

## Degrees of Epistemic Criticizability

**Abstract:** We regularly make graded normative judgments in the epistemic domain. Recent work in the literature examines degrees of *justification*, degrees of *rationality*, and degrees of *assertability*. This paper addresses a different dimension of the gradeability of epistemic normativity, one that has been given little attention. How should we understand degrees of epistemic *criticizability*? In virtue of what sorts of factors can one epistemic failing be worse than another? The paper develops a dual-factor view of degrees of epistemic criticizability. According to the view, degrees of epistemic criticizability are i) an inverse function of degrees of doxastic justification, and ii) a function of degrees of agent culpability. The paper develops an account of each factor, and explains how they should be weighted. The paper also addresses the importance of modelling degrees of epistemic criticizability in a broader context. I focus on the role that such a model can play in the *ethics* of epistemic criticism.

**Keywords:** epistemic criticism; degrees of blameworthiness; degrees of justification; ethics of belief; epistemic normativity

### Introduction

A fair bit has been written about degrees of moral blameworthiness and responsibility (Coates 2019; Coates and Swenson 2013; Kaiserman 2020; Montminy and Tinney 2019; Nelkin 2016; Tierney 2019). Comparatively little attention has been paid to a seemingly related phenomenon in the epistemic domain: degrees of *epistemic criticizability*. This is surprising, given that we clearly make graded normative judgments in the epistemic domain. Indeed, some recent work in the literature examines degrees of *justification* (Hawthorne and Logins 2021; Schulz forthcoming; Shogenji 2012), degrees of *rationality* (Staffel 2019), and degrees of *assertability* (Carter forthcoming). How should we understand degrees of epistemic *criticizability*? In virtue of what sorts of factors can one epistemic failing be worse than another?

In this paper, I defend a dual-factor account of degrees of epistemic criticizability. On the dual-factor view, degrees of epistemic criticizability are the product of two independent factors which must be weighted. On one hand, they are a function of how unjustified a person

is in believing that  $p$ . The more unjustified a person's belief that  $p$  is, the more pro tanto epistemically criticizable they are. However, we must also factor in degrees of agent *culpability*. The less culpable an agent is for being doxastically unjustified, the less epistemically criticizable they are. All things considered epistemic criticizability is the result of weighting these two factors.

Developing the first factor, I draw on the familiar distinction between doxastic and propositional justification, and adopt a broadly reliabilist view of doxastic justification. I construe degrees of doxastic unjustifiedness in terms of scalar proximity to an ideal of sufficient doxastic justification. Developing the second factor, I construct a framework inspired by recent work on degrees of moral blameworthiness (Coates and Swenson 2013; Nelkin 2016; Kaiserman 2020). This work models moral blameworthiness, roughly, in terms of degrees of an agent's *difficulty* in doing otherwise, which in turn is cashed out in modal terms. As an account of degrees of epistemic culpability, the rough idea becomes: agent culpability is a function of the modal distance of the nearest world in which the agent's doxastic attitude is sufficiently doxastically justified.

The paper proceeds as follows. Section 1 addresses some preliminaries surrounding what I mean by "epistemic criticizability", how I will operationalize the phrase "more epistemically criticizable", and a point about my methodology. Section 2 develops my account of the doxastic justification factor. Section 3 turns to agent culpability. The latter is considerably more complex, since the modal framework I deploy—while theoretically useful—invites some immediate worries that need addressing. Section 4 discusses the issue of weighting the two factors. With the framework in place, I'm in a position to explore the payoffs. In Section 5, one payoff I discuss concerns the role that a model of degrees of epistemic criticizability must play in the ethics of epistemic criticism.

## **1. Preliminaries**

What is epistemic criticizability? In this paper, I intend to remain more or less neutral on this question. I am inclined to take a pluralist view according to which epistemic criticism comes in many forms, such as pointed requests for reasons, certain forms of rebuke, possibly even reactive attitudes such as indignation, perhaps milder forms of it in comparison with moral indignation. To briefly note an additional option, Antti Kauppinen (2018) has defended a view on which epistemic criticism—of a particularly robust sort that amounts to kind of *holding to epistemically account*—consists in reducing your epistemic trust in a person, and possibly letting them know it. Cameron Boult has given a role to reductions of epistemic trust

in an account of *epistemic blame* (Boult 2020; 2021). Whatever epistemic criticizability is, we can say that it is a status entailing that an epistemic agent is in some sense worthy or deserving of epistemic criticism, whether any one of the forms of criticism just listed, or perhaps something else.

The important point for now is that whatever epistemic criticizability is, it is something that goes beyond being the proper target of a judgment that one is in a doxastic state that is epistemically unjustified or irrational. As I understand “criticizability”, being *criticizable* for an epistemic failing implies more than being the subject of a true justification- or rationality-ascription of the form “S’s belief that p is unjustified/irrational”. The same is true of knowledge and understanding. Anyone who agrees that agents can be unjustified, irrational, or lack knowledge but be “blameless” for it, should be sympathetic with this point (see Ballarini forthcoming, Boult 2017, Greco 2019, Littlejohn (forthcoming), Madison 2018, and Williamson (forthcoming), for helpful discussion of excuses and other exculpating factors in epistemology).<sup>1</sup>

How should we specify the idea of one action, attitude or omission being “more criticizable” than another? Adopting and slightly modifying Sam Carter’s work on degrees of assertability (forthcoming), I propose the following operationalization for the epistemic case:

If doxastic state B1 and doxastic state B2 are both epistemically criticizable, but we would rationally prefer doxastic state B1 over doxastic state B2—considered only from the point of view of epistemic criticizability (and not other points of view, such as utility, or moral criticizability)— then, other things being equal, doxastic state B2 is more epistemically criticizable than doxastic state B1.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> One might worry that I cannot be as non-committal about the nature of epistemic criticism as my pluralism suggests. Perhaps when it comes to assessing cases, our epistemic *criticizability* judgments will be informed by how we understand the nature of epistemic criticism. Consider: if epistemic criticism can amount to a *mere* reduction of epistemic trust, for example, then it may be less clear whether there is a difference in how *criticizable* agents are across pairs of cases (perhaps because whatever changes across the cases does not make a difference to appropriateness in reducing epistemic trust). I am prepared to accept this point. This is precisely why I have placed the constraint on epistemic criticism at issue here. Whatever epistemic criticism is, I take it to be something that goes beyond mere negative epistemic evaluation. The point is to capture a kind of *engagement* with epistemic evaluation that I take to be characteristic of epistemic criticism. In my view, this sort of engagement, whatever it is, partly explains differences in how criticizable agents in my pairs of cases below are. Thanks to an anonymous referee for pressing this issue.

<sup>2</sup> I think there is also a sense in which one state can be “more criticizable” than a state that is not criticizable at all. But this is trivial, and we’ll therefore be likely to have direct intuitions about such cases. So, in such cases we can dispense with this operationalized definition.

As will become clear below, having this operationalized understanding of “more criticizable” on hand will be useful, because it is not always easy to form direct judgments about the comparative epistemic criticizability of agents.

Finally, a note on methodology. It is increasingly common to find examinations of parallels between epistemic criticizability and moral blameworthiness. Many take the parallel very seriously, going so far as to regard epistemic criticizability as a kind of *blame* in its own right (Boult 2020, 2021; Brown 2020; Piovarchy 2021), in addition to drawing conclusions about the nature of epistemic normativity as a result (Schmidt 2021; Kauppinen 2022). The fact that I will be drawing on recent work on degrees of moral blameworthiness in articulating an account of one dimension of epistemic criticizability might be taken as an indication that I, too, take the parallel seriously. As it happens, I do. However, here are two points about the significance of this.

First, I acknowledge that the notion of “epistemic blame” is somewhat controversial. For this reason, I have chosen to frame my discussion in a way that remains neutral on the question of whether epistemic criticism should to be considered a kind of blame. As we have just seen, there are constraints on how I understand “epistemic criticism”, but I take these to be minimal enough to avoid much controversy in the epistemic blame debate. Second, and relatedly, because I want to avoid controversial assumptions about how seriously we should to take the epistemic criticism/moral blame parallel, I have chosen to focus *directly* on an account of degrees of epistemic criticizability, rather than develop an account of degrees of blameworthiness generally, and then show how it extends to both the epistemic and moral domains. It is of course interesting that existing work on degrees of moral blameworthiness is, as I will be arguing, useful in developing an account of degrees of epistemic criticizability. But it is also important that this framework is only one part of a two-factor account. As I will argue in Section 4, there may be significant differences between the epistemic and moral domains in the way these factors ought to be weighted. If that is right, then independently of staying neutral on the relationship between epistemic criticizability and moral blameworthiness, it turns out that a direct examination of degrees of epistemic criticizability may reveal interesting limits to the parallel idea.

Epistemic criticizability plays a central role in a great deal of epistemological theorizing, and beyond. We need an account of what it is in virtue of which one epistemic failing is more criticizable than another. It strikes me as a fruitful way forward to develop such an account with an open mind to lessons we might learn about the relationship between

moral and epistemic normativity, rather than making controversial assumptions about that relationship at the outset.<sup>3</sup>

## 2. Degrees of Epistemic Criticizability: Doxastic Justification

Consider the following pair of cases:

**Smoking Son 1:** Bob has been .8 confident that his 13-year-old son is not a smoker for a while now. Recently, however, he encountered conclusive evidence that his son is a smoker. Unfortunately, Bob can't bear the thought that his son is a smoker. So, he persists in his attitudes, and continues to be .8 confident that he's not a smoker.

**Smoking Son 2:** Bob\* has been .8 confident that his 13-year-old son is not a smoker for a while now. Recently, however, he encountered conclusive evidence that his son is a smoker. Unfortunately, Bob\* can't bear the thought that he is son is a smoker. So, he adjusts his credences only a bit, and remains .5 confident that he's not a smoker.

Both of these doxastic states seem epistemically criticizable in some way. Moreover, the first case seems worse than the second. If Bob continues to be .8 confident that his son is not a smoker, this seems somehow *more* epistemically criticizable than if he adjusts his credences only a bit, and remains .5 confident that he's not a smoker. Put differently, it seems true that, other things being equal, and considered only from the point of view of epistemic criticizability, it would be rational to prefer being .5 confident over being .8 confident in these circumstances. After all, at .5, Bob might be more easily persuaded by further evidence, thus coming to adopt a more accurate credence about his son's smoking habit.

What does this difference in epistemic criticizability consist in? A natural idea is to appeal to approximations to a normative ideal or standard. This is especially natural for the present cases, because they involve clearly specified degrees of confidence. Both Bobs fall short of a degree of confidence they epistemically *ought* to have—namely close to 0 (since both Bobs have conclusive evidence that their son is a smoker). Bob is further from this normative ideal than Bob\*, so he's more epistemically criticizable.

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<sup>3</sup> Thanks to an anonymous referee for pressing me to clarify this methodological point.

This proposal seems natural when working with credal states. But not all comparative cases of epistemic criticizability involve differences in credal states. Sometimes we outright believe things. And sometimes, certain beliefs people form seem more epistemically criticizable than others. For example, we can redescribe our cases as follows. Despite having conclusive evidence to the contrary, let's say Bob continues to outright believe that his son is not a smoker. Meanwhile, with the same evidence, Bob\* merely believes that his son is *probably* not a smoker. Other things being equal, Bob's belief seems epistemically worse. But here, there is no difference in credence to compare with some credal state the agent ought to be in. Bob and Bob\* simply believe different propositions, and it is here (or somewhere in the vicinity) that the relevant difference in epistemic criticizability lies. It seems worse to believe one of these propositions rather than the another. What does this difference consist in?

I propose that the relevant epistemic standard is one that governs how epistemically *justified* the belief is. Strictly speaking, we must frame this factor in terms of how *unjustified* a given doxastic state is, as opposed to how justified, because there can be pairs of cases in which neither agent is at all justified, and yet there is a difference in how criticizable they are. Bob and Bob\* seem like a case in point. Neither is justified, but there is an intuitive sense in which Bob's belief is *more* unjustified than Bob\*'s. Of course, since we are in the business of figuring out degrees of epistemic criticizability, an important distinction between types of justification seems relevant here. In particular, consider the commonly made distinction between *propositional* and *doxastic* justification. On one way of putting things, S has propositional justification to believe that p just in case S has sufficient reason to believe that p. Meanwhile, S has a doxastically justified belief just in case i) S has sufficient reason to believe that p; ii) S believes that p; and iii) S's belief is in some sense appropriately connected to S's sufficient reasons to believe that p (Silva and Oliveira forthcoming). When it comes to epistemic criticizability, the more relevant notion of justification seems to be doxastic justification. Even if a person has impeccable evidence or epistemic reasons *available* to them for the proposition they believe, they may nevertheless come to believe it for other reasons—perhaps ones that have no bearing on the truth of the proposition at hand (such as wishful thinking). Thus, a person can be epistemically criticizable even if they believe something that is highly propositionally justified.<sup>4</sup> What more can we say about what

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<sup>4</sup> See Schulz (forthcoming) and Shogenji (2012) and Smith (2016) for formal models of degrees of epistemic justification; see Schulz in particular for discussion of doxastic justification. See Logins and Hawthorn (2021) for work on justification-ascriptions.

it takes to be does it take to be doxastically justified? There are of course numerous approaches to the nature of doxastic justification. I prefer a broadly reliabilist perspective. Being doxastically justified is not a factive status, but it is importantly connected to the truth. I simply happen to think that reliabilism is roughly on the right track when it comes to capturing the connection between justification and truth.

The basic idea behind degrees of justification as I will understand this notion here, then, is as follows:

S's belief that p is *less* doxastically unjustified the closer S's belief is to an ideal of sufficient doxastic justification.

Notice: it is entirely possible that when modelling differences in the criticizability of *credences*, as we did earlier, perhaps what is less epistemically criticizable about being closer the credal state one ought to be in, is that one's credal state is in some sense less doxastically unjustified. The thought would be:

S's credence that p is *less* doxastically unjustified the closer S's credence that p is to an ideal of sufficiently accurate credence.

What I am proposing is that we understand degrees of epistemic criticizability at least partly in terms of an inverse connection to degrees of doxastic justification. Bob is more epistemically criticizable than Bob\* because Bob is in a credal state that is more doxastically unjustified than Bob\*'s. The idea is even more straightforward when applied to the pair of agents who outright believe different propositions. Putting all of this in terms of a model that says epistemic criticizability has to do with approximations to an ideal or standard, the thought is: S is more epistemically criticizable for being in doxastic state B, because S's doxastic state is further from the ideal of believing only that which is sufficiently doxastically justified.

### **3. Degrees of Epistemic Criticizability: Agent Culpability**

Our story sounds good as far as it goes. But it can't be the whole story. This is partly because the cases we have been considering are underdescribed. Consider another pair of cases:

**Smoking Son 3:** Bob has believed that his 13-year-old son is not a smoker for a while now. Recently, however, he obtained conclusive evidence that his son is a smoker. But he finds it somewhat uncomfortable to believe that his son is a smoker. So, Bob continues to believe that his son is not a smoker.

**Smoking Son 4:** Bob\* has believed that his 13-year-old son is not a smoker for a while now. Recently, however, he obtained conclusive evidence that his 13-year-old son is a smoker. But, because of some childhood trauma witnessing his own father die of lung cancer, he finds it extremely difficult to believe that his son is a smoker. So, Bob\* continues to believe that his son is not a smoker.

This case may introduce some unwanted noise.<sup>5</sup> But I think the following is pretty intuitive. It seems true that both of these agents are epistemically criticizable in some way. But it also seems true they hold beliefs that are *equally* doxastically unjustified. They equally fall short of the normative ideal of sufficient doxastic justification. And yet, in some sense, Bob seems more epistemically criticizable than Bob\*. What might the difference in epistemic criticizability consist in here?

To start, we might resist the need to go further in our theorizing by putting pressure on the idea that these agents really are differently epistemically criticizable. Perhaps some of us will look at these cases and think: “Bob and Bob\* are both equally doxastically unjustified! Who cares about their respective psychologies?” To see whether this pair of cases is an example of agents who differ in their degrees of epistemic criticizability, we must check whether they fit with my operationalized way of specifying degrees of epistemic criticizability. Is it true that, other things being equal, and considered only from the point of view of epistemic criticizability, it would be rational to prefer being Bob\* over Bob in this instance?

Of course, it seems most rational to prefer being neither. But if you had to choose, I think it’s fairly natural to prefer being Bob\*. This might remain unclear to some. After all, again, both agents are equally doxastically unjustified. But consider: isn’t it true that Bob seems to have epistemically failed in a *worse* way than Bob\*? One way to put this is as follows. Bob believes what he does, and for the reasons he does, under circumstances in

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<sup>5</sup> For example, because Bob\* has first-hand knowledge of the dangers of smoking, perhaps he should in some moral or practical sense be more attuned to what he epistemically ought to believe here. While an interesting issue, I think getting into this would distract from my main goal.



which it would have been *easier* for him not to, than seems to be the case for Bob\*. We might say that Bob is more intellectually *vicious* than Bob\*. It seems rational to prefer not believing like Bob does, perhaps because, as a more intellectually vicious person, it seems you would be more likely to epistemically fail in *other ways*, and in other circumstances. Consider: if you do as badly as he does in relatively favourable conditions, what would happen if those favourable conditions changed?<sup>6</sup>

This suggests an important additional factor underpinning degrees of epistemic criticizability—one having to do with agent *culpability*. To model this, I propose looking to some recent work on degrees of moral blameworthiness, which roughly understands degrees of moral blameworthiness in terms of difficulty in doing otherwise. The rough idea is that the more difficult it would be for someone to have behaved in a way that is sufficiently responsive to moral reasons, the less blameworthy they are for behaving that way. Borrowing some ideas from Coates and Swenson (2013), and importing them into the epistemic domain, I propose framing this dimension in the epistemic case as follows:

**Epistemic Difficulty**<sup>First Pass</sup>: other things being equal, the further away the nearest world is in which S’s doxastic state concerning p is sufficiently doxastically justified, the less epistemically criticizable S is for being in their doxastic state concerning p.

The basic thought is, the more that things would have to be different from the way they actually are for S (in order for S to do well epistemically), the less epistemically criticizable S is for not doing well epistemically.<sup>7</sup> Put this way, this additional constraint on epistemic criticizability is in a sense a special case of the doxastic justification factor. But it operates independently. Basically, we are modelling the way *exculpating factors* can mitigate degrees of epistemic criticizability. We are accounting for the way degrees of culpability interact with degrees of doxastic justification—the overall result of which is an agent’s all-things-considered degree of epistemic criticizability.

A few background comments on Coates and Swenson’s motivation for taking a modal approach to “difficulty in doing otherwise” are in order. Coates and Swenson are working with Fischer and Ravizza’s (1998) minimal threshold account of moral responsibility and blameworthiness. The account is complex and nuanced, but the basic idea is that a minimal

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<sup>6</sup> This point is reminiscent of some ideas W.K Clifford defends in “The Ethics of Belief” (Clifford 1876).

<sup>7</sup> This is a very rough sketch of the idea. I will be tightening it up in the remainder of this section.

threshold on an agent being morally responsible for X is that the agent was “weakly reasons receptive” and “weakly reasons reactive” in doing X. These are basically just ways of accounting for the intuition that a minimal condition on someone being responsible for their action or attitude is that they were, in some sense, in control of what they did. The condition of weak reasons-reactivity, for example, requires that the mechanism that produced X in the actual world be such that there is at least one possible world in which that mechanism was responsive to sufficient moral reasons to do otherwise. Coates and Swenson naturally develop this modal dimension of the account to accommodate degrees of moral blameworthiness. Roughly, the further out from the actual world the nearest world in which the mechanism is responsive to sufficient moral reasons to do otherwise is, the *less* morally responsible a person is for their action or attitude. Put differently, the *harder* it would be for the person to have responded to sufficient moral reasons to do otherwise, the less responsible they are for what they did. They lacked (or had less of) the relevant kind of control required for moral responsibility.

Coates and Swenson add some further details to their account having to do with reasons *receptivity* (thereby allowing them to deal with cases involving adolescents (Coates and Swenson 2013, 641)), but I leave those details to one side. They do not seem important for my discussion of degrees of epistemic criticizability. More generally, epistemology is no stranger to modal elucidations of epistemic concepts (such as knowledge (Sosa 2009, 2015; Pritchard 2012, 2015), normic support (Smith 2010, 2021), and more recently propositional justification (Whiting 2020)). So, the complex background of Fischer and Ravizza’s theory of moral responsibility seems at best unnecessary to get into for my general discussion, and at worst distracting.

Here is an immediate concern. Consider a fifth case (everything the same as before, except for new details):

**Smoking Son 5:** Bob\*\* obtains conclusive evidence that his 13-year-old son is a smoker. But he finds it somewhat uncomfortable to believe that his son is a smoker. So, Bob\*\* continues to believe that his son is not a smoker. Unbeknownst to Bob\*\*, a powerful being is keeping watch of his doxastic attitudes, and will do whatever it takes to ensure that, should Bob\*\* make an effort to be more epistemically responsible, he will be unable to do so.

It seems true that Bob\*\* is more epistemically criticizable than Bob\*. But, intuitively, the nearest world in which Bob\*\*'s doxastic state is sufficiently doxastically justified is even *further* out than the world in which Bob\*'s doxastic state is doxastically justified. So, doesn't **Epistemic Difficulty**<sup>First Pass</sup> predict the wrong result here?

What this case reveals is that we must modify our account to avoid spurious modal factors having an influence on the epistemic culpability of agents. I propose the following tweak:

**Epistemic Difficulty**<sup>Second Pass</sup>: other things being equal, and holding fixed the doxastic mechanisms by which the agent's doxastic state concerning p is formed in the actual world, the further away the nearest world is in which S's doxastic state concerning p is sufficiently doxastically justified, the less epistemically criticizable S is for being in their doxastic state concerning p.

By "holding fixed the doxastic mechanisms by which the agent's doxastic state concerning p is formed in the actual world", I mean that we relativize our counterfactual judgment to only those worlds in which Bob believes things on the basis of the "same type" of doxastic mechanism as the one he does in the actual world. Now this of course raises a number of issues. For example, when individuating types of mechanism, we must avoid doing so too narrowly, as well as too broadly. There may even be general issues about the very idea of individuating "types" of belief forming mechanism. In any case, doing so too narrowly, we could end up relativizing worlds to those in which Bob\*\* believes on the basis of *wishful thinking*, for example. The worlds in which he forms a sufficiently doxastic state on the basis of wishful thinking are very far off indeed, so we still end up excusing Bob\*\* for something he is intuitively epistemically culpable for.

We need to individuate types of doxastic mechanism more broadly, with the idea being that they are still in some sense *Bob\*\*'s* as opposed to mechanisms that involve a causal role for the powerful being. Performing this trick is no small feat—it generates the same challenges that, for example, Nozick (1981, 2000) faced when individuating methods in his modal analysis of knowledge, and that Fischer and Ravizza face when relativizing their modal analysis of reasons-receptivity to "mechanism M" (1998). Rather than get into the weeds here, I will simply assume that there is a satisfactory way of dealing with this issue and press onwards. If this is indeed a fatal flaw in the modal approach to degrees of epistemic criticizability, then perhaps we should look elsewhere. If it is not—as I believe is likely—

then it is simply a puzzle for the broader research program that I am more interested in putting on the table. For rough and ready purposes, I will assume that the relevant doxastic mechanism is something like a suite of cognitive processes Bob\*\* typically deploys in forming beliefs about the world around him. This suite of processes can function in different ways. Sometimes it succumbs to wishful thinking; other times it fittingly proportions doxastic states to the available evidence. The idea is to relativize our counterfactual judgment to *this* “doxastic mechanism”, rather than consider worlds in which a powerful being is responsible for Bob\*\*’s doxastic state.

This avoids the worry presented by the powerful being. The issue presented by the powerful being is that it seems to show that, even though the *agent* may have believed in such a way that it intuitively seems the agent easily could have avoided—i.e. they were simply being lazy, or careless, etc.—we can stipulate a situation with a modal profile that ensures it is false that they could easily have been in a sufficiently doxastically justified state. The reason our judgments about agent culpability remain fixed in such cases is because the modal profile of the case intuitively has nothing to do with the agent whose culpability (or lack thereof) we are considering. **Epistemic Difficulty**<sup>Second Pass</sup> has been adjusted to capture this. We simply specify that the further out the nearest world is in which *the agent* has brought it about that they are in a sufficiently doxastically justified state concerning p (whether by exerting a conscious effort, implicitly having the skills, it doesn’t matter here), the less epistemically culpable they are in the actual world for being in a doxastic state that’s not sufficiently justified (to whatever degree).

Notice that this enables us to handle a closely related, perhaps less fanciful sort of scenario. Imagine Bill, who grew up in and continues to live in a very hostile epistemic environment (a cult with very powerful methods of indoctrination). Let’s say that Bill believes that P in an intuitively epistemically culpable way (i.e. wishful thinking, or lazy reasoning), albeit for reasons that have nothing to do with the epistemic influences of the cult. It might seem that the world in which Bill is in a sufficiently doxastically justified state regarding P is really far off. After all he lives in a cult, so, even if he had not behaved epistemically culpably on his own, the influences of the cult would have been likely to trigger epistemically culpable conduct anyway; so, the nearest world is far off in the sense that his entire epistemic environment would have (had) to be different. So, we might worry about whether our account of degrees of epistemic culpability forces us to excuse Bill for similar reasons as in the powerful being case. However, once we relativize our counterfactual analysis to the relevant doxastic mechanisms, this case is no more of a problem than the

powerful being case. Intuitively, there *is* a nearby world in which, deploying the same doxastic mechanisms as he does in the actual world—i.e. some suite of cognitive mechanisms he typically deploys in forming beliefs about the world around him —Bill forms a sufficiently doxastically justified belief about P.

What about cases in which the agent is simply very determined to be doxastically irresponsible? Aren't they *more* culpable in virtue of being so determined? This seems to present another, perhaps deeper problem. It presents a problem because these agents, as such, seem to be classified as *less* culpable by **Epistemic Difficulty**<sup>Second Pass</sup>. But notice that—to remind ourselves of actual human psychology—no one is *simply* very determined to be epistemically irresponsible. We tend to have reasons, or causes, behind our actions, attitudes, and decisions. In this sort of case, much depends on our understanding of why such a person is determined to be epistemically irresponsible. What I want to suggest is the following. On one hand, the more the person is determined as a matter of sheer whimsy or arbitrary choice, the less far off the nearest world is in which they bring it about that their doxastic state concerning p is sufficiently doxastically justified. Intuitively, we can quite easily *not* do the things we do out of whimsy. So, such a case will be properly classified by **Epistemic Difficulty**<sup>Second Pass</sup>. On the other hand, the more that such determination is the product of some ingrained pathology or biological condition, for example, then, strictly speaking, it may be true that the nearest world in which they bring it about that their doxastic state concerning p is sufficiently doxastically justified is far off. But it also seems true that the agent is now correspondingly *less* epistemically culpable for their attitude towards p. The case basically starts to look like **Smoking Son 4**. If so, our judgments should be the same here as they are there. So, again, results are properly predicted by **Epistemic Difficulty**<sup>Second Pass</sup>.

This last case involves an agent who is epistemically irresponsible either out of whimsy or some pathological condition. Perhaps this dichotomy masks a remaining deep difficulty for the proposal. Consider Ted, who just is a deeply intellectually lazy person. Intellectual laziness is simply part of who he is—part of his character, or “deep-self”. Here is another case:

**Ted:** Ted obtains conclusive evidence that his 13-year-old son is a smoker. But, because he just is a deeply intellectually lazy person, Ted continues to believe that his son is not a smoker.

Intuitively, the nearest worlds in which Ted believes any differently than he does in the actual world are very far off—perhaps just as far off as the respective worlds for Bob\* in **Smoking Son 4**. But Ted is intuitively more epistemically culpable for believing badly than Bob\*.

How might we address this sort of case?

I propose the following, final adjustment to the account:

**Epistemic Difficulty**<sup>Third Pass</sup>: other things being equal, and holding fixed the doxastic mechanisms by which the agent's doxastic state concerning *p* is formed in the actual world, the further away the nearest world is in which the following conditional is true:

*if S cared about being in a sufficiently doxastically justified state concerning p, S would be in a sufficiently doxastically justified state concerning p—*

the less epistemically criticizable S is for being in their doxastic state concerning *p*.

By further relativizing to worlds in which this conditional is true, we capture the intuitive difference between Ted and Bob\*. The worlds in which it is true that, *if Ted cared about being in a sufficiently doxastically justified state concerning p Ted would have a sufficiently doxastically justified belief concerning p*, are closer than those respective worlds are for Bob\*. After all, while it may be very unlikely that Ted would do anything other than continue to believe his son is not a smoker, it is nevertheless plausible that the nearest worlds in which, *if he were to care more about the relevant epistemic goods he would have formed a sufficiently justified belief*, aren't very far off. Meanwhile, in light of his childhood trauma, even if Bob\* cared about forming a sufficiently doxastically justified belief about his son's smoking habit, the nearest worlds in which he succeeds in doing so may nevertheless be quite far off.

It is worth noting that this maneuver may help me avoid a related issue that Dana Nelkin (2016) raises for Coates and Swenson's original account in the moral domain. Nelkin takes Coates and Swenson's approach to be on the right track in comparison with potential competitors (2016, 365-66). But she is skeptical of the account's modal approach to *difficulty*. Nelkin addresses Coates and Swenson's analysis of a pair of agents who have failed to follow through on a promise to pick up a friend at the airport. One of them does so because they are incapacitated by a deep depression. The other simply feels like watching their favourite TV show. Nelkin grants that the framework appears to get the right result here,

classifying the deeply depressed person as less blameworthy, roughly, because the world in which they respond to sufficient moral reasons is “less accessible” from the actual world. However, Nelkin argues that there may be agents with a similar modal profile to the deeply depressed person, but for whom it is intuitively *not* very difficult to respond to sufficient moral reasons:

I think we could imagine a third person of whom the same counterfactuals would be true, but who just doesn’t care about other people. He sees the reasons; he just does not care... lack of care might in a sense be an obstacle, and perhaps it is mitigating of blameworthiness, but it isn’t obviously a case of increased difficulty—at least not in either of the senses we have considered here, namely, effort and sacrifice required (Nelkin 2016, 367).

I am prepared to agree with Nelkin that the person who just doesn’t care is not beset by difficulty of the sort faced by the deeply depressed person. However, other things being equal, I also think they are correspondingly *less* off the hook for failing to respond to sufficient moral reasons. Indeed, I think the case can be read as a structural analogue of Ted. It is a case of someone who “just doesn’t care”, as a matter of who they are, rather than as a matter of some pathological, or otherwise “external” intervening influence. As such, I suspect there is a formulation of the framework in the moral domain that can deal with this sort of case. We model both difficulty and degrees of blameworthiness in modal terms, by relativizing our counterfactual judgment to the worlds in which something (roughly) like the following conditional is true:

*if* S cared about being sufficiently responsive to moral reasons concerning act A, S would be sufficiently responsive to moral reasons concerning act A—

Again, the idea behind this maneuver is to prevent an intuitively *non*-exculpating feature of the person’s situation—namely the fact that, as a matter of their character, they just do not care—from impacting our assessment of how “difficult” it would be for them to respond to sufficient moral reasons concerning act A, and, correspondingly, how blameworthy they are for not doing so. All of this said, I am not in the business of defending Coates and Swenson’s

original framework against all objections. I make this observation simply to point out that a potentially powerful worry in the literature is not a threat to my account.<sup>8</sup>

One might worry that while **Epistemic Difficulty**<sup>Third Pass</sup> seems to work for agents like Ted who are deeply epistemically lazy, it won't work for agents who have other kinds of epistemically problematic characters. For example, imagine Susan, who just is a deeply gullible person. We can readily imagine that the nearest worlds in which it's true that, *if* Susan cared about being in a sufficiently doxastically justified state concerning *p* she would be in a sufficiently doxastically justified state concerning *p*, are very far off. Caring about epistemic goods isn't sufficient for avoiding many intellectual foibles. However, I suggest that precisely the sorts of intellectual foibles that can get in the way of the acquisition of epistemic goods *despite* an agent's care for epistemic goods, will typically be ones that mitigate our sense that an agent is epistemically culpable. That is to say, if the nearest worlds in which Susan is in a sufficiently doxastically justified state concerning *p* are far off because, *despite her best efforts*, she's just a very gullible person, this isn't really the sort of thing we would typically hold against *Susan*. My point is that there are traits we sometimes group together with intellectual virtues and vices, or which may even partly comprise certain intellectual virtues and vices, that are more like *natural competences*, which we tend think of as in some sense outside the realm of our control. For this reason, if a person happens to be deeply afflicted as such, and the account classifies them as less epistemically culpable for it, that strikes me as the right result.<sup>9</sup>

Of course, this discussion invites much bigger picture worries about whether any of us is ultimately culpable for anything at all. These are important worries—but, in my view, they amount to changing the subject. I think it's fair to approach this topic without taking these sorts of worries head-on: there is an intuitive sense in which there's a real difference

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<sup>8</sup> Thanks to an anonymous referee for raising this issue. See Section 5 of Nelkin (2016) for helpful responses to some other sources of skepticism about the role of difficulty in degrees of blameworthiness.

<sup>9</sup> In a recent paper, Hanna Tierney (2019) also challenges Coates and Swenson's difficulty account of degrees of moral responsibility. She presents a case in which it would be quite difficult for *S* to *X*, where the fact of difficulty doesn't mitigate one's sense that they are blameworthy for not *X*-ing. She uses the example of a husband for whom it would be quite difficult to keep his promise to do the shopping, because he deems shopping to be beneath him (presumably, this is connected to some deep feature of his character). Tierney takes this to suggest that, in addition to considerations about difficulty, we must allow a separate role for considerations about an agent's *quality of reasons* when determining their degree of blameworthiness. There are clear similarities between Tierney's husband case and my Ted case. Perhaps Tierney's quality of reasons approach would be preferable to my own proposal in dealing with analogous cases in the epistemic domain. I won't attempt to settle this here. One point that speaks in favour of my approach, however, is that it does not require an entirely new dimension of assessment for determining degrees of epistemic criticizability.



between the alternatives I just sketched (a real *modal* difference). The important thing for present purposes is that this difference is properly tracked by **Epistemic Difficulty**<sup>Third Pass</sup>.

Further details may ultimately need addressing. For example, we may need to consider whether a more fine-grained approach to differences between *agential* versus *environmental* exculpating factors is required. For now, I am interested in introducing a basic framework and demonstrating its flexibility and promise. So, I won't pursue these issues further here.

#### 4. Weighting the Factors

We have arrived at a formulation of the dual-factor view of degrees of epistemic criticizability. According to the view, degrees of epistemic criticizability are a function of two competing factors, which must be weighted:

Factor 1): degrees of doxastic justification

Factor 2): degrees of agent culpability

I have spelled out 1) in terms of proximity to an ideal of sufficient justification, where this is understood in terms of how *unjustified* the relevant doxastic state is. I have spelled out 2) in terms of the principle **Epistemic Difficulty**<sup>Third Pass</sup>. I leave it open whether further refinements to that principle are needed; again, perhaps more fine-grained ways of differentiating agential and environmental exculpating factors are worth examining.

For now, we have the remaining important task of weighting. Since the two-factor view has two factors, we need to know how they relate. What is the comparative significance of each factor when spelling out, or accounting for, how epistemically criticizable a given agent is for an epistemic failing? I think it is legitimate to be somewhat vague here because our judgments about degrees of epistemic criticizability are vague. Still, we can give structure to this by way of comparative analysis of some pairs of cases. In a nutshell, the basic idea I want to bring out is the following:

**Basic Weighting Claim:** it is worse to be *more culpable* for believing a less unjustified proposition than it is to be less culpable for believing a *more unjustified* proposition.

To see this, consider the following pairs of cases:

**Alf:** Alf finds it somewhat unpleasant to imagine things being different than they appear; he believes the world is flat because of the way the horizon looks to him.

**Bill:** Because of some childhood trauma, Bill experiences high degrees of anxiety when imagining things being different than they appear; he believes the world is flat because of the way the horizon looks to him.

Other things being equal, we might say that both Alf and Bill are unjustified in their beliefs. But the nearest world in which Bill has a sufficiently doxastically justified belief is much further out from his actual world than is the case for Alf.<sup>10</sup> Alf is more epistemically culpable. But now consider this pair:

**Cecil:** For no reason other than that he heard that Biden is an incarnation of the devil on YouTube the other day, Cecil is .5 certain that Biden is an incarnation of the devil.

**Delf:** For no reason other than that he heard that Biden is an incarnation of the devil on YouTube the other day, Delf is .8 certain that Biden is an incarnation of the devil.

Let's stipulate that it would be equally easy for Cecil and Delf to be in a sufficiently doxastically justified doxastic state concerning whether Biden is an incarnation of the devil. That is to say, the nearest possible worlds in which Cecil and Delf have sufficiently doxastically justified credal states, respectively, are equally far out from the actual world. According to **Epistemic Difficulty**<sup>Third Pass</sup> they are equally epistemically culpable. However, Delf is *more* epistemically unjustified than Cecil. He is farther from the ideal of sufficient doxastic justification (which, in this case, we can stipulate is something closer to a credence of 0). The point I am trying to illustrate is that there is *less* of a difference between Cecil and Delf than there is between Alf and Bill. In some fairly vague way, when it comes to matters of epistemic criticizability, how *culpable* you are matters more than the degree of doxastic justification you have for whatever you believe. I think this is a very natural idea, bearing in mind we are talking about *criticizability* and not *justification* itself. Criticizability can come apart from truth-conduciveness in ways that justification, as I understand that notion, does

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<sup>10</sup> Technically speaking we must relativize this claim in the way specified by **Epistemic Difficulty**<sup>Third Pass</sup>.

not. While this might seem fairly obvious, it is nevertheless helpful to make our comparative judgments about these pairs of cases perspicuous.

I mentioned at the outset that I have deliberately chosen to focus directly on degrees of epistemic criticizability rather than developing a general account of degrees of blameworthiness and then showing how it extends to both the epistemic and moral domains. I noted that one reason for this methodology is to avoid making controversial assumptions about parallels between epistemic criticizability and moral blameworthiness. Here, I want to point out that an interesting upshot of this methodology is that it may even reveal an important limit to the parallel idea itself. This is because the claims I have just made about how the two factors in the dual-factor view ought to be weighted do not seem to extend naturally to the moral domain.

Consider the following pairs of cases:

**Alf\*:** Alf\* finds it somewhat unpleasant to take the long route to work. He can avoid the long route by jaywalking at the intersection of 1<sup>st</sup> and Main. So, each morning he jaywalks at 1<sup>st</sup> and Main.

**Bill\*:** Because of some childhood trauma that took place along the long route to work, Bill\* finds it extremely difficult to take the long route to work. He can avoid the long route by jaywalking at the intersection of 1<sup>st</sup> and Main. So, each morning he jaywalks at 1<sup>st</sup> and Main.

Assume for the sake of argument there are only two route choices in each case—the long route, and the one involving jaywalking. Assume also that 1<sup>st</sup> and Main is a busy corner, and both Alf\* and Bill\*'s route choice causes a fair bit of disruption in traffic each day. Other things being equal, we might say that both Alf\* and Bill\* are unjustified in their route choice, at least the part involving jaywalking. But the nearest world in which Bill\* is sufficiently justified in his route choice is further out from the actual world than is the case for Alf\*.<sup>11</sup> According to a suitably framed, modal-difficulty view of degrees of moral culpability, we might take this to suggest that Alf\* is more culpable for his unjustified route choice. He is in some sense more at fault for jaywalking.

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<sup>11</sup> Again, technically speaking, we may have to relativize this claim in some way similar to **Epistemic Difficulty**<sup>Third Pass</sup>.

Now consider this pair:

**Cecil\*:** For no reason other than that he felt like doing so, Cecil\* decided to steal a random stranger's bike on his way home from work the other day.

**Delf\*:** For no reason other than that he felt like doing so, Delf\* decided to jaywalk on his way home from work the other day.

Let's stipulate that it would be equally easy for Cecil\* and Delf\* to be sufficiently justified in their activities after work. That is to say, the nearest possible worlds in which Cecil\* and Delf\* are sufficiently justified in their activities after work, respectively, are equally far out from the actual world. Again, according to a suitably framed, modal-difficulty view of degrees of moral culpability, it would seem they are equally *culpable* for their respective actions.<sup>12</sup> To my mind, however, Delf\* is more *unjustified* than Cecil\* in his activities after work. He is farther from an ideal of morally justified action (whatever we might take this to be in the moral domain). So, here is an interesting observation: in opposition to our cases in the epistemic domain, there seems to be a greater difference between Cecil\* and Delf\* than there is between Alf\* and Bill\*. Justifiedness seems to matter *more* than culpability in the moral domain. At least, it is easy to come up with cases where this seems to be so. We might take this to reveal an important difference between how the respective factors in an analogous account of degrees of moral blameworthiness should be weighted, in comparison with our factors in the dual-factor view of degrees of epistemic criticizability.<sup>13</sup> If we could come up with some general version of the Basic Weighting Claim, it would not extend equally plausibly to the moral and epistemic domains.

I want to refrain from making substantive commitments in offering an explanation of why this appears to be the case. But one possibility is that there are important differences between the respective values at play across the moral and epistemic domains. Degrees of justifiedness can be understood as a property tracking how well one does in promoting these respective values. Culpability, meanwhile, can be understood as a property tracking how much one is at *fault* for failing to promote those values in whatever way one might happen to

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<sup>12</sup> There is perhaps a natural use of "culpable" that simply means "blameworthy". On such a reading, the claim being made here is obviously false. Cecil\* is more blameworthy than Delf\*. But it's important not to lose sight of how the framework treats culpability as just one factor in an overall account of degrees of blameworthiness. It simply refers, in some minimal sense, to how *at fault* the agent is for A-ing.

<sup>13</sup> Thanks to [removed] for raising this point.

fail. Perhaps there is something about moral value such that questions about the extent to which one promotes it are more important than questions about the extent to which one might be off the hook for not doing so. And perhaps the opposite is the case for epistemic value. I will not commit one way or the other to whether this is so. Instead, I will simply point out that the intuitive differences between weighting considerations in our respective cases across the domains seems to reveal a potential, and important, *limit* on the idea that there are parallels between degrees of epistemic criticizability and moral blameworthiness. As I indicated at the outset, this is one reason why I think it is theoretically fruitful to begin directly with an account of degrees of epistemic criticizability, rather than assume we can make sense of degrees of epistemic criticizability and moral blameworthiness in one fell swoop.

## **5. The Ethics of Epistemic Criticism**

Why are degrees of epistemic criticizability important? What exactly is the use of having a better understanding of degrees of epistemic criticizability? In this final section, I briefly explore one application. Having a model of degrees of epistemic criticizability—such as the dual-factor view—is useful because no account of the *ethics* of epistemic criticism would be complete without it.

What do I mean by the “ethics of epistemic criticism”? I mean first-order normative issues surrounding epistemic criticism, such as: who can be an appropriate target of epistemic criticism, and for what sorts of attitudes, behaviours, or omissions? Who is in a position to epistemically criticize? Is there something like a set of norms on *standing* to epistemically criticize, perhaps broadly mirroring norms on standing to blame (assuming there are such norms)? Should we epistemically criticize one another at all, or might there be other more positively valenced or neutral types of responses that we would do well as an epistemic community to revise our epistemic practices in favour of?

It seems fairly obvious that questions about whether we ought to epistemically criticize someone—as opposed to respond to them in some other way, if at all—can, at least under certain circumstances, depend in part on just *how* epistemically criticizable they are. For example, if you are entirely excused for holding an unjustified belief about X, it may be the case that epistemic criticism is not a fitting response to have towards you. Meanwhile, if person A is more culpable than person B for their epistemically unjustified belief, then it may be the case that, other things being equal, it will be fitting to direct different degrees of epistemic criticism towards A versus B. Indeed, it may even be the case that at a certain

threshold, it becomes fitting or appropriate to direct an entirely different *kind* of response towards someone for an epistemically criticizable failing. For example, perhaps for lesser degrees of epistemic criticizability, something more positively valenced could be fitting or appropriate;<sup>14</sup> meanwhile, in the other direction, perhaps for greater degrees of epistemic criticizability, something even more negatively valenced than mere “criticism” could be fitting or appropriate. Perhaps something like *blame* becomes a fitting response after a certain threshold or range of degrees of epistemic criticizability has been met.

Comparable questions are a growing area of concern in moral philosophy—there is an increasing amount of work being done on whether we ought to revise our blaming practices in certain ways, whether they are more or less justified as they are, or whether we have perhaps even failed to adequately appreciate the ways in which responses like blame and anger have value and importance in our social and political lives (Cherry 2021a, 2021b; Hirji forthcoming; Mackenzie 2021; McGeer 2013; Nussbaum 2016; Reis-Dennis 2019; Scanlon 2008; Sher 2006; Westlund 2018). My aim here is not to get into the details of first-order normative theorizing about the fittingness or benefits of epistemic criticism. It is simply to point out the importance of a model of *degrees* of epistemic criticizability for anyone who wishes to do so.

To illustrate, imagine someone seriously engaged in the project of developing a worked-out *defence* of our practice of epistemic criticism. They have an opponent in the literature—someone skeptical of epistemic criticism—who defends an alternative, positively valenced model: let’s say they advocate for a kind of *epistemic empathy*, for example. Who has the correct view? Obviously, among other issues, this disagreement cannot be settled until we get clear on cases involving differing degrees of epistemic criticizability (among other things, of course). For all we know, perhaps the epistemic empathy view is right for some of these cases, and the epistemic criticism view for others. My point is that, in the absence of a firm grip on the variety of cases that are relevant to developing an ethics of epistemic criticism, we will be unable to properly assess the merits of one proposal over another.

An understanding of what degrees of epistemic criticizability consist in is useful for these purposes—especially an account like ours, which tells us about the role that doxastic justification plays (including the fact *that* doxastic justification, as opposed to propositional justification, plays a role), the role that agent culpability plays (including providing a way of

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<sup>14</sup> Or perhaps in some other way be better, such as having more instrumental value.

understanding degrees of agent culpability in terms of difficulty), as well as how these things should be broadly weighted. All of this puts useful structure on the landscape we are theorizing about. Without this structure, we are left relying on direct intuitive judgments about how epistemically criticizable a given agent is, precisely in a context where substantive considerations about what this amounts to are needed.

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