

Epistemic Partiality

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We like our friends, and we hope for the best for them. When we hear that they may have done something foolish or mean, we often suspend judgment, and “give them the benefit of the doubt.” In fact, if we immediately accept the evidence that paints them in a negative light, and believe what it suggests, we open ourselves up to criticism for being a bad friend. Our practice of partiality towards friends has led philosophers to defend Epistemic Partiality (sometimes Epistemic Partialism). Following the literature, I will formulate this in terms of partiality in friendship. Below I will suggest a more general thesis.

Epistemic Partiality makes two claims:

- (i) the norms of friendship require we are partial to our friends. That is, they require biased beliefs and doxastic practices; and
- (ii) the norms of friendship conflict with epistemic norms on belief and doxastic practices.

To give Epistemic Partiality a slogan: A good friend is a bad believer (Stroud: 2006, p. 499). The debate over Epistemic Partiality has precursors in the debate over potential conflicts between individual responsibilities and morality. Significant interpersonal relationships and personal commitments (such as family bonds, friendship, patriotism, and promises) often come into conflict with the demands of morality, when morality is understood as a set of overriding, non-agent-relative requirements (Jollimore, 2022; Lange, 2022). We can resolve the conflict by reconceiving of morality as agent-centered, by rejecting the importance of relationships and commitments, or by holding the two to be fundamentally at odds, and perhaps ranking one over the other.

Sarah Stroud (2006) and Simon Keller (2004) argue that a parallel tension arises between individual responsibilities and epistemic requirements. They both focus their case for epistemic partiality by focusing on the requirements of friendship. Stroud lays out the claim that “Friendship places demands not just on our feelings or our motivations, but on our *beliefs* and our methods of forming beliefs... this epistemic partiality is contrary to the standards of epistemic responsibility and justification held up by mainstream epistemological theories” (Stroud, 2006, p. 499).

Stroud motivates considerations of epistemic partiality by appealing to the phenomenology of friendship. She asks us to consider the case of Sam. Sam is your friend, and you hear a third party report that Sam romanced someone and then ghosted them. How should you update your beliefs about Sam? Stroud argues that if Sam is your friend you should respond differently than if Sam is a non-friend. In the case of a non-friend, you should (absent any defeaters) *believe* the report. But if Sam is your friend, you should engage in different epistemic practices. You might devote more time and energy to coming up with an alternative explanation for the genesis of the report. You might heavily scrutinize the person giving testimony. You might construct and entertain alternative explanations of what Sam “really did.” And as a result of these different practices, you will arrive at different beliefs and make different inferences than if you were a non-friend. While acquaintances might conclude

“What an inconsiderate jerk!” about Sam, as a good friend, you might see his behavior as displaying “fickle enthusiasm and appetite for female charm” though stemming from a good heart (Stroud, p. 499).

Epistemic partiality in friendship isn't merely a contingent matter, but a deep feature of friendship, Stroud thinks. This is because friendship is based on the believer's assessment of the character and qualities of the friend. If the believer comes to see the friend in a bad light, they will lose their ability to maintain the friendship. So maintaining a positive assessment of the friend is crucial to maintaining the friendship. And secondly, Stroud argues, friendship is a commitment, and the commitment involves throwing in your lot with your friend. This commitment is not grounded in exhaustive knowledge of the friend's character. And finally, the partial epistemic practices required by friendship need not be truth conducive, and so they will conflict with epistemic norms.

Responses to Epistemic Partiality reject either (i), the norms of friendship require we are partial to our friends, resulting in biased beliefs and doxastic practices; or (ii) the norms of friendship conflict with epistemic norms on belief and doxastic practices.

There are two general strategies for denying (i). Some argue that there can be no practical reasons for belief, so there can be no genuine reason to be epistemically partial to friends (Brinkerhoff and Arpaly, 2018). Others argue that friendship does not in fact require partiality towards our friends. Crawford (2019) argues that friendship involves appreciation of the friend's character, which is sensitive to evidence. Kawall (2013) and Brinkerhoff (2022) argue that friendship involves patterns of attention that lead friends to greater understanding of the friend. Mason (2020) and Dormandy (2022) argue that friendship involves love, and love seeks knowledge (in Mason's case) or truth (in Dormandy's). These authors contend that, while Stroud is right to think that friendship involves a positive assessment of the character and qualities of the friend, such regard must be rooted in an appreciation of the way the friend actually presents herself. If the friend lacks those traits, friendship does not demand we see what is not there.

Against (ii), some have argued that the requirements of friendship don't actually contravene epistemic norms. If one denies (i), then it is natural to deny (ii) as well, since if friendship does not require partiality, there is no motivation for thinking good friends would believe differently than non-friends (Mason, 2020; Dormandy, 2022). But another strategy is to say that the friend and the non-friend have different evidence and so are required to believe different things. This is because friendship usually involves long personal histories or characterological knowledge not known by strangers (Flowerree, forthcoming). Or it is because friendship directs our attention and so leads us to possess different evidence than the non-friend (Kawall, 2013; Brinkerhoff, 2022). In order to establish (ii), proponents of Epistemic Partiality would have to show that a friend and non-friend *in identical epistemic situations* must believe different things. And this is not shown by the cases given, opponents argue.

Opponents of Epistemic Partiality also deny (ii) by pointing to other cognitive attitudes at work in friendship. They argue that what makes friendship distinctive is not differences in doxastic states, but differences in other attitudes. Kawall writes, “With our best friends we hope and expect that they accept us, flaws and all; they see enough value in our other traits, or enough potential to change that they stand by us. They will *hope* that we can improve, and will presumably *encourage* us to do so. They will also typically be more forgiving than others when we do fall short. But all of these important aspects of friendship only come into play as we recognize our friend's shortcomings, and they ours”

(Kawall, 2013, p. 357-8) In a similar vein, Hawley argues that what is important to friendship is that we *trust* the friend. But trust is not constituted by one's belief or one's doxastic attitudes. Instead, trust involves commitment to the friend. One can be partial in the way required by friendship by trusting the friend. Epistemic partiality need not come into play at all (Hawley 2014).

Epistemic partiality is closely tied to debates over Doxastic Wronging and Moral Encroachment (Gardiner, 2018). Cases of partiality in friendship are often used to motivate the thesis of Doxastic Wronging (that A can wrong B by believing p). Basu (2019) and (2021), Basu and Schroeder (2021), and Rioux (2023) argue that in cases where partiality in friendship is required, failure to believe as friendship demands results in a doxastic wronging towards the friend. Thus, the proponent of Doxastic Wronging accepts (i), that the norms of friendship require partiality and biased beliefs/doxastic practices. They also accept something stronger than (i), namely that morality itself requires biased beliefs and epistemic practices. The thesis of Doxastic Wronging, then, also motivates an acceptance of (ii), that partiality generates genuine conflicts with epistemic norms, and these conflicts are moral in nature.

But there are several defenders of Doxastic Wronging who accept (i) and deny (ii). First, one might reject (ii) by endorsing permissivism. Permissivism is the view that more than one doxastic attitude can be epistemically rational to take towards some body of evidence, E (Smith, this volume). So it might be rational to believe p on the basis of E , but it might also be rational to suspend judgment on the basis of E . A permissivist can endorse (i) and deny (ii) by holding that there are (at least) two doxastic attitudes that it is rational for someone to take towards E , the attitude required by friendship, and the attitude required by a disinterested stance, but both attitudes are permitted by the epistemic norms (Quanbeck and Worsnip, 2023).

Second, Doxastic Wronging is sometimes used to motivate Moral Encroachment (the thesis that some beliefs, because of their moral stakes, require more or different evidence in order to be epistemically justified). Moral Encroachment denies (ii) by holding that when moral stakes (including ones grounded in friendship) require us to believe differently, then epistemic norms do too (Jorgensen, 2020). So suppose you hear the report about Sam. If you believe, "Sam is an inconsiderate jerk!" and when he is instead goodhearted but easily distracted, you morally wrong Sam by falsely believing badly of him. You shouldn't wrong Sam. The possibility of morally wronging Sam makes it that the amount of evidence you have is not sufficient for you to be epistemically justified. And so the epistemic norms shift because of the moral factors present. Because you are morally required not to believe badly of Sam, you are also epistemically required not to believe it.

The literature on epistemic partiality has taken friendship as its prime case. But following the debate on partiality in ethics, we can identify other potential examples. Perhaps other relationships, commitments, or social identity groups also generate reasons for partial believing. Perhaps there is epistemic partiality in politics, religion, familial ties, sports team affiliation, ethnic identities, or patriotism. Some of these possibilities seem more plausible than others. Perhaps Sandy should believe that the Yankees will beat the Red Sox and move on to the playoffs, and he should believe this because that's what a good Yankees fan would believe. But it seems more controversial for George to believe his country's war is just because that's what a good patriot would do (regardless of where the current evidence points). Epistemic Partiality is formulated as a thesis about friendship in particular. We could formulate a more general thesis.

Epistemic Partiality*

(1*) Some relationships, commitments, or social identities require partial believing. That is, they require beliefs and doxastic practices that are biased in favor of the internal norms of those relationships, commitments, or social identity.

(2*) The internal norms of those relationships, commitments, or social identity conflict with the epistemic norms on belief and doxastic practices

Friendship presents a strong prima facie case for Epistemic Partiality* because friendship is a vital human good. It is not optional for creatures like us. And so, given a conflict, we should side with friendship. But some of these other relationships, commitments, or social identities can be equally vital to our flourishing. There has been some discussion about whether religious commitments generate partial beliefs or doxastic practices (Dormandy, 2021; Almeida and Thurow, 2022). Future work could explore which relationships, commitments, and social identities seem to be plausible candidates to support Epistemic Partiality*.

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