Defining Wokeness

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Rima Basu and I have offered separate accounts of *wokeness* as an anti-racist ethical concept. Our accounts endorse controversial doctrines in epistemology: doxastic wronging, doxastic voluntarism, and moral encroachment. Many philosophers deny these three views, favoring instead some ordinary standards for epistemic justification. I call this denial *the* *standard view*. In this paper, I offer an account of wokeness that is consistent with the standard view. I argue that wokeness is best understood as “group epistemic partiality.” The woke person does extra epistemic work before forming a negative belief about a member of an oppressed social group. Just as we do extra epistemic work when forming belief about our friends, so the woke person does for members of oppressed social groups. I first outline the account. I then raise questions about the scope of wokeness and belief formation. After this, I demonstrate that the group partiality view is consistent with the standard view in epistemology. The partiality view, therefore, should appeal to epistemologists who have adopted the standard view because it is consistent with ordinary standards of justification. I conclude that wokeness as a concept in epistemology should not be controversial for those who endorse the standard view.

1. Introduction

The term *woke* has largely been a cultural slang term for someone who is aware of social injustices and oppression. Right-wing media, however, has taken *woke* as a derogatory term for progressive policy. In response, Rima Basu (2019a) and I (Atkins, 2020) have employed *wokeness* as an anti-racist normative concept in epistemology.These authors subordinate wokeness to discussions of moral encroachment—the doctrine that epistemic justification is, in part, determined by whether the belief is morally wrong. They argue that wokeness involves awareness of the epistemic effects moral encroachment has on our epistemic processes. In contrast, I aim to offer a new view of wokeness—the group partiality view—that is divorced from moral encroachment. According to this view, the woke person gives members of oppressed groups and victims of historical injustices the benefit of the doubt. Accusations and negative character claims directed at members of historically oppressed social groups are harder to justify for the woke person —much like Sarah Stroud (2006) argues within the context of friendship. The woke person, in her belief formation processes, is partial to the needs and interests of marginalized and oppressed groups.

I first lay out the group partiality view. According to the group partiality view, the woke person is epistemically partial to members of oppressed groups. The group partiality view consists of six epistemic mechanisms: *Serious Scrutiny, Different Conclusions, Interpretive Charity, Reason, Inquiry Degree,* and *Base Rate Neglect*. According to these mechanisms, the woke person acts charitably toward members of oppressed groups when evaluating evidence and forming beliefs about members of those groups. The woke person has a harder time believing that members of oppressed groups have a negative character trait or have done something wrong. I then argue that wokeness demands we reject most base rate data about oppressed groups and therefore harmful stereotyping too. The woke person seeks out additional evidence when forming beliefs about others, even when stereotypes are likely true. Such behaviors, I show, are epistemically rational—being woke does not require irrationality. I answer this concern in detail in the next section.

To motivate this view of wokeness, I turn to two other views of wokeness available in the literature. My goal is not to undermine these positions but to contrast the partiality view with these positions. One advantage of the group partiality view is that it is consistent with the standard view in epistemology, i.e., the rejection of moral encroachment for a static account of epistemic justification. The group partiality view, unlike the views available, does not entail rejection of the standard view. I then note that in many cases the group partiality view gives us similar verdicts in cases as the wokeness views that reject that standard view. If we can have a plausible, useful account of wokeness with explanatory power without rejecting the standard view, then we should prefer it to accounts that reject the standard view. A further upshot of the argument here is that Black culture has produced a set of significant philosophical concepts and debates in virtue of introducing *wokeness* as a term.

1. Wokeness as “Group Partiality”

*Wokeness* is, broadly, awareness of social injustice, institutional racism, and inequality.[[1]](#footnote-1) *Woke* stems from African American Vernacular English, especially in reference to the Black Lives Matter Movement. Philosophers, however, have brought wokeness into the philosophical literature as a technical concept in epistemology.[[2]](#footnote-2) I focus on wokeness in this philosophical context—here I argue that wokeness makes use of the very same epistemic mechanisms as Sarah Stroud’s epistemic partiality.[[3]](#footnote-3) But first, let’s consider a brief history of wokeness.

The term *woke* dates, at least, back to William Melvin Kelley’s *New York Times* article, “If You’re Woke You Can Dig It” from 1962. Myisha Cherry (2020) notes, however, that the term could date back to the 1940s. In his book, *The Fire Next Time*, James Baldwin uses the term to describe people who are socially conscious. Later iterations of the term include description of the woke or conscious rappers of the 1980s and 1990s, e.g., KRS One, Public Enemy, and MC Lyte. These rappers “were aware of how [unjust] social structures functioned, and they challenged—through rhyme—such structures” (Cherry, 1). I hope to describe the epistemic dimensions of wokeness—toward this goal, I turn now to Stroud’s account of epistemic partiality in friendship.

Friendship is vital to the good life: it makes special demands on us that we do not have toward non-friends. Sarah Stroud identifies four epistemic duties in the context of friendship (and romantic relationships). I borrow Sanford Goldberg’s (2019) nomenclature for these demands.

Friendship, first, requires that we seriously scrutinize accusations against our friends; call this *Serious Scrutiny*. When we hear that our friend has done something wrong, we are more likely to deny the accusation or demand more evidence. When faced with an accusation against our friend’s character, we “tend to devote more energy to minimizing the impact of unfavorable data than we otherwise would” (505). Flippantly believing that a friend has done something wrong, Stroud argues, violates what good friends ought to do.

The good friend arrives at *Different Conclusions* about her friends than she would about non-friends. Friends treat evidence differently with friends than with non-friends: they “draw different conclusions and make different inferences than they otherwise would” (506). Friends “are simply less likely to conclude that their friends acted disreputably, or that he is a bad person, than we would be in the case of a nonfriend” (506).

Stroud thinks charity is central to friendship: partiality is “a matter of extending some interpretive charity to your friends than you naturally would to strangers” (507). Character traits and behaviors are open to interpretation: friends, therefore, treat friends with *Interpretive Charity*. They interpret bad behavior in the most charitable manner possible—unsavory claims about friends are expressions good or neutral traits and not vicious ones. Rather than interpreting my friend’s behavior as obnoxious, I might interpret it as “refreshingly forthright” (507).

Lastly, according to Stroud, friends treat the fact that someone is a friend as a *Reason* that she has good character. Stroud argues: “The good friend’s reason for adopting these differential epistemic practices seems to be simply that the person in question is her friend” (513). Our friends—just because they are our friends—give us reasons to think they have a good character.

My claim is that wokeness makes use of similar mechanisms as partiality in friendship—specifically each of Stroud’s epistemic mechanisms (in addition to the mechanisms I mention momentarily) are partially constitutive of wokeness. The woke person, therefore, demonstrates all these behaviors toward members of oppressed social groups.[[4]](#footnote-4) When a person has the relevant features—oppressed, minority, poverty-stricken—wokeness demands we give her the benefit of the doubt, interpret her behavior and character with charity, and treat her relevant features as reasons when we form belief about her. We do not, however, owe such epistemic behaviors when forming beliefs about people who do not have the relevant features. The woke person gives marginalized people the benefit of the doubt because of their membership in groups that have been historically underrepresented or victimized.

Claims of the following structure, therefore, are harder to justify for the woke person: *Person* x *(who is a member of a historically oppressed group)* *has some negative feature (e.g., has done something wrong or possesses or has demonstrated some negative character trait) because of membership in group* p. There are two kinds of claims that are harder to justify when they are directed at members of marginalized groups: negative character claims and accusations. The mechanism varies depending on the kind of claim in question. For example, when there is a character claim, the woke person extends interpretive charity, whereas she comes to different conclusions when there is an accusation of a wrongdoing. The woke person is going to derive, for example, different conclusion with respect to the available evidence. She also more aptly scrutinizes portions of the available evidence.

I want to propose two additional epistemic mechanisms of partiality: *Inquiry Degree* and *Base Rate Neglect*. I first address *Inquiry Degree*. Renee Bolinger (2020) notes that one epistemic feature Stroud brings to light is the degree to which we ought to inquire. Stroud shows us, Bolinger writes, that “in addition to deciding whether to initiate inquiry, we must also make choices about how much effort to put into it, how long to keep at it, how much energy to pour into seeking counter-evidence, which of several permissible interpretative frames to use for ambiguous evidence” (8). Before investigating whether I am the smartest person in my academic department, I must decide how much effort to put forth in my inquiry, how much counterevidence I ought to consider, and how long to look into my inquiry. Similarly, when we are posed with evidence that our friend has done something wrong or has demonstrated a poor character trait, we decide how much counterevidence to entertain—and presumably we will investigate more than with non-friends!

Wokeness too makes use of this epistemic mechanism: I think the woke person will spend more time seeking out counter-evidence in favor of members of minority groups and oppressed groups than she would for members of privileged groups. For instance, whether a belief contributes to racist structures determines whether the woke person will leave inquiry open. In the same way that I marshal more evidence that supports my friend’s good character, the woke person seeks out evidence that favors members of historically oppressed groups. Similarly, the woke person might ignore evidence that does not favor members of oppressed groups. The woke person directs her attention toward more favorable possibilities and interpretations, in a manner similar to the good friend.

There is another facet of wokeness here: *Base Rate Neglect*.[[5]](#footnote-5) What is a base rate? The base rate is the percent of a given thing among a local population. For instance, if 1% of Americans are firefighters and 99% of Americans are not firefighters, then the base rate of fire fighters in America is 1%. Thus, in a given population of 100 Americans, it might be reasonable to believe that at least one of these people is a firefighter, given the base rate of firefighters in America.

The woke person does not stereotype. The woke person refrains from basing beliefs about members of oppressed or marginalized groups based on the individual’s reference class, even if it is probable that the individual has that feature. Thus, the woke person will, in one way or another, question the various base rates when individual persons are in question. The woke person treats people (who are members of various base rates) as individuals who are in many ways distinct from their reference classes. Which reference classes matter for wokeness? Wokeness does not involve wholesale rejection of all base rates. Rather, it is limited group-specific reference classes.[[6]](#footnote-6)

We make appeals to base rates in everyday life. When most of the members of a reference class share some feature, we often make the inference that some individual member also shares that feature, given that many other do too. We form beliefs, reasonable or not, on this basis all the time. If I know, for example, that employees at the grocery store wear blue aprons as part of their uniform, then when I see a person wearing a blue apron, I form the belief that she is an employee.

Why is this an important facet of wokeness? People wish to be seen as individuals. I think this desire comes with moral significance. Examining people based on stereotypes is morally inappropriate. Consider two reasons for thinking so. Forming belief about individuals on the basis of stereotypes fails to treat people as individuals, distinct from their reference class. [[7]](#footnote-7) Secondly, when we stereotype, we treat people as something to be studied and examined.

Hilde Lindemann (2016) argues that how we shape one another’s identity—which we shape by recognition and our consequent responses—has moral significance. When we recognize others on the basis of stereotypes, our responses reinforce that the individual should conform to the base rates, and therefore, the individual’s autonomy is in some way limited because of recognition and response. Secondly, Rima Basu (2019c) argues that should we avoid certain epistemic attitudes when we form beliefs about other people. This problematic epistemic attitude is that we treat people as something to be studied and predicted. Basu uses the example of Sherlock Holmes. The way Holmes looks at other people is problematic. He attempts to figure out, deduce, and examine facts about people and then make predictions based on the available data; we generally do not like to be studied and then predicted, e.g., as a scientist might study a lab mouse. Stereotyping people, Basu argues, makes us culpable of these bad epistemic practices. If we are to avoid “examining and predicting” other people, we must, therefore, avoid stereotyping, according to Basu.

Alex Madva (2016) and Katherine Puddifoot (2017) also suggest that stereotyping also has damaging effects for egalitarianism. Stereotyping undermines egalitarianism because we expect members of groups to possess traits that members of other groups lack. For instance, Puddifoot mentions that if we appeal to stereotypes, we expect men to be less nurturing than women. Egalitarianism, however, demands that we treat men and women as equally likely to be nurturing. The wrongfulness of stereotyping amplifies as we consider implicit bias in hiring decisions or promotions.

Given these harms, I think one important element of wokeness involves questioning and scrutinizing various base rates when people are in question, even if—generally speaking—base rates are a reasonable source of true beliefs.[[8]](#footnote-8) The woke person will withhold forming beliefs about people, until she has data specific to a particular person.

*Base Rate Neglect* makes claims of the following structure harder to form for the woke person: *Person* x *(who is a member of a historically oppressed group) has feature f because they are a member of group* p*.* Such a claim makes an appeal to base rates.

Consider an objection *Base Rate Neglect*. Throwing out the base rate is an epistemically unforgivable sin. Rationality may require we appeal to the base rate. Consider Tamar Gendler (2011) on this point. Gendler (2011) argues that considering base rates is key to rational belief formation:

Failure to take into consideration background information about the relative distribution of properties is a classic failure of reasoning. When assessing your evidence, if you want to be rational, you need to take base rates into account. If you want to minimize the likelihood of making mistakes in situations where you are operating under less than certainty… you do well to pay careful attention to the distribution of properties across individuals of various categories. (34-35).

Now, the woke person will not be rational when she forms beliefs about specific people, in virtue of her rejection of the base rate. If we agree with Gendler, then the woke person must sometimes be irrational.

Consider a couple of responses. First, Lara Buchak (2014), Duncan Pritchard (2016, 2017), and Georgi Gardiner (2020) argue that beliefs formed from base rates are not safe. Appealing to the base rate and no other evidence leaves open the possibility for error, making the belief unsafe. Gardiner suggests that base rates only provide evidence for general claims about the likelihood of something, rather than an outright belief. Buchak, moreover, argues base rates can justify credence, even very high credence. Yet base rates cannot justify outright belief and the reactive attitudes the follow from them—praise, blame, etc. Blame, Buchak observes, requires full belief.

We might think that responding to a person as if they have some stereotypical characteristic is a reactive attitude of a sort. That is, the responding to a person requires full belief. Given that base rates only justify credence, and even high credence, we cannot respond to a person merely with base rate evidence. We need some other specific evidence too. The woke person may then reject the base rate and maintain that specific people do not always have the characteristics of their base rates.

Moreover, Katherine Puddifoot (2017) argues that many epistemic ills follow from stereotyping. Implicit bias and stereotyping, for instance, affect our memory: we have a strong tendency to remember features of a person that are consistent with a stereotype and ignore other features. Given that memory is central for belief formation, this means that our beliefs will often fail to capture the full truth. Stereotyping and implicit bias also impact how we interpret ambiguous behavioral evidence—those with implicit bias interpret people’s behavior as consistent with stereotypes. A Black person’s shoving a white person, for instance, is seen as violent, while a white person’s shoving a Black person is perceived as playful. She concludes that even if stereotypes reflect reality, the epistemic burdens strongly outweigh the benefits. If she is right, then we have strong epistemic reasons to avoid base rates in our epistemic practices.

Alex Madva (2016) also undermines Gendler’s claim that there’s a tension between epistemic rationality and the wrongfulness of stereotyping. He argues that so long as stereotypes are “inaccessible” they do not pose a moral problem. Whether knowledge is accessible depends on how quickly an agent can call it to mind. Morality demands that we keep knowledge of stereotypes relatively inaccessible. One feature of *Base Rate Neglect* then is that the woke person keep stereotypes on the fringes of her epistemic field.

Consider a different but related objection. Perhaps Stroud gives us epistemically bad advice. Suppose that all the evidence favors that a member of a historically marginalized group has demonstrated, say, a poor character trait or has committed some crime. It may seem like Stroud tells us to deny apparently true claims or claims that the evidence favors. Thus, we may wonder whether the woke person inflexibly (and irrationally) rejects obviously true claims.

In the last section, I claim that the partiality view is consistent with the standard view in epistemology, so I will address this objection at length. It worth noting now, however that such epistemic behaviors, however, are not Stroud’s prescription: “What seems to be characteristic of the good friend is not a stubborn denial of obvious incontrovertible facts about [one’s] friend but something more subtle” (506). If the mechanisms of epistemic partiality are part of wokeness, then we need not conclude that the woke person believes falsely, nor that the woke person believe in spite of the available evidence. The woke person, rather, refuses to make some inferences, e.g., inferences from base rates, and ignores some evidence bases. Accusations are not outrightly denied every time; they are harder to justify, require more evidence, or require we rule out more possibilities and alternatives.

Consider another issue with the partiality account. Friends know one another better than non-friends. They have a set of reasons that favor one another over strangers. Friends are partial because they have special, personal knowledge of one another. But how can I be epistemically partial to strangers, millions whom I have never met? I think the kinds of reasons partiality appeals to for wokeness are clearly different from the kinds of reasons friends have for partiality.

A woke person has largely institutional reasons for partiality. According to the woke person, we ought to marshal more evidence that favors a marginalized person because this person is a member of a group that has been at a disadvantage. Not doing so contributes to ongoing systemic problems. It’s not because the woke person knows every minority that she is woke, but because she is aware of the injustice that such people face. Leveling the playing field may involve giving a slight epistemic advantage to those who suffer from oppression.

We may worry that the epistemic framework I am proposing here is not sufficiently truth-tracking, i.e., it will lead to a suspiciously high number of incorrect beliefs. Though wokeness may produce some inaccurate beliefs, the woke person concerns herself, I think, with withholding beliefs primarily. For instance, the woke person will simply refrain from arriving to certain conclusions given the base rate evidence. Forming true beliefs is the epistemic goal here, but we must do so in a manner that does not contribute to oppressive structures.

In the next section, I address the broadness of wokeness—can we form positive or neutral beliefs about the oppressed based on stereotypes? I argue that wokeness, specifically *Base Rate Neglect*, precludes beliefs about neutral or positive stereotypes.

1. The Scope of Woke

Let us now consider the scope of wokeness generally. Wokeness obtains with beliefs that have serious moral import, such as beliefs that paint an individual’s character in a negative light. But what about beliefs formed based on stereotypes that appear to be morally innocuous or even beneficial?[[9]](#footnote-9) Basu (2019c) and Gardiner (2018) entertain similar questions. I answer that wokeness applies to the neutral stereotyping cases and positive stereotyping cases.[[10]](#footnote-10) That is, the epistemic mechanism, *Base Rate Neglect*, obtains for neutral and positive beliefs. Consider a case to illustrate a morally neutral belief:

*Soda*: Sara is at a department picnic. Her academic department is quite large, so she has only been acquainted with a small subset of people. She becomes acquainted with Tyree, a Black person in her department. After a chat, Tyree asks Sara to grab him a soda from the cooler while he goes to the bathroom. Sara notes that there are many different sodas in the cooler and that Tyree did not express a preference. Among the sodas are Coca Cola, Dr. Pepper, Pepsi, and generic grape soda. Sara recalls a marketing article which suggested that Black people buy more grape soda than any other kind of soda. She grabs the grape soda.[[11]](#footnote-11)

Let’s suppose that Sara’s belief is morally innocuous.[[12]](#footnote-12) So, the question arises: is Sara committing some failing according to wokeness. Has she failed to meet the demand of wokeness, or has she failed to demonstrate virtue? Perhaps she has. Consider that the statistical evidence she bases her belief on plays to a stereotype about Black people, that they enjoy grape soda over other flavors of soda. Although this stereotype is harmless enough, we might imagine Tyree’s response: “You think I like grape soda because I’m Black, don’t you?” Playing into any stereotype has serious moral repercussions. They can affect the identity of individuals and fail to appreciate them as individuals independent of the groups to which they belong. Moreover, since so many morally significant stereotypes surround Black people, it might be the case that even seemingly harmless stereotypes can become morally significant, i.e., that we should consider the relevant alternative that Tyree does not prefer grape soda to other sodas. Thus, it seems to be that wokeness can obtain even for seemingly (or speciously) insignificant beliefs, such as soda preferences.

Dispositional vulnerability can offer some guidance with seemingly innocuous stereotyping. Proponents of dispositional vulnerability argue that marginalized groups are especially vulnerable to the negative effects of stereotyping (Melton 2009). According to this view, “members of historically oppressed groups are more dependent than others on external validation for the maintenance of self-respect and self-esteem” (Basu 2019c: 924). The identity of these individuals is at greater risk of negative identity impacts, such as self-doubt or loathing. If dispositional vulnerability is plausible, then we have some reason to think a believer can fail to be woke by forming seemingly insignificant beliefs, such as beliefs about soda preferences. Assuming such beliefs can have such impacts on one’s identity, the scope of wokeness widens based on the social groups and reference classes to which an individual belongs. Moreover, such beliefs treat individuals in a way that is to be studied and predicted (Basu 2019c). Examining people in this way fails to distinguish people as individuals (Lindemann 2016). Arguably, Sara’s belief fails in this regard. To be woke, therefore, means that one cannot form seemingly insignificant beliefs about members of vulnerable social groups.

It, therefore, seems as though the scope of wokeness is broader than we might have thought. It includes stereotypes that appear to be harmless, e.g., soda preferences. Consider another question: Does the scope of wokeness include stereotypes that paint an individual in a positive light? I think it is right to say that stereotyping is not always negative. Asian people, for example, are thought to be smarter than members of other races.[[13]](#footnote-13) Thus, to be woke, must I think that some individual Asian boy is not as smart as the stereotype or statistical evidence suggests? Consider a motivating case:

*Intelligence Prediction*: Today is Christian’s first day as a high school history teacher. As his principle takes him on a tour of the school, he informs Christian that a rather small number of students scored above average on math portion of standardized testing. Christian then sees an Asian male student, Xi, and forms the belief that he is one of the few students that scored above average on math. *Christian’s belief is true*.

Another example of such stereotyping comes from Gardiner (2018): It would be either neutral or positive to “[infer that] an interlocutor has read *The New Jim Crow* because she is an African American scholar” (172). The puzzling feature of these cases is the fact that the stereotype and the belief in question paint the individual in, arguably, a positive light. Who doesn’t want other people to think that he or she is smart? Nevertheless, we might think that Christian fails to be woke.

Consider two reasons to think Christian fails to be woke. First, we might question how positive this belief is. For example, if everyone around you expects you to be intelligent, it might put pressure on you to fit into that role, i.e., appear to be smarter than you think you are. Even if you desire a service industry job, you might be influenced to do somethings perceived as more successful. Beliefs like Christian’s can limit the autonomy of individuals, such as Xi. Melissa Harris-Perry argues that even self-directed positive stereotyping can “quickly become a prison” (185). Her example is “the Strong Black woman.” Though this stereotype conveys independence and power, it can also convey that Black women do not need assistance, and so “black women’s pain is not taken as seriously as the pain of others’” (Goguen 2019). Christian’s belief likely has a similar effect for Xi.

Secondly, Christian’s belief fails to treat Xi as an individual distinct from his reference class, one of the motivating moral features of wokeness. Arguably, we treat individuals as objects when we form belief about them on the basis of reference classes because we fail to appreciate features about them. If this is plausible, therefore, it strongly seems as though Christian’s belief, even though it is both true and largely positive, objectifies Xi by failing to treat him as an individual. If this is right, then perhaps Christian has failed to be woke. That is, it is plausible that wokeness applies to positive beliefs, as well as negative and neutral ones.

The woke person does not reject every base rate, however. Consider a noteworthy exception to *Base Rate Neglect*:

*Pull Over*: A Black man, Timothy, is pulled over for a minor traffic violation. As the officer approaches the vehicle, the Black man gets scared. He’s scared because he entertains the possibility that he will be unjustly arrested or that the officer is racist. Given that he knows some officers are more hostile to Blacks, he fears (and strongly entertains) that this one is dangerous too. He, in fact, comes to believe that the officer is dangerous. Such fear appears reasonable, yet it also appeals to a base rate about police officers.

In this case, Timothy’s fear is reasonable, even though he forms his belief in a manner consistent with the base rate. What I have said about *Base Rate Neglect* thus far seems to make Timothy’s belief that he is in danger blameworthy. The case shows that *Base Rate Neglect* must have some scope: it does not obtain for the woke person at all points in time.

Consider a potential problem: suppose that a white woman believes that a Black man is likely dangerous because of the base rates about Black males. This inference clearly goes against what I’ve said so far about wokeness. Aren’t this woman and Timothy engaging in the very same epistemic practices? Why think Timothy’s inference is permissible and the woman’s inference impermissible?

In response, the class, *police officers*, is not likely a social group relevant for my account of wokeness. That is, *police officers* might merely be a mere aggregate or an association, according to Iris Marion Young’s account of social groups. If this is right, then one need not “be woke toward” police officers qua police officers. Thus, Timothy’s belief and the woman’s belief are distinct. However, let’s suppose that *police officers* is a social group (it seems reasonable to think that officers share a common identity and experience). Even if this is right, Timothy is *still* believing in accordance with wokeness. This is because Timothy’s social group is in fact oppressed, whereas *police officers* as a social group are not oppressed in the way relevant for wokeness. This feature—the objective oppression and minority of Black males—differentiates Timothy’s belief and the woman’s belief.

Another difference between this case and the previous two is that the officer is not likely facing dispositional vulnerability. Recall that one reason to think that the neutral and positive stereotypes are wrong is that they disrupt fragile senses of self-esteem for those on the fringes. The officer is not likely to face dispositional vulnerability, at least insofar as he is a police officer. Moreover, given the high moral stakes for Timothy, it seems as though he does not need to inquire much to believe that he is in danger.

Perhaps *Pull Over* is not *just* about base rates. When Timothy forms the belief that the officer is racist, he’s not merely appealing to various base rates about police officers, rather he is likely thinking about the institution of policing itself. He may, for instance, think about the fact that modern policing has its origins in slave patrolling or the mass incarceration of Blacks in the U.S.[[14]](#footnote-14) These facts will likely make Timothy fearful, independently of any base rate data about the officer. Given the complexities of our belief formation processes, it is unlikely that we’d appeal exclusively to base rates when forming beliefs. My claim is that *even if* Timothy were to form the belief that the officer is dangerous merely on base rate data, that belief would be consistent with wokeness.[[15]](#footnote-15)

1. The Standard View

Here I lay out the *standard view* in epistemology. Following Sanford Goldberg (2019, 2020), the standard view is, broadly, the endorsement of “ordinary epistemic standards of justified belief and/or responsible belief formation” (2225). More specifically, the standard view is the epistemic standard that “one ought to believe in accordance with one’s evidence” (2225). The standard view is inconsistent with three philosophical doctrines: moral encroachment, doxastic voluntarism, and doxastic wronging.[[16]](#footnote-16) Following Goldberg’s arguments against epistemic partiality in friendship and against pragmatic encroachment, I argue that wokeness—understood as the joint mechanisms of Stroud’s account of partiality in friendship—does not require any epistemically bad behaviors. I then note that the version of wokeness I have laid out above is consistent with the standard view, where other versions of wokeness available in the social epistemology literature depend on its denial. The partiality view of wokeness, therefore, is interesting both because it appeals to epistemologists who have adopted the standard view and because it does not depend upon the controversial claims of the non-standard view. Once I briefly explain each tenant of the non-standard view, I reconstruct the views available in the literature: Basu’s (2019a) and a view I have argued for previously. I then argue that my account of wokeness is consistent with the standard view. The point of this section is not to suggest that non-standard views are false. It is, rather, to isolate wokeness from the controversial philosophical doctrines—to see the facets of wokeness that are consistent with the widely accepted standard view in epistemology.

The first constitutive doctrine of the non-standard view is doxastic voluntarism.[[17]](#footnote-17) This view is about belief formation: do we form belief automatically or do we have some control over what we believe? Doxastic voluntarism says that we have some degree of voluntary control over what we believe. Belief formation is more like doing jump jacks than a knee-jerk reflex.

The second view of the non-standard view is often thought to conceptually depend on doxastic voluntarism—doxastic wronging.[[18]](#footnote-18) According to doxastic wronging, the content of our belief can sometimes directly wrong another person. Neither the belief formation process, nor the consequences that follow from the belief, e.g., actions, dispositions, constitute a doxastic wronging. Rather, it is the content of the belief itself that wrongs.[[19]](#footnote-19) Responses to doxastic wronging involve rejecting traditional standards for epistemic justification, which is inconsistent with the standard view.

Moral encroachment, lastly, constitutes the third view of the non-standard view.[[20]](#footnote-20) There are many details about moral encroachment that I must omit here, but the essential idea is that epistemic norms bend toward moral norms.[[21]](#footnote-21) To help define moral encroachment, consider pragmatic encroachment. According to pragmatic encroachment, beliefs with high stakes are harder to justify than beliefs with lower stakes. Our beliefs often have outcomes that define the stakes of the belief. If we believe that the train leaves at 9 AM (when it actually leaves at 8 AM), we will likely miss our train. And missing the train may have better or worse outcomes given the reasons we have for taking the train—missing an important interview, say, versus visiting a family member. In high stakes contexts, such as the interview, we need more evidence for thinking the train leaves at 9 AM than 8 AM. In lower stakes contexts, we need less evidence. Moral stakes, some authors argue, work the same way. When our beliefs have high moral stakes, they can be harder to justify than belief with lower stakes.[[22]](#footnote-22)

Authors disagree about the epistemic mechanism of moral encroachment. The “moral stakes” of a belief may, for instance, raise the evidential threshold for justification, broaden or contract the sphere of relevant error possibilities, or both.[[23]](#footnote-23) This means that when a belief has the morally relevant feature, we need more evidence to justify that belief or we must rule out more relevant alternatives than we would have needed to otherwise (if the belief did not have morally relevant features).

The accounts of wokeness available in the literature assume the non-standard view.[[24]](#footnote-24) According to these accounts, wokeness, as either a demand or a virtue, follows from the three theses outlined above. I first examine how the views of wokeness available in the literature assess the *Social Club* case. I then highlight how my account of wokeness—which assumes the standard view—also give favorable verdicts in the case. Consider *Social Club*:

*Social Club*: Historian John Hope Franklin hosts a party at his social club, The Cosmos Club. As Franklin reports, “It was during our stroll through the club that a white woman called out to me, presented me with her coat check, and ordered me to bring her coat. I patiently told her that if she would present her coat to a uniformed attendant, ‘and all of the club attendants were in uniform,’ perhaps she could get her coat”. Almost every attendant is black, and few club members are black. This demographic distribution almost certainly led to the woman’s false belief that Franklin is a staff member.[[25]](#footnote-25) (Gardiner, forthcoming)

The lady’s—Agnes, let’s call her—belief is formed in a manner consistent with the evidence. The probability that, given the club’s demographics, that Franklin is a staff member is pretty high. By ordinary epistemic standards, her belief appears quite reasonable. However, there’s something wrong with her belief, and the available accounts of wokeness can help figure what that is.

First, let’s consider Rima Basu’s view of wokeness. Basu (2019a) argues that wokeness is a demand that follows from an epistemic environment tainted by a history of racism. To be woke, she writes:

is to be aware of the moral demands of one’s environment. With regard to our epistemic practices, it is the demand to be aware of the moral stakes of our beliefs about one another. It is the demand to be aware of the background against which our epistemic practices exist, i.e., the unjust world we inhabit, and to ensure that our epistemic practices are not only responsive to unjust features of our environment but that they also do not themselves contribute to those unjust features of our environment. (Basu 2019a)

Wokeness is awareness. We must tailor our beliefs to respond to our environment: wokeness is the demand—moral or epistemic—to not contribute to racism or sexism. Wokeness demands awareness of the ugly features of our epistemic environment, namely historical injustices involving racism or sexism. To be woke, we must be aware of these injustices and not contribute to them.

Basu argues that Agnes’s belief has *doxastically* *wronged* Franklin. It wrongs Franklin because it contributes to an institution that has systemically oppressed Black people. Agnes *can* and *should have* formed the belief that Franklin is not a wait staff member. She needed even more evidence—given the moral stakes of her belief—to conclude that Franklin was a staff member.

In previous work, I argued that wokeness is an epistemic virtue that follows from moral encroachment.[[26]](#footnote-26) Following Moss (2018a) and Gardiner (forthcoming), I argued that moral encroachment changes the sphere of relevance, sometimes making seemingly irrelevant possibilities relevant, as well as seeming relevant possibilities irrelevant.[[27]](#footnote-27) That is, moral encroachment can either expand the sphere of relevance—meaning we must rule out more possibilities than we would otherwise—or contract the sphere of relevance—meaning some possibilities can plausible be ignored. Call this account of wokeness “relevance wokeness.” According to the sphere-expanding view of wokeness, the woke person is aware of the changes in relevant possibilities and tailors her beliefs accordingly and consistently with moral encroachment. Consider the following sphere-contraction for example: a woman who has accused a man of sexual misconduct. It is possible that she is lying about this accusation. According to this version of moral encroachment, however, this error possibility may be made irrelevant, such that we do not need to rule out this possibility and we simply believe her. The woke person will understand how moral features of this situation affect the epistemic features and then believe (or inquire or select evidence) accordingly.

According to sphere-expanding wokeness, Agnes has failed to be woke. Moral encroachment makes relevant the possibility that Franklin is not a wait staff member because, I previously argued, this belief wrongs him. It wrongs him, in part because it contributes to overarching racist structures, but also because it fails to treat him as an individual. Agnes fails to see that Franklin is distinct from the members of his reference class. Failing to treat someone as an individual amounts to a doxastic wronging.

The group partiality view of wokeness can make similar assessments of *Social Club* while also maintaining the standard view. The features of wokeness especially relevant here are *Inquiry Degree* and *Base Rate Neglect*.[[28]](#footnote-28) The woke person, I argued above, entertains more or less evidence given features of the belief in question. The degree to which she inquires is informed by factors such as whether the belief contributes to overarching racism or whether the belief recognizes individuality. To the latter point, the woke person will often (though not always) reject base rates in order to recognize a person’s individuality. Agnes, to be woke on this view, ought to inquire more about Franklin’s status. Given the features of this belief—that it contributes to racist structures and that may fail to consider Franklin’s individual features—the woke person is to treat this belief as having the relevant stakes.

Now let’s examine *Tipping Prediction*:

*Tipping Prediction*: Spencer the waiter sensed that white diners tipped more than black diners. He subsequently researched the trend online and discovered that black diners tip on average substantially lower than white diners. A black diner, Jamal, enters Spencer’s restaurant and dines in a booth outside of Spencer’s area. Spencer predicts Jamal will tip lower than average and later discovers his prediction was correct.[[29]](#footnote-29) (Gardiner, forthcoming)

Consider how Basu’s view of wokeness and the sphere-expanding view may analyze this case. First, Basu does not analyze this case in terms of wokeness, as she did with *Social Club*. But she argues that Spencer’s belief wrongs Jamal. Given what Basu has said about wokeness above, we might think that Spencer fails to be woke as well. Given, for example, the inequitable income between Blacks and whites, we may think that Blacks tip less for a good reason. Spencer fails to note the overarching social structures and the history of racism within his community. Second, the sphere-expanding view of wokeness starts with the assumption that the belief wrongs. Given that Spencer wrongs Jamal with his belief, Spencer must, prior to forming the belief, consider the error possibilities that moral encroachment makes relevant—that Jamal will tip at average or above average. These possibilities are made relevant by the moral stakes of Spencer’s belief. He, therefore, should refrain from forming his belief. Both accounts explain the wrongness of Spencer’s belief; however, the central difference between these two views is the epistemic mechanism at work: failing to consider the prevalent, unjust social structures at play in the context of Spencer’s belief, as opposed to failing to entertain error possibilities relevant in virtue of moral encroachment.

Wokeness as group partiality, as I’ve argued for here, also mandates that Spencer should not form his belief. If Spencer were woke, he would likely see that claim *Black people tip less* as a character charge of a sort or an accusation. Given Jamal’s membership in a historically oppressed group, Spencer would demonstrate *Serious Scrutiny* toward the claim that Jamal will tip less than average, and he would then direct his attention toward counterevidence. The degree to which he inquires into counterevidence is higher than he if Jamal were a member of a privileged group. Moreover, Spencer would likely reject the base rate and not form his belief, though he may or may not adopt some degree of credence. And even if he concludes that Jamal will tip less, he will interpret that claim charitably, considering his behavior “cautiously frugal,” for example, rather than “cheap.”

Available accounts of wokeness assume the non-standard view. But the tenants of the non-standard view are deeply controversial, as I have tried to show. One strength of the account of wokeness outlined above is that it is consistent with the standard view.[[30]](#footnote-30) The mechanisms of epistemic partiality, I noted above, do not assume that beliefs wrong, we have control over our beliefs, or that epistemic norms bend to moral norms. Epistemic partiality may, as Sanford Goldberg (2019, 2020) argues, just come from a set of value-reflecting reasons that are largely subordinate to our other epistemic reasons. This would mean that epistemic partiality does not, strictly speaking, involve epistemically bad behavior. Why? As I mentioned above, Goldberg claims that we have value-reflecting reasons for the mechanisms of epistemic partiality, e.g., we value the friendship. The woke person, like the good friend, adopts the mechanisms of epistemic partiality as the result of value-reflecting practical reasons, like a commitment to social justice.

Goldberg’s (2020) argument against pragmatic encroachment—the view that thresholds for justification are stakes sensitive—highlights my point here. He notes that we commonly have practical reasons for reopening inquiries and adjusting credences. The practical reasons for reopening inquiry are *mere* practical reasons, i.e., do not raise the threshold for epistemic justification, according to Goldberg, and as such are consistent with what I call the standard view. Consider high stakes bank cases. When it is strongly in our interest to get to the bank, we might leave inquiry open and pursue more evidence, even though we already have a sufficient degree of evidence for justifiedly believing that the bank will be open on Saturday. More specifically, we have practical reasons to inquire further, consider various alternatives, and get more evidence. If we do not do so, then we are subject to a “normative downgrading” (1650). Goldberg, however, rejects that knowledge/justification is/are sufficient for practical action. Sometimes we need *certainty* before acting. Thus, we can have positive epistemic status—justification or knowledge—and still have practical reasons to pursue more evidence.[[31]](#footnote-31)

Similarly, the woke person’s value-reflecting reasons generate practical reasons to leave inquiry open when thinking about the interests of various oppressed groups. The woke person’s values, much like the friend who is faced with evidence that her friend has done something unsavory, provide reasons to leave inquiry open, pursue more evidence, or consider more alternatives. The woke person’s reasons for partiality, if Goldberg is correct, end up being mere practical reasons: she has practical reasons to enhance her epistemic position in light of the stakes. Thus, like the epistemic demands of friendship, wokeness is “epistemically innocuous” (2225).

The kinds of value-reflecting reasons, then, that the woke person makes use of appeal to the that our society is largely structured by racist institutions. In such a society, our epistemic behaviors need to be moderated such that they do not lead to racist behaviors. Wokeness—understood as a kind of belief monitoring—need not be understood in terms of an epistemic non-standard view, but rather it is consistent with the standard view in epistemology, or at least I have argued here.

Let me qualify this claim a bit. The partiality view is consistent with one aspect of the standard view. Partiality is consistent with the standard view in the sense that it is open to the correctness of the standard view. However, if the standard view demands that we conduct our epistemic practices in a certain way, e.g., treating all base rate evidence the same, and the partiality view demands conducting our epistemic practices in a contrary way, e.g., rejecting certain base rates, then the two will be incompatible. My goal has been to show that these positions are conceptually consistent and not normatively consistent.[[32]](#footnote-32)

1. Conclusion

I have argued for a novel account of wokeness. Borrowing from Stroud (2006), wokeness uses the very same mechanisms as epistemic partiality in the context of friendship, plus rejection of base rate data in some cases. We also saw that rejecting the base rate in some cases helps avoid morally problematic stereotyping. One strength of this account is that it is consistent with the standard view in epistemology—the joint rejection of moral encroachment, doxastic wronging, and doxastic voluntarism. Other accounts of wokeness available in the literature assume non-standards views. I argued that the group partiality view of wokeness can make similar assessments of *Social Club* and *Tipping Prediction* as the views of wokeness that assume non-standard views: Basu’s view and the sphere-expanding view. My argument has demonstrated both a theoretical and practical strength of the partiality view of wokeness: it will appeal to those who accept the standard view, while also making sense of tough cases from the literature. An upshot of my argument here is that it shows that the cultural context which has produced *wokeness* also produced a number of philosophically sophisticated and interesting concepts relevant to epistemologists.

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1. For more about the term *wokeness*, Pulliam-Moore (2016), Hess (2016), and Cherry (2020). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. We may worry that the “philosophizing” of wokeness runs the risk of committing what Emmalon Davis (2018) calls “epistemic appropriation.” This is a pressing concern. For responses to philosophizing about wokeness as epistemic appropriation, see J. Spencer Atkins (2020). In that paper, I argued that philosophical theorizing about wokeness requires that theorists themselves be woke. We may worry, moreover, about the appropriation of African American Vernacular English—and Black culture—generally. Nguyen and Strohl (2018) argue that cultural appropriation undermines the intimacy of social groups. Thus, borrowing terms from African American Vernacular English runs the risk of undermining these relations. To alleviate this worry, I think we ought to genuinely reflect on this question before, say, we call ourselves woke or use the philosophical term in everyday life. If these responses do not satisfy the reader, another line of response is to simply abandon the terms *woke* and *wokeness*. The literature may be advanced with new terms, say, *anti-racist partiality*. For the purposes of this project, however, I continue to use the terms *woke* and *wokeness*. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Stroud (2006) argues that friendship generates special epistemic obligations. For more about these obligations, see Keller (2004) and Atkins (2021). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. By *social group*, I have in mind Iris Marion Young’s account. According to Young (1990), a social group is “a collective of persons differentiated from at least one other social group by cultural forms, practices, or ways of life” (43). Social groups are not mere aggregates—like green-eyed people— or associations—like churches or political parties—but a group of people who share “a sense of identity… a certain social status… [a] common history and, [who] self-identif[y]” with the group (44). Thus, the woke person is epistemically partial to members of social groups who have been or are oppressed. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. *Base Rate Neglect* is, I believe, the most controversial epistemic feature of the partiality view, but nevertheless has the most interesting implications for our epistemic practices. I, therefore, spend the lion’s share of this section explaining the nuances of this element of wokeness. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. There is a notable connection here to *Serious Scrutiny*—the epistemic mechanism that states that the good friend scrutinizes evidence that casts their friend in a bad light. We might think that the woke person merely exerts serious scrutiny when engaging with base rate evidence about members of oppressed groups. This offers some motivation for the claim that the woke person ignores base rate information about members of oppressed groups. Even if *Base Rate Neglect* is merely an iteration of *Serious Scrutiny*, it seems to me that the two ought to be distinguished. *Serious Scrutiny*, I think, involves questioning individualized evidence, where *Base Rate Neglect* involves questioning inferences from base rate data to particular people. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. For more about the wrongfulness of stereotyping as failure to treat others as individuals, see Beeghly (2018). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Consider, for instance, Basu’s (2019b) rational racist, Spencer the server. Spencer appeals, largely, base rate data for evidence in support of his stereotypical belief that black people tip less than white people. Such a claim, I believe, is much harder to make if Spencer were to appeal to the epistemic mechanism, *Base Rate Neglect*, that I am arguing for. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. The scholarly path of the ethics of positive and neutral stereotyping is well-trodden. For arguments that neutral and positive stereotyping are morally problematic, see Collins (2000), Blum (2004), Harris-Perry (2011), and Goguen (2019). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. It is up for debate whether there are any such things as neutral stereotypes. For the sake of argument, I suppose that there are in order to make the following claim: *if* there are neutral stereotypes, the partiality view of wokeness is consistent with (and even demands) their denial. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Thanks to Sam Webb for this case. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. This may not be correct: I suspect that the stereotype in question, racial soda preference, is likely a harmful stereotype. Thus, my assertion that it is a neutral stereotype may be wrong. I am highly sympathetic to this criticism, and I think it is likely correct. Now, for the sake of argument, I assume that *Soda* is an instance of a harmless stereotype, even though there is strong reason for rejecting this claim. My point is to show that *even if* *Soda* is an instance of a neutral stereotype, the woke person has reason to reject it. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. It is important to note here that there are still problems that follow positive stereotyping. Consider, for instance, Emmalon Davis’s (2015) notion of *credibility excess*. Her idea is that positive stereotypes, e.g., Asians are smart, problematically burden hearers with undue expectations and limits expression: “the problem is that one is *only* permitted (and expected to) contribute in ways that are considered “unique” and “distinct.” That is, it is not that one's epistemic capabilities are exclusively confined to what is seen as derivative of the dominant; rather, one's epistemic capabilities are exclusively confined to what the dominant perceives to be essentially *nonderivable*” (490). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. For more about modern policing’s origins in slave patrols, see Reichel (1988), Spruill (2016), and Brucato (2020). For more about mass incarceration, see Pattillo, et al. (2004). [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Thanks to the anonymous referee for this insightful point. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Non-standard views do not need to affirm all three claims. If someone, for instance, rejected moral encroachment, yet affirmed doxastic voluntarism and doxastic wronging, this person’s views are sufficiently non-standard. Thus, while the *standard* view is the conjoined denial of *all* three views, non-standard views involve affirming one or more of these doctrines. If this is right, then I can, hence, label Basu (2019c) as holding a non-standard view. She affirms doxastic wronging and moral encroachment, even though she is neutral or fairly resistant to doxastic voluntarism. Thus, the non-standard view in epistemology is not necessarily the joint denial of all three doctrines. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Doxastic voluntarism has a growing number of defenders. See Ginet (2001), Audi (2001), Shah (2002), Steup (2012), Flowerree (2016), and Basu and Schroeder (2019). It also has many who dissent: see Williams (1970), Alston (1989), and Buckareff (2004). [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. For defense of doxastic wronging, see Basu and Schroeder (2019), Schroeder (2018b), Basu (2019a), Basu (2019b). [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. There is controversy among those who endorse doxastic wronging over whether belief that wrong must be false. Schroeder (2018b), for example, argues that beliefs that wrong must be false. True beliefs, even though they have the kind of content that would wrong, nevertheless do not wrong. Basu (2019b), by contrast, argues that even true beliefs can wrong. Though this is an important and interesting discussion, it falls outside of the scope of this paper. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. For defenses and accounts of moral encroachment, see Pace (2011), Moss (2018a, 2018b), Basu (2019a), Gardiner (forthcoming). It is also important to note that not all rejections of the standard view require we endorse moral encroachment. The literature on the ethics of testimony, e.g., Fricker (2007) and Crewe and Ichikawa (forthcoming), demonstrates doxastic wronging *without* endorsing moral encroachment. Even though these literatures are, I think, denying the standard view, they do not endorse moral encroachment. For more about the connection between doxastic wronging and moral encroachment, see Bolinger (2020) and Basu (forthcoming). [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. One of the points of controversy among moral encroachers is which moral features of a belief affect epistemic status. There are, broadly, three categories: upstream, “the belief itself,” and downstream. First, the upstream considerations of a belief deal with how the belief was formed (Armour 1994; Moss 2018b). The second set of considerations deals with “the belief itself.” This variety of moral encroachment is labeled *radical* moral encroachment (Basu 2019a, forthcoming; Bolinger, 2020). Radical moral encroachment identifies that beliefs that doxastically wrong others affect epistemic status. Lastly, there are downstream considerations. These are the actions and dispositions that follow from the beliefs we hold (Moss 2018a). Holding some beliefs raises moral stakes because of the consequences of the belief, e.g., how this belief may lead us to action. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Arguments for moral encroachment have wide variation. One point of variation is how moral encroachment relates to pragmatic encroachment. Pace (2011) and Fritz (2017, 2019) argue that moral encroachment is best understood in the image of pragmatic encroachment, and Schroeder (2018a) argues that moral encroachment is “a special case of pragmatic encroachment.” Pragmatic encroachment is the view that the threshold for justification rises with the stakes. Pairs of low and high stakes cases motivate pragmatic encroachment, e.g., bank cases (Stanley 2005) and train cases (Fantl and McGrath, 2002). Fritz (2017) offers parallel cases to motivate moral encroachment, e.g., parking illegally when one may receive a fine versus parking illegally when a police office will kill five people. Basu (2019a) notably rejects this method of argument for moral encroachment. Examining these arguments in detail, however, lies beyond the scope of this paper. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Different authors make use of different mechanisms. For examples of the evidential threshold mechanism, see Basu and Schroeder (2019), Fritz (2017), Guerrero (2007), and Pace (2011). For discussions about relevance and moral encroachment, see Moss (2018a) and Gardiner (forthcoming). [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. With the standard view on the table, let me now entertain an objection. Nomy Arpaly and Anna Brinkerhoff (2018) raise an objection to Stroud’s epistemic partiality and consequently my account of wokeness. They argue that, if one assumes that “there are no practical reasons to believe (or to be in any other doxastic state, including lesser degrees of credence)—beliefs and other doxastic states being involuntary,” then we must reject epistemic partiality since it implies that we must form beliefs on the basis of practical reasons (40). Put another way, we must accept some form of doxastic voluntarism if we are to accept epistemic partiality. This poses two problems for my argument: (1) many who accept the standard view in epistemology will reject epistemic partiality and (2) if we accept epistemic partiality, it looks like we are committed to the non-standard view, since we must accept some form of doxastic voluntarism. I take (2) to be the more serious objection, so I will respond in more detail to it; the response to two also goes some distance to provide a response to (1). In response to (2), I think there’s room for a form of voluntarism that is compatible with the standard view: Nishi Shah’s (2002) “evidence selection” voluntarism. According to Shah, we exhibit control over our beliefs insofar as we exhibit control over the evidence we examine when we form beliefs. If, for instance, I consistently expose myself to right-wing media, then I will form beliefs that are consistent with that media. I do, however, have a decision over which news outlets to examine, and so some upstream control over what beliefs I will form. We can do something similar, I think, with our friends. We choose to examine evidence that favors their interests. Similarly, the woke person will examine evidence that favors the interests of the oppressed. Now, this is consistent with the standard view in epistemology because it would be, I think, unreasonable to deny that we have at least some of control over evidence selection. This seems highly plausible, even for an involuntarist. Thus, if this is right, then (2) is not as much of a problem as we may have thought. All these considerations, I hope, will go some way to alleviate (1) as well because I have tried to show that epistemic partiality should not be so suspicious to someone who accepts the standard view. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Gendler (2011) proposes *Cosmos Club* as an example of irreconcilable tension between morality and rationality. She concludes that there is such a conflict. Schroeder (2018a), Basu (2019a), Bolinger (2018), and Basu and Schroeder (2019) disagree, as each of them uses *Cosmos Club* as motivation for moral encroachment. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. See Atkins (2020). [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. For more about relevant alternatives in epistemology, see Dretske (1970), Stine (1976), and Lewis (1996). [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. The epistemic mechanisms of Stroud’s epistemic partiality in friendship largely deal with rumors and accusations. When our friend’s reputation is on the line, we tend to require more evidence and form beliefs more charitably than with non-friends. These features are not present in *Social Club*—but I will talk about *Tipping Prediction* momentarily. I therefore constrain my discussion to *Base Rate Neglect* and *Inquiry Degree*. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Case adapted from Basu (2018). I prefer this shortened version of the case because we can refer to both Jamal and Spencer. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. With the small caveat that epistemic partiality may require some form of voluntarism. I tried to alleviate this worry above by arguing that some forms of doxastic voluntarism are consistent with the standard view. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Goldberg’s argument also shows us that stakes-related, practical reasons to inquire are perfectly consistent with purism. I also think my account of wokeness is consistent with purism. Purism, according to Fantl and McGrath (2009), is the view that “any two subjects with the same strength of epistemic position with respect to p are such that both or neither (are in a position to) exemplify E with respect to p” (233). If Goldberg is correct that sometimes knowledge/justification are not sufficient for action, then we likely know/have a justified belief that the bank is open on Saturday in both the high stakes and low stakes context. This fact seems to be consistent with purism. The woke person may have a justified belief that a member of an oppressed group has done something wrong, but, given her wokeness, has practical reasons to further investigate and then reassess her belief. Someone who is not woke, but who has identical evidence, would also justifiedly believe that the minority person has done something wrong. This person simply lacks the practical reasons to further investigate—or at least the wokeness-related practical reasons to investigate further. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Consider an objection from a proponent of the standard view. Epistemic partiality—and consequently wokeness—is not necessary for the kind of responsive, socially-aware epistemology I endorse in this paper. All we need, according to the objection, is the desire to hold true beliefs and what Jose Medina’s (2013) epistemic curiosity/diligence or Lorraine Code’s (1987) epistemic honesty. These concepts involve honestly admitting that we often do not know what we believe ourselves to know, i.e., a transparent doubt about our own epistemic status. If we are epistemically diligent and desire true beliefs, then we withhold believe when there is reason to doubt our evidence, including when the evidence is about members of oppressed groups. Such epistemic mechanisms are consistent with the standard view and render epistemic results comparable to wokeness as epistemic partiality. In response, the mere desire to believe truly and the honest admittance of one’s limited evidence fail to appreciate the significance of other people and of oppression. This is because these virtues fail to distinguish the high moral stakes oppressive beliefs. Alone, they fail to explain the significance of forming beliefs about oppressed groups. Assuming I desire true beliefs and have epistemic diligence, I may admit that what I think I know about, say, goldfish could be wrong and, therefore, leave inquiry open. Such epistemic virtues fail to give special treatment to oppressed people, which, I think, is required. Unless the proponent of this objection can explain why people merit special epistemic treatment, I think this objection fails to undermine my view. Partiality is necessary for wokeness. Thanks to the anonymous referee for this objection. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)