

The Epistemic Insignificance of Doxastic Wronging

David DiDomenico

Texas State University

We sometimes wrong others through our actions. Can we also wrong others in *thought*? If it is possible to wrong others in thought, what impact does such wronging have on the norms governing belief formation and revision? For example, is it permissible (or perhaps even *required*) for us to withhold forming a belief about a person if that belief would wrong them?

Recently, some philosophers have argued that we sometimes do wrong others through what we believe about them. *Doxastic wronging* is wronging that occurs in virtue of having certain beliefs about a person.¹ Consider a racist belief directed at a particular individual. Such beliefs can obviously play a causal role in racist actions, e.g. committing a hate crime, but that is not what is meant by ‘doxastic wronging’. A doxastic wrong is *constituted* by a belief rather than caused by it. The idea is that the belief itself wrongs the person it is about, even if the believer doesn’t act on the belief and even in cases where the belief doesn’t cause the person it is about any bodily or psychological harm.²

This paper is about the significance of doxastic wronging for the normativity of inquiry. In particular, I ask: what is the impact of doxastic wronging vis-à-vis the norms governing theoretical inquiry? By ‘theoretical inquiry’ I mean the kind of inquiry whose aim is to figure out what is true and whose late stages terminate in adjustments to one’s overall set of beliefs and credences. In this sense, theoretical inquiry can be distinguished from practical inquiry, or inquiry that is aimed at figuring out what to do and whose late stages terminate in intentions,

decisions, and actions. Some philosophers have expressed sympathy for views about the zetetic significance of doxastic wrongdoing that entail the falsity of what I am going to call ‘Doxastic Purism’, or the evidentialist thesis that evidence alone (and perhaps logic too³) is relevant to norms governing belief formation and revision. Although practical and moral considerations may have zetetic significance, they have no impact on norms governing belief formation and revision, according to Doxastic Purism.⁴ One such view is what we might call ‘Moral Reasons’:

Moral Reasons: the fact that S’s belief that p wrongs is a normative reason for S to not believe that p.

Moral Reasons holds that facts about doxastic wrongdoing are themselves moral reasons to not believe certain propositions.⁵ Accordingly, if my believing that p would wrong another person, this fact is a moral reason to not believe that p. Another view that is inconsistent with Doxastic Purism is ‘Moral Encroachment’:

Moral Encroachment: the fact that S’s belief that p wrongs thereby raises the threshold for what counts as sufficient evidence for S’s belief that p.⁶

Moral Encroachment, like Moral Reasons, locates an epistemic impact of doxastic wrongdoing on norms governing belief formation and revision. Suppose that I am in a situation where forming the belief that P would wrong another person. Moral Encroachment, unlike Moral Reasons, does not entail that there are any moral reasons for belief. Rather, Moral Encroachment holds that moral features can still be relevant to the epistemic rationality of believing that p, it’s just that they play a different rational role than that of reasons. According to Moral Encroachment, moral features are capable of modulating the threshold of justificatory sufficiency.

Is it possible to maintain Doxastic Purism while also taking doxastic wrongdoing seriously? This is precisely the issue I want to address in what follows. In addition to Moral Reasons and

Moral Encroachment, another theoretical option is this: doxastic wrongdoing has no *epistemic* significance. Rather, its normative significance for inquiry—i.e. its *zetetic* significance—arises at stages of inquiry that precede belief formation and revision. This view, which is consistent with Doxastic Purism, is what I will call ‘Epistemic Inertness’:

Epistemic Inertness: the fact that S’s belief that p is morally wrong has no direct epistemic significance.

In the next sections, I provide an argument to support Epistemic Inertness. In short, I will argue that the normative error made by the subject who wrongs in putative cases of doxastic wrongdoing occurs, in every case, at stages of inquiry that precede belief formation and revision. Given the plausible assumption that epistemic norms directly govern the formation and revision of beliefs and credences, this view about the normative errors that give rise to doxastic wrongdoing entails Epistemic Inertness. On to the argument.

2. Zetetic Structure and Pre-Doxastic Wronging

Let ‘Doxastic Wronging’ be the following view:

Doxastic Wronging: the normative error made by the subject who wrongs in putative cases of doxastic wrongdoing is to be found in the belief that wrongs.

In this section, I deny Doxastic Wronging, and I sketch a rival theory that offers an alternative, and better, explanation of the normative error that gets made by the subject who wrongs in putative cases of doxastic wrongdoing.

To begin, there is much more to theoretical inquiry than giving (partial) assent to propositions by believing (or creding). Zetetic structure can be broken down into various stages. *Early stages of inquiry* are constituted by cognitive attitudes and activities like asking questions,

wondering whether this or that proposition or theory is true, etc. *Middle stages of inquiry* involve attempts to make progress in answering the questions that come up at the earlier stage. Such attempts involve collecting data, surveying the evidence, considering possible answers, constructing thought experiments, entertaining hypothetical and real-life scenarios, etc. *Late stages of inquiry* involve settling on answers and closing off lines of inquiry.⁷ Traditionally, epistemologists have been mostly preoccupied with explaining the elements of late stages of inquiry: knowledge, justified belief, rational belief formation and revision, etc. It comes as no surprise that the lion's share of attention in the domain of cognitive wrongdoing has been given to *doxastic* wrongdoing.

In putative cases of doxastic wrongdoing, at what stage of inquiry is the normative error made by the subject who wrongs to be found? Is the normative error to be found at a late stage, i.e. in the belief itself? In something leading up to the belief during an early or middle stage? Consider, for example, the following familiar example of doxastic wrongdoing from the literature:

John Hope Franklin: "In the summer of 1995, historian John Hope Franklin - author of *From Slavery to Freedom* - received a call from the White House informing him that President Clinton planned to present him with the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the nation's highest civilian honor. On the night before the award ceremony, Franklin hosted a dinner for a small group of friends at the Cosmos Club, a Washington DC social organization of which he was a member. He writes: "It was during our stroll through the club that a ...woman called me out, presented me with her coat check, and ordered me to bring her coat. I patiently told her that if she would present her coat to a uniformed attendant, 'and all of the club attendants were in uniform,' perhaps she could get her coat" (Franklin 2005, p. 340)."⁸

The relevant background information is this: the members of the Cosmos Club are predominantly white while the staff attendants are predominantly black. John Hope Franklin is black, and the woman's belief that he is an attendant is the result of racial profiling. Is the woman's error *believing* that John Hope Franklin is a staff attendant? Suppose that instead of outright believing that John Hope Franklin is an attendant, the woman merely *wonders* whether he is an attendant, and she walks up to him and asks, "Are you taking coats tonight?" It's plausible that if the *belief* that he is an attendant—when rooted in a thought process of racial profiling—wrongs him, then the interrogative attitude of *wondering* whether he is an attendant—when rooted in a thought process of racial profiling—also wrongs him.⁹ Such an act of wondering doesn't have to be a result of racial profiling, but it can be, and when it is, doesn't such wondering, just like believing, have the potential to wrong?

This observation naturally lends itself to the view that it is *something leading up to the belief* that constitutes the normative error rather than the belief itself. It remains an open question whether individual attitudes can ever constitute normative errors all on their own. Reflection on cases suggests that identifying an instance of doxastic wronging requires us to zoom out from individual beliefs and look at the process that leads up to the belief that wrongs. We can see this most clearly by reflecting on *same-belief-different-basis* cases:

Thirsty Profiler: Kyle is at a fancy restaurant enjoying the food and ambience. He would like some more water. He looks to see if there are any waiters around. Kyle sees a young black woman standing in the corner and he forms the belief that she is a waitress after considering the woman's race and drawing on statistical generalizations about race and service work.

Just Thirsty: Monique is at a fancy restaurant enjoying the food and ambience. She would like some more water. She looks to see if there are any waiters around. Monique sees a young black woman who is wearing an apron emerge from the kitchen while carrying two carafes of water. She forms the belief that she is a waitress after considering the woman's waitress-like presentation and behavior in the restaurant.

In *Thirsty Profiler*, Kyle seems to doxastically wrong the young woman. His thought process constitutes a morally objectionable form of racial profiling. In *Just Thirsty*, Monique forms a relevantly similar belief as Kyle—a belief that *that woman is a waitress*—but Monique does not seem to doxastically wrong the woman. Some commentators argue that the contrast here suggests that the moral status of a belief depends on the evidential position of the believer.¹⁰ Although this is a worthwhile point, the contrast brought out by same-belief-different-basis cases also suggests the possibility that the normative errors that result in doxastic wronging do not lie in the beliefs themselves but rather in something leading up to the belief. I will refer to this possibility as follows:

Pre-Doxastic Wronging: the normative error made by the subject who wrongs in putative cases of doxastic wronging necessarily occurs during early and middle stages of inquiry.¹¹

There are various kinds of error that can arise during early and middle stages of inquiry. In the John Hope Franklin case described above, for example, the error might be that the woman failed to consider the possibility that 'that man is a staff attendant' only seemed true to her because of the color of his skin. The error could be an *omissive failure*, or a failure to do something that one should have done while inquiring—e.g., consider a relevant possibility, ignore a biased body of information, etc.¹² That she failed to consider the relevant possibility that 'that man is an

exception to the stereotype generalization' is a plausible candidate for the normative error that she makes. In the next section, I offer two arguments in support of Pre-Doxastic Wronging.

3. In Defense of Epistemic Inertness: Pre-Doxastic Wronging

The first argument is that Pre-Doxastic Wronging affords a practical upshot over Doxastic Wronging. The upshot is this: Pre-Doxastic Wronging allows for a smoother integration of commonsense action-guiding principles with abstract normative theorizing.¹³ To see this practical upshot, consider the following problem that arises for Doxastic Wronging: the *problem of control*.¹⁴ This is the problem of explaining how we can wrong others through our beliefs when our beliefs are not under voluntary control. We have good reason to believe that beliefs are not subject to voluntary control, but we also have good reason to believe that pre-doxastic constituents of inquiry like asking questions, considering possible answers, collecting evidence, etc. *are* subject to voluntary control, and so they are better candidates for normative error than are beliefs. For example, if I notice that I am failing to consider the relevant possibility that this man is an exception to a statistical generalization about black men, I can exert control over my thought process by considering it. In this way, Pre-Doxastic Wronging coheres better with what we already have good reason to believe about the degree of control we have over basic constituents of inquiry.¹⁵ In short, the problem of control does not arise for Pre-Doxastic Wronging.

This virtue of Pre-Doxastic Wronging is worth elaboration. It is easy to see how it is possible to try one's best to ignore race as a factor when trying to determine who the staff attendants are at a fancy club. But what practical counsel is smoothly integrated with Doxastic Wronging? If the problem of control really is a problem, then Doxastic Wronging (and the

theories of the zetetic significance of doxastic wronging that assume it) do not afford much practical advice for avoiding doxastic wronging. For example, putative moral reasons to believe that p are, on their own, incapable of moving us toward actually believing that p. That is, even if I believe I have a moral reason to believe that p, I nevertheless am incapable of using that reason as a premise in reasoning toward the belief that p. And what of Moral Encroachment? ‘Collect more evidence before making judgments about people when those judgments are likely to wrong them’. This doesn't give the thinker in the John Hope Franklin case the sound practical advice they need because it misdiagnoses the error. Collecting more evidence won't make them less susceptible to racial profiling.

The second argument in support of Pre-Doxastic Wronging is that it affords a cleaner epistemology of inquiry than that afforded by Moral Reasons and Moral Encroachment. To see this, consider another main problem for Doxastic Wronging: the *problem of coordination*. This is the problem of explaining how moral considerations and traditional epistemic considerations coordinate with one another to determine what a subject ought to believe, all things considered.¹⁶ If, for example, moral reasons can make a belief wrong without affecting the evidence, what coordinates moral and epistemic standards governing belief? Just like the problem of control, the problem of coordination can be sidestepped by embracing Pre-Doxastic Wronging. Pre-Doxastic Wronging is consistent with the traditional epistemological view that answers to questions are to be settled in whatever way is best supported by the evidence and that epistemic relations between evidential reasons and the beliefs for which they are reasons are what they are independently of the moral and practical standards governing early and middle stages of inquiry. Insofar as Pre-Doxastic Wronging can sidestep both the problem of control and the problem of

coordination, it provides a better explanation of the source of normative error in putative cases of doxastic wrongdoing.

One further reason to endorse Pre-Doxastic Wronging is that it casts a wider explanatory net than Doxastic Wronging. Whereas Doxastic Wronging can only explain the normative error in cases where a doxastic attitude is formed, Pre-Doxastic Wronging can explain both the normative error in cases where such an attitude is formed—e.g., the original John Hope Franklin case described above—and in cases where no explicit doxastic attitude is formed—e.g., the revised case where the woman merely wonders whether John Hope Franklin is a staff attendant. In either case, the normative error consists in the woman either doing something she shouldn't (racially profiling John Hope Franklin) or failing to do something that she should (consider the possibility that he might be an exception to the stereotype generalization) during early and middle stages of inquiry. One might be tempted to think that Pre-Doxastic Wronging fails to explain the distinctive error that occurs when the woman *settles* on an answer to the question like 'Is he a staff member?' But this temptation ought to be resisted. There is no *further* error constituted by the settling itself. At this late stage of inquiry, the normative error has already been committed at the earlier stage. Indeed, the answers that a subject settles on often bear the traces of the careless errors that can occur at earlier stages of inquiry, but there is no further error that arises at the stage of settling, at least not one that results in a novel cognitive wrong that isn't explained by the earlier error.

4. Conclusion

The main argument that I have defended in this paper runs as follows:

(1) The normative error made by the subject who wrongs in putative cases of doxastic wrongdoing necessarily occurs during early and middle stages of inquiry.

(2) Epistemic norms directly govern the formation and revision of beliefs and credences.

Therefore,

(3) The fact that S's belief that p is morally wrong has no direct epistemic significance.

I defended the first premise by appealing to the explanatory advantages of Pre-Doxastic Wronging over Doxastic Wronging. The second premise is a plausible claim about the nature of epistemic norms. Epistemic Inertness and Pre-Doxastic Wronging offer a package deal that is consistent with Doxastic Purism, an evidentialist thesis that many will find independently attractive. Moreover, the package allows for a smoother integration of commonsense practical wisdom with abstract normative theorizing about inquiry.

Works Cited

- Adler, J. (2002). *Belief's Own Ethics*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.
- Basu, R. (2018). Can Beliefs Wrong? *Philosophical Topics* 46 (1):1-17.
- Basu, R. & Schroeder, M. (2019). Doxastic Wronging. In Brian Kim & Matthew McGrath (eds.), *Pragmatic Encroachment in Epistemology* (pp. 181-205). Routledge.
- Berker, S. (2018). A Combinatorial Argument against Practical Reasons for Belief. *Analytic Philosophy* 59: 427–70.
- Conee, E. & Feldman, R. (2004). *Evidentialism: essays in epistemology*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Dandelet, S. (2023) Doxastic Wronging and Evidentialism. *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 101(1): 82-95.

Enoch, D. and Spectre, L. (forthcoming). There is no such thing as doxastic wrongdoing. *Philosophical Perspectives*.

Franklin, J. H. (2005). *Mirror to America : The autobiography of John Hope Franklin*. New York, NY: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux.

Gendler, T. (2011). On the Epistemic Costs of Implicit Bias. *Philosophical Studies* 156(1):33-63.

Gregory, A. (2016). Normative reasons as good bases. *Philosophical Studies* 173: 2291-2310.

Hieronymi, P. (2005). The Wrong Kind of Reason. *The Journal of Philosophy* 102(9): 437–57.

Kolodny, N. (2005). Why Be Rational? *Mind* 114(455): 509–63.

Moss, S. (2018). *Probabilistic Knowledge*. Oxford University Press.

Sellars, W. (1956). Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind. *Minnesota Studies in the Philosophy of Science* 1(19): 253–329.

Shah, N. (2006). A New Argument for Evidentialism. *The Philosophical Quarterly* 56: 481–98.

Staffel, J. (forthcoming). Transitional Attitudes and the Unmooring View of Higher-Order Evidence. *Noûs* 57(1): 238-260.

¹ For insightful discussion of doxastic wronging, see Basu (2018) and the other collected papers in *Philosophical Topics* 46, a special issue on doxastic wronging.

² Some philosophers have expressed skepticism about the possibility of doxastic wronging. See Enoch and Spectre (forthcoming).

³ Think here of coherence/consistency requirements of structural rationality.

⁴ Doxastic Purism is distinct from other evidentialist theses in the vicinity. For example, Conee and Feldman's (2004) evidentialism is about epistemic justification rather than the norms of belief formation and revision. Dandelet (2023) distinguishes between intrinsic evidentialism and moral evidentialism. According to Dandelet, intrinsic evidentialism is the thesis that only evidence can figure in epistemic deliberation and justification; moral evidentialism is the view that what one morally ought to believe depends only on one's evidence. For defenses of intrinsic evidentialism: see Adler (2002), Hieronymi (2005), and Shah (2006).

⁵ Dandelet (2023) defends this view in the course of arguing against strict evidentialism, or the view that only evidence can figure in epistemic deliberation and justification.

⁶ Defenders of Moral Encroachment include Basu & Schroeder (2019) and Moss (2018).

⁷ It is worth pointing out here that settling on an answer does not necessarily terminate a line of inquiry. See, for example, Staffel (forthcoming) on the distinction between transitional and terminal attitudes in inquiry.

⁸ This example is from Basu (2018). The significance of the John Hope Franklin case for inquiry was first discussed by Gendler (2011, p. 35).

⁹ I assume here that interrogative attitudes can be the result of racial profiling in the same way that beliefs can. In the imagined case in the text, we can suppose that the woman would not have wondered whether a white man standing next to the coat check was a staff attendant.

¹⁰ See e.g. Dandelet (2023, p. 85): “Whether you wrong the club attendee by believing that she is a staff member depends not at all on whether she actually is a staff member, and depends very much on your evidence. It is offensive to assume that someone is a waiter based solely on statistical facts about her race, regardless of whether the assumption is correct. And it is not offensive to believe that someone is a waiter on the basis of seeing her expertly manoeuvring through the crowd with drinks held aloft on platters, etc.— even if she turns out not to be a waiter. The general lesson is that, in so far as a belief has a moral status at all, this status depends at least in part on the evidential position of the believer.”

¹¹To ward off confusion, Pre-Doxastic Wronging is not a bald denial of the claim that beliefs can wrong, although it is consistent with such a denial. Pre-Doxastic wronging is a claim about what constitutes the normative error in putative cases of doxastic wronging. Thus stated, Pre-Doxastic Wronging is consistent with views about, for instance, the content and directedness of appropriate apologies for having doxastically wronged someone that demand an apology for the belief itself. Even if the normative error that underwrites a doxastic wrong is not itself something that is appropriately apologized for, that does not mean that it is not what constitutes the error.

¹² Pre-Doxastic Wronging is consistent with, and nicely complements, Moss’s (2018) view according to which the normative error in cases of racial profiling is a failure to consider the possibility that the targeted subject is an exception to the statistical generalization one makes use of in the act of profiling. One can endorse this aspect of Moss’s view without also endorsing Moral Encroachment.

¹³ For an example of the kind of commonsense action-guiding principle I have in mind here, consider the principle ‘Don’t consider someone’s race when trying to determine what line of work they’re in’ or ‘Hear your friend out before judging that they are guilty of a crime’.

¹⁴ This problem, as well as the next one that I will discuss below (the problem of coordination) are both discussed in Basu and Schroeder (2019).

¹⁵ By ‘constituents of inquiry’ I am talking about attitudes like beliefs, credences, interrogative attitudes like wondering whether p, as well as activities like collecting evidence, calculating probabilities, constructing thought experiments, etc.

¹⁶ For critical engagement with this type of problem in the case of practical reasons for belief, see Berker (2018).