016, 513–514).

The cognitive component of this form of arrogance is certainly similar to that of epistemic hubris, but it is also close to that of many other epistemic vices. The affective component differs again, as epistemic hubris does not entail the coolness, fearlessness, and sense of invulnerability characteristic of intellectual arrogance. Here too, it seems that the affective component cannot be easily stripped off without modifying the vice itself. This component has also implications on behavior: it is precisely the sense of invulnerability that drives the actions of the arrogant investment banker—his recklessness and disregard for the interests of others. This is something that is absent in cases of epistemic hubris.

However, despite my view on the centrality of the affective component of arrogance, we cannot rule out the possibility that what I describe as epistemic hubris is merely a form of intellectual arrogance lacking its affective component—thus making it more closely resemble hyper-autonomy. In Tanesini’s view, the behavior typically associated with intellectual arrogance is indeed similar to that of the hyper-autonomous individual. It is therefore necessary to examine hyper-autonomy more closely in order to determine whether the differences between it and what I term epistemic hubris are sufficient to justify treating them as distinct epistemic vices.

Hyper-Autonomy

For a number of weeks, I was convinced that the phenomenon of improvised expertise was a specific manifestation of hyper-autonomy. Yet the more I reflected on and studied the nature of hyper-autonomy, the more I came to feel that the differences between this vice and the one I sought to describe were significant, and that the epistemic phenomenon I wanted to capture was of a different kind altogether. I suspected that those who had worked on and theorized hyper-autonomy would raise an eyebrow—since, in attempting to reinterpret the vice, I was in fact distorting it, reshaping it into something else, because the phenomenon I had in mind concerns individuals who rely on a wide range of sources and who are, in fact, far from being intellectually autonomous.

Let us now take a closer look at hyper-autonomy by considering its cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions. The cognitive dimension of hyper-autonomy and of epistemic hubris appears to be largely overlapping: both vices entail the belief “that one can substitute oneself for experts, justifiably challenge their opinions and generally acquire expertise about anything” (Pongiglione 2024, 99). The affective dimension is different: hyper-autonomous individuals exhibit a high degree of skepticism and general distrust toward others’ testimony, adopting a suspicious stance (Vega Encabo 2008, 61); they are also obsessed with self-authorship (Cobb 2019). In the case of hyper-autonomy as well, the affective dimension appears to be significant, and in part constitutive of the vice itself. If this element of extreme distrust is removed, the vice seems to lose much of its force.

So let us consider the behavioral dimension. Hyper-autonomous individuals reject epistemic dependence on others as a matter of principle: they want to act independently and to be epistemically self-sufficient; they refuse to take advice from others and are resolute in making decisions independently (Roberts and Wood 2007; King 2020). As Matheson rightly points out, this is ultimately a chimera—no one can be entirely epistemically self-sufficient. To some extent, then, it is a matter of degree: of how autonomous one aspires to be. Yet the crucial point is that hyper-autonomous individuals *strive* for epistemic self-sufficiency in a way that those affected by epistemic hubris do not—and do not care to. The latter do trust other sources; they do not deny this, nor are they concerned with doing so. The fact that they are not fully epistemically autonomous does not seem to bother them at all. I doubt that the same holds true for the hyper-autonomous individual.

Can we strip hyper-autonomy of its obsessive drive for epistemic independence without altering the nature of the vice itself? Here again, my sense is that if we remove its affective core—namely, the deep-seated skepticism toward others’ testimony and the desire to achieve complete (albeit unattainable) epistemic self-sufficiency—we end up distorting the vice and turning it into something else. Perhaps precisely into epistemic hubris. And if that is the case, then it becomes legitimate to assign it a distinct name of its own.

Final Remarks

So far, I have attempted to explain why epistemic hubris should be considered distinct from other epistemic vices. However, I have not yet approached the issue from the opposite direction—namely, by starting from the phenomenon I sought to explain, improvised expertise, and asking whether this phenomenon can be adequately accounted for using already theorized vices.

Matheson argues that this phenomenon can indeed be captured by appealing to the combined action of arrogance and hyper-autonomy, or to either of these vices once stripped of their affective dimension. In my view, however, this does not work well for a number of reasons: the arrogant individual sometimes improvises expertise, but not always—often, they simply want to be right, without necessarily claiming expert status. The hyper-autonomous individual does improvise expertise, but in a peculiar way: by rejecting epistemic dependence, striving for total (albeit unattainable) autonomy, and refusing to place trust in others.

Furthermore, there is yet another type of individual who engages in improvised expertise: the contrarian thinker. This figure may be the one who most closely resembles the person affected by epistemic hubris, as they too conduct independent research and often rely on alternative sources and theories. Why, then, did I not explain the phenomenon by appealing to contrarian thinking? Because contrarian thinking is also characterized by a distinctive affective component: a marked skepticism toward official sources *because* they are official, often accompanied by a tendency to drift toward conspiratorial thinking. This affective stance is not necessarily present in those affected by epistemic hubris.

Just as it makes sense to distinguish hyper-autonomy from contrarian thinking, despite their similarities, it likewise makes sense to assign a new label to a vice that resembles several others but cannot be reduced to any of them: epistemic hubris. This vice can be found across various types of individuals: in the expert who ventures into a field outside their own, lacking sufficient knowledge to speak authoritatively; or in the layperson who believes they can easily replace experts and confidently deliberate on complex matters where expert judgment is essential—such as in the medical domain.

The point of my reply to Matheson is not to claim that his approach is wrong and mine is correct. Rather, I see our perspectives as two different ways of addressing the same underlying task: identifying epistemic vices and accounting for their many recurring and nuanced forms. Matheson writes: “I doubt that we gain anything by patching together the relevant aspects of these two character traits [intellectual arrogance and hyper-autonomy] that relate to improvising expertise and giving them a new label” (12). In my view, the value of introducing a new label lies precisely in the ability to capture a specific nuance within a recurring intellectual pattern—one that is similar to others, yet distinct. Admittedly, we could identify the phenomenon without introducing a new label, perhaps using a few more words to clarify what we mean. Neither option is necessarily better than the other; to a large extent, it is a matter of one's preferred methodological stance. In this case, for me, more is more.

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