Wronging in Believing*

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Abstract

What is it for a *belief* to wrong someone? Views that have largely shaped the recent literature on doxastic wronging maintain that beliefs that wrong do so in virtue of *what* is believed. This paper offers some criticisms of these views, as well as a contractualist alternative. On the view I defend here, beliefs can wrong when they stem from inferences licensed by principles to which others would have sufficiently weighty objections. Doxastic wronging, on this account, is not (or is not entirely) a matter of having beliefs with certain kinds of objectionable representational content, but rather a matter of our being unable to *morally justify* our beliefs to others.

1. Introduction

It goes without saying that we are deeply invested in what others believe about us. We generally like it when others attend to us carefully and generously when they think about us, just as we are apt to feel insulted when they jump to less-than-flattering conclusions about us. More than that, we can be materially negatively affected by what others believe about us. The hiring manager who believes that the female job candidate only wants the job for its parental-leave benefits may, on that basis, deny her an important professional opportunity; a shopper might be wrongfully interrogated because of the security guard's suspicion that she is likely to steal.[1]

Can we be *morally wronged* by what others believe about us? Of course, we might think that since a person's beliefs can lead to various forms of mistreatment, those beliefs can be said to wrong others in a derivative sense, or only insofar as those beliefs lead to *actions* that are morally wrong. The hiring manager's belief wrongs the candidate, on this view, only if, and because, he wrongfully denies her the job. Likewise, the security guard's belief wrongs the shopper only insofar as his belief leads to some kind of wrongful interference. But might there be a further sense in which beliefs can wrong? The question at the center of recent work on doxastic wronging is whether someone's belief

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[1] Versions of these two cases appear in Schroeder (2018) and Basu (2019b), respectively.

about another person can wrong that other person, independently of whether that belief in fact gives rise to wrongful action.

A view shared by prominent recent defenders of the possibility of doxastic wronging is that beliefs can wrong others "in virtue of *what* is believed."[2] As Rima Basu (2021) puts it, "[i]t is in virtue of belief's *committing* us to this content—content that represents, in the case of beliefs about another person, perspectival claims about that individual's status in the world—that I conjecture solidifies belief's moral standing."[3] More specifically, these accounts of doxastic wronging are broadly united in the idea that there is a certain ideal for how we ought to regard others *as persons*, in some morally relevant sense, and that beliefs that wrong are beliefs that fail to meet this ideal.

This paper has two aims. The first is to raise some problems for these accounts of doxastic wronging that aim to locate doxastic wronging in a failure to regard others as persons. The second is to sketch an alternative account. On the account I offer here, beliefs can wrong when they stem from inferences licensed by principles to which others would have sufficiently weighty objections. A belief that wrongs someone, on this account, is a belief that cannot be *morally justified* to that person, insofar as the sort of objections that might be raised on that person's behalf to a principle that would permit the inference from which the belief stems are not outweighed by relevant countervailing considerations. (As I'll discuss below, this account offers an extension of T. M. Scanlon's moral contractualism, and so offers a way of thinking about doxastic morality in connection with traditional moral theorizing in other domains.)

A few notes about the scope of this paper before we begin. First, it is important to distinguish the possibility of *doxastic wronging*, our central focus, from the possibility of *moral encroachment* on the epistemic. Defenders of moral encroachment maintain that the epistemic status of a doxastic attitude can depend on the moral implications of having that attitude.[4] As others have pointed out, these views, though often discussed in tandem, are conceptually distinct.[5] My account of doxastic wronging does not have the implication that beliefs that wrong others are those that *epistemically* fall short in some way, and so it does not entail moral encroachment.[6]

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[2] Basu and Schroeder (2019), 181. In recent joint and independent work, Rima Basu and Mark Schroeder have provided accounts of doxastic wronging that have largely driven the recent discussion on whether beliefs themselves can wrong. See, especially, Basu (2019a) (2019b), (2021); Basu and Schroeder (2019); Schroeder (2018).
[3] Basu (2021), 107.
[4] For more on moral encroachment, see, e.g., Bolinger (2018) (2020), Fritz (2020), Moss (2018), Basu (2019c) (2021), Schroeder (2018), among others.
[5] Bolinger (2020); Basu (2021); Enoch and Spectre (forthcoming).
[6] The view that doxastic wronging need not entail that beliefs that wrong are also epistemically defective in some way is at odds with the view developed in Basu and Schroeder (2019), who maintain that if beliefs can morally wrong others,

Second, there are a number of challenges to the possibility of doxastic wronging that I will not have the space to address in this paper. One might, for example, think that the possibility of doxastic wronging entails an implausible form of doxastic voluntarism,[7] or that it gives rise to reasons of the "wrong kind" for beliefs.[8] One can read this paper as offering a way of thinking about what it would mean for beliefs to wrong so long as these foundational challenges can be met.

Finally, I will not focus here on how to make sense of the possibility that *other* attitudes or doxastic responses (like suspending judgment, or failing to believe someone, and so on) might also wrong. As I have argued elsewhere in work on testimonial injustice, failing to accept someone's testimony can, in some cases, wrong that person.[9] My focus here will be on how *beliefs* wrong, but I think that a virtue of the sort of account I provide below is that it can be broadened to explain how other doxastic responses can wrong.

2. Doxastic wronging: Some preliminaries

Let's begin with the following case:

> **SOCIAL CLUB**.[10] John is enjoying an evening at an exclusive social club in town. The club has a racist history of excluding Black people from membership, and John is one of its first and only Black members. That evening, Agnes, a white member of the club, is looking to retrieve her coat. Having spotted John, she moves toward him with her coat check ticket, believing him to be an attendant.

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then "there must be some coordination between the moral and epistemic norms governing belief" (201), and that moral encroachment provides the best way to coordinate moral and epistemic norms. I don't accept the first claim about coordination, for reasons that are grounded in a broader view I have about the relationship between the epistemic and non-epistemic normative domains, which I don't have the space to develop in detail here. For further discussion of Basu and Schroeder on the "problem of coordination," see Traldi (2022).

[7] For more on the concern about whether our beliefs can wrong others if we cannot directly control what we believe, see, e.g., Basu and Schroeder (2019), Nolfi (2018), Saint-Croix (2022).

[8] For more on the connection between moral encroachment and reasons of the "wrong kind" for or against belief, see, e.g., Fritz (2020), Leary (2022).

[9] Crawford (2021).

[10] This version of the case is adapted from Basu (2019c), which is based on the case described in Gendler (2011). The case originates from John Hope Franklin's (2005) personal account of a similar incident. For more discussion of the case in connection with doxastic wronging and moral encroachment, see, e.g., Bolinger (2018) (2020), Basu (2019b) (2019c) (2021); Gardiner (2018).

The key intuition that this case typically elicits is that Agnes's belief that John is an attendant wrongs him, even if she never presents her coat check ticket to John or otherwise makes that belief apparent to him.

What can we say, more broadly, about what it is for a belief to wrong another person? Basu and Schroeder (2019)'s widely influential discussion of doxastic wronging begins by identifying three key hallmarks of the phenomenon.[11] The first of these is what I'll call the *directedness* hallmark: that if A's belief wrongs B, that wrong is *directed*. The idea here is that A's belief is not (merely) morally wrong, but also that it wrongs *B in particular*. Though Agnes's friend might find Agnes's inference about John's status at the club offensive, it is John, not Agnes's friend, who is wronged.

The second hallmark of doxastic wronging, on their view, is what I'll call the *location* hallmark: that the wrong "does not lie in what you do, either prior to, or subsequent to, forming a belief, but rather in the belief itself."[12] This is primarily a negative claim about where the wronging is *not* located: it is not located in, for example, the agent's various epistemic practices, motivations, affective attitudes, and so on, that help bring about the belief, nor is it located in the actions and other consequences to which the belief gives rise. In SOCIAL CLUB, the idea is that Agnes wrongs John by believing him to be an attendant, whether or not, for example, her belief leads her to present her coat check ticket to him, or whether or not her belief stems from broader racist animus.

This hallmark is closely related to what they identify as a third hallmark, which I'll call the *content* hallmark: that "doxastic wrongs are wrongs in virtue of what is believed."[13] Basu (2021) breaks this down into two primary components: the wrong is secured in virtue of the representational content of the belief, as well as the fact that the person who has the belief is thereby committed to the truth of what is believed.[14] In SOCIAL CLUB, the idea would be that Agnes's belief that John is an attendant wrongs him in virtue of her commitment to the truth of her representation of him as occupying a lesser social position than the one he in fact occupies. In another case that Basu (2021) discusses, Grace reveals that she harbors negative beliefs about her daughters, Brianna and Mallory, including the belief that Brianna is a bad CEO, and that Mallory never made good use

[11] Basu and Schroeder (2019), 181-3. Basu (2021) reiterates these three hallmarks, though she provides further elaboration on each.
[12] Basu and Schroeder (2019), 181.
[13] Ibid.
[14] Basu (2021), 107.

of her degree. Basu notes that "her daughters have a legitimate complaint about the picture that content paints of them," because she takes these things as *true* of each of them.[15]

Each of these hallmarks can be clarified in different ways, and so it would be worth distinguishing and then assessing stronger and weaker versions of each. But rather than beginning the paper by setting out different versions of the hallmarks and examining the various objections they would invite, I want to focus in the next two sections primarily on getting clearer on the content hallmark. I will examine the different ways that Basu and Schroeder, in their separate accounts, aim to characterize what it is to fail to regard another person fully *as a person* in what one believes about them.

Before we turn to the specifics of those accounts, consider the following simple argument against the content hallmark. If a belief's moral status (e.g., whether that belief wrongs someone) is grounded in its content, then two beliefs about a person that are identical with respect to their content should not differ with respect to their moral status. But content-wise identical beliefs can intuitively differ from one another in this way.[16] We can easily imagine variants of SOCIAL CLUB in which a person who has the same mistaken belief that Agnes has—namely, the belief that John is an attendant—is someone who respects the attendants and prefers their company to the company of the club's elitist and exclusionary members. In a variant case, suppose that Bert arrives at his belief that John is an attendant in a different way: he has never before set foot in an exclusive club like this and is completely unfamiliar with the dress code, and since John is the first man he sees in a tux, and he believes that only attendants would wear tuxes, Bert comes to believe that John is an attendant. Agnes and Bert both believe the same thing about John, but intuitively Bert's belief does not wrong John, while Agnes's does.

One might think that an account of doxastic wronging that accepts the content hallmark would seek to distinguish between kinds of belief contents—for example, between belief contents that are merely descriptive and those that are more obviously evaluatively loaded. Though we can easily come up with different cases in which the seemingly merely descriptive belief that *John is an attendant* intuitively varies with respect to its moral status (since being an attendant is obviously not a bad thing), it is hard to see how the explicitly racist evaluative judgment that, e.g., *John's race makes*

[15] Basu (2021), 108.
[16] Saint-Croix (2022), 501-2, makes a similar argument against what I'm calling the content hallmark.

him unworthy of membership could. And so, we might think that beliefs that wrong are only going to be beliefs of the latter kind.[17]

Basu and Schroeder don't want to go this way, though. Even those beliefs that appear to be merely descriptive—like the belief that John is an attendant, or that one's spouse in recovery has had a drink,[18] or that Sanjeev smells of curry,[19] and so on—can differ with respect to the kind of representation of the other they constitute in a given context.[20] Whether beliefs like these represent the other as object- or thing-like (for Basu), or whether these beliefs are diminishing (for Schroeder) can vary. In what follows, we will examine more closely what Basu and Schroeder, in their separate work, take those kinds of representations to be.

3. Basu on the objective stance

Over a number of recent papers, Basu has developed an account of doxastic wronging on which beliefs that wrong are beliefs that regard others as object- or thing-like.[21] These beliefs fall short of what Basu articulates as a moral ideal to regard others as persons, which she takes, more specifically, to involve taking up "a stance where we see others as agents who are responsive to reasons."[22] As Basu (2021) puts it, "[P]eople should figure in both our theoretical and practical reasoning in a way that's different from objects. We are how we feature in the thoughts of other people, and we want to be regarded in their thoughts in *the right way*. That is, doxastic wrongs are failures to regard people in the right way."[23]

Basu draws here on the Kantian idea that there is an important difference between the way we regard and relate to persons, on the one hand, and mere objects, on the other.[24] On this view, objects are the kinds of things that we approach through a causal or predictive lens, by seeking to explain and anticipate their behaviors. Of course, we can also relate to persons in this way. But we are able to relate to persons in a further, distinctive way: we can recognize them as capable of setting

[17] See Baril (2022), esp. section 3, for further discussion of the distinction between merely descriptive beliefs and evaluative judgments in connection with doxastic wronging. As Baril points out, evaluative judgments plausibly involve non-cognitive elements, and so an account of doxastic wronging that focuses only on how evaluative judgments can wrong will risk losing its distinctively *doxastic* focus.
[18] Basu and Schroeder (2019), 182.
[19] Basu (2019a), 919.
[20] For more on Basu's discussion of the wrong of racist beliefs in particular, see Basu (2019b).
[21] See, e.g., Basu (2021), (2019a), (2019b), (2019c), (2023); Basu and Schroeder (2019).
[22] Basu (2023), 5.
[23] Basu (2021), 109-110.
[24] Basu (2019a), section 3; Basu (2021), section 2.

ends for themselves, and acting and forming beliefs for reasons, not simply out of physical or psychological compulsion. We can, in other words, regard others *as agents* in a way that we do not regard mere objects.

Basu and others have drawn on Strawson (1962)'s distinction between the *participant* stance and the *objective* stance to further illuminate these different ways we have of regarding and relating to others.[25] The former is constituted by a range of reactive attitudes—like resentment, blame, gratitude, and the like—that are distinctive of our participation in interpersonal relationships. These attitudes register the other as one from whom we can expect or demand certain forms of concern or regard in their dealings with us. Contrast the participant stance with the objective stance, from which one sees the other primarily through a causal or predictive lens, and so no longer takes the other as the appropriate object of these attitudes.[26]

As Basu notes, we are apt to form reactive attitudes as responses to the ways in which others' regard for us are made manifest in their *beliefs* about us, not just in the ways they behave toward us. In cases of doxastic wronging, "anger or dismay is an appropriate reaction to the beliefs in question because these beliefs express or betray moral indifference or insufficient regard. They are responses to a way of looking at another person not as a person, but as an object that is determined by causal laws, as something whose behaviour is to be predicted. It is to step back from seeing them as a person."[27] Drawing on Kant's and Strawson's reflections on the different ways we have of relating to persons, Basu suggests that "what we are epistemically owed, then, could be the adoption of a Strawsonian participant or Kantian involved stance: one that requires believers to acknowledge one another as persons and not things."[28]

It is not clear, though, that the broadly Kantian-Strawsonian view about regarding and relating to others as persons helps to explain cases of doxastic wronging. In SOCIAL CLUB, Agnes does take up a causal or predictive stance toward John when she infers that he's an attendant. But her taking up this stance does not crowd out her susceptibility to taking up the reactive attitudes toward John that are distinctive of the participant stance. Indeed, we can easily imagine that John's perceived good- or ill-will towards her *matters* to her, in that she might well resent him if he rebuffs her request and blame him when he understandably takes offense. Part of what might be at issue,

[25] Other philosophers who draw on Strawson's distinction to inform their discussions of epistemic partiality and doxastic wronging include Marušić and White (2018), Paul and Morton (2018).
[26] Strawson (1962), 9.
[27] Basu (2019a), 922-923.
[28] Basu (2019a), 925.

were we to draw out their interaction further, is her sense of *entitlement* to his attentiveness and help, her implicit *demand* that he not think of her as some kind of racist, all of which would be difficult to understand if we took her as relegating John to a space outside the bounds of moral agency.[29]

Even if the Kantian-Strawsonian picture provided a view about what it is to relate to others "as persons" in our beliefs about them in a way that would help us explain cases like SOCIAL CLUB, Basu's view about *why* we ought to regard others "as persons" in our beliefs runs into difficulties. Across several papers, Basu grounds her account in the following dependence claim: that our sense of self-esteem and self-understanding depends on how others treat us, interact with us, and (most importantly for our purposes) what they believe about us.[30] This is perhaps most obvious when we consider what are often the most central aspects of our identities, many of which plausibly require some degree of social uptake and recognition.[31] Our dependence on others' beliefs about us in the development of our self-esteem and self-understanding means that others' beliefs about us can negatively impact our ability to develop in these ways. Beliefs that stand to constrain our ability to understand and develop ourselves in various ways stand to wrong us thereby. And so, the thought goes, we owe others special care in our beliefs about them, by regarding them *as persons*.

The dependence claim on its own is plausible, though note that it is to some degree in tension with the location hallmark of doxastic wronging—namely, that the wrong of a given belief is not located in its downstream effects or upstream causes, but *in the belief itself*. If beliefs stand to wrong us in virtue of the fact that we depend on the beliefs of others for our self-understanding or self-esteem, then it seems that the potential for a given belief to wrong someone turns on whether that belief is likely to negatively affect that person's self-understanding or self-esteem. And this appears to deny that it is the belief *itself* that wrongs others, independently of whatever effects that belief may have.

Even if the dependence claim is true, it's not clear what normatively follows from it. After all, it is clearly not the case that all of the identities we develop and seek recognition for are plausibly

[29] This point broadly resonates with some observations Manne (2016) makes in her criticism of the view that misogyny is grounded in the holding of certain dehumanizing attitudes (e.g., the belief that women are somehow *subhuman*). As Manne argues, when we consider misogynistic treatment, "it's not a sense of women's humanity that is lacking. Her humanity is precisely the problem, when it's directed to the wrong people, in the wrong way, or in the wrong spirit, by his lights." (Manne [2016], 22).

[30] Basu (2019a), section 3; Basu (2021), section 2; Basu (2023), 5-6. See also Marušić and White (2018), 98.

[31] On this point, Basu (2021) expresses sympathy for Lindemann (2016)'s view that our identities are "pieces of narrative construction that are constituted in part by others' beliefs about us … and thus we fundamentally depend on others" (110).

owed the sort of recognition that taking up the moral standpoint would require.[32] This is perhaps most obvious when we consider people who develop and become invested in identities that are morally objectionable,[33] but the point also holds for a much broader range of identities. A person adopted at birth, for example, presumably does not owe it to his biological parents to recognize them as family when they later come to develop a deep feeling of connection to him. The retired politician who is invested in being a mentor to rising political stars depends on their recognition of her as a mentor in order to develop that part of her identity, but that, of course, does not make it incumbent on them to see her as such.

In cases where we more plausibly *do* owe it to others to cultivate our beliefs in ways that do not hinder the development of their self-esteem and self-understanding, it's not obvious that *what* is owed is a special regard of the other "as a person," in the broadly Kantian-Strawsonian sense sketched above. Consider academic advisor-advisee relationships in which advisees are especially dependent on what their advisors believe of them, plausibly giving advisors reasons to take special care in forming beliefs about them. An advisor might see her first-year female graduate student's consistently negative assessment of her talents and her expressions of self-doubt through the lens of imposter syndrome, thereby effectively *looking past* her student's own sense of her situation and viewing her testimony instead as the product of trying to navigate a challenging environment. To be sure, this sort of interpretation might be unwelcome in some cases. But in others, a diagnosis of this sort may in fact *help* the student achieve a certain kind of self-understanding. The broader point here, it seems to me, is that *which* beliefs best support those who are especially dependent on us need not neatly track the category of beliefs that regard them "as persons," in the broadly Kantian-Strawsonian sense.

4. Schroeder on false diminishment

Mark Schroeder (2018) offers an account of what it is to regard and relate to others "as persons" that departs from Basu's Kantian-Strawsonian view. As Schroeder notes, regarding and relating to others as persons very often *requires* viewing them through a causal or predictive lens. The best way to understand the imperative to regard and relate one another "as persons," according to Schroeder,

[32] Basu (2019a) acknowledges this (929), though it is not clear to me how this point is meant to fit with her view.
[33] Gardiner (ms) discusses a related set of cases: namely, those involving perpetrators of abuse who no doubt benefit from being positively regarded and interpreted generously (see esp. 14-16).

is to see it as an imperative to provide the *best interpretation* of the contribution that another's behavior makes to the world. Doxastic wronging, on this view, can occur when we fail to take up the best interpretation of another person's behavior. More specifically, according to Schroeder, beliefs that wrong are beliefs that *falsely diminish* the other person.[34]

What is it to take up the *best* interpretation of another's behavior? According to Schroeder, the best interpretation is one that "makes your contribution out to be the greatest, along the dimensions of size and value, that is recognizably your own."[35] The goal of providing the best interpretation of others, for Schroeder, is fundamentally an *epistemic* one: on Schroeder's interpretive theory of persons, it is because persons *just are* the best interpretation of their behavior that our arriving at the best interpretation of their behavior *just is* to see them for who they are.[36] An interpretation that falsely diminishes, by contrast, is one that makes a person's "agential contribution out to be less," either "because it is a *worse* contribution," or "because it is *less* of a contribution."[37] Crucially, this is not to be confused with having beliefs that falsely attribute negative properties to another person. For example, even though being good at math is a good thing, the belief that a particular Asian student must be good at math can diminish that student by making her mathematical ability out to be something other than the product of her hard work or skill—the interpretation makes the student's abilities out to be *less* in that way.

Of course, the belief that this particular Asian student must be good at math need not be diminishing. One could, for example, form that same belief on the basis of her math instructor's testimony about her recent exam scores. The belief in this case need not constitute an interpretation of her that somehow minimizes her agency. *What* a person believes, then, is not enough to determine whether some particular belief is diminishing—different people can have content-wise identical beliefs about someone and nevertheless differ with respect to whether their beliefs are diminishing in the way that Schroeder describes.

Even in cases where false diminishment is clearly at play, one need not be *wronged* by being falsely diminished. After all, someone might *knowingly encourage* another person's falsely diminishing interpretation. If that is so, it is not obvious that the person who is falsely diminished has legitimate grounds for complaint against the person who has the relevant belief, something we might think is

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[34] Schroeder (2018).
[35] Schroeder (2018), 124.
[36] On Schroeder's "interpretive theory of persons," a person "is constituted by the best interpretation of what contribution their behavior makes to the world." (2019), 110.
[37] Schroeder (2018), 124.

required in order for someone to be wronged. Suppose, for example, that your new colleague regularly talks about his excellent co-authored work in a way that significantly undersells his own contributions to it, perhaps because he wants to manage others' expectations. In taking him at his word, your belief that his own contributions were fairly minimal falsely diminishes him, insofar as it takes his contributions to be less than they in fact are. But the fact that he leads you to believe as you do seems to undercut the potential for this belief to wrong him. Indeed, he may even *have an interest* in being so regarded, if, for example, he works best when expectations are low.

False diminishment is also not necessary for doxastic wronging. According to Schroeder, beliefs that wrong others are beliefs that impose costs on others (or at least risk imposing such costs). And these costs are, specifically, *costs of error*—they are costs that others stand to incur if the belief is false. But the potential costs of belief are not exclusively costs of error. Consider cases that involve a belief about a person's future course of action, where the truth of that belief is not yet settled.[38] One's pessimistic belief that her spouse will eventually fall off the wagon, despite his sincere resolution to quit drinking, stands to erode the bonds of mutual trust and support that partly constitute their relationship. Her belief plausibly comes at a cost to their relationship, as well as to her spouse. But whether he will falter on the road to recovery is not yet settled—it depends on what he ends up doing. In other words, her belief about his future failure in recovery is not yet true or false, and yet it stands to undermine the relationship anyway.

Note the following general feature of Basu's and Schroeder's accounts that make them vulnerable to certain counterexamples: These accounts have a hard time handling cases in which it might be in the other's interest to be regarded in that way, or cases in which the other is responsible for being regarded in the way that these accounts take to be objectionable. In my view, it is difficult to fully do justice to these important features of particular cases if we are focused exclusively on trying to locate doxastic wronging in *what* is believed.

5. Morally justifying our beliefs to others

I want to develop in this section an account of how beliefs can wrong that departs from the accounts we've considered so far. But my account aims to preserve a key insight that lies at the heart of those accounts: namely, that "we owe people more care in thought."[39] The sort of care that we

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[38] Marušić (2015) explores cases of this general sort.
[39] Basu (2021), 111.

owe to people in our thoughts about them is not, in my view, fundamentally or exclusively a matter of making sure that we form (or avoid forming) beliefs with certain kinds of representational content.[40] Rather, it is about making sure that our beliefs are *morally justifiable* to others.

This account offers an extension of central elements of T. M. Scanlon's influential form of moral contractualism. Let's first get on the table a brief statement of the various elements of the view. Beliefs that wrong others, as I've said, are beliefs that cannot be morally justified to others. When we cannot morally justify our beliefs to others, we have formed our beliefs in ways that accord with broader principles to which others would have sufficiently weighty objections. These are just principles that specify whether certain considerations can be treated as sufficient to form a belief in certain circumstances.[41] These principles are analogues, in the doxastic domain, of the sort of practical principles we might try to identify and assess when we seek to morally justify our actions to others. Many of the objections I will focus on have to do with how the general reliance on such principles would stand to negatively affect others in various ways. And these objections are *sufficiently* weighty when they outweigh the strongest objections there would be to the alternatives.

Let's consider these elements in turn. When an agent believes that p on the basis of a given set of considerations, we can see that agent as forming a belief in accordance with a principle that would permit treating those considerations as sufficient for believing that p. For example, consider the inference Agnes makes in SOCIAL CLUB. Agnes believes that John is an attendant, and she believes this because John is Black and most of the Black men at the club are attendants. In inferring as she does, Agnes believes in accordance with a principle that would permit treating a statistical generalization about Black men at the club as sufficient for believing, of a particular Black person at

[40] I don't want to claim that my account covers *all* of the possible ways that beliefs can wrong. There is obviously much more to say about what is wrong with explicitly racist beliefs and other kinds of prejudicial beliefs, for example (like the racist belief, mentioned earlier, that John's race makes him unworthy of membership at an exclusive club). My goal here is to make the case that beliefs can wrong others when they cannot be morally justified to others, and that beliefs that fail this test of moral justifiability need not be evaluatively loaded on their face. Thanks to a reviewer for pressing me on this.

[41] First, I am thinking of principles that are like those that Scanlon describes in the practical domain—namely, as he describes them, "general conclusions about the status of various kinds of reasons for action." Scanlon (1998), 199. Second, I see these as *moral* principles that specify whether certain kinds of considerations are sufficient to believe that p. But note that the basics of the account here could be adapted in other ways. For example, consider the moral encroachment thesis, according to which the epistemic status of a given belief depends on moral factors. A defender of moral encroachment might hold that the moral stakes involved in a given case can raise the "threshold" that the evidence has to meet in order to count as sufficient for belief. On this sort of view, one could maintain that the relevant candidate principle to which Agnes's particular inference conforms is *epistemic*, and the objections we then consider on John's behalf are objections to how that candidate epistemic principle sets the relevant *evidential sufficiency* threshold. This would be a way to develop the core of account I'm offering here in a moral-encroachment-friendly direction.

the club, that he is an attendant.[42] I want to suggest that if Agnes's belief wrongs John, that is because John has, in virtue of his position in this case, sufficiently weighty objections to a principle that would permit treating a statistical generalization about Black men at the club as sufficient for believing that some particular Black man at the club is an attendant. Many of those objections are grounded in how someone like John stands to be affected by the general reliance on a principle of this sort.[43]

To get a handle on what some of these objections might be, we can begin by considering some of the costs that someone in John's position (a Black man at a predominantly white social club with a history of racist exclusion) might stand to incur. In her discussion of SOCIAL CLUB, Bolinger (2018) identifies several such costs that are helpful to examine. One of these is the potential for such a principle, when generally relied upon, to prevent those in John's position from exercising opportunities to "signal authority and high social status," which would thereby "limit their opportunities for advancement and constrains their options in a way incompatible with respecting their moral equality and autonomy."[44] In other words, treating the fact that someone is Black and a statistical generalization about Black men at the cub as sufficient for inferring that some particular individual is an attendant would hinder the ability of someone in John's position to be recognized by others as a fellow member equally deserving of the recognition and privileges that come with club

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[42] One might worry that there are many possible principles, specifiable at various levels of generality, that license Agnes's inference. Her inference about John is licensed by a principle that permits forming a belief about a particular individual on the basis of a *race-sensitive* statistical generalization (about Black men at the club in particular). But it is also true that her inference would be licensed by a much broader principle that would permit forming a belief about a particular individual on the basis of a statistical generalization. Why do we focus our assessment on the former, more particular principle rather than on the latter?

One reason is that the race-sensitive statistical generalization Agnes makes in this case plays a central role in the explanation of how she arrives at her belief about John. Note that there is a nearby statistical generalization easily available to her that she does not treat as salient, and which would have blocked her from inferring that John is an attendant -- namely, that all (or nearly all) of the attendants are in uniform. (Indeed, as John Hope Franklin himself points out in his account of what happened to him in the incident that this case is based on: "if she would present her coat to a uniformed attendant, 'and all of the club attendants were in uniform,' perhaps she could get her coat." Franklin (2005), 340.)

So, more broadly, we might respond to the general problem here by saying that when we select a relevant principle to assess, that principle should include those features that are explanatorily ineliminable from the agent's actual inference. There may be other ways of determining how to zero in on principles at the right level of generality. Any fully adequate treatment of the challenge will have to provide a way of holding fixed the morally relevant features present in a particular inference when seeking to assess the broader principle. Thanks to a reviewer for pressing me to address this challenge, which I hope to expand upon elsewhere.

[43] Note that sort of objections I discuss here are those that can be raised on John's behalf, in virtue of his position, but they are not idiosyncratic to John in particular. That is to say that these objections are not unique to the particular life circumstances of John; they are objections that others would be in a position to raise in virtue of being Black members of a predominately white and exclusionary club.

[44] Bolinger (2018), 2426.

membership. And this, in turn, stands to constrict the space of opportunities available to someone in John's position.

There are, of course, other ways that someone in John's position stands to be affected. General reliance on such a principle also has the potential to reinforce patterns of racial discrimination and racist stereotypes that obviously put John at risk of various forms of mistreatment.[45] And there are other kinds of objections worth considering here that have to do with the sort of *disrespect* that believing in accordance with such a principle would manifest. As many others have noted about this case, Agnes's inference strikes us as inappropriate, at least in part, because it fails to attend to readily available and relevant contextual information about John other than his race, thereby making his racial identity his most salient and determining feature in this context. And this is just to fail to treat John in a way that respects the full range of his agency.

But note that having objections, even seemingly compelling ones, to certain principles does not make it the case that those objections are *sufficiently* weighty. To determine whether they are, we need to compare the objections we've considered with those that someone like Agnes might have to the alternative—in particular, a principle according to which the sort of features she attends to in this case are *not* sufficient for inferring that a particular person is an attendant. This would then require someone in Agnes's position to engage in further inquiry and evidence gathering before forming a belief. Of course, having to do more work might be a practical inconvenience, as it would take a bit more cognitive effort to discern what other kinds of signals might serve as relevant indicators of whether one is an attendant. But the costs of having to engage in further inquiry before drawing a conclusion seem clearly outweighed by the sort of objections we've canvassed to the principle that Agnes relies on in this case.

It is important to note that not all of the cases that get discussed in the relevant literature are ones that the account I've sketched will recognize as clear-cut cases of doxastic wronging. For example, consider the following widely discussed case:

> **SUSPICIOUS SPOUSE**.[46] For much of your adult life, you have struggled with alcohol addiction. In the last several months, however, you have dedicated yourself to your recovery, and you have managed to stay sober. One night, at a departmental event, a colleague

[45] As Moss (2018) and others note in discussion of the moral harms of profiling.
[46] For the original presentation of the case, see Basu and Schroeder (2019).

> accidentally spills wine on your sleeve. When you return home, your partner notices the wine stain. She believes that you have fallen off the wagon, when in fact you have not.

Does your spouse *wrong you* by believing that you have fallen off the wagon? It is clear why you would likely find such an inference insulting. In believing as she does, your spouse effectively treats a wine stain on your sleeve (something that surely invites multiple explanations) as a stronger predictor of whether you will be successful in your recovery than your sincerely stated commitment and demonstrated resolve over the course of many months to staying sober. Consider the broader principle to which her inference conforms—a principle on which this bit of circumstantial evidence is to be given more weight in determining what to believe than other considerations that are surely relevant, including your track record of having abstained for many months. Relying on this principle in the context of an intimate relationship is also one that comes with clear costs—in particular, costs to a relationship sustained in large part by mutual trust.

But we also need to consider the standpoint of the suspicious spouse. In doing so, it is important to take seriously what so often comes with loving and supporting a person who is struggling with addiction.[47] As stipulated in the case, you have struggled with alcohol addiction for much of your adult life, and so you have some history of having fallen off the wagon—a history that your spouse may well have had to witness and endure alongside you. Given that history, she might point out, hypervigilance is warranted, especially in social settings involving alcohol that might be difficult for you to navigate on your own. Now imagine an alternative principle that would prohibit drawing the conclusion that a person has fallen off the wagon on the basis of the bit of circumstantial evidence available in this case. Being *unable* to draw such an inference might prevent someone in her position from attending to the signs that she needs to be able to recognize to come to your aid.

Here I think we have compelling objections that pull us in different directions. My view is that this case, as it is typically presented in the literature, is under-described. And that is due, in part, to the fact that discussion here often neglects to attend carefully to the sort of objections that can be raised from the standpoint inhabited by the suspicious spouse. A key aspect of the account I sketch here is that it offers a framework for how to think through and compare the objections that can be

[47] See Gardiner (ms), 17-18, for an illuminating discussion of this case.

raised from the various standpoints of those who stand to be affected by the relevant principles.[48] But of course, many cases involve competing objections that are difficult to compare, and tidy or definitive verdicts about them will often feel elusive.

6. A reexamination of the hallmarks of doxastic wronging

On the account I've sketched, our beliefs can wrong others when we cannot *morally justify* those beliefs to others. But a worry here is that this sort of view effectively gives up on a distinctive feature of doxastic wronging—that *beliefs themselves* can wrong others. And if the view gives up on this, one might think that it has effectively given up on being an account of *doxastic wronging* altogether.

It is worth returning at this point to the suggestion I mentioned in Section 2—namely, that these hallmarks can be clarified in ways that admit of stronger and weaker interpretations, and that these would be worth examining separately. Let's now focus on the location hallmark, according to which doxastic wronging "does not lie in what you do, either prior to or subsequent to forming a belief, but in the belief itself."[49]

One way to understand this hallmark would be to see it as a claim about what must be excluded from an explanation of distinctively *doxastic* wronging. On this strong version of the hallmark, the idea would be that in order to explain how it is that A's belief about B wrongs B, we can appeal neither to various factors upstream of the belief, like the reasoning behind A's belief about B, nor to downstream factors, like the various ways that B, or A's relationship to B, stands to be affected by A's belief about B.[50]

But this strong version of the hallmark is surely implausible, as even Basu's and Schroeder's separate accounts incorporate downstream factors into their explanations of doxastic wronging. As we saw, Basu's and Schroeder's accounts emphasize, in different ways, B's vulnerability to A's beliefs about B—which is just to say that the wrong is to be explained, at least in part, in terms of how B

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[48] Scanlon himself is clear on this point about his framework when he emphasizes that determining whether a particular action is right or wrong will require a "substantive judgment" on our part about what the relevant objections are. See Scanlon (1998), 194.

[49] Basu and Schroeder (2019), 181.

[50] This may be another way of articulating Saint-Croix (2022)'s interpretation of what I'm calling the location hallmark, which she calls "evaluative resilience" (495): namely, that whether a belief is an instance of doxastic wronging will be *resilient* in the face of any changes to factors upstream and downstream of that belief. Her paper gives good reasons to think that evaluative resilience is implausible, though she takes this to show that we should focus on what she calls *attentional epistemic wronging* rather than doxastic wronging. By contrast, I think that accounts of doxastic wronging should just give up on evaluative resilience.

risks being affected by A's belief. Recall the discussion in section 3 of the dependence claim in Basu's account—namely, that each of us is dependent for our own self-understanding and self-esteem on what others believe about us. This plays an important role in the broader explanation of how our beliefs about others can wrong them, but appealing to this claim would seemingly violate this stronger version of the hallmark.

An analogy with action might help to bring out just how restrictive this version of the hallmark would be. Suppose, by analogy, that we wanted to offer an account of wrongful action, one that aims to capture the distinctive way in which *what we do* can wrong others. And suppose that we adopted an analogue of the location hallmark, according to which an explanation of how, for example, A's throwing a rock at B in a given context wrongs B *cannot appeal* either to upstream factors, like A's reasons for throwing the rock, his behavioral dispositions, etc., nor to any downstream consequences, like the fact that getting hit by the rock is painful or injurious.[51] It is hard to see what would even motivate adopting such a restriction before we can even get into the specifics of different accounts of wrongful action.

We need not interpret the location hallmark in this way, though. We might instead see it as a claim that the wrong of doxastic wronging is *not reducible* to a belief's upstream causes and downstream effects. On this more modest and more plausible version of the hallmark, the claim that the wrong of doxastic wronging "does not lie" in the belief's upstream or downstream factors is the claim that the wrong is not *merely* a matter of these factors. Returning to the analogy with explaining wrongful action, the idea here would be that the wrongfulness of A's throwing the rock at B is not *just* a matter of A's reasons for throwing the rock, A's dispositions, and so on, nor is it *just* a matter of B's subsequent pain or injury. An account of what makes A's throwing the rock at B wrongful can satisfy this version of the hallmark even if it takes these elements to be explanatorily relevant, so long as the account does not see the wrong as explanatorily *reducible* to them.

Basu's and Schroder's accounts are perfectly consistent with this understanding of the hallmark. And so is mine. First, my account maintains that a belief can wrong someone even if that belief luckily does not *in fact* give rise to wrongful downstream effects. Even if Agnes does not express her belief about John in action, her belief wrongs him insofar as the principle that permits her to infer his status on the basis of his race is one that John has sufficient reason to reject. And so, while my account takes the risks of acting on a belief to be relevant to the sort of objections John

[51] The rock-throwing analogy is inspired by an analogy in Saint-Croix (2022), 510, though I'm putting the analogy to somewhat different use.

might have to the principle that permits Agnes's inference, it does not *reduce* the wrong of Agnes's belief to such effects.[52] Second, it is central to this account that whether or not, say, Agnes's belief wrongs John is not just a matter of what that belief might mean *for John*. The wrong here, as I emphasized in the previous section, is grounded in a comparative fact, namely, that John's objections are *stronger* than the sort of objections that Agnes would have to principles that would prohibit her from inferring John's status on the basis of his race. Third, the account allows for some flexibility with respect to the grounds of objections that John might have to the principles that permit Agnes to infer as she did. In laying out my account, I focused primarily on objections that are grounded in the various ways that John stands to be affected by the general reliance on such principles (e.g., by being denied signaling opportunities, as Bolinger's discussion emphasizes). But as I briefly mentioned in the last section, we can also consider objections that have to do with the ways that inferring in accordance with such principles can manifest disrespect (e.g., by making John's perceived racial identity his most salient feature). It is consistent with the contractualist apparatus that some of the relevant objections arise from concerns that go beyond the expected negative consequences that one might incur if such principles were generally adopted.[53]

In closing out this section, I want to briefly return to the *directedness* hallmark—that is, that when a belief wrongs, it wrongs *someone in particular*. This, too, demands further elaboration. Sophia Dandelet (2023) provides illumination here when she offers the following way of unpacking this claim about directedness.[54] To say that A wrongs B *in particular* is to say that A has failed in some duty that A owes it specifically to B to fulfill. And directed duties are grounded in the interests of those to whom those duties are directed. This is to say that for A to have a duty to B in particular, it must be the case that B's interests stand to be affected by whether or not A fulfills that duty.

The contractualist apparatus offers a distinctive way of thinking about interests and their relationship to directedness. While objections that might be raised against various principles on behalf of the individuals who stand to be affected by them are grounded in their personal interests, those interests are not by themselves sufficient to establish directed duties. Here, too, it is important

[52] Note that, in the same way, the Scanlonian framework focuses on reasons to reject *principles*, not reasons to reject *actions themselves*. On Scanlon's picture, we're interested in being able to justify our actions to others, and in responding to certain ways that others might attempt to justify their actions to us. And justifying our actions, and responding to the justification of others, just is to defend, or to respond to others' defenses of, broader principles on which certain kinds of considerations can be treated as reasons to act. For more on the importance of this distinction, see esp. Scanlon (1998), 197-202.

[53] Scanlon himself is clear that grounds for reasonably rejecting principles are not limited to the effects that the general implementation of principles would have on the well-being of individuals. See, e.g., Scanlon (1998), 214-18.

[54] Dandelet (2023), 235.

to return to the contractualist's emphasis on comparing the strength of various objections against one another. As Jay Wallace (2019) emphasizes, this comparative aspect that is central to Scanlonian contractualism can be seen as providing a way of thinking about how we can get from the *interests* of various individuals who stand to be affected to the *claims* they might have against others to comply with candidate moral principles.[55] In the Social Club case, if the sort of interests that ground John's objections to a principle that would permit Agnes to infer his status on the basis of his race *outweigh* whatever objections Agnes might have to a principle that would not permit her to do so, then John has a claim against Agnes that she not make such an inference. From here we can begin to say more about other characteristics of directedness—for example, that when A wrongs B, an apology on A's part is owed to B, among other things.[56]

There is more to say here about each of these elements. The point worth emphasizing in closing is that much depends on how we go on to clarify the hallmarks that Basu and Schroeder (2019) identify. These hallmarks, which have largely framed the subsequent literature on doxastic wronging, admit of various interpretations, each of which stands to shape, in different ways, what we take the domain of the phenomenon to be.

7. Conclusion

I've provided an account of how beliefs can wrong that is related to other recent work in the literature on doxastic wronging that focus on the idea that we morally owe it to others to entertain certain possibilities, and to resist drawing certain kinds of inferences, when it comes to forming beliefs about others. Catherine Saint-Croix (2022), for example, argues that we can have moral obligations to direct our attention in various ways (especially in our personal relationships), and that it is in virtue of these obligations that failures to appropriately attend to others can wrong them. Sarah Moss (2018a) endorses a moral *rule of consideration*: that in many cases in which you are forming a belief about another person, you ought to keep in mind the possibility that that person is an exception to statistical generalizations.[57]

[55] For Wallace's relational interpretation of Scanlonian contractualism, see Wallace (2019), esp. 178-189.

[56] As Wallace notes in his discussion of Scanlon's contractualism: "It is … a consequence of the contractualist procedure of justification that it grants to certain individuals 'special standing' to complain about behavior that violates moral principles… These same aspects of contractualist reasoning enable us to see those individuals as, in effect, the bearers of claims against the agent to compliance with the principles, and as the persons to whom such compliance is owed." Wallace (2019), 184.

[57] Moss (2018a), 221.

It may well be that something like these particular positive duties of attention and consideration are upshots of the sort of view I've sketched here: if Agnes morally wrongs John by inferring that he is an attendant, then perhaps it follows (per the rule of consideration, or per attentional obligations) that Agnes morally ought to keep in mind or attend more closely the possibility that John might be an exception to the statistical generalization. My aim in this paper has been to provide a very general framework for how to think about how beliefs can wrong, one that may connect with more specific, positive moral duties that govern how we ought to reason about each other. As I've argued above, the framework will not tell us which *belief contents* to watch out for and avoid. But like the other accounts we considered above, it aims to direct our attention to a key moral fact of our epistemic lives: that we have a stake in how we feature in each other's thoughts.

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