Banal Skepticism and the Errors of Doubt: On Ephecticism about Rape Accusations

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Abstract.
Ephecticism is the tendency towards suspension of belief. Epistemology often focuses on the error of believing when one ought to doubt. The converse error—doubting when one ought to believe—is relatively underexplored. This essay examines the errors of undue doubt.

I draw on the relevant alternatives framework to diagnose and remedy undue doubts about rape accusations. Doubters tend to invoke standards for belief that are too demanding, for example, and underestimate how farfetched uneliminated error possibilities are. They mistake seeing how incriminating evidence is compatible with innocence for a reason to withhold judgement.

Rape accusations help illuminate the causes and normativity of doubt. I propose a novel kind of epistemic injustice, for example, wherein patterns of unwarranted attention to farfetched error possibilities can cause those error possibilities to become relevant. Widespread unreasonable doubt thus renders doubt reasonable and makes it harder to know rape accusations. Finally, I emphasise that doubt is often a conservative force and I argue that the relevant alternatives framework helps defend against pernicious doubt-mongers.

Key Words.
doubt-mongering; withholding; rape accusations; relevant alternatives theory; testimony; testimonial injustice; stakes; epistemic thresholds; error possibilities

1. The Global Skeptic and the Local Doubt-Monger

Doubt is endemic to rape accusations. This doubt is often disproportionate, at least relative to track records—most accusations are true—and the total available evidence. The doubt is also disproportionate compared to hearers' more trustful responses to relevantly similar claims, such as accusations of non-sexual violence. On hearing rape accusations, many people tend towards a chary ephecticism, viewing withholding as more cautious and virtuous than belief, or they outright disbelieve the accusation.[1]

Epistemology focuses on errors of belief, such as believing despite paltry or misleading evidence. The converse errors—not believing despite excellent evidence—remains relatively underexplored.[2] This relative neglect of the errors of doubt contributes to the sense that withholding belief is safe, cautious, and immune from criticism. This essay highlights the errors of undue doubt, focusing on doubts about rape accusations.

[1] This essay does not directly argue for the claims that rape accusations are often doubted and are often true. These patterns are documented elsewhere (Kelly, et al, 2005; Gilmore, 2017; Tuerkheimer, 2017; Epstein, 2021).

[2] Chrisman (2008), Medina (2015), Goldberg (2017), Ichikawa (2020), and Simion (forthcoming) are recent exceptions.

Note that I do not claim hearers should believe rape accusations *tout court*. Rape accusations are a heterogenous class and the claim is too coarse-grained to endorse, except perhaps as a generic, not universal, claim.[3] My claim—that rape accusations receive disproportionate and undue doubt—is far weaker. These doubting patterns and dispositions admit of many kinds of explanation, some appealing to emotions like fear or guilt, or to social norms about sex and gender. I focus on diagnoses and remedies that are well-illuminated by epistemology, especially the relevant alternatives framework. Note too that disproportionate doubt is not unique to rape accusations. Other assertion kinds, such as claims about one's disability status or young people's assertions that they are not straight, also provoke undue doubt.

An influential skeptical argument targets ordinary knowledge claims, such as knowledge that one has hands, by claiming one cannot rule out incompatible alternatives, such as that one is a handless brain-in-a-vat. Global skepticism challenges all, or almost all, knowledge claims. Local skepticism, by contrast, denies knowledge about particular areas, such as the nature or existence of God. Few people, if any, are genuinely global skeptics. Local skepticism is typically easier to sustain and arguments for local skepticism are often more efficacious sources of doubt.

In real life we rarely meet a skeptic, especially a global one. We more typically encounter a doubt-monger. A doubt-monger expresses obdurate conviction that the evidence does not suffice to settle belief and they aim to instil doubt in others.[4] Effective doubt-mongering is local; it does not target all assertions. Global doubt-mongers can be ignored as wholly unreasonable. Effective doubt-mongers selectively doubt certain kinds of claims or people, such as Holocaust narratives or vaccine scientists. They claim we can't know whether smoking causes cancer, for example, or they express skepticism about rape accusations.

By focusing on radical, global skepticism, epistemology risks overlooking the social and epistemic contours of selective doubt-mongering. Indeed, foregrounding global, radical skepticism can be pernicious because radical global skepticism generates false equivalency amongst diverse epistemic conduct. It lumps together, as non-knowers, the diligent scientist and the p-hacker, for example. And whereas epistemological skepticism usually focuses on abstract questions about whether beliefs qualify as knowledge, doubt-mongers aim to enervate beliefs. The latter is socially consequential. This essay shines a light on the everyday doubt-monger's tricks and illuminates his mistakes.

Rape accusations serve as a case study to better understand doubt, epistemic justification, and the forces of social power on epistemic practices. Similar ideas apply to undue doubt sustained by, for example, conspiracy theories.[5] As I explain, the relevant alternatives framework illuminates new sources—and perhaps new species—of epistemic injustice. In classic accounts of testimonial injustice, the hearer commits an error. Typically, the hearer affords the speaker too little credit given her expertise or evidence. I posit a species of testimonial injustice where the hearer does not err. As an individual, his doubt is justified because widespread undue doubt renders ephecticism reasonable.

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[3] Bolinger (2021) and Ferzan (2021) discuss generic interpretations of the imperative to '#BelieveWomen'.

[4] On the history of doubt-mongering, see Michaels (2008) and Oreskes and Conway (2010).

[5] Gardiner (forthcoming: §8) applies the relevant alternatives framework to gaslighting, testilying, crying wolf, and conspiracy theories.

Social power is a recurring theme: Doubt-mongering is often a conservative force. It allows people to preserve existing beliefs despite mounting counterevidence and thus favours the status quo. Ephecticism, inaction, and the resulting inertia are powerful. The efficacious skeptic, then, is the everyday doubt-monger, not the global skeptic of the philosophy classroom. We must scrutinise his epistemic position and arsenal.

2. Ignoring is Powerful

I begin with a condition on knowledge.[6]

> Relevant Alternatives Condition on Knowledge. S knows that p only if S can rule out all relevant alternatives to p.

The thrust of this claim is anti-skeptical. It helps defend against the mongers of undue doubt. This might sound puzzling: the condition is a necessary condition on knowledge, not a sufficient condition. It says what we must do to possesses knowledge, but it does not state we possess knowledge if we satisfy the condition. So how can its thrust be anti-skeptical? It is anti-skeptical because it licences disregarding undue doubts.

Suppose a birdwatcher, Bertha, sees a robin and forms the belief 'That bird is a robin'. In order to know, her evidence must rule out ordinary alternatives, such as its being a thrush or sparrow. And typically—with a good look and normal background knowledge—her evidence does this.[7] Bertha need not rule out more distant, farfetched, irrelevant possibilities. She is licensed to ignore them; she knows it is a robin. Suppose a doubt-monger claims, 'You don't know it is a robin, it could be a robot, a hologram, a disguised sparrow. Perhaps you are mistaken. Perhaps you have been drugged. Perhaps there is trick lighting, or you are dreaming…' The doubt-monger tries to undermine Bertha's belief or deny her claim to know. According to many relevant alternatives accounts, Bertha can simply disregard these error possibilities.[8] These putative sources of doubt are irrelevantly farfetched. The doubt-monger does not undermine Bertha's knowledge merely by mentioning these possibilities. By disregarding the doubt-monger, Bertha remains a knower and so retains social power. Ignoring is powerful, and the relevant alternatives condition licences ignoring.

The relevant alternatives condition posits key structural features: The claim, p. Error possibilities, also known as 'alternatives', are any claims inconsistent with p. If p is 'the bird is a robin', error possibilities include its being a sparrow, robot, and so on. Some error possibilities are mundane and normal. Our evidence continually eliminates uncountably many of these. Seeing the red chest rules out 'sparrow',

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[6] See Dretske (1970, 1971), Stine (1976), Lewis (1996), Gerken (2017), Ichikawa (2017), McKinnon (2013), Lawlor (2013), and Gardiner (2019; forthcoming-b). Rysiew (2006) and Bradley (2014) emphasise the plausibility of the relevant alternatives condition and argue the condition is compatible with a wide range of epistemological views. Controversies arise with additional claims—supplementary to the basic relevant alternatives condition—such as contextualism about knowledge attributions.

[7] Ruling out error possibilities is ubiquitous and automatic. We need not think about error possibilities explicitly or think of ourselves as eliminating possibilities.

[8] Exceptions include Lewis (1996) and related contextualist accounts, which hold that merely raising error possibilities renders them relevant. I return to this.

for example. Other error possibilities are increasingly farfetched, bizarre, or skeptical. The 'hologram' possibility is remote. Remoteness of error possibility comes in degrees.[9]

Error possibilities are dividable. Sparrow divides into normal sparrow and disguised sparrow, for example. Seeing the red chest eliminates the 'normal sparrow' possibility. Disguised sparrow is farfetched, and so can be properly ignored.[10] The divisibility of error possibilities feeds the skeptical challenge and fuels doubt. Consider again the 'normal sparrow' error possibility. I said Bertha's evidence eliminates it. But this was too quick. The possibility further cleaves into 'normal sparrow with good viewing', 'normal sparrow in trick lighting', 'normal sparrow but Bertha was drugged and unknowingly hallucinates', and so on. Her evidence may only eliminate the first of these sub-sub error possibilities. No matter how good one's evidence is, there are always remaining uneliminated error possibilities.[11] This inevitable remainder fuels the skeptical challenge.

Evidence addresses a relevant error possibility by either being inconsistent with the possibility or, more commonly, being inconsistent with many sub-alternatives of the error possibility, leaving uneliminated only sub-alternatives that are disregardably farfetched. Some sub-sub-alternatives inevitably remain but, if the evidence is good and the uneliminated possibilities are sufficiently paltry and farfetched, they should be ignored.

The relevant alternatives framework diagnoses the radical skeptic's error and offers a remedy: Radical skeptical error possibilities are irrelevant to everyday knowledge claims. One may typically disregard them.[12] It suggests a similar response to an unreasonable everyday doubt-monger. One must be sensitive to which error possibilities are disregardably remote. The doubt-monger notes that trick lighting is possible, for example, but trick lighting is normally farfetched. Even though the possibility is consistent with Brenda's evidence—and so her evidence is consistent with not p—she can disregard this possibility. Brenda can respond with social and epistemic power: She can ignore.

3. Remoteness

The relevant alternatives framework posits the following basic schema: There is a claim, p, such as the bird is a robin. There are various not p possibilities, which can typically be sub-divided. Some sub-alternatives are eliminated by the evidence. Others lie outwith a particular threshold; that is, they are sufficiently remote to properly ignore. The relevant alternatives account of knowledge posits a knowledge-relevant threshold of disregardability.[13] One can adapt this schema by positing other thresholds, such as those governing legal standards of proof.

> Claim p is established to legal standard, L, only if the evidence eliminates the L-relevant error possibilities.

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[9] Increasing remoteness does not entail a numerical or formal approach; that beaches vary in beauty does not entail a numerical beauty scale. Gardiner (2019; forthcoming-b) contrasts the relevant alternatives framework with quantifiable approaches to epistemic support.

[10] At least, it is ignorable in normal circumstances. There are some abnormal circumstances where the error possibility is relevant, such as a disguised bird convention.

[11] As described below, the cogito is an exception.

[12] Some relevant alternatives accounts hold that mundane knowledge ascriptions are undermined by mentioning or considering skeptical error possibilities. But even those views hold you can normally ignore those possibilities.

[13] Relevant alternatives accounts diverge on whether the knowledge-relevant threshold is fixed or shifty.

Indeed even if it fails as a condition on knowledge, the relevant alternatives framework might outline the structure of epistemic support provided by evidence. Consider the 'preponderance of the evidence' standard, which governs civil disputes in many jurisdictions. The relevant alternatives account of legal standards holds that claim p is established to a preponderance of the evidence only if the evidence adduced rules out preponderant error possibilities. ('Preponderant' mean the most significant and least remote.) Beyond reasonable doubt, which governs criminal conviction, is more demanding. It accordingly has a more distant disregardability threshold. Claim p is established beyond reasonable doubt only if the evidence rules out all reasonable error possibilities.[14]

The increasingly demanding epistemic standards correspond to concentric rings. Error possibilities that can be disregarded for lower thresholds must be addressed to satisfy more demanding standards, such as knowledge and proof beyond reasonable doubt. There remains an extremal standard: Beyond all possible doubt. To satisfy this standard, evidence must eliminate all conceivable error possibilities. Few beliefs satisfy this demanding standard. The cogito survives: There are no uneliminated error possibilities. Doubt cannot take hold there. Plausibly the cogito is the only claim for which available evidence eliminates all possible doubt.[15] For that claim—and perhaps that claim alone—we can respond to the doubt-monger with refutation, rather than by learning when to properly ignore him.

To properly ignore the doubt-monger, one must be cognisant of what the error possibility is and its remoteness, and one must track the appropriate epistemic standard. Acceptance within normal conversation has a relatively permissive threshold. One need not rule out farfetched error possibilities for normal everyday assertion. Criminal proceedings, by contrast, are governed by a higher standard. One must eliminate relatively farfetched error possibilities. As I discuss in section six, one doubt-mongering trick is illicitly invoking demanding epistemic standards in ordinary conversations.

Unless otherwise specified, I focus on epistemic standards for assertions in ordinary conversational contexts, which is intermediate in demandingness between preponderance of evidence and beyond reasonable doubt.

The relevant alternatives framework raises two central questions: What determines an error possibility's remoteness and what are the various disregardability thresholds? Both questions ask why some error possibilities can be disregarded whilst others must be addressed. Various proposals have been advanced. These include, for example, that an alternative is relevant if true, believed, or mentioned.[16] Similarity-based accounts hold that error possibilities are closer to the extent they resemble the actual world and remote to the extent they differ from the actual world.[17] Others propose a possibility is closer to the extent that it is suggested by your evidence.[18] Veronica Ivy (Rachel

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[14] Gardiner (forthcoming-a; 2019) develops this proposal. See also Ho (2008), Amaya (2015), and Moss (forthcoming). Strictly speaking the rings need not be concentric. Perhaps some error possibilities are relevant to the 'preponderance' standard but irrelevant to a higher standard. This can occur if, for example, civil procedure requires addressing error possibilities that are ignorable in criminal trials.

[15] Other possible exceptions include claims about some mental states and simple mathematical, logical, true-by-definition, and tautological claims.

[16] Lewis (1996), McKinnon (2013), Gerken (2017), Ichikawa (2017), and Gardiner (2019; forthcoming-b: §5) discuss what determines remoteness.

[17] Pritchard (2005); Smith (2010; 2016).

[18] Stine (1976), Austin (1946).

McKinnon, 2013) posits an error possibility is remote to the extent it is 'destabilising', meaning its uptake would or should trigger a significant restructuring of one's background beliefs about how the world works.[19] David Lewis (1996)'s rule of attention claims that merely attending to an uneliminated error possibility suffices for undermining knowledge. This essay argues against Ivy's view and Lewis's rule of attention.

Lewis (1996: 559) proposes the rule of conservation. He writes,

> Suppose that those around us normally do ignore certain possibilities, and it is common knowledge that they do […] Then—again, very defeasibly!—these generally ignored possibilities may properly be ignored. We are permitted, defeasibly, to adopt the usual and mutually expected presuppositions of those around us.

The principle endorses deferring to one's community—if people tend to disregard a possibility, it can be properly ignored. It is constructivist, in the sense that actual behaviour shapes epistemic normativity, and it highlights epistemic dependency: Reliance on others is not limited to acquiring evidence and epistemic abilities. Other people's practices indicate, and determine, which error possibilities are properly disregardable.[20]

Consider a converse conservation principle: If others tend to take seriously an error possibility and treat it as relevant, it is (defeasibly) thereby relevant. This principle has merit. Suppose locals tend to take seriously the possibility the observed bird is a disguised sparrow. Locals consider this a reason to doubt putative robin sightings. If this source of doubt is common, including amongst intelligent and epistemically virtuous locals, it thereby constitutes evidence that disguised sparrows are a serious possibility. It is evidence there are—or might well be—disguised sparrows around. Perhaps someone dyes local sparrows, for example, and robins are rare. Arguably if locals seriously consider this error possibility, and accordingly lack confidence the observed bird is a robin, then Bertha would be epistemically reckless to ignore these doubts and retain conviction that the bird is a robin. Her evidence does not, after all, address this error possibility. This shows an epistemic potency of having or expressing doubts. It can cause others to doubt, and even render error possibilities relevant, so that others *should* have doubts.

Note that sometimes the source of doubt is chimerical, and although others worry about the spectre of uneliminated error possibilities, an individual need not cede social and epistemic power. Despite widespread doubts, in some cases Bertha can retain belief and knowledge that it is a sparrow, for example. I return to this below. Note too that although the attentional conduct of oneself and others can influence an error possibility's relevance, by contributing to the error possibility's perceived importance, mere isolated attention by itself does not suffice for relevance. That is, an uneliminated error possibility's arising in thought or talk does not undermine knowledge or justified belief. If it did, the doubt-monger would be on firm ground because when he merely mentions any farfetched error possibility, one's evidence must eliminate it. The doubt-monger wins.

This essay is largely ecumenical about what determines remoteness. I explore two proposals about remoteness of error possibility. Firstly, an error possibility is nearby to the extent it is a normal source of error. For a proposition and evidence set, an error possibility is nearby insofar as it is typically true

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[19] Veronica Ivy previously published as Rachel McKinnon.

[20] Gardiner (2022) investigates epistemic effects of social patterns of attention, including learning from others what to ignore and pay attention to.

given the evidence. If the error possibility's obtaining is abnormal given the evidence, the error possibility is—to that extent—remote. In almost every case, it would be extremely weird for a bird that looks like a robin to be a disguised sparrow. Hence, this error possibility is remote Normality, and corresponding remoteness, come in degrees.[21]

Secondly, an error possibility is nearby to the extent that evidence indicates it is true. Suppose a reliable, experienced local birdwatcher says, with apparent sincerity, 'That bird is actually a disguised sparrow'. Their assertion is evidence for the error possibility, which renders it less remote. Whereas before Bertha could disregard this farfetched possibility, perhaps now she cannot. She no longer knows it is a robin without addressing the newly-relevant error possibility. An expert's treating an error possibility as true can constitute evidence it is true, and so perhaps can cause the possibility to become relevant. It is, after all, typically dogmatic and arrogant to disregard others when forming beliefs, especially experts. I return to this in section eight.

These two criteria for determining remoteness—error possibilities being normal and being indicated by the evidence—usually coincide. People raise error possibilities that are common sources of error, and evidence reliably indicates what is normally true. But they can diverge. Conspiracies theories, gaslighting, or mental illness, for example, can generate evidence for error possibilities that are wholly abnormal.[22] Conversely, a possibility might be normally true, but widely unappreciated and so obscured by available evidence. Consider an error possibility that involves repression of a traumatic memory, for example. This might be a normal, common source of error but—until such repression is acknowledged by psychology and society—the available evidence indicates the error possibility is remote.

4. Errors

The relevant alternatives framework highlights and systematises two central kinds of error.[23] Firstly, a person can err by treating a nearby error possibility as remote. They ignore a source of error they should address, and so believe p when they should withhold. Suppose a police officer, Percy, is accused of rape but his colleague, Collin, attests, 'I was with Percy during the time of the alleged assault. It could not have been him.' Claim p is 'Percy is innocent'. Consider a source of doubt: Perhaps Percy is guilty and Collin is lying. Suppose a hearer considers this possibility farfetched and so disregards it. Police officers would not lie to cover up rape, she thinks. If such behaviour is not farfetched, then she commits the first kind of error, and so believes p when she should doubt.

The first error—regarding nearby error possibilities as remote—causes ignorance. Ignorance results because either p is falsely believed or p is truly believed but unknown because of uneliminated relevant error possibilities.

The second error is the converse. A person errs by treating a remote error possibility as nearby. They treat a source of doubt as relevant when they should instead disregard it. The error possibility is bizarre and abnormal—something they should disregard—but they fail to appreciate that the possibility is

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21 'Typically' admits numerical and non-numerical interpretations (Smith, 2010; 2016).

22 See also the passenger testimony and school shooting examples in Gardiner (forthcoming-b: 11-12).

23 There are, needless to say, other kinds of error, such as forgetting evidence.

farfetched. They consider it a common, ordinary possibility. Since their evidence does not eliminate this farfetched error possibility, they harbour doubt where they should instead believe.

Suppose five women each accuse a wealthy celebrity, Caleb, of sexual violence, and one of them sues for damages. In the US, the relatively low 'preponderance of evidence' standard—often glossed as more likely than not—governs such civil litigation. Claim p is 'Caleb committed the crime'. In court, the women describe strikingly similar criminal sexual violence and, furthermore, they testify they had not met before approaching investigators. The jurors take seriously the error possibilities—that is, possibilities in which Caleb is innocent. They consider the possibility the women are secretly friends who concocted their stories for financial gain and are lying when they deny knowing each other beforehand. The jurors decide this error possibility is preponderant and uneliminated, and accordingly find in favour of the defendant. Plausibly the jurors err by treating a remote source of doubt as relevant. They should have instead realised the error possibility was remote enough to properly ignore.

Epistemology focuses on the importance of avoiding false beliefs and often underemphasises the converse error of failing to believe despite compelling evidence. This error can manifest irrationality, evidential insensitivity, and failure to appropriately represent reality. The error has practical significance when belief is needed for action. Withholding is widely viewed as more cautious and careful, but withholding and inaction have effects. Withholding despite compelling evidence can constitute and cause various injustices, including unduly doubting speakers. Since withholding belief often underwrites inaction, doubting often favours the status quo. Doubt-mongering can be a potent conservative force against social change, such when one instils doubts that a new policy is viable or that change is needed.

Note that doubt is not univocally a conservative force. Lack of doubting also perpetuates inertia, such as when citizens unquestioningly consume mainstream media. And neither doubt nor conservative forces are monolithically good or bad.[24] Finally, people often believe too firmly. Rather than demonise doubt and inertia, I interrogate distributions and sources of doubt.

As noted above, error possibilities are always further dividable and—cogito aside—remaining uneliminated error possibilities are inevitable. Caleb's innocence is inevitably consistent with any mounting incriminating evidence, but only via increasingly farfetched error possibilities, such as an increasingly elaborate conspiracy against him. A common error, one highlighted by the relevant alternatives framework, treats the mere consistency of innocence and available evidence as sufficient for doubt. The doubter is too impressed by mere consistency, perhaps failing to appreciate that consistency is almost guaranteed, and exhibits insensitivity to the fact that the only remaining error possibilities are remote enough to properly ignore.

These two kinds of error—treating remote error possibilities as nearby and nearby ones as remote—can be systemic. The errors are not randomly distributed. This systemic misestimation of remoteness of error possibility can comprise social epistemic injustice. These kinds of error and concomitant injustices are pernicious because the perceived remoteness of an error possibility is often implicit and resistant to counterevidence. It is determined by prejudice, emotion, upbringing, and background culture, and so misplacements of error possibilities can be relatively difficult to notice, discuss, and correct. It is typically easier to discern whether someone lacks evidence, for example, because it can

[24] A perceptive conservative student commented that he favours the status quo, and accordingly values doubt. I am grateful to Richard Arning, Cat Saint-Croix, and Jon Garthoff for helpful comments.

be relatively easy to unearth who has heard what information. It is typically more challenging to communicate about perceived remoteness of error possibilities.

5. Threshold-Shifting and Alternative-Shifting

We can contrast the relevant alternatives framework with the more simple 'quantifiable balance' framework. On this rival model, epistemic support is a matter of probability given the evidence, and epistemic standards—such as knowledge and legal standards of proof—correspond to numerical evidential probability thresholds.[25] The relevant alternatives framework is richer. It posits increasingly farfetched error possibilities and various disregardability thresholds, and thus holds greater promise for systematising, explaining, and diagnosing the doubt provoked by narratives of sexual assault.

This richer framework engenders distinctions unavailable to the quantifiable balance framework, such as the distinction between whether practical factors shift the overall disregardability threshold or shift the relative disregardability of particular error possibilities. Gardiner (forthcoming-b: §7) calls these 'threshold-shifting' and 'alternative-shifting' respectively and argues the quantifiable balance model captures only the first of these.[26]

To illustrate the former: Pragmatic encroachment holds that when error costs are increased, more evidence is required to know. On most interpretations, this requires an increase in evidential probability or rational confidence, or addressing more error possibilities without specification of which particular error possibilities are newly relevant. This exemplifies 'threshold-shifting' because the overall threshold moves. To illustrate the latter: On Lewis's view, mentioning an error possibility renders it relevant. This illustrates 'alternative-shifting'. (These claims illustrate the distinction, but I deny both claims.)

The distinction between 'threshold-shifting' and 'alternative-shifting' helps explain how social forces affect the aptness of doubt. Note that for each illustration, relevant alternatives theories diverge about whether the relevance of error possibility—and thus whether the evidence suffices for judgement—genuinely shifts or only appears to shift. The latter holds that other people's doubting conduct cannot epistemically justify doubt. Section eight investigates this question.

Suppose local birdwatchers are generally wary of bird identification claims and demand substantial evidence before updating the group's birding log. This conduct is evidence that costs of false positives are high—perhaps the data are used for scientific inquiry, for example—which can raise Bertha's disregardability threshold for asserting bird identification claims to the group. It also suggests false positives are common, perhaps because bird identification is challenging. Bertha may accordingly seek additional evidence before settling on bird identification judgements, especially if she is currently learning birdwatching norms. This illustrates (perceived) threshold-shifting.

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[25] Gardiner (2019; forthcoming-b) and Gardiner and Zaharatos (ms) argue the relevant alternatives framework models epistemic support better than the rival quantifiable balance approach.

[26] Gardiner (forthcoming-b: §7) argues this distinction is required to understand recent theorising about moral encroachment and epistemic partiality because these views hold—or should hold—that moral features affect the relative disregardability of error possibilities. This cannot be understood as simply shifting an overall threshold of evidence or probability, independent from specific error possibilities. For moral encroachment surveys, see Bolinger (2020) and Gardiner (2018).

Secondly, other people's doubt can lead to (perceived) 'alternative-shifting'. Recall the local expert taking seriously the possibility an observed bird is a disguised sparrow. This doubting conduct provides evidence the error possibility is relevant. The overall (apparent) disregardability threshold does not shift, but the expert's doubt may cause an otherwise farfetched error possibility to seem, or even become, relevant for Bertha.

Doubt is contagious. And it should be. But this leads to injustice when that doubt is undue and unfairly distributed. Section six describes how these mechanisms cause contagious doubt about rape accusations.

6. Testimonial Injustice

Testimonial injustice is often glossed as a speaker's unfairly receiving less credibility than they are owed. But arguably credibility amounts—both assigned and owed—are unrealistic or ill-understood posits, especially if understood as simple magnitudes.[27] The relevant alternatives framework suggests an alternative conception: Testimonial injustice occurs when a speaker's assertions are not regarded as ruling out relevant error possibilities. Hearers unfairly regard distant uneliminated error possibilities as relevant or unfairly regard nearby ones as not eliminated by the testimony. This can be through (perceived) threshold-shifting or alternative-shifting factors. One must add additional conditions, such as being caused by prejudice, to yield a full account. This essay only posits the underlying epistemological structure of testimonial injustice.

First, consider threshold-shifting. In ordinary conversation, speakers are typically happy to flat-out assert second-hand assertions. If Jill hears that Larry and Laura used to date, typically this suffices for Jill to repeat the claim, without a reportative hedge, like 'Larry says that he used to date Laura' or 'I heard that they used to date'. This is because testimony normally suffices for knowledge and the costs of false assertion, including the hearer's resulting false belief, are not deemed strikingly high.

Rape accusations are often treated differently. Speakers disproportionately use reportatives, like 'Jane says that' and other hedges, like 'alleged'. Second-hand testimony about rape accusations characteristically distances itself from flat-out asserting the claim. Widespread caution and doubt generally indicates either that false belief is easy in the domain or that false belief is costly. (To illustrate the former, consider viewing optical illusions. For the latter, recall one's hesitancy in flat-out asserting important appointment times without double-checking.) Either way, other people's cautious and ephectic tendencies expands the perceived disregardability threshold.

Costs of falsely believing a rape accusation are seen as strikingly high in everyday contexts. Gardiner (forthcoming-c) argues they are markedly overestimated; the actual costs are not notably high. Many doubters also overlook the costs of not believing a true accusation. If pressed about the costs of their falsely believing an accusation, people give explanations like, 'The accused person could go to prison'. These reasons are almost always mistaken. This quote was from a bright student in my advanced epistemology seminar, for example. 'You aren't a juror', I pressed, 'So imprisonment isn't a consequence of your belief.' 'But I *could* be a juror' the student protested. This exemplifies how high legal standards are illicitly imported into non-legal conversations about rape accusations. The speaker

[27] I am grateful to Amy Flowerree for this suggestion.

projected himself into a juror role and, given the high standards operative in the projection, withheld judgement in his actual mundane context. This conduct is common.

The term 'rape allegation', rather than 'accusation', contributes to this endemic importing of legal standards into everyday conversational contexts. 'Allegation' is commonly used for rape accusations but is otherwise seldom used outside legal contexts.

In sum, positing multiple or moveable disregardability thresholds raises the question of which epistemic standards are operative in the context. Epistemic injustice occurs when rape accusations are unduly seen as governed by highly demanding epistemic standards.[28] This tendency breeds doubt about rape accusations, since even if the accuser possesses evidence that can satisfy criminal legal standards, that evidence is rarely available in everyday conversational contexts. Given the mismatch between standards for acceptance and evidence typically available, doubt prevails.

Secondly, consider mechanisms that shift the (perceived) relative disregardability of particular error possibilities. Testimony that p typically eliminates all nearby error possibilities, and so typically conduces to knowledge. This is because assertions are typically sensitive to p; normally S would not assert p unless p obtains. And so, for most assertion kinds, false assertion is abnormal. That is, if S asserts p, the only uneliminated not-p possibilities are ones in which she is mistaken or lying, and these are—for most ordinary assertion kinds and practical contexts—sufficiently remote to properly ignore. Lying is, accordingly, treated as a remote error possibility and the assertion is believed.

But for rape accusations, distant error possibilities can be unduly deemed nearby. This includes, for example, an accuser's lying for financial gain. Widespread mentioning of this possibility fuels the sense that it commonly occurs, and so the error possibility can thereby feel relevant.

Gardiner (forthcoming-c) describes 'as-if disregarding' and 'as-if regarding'. In the former, the person does not genuinely regard the error possibility as farfetched, but they treat it as disregardably farfetched for conversational, moral, prudential, or belief-forming purposes. 'As-if regarding' is treating an error possibility as relevant despite considering it disregardably farfetched.[29] Suppose a hearer, Harry, professes to doubt an accusation because the accused denies it and Harry claims the accused is unlikely to lie. If Harry does not sincerely regard this error possibility as farfetched, he is as-if disregarding. Gardiner (forthcoming-c) describes how as-if disregarding and regarding is performed for moral and social reasons but has epistemic consequences. It affects the (apparent) relevance of particular error possibilities. The next section discusses how attending to particular error possibilities, especially in a puzzle-solving mode, can illusively make them appear relevant. These mechanisms shift the (apparent) remoteness of particular error possibilities and thus sustain doubt about rape accusations. Given the causes and distributions of this doubt, it constitutes testimonial injustice.

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[28] Gerken (forthcoming) and Dotson (2018) argue that pragmatic encroachment entails that marginalised individuals often know less than other people because they frequently encounter higher stakes. Similarly on some views, one cost of criminal victimisation is that one cannot assert subsequent accusations without raising conversational stakes. (Note I argue people commonly overestimate the costs of believing false accusations.) Cf. Ichikawa (2020). Gardiner (forthcoming-c) discusses further (perceived) threshold-shifting mechanisms.

[29] 'As-if' regarding and disregarding concerns behaviour. Moral encroachment, by contrast, claims the relative disregardability of error possibilities *is* affected by moral facts. Gardiner (2018; forthcoming-b) criticises moral encroachment.

I close this section with two final comments about testimonial injustice. Firstly, the testimonial injustice characteristic of rape accusations is best characterised by assertion content, rather than by the speaker's membership in a social group. Any speaker making an acquaintance rape accusation is likely to face undue doubt.

Secondly, reflecting on testimony and doubt suggests another advantage of the relevant alternatives framework over the rival 'quantifiable balance' model, on which epistemic support is largely a matter of numerical probability given the evidence. People are generally believed when they assert improbable claims. If the proposition is merely improbable, uptake is usually frictionless. Suppose a person asserts that ticket 796240 won the lottery, Hilary Clinton is in London, or *The Times* misspelt the Ghanaian president's name. These things are improbable given a hearer's prior evidence. Yet when asserted, the speaker is usually believed. Hearers' suspicion arises when assertions are, or are perceived to be, *farfetched*. That is, assertions that are antecedently considered merely improbable do not raise eyebrows or provoke doubts. Farfetched ones do.

This distinction—which is hard to countenance on the simpler quantifiable balance model of epistemic support—helps model testimonial injustice. Many claims about rape victimisation are deemed not merely improbable, but farfetched. Gardiner (ms) describes how supplying details about *how* acquaintance rape occurred induces doubt because hearers harbour unacknowledged and often unsupported background beliefs that specific modes of rape are implausible. Hearers assume the 'freeze response' or remaining asleep during penetration are farfetched, for example. Similarly, it is seen as farfetched that nice men commit rape or that victims are friendly to assailants afterwards. Testimonial injustice occurs because, owing to rape myths, normal claims are seen as farfetched and farfetched error possibilities are seen as normal.

7. Pitfalls

The relevant alternatives framework highlights an epistemic pitfall to which reasoners are vulnerable. I suggest that merely considering an error possibility does not make that possibility relevant. But farfetched error possibilities can delusively appear relevant, reasonable, or plausible in virtue of 'cleverly' thinking of them.

Suppose Rafaela accuses Paul of raping her when they were in high school. She sues him. Claim p is 'Paul is guilty'. Evidence includes an affidavit from Rafaela's former therapist attesting that Rafaela described the incident ten years ago, identifying Paul by name. This evidence is highly incriminating. It eliminates many error possibilities, including almost all those in which Rafaela recently fabricated the story. But the evidence is not fully conclusive; it does not eliminate all possible doubt. This is no surprise: Recall that for almost every claim, remaining uneliminated error possibilities are inevitable. The anti-skeptical thrust of the relevant alternatives account emphasises the inevitable remainder is unproblematic.

One helpful conception of skeptical challenges is as attempts to deny us epistemic properties that we value and—crucially—that we hitherto thought we possessed. We value fully conclusive evidence that eliminates all error possibilities. But one should not think one possesses it, even before encountering the skeptic. Uneliminated error possibilities are thus not, as such, a cause for doubt. Only relevant ones are.

Consider the error possibility that Paul is innocent and Rafaela has a lifelong obsession with him. This possibility is not merely consistent with the affidavit, it is even somewhat highlighted by it. As described above, evidence addresses a relevant error possibility by either being wholly inconsistent with the possibility or—more commonly—being inconsistent with many sub-alternatives of that error possibility, and leaving uneliminated only sub-alternatives that are irrelevantly farfetched. But the evidence, by doing this, can thereby draw attention to these remote error possibilities. The factfinder may never have considered the possibility of a lifelong obsession unless prompted by the evidence.

The very process of eliminating error possibilities can make remote error possibilities seem important because factfinders thereby think about them *as* uneliminated and so confront the fact their evidence is consistent with uneliminated error possibilities. This does not make the possibilities relevant, but it can make them feel relevant. Attention is drawn to those exonerating error possibilities that the evidence does not eliminate. As increasingly incriminating evidence stacks up against Paul, this can have the unintended consequence of drawing attention to the convoluted sub-sub-sub alternatives in which he is innocent. Factfinders can thereby mistakenly think of such error possibilities as significant.

Indeed when evidence addresses a sub-alternative, that evidence can make a subset of that sub-alternative more probabilistically likely. But the uneliminated error possibility nonetheless remains beyond the relevant threshold—too farfetched, that is, to take seriously. The therapist's affidavit increases the evidential probability of a lifelong obsession. This error possibility is, in almost every case, itself too outlandish to require addressing. Factfinders would not have considered it prior to hearing the evidence. Mistaking an increase in evidential probability for the possibility's becoming relevant is an epistemic pitfall.

Thinking of these error possibilities and seeing that they are consistent with the evidence adduced can create an 'ah-ha' moment; a psychological feeling of having figured something out, like fitting puzzle pieces together. In a sense, the thinker *has* solved a puzzle—they have taken highly incriminating evidence—the affidavit—and seen how it can nonetheless fit with innocence. This can require skill and creativity. On seeing how the evidence can cohere with innocence, things can 'click', fit together, and make sense. Ordinarily 'ah-ha' feelings indicate truth or understanding. Thus the 'ah-ha' feeling can delusively suggest the error possibility is significant or even true.

The 'ah-ha' moment can feel like evidence that Rafaela harboured a lifelong obsession. And so the merely epistemically possible can feel epistemically boosted in virtue of the cognitive pathway by which it was reached. That is, the very strength of the inculpatory evidence—it eliminated all but farfetched error possibilities—itself lends (delusive) credence to the 'obsession' error possibility because it was reached via an intellectual accomplishment, with its resulting 'ah-ha' sensation. The mistake is that one of the constraints in the puzzle-solving exercise was fixed inappropriately. The thinker was only following the path because of undue attachment to the defendant's innocence.

Indeed epistemic support is not mediated only by the 'ah-ha' phenomenology. Plausibly coherence of propositions itself generates epistemic support, albeit weak support. A proper perspective appreciates that fitting together with inappropriately fixed propositions is not epistemic support worth embracing. The relevant alternatives model diagnoses the undue doubt and proposes a remedy. Thinkers should always bear relative plausibility in mind. The incriminating evidence is consistent with Paul's innocence, but it is more plausible that he raped her, as she claims.

A similar psychological mechanism plausibly underlies some apologetics, theology, and conspiracy theories. The intellectual achievement sees how the puzzle pieces fit. The mistake is undue attachment to some puzzle pieces. Over fifty women accused Bill Cosby of sexual assault. Their accounts are strikingly similar. The evidence is difficult to doubt. Difficult but—as the relevant alternatives framework makes clear—never impossible. A conspiracy theory developed that these women are paid accusers because Cosby tried to buy NBC and create empowering mainstream Black entertainment. His former co-star Phylicia Rashad told reporters, for example, 'Well, my initial reaction to the allegations was, "Hmmm. Someone has a vested interest in preventing Mr. Cosby's return to network television."'[30] Similar conspiracies developed around the accusations of Julian Assange, Brett Kavanaugh, Donald Trump, Bill Clinton, MJ Akbar, Michael Jackson, and others.

The psychology of social power helps illuminate this phenomenon. By using their epistemic creativity to find sources of doubt consistent with damning evidence, the doubter retains social power. Their stance is 'I need not accept what you say. I can think of a reason to doubt.' They feel they can 'defend' themselves from the 'threat' of changing their mind. They 'resist' having to adapt to new knowledge, such as that a beloved entertainer or favoured activist is a sex criminal. Doubt, recall, is often a conservative force. It helps resist change—both change of mind and social change. Doubt supports inaction and preserves the status quo. Recalling Cosby tried to buy NBC can feel satisfying. It can feel victorious to resist attempts to force you to change your perspective, beliefs, or society.

The relevant alternatives approach is a non-skeptical, belief-friendly framework. Belief does not require eliminating every possible source of doubt; only relevant ones. The theory emphasises that remaining uneliminated alternatives are inevitable, and so fixating on them is not clever or important. An anti-skeptical approach to rape accusations pairs this framework with two further claims, which I do not argue for in this essay. Firstly, false rape accusations are relatively abnormal. Typically the possibility is sufficiently rare and farfetched to ignore for most ordinary contexts, such as mundane conversations. Secondly, the disregardability threshold is not sky-high compared to other claims in everyday conversation. Even if it is higher for rape accusations than for other claims, hearers typically overestimate this difference. Combining these claims means that doubting rape accusations is often erroneous.

This raises the question of what attitude hearers should have towards the denial of disregardable error possibilities like, for example, 'Rafaela described a fictional incident to her therapist because of a lifelong obsession with Paul'. Are hearers epistemically justified in believing, accepting, assuming, presupposing, or asserting that this counterclaim is false? Different relevant alternative accounts yield different responses to this question.[31] Rather than address this question, I instead emphasise that epistemic agency is not exhausted by propositional attitudes, such as belief, disbelief, suspension, and credences towards particular propositions. Epistemic normativity is far broader than determining which propositional attitudes are warranted by evidence currently possessed. It includes, for example, how to interpret narratives, which hermeneutical frames to develop, how to learn, what to inquire about, and what to ignore. I propose we are epistemically licensed to ignore such error possibilities, at least in most ordinary circumstances. Ignoring the irrelevant exhibits cognitive virtue.[32] My proposal

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[30] France (2015).

[31] See, for example, Wright (2004) and Coliva (2015), who hold we accept or assume the denial of irrelevant error possibilities, and this differs from belief.

[32] Gardiner (2022) theorises attunement, the cognitive virtues of attention.

focuses on epistemic conduct and social power. It is consistent with various accounts of whether can know, believe, accept, or assume, the denial of irrelevant error possibilities; I simply emphasise their irrelevance.

8. Rendering Relevant: A New Species of Epistemic Injustice

People are not epistemic islands. We gain evidence and epistemic skills from others. As section three describes, we also gain a sense from others of which error possibilities can be properly ignored. We observe what sources of doubt others take seriously and which they disregard.[33]

Most rape accusations are true. Yet many people habitually take seriously error possibilities in which the accuser is lying or mistaken. Error possibilities marshalled include lying for revenge, money, political reasons, and so on. The jilted lover looms large in the public imagination.[34] This raises the question: Suppose society tends to treat particular error possibilities as relevant, do they thereby become relevant? If someone accuses a politician, for example, should we normally suspend judgement unless presented with evidence addressing the possibility the accuser is lying for political reasons?

Assuming this conduct is rare, it is typically a distant error possibility. But if sufficiently many people treat it as relevant, is it thereby relevant? Call this the 'constructivism question'. In section three I suggested two factors that could contribute to an error possibility being nearby: If it is normal and if one's evidence suggests it is true or normal. If enough people wonder about the accusers' political motivations—both generally and in specific cases—doesn't this constitute evidence that the error possibility is true or normal?

Space does not permit a full response to the constructivism question, so I must be brief. A central argument for yes—society thereby renders the possibility relevant—emphasises that it is usually dogmatic and overconfident to ignore what so many take seriously. If others take the possibility seriously, this is evidence that it is true or, at least, not outlandish. A central argument for no is that people can be mistaken *en masse*. On this view, people who raise these sources of doubt are predominantly mistaken, and it is not epistemic virtue to copy others' mistakes, no matter how common. This view holds that widespread doubt does not render doubt appropriate.

One might argue the error possibility merely seems relevant but does not thereby become relevant. But note this seeming can itself cause people to lose confidence. And, furthermore, arguably it typically should: It can be irrational to retain conviction despite uneliminated error possibilities that *seem* relevant, especially when those around you withhold belief.[35]

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[33] Gardiner (forthcoming-b: §8) applies the relevant alternatives framework to conspiracy theories and gaslighting. Many questions raised in this section apply to these topics.

[34] Kelly, Lovett, and Regan (2005).

[35] Whether belief is justified despite widespread doubt depends on manifold features, including one's broader understanding. Error theories that explain an error possibility's salience can help preserve rational confidence, for example. Asking whether an individual's particular belief is justified reveals how interlaced epistemic norms are with one's social context, developmental conditions, and broader character and understanding. I suspect these latter questions—and investigating what epistemic character and society people have and should cultivate—are more significant than whether individuals' beliefs are warranted. I am grateful to Renée Bolinger, Jon Garthoff, Jessie Munton, and Wayne Riggs for helpful conversations.

In addressing the constructivism question, we must distinguish (a) people deeming the possibility relevant from (b) people deeming it true. Those in category (a) withhold belief and express doubt unless the error possibility is addressed by evidence. Those in (b) tend to, for example, assert the accuser is lying, not merely that she might be. The former might be construed as epistemic caution—albeit perhaps erroneous caution—the latter cannot be. The two categories may affect relevance differently. Perhaps, for example, only conduct characteristic of category (b), but not (a), can render error possibilities relevant. Note that this intermediate answer to the constructivism question will not satisfy those who aim to vindicate fully ignoring doubt-mongers.

Recall Lewis's rule of conservation and the converse principle 'if everyone treats a doubt as relevant, it thereby (defeasibly) becomes relevant'. This discussion highlights how these principles are conservative forces. They perpetuate, endorse, and even prescribe, the doubt and suspicion endemic to rape accusations. The principles—which support constructivism about relevance—affirm the status quo, even where that status quo is disproportionate skepticism about reliable kinds of assertion.

If the answer to the constructivism question is yes, this suggests a new kind of testimonial injustice. Society renders an error possibility relevant, where it otherwise would have been disregardably farfetched. On this variety of injustice, a person asserts a plausible rape accusation. The hearer doubts the assertion. This is unjust because rape accusations tend to be true and typically warrant belief. But, crucially, the hearer has not committed an epistemic error. He has not afforded her too little credibility or harboured undue doubt. His doubt is epistemically apposite given epistemic features of the context. Given the uneliminated relevant error possibility, he should withhold. As an individual, his doubt is reasonable. It is nonetheless epistemic injustice because the epistemic features he responds to are constructed by society. Widespread disproportionate doubting of rape accusations is why the error possibilities are relevant.

Consider non-rape illustrations of contagious doubt. In 2020 it was widely reported that the El Dorado wildfire was caused by a bungled gender reveal stunt. Shortly afterwards, social media uses began to express doubts. Seeing those doubts undermined my belief. I didn't read news reports myself, so my suspending was appropriate. Or consider the 1980-90s culture of suspicion around civil lawsuits against large corporations. The ubiquitous, ingrained suspicion against plaintiffs exemplifies the culture-shaping power of large corporations.[36] Returning to rape accusations, consider a hypothetical society in which some fathers sexually abuse their children, but almost everybody assumes this is vanishingly rare and instead suspect almost all incest accusations are caused by so-called 'Daddy issues'. If this defeater is widespread, including across experts, this culture of doubt might justify doubt when ordinary, distantly-removed third-parties hear of an accusation without further information. This society resembles pre-1980's, Freudian-infused Western culture, but is more extreme. The epistemic injustice is acute because additional evidence that could address the error possibilities is often lacking. Frequently there is no independent corroboration, such as witnesses, for rape.

Lack of hearer error is a novel feature. In theorised varieties of testimonial injustice, the hearer doubts the assertion because of a mistake on their part. The doubt is caused by the hearer failing to recognise the speaker's competence or holding unreasonably high standards for acceptance. On this new variety, testimonial injustice results in the hearer doubting the speaker, but the hearer is not committing an

[36] See Susan Saladoff's 2011 documentary *Hot Coffee*.

error. They respond properly to epistemic reality. The injustice stems from the way society sculpts that epistemic reality.[37]

Lewis (1996)'s rule of attention holds that attending to an error possibility, however fleetingly and randomly, suffices to undermine knowledge. He argues that denying this leaves the allure of skeptical arguments unexplained (1996: 561). The skeptic raises error possibilities, such as the brain-in-a-vat possibility, against mundane knowledge claims. If those error possibilities remain irrelevant despite attending to them, Lewis argues, we should not be swayed at all by skeptical arguments. But, Lewis claims, we are. My response is two-fold. Firstly, even if mere fleeting attention to farfetched error possibilities cannot undermine knowledge, stable attentional dispositions, such as widespread frequent mentioning, can make an error possibility seem, or even become, relevant. Sustained or socially-distributed attentional patterns and habits are epistemically potent, but Lewis overestimates the epistemic power of single attentional instances.[38] Secondly, thinking of error possibilities in the 'ah-ha' inducing puzzle-solving mode described above can illusively make error possibilities appear relevant. Philosophical skeptical arguments arouse this mode. These features help explain the allure of skeptical arguments.

9. Conflating 'P' and 'She is Telling the Truth about P'

The relevant alternatives framework suggests another source of undue doubt and concomitant epistemic injustice. A person articulates 'I was raped'. Hearers should treat 'I was raped' as the central claim, and consider error possibilities relevant to that claim. Normally assertions that p eliminate most or all relevant nearby not-p possibilities. The only remaining uneliminated error possibilities include things like 'she is lying about p' or 'she is mistaken about p'. Such error possibilities are ordinarily relatively remote. For most purposes and most assertions, such possibilities can be disregarded. Consequently assertions are typically believed without the speaker's needing to present evidence addressing the possibility they are lying or mistaken.

As described in section three, this is because assertions are normally sensitive to p. Typically the speaker, S, would not have asserted p unless p, so assertions eliminate nearby error possibilities. In the remaining error possibilities, S asserts p despite not p; for most kinds of assertion these are relatively remote alternatives.[39]

Rape accusations are often treated differently. Error possibilities in which the speaker is lying or mistaken are treated as nearby and preponderant. Even for low standards, such as casual reporting, these possibilities are treated as relevant. Speakers hedge with reportative expressions like 'she says she was raped' and 'the alleged rape'. One explanation is that when hearing a rape accusation, hearers unwittingly treat 'she is telling the truth about p', rather than p, as the central claim. Error possibilities that should seem distant—ones in which she is lying or mistaken—now seem relevant. This is because

[37] Ichikawa (2020) describes a kind of testimonial injustice where the evaluator does not underestimate the accuser's competence, instead they perpetrate epistemic injustice by creating and sustaining high epistemic standards. These high standards mean it is true when S says 'we don't know what happened'.

[38] Gardiner (2022) investigates the epistemic potency of attention.

[39] For some assertions, error possibilities in which the speaker is lying or mistaken are nearby. This includes assertions where the topic is commonly lied about, for example. Gardiner (ms) argues that even if most guilty accused people tell the truth and so confess to the rape, most denials are nonetheless lies. To the extent this seems counterintuitive, it exemplifies the base rate fallacy.

they *are* relevant to the mistakenly substituted claim. I propose this is a common error when assessing rape accusations. This conflation helps explain hearers' disproportionate tendency to consider error possibilities in which the accuser is lying or mistaken.

An analogy might help illustrate. Suppose Larry tells you 'Carrie's car is green'. Under most normal circumstances, you would readily believe the claim. There is nothing suspicious about it. Suppose instead Larry tells you 'I'm telling the truth, Carrie's car is green'. In many normal contexts, the second assertion raises error possibilities to salience. We begin to wonder whether Larry is lying and question his motivations. If we need to know the colour, we might seek independent verification.

This effect can arise when Larry's assertion is constant, and we change only the proposition assessed. Larry asserts 'Carrie's car is green'. Compare two epistemic tasks. In the first, we must determine Carrie's car colour. In the second, we must determine whether Larry is telling the truth about Carrie's car colour. In many normal contexts the mere fact of Larry's assertion is almost conclusive evidence, absent defeaters, for the first task. But, by contrast, it is weak evidence for resolving the second; we must seek further evidence, such as whether his demeanour seems trustworthy and whether he has incentives to lie. The second task typically makes salient many possibilities—Larry is deceiving, mistaken, misremembers, or has outdated information—that we can ignore for the first task.

The epistemic difference between the two inquiries is relatively conspicuous in the car example. I suggest a similar but unnoticed mechanism induces doubt about rape accusations. The hearer should be—and they believe they are—assessing whether p. But they unwittingly substitute 'she's telling the truth that p' instead. For the latter claim, the accuser's honesty, incentives to lie, and potential for false belief are acutely relevant. The mere fact the accuser asserted an accusation is weak evidence. Hearer's instead assess, for example, her demeanour or incentives to lie.

This substitution is pernicious in part because eliminating relevant alternatives to 'I am telling the truth that p' is considerably harder, especially where p is a claim, like 'I was raped', where there is frequently no corroborative evidence. Hearers might not recognise this conflation in part because it is ubiquitous. It constitutes testimonial injustice because the speaker is unfairly held to a more demanding epistemic standard. To be believed, the evidence must address error possibilities that should be treated as remote.

If the claims 'p' and 'I'm telling the truth that p' yield different fields of relevant alternatives, then accusers themselves can unwittingly cause the field of relevant alternatives to change. They assert the latter claim in place of the former, without appreciating that this substitution renders additional error possibilities relevant. Asserting 'I am not lying; p'—such as 'I am not lying; he raped me'—intuitively puts speakers on the backfoot. It seems suspiciously defensive. I suggest the difference is even more unfavourable for the speaker: The second assertion introduces the new field of relevant alternatives, including especially those in which she is lying. Leveraging this effect, defence lawyers and other doubt-mongers bait the accuser into asserting claims like 'I am not lying', to make those error possibilities relevant.[40]

[40] This section benefitted from conversations with Heather Battaly, Catherine Elgin, Hilary Kornblith, and Declan Smithies.

10. Destabilisation

I have drawn on the relevant alternatives framework to illuminate the doubt endemic to third-party uptake of rape accusations. Hearers can overestimate the ordinariness of error possibilities when hearing rape accusations and employ unduly distant disregardability thresholds for believing accusations in mundane contexts, including by illicitly invoking demanding legal standards in everyday conversations and overestimating the costs of false belief. I articulated kinds of mistake highlighted by the relevant alternatives framework, such as being too impressed by uneliminated error possibilities and mistakenly substituting 'she is telling the truth about p' for 'p' when assessing accusations.

One theme throughout is that doubt can be a conservative force. It allows people to retain the status quo—in minds and society—despite compelling evidence. People's disproportionate concern about the mistake of believing despite inconclusive evidence crowds out concerns about the converse error: inappropriate doubt despite excellent evidence. The relevant alternatives framework helps diagnose and treat these errors. It emphasises that almost no evidence is conclusive and helps vindicate ignoring doubt mongers.

I end by articulating some reservations about Veronica Ivy's (Rachel McKinnon, 2013) relevant alternatives account. As sketched in section three, on this view an error possibility is remote to the extent it is 'destabilising', meaning its uptake would trigger a significant restructuring of our background beliefs. She proposes (McKinnon, 2013: 537),

> Non-Destabilising Alternatives Theory (NDAT): An agent may ignore an alternate possibility iff the supposition of the alternative possibility would or ought to trigger a rational re-examination and restructuring of a significant class of background beliefs.

As Ivy explains, the relevant class is 'background beliefs about the way the world works', including the social world and one's own belief-forming abilities. This helps explain why a person can know their car is parked outside, despite the uneliminated error possibility that it was recently stolen, and that the observed animal is a zebra, despite the 'cleverly disguised mule' possibility. Such error possibilities, if supposed true, would destabilise beliefs about the social world and about belief-forming capacities. Thus, on Ivy's view, one can disregard these error possibilities and thereby typically know the car is in the driveway and the animal is a zebra.

Ivy's view has merit when our belief-forming practices are good; those beliefs should not be destabilised. But what about when belief-forming practices are pathological? What if believers have doubts where they should have conviction, and conviction where they should doubt? What if they disregard error possibilities—such as the police officer's lying to protect his colleague—because such possibilities would destabilise their belief in the integrity of police officers? Ivy's view endorses the status quo. It allows individuals to retain belief despite uneliminated error possibilities, if those possibilities would destabilise their background beliefs about how the world works.

Reflecting on rape accusations highlights that some background beliefs should be destabilised. Some people are too confident—and wrong—about how the social world works and about their own and other people's belief-forming practices. They believe that, for example, acquaintance rape is rare, nice guys don't commit rape, victims are almost never friendly to their assailant afterwards, and victims

almost always realise that rape occurred. These background beliefs, which perpetuate undue doubt about rape accusations, are false.[41]

This essay focused on misguided and iniquitous doubt. But reflecting on undue confidence in rape myths reveals, contrariwise, the value of doubt. Ivy's view legitimises retaining existent beliefs in the face of radical skeptical error possibilities. But her view also aids the more pernicious everyday doubt-monger, who leverages false background convictions to seed everyday skepticism about rape accusations.[42] When people are wrong, destabilisation is welcome.

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[41] See Warshaw (1994), for example. My criticisms of Ivy's view accord with Medina's exhortation to destabilise pernicious background assumptions. Medina writes, (2015: 196-7): 'to overcome the different forms of "blindness" or insensitivity that constitute the limits of our perspective […] We all have a prima facie obligation to […] interrogate received attitudes and habits.'

[42] Can a similar criticism be levied at Lewis's rule of conservation? I think not, because the views differ importantly. The rule of conservation, if true, shows our interdependence; other people affect what we can ignore. Ivy's view is individualistic: It holds that individuals can rest easy on their epistemic laurels.

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