Epistemic Courage

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This file contains a draft of the front matter for my book, with is forthcoming with Oxford University Press. Please cite the published version.

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Acknowledgements

Philosophy — at least the only way I know how to do it — is a *deeply* social enterprise. I have been working on the ideas in this book for many years. I don't know how specify what percentage of the work has taken the form of reading, how much has been writing, how much has been conversation, etc., but I can confidently say that philosophical conversations with colleagues, students, friends, and the occasional stranger have made up an extremely central part of the development of this project. I wish I could list everyone to whom I owe intellectual debts on this work.

At the top of the list is my friend Jennifer Foster, whose own work on doxastic courage has been inspirational to me. (We each developed many of our ideas in conversation with one another.) I have also benefitted from helpful conversations on the general themes of this book with Eli Alshanetsky, Alisabeth Ayars, Jeremy Fantl, Eleanor Gordon-Smith, Alex Guererro, Patrick Greenough, Sally Haslanger, Cassie Herbert, Carrie Jenkins, Chike Jeffers, Owen McLeod, Lisa Miracchi, Gillian Russell, Patrick Rysiew, Mark Schroeder, Mona Simion, Matt Weiner, and Alison Wylie, as well as two detailed sets of comments from anonymous reviewers for Oxford University Press. I'm also grateful to Peter Momtchiloff at OUP for believing in this project and helping make this book a reality.

I have had many occasions to discuss the ideas in this book, and specific draft material, with my graduate students at the University of British Columbia, who made up an excellent and lively working group, bursting with ideas, many of which are now in this manuscript. I'm very grateful to my supervisees Alex Bryant, Nathan Cockram, Steven Diggen, Cam Gilbert, Mira Kuroyedov, Phyllis Pearson, Emily Tilton, Ritu Sharma, and Kelsey Vicars for all that I have learned from them.

I had the opportunity to include this material in a graduate seminar syllabus in Fall 2022, where an early draft of these ideas benefitted from the careful eyes and critical discussion of my students Hira Ahmed, Anjali Bauri, Zach Bloom, Evan Cave, Terrina Chan, Alyssa Izatt, William Jettinghoff, Nick Kay, Noah Macdonald, Ritu Sharma, Juan Stefan Tallaj Rodriguez, Michelle Tobiash, Carsten von Wersebe, and Jack Wands.

Thanks very much to the COGITO research group in Glasgow, who invited me in the summer of 2022 to give a series of seminars on my book in progress. There I benefitted particularly from conversations with Adam Carter, Jamie Collin, Jennifer Corns, Chris Kelp, Isac Andri Olafsson, Ross Patrizio, Andrew Sherwood, Mona Simion, Elise Woodard, and Robin Zheng. I also benefitted greatly from a workshop on Epistemic Anxiety at the University of British Columbia in December 2022, including especially conversations with Alisabeth Ayars, Anjali Bauri, Alex Bryant, Steven Diggin, Jen Foster, Carrie Jenkins, Stefan Lukits, Inkeri Koskinen, Chris Mole, Jennifer Nagel, Phyllis Pearson, Brian Weatherson, and Alison Wylie, and a session at the 2023 Bled Epistemology conference, where I had helpful discussions with Kelly Becker, Bob Beddor, James Beebe, Jessica Brown, Georgi Gardiner, Mikkel Gerken, Peter Graham, Heidi Grasswick, Sandy Goldberg, Michael Hannon, Igal Kvart, Maria Lasonen-Aarnio, Lauren Leydon-Hardy, Ben McCraw, Simon Rippon, Cat Saint-Croix, Mona Simion, and Elise Woodard.

I presented a version of Chapter 1 at a CONCEPT workshop online in Cologne in February

2022, and a public lecture at Lafayette College in March 2022. I'm grateful to the audiences there, including Matt Andler, Jumbly Grindrod, Marlene Maislinger, Owen McLeod, George Panichas, Francesco Praolini, Joe Shieber, Paul Silva, and Nikolay Tarabanov for a helpful discussion, and especially to Eve Kitsik and Christos Kyriacou, who provided me with insightful detailed comments. I'm also grateful to the The Bertrand Russell Peace Foundation Ltd., for permission to use the copyrighted quote in the epigraph to Chapter 1.

I presented a version of Chapter 2 at Arizona State University in March 2022, where I had helpful conversations with Brad Armendt, Tyler DesRoches, Rachel Levit-Ades, Angela Barnes, Cindy Bolton, Triston Hanna, Bernie Kobes, Shyam Nair, Nathanael Pierce, Ángel Pinillos, Doug Portmore, and others. I also presented a version of this material in a September 2022 colloquium at Vanderbilt University, and received useful feedback on this and other chapters from Eli Alienikoff, Emerson Bodde, Ema Costa, Kelly Cunningham, Diana Heney, Ismael Kurun, Jennifer Lowell, Eric MacPhail, Lucy Vollbrecht, John Weymark, and Wangchen Zhou. Thanks also especially to Steven Diggin, Dennis Whitcomb, and Mark Nelson for helpful written comments on the ideas in Chapter 2.

I discussed an early draft of Chapter 3 with my supervision group at the University of British Columbia. I'm grateful to my students for their insightful discussion there, and to my colleagues at a joint UBC/Simon Fraser faculty Work in Progress Seminar, where I received helpful feedback from Dom Alford-Duguid, Scott Anderson, Alisabeth Ayars, Matt Bedke, Aaron Henry, Cat Prueitt, Chelsea Rosenthal, and Chris Stephens. I also spoke about a draft of this chapter at an online Words workshop organized by Nikki Ernst in September 2021, where I was grateful for an excellent discussion with Patrick Connolly, Jen Foster, Samia Hesni, A.G. Holdier, Quill Kukla, Sally McConnell-Ginet, Devin Morse, Jenny Saul, Naomi Schemas, Ritu Sharma, Eleanor Steele, Jeremy Wanderer, Kelsey Vicars, Audrey Yap, and Sequoya Yiaueki. I also remember useful conversations with Lewis Powell on this material. Likewise, I had a nice discussion at a UNLV colloquium talk in 2021, where I'm grateful to Cheryl Abbate, Abigail Agular, Gabriel Cassidy, Sandeep Dhillon, Andrew Kim, Bill Ramsey, Amy Reed-Sandoval, Samantha Wakil, James Woodbridge, and Emmanuel Yirdaw for helpful comments and questions. I presented this material at the University of Hawai'i in 2022, where I benefitted from helpful exchanges with Tamara Albertini, Arindam Chakrabarti, Ann Cotten, Vrinda Dalmiya, Taylor Hunter, Emma Irwin-Herzog, Sera Kong, Jana Light, Ella Marsh, Ian Nicolay, Franklin Perkins, David Simone, Neil Sims, Sean Smith, and Griffin Werner, and in 2023 at UC–Davis, where Jordan Bell, Niko Boylan, Rohan French, Cody Gilmore, David Glick, Bobby Johnson, Cameron Kincaid, Xander Macswan, Francisco N. Martinez-Avina, Chanwoo Lee, Ryan Light, Jerome Romagosa, Patrick Skeels, Kann Tabakci, Ramiel Tamras, Paul Teller, Hannah Tierny, Adam Sennet, and Danielle Williams each gave me helpful discussion and ideas. Thanks also to Linh H. Mac for further helpful discussion on Chapter 3.

I presented a version of Chapter 4 at the 2022 Rocky Mountain Ethics Congress, where I had helpful conversations with Mark Boespflug, Shmuel Gomes, Andrew Lichter, Michal Masny, Alastair Norcross, Jason Raibley, Catherine Rioux, Mark van Roojen, Anna-Bella Sicilia, Anthony Smith, Laura Soter, and Travis Timmerman, to whom I am grateful. I am also grateful for other helpful conversations on the ideas in Chapter 4 with Rima Basu, Quill Kukla, Alex Lloyd, Sarah Moss, Mark Schroeder, and especially Jen Foster.

Chapter 5 is based on my (2020b) paper "Faith and Epistemology". That paper was first drafted as part of a 2016 seminar on the value of faith in Bellingham, WA, supported by a 2016 grant from the Templeton Religion Trust. I had helpful conversations with many people in preparing that paper, including Jack Beaulieu, Liam Kofi Bright, Roger Clarke, Bianca Crewe, Kyle da Silva, Jeremy Dawson, Alex Dembroff, Jennifer Doyle, Kinley Gillette, Jas Heaton, Dan Howard-Snyder, Carrie Jenkins, Michael Lee, Jonathan Lopez, Graham Moore, Phyllis Pearson, Kathryn Pogin, Bradley Rettler, Chris Stephens, Rodrigo Valencia, and Neil Van Leeuwen. The paper on which this chapter

was based was published open access via funding from the 2017–19 "Knowledge Beyond Natural Science" project at the University of Stirling, funded by the Templeton Foundation.

Chapter 7 derives in part from ideas first published in Bianca Crewe and Jonathan Ichikawa (2021), "Rape Culture and Epistemology," in Jennifer Lackey's *Applied Epistemology* volume with Oxford University Press. The version in this book is my own, and includes some new ideas, but it also includes many ideas I first developed with Bianca, to whom I am very grateful. In preparing our older paper, Bianca and I benefitted from discussions with Nate Bemis, Nathan Cockram, Annaleigh Curtis, Jeremy Dawson, Logan Fletcher, Jennifer Freyd, Sandy Goldberg, Jade Hadley, Cassie Herbert, Marc Hewitt, Carrie Jenkins, Glynnis Kirchmeier, Jennifer Lackey, Lauren Leydon-Hardy, Clayton Littlejohn, Lucia Lorenzi, Graham Moore, Carla Nappi, Phyllis Pearson, Kathryn Pogin, Alan Richardson, Kyle da Silva, Joe Slater, Chris Stephens, Rodrigo Valencia, Jordan Wadden, Nancy Wu, and Michel-Antoine Xhignesse, and especially to Alex Guererro. I also had a very helpful discussion with my supervision working group again on a version of this material. I had additional helpful conversations in preparing this chapter with Lauren Leydon-Hardy, Kathryn Pogin, and Emily Tilton. Thanks to Cambridge University Press for permission to use the copyrighted quote in the epigraph to Chapter 7.

Chapter 8 incorporates material first published in my (2020a) "Contextual Injustice" in the *Kennedy Institute Journal of Ethics*, which in turn developed out of an idea first introduced in §6 of Crewe and Ichikawa (2021). I presented versions of that paper at a 2018 UNC Philosophy Department colloquium, a 2018 UBC epistemology working group meeting, a Society for Women in Philosophy symposium at the 2019 Canadian Philosophical Association Meeting, a 2019 Arché reunion conference, a 2019 conference at Peking University on Knowledge, Context, and Responsibility, and a 2019 conference at Glasgow University on Epistemic Injustice, and Blame, where I received a lot of useful feedback from many people. I owe particular thanks to Derek Ball, Aliosha Barranco Lopez, Sam Berstler, Christopher Blake-Turner, Hannah Bondurant, Jessica Brown, Roger Clarke, Kristin Conrad, Bianca Crewe, Alexander Dinges, Davide Fassio, Jennifer Foster, Miranda Fricker, David Friedell, Jie Gao, Georgi Gardiner, Joaquim Giannotti, Sandy Goldberg, Jas Heaton, Cassie Herbert, Torfinn Huvenes, Carrie Jenkins, Ira Kiourti, Alison Duncan Kerr, Os Keyes, Marc Lange, Karen Lewis, Qilin Li, Yong Li, Stefan Lukits, Federico Luzzi, Mauricio Maluff Masi, Elinor Mason, Matt McGrath, Robin McKenna, Michaela McSweeney, Shoshana Messinger, Chris Mole, Graham Moore, Ram Neta, Holly Onclin, Molly O'Rourke-Friel, Phyllis Pearson, Kathryn Pogin, Geoff Pynn, John T. Roberts, Gillian Russell, Geoff Sayre-McCord, Dan Shahar, Kevin Scharp, Jonathan Shaheen, Mona Simion, Zach Thornton, Emily Tilton, Lauren Townsend, Kelsey Vicars, Sam Wakil, Yanjing Wang, Jenna Woodrow, Alex Worsnip, Audrey Yap, Ru Ye, Yiwen Zhan, Weiping Zheng, and others, for helpful discussions of these ideas and early drafts of this material. I also received feedback on a version of this material from several referees and editors for *Ergo*, the *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, and the *Kennedy Institute of Ethics Journal*, and I am grateful to most of them too.

Over the course of writing this book, I benefitted tremendously from several research assistants, both intellectually and with respect to many of the logistical details. Thanks to Alex Bryant, Ali Jewell, Mira Kuroyedov, Steven Diggin, Emily Tilton, and Kelsey Vicars for excellent, careful, thoughtful assistance with this project.

Work for this book was supported in part by an Insight Grant from the Canadian Social Science and Humanities Research Council for a project on positive epistemic norms, and a UBC Killam Research Fellowship.

I will forever bear a debt of gratitude to Ernest Sosa, who supervised my Ph.D. and introduced me to epistemology. Ernie's approach to knowledge and skill and agency, and the way he always kept the big picture in mind, has had a profound impact on the way that I think about belief and knowledge and acting well in the world.

Introduction

Epistemology is Sexy Now

Epistemology is the ancient branch of philosophy that focuses on belief and knowledge. Its characteristic questions include: What is knowledge? How is knowledge possible? Is it possible to really know anything at all? What makes some things more reasonable to believe than others? Should we trust our senses? Should we trust our scientific experts?

Over the course of my career, I've noticed a change in the way that people react to epistemic questions. These days I have a much easier time interesting new acquaintances in my academic field than I used to. The conversation usually starts like this:

THEM: What do you do for work?
ME: I'm a philosophy professor.
THEM: What kind of philosophy do you do?
ME: Do you know what epistemology is?
THEM: Hmm, remind me? / No.
ME: It's the branch of philosophy that has to do with knowledge and belief — what is knowledge, what makes beliefs reasonable or unreasonable, what's the difference between doing a good job and a bad job deciding what to believe, things like that.

I've been stepping through these opening conversational moves, with minor variations, since I was a grad student during the George W. Bush administration. It's the next stage of the conversation that's now quite different from the way I remember it going earlier in my career. People used to ask me where one goes with that, or whether I find it interesting, or whether this means I'm mostly working on religion. But now, almost every time, they say:

THEM: That sounds really important and timely.

Questions about what to believe are urgent ones. It has become increasingly obvious that managing beliefs is a major factor in how the world is going — and in particular, people doing a bad job of it is a big part of what is going wrong. Look at all that *fake news*. There's so much *misinformation*. Look at people's embrace of *conspiracy theories*. There are, people have realized, a lot of bad beliefs out there.

Bad Beliefs

I'm sure you've noticed that some people — many of your political opponents, especially — are far too quick to believe what they're told, especially when they're being told pretty much what they want to believe anyway. Observations like this one have led to much disapproving discourse

about "alternative facts" or a "post-truth" world. "If only," one is inclined to say, "people would be more careful about what they believe! If only people would treat information more critically, they wouldn't have so many bad beliefs."

This book is a reaction to these natural thoughts. I don't exactly disagree with them, but I think they are incomplete in an importantly distorting way. Yes, there are indeed a lot of bad beliefs out there. And yes, I do wish the people who had them would examine their evidence more critically. There are many Americans, for example, who believe that Donald Trump rightfully won the 2020 U.S. Presidential election, but had the election stolen by a nebulous global conspiracy. There is no credible evidence suggesting as much, so people shouldn't believe that. So far, I agree with the received intellectual wisdom.

But it's a mistake to focus *too* much on bad belief. Bad belief is a problem, but it's not the only problem, and its cousin — bad *failure to believe* — can be just as destructive, and is going far less noticed. Many people focus on the mistake of believing things people shouldn't believe. This book highlights the converse mistake: the mistake of *not* believing things people *should* believe. Correcting such mistakes should be of interest to epistemologists, because it will help us to think more clearly about ancient and important questions about what to believe. And it should also be of interest to everybody else, because this kind of mistake often has harmful moral, social, and political consequences. Explaining these harms, and pointing to strategies for improving things, are the central projects of this book.

Belief, Disbelief, and Suspension of Judgment

Suppose one is interested in the question of whether *P*. The variable *P* here can stand for any claim; for concreteness, you might consider this one:

***P*:** Receiving a vaccination for COVID-19 is, all things considered, safer than the alternatives.

Epistemology has to do with the decision between three possible responses to a given idea.

First, one might *believe* that *P*, affirming that being vaccinated is the safest option. (Someone who formed this belief would likely seek out a vaccine.)

Second, one might *disbelieve*. This is the same as believing the opposite — in this case, one might believe that vaccines are not safer than the alternatives. For example, one might believe that vaccines introduce dramatic long-term medical risks that outweigh the risks of COVID-19. (Someone who disbelieves *P* is likely to avoid being vaccinated.)

There is an important third option: one might *suspend judgment* on the question. Here, this would be to remain undecided as to whether *P*. One neither believes that *P* is true nor believes that *P* is false.

In this example, given the evidence publicly available as I write in 2022, the right thing to do is to believe. The available evidence overwhelmingly indicates the safety and efficacy of our available COVID-19 vaccines, as well as the danger of the disease itself.

One way to make an important epistemological mistake in this instance is to disbelieve *P*. This would be a bad belief — it is well characterized by those who complain about people who are too uncritical of bad sources of information. But in this case, suspending judgment would also be an important epistemological mistake. It can be a particularly dangerous and insidious kind of mistake, I think, for at least four reasons.

First, it will often have the same kinds of harmful effects on the world as the bad belief would. People who remain unvaccinated because they're not sure whether the vaccines are safe are just as harmful to public health as people who do so because they're confident that vaccines are unsafe.

Second, there are strong stereotypes that venerate reactions like suspending judgment, being deliberate, being cautious, and playing it safe. This kind of reaction tends to be coded as rational. This can make correcting bad suspension more difficult than correcting bad belief. This is part of why bad suspension of judgment can be so insidious. It's easy to fail to recognize that it's a substantive reaction that could be mistaken.

Third, relatedly, because bad suspension is undertheorized, it is easier for it to go misunderstood and unrecognized. (Indeed, there is an active debate within academic epistemology whether it ever *can* be an epistemic mistake to suspend judgment. I shall argue, with common sense, that it can.)

Fourth, bad suspension, I'll argue, has a special role to play in entrenching and perpetuating harmful elements of the status quo. Because of important connections between epistemology and action, one's epistemic biases are not *merely* a matter of what one believes — they also have political import. A bias towards the skeptical — which happens when one worries much more about bad belief than about bad suspension — will also, in many cases, amount to a bias towards the conservative.

I'll explore all four of these considerations further in the chapters that follow.

An Example

Many examples will come in the chapters that follow, but here is one illustration to warm you up to the project. The precipitating event made international headlines: In October 2018, Saudi dissident Jamal Khashoggi was killed in a Saudi consulate. As the gristly details of his death became known, intelligence agencies and journalists around the world reported, with a high degree of confidence, that his murder was at the order of Mohammed bin Salman, the Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia. Despite CIA reports supporting this conclusion, American President Donald Trump expressed uncertainty about the Crown Prince's involvement.

In a rambling White House statement dated November 20, Trump emphasized the strategic importance of the US–Saudi relationship, as well as the financial benefits of a recent arms deal, before finally turning to Khashoggi's dismemberment. Trump wrote:

> Representatives of Saudi Arabia say that Jamal Khashoggi was an "enemy of the state" and a member of the Muslim Brotherhood, but my decision is in no way based on that — this is an unacceptable and horrible crime. King Salman and Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman vigorously deny any knowledge of the planning or execution of the murder of Mr. Khashoggi. Our intelligence agencies continue to assess all information, but it could very well be that the Crown Prince had knowledge of this tragic event — maybe he did and maybe he didn't!
>
> That being said, we may *never* know all of the facts surrounding the murder of Mr. Jamal Khashoggi. In any case, our relationship is with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. They have been a great ally in our very important fight against Iran. The United States intends to remain a steadfast partner of Saudi Arabia to ensure the interests of our country, Israel and all other partners in the region. It is our paramount goal to fully eliminate the threat of terrorism throughout the world!

The action discussed in this statement is Trump's decision to "remain a steadfast partner of Saudi Arabia". His justification for it cites *uncertainty*, raising the possibility that perhaps Khashoggi was a pretty bad guy, noting that bin Salman *vigorously denies* involvement or knowledge. Did he know? *Maybe he did and maybe he didn't!*[1] He speculates that we *may never know* what really happened.

[1] As indicated above, US intelligence sources had indicated that bin Salmon didn't merely *know* about the murder — that he actually *ordered* it. Trump doesn't even express ignorance about this idea; his statement ignored it altogether.

This is epistemic vocabulary. Questions about what one can or cannot know (or even whether one can know anything at all), what direction (or directions) the evidence points, what it would or would not be reasonable, or permissible, or mandatory, to believe are the central questions of epistemology. But the skeptical moves here — the denials of knowledge, the raising of alternative possibilities — are not *merely* epistemic. They work in the service of a particular decision: the decision to continue to support the Saudi leaders, trade arms, and engage in joint military projects.

Epistemology has always been a deeply practical branch of philosophy, because decisions about what to believe play central roles in decisions about what to do. These questions matter.

Moreover, although suspension of judgment is not always the rational or careful response, there are powerful social stereotypes and scripts that often tend to make it feel as if it is. If one criticized Trump's epistemic claims here, Trump would have had a rhetorically strong position available: "I'm not saying bin Salman didn't order the murder," one can imagine him or his defenders saying. "I'm just saying, we don't know! Let's not jump to conclusions here!" As I'll explain in Chapter 1, there's something of a neat trick available, marshalling skeptical thoughts and arguments in a way that can enjoy a presumption of common sense, and that is often used, as it is here, to further conservative projects and protect the status quo.

"Skepticism itself," one of Tucker Carlson's guests opined in November 2022, after Paul Pelosi was attacked in his home by a rightwing conspiracy theorist, "can never be wrong. Skepticism says there is evidentiary holes, and there is faulty reasoning in what we are being told, even if evidence does emerge later on to prove it, the skepticism itself was not just valid, but necessary."[2]

I disagree. In a complex world with difficult-to-interpret evidential situations, *not being convinced* of certain disruptive ideas can be a pretty good way to keep doing what you want to do, even whilst wrapping oneself in a stereotypical image of a measured, thoughtful, and careful person. But such skepticism often amounts more to an excuse for inaction than to the product of scrupulous respect for intellectual norms.

You

Let me say a bit about whom this book is for.

Like many academics, most of my training emphasized writing scholarly work for academic professionals, especially articles in specialist philosophy journals. I've done a lot of that kind of work throughout my career. I think the kind of scholarship that mode can be necessary for is often valuable, and I'm glad that a lot of us have done a lot of it, and continue to do so.

But — also like many academics — I've been noticing more and more that the broader public inaccessibility of much of our work is a serious limitation to its impact. As the examples I've highlighted already show, some of the things I want to write about are of broad public importance. Academics must not only be talking to one another.

Public-facing philosophical work is more common now than it was at the start of my career. One can read or hear distillations and adaptations of important philosophical ideas in major newspapers, magazines, and podcasts. Such work is valuable, and I am glad it is becoming more common. But I also hold a place for a deeper kind of philosophical investigation that engages the broader public. It's one thing to adapt and communicate professionally-developed philosophical work for the masses; it's quite another to invite nonspecialists to engage in more detailed scholarly research in its own right.

As I was planning this book, I considered trying to write it as a trade book instead of an academic monograph. That book would have been shorter than this one, with far fewer footnotes and citations.

[2] 1 November, 2022, *Tucker Carlson Tonight*. Transcript available at `https://www.foxnews.com/transcript/tucker-carlson-democrats-defending-indefensible`.

It would have been designed for a quicker and more entertaining read. (It also would have required some literary writing skills that would've been new to me.) There were a variety of reasons I ultimately decided to write this book in this form instead — high up on the list was my desire to engage in more detail with the extant philosophical literature. (I *like* having lots of citations!) I am convinced that in some cases, serious scholarship — at the level of theoretical engagement that fits far better in journal articles than op-ed pages — is broadly important and interesting, and of benefit to the general public.

Although I have written an academic monograph, it is my strong hope that it is not *only* for scholars of philosophy. I have attempted to write this book in a way that will make it open and inviting to intellectually curious readers without a formal academic background. If you are such a person, I'm very glad you are here! While I want this book to be broadly accessible, I also want it to be interesting to specialists. This is a narrow path to walk, and no doubt I have veered from it on each side from time to time. At some points along the way, I'll signal sections that may be of more or less interest to certain kinds of readers. I've designed the book so that sections can be skipped without too much disruption to the main ideas.

In the rest of this Introduction, I'll go over two sets of background ideas, putting some conceptual foundations in place about epistemology, and about ideology and critical theory. Then I'll finish the Introduction with an outline of the rest of the book.

Knowledge, Belief, and Truth

This section is especially for readers without a philosophical background in epistemology.

Epistemology has to do with what people know, what people should believe, and how to regulate our beliefs so that we end up believing the truth. These three philosophical notions — knowledge, belief, and truth — are also familiar in non-philosophical discussions.[3] Fluent speakers of English know these words well. Nevertheless, it is worthwhile to be explicit and careful about the distinctions between them. Please indulge me if I belabour some obvious points in the paragraphs that follow. My experience teaching epistemology has taught me that, prior to studying epistemology, many people have a general sense of these distinctions, but are liable to treat them a bit fuzzily if we don't belabour them at least a bit.

In particular, *truth*, and related notions like *facts* and *reality*, are a matter of *how things really are*, whether or not you or I have any awareness of them. By contrast, *belief* is essentially a matter of how someone represents the world — of how someone *thinks* things are. Belief is a more subjective, psychological matter. John Keats (1820, p. 38) once wrote that "nothing ever becomes real till experienced." This may be good poetry — it gestures metaphorically at an important truth — but as a literal metaphysical matter, experience and reality are very different things. Whether you believe that I am Canadian is a question about you. Whether it is *true* that I am Canadian is a fact about me.

This isn't to deny that many truths are socially constructed. The fact that I'm Canadian is a good example — it is in virtue of a certain social system that humans have set up that it's true that I am Canadian. Other facts seem more objective, like the fact that 7 is a prime number. Whether socially constructed or not, something's being true, and your believing it, are very different things. You probably do believe that I'm Canadian. I just told you that I am, and it would be strange for you to doubt me on the matter. So in this case, your belief lines up with the truth. That's good — beliefs are in some sense *supposed* to be true.

Some standard philosophical terminology: a *proposition* is a kind of representation that could be true or false. *Jonathan is Canadian* is an example of a true proposition. *Jonathan is riding an*

[3] My attitude towards a fourth central label in contemporary epistemological discussions, "justification," is more complicated; it is the subject of Chapter 3.

elephant right now is, alas, an example of a false proposition. A proposition is *true* just in case the world really is the way the proposition represents it as being. For my purposes in this book, we can just think of a *fact* as a true proposition.

I think the above is more or less a straightforward precisification of tacit knowledge that ordinary speakers have about the distinction between belief and reality. But there are some uses of language that tend to muddle them. Sometimes people will say for instance that something is *true for some people*, when what I think they mean is that that *some people believe* it. It is true that the Earth is approximately spherical — that is a fact. NBA player Kyrie Irving is reportedly a flat-earther — he subscribes to a complex theory according to which the Earth is flat, along with baroque attempts to explain away scientific evidence to the contrary. People might be tempted to say — perhaps metaphorically — that the flat-earth theory is *true for Irving*. I'm not against the use of metaphor, but when we are doing epistemological theorizing, it is important to remember that such claims are not strictly speaking true. They tend to collapse the critical distinction between truth and reality.

This conflation has made its way into politics.

In November 2016, Donald Trump surrogate Scottie Nell Hughes was asked on the *Diane Rehm Show* to defend Trump's lies about the popular vote total in that year's election. Hughes's response was that "there's no such thing anymore unfortunately as facts". In January 2017, Kellyanne Conway gave a now-infamous description of blatantly false statements about Trump's inauguration crowd size as expressions of "alternative facts".

I don't think Hughes really thinks, or even really meant, that there are no facts. I think she meant there are, within some restricted sphere of politically interesting claims, no facts that are generally accepted and can be assumed without contest. I don't think Conway really thinks there's a kind of fact other than the true kind. (Later in her interview, she retreats to an epistemic claim, saying that there's no way to *know* the size of a crowd.[4] I think this is a badly mistaken piece of skeptical epistemology, but it's not the incoherent invocation of facts that contradict reality.)

Critics of the Trump administration were quick to ridicule this language. I agree with many of their critiques. But some of them, while politically well-intentioned, were also philosophically confused. Take for example this tweet from Meriam-Webster, posted the same morning as Conway's invocation of "alternative facts":

> A fact is a piece of information presented as having objective reality.[5]

This was widely interpreted as a criticism of Conway.

But this, to be frank, is quite a bad definition of a fact — and one that does not obviously work against the Trumpian rhetoric. Suppose I tell a lie. In my introductory epistemology course, let's imagine, I tell my students that Barack Obama once asked me to explain to him the distinction between metaphysics and epistemology. This is not true. I have never met Obama. But, in an attempt to make myself seem important to my students, we may imagine that I tell them this lie — and moreover, that I tell it in a serious tone of voice, with a clear expectation that they should believe me. This lie is a piece of information presented (by me) as having objective reality. So it counts as a fact, by the Merriam-Webser definition.

Maybe you think a lie doesn't count as a "piece of information". Only truths can be information. OK, in that case, why is Merriam-Webster talking about presenting as objective reality at all? Truths don't become facts when people present them.

[4] "Maybe this is me as a pollster, Chuck. And you know data well. I don't think you can prove those numbers one way or the other. There's no way to really quantify crowds. We all know that." January 22, 2017, *Meet the Press* — transcript available at `https://www.nbcnews.com/meet-the-press/meet-press-01-22-17-n710491`.

[5] `https://twitter.com/MerriamWebster/status/823221915171061760`

There are also lots of facts that haven't been "presented as" having objective reality. Lots of the facts about the current condition of my condo, for example, haven't been *presented* in any way. Some of them, I know but haven't mentioned them to anyone; others, nobody knows or will ever know. There is a fact, for example, about exactly how many grains of rice are in my rice canister right now, but that fact will never be presented as having objective reality. It just *has* objective reality.

Somewhat ironically, by Merriam-Webster's definition, Conway's invocation of alternative facts actually makes perfect sense. If a fact is just an assertion, then the crowd-size experts have one assertion, and the Trump administration has an alternative assertion. Merriam-Webster has offered something more like a definition of a *purported* fact. But not all purported facts are facts, just like not all alleged murderers are murderers.

This dictionary entry does seem comfortable with the notion of *objective reality*, using that phrase in its definition. Once we have a grip on that notion, we can define 'fact' quite simply: a fact is a part of objective reality. A fact is something that is true, whether or not someone presents it as true, and whether or not anyone or everyone recognizes that it is true.

Epistemology is about how to manage the task of making one's representation of the world — one's beliefs — match up with the reality of it — the truths. When we do a good job forming beliefs, and they line up with reality in the right way, we have *knowledge*. Knowledge is a special kind of belief that puts one in touch with reality. To know that *P*, one must truly believe that *P*. (Other conditions must also be met.)

Again, I don't expect much of this section to be news — it's written more in the spirit of bringing out and reinforcing a tacit understanding of these important distinctions.

I said above that knowledge, belief, and truth are common-sense notions. I should qualify this a bit with respect to belief. As I'll discuss a few times in the book, especially in Chapters 1 and 4, I'm mostly working with a notion of *outright* belief that involves a mental *commitment* to its truth — not merely an assessment of something as probable. Sometimes people talk of 'belief' in a weaker way, where you might count as 'believing' something if you merely think it's pretty likely to be true — likelier than the salient alternatives, for example. Someone asked me for instructions to a local bar the other day, and I said, "I'm not sure, but I think it's on the other side of the library." I wouldn't describe myself in this case as outright *believing* that the bar was on the other side of the library — I was suspending judgment, but also reporting that my best guess was that it was over there. When you really believe something, in the sense that interests me in this book, you're not just giving it your best guess; you're treating the question as settled. (If they'd asked me where the library was, I wouldn't have expressed uncertainty or given a guess — I would have expressed my outright belief by telling them exactly where I am sure it is.)

Critical Theory and Ideology

The other topic to which I wanted to include a bit of a primer in this Introduction is critical theory. I will have things to say throughout this book about ways in which epistemic norms and habits and stereotypes can be *ideological*, and contribute to oppressive social systems like white supremacy and the patriarchy. Since I do not assume that my readers are familiar with critical theory, I would like to explain a few of its central ideas.

Critical theory is an approach to sociological investigation that seeks, not merely to describe society, but also to scrutinize it, identifying deeply-held assumptions that are easily overlooked, and the social structures that tend to reinforce them. One characteristic observation in critical theory is the recognition that a putatively "neutral" or "objective" practice, police, or policy in fact serves oppressive ends.

For example, nearly all American states prohibit citizens from voting if they are incarcerated for a felony conviction, and many states extend that prohibition to people on parole and probation, and even those who have completed their sentences. Such laws are racially neutral on their face — the laws are simply written in terms of criminal convictions and do not mention race — but, due to the massively racist American criminal justice system, such felon disenfranchisement laws contribute to and reinforce American white supremacy.[6]

Here is another example.[7] Consider a heterosexual couple deciding how to organize their lives and careers after becoming parents. For familiar and sensible economic and family reasons, they decide that one of them should cut back from their full-time job to devote more time to parenting. Which will it be? Every relationship is different and nothing is inevitable, but it is not an accident that in most such cases, the father keeps working full-time and the mother cuts back — even if they are equally competent at their similar professions and at child-rearing activities. They live in a sexist society that expects men to be employed and women to be mothers, and they will face many incentives to conform to the script. If they do so — for perfectly understandable reasons that need not reflect any sexist ideas or preferences of their own — they will contribute to, and reinforce, those unjust social norms.

There is no individual villain in these stories. Bad cultures work to sustain themselves, via ideologies that influence and shape individuals' decisions in ways that tend to perpetuate them. Sally Haslanger (2016; 2017c) discusses some of the mechanisms by which they do so. We don't need to go into too many such details for present purposes.

These ideological factors tend to go unnoticed — indeed, as Haslanger (2017c) highlights, this is important to their operation, as many people, faced with the explicit choice, would not wish to contribute to oppressive features of society. We wouldn't do so as regularly as we do if those features didn't have effective ways to remain beneath our notice. Part of what it is to live in an ableist world, for example, is for ableism to be a strong default. Even someone well-informed about disability and committed to inclusion will often behave in ableist ways, often without recognizing that they are doing so.[8]

Much oppression is *structural*. White supremacy is not, on the whole, driven by racist individuals pulling the social strings with nefarious ends in mind. There are some very bad and very racist actors out there, and they do make things worse, but the social system is something of an ecosystem of its own: it works to perpetuate itself.[9]

Part of critical theory is observing such ways in which apparent "objectivity" is part of a social strategy for perpetuating and reinforcing an unjust system. I'll argue in this book that skeptical thought, rhetoric, and stereotypes, and the negative bias in epistemology, also serve to protect and reinforce oppression.

Another key idea of critical theory is that the ideologies in question aren't just harmful, to be opposed on moral ground — they're also epistemically *misleading*. As Raymond Geuss puts it, under ideology, "agents in the society are deluded about themselves, their position, their society, or their interests."[10] Under ideology, agents tend to get important things wrong. The idea that men are naturally more ambitious than women, for instance, is the false product of a sexist ideology, even if an individual bases it on a robust sample of observed men and women.

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[6] See Alexander (2010) for a classic discussion.

[7] I take this example from Haslanger (2016, p. 122), who in turn cites Cudd (2006).

[8] As Yap and Ichikawa (2023) discuss, pointing out that one is doing so in such cases is often likely to involve identity-driven defensiveness, which can also be a powerful epistemic obstacle.

[9] Cf. Geuss (1981, p. 15).

[10] Geuss (1981, p. 12). Geuss also (p. 19) says that ideologies must be "in some sense *false*" (emphasis in original). The qualifier "in some sense" may be in recognition of the idea that ideologies themselves may not be truth-evaluable; they may include habits, customs, systems of meaning, etc., which cannot strictly be said to be true or false. Cf. Haslanger (2017c).

I would add, however, that *delusion* is a label for only one kind of epistemic mistake — delusions are bad beliefs. Ideology *can* promote this mistake, to be sure, but it can also promote the converse mistake that is the main idea of this book. Ideologies can *hide the truth* just as well as they can *present falsehood*. Indeed, doing either one is often part of the means by which they do the other. I'll argue in Chapter 2 that the negative bias in epistemology is part of a conservative, status-quo-protecting ideology. It does much of its epistemic damage by preventing good beliefs, rather than by promoting bad ones.

One final note on critical theory: a few years ago this wouldn't have needed saying, but given some recent American political rhetoric, it is now important to be clear: critical theory is not at all about fomenting hatred or shame between or among any individuals.[11] It is about recognizing, explaining, and resisting powerful social oppressive forces that transcend individuals. Possible improvement, not condemnation, is the point of the 'critique.' So when I argue, as I will later in the book, that certain very common ways of discussing skepticism or the justification of beliefs has a tendency to promote rape culture and white supremacy, I do not intend this as an attack on any individuals. Rather, it is a critique of a system that many of us (myself included!) have often contributed to. My motivation derives from hope for — and indeed, from love of — a culture I live in and am part of, and wish to see improve.

Outline of the Book

I have already stated the central idea of the book: we are, on the whole, too suspicious of belief. Some beliefs are false, unjustified, and harmful, yes — and it is good that people think about strategies to avoid believing things they shouldn't. But we must not lose sight of the converse possible mistake: being too slow to believe, and failing to believe things that we should. This core idea is spelled out more thoroughly in Chapters 1 and 2; the rest of the book develops and explores case studies and implications. Many of the chapters can stand independently or be read out of order, but I do recommend beginning with Chapters 1 and 2 (in that order).

Chapter 1 starts making the case that there is a negative bias about belief, both in epistemology and in nonacademic discussions of intelligence, thoughtfulness, and rationality. Its central philosophical stalking-horse is the epistemological emphasis on skeptical modes of thought. It also draws a connection between epistemology and decision-making, and the corresponding connection between skepticism and a conservative instinct to preserve the status quo. Chapter 2 expands the critique of skepticism to a critique of a negative approach to epistemology generally — the assumption, often tacit but sometimes explicit — that epistemology is most fundamentally about *making sure one doesn't have bad beliefs*, thereby ignoring or denying the possible mistake of *not believing the things one ought to believe*. Chapter 2 also engages with some influential recent arguments against the idea that epistemic norms can ever require belief. The chapter closes with a discussion of negative epistemology as an ideology, serving to entrench harmful features of culture under a guise of objectivity.

Chapter 3 is especially for readers who have studied epistemology in its Western philosophical tradition; it may be less interesting to readers uninterested in that tradition. I'll argue in that chapter that some of the central language that academic epistemologists use to discuss belief has the effect of further entrenching the negative bias. In particular, the ubiquitous language of the *justification* of belief carries a stealthy presupposition: the idea that belief is presumptively bad, something standing in need of justification or excuse. The chapter is an extended linguistic critique of that terminological

[11] In 2021, American right-wing politicians and commentators turned "critical race theory" into something of a progressive bogeyman, especially in connection to K–12 education, arguing — or rather *assuming*, for the most part — that discussion of structural racism amounts to teaching white children to hate themselves.

choice, premised in the recognition that unreflective and unnoticed choices about terminology can have profound ideological effects. We've long since recognized the homophobic harm of saying something is inappropriate or faulty by calling it "gay" — I argue that talking about beliefs in terms of whether they are "justified" carries a similar hidden negative message about belief.

Chapter 4 takes up another specific epistemological case study — the idea that whether one should believe depends in a central way on the moral and practical stakes and costs of belief. When the stakes are high, and error would be particularly harmful, people tend to demand more evidence before believing; some have defended *pragmatic encroachment*, arguing that epistemic norms demand more skeptical responses to higher-stakes situations. Other *moral encroachment* theorists have made similar claims about the importance of requiring extraordinary levels of evidence before acquiring beliefs with certain moral implications: racist beliefs, for instance, or beliefs that reflect poorly on someone to whom one has special obligations. This chapter argues that much of the discussion in this domain tends more to exemplify the negative bias about belief than it does to justify it. It resists the general tendency towards skepticism, and explores the prospects for treatments of pragmatic and moral encroachment whereby, in certain cases, due to the importance of a question, one should be *quicker* to believe, rather than slower.

Chapter 4 also introduces Jennifer Nagel's concept of *epistemic anxiety*, which plays key roles in the subsequent chapters. Epistemic anxiety is a felt uncertainty, leading one to suspend judgment and leave questions open, due to a perceived lack of adequate evidence. In Chapter 5, I discuss epistemic anxiety in more detail, emphasizing cases where the skeptical instinct such anxiety motivates is best resisted. I focus particularly on proper beliefs in good epistemic standing, despite apparent weaknesses in one's reflectively accessible basis for them. I discuss a variety of beliefs and inferences, including ordinary perception, fundamental logical matters, and politically controversial beliefs about ideology and oppression — explaining a way in which epistemic *faith* can be both proper and necessary. This is no compromise of epistemic norms — rather, I argue that epistemic norms themselves, especially the positive ones, sometimes require epistemically virtuous faith.

The virtue of epistemic courage, after which this book is named, is the focus of Chapter 6. Epistemic courage is modelled rather directly on moral virtues, especially moral courage — it represents the proper balance between epistemic cowardice — where one tends to suspend judgment when one ought to believe, and lets one's beliefs wither too quickly in the face of challenges — and epistemic recklessness — where one proceeds dogmatically, without due regard for contrary evidence. Epistemic courage centrally involves practical wisdom. There is no simple trick to achieving it, but I give some suggestions in the chapter as to how one might go about developing this important virtue.

Chapter 7 is an extended case study about testimony and rape culture, illustrating the negative epistemic bias and some of the ways it plays out in oppressive contexts. Reflexive skepticism about many sexual harassment and assault reports enjoys an unearned presumption and stereotype of measured reasonability, perpetuating sexist harm. But we must also recognize that reflexively *accepting* all such reports would commit the opposite epistemic error, and also contribute to oppression, especially racism. Epistemic courage in this domain requires intersectional wisdom.

Finally, I close in Chapter 8 with a return to linguistic matters, connecting negative epistemic bias with epistemic contextualism — the idea that the language we use to talk about knowledge is *context-sensitive*, and so contributes to truth conditions in flexible ways. This linguistic flexibility allows the negative bias to play out in different subtle ways, and points to a broader phenomenon I call "contextual injustice".

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