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WHAT'S WRONG WITH WISHFUL THINKING?
“MANIFESTING” AS AN EPISTEMIC VICE
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ABSTRACT. The popular trend of manifesting involves supposedly making something happen by imagining it and consciously thinking it will happen in order to will it into existence. In this paper Laura D’Olimpio explains why manifesting is a form of wishful thinking and argues that it is an epistemic vice. She describes how such wishful thinking generally, and manifesting in particular, are epistemically problematic in the ways they obstruct the attainment of knowledge. She further adds that manifesting leaves the epistemic agent vulnerable to unrealistic expectations, being set up for failure, and being prone to self-blame, and it also encourages a blurring of the distinction between thought and truth. D’Olimpio offers an example that demonstrates how manifesting as a particular instantiation of wishful thinking invites and encourages obsessive and compulsive habits and rituals that corrupt the epistemic agent’s rational conclusions. Wishful thinking and manifesting negate the role for luck and privilege in achievement and downplay the role of effort and action. D’Olimpio concludes that as educators we may play a role in dispelling the myth that manifesting is a virtuous or beneficial practice and instead teach our students that, as a form of wishful thinking, it is an epistemic vice best avoided.

KEY WORDS. manifesting; epistemic vice; intellectual vice; wishful thinking; epistemic agent; philosophy of education

INTRODUCTION

Manifesting is all the rage. Based on the idea of the laws of attraction, the so-called act of willing what you desire into reality through the power of thought and belief has grown in popularity, especially amongst younger generations. The Cambridge English Dictionary defines manifest as a verb connoting “to show something clearly, through signs or actions” or “to make something happen by imagining it and consciously thinking it will happen.” Manifesting as a noun is defined as “the act of making something happen by imagining it and consciously thinking it will happen.”¹ In this paper I will argue that manifesting is a form of wishful thinking and, as such, is an epistemic vice. Wishful thinking, and specifically the idea of manifesting, is epistemically problematic and obstructs the attainment of knowledge. In order to cultivate epistemically virtuous agents, we ought to dispel the myth that manifesting is useful, constructive, possible, or desirable.

A quick search of the internet or social media sees millions of results returned for “manifesting” that relate to the idea of willing into existence that which you most desire. Reinforced by the self-help movement, and leveraging other themes in pseudo- and pop-psychology, the idea of the power of positive thinking has been distorted into the idea that if you wish for something hard enough, you can create it via the power of your mind. This is not an entirely new notion. Some of the early

popular self-help books that peddled this idea include Napoleon Hill’s *Think and Grow Rich* from 1937 and Louise Hay’s *You Can Heal Your Life* from 1984.\(^2\) The trend really took off with the publication of Australian television producer and author Rhonda Byrne’s best-selling book, *The Secret* in 2006, which proclaimed that “your whole life is a manifestation of the thoughts that go on in your head.”\(^3\) *The Secret* sold more than 35 million copies and boasts a legion of celebrity fans including Oprah Winfrey, Will Smith, and Ellen DeGeneres.

Yet it was the coronavirus pandemic that created a resurgence of interest in the idea that you can will into existence the things you most want. The pandemic was the first experience many of us in the developed Western world had of significant restrictions suddenly being imposed upon us, changing the way we lived our lives. As Katie O’Malley recently pointed out (in one of millions of popular magazine articles about manifesting),

> in recent years and following the Coronavirus pandemic, it seems manifesting is seeing a monumental surge in popularity among those wanting to take back the reins. For example, searches for the term “manifestation” have increased steadily on Google since 2017, and peaked in July 2020 at the height of the pandemic. A quick look at social media and the hashtag #manifestation has been tagged over eight million times on Instagram, and over 25 billion times on TikTok, with the now famous “3-6-9 Manifestation Method” becoming a particularly popular trend in 2021.\(^4\)

The 3-6-9 Manifestation Method refers to writing down and then repeating your chosen affirmation three times in the morning, six times in the afternoon, and nine times before you go to bed to add “power” to your wish. Clearly, these popular fads are promoting behavioral patterns that are obsessive and compulsive, but they are also encouraging epistemically flawed thinking, epistemically vicious habits, and faulty reasoning.

In this paper I will explain why manifesting is a form of wishful thinking and argue that it is an epistemic vice. I will explain how wishful thinking generally and manifesting in particular are epistemically problematic because they obstruct the attainment of knowledge. Both leave the epistemic agent vulnerable to unrealistic expectations and being set up for failure; manifesting encourages self-blame and a blurring of the distinction between thought and truth. Both wishful thinking and manifesting neglect the role for luck and privilege in achievement and downplay the role of effort and action. I conclude that as educators we should work to dispel the myth of manifesting and instead portray it as a form of wishful thinking, an epistemic vice that is best avoided.


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Wishful Thinking as an Epistemic Vice

Manifesting is a form of wishful thinking, which is an epistemic vice. As Quassim Cassam explains, “vice” is from the Latin *vitium*, which is a fault or a defect: “Vices of the mind are personal intellectual failings that have a negative impact on our intellectual conduct.”\(^5\) Intellectual or epistemic vices are obstacles to knowledge, and they can take the form of character traits (such as close-mindedness or naivety), attitudes (such as intellectual or epistemic insouciance or prejudice), or thinking styles (such as wishful thinking). It is worth pointing out that not all obstacles to knowledge are intellectual vices; insomnia, for example, might interfere with our ability to gain knowledge, but it is not an epistemic vice.\(^6\) An epistemic vice is an intellectual defect that habitually blocks or obstructs our reasoning and ability to gain knowledge and understanding, and for this reason merits criticism.

Alessandra Tanesini fleshes out our understanding of epistemic virtues and vices by detailing some characteristic qualities they share, which are understood upon a social psychological account. She notes that virtues and vices are aspects of a person’s character that are relatively stable and consistent across time and in various situations. In this way, they are attributes that contribute to how we define ourselves and others (one example she provides is a person who is prone to wishful thinking).\(^7\) These virtues and vices are “intelligent” because they are responsive to reasons,\(^8\) they have emotional elements or characteristic emotions associated with them,\(^9\) and they have motivational components.

So, for example, a person may have the intellectual vice of close-mindedness, whereby they routinely discount or dismiss views that counter, contradict, or differ from their own. Heather Battaly defines close-mindedness as the “unwillingness or inability to engage (seriously) with relevant intellectual options.”\(^10\) People may be close-minded generally, or they may be close-minded in relation to a particular belief or ideology they hold (such as their religious belief or political allegiance). They are close-minded in this way consistently, regardless of the context in which they find themselves or with whom they are speaking. Close-minded people may be very polite and agreeable in conversation, yet internally know they would never cede any ground to a view other than the one they have come to accept as true. This character trait may be accompanied by certain emotional characteristics.

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6. Ibid., 4.
such as defensiveness, irritability when challenged on their view, or even anger toward views that differ from their own. The motivational aspect to this vice may derive from an urge not to expose oneself to ideas that contradict one’s own, or perhaps from a desire to argue against others with whom they disagree, or from an intolerance of people who hold different beliefs from themselves.

The close-minded person may or may not recognize that they are close-minded. Being close-minded is an epistemic vice because it is a habit that can get in the way of the epistemic agent gaining knowledge or acquiring additional evidence that could support the formation of true beliefs. So, if the belief held is false, a close-minded person may be reluctant to consider any available evidence that could disprove their idea and will defend it regardless of its validity. But even if the belief held is true, being close-minded about it prevents the epistemic agent from engaging critically with this idea and may hinder meaningful dialogue with others who hold different beliefs.11

Wishful thinking is a particular kind of thinking style that is epistemically vicious because it leads the epistemic agent to false conclusions, often through weighing up the evidence for their conclusions inaccurately or by inflating the likelihood or accuracy of their assumptions or premises. The person who is a wishful thinker overinflates their sense of hope and optimism about the likelihood of a preferred outcome based on their desire for it to come about. They may spend time daydreaming about what they wish to come true or fantasizing about what it will be like if and when they achieve their dream, goal, or wish — for example, they may wish to become famous and spend time imagining or visualizing what their life will be like when they are famous. They may or may not act in accordance with these wishes — for instance, a child may believe they will become a famous pop star when they are older, but they may or may not practice singing in front of the mirror. A key element to their wishful thinking is that they really believe their wish to be true, and that they will, for instance, become rich and famous when they grow up. This belief is what distinguishes wishful thinking from momentary imaginative flights of fancy whereby I might imagine I am rich and famous after having watched a documentary on Taylor Swift which gave me an insight into her life, but I do not truly believe I will become a pop star.

The wishful thinker may offer as evidence for their view that their preferred outcome will come about (flawed) self-assessments of their own character such as “I am a lucky person” or “I attract positive things to me because I am a positive person.” And they may look for and read into unrelated events or objects some sign or symbol that they are correct or on the “right path.” For instance, they may identify the seeing of butterflies as a good omen and look for butterflies, which they then point to as evidence of affirmation of their own beliefs.

11. For more on how to educate against close-mindedness and instead cultivate open-mindedness, see Danielle Diver’s “Philosophy in Schools as a Vehicle for Open-Mindedness,” and Seunghyun Lee’s “Teaching Open-Mindedness in Challenging Classrooms,” both in this issue.
I have a friend who so desired to have a baby girl that when his partner was pregnant, they picked out only a girl’s name. When planning for a trip to take after the baby was due to arrive, the flight reservation required a name to be put alongside the ticket for the unborn baby, so he put the girl’s name he had selected. So certain was he that he would have a baby girl, simply because he desired one, he was left completely unprepared for when the baby arrived and it was a boy! This is an example of wishful thinking.

The wishful thinker may or may not actually work to bring about their desired outcome. For some, merely thinking about, hoping, or willing this result will occur does count as “working to make it happen.” Thus, the “wish” in wishful thinking points to the mental activity that occurs, which the wishful thinker may deem to be an effective causal process. Sometimes people may say “that’s just wishful thinking” as an insult, referring to the fact that the person to whom this comment is directed is hoping for or believing in a positive outcome that may not be earned, deserved, or likely.

Manifesting, then, as an example of wishful thinking, focuses specifically on this mental activity and associated rituals designed to add potency to the wish in order to “manifest” or make it come true. In this way, manifesters misattribute the causal relationship between what they want or hope (their “wish”) and the associated outcome. The person who is convinced of the efficacy of manifesting draws faulty epistemic conclusions, usually based on this erroneous attribution of causation. In the case of the person who is manifesting, they attribute successful outcomes with the act of hoping or wishing, or with an associated personal characteristic (such as the attribute of luckiness or the attitude of positivity). These explanations are limited in that they do not properly identify the cause of the outcome under consideration, and often underestimate the role of chance or coincidence.

One well-known informal fallacy is post hoc, ergo propter hoc, which is the flawed reasoning that something that occurred after something else was caused by the preceding thing, when in fact it may not have been. One reply to this kind of fallacious thinking is to point out that correlation does not imply causation. The wishful thinker — the person who believes they are manifesting — erroneously attributes the desired outcome they were hoping for to the hoping or wishing (the positive thinking) they were engaged in beforehand; however, this does not mean that their hoping was the cause of the outcome.

An additional problem with wishful thinking that obstructs an epistemic agent’s path to knowledge is that it is often operating as a closed theory, whereby the theory is impossible to disprove, or in which circular reasoning is offered as evidence for their conclusions. The wishful thinker may believe it is the power of their wishing or hoping that results in the desired outcome taking place, and in their calculations they may neglect the other causes that likely played a role in achieving the desired outcome. For instance, if a good student studies hard and achieves a good grade, they may attribute their good mark to the effort they put into studying. However, if they are also a wishful thinker who recited a daily mantra
or repeated affirmations before the test, they may explain that result in part (even in large part) as brought about by the affirmations they recited. When it comes to their next assessment, they may continue manifestation rituals but study less.

The negative example of wishful thinking is when the outcome that the wishful thinker hoped for and expected does not occur; this may be explained in positive or fatalistic terms. They may claim that the universe or God has something “better” in store for them, which is why that particular outcome could not take place, or they may claim that it was not going to be good for them after all (for example they may add a caveat that what they desire should be in their “best” interest, or for their “higher good”). They therefore take the negative outcome as additional evidence that they are still correct to think positively, and it does not do anything to deter them from wishful thinking or to correct their view that their positive thinking results in their desired outcome. This is what Karl Popper called an “unfalsifiable hypothesis”: when the expected result occurs, this confirms the manifesters belief; and when the expected result does not occur, this does too.

As an example of circular reasoning, when the outcome they desired does come about, the wishful thinker may count this as evidence of the accuracy of their wishful thinking. For example, the person who sees themselves as lucky has the outcome of coming across a dollar bill on the ground and picks it up, brandishing it as evidence of their lucky nature or a reward from the universe. However, psychological studies have been conducted that demonstrate that so-called lucky people will look for opportunities — such as they may have their eyes peeled for discarded notes that have fallen out of people’s wallets — and thus they are more likely to affirm their own biases through their behavior and the attention they are paying to their environment.12

Conversely, the person who thinks of themselves as unlucky similarly pays attention to and affirms this view of themselves by, for instance, not noticing the opportunities that are there that they may take advantage of, just as the lucky person would. Wishful thinking may take the form of confirmation bias, whereby the epistemic agent seeks evidence for the conclusions they already hold, or whereby circular reasoning is offered as evidence for certain claims — such as looking for opportunities to attribute luck to oneself when one thinks of oneself as lucky (or indeed the reverse).

Wishful thinking may also take the form of magical thinking, whereby the power that brings about the desired outcome is deemed to be magical, or benevolent, or the work of God or a godlike being. The causal energy that brings about the desired outcome may be viewed as the power of positive energy, either sourced internally or externally (from the self, the universe, or perhaps as a form of karma), or it may simply be an inference to not the best explanation. For example, instead of using Occam’s razor and seeing the most likely causal explanation for an outcome

as the simplest, the wishful thinker will often add an attributing power to the explanation for what occurred.

Returning to the example above, the lucky person attributes power or force to luckiness in explaining how they made it to their bus on time, or found a dollar bill lying on the ground, or why there was one clothing item left in their size when they went to the store (it was a sign that they were “meant” to buy it). The reasons provided are simply offered as additional, unnecessary, and purportedly causal reasons as to how this wishful thinker affirms (and often brings about) their preferred desired outcome.

In this context, it is interesting to note how Tanesini points out that epistemic vices are fundamentally sourced in attitudes held toward oneself. Such attitudes may include narcissism, arrogance, fatalism, or self-satisfaction, which encourage the epistemic agent to over- or undervalue themselves, their skills, and their attributes in various ways. Thus, the wishful thinker overvalues how the world works in causal terms, seeing their desires and attitudes as central to the causal movement of events. They take their own perspective to be a true, accurate, or objective rendering of the world and, in this way, take it as a form of explanation for what happens and why. In extreme cases, the connection between the reality of how causation works and the wishful thinker’s representation of how the world works for them comes apart, with each bearing little relation to the other.

It is in these multiple and various ways that wishful thinking is an epistemic vice: wishful thinking obstructs knowledge because the wishful thinker inaccurately weighs up the evidence they have for a conclusion, usually by attributing too much weight to the positive reasons to support the conclusions they most want to occur and by downplaying or disregarding any counterevidence for different outcomes. They may engage in fallacious and circular reasoning to prove their preferred conclusions, often confirming their preexisting biases. Furthermore, the manifester as a specific kind of wishful thinker misattributes causality by imagining that their very wishes and desires can bring about certain outcomes. Wishful thinking and manifesting often operate as a closed theory because even negative instances in which the desired outcome does not manifest are still taken to be evidence that wishful thinking is not to blame; in this, the belief is affirmed that wishful thinking or manifesting remain effective, or at least not epistemically harmful, processes of thinking.

**Manifesting as a Form of Wishful Thinking**

Manifesting is a form of wishful thinking because it involves believing and acting as though the power of one’s convictions is sufficient to creating the preferred outcome or causing the desired “wish” to come true. One way it is described is as believing in something in order to will that thing into existence or into your life:

Contrary to the belief that “seeing is believing,” manifesting is all about believing in something in order to see it come your way. “Manifesting is the ability to use the power of your mind to change and create the reality you experience,” explains self-development coach Roxie Nafousi.14

Yet how the manifester is using the “power” of their mind to effect change in the world is unclear.

Elsewhere, such as on the popular Oprah Winfrey website, the guidance on successfully manifesting includes putting into action the steps to bring about your desired outcome:

Keep in mind: It doesn’t happen overnight. Although manifesting is about turning your dreams into reality, it does require you to take proactive steps toward whatever it is you desire. You shouldn’t expect it to happen instantly — but even though it’s a lengthy process, that time is a small price to pay for a [hopefully] profound impact on your life.15

Offering this practical advice is cunning, because it is the practical action taken that is likely to bring about the desired outcome, which can then be attributed to the power of positive thinking. In this way, the manifester is likely to erroneously attribute their successful [desired] outcome on the power of their thoughts, and simultaneously likely to underestimate or disregard the causal efficacy of their actions. To be clear, there is nothing problematic about acting to bring about a desired outcome and hoping for the best; the problem is when manifesting emphasizes the latter as a substitute for the former.

Some commentators note that the rise in popularity of manifesting following the COVID pandemic is hardly surprising. Stuart McGurk notes that people often turn to faith following trauma, and the pandemic was certainly experienced as a collective trauma: it involved substantial loss and anxiety. Yet, “at its heart, manifesting is religion without the altruism,” he says.16 The focus is entirely on the self and what the self wants, regardless of the desires, needs, or good of anyone else. McGurk explains,

The concept, roughly, is this: manifesting takes the idea of a positive mental attitude and runs with it. So, while negative thoughts create “limiting beliefs”, and in turn prevent positive things from happening, positive thoughts — when focused on specific goals and outcomes — can make those things happen. “You are co-creating with the universe,” explains [Moon Onyx] Starr, who says she avoids reading the news in order to minimise limiting vibes.

One key caveat: “You can only manifest in line with your higher purpose.” (Essentially, the universe can say no, which is often the explanation when things don’t happen).17

17. Ibid. Moon Onyx Starr, whom McGurk quotes, is a 38-year-old self-help entrepreneur who runs events on manifesting.
Manifesting as a kind of wishful thinking then is self-involved, with the wants of the manifester being central to one’s focus and the concentration of their (mental) energy and time. By allowing a caveat along the lines of “if something isn’t going to be the best thing for you, then it won’t happen,” those who believe in manifesting are supporting a closed theory, with a built-in internal mechanism for resisting any objections. Here again, the theory is closed because it is unable to be disproved; any failed attempts at manifesting are explained away as not being good outcomes for the manifester.

Some of the specific ways manifesting blocks the epistemic agent’s rationality include confusing thought for reality and misattributing the direction of causality. For example, manifesting is said to work once you commit yourself to believing in the desired outcome before the outcome will come about. It is the believing that is supposedly doing the work here. This process of thinking is at odds with our usual processes of thinking, whereby it is reasonable to see or experience things happening first and then, on the basis of that experience, believing that the thing occurred and reflecting upon the reasons why it occurred.

These reasons for an event’s occurrence usually include practical actions and circumstantial events, which may also include the agency of others. Despite the fact that in many scenarios we often work with others to bring things about, the manifester is inclined to downplay or bracket the efforts of others in their reckoning about why things come about. Instead, in the case of manifesting, the manifester narrowly believes in the power of their own thoughts to create reality. This belief worryingly downplays the role of practical actions and the efforts of others in making one’s desired outcome come about. Furthermore, such faulty reasoning also fails to take into account the role of luck, chance, privilege, and circumstance in the explanation of why some things happen and others do not.

There are additional concerns about this reversing of the usual causal chain in the mind of the epistemic agent. If the desired outcome fails to manifest, the likelihood of self-blame is extremely high. If the attributed cause of the outcome is said to be willing or wishing it into being, and then the outcome does not occur, it follows that one might think they did not will or want or believe hard enough or with complete conviction, which is why the desired outcome failed to eventuate. This kind of reasoning mistakenly overemphasizes the role of a person’s thoughts in creating their reality. And if they experience some failure, they may try again, and this time they may try to believe with all their might, without allowing for the thought that perhaps there were other reasons why their desired outcome did not occur. The practical and psychological concerns in this scenario are that the epistemic agent is left without any back-up plans or any emotional reserves dedicated to protecting themselves from the feelings of failure or from any disappointment experienced when the desired outcome fails to manifest.

A further concern with manifesting is that it is a form of wishful thinking that confuses thought with reality. By overemphasizing the role of a person’s thoughts in bringing things (wishes) about, it blurs the line between thought and action. This distinction is important because, for instance, I am free to think what I like,
but I am certainly not at liberty to say whatever I want (consider hate speech) or to act in any way that I please. So there is an important role for thinking that does not manifest in reality or action, while manifesting as a flawed way of thinking suggests that the way we think directly creates our reality. This reductive role for thought fails to recognize that the thoughts we think may be imaginative, fictive, fanciful, or fantastic and that that is a good thing: it is enriching and even positive that many times our thoughts do not come true!

What Is the Role for the Educator?

Insofar as the educator is committed to supporting students to become responsible believers and virtuous epistemic agents, the educator has a role to play in helping students understand how wishful thinking, and manifesting in particular, is epistemically vicious and best avoided. Even if not everyone is accurately described as a wishful thinker, we are all capable of wishful thinking and the current popularity of manifesting is fairly widespread.

Cassam argues that wishful thinking is not a character trait, even though it is a thinking style and an epistemic vice:

In these terms, wishful thinking isn’t a character trait even though there is a good case for regarding it as an epistemic vice. It is a way of thinking rather than the disposition to act, think, and feel in particular ways. It gets in the way of knowledge because it is thinking in which the thinker’s desires have a greater influence than logical or evidential considerations. Wishful thinking is what a person does rather than what a person is like. A person’s character is, of course, partly a function of how they think, but this is not a good reason to classify ways of thinking themselves as character traits. For example, to attribute [Donald] Rumsfeld’s views about the number of troops needed in Iraq to wishful thinking is to make a comment about the nature and the quality of the thinking that led to a particular conclusion. The fact that a person is guilty of wishful thinking on a particular occasion or topic says something about them, but how much it says depends on whether their thinking was in character. A person who is prone to wishful thinking might be described as a “wishful thinker,” but one doesn’t have to be a fully fledged wishful thinker to engage in the occasional spot of wishful thinking.18

When we engage in wishful thinking or the practice of manifesting, we are practicing an epistemically bad habit. (Note that whether we are also practicing a morally bad habit or a moral vice is a question I am setting aside for the purpose of this paper.) To the extent that we are engaging in epistemically flawed reasoning, we may be considered responsible for our faulty logic or irrational argumentation, but is this the case even at those times when we are not aware that we are doing so?

Battaly claims that “epistemic vices ... are reprehensible, or criticizable, or blameworthy in a non-voluntarist way, even when the agent is not accountable for them [because she lacks control over them].”19 We might be inclined to say that epistemic agents should always be held responsible for their epistemic vices, but some of these may be “stealthy,” such as certain forms of cognitive biases.20

Furthermore, Tanesini notes that as we develop certain thinking patterns, we are also likely to develop ego- or self-protective measures, which may take the form of epistemic vices, that serve a protective function psychologically and emotionally, usually in shielding our faulty thinking habits from our own detection:

> It is hard for individuals to discover their intellectual vices since they have usually developed over time ways to rationalize their behaviour to cover up the mechanisms that are in fact responsible for it. Individuals who are intellectually vicious are therefore prone to something akin to self-deception.

> The view that character vices have unendorseable motivational components also explains how intellectual vices negatively affect information processing. If intellectual character vices must include motivations that cannot be acknowledged, then these vices are causally responsible for widespread wishful thinking and self-deception about any issues that threatens to expose the motivated nature of the agent’s beliefs.\(^{21}\)

As such, some stealthy epistemic vices can be difficult to identify and to correct. While we can work on educational remediation for epistemic vices, Cassam counters Battaly on the point about responsibility and argues that “we need to be careful about the idea that the intellectually vicious have ‘blameworthy psychologies.’ In this area, as in other areas, we should refrain from being excessively moralistic.”\(^{22}\)

Furthermore, Ian James Kidd points out that if we are charging others with epistemic vices, like wishful thinking, we should also consider what might feed, sustain, or encourage such epistemic vices.\(^{23}\) This includes considering the socioeconomic contexts in which such vices may arise, either individually or collectively. While noting that there are individual and personal anxieties, vulnerabilities, fears, and dreads that may give rise to certain vices or virtues, there are also contexts and people who may take advantage of or exploit people’s vulnerabilities and circumstances. It is easy enough for any of us to have epistemic vices or to engage in epistemically vicious thinking, whether as a matter of habit or not. But precisely because faulty reasoning is commonplace, we ought to attend to the role for education in promoting epistemic virtues and equipping all students with the skills to recognize and avoid epistemic vices.

Whether we consider the epistemic agent to be responsible for their epistemic vices or not, as educators we want to help students learn to identify epistemic vices as undesirable precisely because they obstruct the epistemic agent’s path to knowledge [here understood as the standard definition whereby knowledge is justified true belief]. When considering what the educator may be able to do to help overcome or prevent such faulty reasoning and argumentation, we realize

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that the educator is particularly well-placed to be able to assist in this regard because they are teaching a young person while they are attending mandatory schooling and before they reach full autonomous adulthood. In this way, the classroom is a good place to teach the skills of argumentation and reasoning, critical thinking, and the epistemic virtues (such as open-mindedness, intellectual humility, curiosity, etc.).

If the classroom is well suited to educating for epistemic virtues, then it is also a good place to tackle overcoming intellectual vices, as these counter corresponding virtuous traits (for instance, intellectual arrogance opposes intellectual humility, and close-mindedness opposes open-mindedness\(^\text{24}\)). If we can teach students to get better at recognizing epistemic virtues and vices in themselves and in others, we are supporting their epistemic agency and their capacities as critical thinkers and responsible believers.

One way we may explicitly teach the skills of good argumentation, including the epistemic virtues and vices, in the classroom is through the teaching of philosophy and using philosophical pedagogies that encourage critical and reflective thinking. Some specific examples of what teachers can do in the classroom to educate responsible epistemic agents include the use of Socratic questioning, Socratic dialogue, and the teaching of logical fallacies. Socratic questioning combined with Socratic dialogue (such as that used by practitioners of Philosophy for Children and the Community of Inquiry pedagogy) encourages students to think deeply about their beliefs and assumptions. Philosophy is a subject that focuses specifically on the importance of good reasons for providing evidence for or against a claim. The epistemic skills honed by the discipline include attending to premises and inferences, learning to identify the logical flow of arguments in support of conclusions, checking for soundness and validity, and spotting formal and informal fallacies.

However, in terms of combatting the idea of manifesting in particular, there needs to be an understanding about why the concept may initially appear so appealing to people. Why has it become so popular, apart from the fact that social media amplifies trends and many people want to feel in control of what happens to them? There is something about manifesting’s connection to the power of positive thinking that seems to be the initial hook. So if educators are going to help young people recognize the difference between manifesting and positive thinking, whereby the latter may be useful or beneficial to our mood and attitude, they need to help students work through examples where manifesting differs from, and becomes an irrational distortion of, positive thinking. Supporting students to work this out for themselves would also be a far more effective antidote to manifesting’s lure, especially when considering the reality of what behavioral psychologists term the “familiarity backfire effect,” in which some

\(^{24}\) See, for example, Diver, “Philosophy in Schools as a Vehicle for Open-Mindedness.”
myths may actually be reinforced in the believer’s mind if debunked or challenged directly.25

**The Power of Positive Thinking versus Manifesting**

To start with, it would be worthwhile for the teacher to acknowledge times when positive thinking is useful or beneficial. For instance, William James notes that occasionally we are justified in believing something on insufficient evidence if it will have a significant (positive) effect upon our lives and sense of self. In arguing for a wider ethics of belief than William Clifford’s evidentialism,26 James points out that sometimes we take things on faith.27 Examples of this include teachers believing their students are capable of achieving more than they have historically achieved in order to build their confidence, which in turn does result in better learning outcomes. The evidence to hold this belief may be lacking, but the positivity is nevertheless somewhat helpful and efficacious, because pupils who think they are smart do indeed perform better academically.28

It is also true that patients who are chronically ill sometimes show medical improvements when they adopt a positive attitude, as compared to when they are depressed and hopeless. It is precisely this intuition that positive thinking helps that has led to causal claims about the power of positive thinking, but it is not always acknowledged that the reason positive thinking is so helpful is partly because it motivates the patient to adopt healthy habits or to try the medical interventions recommended by medical experts. Manifesting becomes problematic when the actions taken are not given relevant evidential weight when compared to the efficacy of thinking itself; this distortion is best exemplified in Louise Hay’s *You Can Heal Your Life*, mentioned earlier, in which it is the positive thinking alone that is deemed to be what makes one better.29 So where is the blurry line between a helpful (or at least harmless) positive attitude and epistemically and psychologically harmful manifesting? In order to support students in working through exactly this question, the use of concept games to weigh evidence of the causal efficacy of various factors could be used to stimulate thinking, problematizing, and dialogue around precisely this topic.

Concept games such as those used by practitioners of Philosophy for Children invite students to analyze a concept in a family resemblances manner, by

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28. For further discussion of this topic, see Jeff Standley, “Responsible Belief and the Epistemic Obligations of the Educator,” in this issue; and Jeff Standley, “The Ethics of Belief in Student Ability,” *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 53, no. 1 (2019): 61–76. Standley claims that teachers hold responsible epistemic roles that require them to subscribe to, and not undermine, epistemic standards.

considering examples closer to and further away from the concept under scrutiny. A version of this game may be around health and could have the outcomes of “gets better,” “gets worse,” and “stays the same” as options. The students then consider various factors such as “takes medical advice from medical experts,” “relies on Google for medical advice,” “gets enough sleep,” “eats well,” “is healthy,” “is young,” “is old,” “exercises,” “has a positive attitude,” “is depressed,” “smokes,” “drinks a lot of alcohol,” “has friends who visit,” “has a supportive family,” and so on. The students, in pairs or small groups, could be asked to weigh the factors in terms of how much or how little they might contribute to the outcome under discussion.

A specific concept game around the idea of manifesting may include the outcomes of “manifests” and “does not manifest,” and then ask students how causally efficacious are things like meditation, daily mantras, journaling, vision boards, imagining, wishing, and other rituals. The beauty of this game is that dialogue and constructive disagreement are encouraged as the students work out for themselves what they think is the case. When I asked my students whether they thought manifesting was real, I received different responses. One student said, “No, because I tried it once and it didn’t work.” But it was hearing from one another about their experiences that was more powerful than a teacher telling them that manifesting does not work or is irrational. The role for the teacher is to probe further: for instance, if the students do not consider alternative explanations, the teacher’s task is to ask questions such as “What else could have caused that outcome?,” or “What is being left out of this explanation?”

By asking probing, open questions, educators can guide students to examine the soundness and validity of their own claims and the arguments of others, leading to a more thorough understanding of how to weigh up evidence and make logical inferential moves. These skills in argumentation and critical analysis help to develop skills that are at odds with wishful thinking. The wishful thinker weighs evidence inaccurately, so practicing more accurate weighing of evidence helps to counter this tendency. By offering students the chance to play a concept game specifically about manifesting, they are invited to scrutinize forms of wishful thinking that may be initially appealing and to consider the evidence for and against these ways of thinking. Such lessons aim at helping students recognize when their or others’ thinking might be flawed. Making use of such skills in a dialogical activity can expose students to diverse viewpoints and, in this way, help challenge their preconceptions and assumptions.

It may also be beneficial for a teacher to present their class with an interesting case study designed to encourage a dialogical analysis of the consequences of flawed thinking.30 The teacher may find and use a real-life example involving

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30. Thanks to Rianna Yafaia for a helpful discussion about practical teaching strategies to combat wishful thinking.
wishful thinking that resulted in undesirable consequences, perhaps one that is relevant to the particular issue or circumstances affecting the group they are teaching. I have previously made use of the Harvard Graduate School of Education’s Justice in Schools case studies — developed for the purpose of fostering critical ethical reflection by educators and policymakers — including one titled “A Parallel Universe: Conspiracy Theories and the Limits of Education” by Johannes Drerup. These cases can be discussed in class, allowing students to dissect and understand where logical, critical thinking was or was not applied and the resulting judgments and potential consequences. These case studies are purposefully designed to encourage a diverse range of opinions and perspectives, so the dialogue that ensues is interesting and complex, while being concretely situated in realistic educational settings. Such facilitated discussion aims to strengthen pupils’ critical reflection and analysis and provides them with the opportunity to put such skills into practice in a safe, educational space, helping to shape them as virtuous epistemic agents.

In these ways, the study of philosophy and its associated critical thinking “tool kit” is well suited to teaching the epistemic skills that will support students in becoming responsible believers, cultivating epistemic virtues while identifying and avoiding epistemic vices. In terms of wishful thinking and manifesting in particular, the teacher may facilitate a concept game that encourages epistemic agents to critique processes of thinking that misattribute causality to the power of thought, so that the students may reflect upon how manifesting and wishful thinking invite us to incorrectly weigh the reasons for why things do or do not happen. While such a critical thinking tool kit is not unique to the study of philosophy, this disciplinary home makes it a promising subject to teach students the skills and techniques of reasonable argumentation that avoid fallacious thinking, and encourages epistemic virtues instead of epistemic vices.

**Conclusion**

In this paper I have argued that manifesting as a form of wishful thinking leaves the epistemic agent vulnerable to unrealistic expectations, being set up for failure, prone to self-blame, and encourages a blurring of the distinction between thought and truth. Both wishful thinking and manifesting ignore the role of chance, luck, and privilege in achievement and downplay the role of effort and action. The explanation that is provided by a manifester for why things do or do not occur is epistemically flawed and often misattributes causality, including directionally. In these ways, manifesting as a particular instantiation of wishful thinking corrupts the epistemic agent’s rational conclusions and must therefore be deemed to be an epistemic vice.

It is important that the role of the educator is considered in relation to teaching the epistemic virtues and identifying and avoiding epistemic vices because schools should be places that teach the skills and dispositions of reasonable argumentation, logical analysis, and critical thinking. The responsible epistemic believer will recognize that manifesting is a form of magical thinking because it ascribes power to thought, will, and wishes, to the neglect of other causes. The rituals encouraged by those who practice manifesting are repetitive and compulsive, and when the desired outcome does not manifest, the manifester is being set up for failure because they hold unrealistic expectations. As a result of this misjudgment, the manifester is likely to experience self-blame rather than self-compassion. Moreover, because the theory offered in defense of manifesting is closed or circular, there is no easy way of disproving it internally. Any failure of a desired outcome occurring is blamed on not wanting or willing it into being hard enough, and so the manifester may try again, concentrating on believing this outcome will occur with no thought of a backup plan or any emotional or psychological preparation for disappointment. In this way, manifesting encourages a toxic positivity as it denies any role for what are deemed to be “negative” emotions or thoughts — including the consideration that perhaps the desired outcome may not occur and anticipating or planning for what might be an acceptable alternative.

The educational space that encourages reasonableness will help an epistemic agent to realize that it is irrational and unhelpful to think that believing something hard enough will make it come true. Instead, teachers may help their students to understand the difference between positive thinking and its distorted version, as exemplified by manifesting. I have offered some examples of how teachers may support students to reach such conclusions, through philosophical pedagogies such as concept games. Through Socratic dialogue students may affirm that they should set realistic goals and work on thinking through, step by step, how to achieve them by attending to that which is within their skill set and their power to achieve. This will include a recognition that sometimes chance, luck, or other privileges (e.g., those having to do with socioeconomic status, background, education, confidence, and cultural capital) play a role in successful [and unsuccessful] outcomes. I conclude by offering the suggestion that the study of philosophy, and the critical thinking skills central to this discipline, would usefully fill out the epistemic tool kit students develop, helping them to cultivate epistemic virtues and to identify and avoid epistemic vices such as wishful thinking and the practice of manifesting.

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