# Forthcoming in *Well Founded Belief: New Essays on the Epistemic Basing Relation*, Patrick Bondy and J. Adam Carter (eds.) Routledge, 2019.

# **Well-Founded Belief and the Contingencies of Epistemic Location**

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*Abstract.* A growing number of philosophers are concerned with the epistemic status of culturally nurtured beliefs, beliefs found especially in domains of morals, politics, philosophy, and religion. Plausibly, worries about the deep impact of cultural contingencies on beliefs in these domains of controversial views is a question about well-foundedness: Does it defeat well-foundedness if the agent is rationally convinced that she would take her own reasons for belief as insufficiently well-founded, or would take her own belief as biased, had she been nurtured in a different psychographic community? This chapter will examine the proper scope and force of this *epistemic location problem.* It sketches an account of well and ill-founded nurtured belief based upon the many markers of doxastic strategies exhibiting low to high degrees of *inductive risk:* the moral and epistemic risk of ‘getting it wrong’ in an inductive context of inquiry*.*

1 Epistemic Location and the Epistemology of Nurtured Beliefs

Many of the beliefs that people hold dearest to their sense of personal and social identity are beliefs profoundly shaped by their own upbringing. The impact of a person’s place in time, their familial, communal, cultural, and geographic/demographic setting are some of these contributory causes, but to a varying degree an agent’s controversial view might be highly conditioned by personal temperamental factors or other pragmatic constraints on an agent’s beliefs.

We will follow J. Adam Carter (2018) and others who use the term *controversial views* to refer not just to one’s religious or irreligious views, but also our substantial views in the domains (at least) of morals, politics, and philosophy.[[1]](#endnote-1) Nurtured beliefs/opinions are not a ‘domain,’ but the best examples of contrariety among culturally nurtured beliefs fall within these domains. Let a person’s epistemic location refer us to how the individual is located demographically (family; broader culture; class, etc.), in addition to geographically and historically. We will use the term *epistemic location problem* to highlight etiological challenges to controversial views that bear marks of contingency and of what John K. Davis (2009) terms the impact of trait-dependence upon our cognitive judgments.[[2]](#endnote-2) In its most general sense, the epistemic location problem is the problem that our obvious psychographic differences – differences in such things as attitudes, values, and most importantly for this study, what John Rawls terms *comprehensive conceptions of the good* – are strongly conditioned by contingent matters of the individual’s historic, geographic, and demographic location.

Religious identity and whatever beliefs one has stemming from a testimonial faith tradition are a prime example of this familial or cultural inheritance, and the apparent contingency of such nurtured beliefs. Although certainly not the only example, the proximate causes of one’s religious identity and the formation of attendant beliefs are, for most people, a matter of their epistemic location, which in turn appears to be an accident of birth.[[3]](#endnote-3) Michel de Montaigne gave a version of a ‘contingency’ or epistemic location argument when he wrote,

[W]e receive our religion in our own way and by our own hands, and no differently from the way other religions are received. We happen to find ourselves in the country where it has been practiced; or we value its antiquity or the people who have supported it; or we fear the threats it attaches to wrongdoers, or we follow its promises… By the same means another country, other witnesses, similar promises and threats, could in the same way imprint in us a contrary belief.[[4]](#endnote-4)

Perhaps motivated by a resurgence of social epistemology and epistemology of testimony, and by the increasing importance of understanding group dynamics and the causes of psychographic diversity, philosophers have become increasingly concerned with the epistemology of culturally nurtured beliefs. So there is much agreement that to improve the epistemology of controversial views, philosophers need to focus more carefully on the right target, proper scope, and epistemological force of arguments of the sort that Montaigne and Mill share. Davis’s work takes steps in this direction, as he has plausibly argued (2009) that the concern about the contingency of so many of our testimony-dependent beliefs involves a question about the *basing relationship:* Does it defeat proper basing if the agent is rationally convinced that she very likely would see her own actual nurtured belief as both false and tainted by unrecognized bias, had she been nurtured in a different culture or epistemic community?

George Sher (2001) and Gerald Cohen (2000a; 2000b) are also often credited with igniting a more careful philosophical interest in nurtured belief, and with it, arguments from the contingency of epistemic location. Sher asked us to study “the implications of the fact that even our most deeply held moral beliefs have been profoundly affected by our upbringing and experience—that if any of us had had a sufficiently different upbringing and set of experiences, he almost certainly would now have a very different set of moral beliefs and very different habits of moral judgment.”[[5]](#endnote-5) As Sher here indicates, etiological challenges and the contingency anxiety they arouse in those who take them seriously may attach to a far broader group than just religious beliefs.[[6]](#endnote-6) Cohen similarly describes ‘paradoxes of conviction,’ paradoxes that he thinks we face in assenting to propositions that we realize, or should realize, are produced and maintained through cultural influences, such that if one had a sufficiently different upbringing they would likely hold different beliefs, attested by different justificatory reasons.

Nathan Ballantyne (2015) has also worked on this “pervasive and disconcerting worry about intellectual life: our controversial beliefs regarding morals, politics, religion, and philosophy depend on facts about our personal history.” Yet he is correct to find that in arguments from contingency both ancient and modern, “pointing is typically all we get—worked-out arguments based on variability are uncommon.”[[7]](#endnote-7) To move beyond this, Ballantyne connects serious engagement with the problems posed by Montaigne and Mill not to a generalized scepticism or to dogmatism, but to more concerted attempts to “debunk biased thinkers (including ourselves).” Joshua DiPaolo and Robert Mark Simpson (2016) similarly investigate the epistemic location problem not just with cases described from the armchair, but together with utilization of affects that psychologists are studying, including *contingency anxiety* and *indoctrination anxiety.*[[8]](#endnote-8) This is an approach that we will pursue, one that marshals not just considerations of epistemic luck/risk, but also the now-vast literature on studies of individual/social biases and heuristics.

Before going further, however, I note that Ballantyne draws two general lessons from his study of the impact of the epistemic location problem on the epistemology of controversial domains, including especially nurtured controversial views: “[W]e should hold some of our controversial beliefs with less confidence… [and] we need better methods to make judgments about biases.”[[9]](#endnote-9) This will be a good starting point for us, since I generally agree with the spirit of both lessons, but will work them out somewhat differently.

I begin by locating the historic, geographic, and demographic contingency of people’s nurtured controversial views within a much broader set of recognized sources of cognitive diversity. A person’s epistemic location is one of the most unavoidable of these sources of contrariety, being basic to the human condition. Arguably the contingencies of belief that derive from people’s geographic and demographic diversity are closely related to the evidential ambiguity that affects so many views we hold on morals, politics, philosophy, and religion. Such contingency makes for no sweeping indictment of a belief’s reasonableness: this would be to *dichotomize* between the rational and the social, which our understanding of the epistemic location problem most expressly should not. Instead I want to develop Ballantyne’s second lesson, the need for more principled and fine-grained application of bias studies to well-motivated etiological challenges. In doing so we will have recourse to work on the differences between benign and malign epistemic luck, to Patrick Bondy and Duncan Pritchard’s discussion of the close connection between malign luck and epistemic *risk,* and to Ian Kidd’s work on the differences between “robust” and merely “rhetorical” vice charging.

This chapter aims to develop several sides of an *inductive risk-based account* of what it means to motivate serious etiological challenges and to support them empirically through markers of bias. More fully, this chapter sketches an inductive risk-based account of assessments of the doxastic states (belief/alief/credence) and epistemic standings (knowledge, understanding, subjectively/objectively justified belief, rational belief, etc.). *Inductive risk is the study of the chance or possibility of getting it wrong in an inductive context.* The concept of inductive risk is widely used in science, and the possibility of getting it wrong is there acknowledged to often raise moral as well as epistemic concerns. If portable beyond philosophy of science, the concept of inductive risk might serve equally well as common-ground for wide-ranging discussions over doxastic responsibility. *Counter*-inductive thinking entails the highest degrees of inductive risk.[[10]](#endnote-10)

I will relate motivated etiological challenges to well-founded belief as directly related to its being highly overdetermined by trait-dependent factors.We do indeed need better methods to make judgments about biases and other temperamental factors which negatively affect well-foundedness, in terms both of the agents’ creditworthy exercise of a genuine cognitive ability, and of their personal justification.[[11]](#endnote-11) But we do *not* contend that the normative upshot of the prevalence of trait-dependent beliefs in the domains of controversial views is that they are never well-founded. As seems to be the case with Montaigne and Mill, what normative upshot philosophers should draw is more contextual than that; assessment cannot be uniform because it crucially depends upon the varying degree of blind spot bias that actual agent’s exhibit. Agents may exhibit the bias in various ways, through over-estimation of the epistemic status of their views, through rhetorical and unsupported asymmetries of explanation, and more defensively through rhetorical peer denial. It is the dogmatic ways in which nurtured beliefs are sometimes held that motivates a serious *de jure* challenge, rather than the amorphous line between properly doxastic and sub-doxastic attitudes.

This returns us to Ballantyne’s first lesson, a lesson about guidance. Ballantyne like many others conclude that we should hold “with less confidence” our controversial views. Conformists make this a universal prescription, moving from epistemic assessment to guidance. Even Carter’s qualified version of controversial view agnosticism, which opens up sub-doxastic attitudes such as “suspecting that,” which he rightly points out that Richard Feldman Triad model of doxastic attitudes neglects, speak in terms of downgrading the degree of confidence in a proposition being the prescriptive upshot of conditions of genuine peer disagreement. Under conditions that cover a large portion of our beliefs in controversial subject areas, Carter’s principled controversial view agnostic asserts, “we are rationally obligated to withhold judgment.”[[12]](#endnote-12)

Carter argues effectively that “a tacit commitment to the Triad View, with its deontological categories of belief, suspension of belief, and disbelief, has the effect of artificially restricting the range of reasonable attitudes we might take up in controversial areas….” (15). By opening up other sub-doxastic attitudes besides “suspension,” Carter develops resources for modifying the conformist thesis to make it more ‘liveable,’ while holding on to its guiding principle.[[13]](#endnote-13) Carter’s version of conformism we can term principled agnosticism about domains of controversial views. While I appreciate Carter’s risk-focused account of controversial views, principled agnosticism is still impermissivist.

Let me say something about this in order mostly to set it aside. I will return to this in my conclusion, but I hold that the same detail that the bias-studies and inductive risk approaches bring to the table to distinguish motivated from unmotivated etiological challenges, shows how overgeneralized are the prescriptions that conformists and steadfasters each ask us to accept as the upshot of genuine peer disagreement. Epistemic assessment and epistemic guidance need to be more carefully distinguished than has been the case in this debate. These are primarily questions of guidance and thus also of the ethics of belief. On these questions I have written in defense of permissivism.[[14]](#endnote-14) I see no easy path, either from moral or epistemic evidentialism, to the kind of universal guidance issued either by the equal-weight view, or by principled agnostics.[[15]](#endnote-15) If we should discern a more diverse set of doxastic attitudes than the Triad model allows us to see, I would argue that we should also discern a more diverse set of permissible responses to genuine peer disagreement. More specifically, the importance of the reliable etiology of belief for doxastic justification seems from my pragmatist or *inquiry-focused* epistemology to cast doubt on why doxastic responsibility and guidance-prescriptions should take a primarily *synchronic* form.[[16]](#endnote-16)

So while I won’t try to provide a fuller account of guidance, I just want to state my resistance to any and all of the universalized prescriptions on offer from dogmatists, phenomenological foundationalists, equal-weight conformists, and principled agnostics. Instead I will agree with Ian Church and Justin Barrett (2016) that “psychological dynamics… suggest that belief firmness, or a belief’s resilience to revision or relinquishment, are not the only or best relevant metrics for intellectual humility.”[[17]](#endnote-17) This allows that there may be different levels at which to exhibit epistemic deference, not just at the level of one's credences but also on various levels of one's reasonings (Pittard 2014).

Pragmatists like Davis, Susan Haack, and Susanna Rinard insist that we distinguish more carefully between norms for guidance-giving and those for epistemic assessment.[[18]](#endnote-18) At the same time, permissivists like virtue theorists hold that “the gap between the ways in which we are meant to normatively assess belief and action may not be as wide as has been thought,"[[19]](#endnote-19) and that responsible actions are often not ‘obliged,’ but merely ‘permissible’ actions. An area for merely permissible belief seems missing on the impermissivist view. So before moving on I just want to leave it in the mind of readers that a pragmatist and permissivist ethic of belief – in so far as it is a permissivism ‘with teeth’ – may prove itself more effective than the principled agnostic/evidentialist demand for synchronic ‘downgrading,’ in challenging a dogmatic thinker’s faulted attempts to epistemically privilege their own or their ingroup’s nurtured beliefs.[[20]](#endnote-20) For if epistemologists, as I believe, have useful guidance to give agents in regard to the limits of reasonable disagreement, that guidance should not assume an ideal or atemporal agent without pragmatic interests or constraints. It should be guidance consistent with Montaigne’s two points: 1) that “we are all of the common herd,” a thought commensurable with psychological studies of biases and heuristics, and 2) that due to our directional thinking especially in matters we care a great deal about, we are constantly guilty of confusing affectively-conditioned commitments with possessing truth, warrant, proper basing, and right epistemic motives.[[21]](#endnote-21)

2 Environmental Luck-based Etiological Challenges: A Tess Case

This section aims to elaborate the epistemic significance of the distinction between contexts of inquiry dependent only on benign evidential luck, and contexts of inquiry impacted by malign environmental epistemic luck. Pritchard’s post-2005 splitting of veritic luck into environmental and intervening types has strong implications for the epistemology of nurtured beliefs. So might Bondy and Pritchard’s recent identification of propositional luck as a malign form of epistemic luck *in addition* to veritic luck, but given our limited space I must pass over discussion of propositional luck.[[22]](#endnote-22) What these authors’ do that more directly concerns us is to translate questions about epistemic luck into questions about the modal riskiness of a belief-forming cognitive strategy.[[23]](#endnote-23) With this in mind, what I want to do is to discuss the importance for well-founded belief of the distinction between evidential (as benign) luck and environmental (as malign) luck. Can we always correctly distinguish them when presented with a case, and if so, how?

Note first that intervening and environmental luck, while subtly different, are both forms of what epistemologists refer to as veritic luck. In cases of veritic luck, it’s a matter of luck if the belief one holds is true, –viz., one very easily could have believed incorrectly. The intervening form is the form of luck that we find in standard Gettier cases such as the famous sheep-in-the-field case. Environmental luck by contrast is the kind that we find in barn facade cases. Environmental epistemic luck, understood as veritic luck and hence as distinct from simple evidential luck, is not compatible with knowledge, most epistemologists hold. If they are correct in this, it is because Barney’s belief, considered modally, appears to be unsafe.

By contrast, Pritchard’s taxonomy of forms of epistemic luck recognized several benign kinds. I will treat only evidential luck, since it is the complicated relationship between malign environmental luck and benign evidential luck that I want to get at. Simple evidential luck does not violate the safety principle; it is the luck of being situated in a way that others might not be to have supporting evidence for a true belief. Ernest Sosa uses the simple paradigm example of coming to hold the true belief that there is a crow in the yard, but only because one happened to glance out the window at that particular moment it flew by. By contrast, environmental luck does violate the safety principle. It is the luck that one’s belief *is true,* given a set of modal or other epistemic circumstances that are *inhospitable* to the reliability of the utilized doxastic strategy (mode of belief-uptake). What is importantly different between intervening (Gettier) and environmental luck cases is that in the former it is no matter of ability or competence or achievement that a true belief is acquired, whereas in environmental luck cases the agent’s beliefs are the product of the exercise of a cognitive ability that *in more cooperative epistemic circumstances* might provide more positive epistemic status to their beliefs. The concepts of luck and risk helps us analyse how agents achieve or fall short of more valuable epistemic states or standings –rationality, personal justification, knowledge, understanding, etc. But they may not apply in quite the same way across domains of controversial views.[[24]](#endnote-24)

With that much said, I now want to argue that it is not difficult to construct *testimonial environmental luck* cases, cases in which our intuitions about epistemic status basically parallel those that people report about Barney cases, where the agent’s *visual perception* is the primary source of the target belief. The predominance of visual perception cases in epistemology is partly due to their relative simplicity, but partly also to many decades where methodological individualism was assumed. If so, testimonial cases allow the philosophy of luck/risk to better engage contemporary social epistemology. Here is such a case.

The Basic Tess Case

*Imagine Tess, a good friend of Barney, travelling to visit relatives in Land of Lakes County. In the base case, this is Tess’s first visit, and she does not know that many others refer to this county as ‘Fake News County.’ Scattered about on corners of the town and the whole county are brightly-coloured metal or plastic, free publication newsstands, each advertising its wares in its small front window. Sometimes there were several such boxes at the same corner, but most often just one. Tess, who knew none of this, is met at the train station by her uncle Sal, and before they get to his ride they pass a corner outside the station with a blue metal newsstand. Tess had just asked her uncle a question about the history of the county, and Sal goes to the box and gets them each a copy. “Blue-box publications. Yes, this one you can trust!” says Sal, and to emphasize his point he flips the paper over and taps the large printed warning on its back page: “Remember, trust only the news from this box! All of the other boxes contain fake news.”*

*Tess finds this a bit quizzical, in part because she has not encountered other boxes; but they have much to talk about, and the conversation quickly takes another direction. But that night when she retires to the guest bedroom, she finds the paper on her dresser, and reads it in bed. It contains many tales about the county and its founding citizens that Tess finds quite moving and even profound. Although there were seemingly fantastical elements to these stories, and some of them drew strong moral lessons that clearly went beyond factual information, Tess remembers her uncle’s assurance of the paper’s trustworthiness, and she accepts the content of the paper pretty much at face value.*

*While being driven back to the station after her pleasant weekend visit, Tess notices for the first time a different coloured newsstand, then another, then another. Indeed walking into the station she comes upon a veritable array of such boxes in a row. Having been so enamoured of the first, Tess starts walking up to a yellow plastic one to get an issue of it for some reading on the way home. Picking it up, she is surprised to see the same strong warning against trusting other papers that Sal had called attention to on her blue-box paper. But immediately Sal stops her, saying, “All these other boxes are from different publishers, and they give only fake news. Return them. They are worthless –only trust the papers in a blue-box. They tell you all you need to know.”*

*It saddens Tess a bit that she won’t get more such stories, but out of respect for her uncle she puts it back and refrains from gathering more papers. On the train, though, she pulls out her blue box paper and reads it again. It is growing on her, and when she tells her sister about her trip, what she relates as factual about the history of Land of Lakes County and its founding citizens is what she says any blue-boxer like herself holds as true.*

Now we can imagine multiple variations on this base Tess Case. Perhaps Tess learns that had she listened to Sal’s neighbour, she would have been introduced only to a red-box paper, and been told that *that* was the reliable one. Perhaps all the people in Sal’s family trust the blue-box paper, but most people in the county trust the yellow, or vice versa. Perhaps Tess knows that she is in Fake News County (Enlightened Tess) or perhaps she does not (as in the base case). In each such case, although it is testimonial transmission rather than visual perception that is the source of belief in Tess cases, it must be acknowledged as an environmental veritic luck-impacted context of inquiry if Tess was veritically lucky (that is, lucky that she came to acquire a true rather than false belief) given the doxastic method she employed in her specific epistemic environment.

I hold that these conditions are fulfilled in the Tess case, and that her belief fails to be knowledge even if there was one wholly true newsstand and it was the one she vested authority in. True, this argument requires modal closeness, and relevant similarity of basis, but these conditions seem to be fulfilled and I do not see other ways to pry the Barney and Tess cases apart. This does not imply that multiple pieces of independent evidence might not mitigate the risks that in Tess’ case constitute an environment of malign veritic luck. Not all testimonial transfer is unsafe, and not all testimonially-based beliefs are insensitive in the way that Tess’ are. I will discuss the compounding of benign “evidential” by malign “environmental” luck below; but my claim is about Tess, as described, and not about all persons who have invested authority in a testimonial source under conditions of contestation. So neither do I think that recognizing the impact of malign luck on Tess’s beliefs about the history of the county must inevitably lead us some much broader scepticism about testimonial knowledge generally. The way that safety and sensitivity are here construed does not invite, but will indeed I think provide grounds for rejecting the broad “parity” response popular in religious apologetics: the response that to be sceptical about the epistemic status of Tess’ testimonial beliefs will result in excessive scepticism about a much wider range of ordinary testimony cases.[[25]](#endnote-25)

Another reason why Tess’ and other agents’ beliefs in the narratives of one or another Fake News County newsstand must be seen as the product of a highly risky doxastic strategy is the relationship between the testimonies that the papers provide about the history of the county: *contrariety of content itself*. Part of the intuition that there are propositional defeaters to Tess’ personal justification for her testimonial beliefs is that the base case describes significant contrariety of content. Further, it describes what we will term *symmetrical contrariety*, in that each publisher claims all other publisher’s publications are untrustworthy. Now had there not been such actual or reported contrariety to their contents, would Tess’ beliefs, if we assume them true, be less impacted by malign environmental luck? If we answer to this question ‘Yes,’ as I want to argue that we should, then why do epistemologists of testimony seem so often to ignore such factors, and think only in terms of the reliability of the single testimonial chain an agent “trusts”?[[26]](#endnote-26) The inductive risk account shows as epistemically significant not just the *diversity* of beliefs in a domain, but *contrariety* of those beliefs*.* Not all testimonies or testifiers are as polemical as the described news publishers, demanding counter-inductive inference to the unique or complete truth of just one. These are things that compound Tess’ situation with malign luck. As an agent acquires more information about the contents of the papers in the different coloured boxes, the degree of contrariety and mutual vice-charging further impacts the well-foundedness of a belief acquired on the basis of acquaintance with just one of the numerous publishers.

Epistemologists refer to an epistemic environment as “hostile” if it is one that is unsafe for the doxastic method employed, and this is a key characteristic that distinguishes mere evidential luck from a condition where it is compounded by environmental luck. Barney’s method of coming to believe ‘That is a red barn’ is unsafe, because easily could he have gotten it wrong in his driving environment, trusting only to his eyesight from the roadway. If Barney looks out the window a minute earlier or later, he acquires a belief with relevantly similar content, yet false. Barney’s belief is also insensitive since what Barney affirms as a barn he *would have* affirmed, even if he was not lucky enough to have come across one of the few real barns. Analogously, I argue that Tess’ method of coming to believe that the blue box described true history of Land of Lakes County is unsafe, because easily could she have gotten it wrong in her news reporting environment, trusting only to the testimony of a friend or family member, and to the vivid phenomenal seemings she has in reading blue box stories.

Tess’ belief is also insensitive because we have to surmise that if the publisher was not reliable, Tess would have still believed that it was. If she would trust the news of just the first box she came to, when it might be a small and/or unrepresentative sample, or because it is uniquely recommended by one among many disagreeing residents, or by someone she considers reliable because a kinsman, then Tess would believe the same thing even were it false. Insensitive beliefs are not typically a by-product of a hostile epistemic environment, as Pritchard describes unsafe belief, but of what I propose to term a *beguiling* environment. I will develop connections between a beguiling evidential situation and epistemic responsibility in the final section. But as a general point, when trait-dependent factors are salient in one’s belief, it is commonplace to find the agent reasoning backwards from the assumption that their belief is true, to the benign nature of any luck they may have had in coming to that belief. It is commonplace to find them confusing (presumed) truth with objective justification, which in turn beguiles them into thinking that their (obviously good) luck of having grounds for a *true* belief also guarantees the *benign* nature of luck’s impact on their epistemic situation. But the assumption is naïve: the malign/benign epistemic luck distinction is instead a modal one, and one that is inextricable, for agents performing inquiry, from recognition of the centrality of inductive norms to epistemic assessment.

But perhaps the most interesting conclusion that might be drawn from the preceding is that the positive epistemic status of beliefs based on testimonial transmissions is not guaranteed, *even if* it is maintained that the particular testimonial chain that sources the beliefs to be assessed is a trustworthy testimonial chain.[[27]](#endnote-27) It is not guaranteed any more than that Barney’s true belief that he sees a barn has positive epistemic status.[[28]](#endnote-28) That depends not just on the object, and his process, but upon a third factor that situates his inference in an inductive *context.* What in a simple, non-fake barn country scenario would certainly seem to have positive epistemic status, is far more problematic in Barn County. Whether recognized or not, Tess like Barney is in an epistemic environment in which there are defeaters to personal justification. An inductive context implies inductive epistemic risk. High epistemic risk derives from epistemic situations inhospitable to the epistemic strategy one is employing. Modal riskiness marks epistemic luck as veritic and malign. Environmental luck isveritic luck, and the epistemic standing of Barney’s luckily true belief is doubtful because of the inductive norms Barney violated in forming his belief.[[29]](#endnote-29)

Epistemic success arguably requires an agent’s doxastic strategy being modally safe, for modal riskiness marks epistemic luck as veritic and malign. This may be an externalist perspective, but if we think in terms of argument structures we can translate these concerns into ones of defeaters and defeat. Tess like Barney has a propositional defeater of the undercutting variety, which is a most serious matter. Propositional defeaters are conditions external to the perspective of the cognizer that prevent even a personally justified true belief from counting as knowledge. The pertinent external fact is that our two agents Tess and Barney are in such conditions that there is no level of generality that a reliable belief-forming process plausibly explains the truth of their beliefs. Our account can certainly be flexible enough to allow partial defeaters. But these bare facts of Tess and Barney’s inductive contexts of inquiry are arguably each as much a propositional defeater of the undercutting variety as that the wall in front of me is being irradiated with a red light is an undercutting defeater for my belief that the wall in front of me is painted red because it visually appears red to me. It could still be true that it is painted red and not white or some other color; but my trusting my eyes as the rational basis for that belief is undercut by this further fact of which I was unaware when I formed my belief.

Summarizing, Tess like Barney does an inductive ‘fail,’ although an agent’s *culpability* for being ignorant of their inductive context of course depends upon details of the case described.[[30]](#endnote-30) My point is that environmental luck is a serious worry about the well-foundedness of belief whether one is aware *or* ignorant of their inductive context. That environmental luck threatens to impact the well-foundedness of an agent’s belief, and that the agent’s context of inquiry is properly describable as an inductive context, are nearly synonymous.

We should say that environmental luck, when it affects an agent’s epistemic situation, *compounds* evidential luck. It is not as if evidential luck went away and a malign kind just ‘replaced’ it. An epistemic context can change by degrees, much as the assessment of the strength of an inductive argument can change by degrees. Evidential luck, as the only way we are in a position to know anything beyond the analytic and *a priori,* is ever-present to the human condition, but its benign status is upset when malign conditions change its demeanor. This compounding thesis suggests a more complex relationship than one where epistemologists treat the benign/malign distinction more as separate buckets than as dialectically negotiated borders.[[31]](#endnote-31)

This negotiation is quite apparent when we recognize how closely the epistemology of nurtured controversial views depends on testimony and testimonial transmission. As Rachel E. Fraser points out, “Recent epistemological history has inclined towards ‘testimonial optimism,’ keen to stress the division of epistemic labour and the ubiquity of our dependence upon the words of others.”[[32]](#endnote-32) Not incidentally, testimonial optimism is associated with Christian evidentialist apologetics, phenomenological conservativism, and the unmovably steadfast position its proponents justly describe as “dogmatism.” These view seem at opposite extremes from the broad skepticism about knowledge in domains of controversial views mentioned earlier (Cohen and Sher). I would like to think of our inductive risk-based account as a third option in what Fraser seems right to see as an important emerging debate between testimonial optimists and testimonial pessimists.[[33]](#endnote-33) But as a third option it is not completely neutral between an account that makes for ‘easy knowledge’ even of religion-specific claims so long as one thinks their purported special revelation is more special than other purported special revelations, and a view that is skeptical of that. We should all be skeptical of that, and the specialness of the home religion’s special revelation is an article of faith, not a premise in an argument that those not already predisposed to should accept on the basis of its epistemic merits. Every religious testimonial tradition’s revelation is reliable to its adherents, just as every theology or sect is orthodox unto itself.[[34]](#endnote-34) The self-reassurance of religious knowledge here becomes an article of faith. But there is good philosophical criteria for when a testimonial environment is impacted by malign environmental luck. Cultural chauvinism, gender chauvinism and racism manifest attitudes the commit epistemic injustice to outsiders, and this must be what each religious exclusivist community thinks of all others.[[35]](#endnote-35) Even setting aside apologetic motivations for testimonial optimism, phenomenological conservativism, etc., in testimonial cases generally we have to look not just at the source, but at agents engaged in inquiry, at how to naturalistically describe their belief-forming cognitive strategies, and at their objectively-described inductive context. Only in this way can we assess whether the kind of epistemic luck operating in particular real or imagined cases is benign, or instead malign, i.e., undercutting of positive epistemic status.

3 Trait-dependent Overdetermination, Risk, and Well-founded Etiological Challenges:

The Psychology and Epistemology of our Importunate Presumptions

# “Our eyes see nothing behind us. A hundred times a day we make fun in the person of our neighbour, and detest in others, defects which are more clearly present in ourselves, and we marvel at them with prodigious impudence and heedlessness. *Oh, importunate presumption!*” – Montaigne[[36]](#endnote-36)

Montaigne’s passage describing our ‘importunate presumptions’ captures quite well the contemporary recognition of our common *bias blind spot*. Our obvious psychographic diversity, and the polemical ground dynamics involved in our ‘culture wars’ are compounded on the agential side by the invisibility of our biases to ourselves*.* The judgments we make in ignorance of our own biases Montaigne calls our importunate presumptions, and he suggests a host of practical factors that make them appealing. Along with its denial in favor of exceptionalism, Montaigne points out that the cost of these ego, ethnic, and anthropocentric presumptions is that, sadly, “it comes to pass that nothing is more firmly believed than things *least* well-known.”

This is an ironic caricature of dogmatism and bias to be sure, but Montaigne is noticing persons and groups, and that while the impact of directional thinking on nurtured controversial views is very significant, it’s bearing on well-foundedness is not all-or-nothing. Which of our beliefs can claim to be free from underdetermination/overdetermination? So I agree with Davis (2009) and other permissivists that recognized trait-dependence in the aetiology of belief does not undermine the basing relationship in any sweeping sense: it undermines that relationship only if and when that trait-dependence takes the form of personal or social bias. We will return to specific, scalar markers of this shortly. But when it does *not* undermine the basing relationship then agent reasons competently, and the influence of personal traits need only be regarded as one of the many sources of the faultless cognitive diversity that John Rawls explained as grounds for *reasonable pluralism.* Davis makes the connection between trait-dependence and Rawlsian reasonable pluralism explicit by quoting the deservedly famous “burdens of judgment” section of *Political Liberalism*: “To some extent (how great we cannot tell) the way we assess evidence and weigh moral and political values is shaped by our total experience, our whole course of life up to now; and our total experiences must always differ” (25).

Although many nurtured beliefs may be biased, we cannot assume that all are without begging the interesting philosophical questions.[[37]](#endnote-37) The ‘trait-basing question,’ which asks whether and when trait dependence defeats the basing relationship, requires investigation. In order to investigate it, Davis thinks we should first adequately distinguish simple trait-dependence from bias, in order to compare them. He defines ‘trait’ broadly to include “not only personal traits such as gender or features of one’s personality, but also such properties as socioeconomic background, rigorous training, exposure to certain individuals or groups, subscribing to a certain ideology or religion, or having a certain personal history.”

Differences in people’s experiences, background beliefs, and available testimonial evidences can make robust the evidential ambiguity that affects so many views we hold on morals, politics, philosophy, and religion. The robustness of evidential ambiguity and the resultant need for holistic judgments on the part of agents, in turn impacts both epistemic assessment. We accordingly describe epistemic location not straight away either as bias or as the intrusion of epistemically-irrelevant influences, but rather as a source of (sometimes but not always) faultless disagreement.[[38]](#endnote-38) Consistent with Davis’ divergentism (2015), I take faultless disagreement and responsibility in doxastic as well as sub-doxastic ventures as the charitable default assumption about controversial views. This kind of faultlessness does not imply relativized truth, or the idea of both parties being *right.*[[39]](#endnote-39)

So censure on the basis of an agent’s doxastic irresponsibility is the exception, and has the burden of evidence upon it.[[40]](#endnote-40) But there are many exceptions where censure is well-founded because the agent’s beliefs are *not* well-founded, and these exceptions may readily occur in any of the four domains of controversial views. An etiological challenge has to be mounted domain-by-domain, and case-by-case. Those cases where well-foundedness is especially challengeable are one’s where belief-formation or maintenance flow from a risky doxastic strategy, and/or where the agent exhibits psychological marks of undue inﬂuence by subjective factors. The agents may “mirror” known biases, engage in rhetorical vice-charging, and/or exhibit certain psychological affects like contingency or indoctrination anxiety, or confabulation.

Philosophically, some thought experiments that heighten these effects can be helpful for agents to gain perspective on their nurtured controversial views. What if the agent is rationally convinced that she very likely would see her own actual nurtured belief as *false* had she been nurtured in a different culture or epistemic community? What if the agent concedes she would likely see it as a product of unrecognized bias? Would these outcomes of the thought experiment be defeaters to proper basing? Sensitivity is often criticized as a strong demand, and I am not assuming that it is a condition of knowing. But it seems to track some relevant aspects of reasonableness, despite the fact that the belief of the victim of a *malin genie* that he has a physical body is as insensitive also. My entitlement to hold fast to these metaphysical beliefs in a physical universe, other minds, etc. where all sources of empirical evidence support my causal story may not extend to an entitlement to hold steadfast in the case of more controversial views.[[41]](#endnote-41)

For a culturally nurtured belief to be insensitive, we do not have to imagine radical deception scenarios.[[42]](#endnote-42) We only have to make some quite modally close changes, such as: growing up in a politically or religiously conservative family instead of a liberal one, growing up in our same society but in a different religious tradition; growing up in a different society that has a different majority religious tradition, etc. So it is plausible that sensitivity tracks reasonableness when the closest error-possibilities are nearby, and it doesn’t track reasonableness when the closest error-possibilities are distant.[[43]](#endnote-43) Whatever we can say about the truth-aptness of beliefs in domains of controversial view, and about trusting putative moral or religious experts, it is clear that beliefs in these domains are exceptionally insensitive.[[44]](#endnote-44) But their insensitivity and their causally over-determined aetiology are almost indistinguishable.

Now even if the mentioned thought experiments regarding the safe and sensitive founding of our beliefs are indeed epistemologically significant, does the bias blind spot *allow* agents to see the implications? Does it render them able to see when the attributions of bias or intellectual vice which they readily apply to others, apply as well or better to themselves? The approach taken here is far from defeatist, because I think there is much to be said that can redress the bias blind spot. The numerous indications of bias are a resource for epistemologists, just as they are for psychologists. True, epistemologists are always going to be censuring those who are least likely to acknowledge their importunate presumptions, or to be motivated to re-evaluate their beliefs. Indeed that is *why* we censure what we perceive as bias and circular reasoning: for without a mirror to hold oneself up against, it is almost impossible to see that the ‘inductive finger’ points not just outwards at holders of contrary views, but frequently back at them.[[45]](#endnote-45) It would be impossible to understand that people with contrary views to ours may still be made in our same image; instead they become trapped in seeing their deviance from our opinions as confirmation of *their* bias.

So the problem of motivation to de-bias oneself is one in which philosophers can seek the aid of psychology. The horses I am familiar with do drink when led to water, and if they don’t then I suggest thereafter riding them much harder. But our project here is much concerned with what philosophers can contribute to the assessment of bias and other defeaters to well-founded belief. Here I see a lot of untapped resources. Epistemology can show the *enemy in the mirror* to those who need most to see it, although the act of recognition, since it requires proper motivation, has to come from within.

We have started to sketch an account of well and ill-founded belief based upon low and high *inductive risk.* Our account says that agents mitigate epistemic risk by acknowledging an inductive context and abiding by inductive norms. It says that agents exacerbate moral and epistemic risk by asymmetrically positing themselves or their sources of belief as exemptions to a recognized pattern. In one sense this is really just the philosophical analysis of what psychologists call my-side, or belief-bias. Complementary to discussion of degrees of trait-dependence, I want to introduce overdetermination theory. The problematic sort of overdetermination stems from finding multiple trait-dependent factors each sufficient to produce the target belief. In such cases we have trouble isolating which of these processes actually caused the belief. If the belief somehow is true, we have lost the connection with creditworthiness on the part of the agent.

To develop the inductive risk account further, let’s very briefly take a closer look at two further inductive risk-indicators: confabulation, and merely rhetorical or self-deceived bias-charging. Confabulation is counter-point to contingency anxiety, though they could be seen as two different ways to deal with the cognitive or moral dissonance. As Andreas Mogensen (2017) explains, “Etiological Challenges encourage us to pay attention to notable facts about our belief-forming processes that would otherwise be ignored.” Mogensen usefully gives a name —contingency anxiety— to the anxiety that a person might have who rationally concedes to counter-factual statements indicating that they would in other circumstances have come to hold beliefs that *are by their own lights* wrong, or more to the point to reject as false beliefs that are by their own lights true. DiPaolo and Simpson focus on a close cousin:

Indoctrination Anxiety, on our usage, is something narrower than Genealogical Anxiety, in which an individual is caused to ‘worry that the origins of her beliefs will turn out to be a source of discredit not vindication,’ and also narrower than a more general feeling of Contingency Anxiety, in which an individual is led into ‘a feeling of unease due to discovering that she holds certain beliefs because of arbitrary factors in her background.’ *Indoctrination Anxiety*, rather, is the distinctive sense of unease a person experiences when she’s led to suspect that her beliefs resulted from a systematic program of doctrinal inculcation.”[[46]](#endnote-46)

Where one or another form of anxiety and attendant epistemic humility is appropriate yet lacking in an agent, we can hypothesize that she will be quick to engage in confabulatory explanation. Confabulation is counter-point to contingency anxiety, though they could be seen as two different ways to deal with the cognitive or moral dissonance. William Hirstein writes, “Confabulation involves absence of doubt about something one should doubt: one’s memory, one’s ability to move one’s arm, one’s ability to see, etc. It is a sort of pathological certainty about ill-grounded thoughts and evidences.” More than simple rationalization, “Confabulators don’t know that they don’t know what they claim.”[[47]](#endnote-47) Hirstein gives these conditions:

“Jan confabulates if and only if:

1) Jan claims that *p* (e.g., Jan claims that her left arm is fine).

2) Jan believes that *p.*

3) Jan’s thought that *p* is ill-grounded.

4) Jan does not know that her thought is ill-grounded.

5) Jan should know that her thought is ill-grounded.

6) Jan is confident that *p.*”[[48]](#endnote-48)

Sharp and apparently unprincipled explanatory asymmetries are another key marker of bias. In “You Don't Know me, but I Know You: The Illusion of Asymmetric Insight,” Pronin, Kruger, Savitsky, and Ross discuss psychological studies confirming that people often exhibit “an asymmetry in assessing their own interpersonal and intrapersonal knowledge relative to that of their peers.”[[49]](#endnote-49) We tend to judge others as biased, especially when they disagree with our controversial views. Yet we are more likely to take our own views (and our own attributions of bias) to be bias-free. So perhaps ironically, one place to look for such asymmetries is in “bias-charging” behavior itself. Peer denial through ill-founded bias-charging is a very common but highly dogmatic way to insulate particular beliefs from rational criticism. Emily Pronin and Lee Ross in particular have also suggested broader application of their findings by describing more of the psychology of “naïve realism” that biased trait-attributions often presupposes: “although this blind spot regarding one's own biases may serve familiar self-enhancement motives, it is also a product of the phenomenological stance of naive realism.”[[50]](#endnote-50) Naïve realism as psychologists discuss it is connected with what philosophers such as [Lisa Bortolotti](https://philpapers.org/s/Lisa%20Bortolotti) & [Matthew Broome](https://philpapers.org/s/Matthew%20Broome) (2009) refer to as *failures of belief ownership and authorship*.[[51]](#endnote-51) So psychologists, and philosophers who utilize psychological research are both interested in “the relevance of these phenomena to naïve realism and to conflict, misunderstanding, and dispute resolution.”[[52]](#endnote-52)

Ian Kidd (2016) relatedly points out that vice-charging can either be an encouragement for needed self-awareness and doxastic responsibility in the agent who is criticized, or it can be a strategy of protecting oneself or one’s beliefs from criticism. Kidd distinguishes *rhetorical complaints* and *robust charges*, where only the latter qualify as legitimate modes of criticism: “A rhetorical vice charge involves an agent expressing a negative attitude, opinion, or evaluation of some other agent… but not the presentation of any reasons, evidence, or feelings in support of them, so they do not do any real critical work….”[[53]](#endnote-53) Robust vice-charges require a clear concept of epistemic responsibility, and so “should be sensitive to the aetiology of vice and the ecological conditions of epistemic socialisation.”

Each of these psychological effects might motivate a strong etiological challenge to the well-foundedness of belief. Each suggests the salient causes of belief to be temperamental factors that, if they do not *exhibit*, at least must be acknowledged to *mirror* known personal or social biases. To summarize this section, the study of trait-dependence is vital to the epistemology of controversial views. Trait-dependence appears to be indicative of the overdetermination of belief by temperamental factors.[[54]](#endnote-54)

The beguiling nature of evidence in environmental veritic luck cases is exacerbated by the trait-dependent overdetermination of belief. This appears to be especially so with culturally nurtured controversial views. In cases of causally overdetermined belief, an agent’s belief mighthave been adopted on any one of several different trait-dependent bases, although on an *ex ante* basis the belief is underdetermined by the agent’s actual evidence, evidence which would not rationally convince persons not already disposed toward the belief. Although we rarely treat them this way, evidential underdetermination and causal overdetermination are *paired* theses. The first is a philosophical concept and the second is a scientific one, but the two are conceptually linked. Overdetermination theory is still a largely unexplored approach in debates over the basing relationship. But it is motivated by the holistic nature of people’s reasoning about worldview beliefs, and under conditions of uncertainty and other pragmatic constraints, as Rawls alerted us to. It is motivated also, we have now seen, by some specific psychological studies, research that illuminates how trait-dependent judgment contributes to psychographic contrariety.

4 Conclusion

This chapter has argued for a fairly common-sense view: That our nurtured beliefs being exposed to the epistemic location problem need not undercut their reasonableness or our right to hold them. The bearing of epistemic location on nurtured controversial views is very significant, but need not fall evenly across domains. Nor does it fall on all agents the same, as we need to know more specifics about the sensitivity of an agent’s reasons for her belief in order to assess how seriously to take an etiological challenge. People are not necessarily intellectually vicious for accepting nurtured beliefs and holding them without a great deal of reflection. But neither does such a permissivist account rationalize dogmatism or imply the reasonability, *tout court,* of holding to what we are taught*.* Permissionism should *sharpen* reasoned criticism rather than lead to its abandonment, and the turn to risk and inductive risk in particular, I have been arguing, shows us how. There is faultless or reasonable disagreement aplenty on the present view, but it occurs primarily in minimally truth-apt discourses where the parties to the disagreement *recognize* their discourse as minimally truth-apt. The disputants then take commitments in the domain of their disagreement as requiring a greater degree of epistemic and moral humility than disagreements over straight-forwardly empirical claims or questions. Faultless disagreement does not occur under conditions of self-deception or of bias mirroring. Ways of acquiring or maintaining a belief dependent upon apparent violations of inductive norms are far from faultless, and the beliefs of agents who rely on such methods are especially exposed to serious etiological challenge.

To conclude, nurtured beliefs cannot all be evaluated in a uniform way as conformists and dogmatists have assumed.[[55]](#endnote-55) Our commitments in domains of controversial views, do not deserve to be assessed as ill-founded simply because conditioned by temperament and epistemic location. But our approach suggests that neither do they deserve the free pass (as personally justified and as enjoying positive epistemic status) that epistemic conservatives and epistemic dogmatists issue them on the basis of an agent’s phenomenal seemings.[[56]](#endnote-56)

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Notes

1. According to J. Adam Carter (2018), recognition of peer disagreement implies that “we are rationally obligated to withhold judgment about a large portion of our beliefs in controversial subject areas, such as philosophy, religion, morality and politics.” He recognizes that a thorough-going agnostic suspension or the kind recommended by some epistemologists is open to objectionable consequences of ‘spinelessness,’ and impracticability —the un-livability objection. So he distances his version of controversial view agnosticism from these worries, qualifying it such that it allows for ‘suspecting that’ but not ‘believing that.’ [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Trait-dependent belief is widely acknowledged in domains where informal logic, interpretation, weighing factors or norms, and the exercise of judgment are normal aspects of epistemic assessment. In the acquisition of trait-dependent beliefs, “the subject reasons competently from justifying considerations to a belief, but would not do so if he or she lacked some trait that appears to be epistemically irrelevant, even if the subject and the situation were the same in all other respects.” He agent “would not take those considerations to justify that belief if she had a different socioeconomic back-ground, religious afﬁliation, temperament, political ideology, or the like, even if she were otherwise in the same epistemic circumstances” (23). [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. See Dan M. Kahan (2013) for a discussion of empirical work on motivated reasoning, and (2017) on how identity-protective cognition can generate inaccurate perceptions. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Montaigne, *Apology for Raimond Sebond,* 6. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Sher 2000. See also Mogensen 2017a; Ballantyne 2013; Vavova 2014; DiPaoli and Simpson 2016. Vavova 2018 also argues that evidence of irrelevant belief influence is sometimes, but not always, undermining. It is surprising how little this quite plausible thesis has been systematically explored, but epistemologists of disagreement have been enamored of universalist answers. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. The truth-aptness of philosophical judgments have been challenged in similar ways. See Amia Srinivasan (2015) for a treatment of “genealogical skepticism” about philosophical judgments. Srinivasan’s account overlaps mine where she provides discussion of different arguments for genealogical skepticism and in response to it; more especially, in her noting that, “Epistemologists differ over the extent to which luck plays a role in the acquisition of knowledge. All epistemologists will agree that luck has some role to play... Where epistemologists disagree is on just how much knowledge we can acquire through good luck” (347). The Tess case (below) will argue that this is a matter of the *kinds* of luck in play, and not merely the domain. I thank Adam Carter for bringing similarities with Srinivasan’s learned paper to my attention. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. It is hard to say, for instance, just what the conclusion of Mill’s argument about the “London Churchman” in *On Liberty* is. Bogardus (2013) very plausibly suggests that the alleged wrong—and the basic reason for contingency anxiety— is a violation of safety. “For Mill, there are nearby possibilities in which one forms religious beliefs via the same method she actually used, and yet in which she would believe something which is, by her own lights, false.” But it also seems to involve failure of sensitivity. See also Ballantyne (2013) and Baker-Hitch (2014). [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. DiPaolo and Simpson (2016). They bid philosophers to more carefully investigate the question, “How does recognition of the contingent cultural etiology of one’s beliefs affect their epistemic standing?” See also Simpson (2017). [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Ballantyne 2015, 159. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. *Counter-induction is defined in dictionaries as a strategy that whether self-consciously or not reverses the normal logic of induction.* In its most formal sense, counter-inductive thinking is something much more specific than weak inductive reasoning. It is not just weak analogy, weak causal inference, or faulty generalization, to refer to the three forms of inductive reasoning, analogical, causal, and generalization. Rather, counter-inductive inference is the logically illicit move of reasoning *oppositely* to what induction suggests. For our purposes it is more simply a logical failing to apply to one’s self (or to one’s own epistemic situation) an explanation that one recognizes as applying to others (and others’ epistemic situations). [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. I prefer to interpret well-foundedness broadly enough to indicate plural kinds of epistemic assessment. Where it might indicate merely subjective justification, or a sense of rationality or personal justification related deriving from ‘synchronic evidential fit,’ objective factors are obscured from view and I can no longer find it a very interesting concept. Well-foundedness cannot mean such a subjective status as personal or subjective justification, cut off from causal etiology and objective justification, without losing its philosophical interest. Thanks to Ru Ye for pointing out the need for me to say more about well-foundedness. See Axtell (2011) for a fuller critique of the evidentialist way of construing grounding, which fixates on ‘synchronic evidential fit’ as answering questions both about agent rationality and about epistemic assessment. Actually that concept can answer neither of these concerns. I portray it as an answer in search of a question. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. It may be that the traditional project of analysis shows that people “know” far less than they imagine. I suspect this is true, but it is a question in the project of analysis, and I do not see the connections which others would make that one therefore should not *believe.* The language of being rationally obligated to withhold judgment but to adopt only a lesser doxastic attitude than belief, is a language that I suspect is objectionably voluntaristic. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. To accommodate the unlivability objection to principled agnosticism, Carter expands the connotation of “agnosticism” to include the sub-doxastic attitude of ‘suspecting that,’ when conditions are right. But in this prescription, much like Feldman, there is still assumed a single right response to revealed peer disagreement among controversial views: agnosticism. Like Feldman it appears that Carter’s categories of doxastic attitudes are still essentially treated deontologically, since they line up with epistemic duties or entitlements. These are things denied by permissivists like myself. See especially the work of Thomas Kelly, and [Matthew Kopec](https://philpapers.org/s/Matthew%20Kopec) and [Michael Titelbaum](https://philpapers.org/s/Michael%20G.%20Titelbaum). [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. In defence of permissivism, see especially Kelly (2013), Booth and Peels (2014), and Kopec and Titelbaum (2016). Virtue theory in contrast to internalist evidentialism I take to be champion of *diachronic* norms*,* viz., the axiological-etiological or forward/backwards spectrum. For my own virtue-theoretic account of permissivism, which I term *doxastic responsibilism,* see Axtell (2013 and 2018). [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Principled agnosticism has seemed to its critics to prohibit actions where an act is forced. I do not want to stray very far into questions of guidance-giving, since I take the norms that should inform it to not be highly commensurate with norms that inform epistemic assessment, or the project of analysis of propositional knowledge. I do not see these projects as very commensurate and wonder what concept of rationality can bear the burden of guidance that one should always ‘split the difference’ with our disagreeing peers, or again that one should ‘not traffic’ in belief at all in the domains of controversial views. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. I have elsewhere (2011) argued that the norms that inform an ethic of belief are typically more diachronic than synchronic, and that guidance-giving takes place in the context of ecological rationality, not ideal agency where the *order* of acquired evidence should make no rational difference as all. Note that the objections I present to Feldman and Conee’s explicitly *epistemic* evidentialism are meant to be complemented by my direct response (2018) to the over-weaning *moral* evidentialism of Scott Aikin and Rob Talisse (2018). Both parties I think mis-apply the *rational uniqueness thesis* to the epistemology of controversial views. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. It is admittedly difficult to say what appropriate deference in one’s reasoning is, and this difficulty is made worse by belief-focused epistemology where synchronic measures of evidential fit are privileged due to the *ex ante* approach taken to personal justification. The highly influential Protestant conceptions of religious faith that are *prescriptively* anti-evidentialist yet also identify faith with assent to belief I take as sufficient to show why this ‘degree lowering’ kind of guidance is of little value in the debate over the rationality of religious belief. Church and Barrett’s (2016) alternative is welcome. They are unhappy with extent accounts of intellectual humility, and so propose a doxastic account on which intellectual humility “is the virtue of accurately tracking what one could non-culpably take to be the positive epistemic status of one’s own beliefs.” [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. I do not want to say too much about the nature of our control over belief, but I agree with Rinard that practical considerations to serve as motivating reasons for belief. See her critique of Feldman and the *rational uniqueness thesis.* Contrasting that evidential principle with the more pragmatism-friendly *Equal Treatment*, Rinard correctly argues that “Insofar as we have control over these beliefs (be it direct or indirect), Equal Treatment acknowledges the moral dimension as highly relevant to the question of what we should believe” (“Equal Treatment for Belief,” 2018c). See also Rinard 2018a and b. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. Booth and Peele, 2014. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. As children of time, we deserve respect for background beliefs and for many other effects of culture. Guidance must be consistent with psychological acknowledgment of pragmatism about reasons and of the ecological rationality of human agents. I would not presume to say that belief may never be permissibly responsive to non-epistemic reasons. We must not forget that we rightly reason holistically, and that as creatures of time as well as of place, we so inevitably ‘live forward.’ Looking backwards, as Montaigne correctly says, is much more difficult for us, and this is where philosophy and the sciences help the most. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. These points are arguably recognized in Rawls’ guidance of expecting much faultless disagreement as an implication of conditions of free inquiry in a democracy. The burdens of judgment are coordinate with sources of cognitive diversity over which we have little control. But they appear to be denied by those whose self-ascriptions of knowledge distain the burdens of judgment, if not also by impermissivists as a consequence of allowing no place for doxastic permissions/invitations not reducible to epistemic duties to believe, suspend belief, or disbelieve. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. Propositional luck is not a form of veritic luck because it is not a type that comes ‘betwixt the agent and the world,’ as is the case in Gettier-type (intervening veritic luck) and barn-façade-type (environmental veritic luck) cases. In Bondy and Pritchard’s explication of propositional epistemic luck (PEL), they write, “S’s belief B is propositionally epistemically lucky iff S has a good reason R (and therefore, propositional justification) for B, but it is only a matter of luck that she does….. All cases of propositional epistemic luck are cases where a subject has a belief which is propositionally but not doxastically justified (though, as we will shortly see, not all cases of beliefs which enjoy propositional but not doxastic justification will involve propositional epistemic luck). There are two ways in which a belief that is propositionally justified can fail to be doxastically justified: it can be held on the basis of a bad reason, or it can be held on the basis of a good reason but in a bad way.” [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. For other important recent work on the turn to epistemic risk, see Carter (2017) Freedman (2015), and Riggs (2008). [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. This differs somewhat from Carter’s treatment; Carter sets up helpful conditions of “centrality” and “symmetry” of disagreement in a domain as a way to distinguish less and more well-foundedness. But he then seems to generalize to these conditions being met in all four domains of controversial views, without recourse to more specifics that might distinguish them. It is unclear to me why a person’s knowing that they are not in the market for knowledge, is thereby rationally from being in the market for belief. Belief *that p* entails believing *that p* is true in some sense, but does not without absurdity entail believing that one has everything else required of knowledge over and above true belief. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. Baker-Hitch (2018, 189) uses a parity approach to argue that contingency arguments like Mill’s will “result in excessive skepticism concerning a range of ordinary testimony cases.” But Mill already mentioned political ideologies in his argument, and we have already conceded that the epistemic location problems affect domains of controversial views. For a deep and provocative treatment of broad parity responses to etiological challenges to knowledge in a testimonial religious tradition, see Quinn (1991 and 2007). [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. Contrariety is something largely lacking is perceptual cases, and this is part of why Barney cases do not aid philosophers in analyzing environmental luck in ways that adequately distinguish it from benign evidential luck. Why is ‘actual trust plus posited truth’ supposed to be a defeater for the importance of testimonial diversity, and not ‘testimony diversity with symmetrical contrariety’ a defeater for rational trust and the right to claim truth? [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. I agree also with John Bishop (and others including Jennifer Lackey, 2018) who argue “against the proposal that faith’s similarities to interpersonal trust merit its being considered reasonable or virtuous.” Bishop argues that “there is an important analogy between faith and trust that is crucial to understanding the content of faith. But the disanalogies between the two sever the attempt to justify faith along the same lines as trust” (Bishop 2014). For recent work on trust, see Faulkner and Simpson (eds.) (2017). [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. As Rachel E. Fraser points out, “Recent epistemological history has inclined towards ‘testimonial optimism,’ keen to stress the division of epistemic labour and the ubiquity of our dependence upon the words of others” (2018, 204). Several authors have explored testimonial pessimism, which takes a more dour view of testimonial transmission in domains of controversial views. See also Howell 2014, and Mogensen 2017b. As both Fraser and Mogensen argue, our dealings with testimonial reception bring in tow an ideal of authenticity that places special demands upon us. I understand the key demand as primarily one to symmetrically apply inductive norms, rather than to think counter-inductively. Charlie Pelling’s (2013) “[Assertion and Safety](https://philpapers.org/rec/PELATA-3)” offers an account that connects a safety condition on knowing with “a safety account of assertion, according to which one asserts p properly only if one asserts p safely. The central idea is that an assertion’s propriety depends on whether one could easily have asserted falsely in a similar case.” This kind of translation between 3rd and 2nd personal (roughly, externalist and internalist) perspectives on epistemic assessment is always welcomed. [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
29. On Pritchard’s ‘turn to risk,’ see his 2017 and recent papers on epistemic dependence and ALVE papers. As a proponent of ALVE, Pritchard does not make sensitivity a generally necessary condition on knowing. Indeed a strong sensitivity condition for everyday beliefs may invite radical skepticism. But I will be interested to try to explain why it does mark out belief formation that, viewed in terms of high epistemic risk, sometimes motivates a serious etiological challenge. It also motivates an inference that contradicts the agent’s own account of reasons for belief: the inference that the belief is insensitive because biased. The agent’s bias blind spot prevented them from seeing that they have no good grounds for denying that the inductive finger points back at them, and that their own belief was about as strongly overdetermined by cultural and temperamental factors as was the contrary belief of their peers. [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
30. Questions of agent culpability I take to go with a theory of doxastic responsibility or epistemic rationality. That theory may well connect with aims of guidance and perhaps censure, *not* with the project of analysis. These I see as separate projects. Indeed I think there are three not two sorts of normativity epistemologists are interested in: “personal” justification (synchronic and diachronic), “epistemic” justification (epistemic ability and any further anti-luck conditions), and “guidance” which may censure, but is purely ideal unless it respects human ecological rationality and pragmatic constraints on doxastic attitudes. So evidentialists like Feldman are mistaken in the first place to treat synchronic rationality as basic to analysis of knowledge, and mistaken again when taking epistemic evidentialism as grounds for his evidentialist ethics of belief. See Booth (2011) in support of the separate projects idea, the ‘divorce’ between the theory of rationality and the analysis of knowledge earlier proposed by Richard Foley. [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
31. What I present is certainly more contextual an account than one where religious apologists and philosophical theologians treat the benign/malign and the evidential/environmental as lining up, but just determinable by whether one thinks that good religious epistemic luck has given them a uniquely reliable testimonial source. This is circular reasoning that privileges the ‘home’ religion without acknowledging the extent that adherents of contrary testimonial faith traditions do just the same. Arguably its social consequences, far from respecting the Rawlsian burdens of judgments, promotes rhetorical vice-charging. I argue in *Problems of Religious Luck* (Axtell, 2019) that it appears to recommend embracing us/them group polemics rather than facing down our bias blind spot or allowing any possibility, consistent with faith, that as far as religious epistemology goes, the ‘inductive finger’ points back at them. [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
32. Fraser 2018, 204. Charlie Pelling (2014; 2013) relatedly argues that there are significant differences between the norms of “assertion” and of “telling,” differences that are often overlooked among testimonial optimists. They need to be treated separately because the norms of telling are not reducible to those of assertion. [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
33. Several authors besides Fraser have explored testimonial pessimism, which takes a more dour view of testimonial transmission. See also Howell 2014, and Mogensen 2017b. My own *Problems of Religious Luck* (2019) also engages this dispute. [↑](#endnote-ref-33)
34. Post-liberals maintain that all discussion should proceed “intra-textually.” Plantinga holds that if Christianity is true then that are no propositional defeaters to warranted Christian belief. But these arguments are both examples of the epistemically circular attempt to justify one’ framework with reference to that very framework. [↑](#endnote-ref-34)
35. Consistent with work on epistemic injustice, I hold that attitudes and beliefs about others can wrong others. But this claim is not uncontroversial. For recent work on this question of doxastic responsibility and its limits, see the journal special edition edited by Rima Basu and Mark Schroeder (2018a), and their paper “Epistemic Wronging” (2018b) which (like Axtell 2013) appears to defend Susan Haack’s (1997) moral-epistemic “overlap” account. [↑](#endnote-ref-35)
36. Montaigne, “Of the Art of Discussion,” in Frame (ed.), 709. [↑](#endnote-ref-36)
37. Davis does not think it is correct to say that traits *consist* of holding particular beliefs, though the trait may *involve* holding some beliefs. (24) A bias in cognition “is a tendency towards a certain kind of distortion in one’s process of reasoning and belief formation.” But in trait-dependence cases as Davis wants to understand them, *ex hypothesi* “there are no such distortions – just the dependence relation… Trait-dependence is not a cognitive distortion unless trait-dependence defeats the basing relationship – and that is the question before us; we cannot assume an answer to it.” (24) [↑](#endnote-ref-37)
38. On the one hand, Davis reasons, it is implausible to present all controversial views as merely biased. Agents can be quite sincere and competent in offering justificatory reasons for their nurtured beliefs, and we often cannot detect overt bias or cognitive distortions in the reasons they offer. Davis (2009) thinks that judgment can be *based* on the considerations the agent claims as her reasons or justiﬁcation even when those reasons depend on personal traits. On the other hand, Davis points out, there remains a deeply worrisome relation between a person’s actually-held belief and the counter-factual consideration that the agent would not take those considerations to justify that belief if his or her ‘epistemic location’ were different than it actually is. I agree with Davis that it is implausible that either on a moral evidentialist or epistemic evidentialist basis, guidance on doxastic responsibility given to agents should demand strict suspension of nurtured beliefs. The treatment both of epistemic assessment and of guidance-giving needs to be more contextual than this, and as I will add, these two forms of normativity need to be more carefully distinguished. [↑](#endnote-ref-38)
39. Thanks to Adam Carter for bring Max Kolbel’s work (2004) and the relativist/contextualist view to my attention. It may be that all domains of controversial views are only minimally truth apt, but even if this is it does not imply relativism. I am using ‘faultless’ in a sense of the bounds of reasonableness. I could concede that that must be some error when anyone comes to a false belief, since we should not reduce error to culpable fault. [↑](#endnote-ref-39)
40. See especially Bishop 2007a and b on how moderate fideism can constrain doxastic ventures. Some degree of failure to apply inductive norms is common-place in our thinking. See also Erik Baldwin and Michael Thune (2016) on the relationship between experiential and testimonial transmission account of warranted religious belief. [↑](#endnote-ref-40)
41. Kevin Wallbridge (2018) argues that while inductive knowledge may not be strongly sensitive, it *is* weakly sensitive. The point is supportive of the importance of the insensitivity of counter-inductive thinking to epistemic rationality or reasonableness, even though I do not take sensitivity as a general necessary condition on knowing. [↑](#endnote-ref-41)
42. Insensitive belief that is not based upon shared facts but rather on private intuitions or other subjective factors cannot claim the same reasonableness as the belief that I am not radically deceived. My entitlement for the latter does not imply entitlement to the former, potentially much more temperamental choice. [↑](#endnote-ref-42)
43. I thank Patrick Bondy for suggesting this formulation of the difference. [↑](#endnote-ref-43)
44. James Fritz (2018) argues that there no easy or compelling root from pessimism about moral deference to steadfastness about moral disagreement.  [↑](#endnote-ref-44)
45. Some will reply that abiding by inductive norms is the council of caution, but that a council of courage is just as or more legitimate in some domains like that of religion. But our account already acknowledges pragmatic reasons for beliefs in CV domains; it targets only self-deception and overt bias mirroring, while allowing some influence of personal temperament, as quite reasonable and permissible. To the principled agnostic it says, ‘Seek your *ataraxia* your own way’; to the political ideologue, the moralist, and the religious enthusiast it says, ‘Seek your personal perfection, but don’t let *your* faith venture risk me or others unjustly.’ Interestingly, Carter utilizes the dual-aims point, but neglects responding to Kelly (2013) who had earlier used it as a central reason to support permissivism *over* impermissivism. [↑](#endnote-ref-45)
46. DiPaolo and Simpson continue, “Indoctrination consists in the use of educational practices that serve to impart something like absolute and inflexible acceptance. To indoctrinate is to ‘teach someone to fully accept the ideas, opinions, and beliefs of a particular group and to not consider other ideas, opinions, and beliefs.’” [↑](#endnote-ref-46)
47. Confabulation is arguably of special philosophic concern when it manifests in connection with the holding of controversial views for which there are strong aetiological challenges. If we fill in that that “believes that p” in the above is a belief *about a trait asymmetry between Jan and another person or persons,* then we can see that asymmetry and confabulation are often found combined. Rationalizing an asymmetric ascription or explanation on weak rational grounds *invites* overt confabulation on the part of the agent, and perhaps the more so as it *incites* psychological contingency anxiety or another form of cognitive dissonance. [↑](#endnote-ref-47)
48. William Hirstein (2005), 209 and 187*.* Compare Lisa Bortolotti: “When people confabulate they ignore some of the psychological processes responsible for the formation of their attitudes or the making of their choices, and produce an ill-grounded causal claim when asked for an explanation”(2018, 235). [↑](#endnote-ref-48)
49. Pronin, [Kruger, Savitsky, and Ross (2001), 639.](https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/?term=Kruger%20J%5BAuthor%5D&cauthor=true&cauthor_uid=11642351) See also Pronin et. al. 2002; 2004. [↑](#endnote-ref-49)
50. Pronin, Gilovich, and Ross (2004, 781). [↑](#endnote-ref-50)
51. The strong connections between failure of belief ownership and appeals to luck should be obvious. [Bortolotti](https://philpapers.org/s/Lisa%20Bortolotti) and Broom argue that “by appealing to a failure of ownership and authorship we can describe more accurately the phenomenology of thought insertion, and distinguish it from that of non-delusional beliefs that have not been deliberated about, and of other delusions of passivity.” Breyer and Greco (2008), in their account of the epistemological importance of cognitive integration and the ownership of belief, hold that a belief is well-integrated in the way that brings abillity and epistemic credit to the agent, not only if the subject *owns* the belief, but also *only if the (real or putative) process or ability is not subject to any defeaters to which the agent has access.* But contrary to these authors, I argue that counter-inductive methods of belief-formation have defeaters of which the agent has access. Disowning grounds for the truth or justification of belief of one’s belief, against inductive pattern, is *itself* a most serious violation of the second condition of the absence of accessible defeaters. [↑](#endnote-ref-51)
52. Pronin, Lin, and Ross (2002), 369. [↑](#endnote-ref-52)
53. Kidd (2016), 183. [↑](#endnote-ref-53)
54. If we were to determine that this is the case with *all* extent beliefs in the domain, then even though evidence always plays some significant role, it might suggest to neutral observers that we are dealing with a domain of discourse that, unlike straightforward empirical domains, is only minimally truth-apt. So trait-dependent overdetermination and the grounds for anti-realism about discourse in a domain, are also interestingly linked. Axtell (2019) also looks at this in terms of what conditions might lead one to legitimately move from a *de jure* to a stronger *de facto* objection. For example, when might one move from a Humean criticism of the rationality of testimonially-grounded belief in one purported miracle event, to a stronger metaphysical or *de facto* (‘debunking’) claim that the best explanation of the epistemic shortcomings of many/all miracle beliefs is that there are no miracles. But there as here I leave the legitimacy of these shifts as open questions, since my point is that there is no *direct* inference to be made, but only an argument based on inference to the best explanation. So my aim is merely to articulate conditions under which they gain in their plausibility. [↑](#endnote-ref-54)
55. See Haidt (2012). Davis distinguishes broad and narrow traits, and argues that one’s belief “is properly based when such traits operate just like broader traits whose basing relationship is not disputed” (2009, 36). Broad traits help one form many uncontroversially true beliefs, and when they do so reliably “are good candidates for faculties, capacities, or epistemic virtues” (30). Getting credit for true belief through well-integrated cognitive abilities is indeed earned credit. It is not credit on the cheap as we find in cases so insensitive and unsafe that “warrant” (positive epistemic status) for the agent would *disappear* if the belief were not presumed true. Plantinga for example concedes that what he terms “warranted” Christian belief would not be warranted, by his own account of the term, were the content of the claim not true. So warrant simply follows the purport of truth in metaphysical claims, and that truth itself is a *felix culpa*. In my (2019) I develop Plantinga’s concession as indicating a self-described externalist apologetic that ‘leans on luck,’ and fails to accept the full implications of externalism for epistemic assessment. [↑](#endnote-ref-55)
56. Examples of philosophers taking these positions are McCain (2008) for phenomenological conservativism, and Fantl (2018) and Tucker (2010) for dogmatism. [↑](#endnote-ref-56)