The Ethics of Belief (From a Philosophical Perspective)

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Abstract

This chapter surveys a few of the central questions about philosophical
perspectives on the ethics of belief, focusing especially on (1) questions
about whether doxastic involuntarism is consistent with the normative
approach to epistemology characteristic of any ethics of belief; (2) the
status and interpretation of William Clifford's famous injunction against
belief on "insufficient" evidence, and broader questions about the role of
negative versus positive doxastic norms; (3) whether norms governing
belief are distinctively epistemic norms, or are instead moral or practi-
cal ones; and (4) how moral and political questions about belief bear
on epistemic norms, including a discussion of doxastic wronging, racist
beliefs, skepticism and rape culture, and epistemic partiality—whether,
for instance, friendship requires beliefs that violate epistemic norms.

Keywords: ethics of belief; doxastic involuntarism; epistemic norms; insuf-
ficient evidence; positive epistemic norms; epistemic versus practical norms;
doxastic wronging; epistemic partiality; friendship and belief

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Introduction

In general, the ethics of X is the philosophical investigation of normative con-
siderations related to X. The ethics of belief, then, is about normative questions
related to belief: when ought someone to believe something, and when ought
they not to? Can one wrong someone by believing certain things about them?
How should we theorize about the ways in which believing—or not believing—
can reflect and/or contribute to social harms?

Much of the philosophical literature on the ethics of belief can be sorted
into four broad categories, with vague boundaries and substantial overlap: (1)
discussions of whether belief is subject to genuine norms; (2) investigations into
what particular rules or norms might govern belief; (3) discussion of what *kinds*

of norms could govern belief—in particular, whether they are moral norms, prudential norms, a distinctive kind of sui generis epistemic norms, or something else; and (4) discussions of the ethically significant moral, social, and political consequences of belief.

In this chapter, I'll briefly outline what I take to be some of the central philosophical questions and discussions about the ethics of belief. I aspire neither to comprehensiveness nor neutrality, but I hope that I will give the reader an accurate sense of the central motivations behind a reasonably representative sample of the philosophical projects in the ethics of belief.

1   Can Beliefs Be Subject to Norms?

Many contemporary epistemologists consider it obvious that epistemology is a normative discipline, centrally concerning questions about the circumstances under which one *ought* or *ought not* to believe.[1] Not everyone agrees with this picture of epistemology. W.V.O. Quine's (1969, 75) "naturalized epistemology," for example, treated epistemology as an empirical science, primarily concerned with descriptive psychological questions about how humans actually go about forming beliefs. But most philosophers, including myself, think this would ignore much of what is central to epistemology.[2]

One influential source of skepticism about obligations about belief is based on doxastic involuntarism. The idea can be characterized by this simple argument:

1. If belief is involuntary, there can be no norms governing belief.

2. Belief is involuntary.

∴ 3. There can be no norms governing belief.

Most philosophers agree that one can't simply decide what to believe.[3] Such considerations have driven some philosophers to argue that there can be be no normative evaluation of belief—in other words, that there is and can be no ethics of belief.[4]

This argument is an instance of a more general worry about free will and ethics. Someone impressed by a scientific picture of the causal role of humans in a naturalistic world might argue quite generally that there can be no ethics of any human endeavor:

1. If some behaviour is involuntary, there can be no norms governing that behaviour.

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[1]For a few explicit commitments along these lines, see Chisholm (1989, 42–3), Sosa (1980), Kim (1988), Berker (2013), and Ichikawa (2024, 38–9).

[2]See Kim (1988) for this criticism of Quine.

[3] Williams (1973, 136) gave an influential argument to this effect.

[4]Alston (1988, 259) gives a particularly clear expression of this worry. For further discussion of ideas along these lines, see Price (1954), Grandy (1994), Alston (1988), Feldman (2000), Steup (2000).

2. All behaviour is involuntary.

∴ 3. There can be no norms governing any behaviour.

While arguments along these lines have been influential, few philosophers take them to settle the matter against the idea of ethical obligations. A detailed investigation into the many philosophical strategies for resisting this conclusion would take us too far afield, but considering a couple representative responses, and their analogues in the ethics of belief, may prove instructive.

One possibility is to deny that premise (2) in this argument is an implication of a naturalistic approach to action. One may hold, for instance, that even though all of one's choices are ultimately caused by factors outside of one's control, certain special causal mechanisms nevertheless suffice for voluntariness.[5] Another possibility is to deny the link between voluntariness and ethical assessibility, rejecting premise (1) and holding that sometimes valid norms govern things that are not voluntary.

Likewise, some epistemologists have suggested that even if one doesn't decide deliberately what to believe, one's beliefs are a product of one's mental capacities in an intimate way. Perhaps when I form beliefs as a result of certain kinds of processes, they are products of my agency in a way permitting normative assessment.[6] Some epistemologists have argued that some beliefs are subject to volition in the same way that actions are—Brian Weatherson (2008), for example, defends the view that inferential and other indirect beliefs are voluntary and subject to normative assessment, while more automatic and direct beliefs, like perceptual ones, are neither.[7]

In the remainder of this chapter—as in most of my epistemological work—I'll assume that it can make sense to make normative evaluations about belief. It's not obvious what one should say about the degree to which beliefs are subject to voluntary control, or the connections between voluntariness and normative appraisal, but it is obvious, in my view, that whatever we say about those questions, there are some things that some people *ought to believe*, and others that people *ought not to believe*, that some beliefs are *good* ones and some are *bad* ones, etc. In other words: there can be an ethics of belief.

2 What Epistemic Norms Are There?

2.1 On "Insufficient" Evidence

William Clifford (1879, 186) famously articulated this norm:

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[5]This is the *compatibilist* response to determinism-based worries about free will. See McKenna and Coates (2024) for an overview.

[6]Some such strategies include Ryan (2003), Smith (2005), Hieronymi (2008), Boyle (2011), and McCormick (2014, ch. 6).

[7]Other sympathetic discussions of the idea that belief is subject to control include Steup (2000), McHugh (2011), Paul (2015a,b), Roeber (2019), Kearl (2023).

Clifford's Principle "[I]t is wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone to believe anything on insufficient evidence."

Clifford invokes a thought experiment about someone who believes their ship is safe and seaworthy, despite indications that ought to have made them more cautious. Clifford says this belief is wrong, because it is based on insufficient evidence. 'Insufficient" is both a vague word, and a normative one, complicating the adjudication of some of the philosophical debates to which Clifford's discussion gave rise. William James (1896) famously argued against Clifford in his "The Will to Believe." I've always found it a bit surprising that James followed Clifford in framing the question as one about believing on *insufficient* evidence. This framing is very friendly to Clifford's view on the matter: "insufficient" is a normative term that builds in the idea of, well, insufficiency.

It's arguably analytic that, for any action Φ and determinable trait Ψ, one shouldn't Φ unless one has sufficient Ψ. ("Sufficient" is a context-sensitive term, but it is mostly naturally interpreted in this context as setting the minimal threshold for Ψ in order to permit Φ-ing.) You shouldn't take a vacation unless you have sufficient funds. You shouldn't go on a hike unless you have sufficient stamina. And you shouldn't believe unless you have sufficient evidence.

There are some instances of this schema that do not seem obviously true; this happens when how much Ψ one has is not even relevant to whether one may Φ; an instance of this kind will feel like an odd non sequitur:

Weird You shouldn't pet your cat unless you have sufficient blood iron levels.

It's not that Weird is *false*—it's not like it's actually *fine* to pet one's cat when one's iron levels are insufficient—rather, this utterance seems defective in a different way. Perhaps it carries a false *presupposition* to the effect that whether petting cats is permitted depends on one's iron levels.[8]

For these reasons, it seems to me that the most obvious way to express disagreement with Clifford would have been either to dispute his assumption that the cases he focuses on really were cases where there is "insufficient" evidence for belief, or to argue that in at least some cases, the amount of evidence one has is not relevant to whether one is permitted to believe. But James's famous response to Clifford doesn't take either tack; instead, James disputes Clifford's claim head-on, arguing that there are cases where one is permitted to believe, despite having what Clifford admits to be "insufficient" evidence.

In his critique of Clifford, James gives cases that emphasize the benefits of belief. He is especially interested in cases where the evidence with respect to P is neither overwhelming for it or against it, but where believing that P might provide important benefits. He discusses (1896, 24–25), for example, a collective action problem in a traincar that is being robbed. Each passenger has little evidence about how other passengers will respond, but it would be beneficial if they believed they would work together to stop the robbers. For if they did, this belief would motivate them to rise up and prevent the robbery.

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[8]On semantic presupposition, see Beaver et al. (2021).

James also connects his discussion to theological beliefs. Believing that God exists, James says—and more generally, that one's religious commitments are by and large true—can be permissible, despite there being "insufficient" evidence for these beliefs. I'll discuss James's ideas further in §3 below. I'll also return in that section to the somewhat puzzling question of what one might even mean by the idea that one may believe on "insufficient" evidence, and the parallel question of what substantive claim Clifford's principle could have been making.

First, however, I'd like to turn to a different issue about what epistemic norms there are. §2.2 will focus on the difference between possible *positive* and *negative* norms in the ethics of belief.

2.2 Positive and Negative Norms

Clifford's norm is a negative one: it prohibits belief in certain circumstances; it never requires belief. Suspension of judgment is a way to guarantee meeting Clifford's Principle.

Most epistemologists have followed Clifford in emphasizing the negative in the ethics of belief. A motivation central to epistemology is the idea that one shouldn't believe too hastily—that one should take care not to believe things one shouldn't believe. It is far less common for epistemologists to focus on the converse possible error: the failure to believe things that one *should* believe. Some epistemologists have gone so far as to deny that there can ever be any genuinely epistemic obligations to believe.[9] Belief, according to this negative-emphasizing picture of epistemology, is the state that is risky, and stands in need of justification; *declining* to believe, by contrast, is often assumed or argued to be safe by default, and not something that could ever be an epistemic error.

I do not agree with this negative emphasis in epistemology; Ichikawa (2024) critiques it at length. I think this negative focus overlooks the respect in which the ethics of belief, like the ethics of action, can be genuinely difficult. If the ethics of belief were exclusively about making sure one doesn't believe the wrong things, then being as skeptical as possible—suspending judgment any time one felt uncertain—would be a normatively safe strategy. But, I argue, misplaced suspension of judgment, like misplaced belief, can constitute an important doxastic error.

Here are three examples illustrating the importance of positive doxastic norms.

Skeptical Perception George knows that although most people have five fingers on each hand, some people have other numbers. He wonders whether Thomas might have an unusual number of fingers on his left hand, so he looks at Thomas's left hand, which is resting on the table in front of him.

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[9]For example, Wrenn (2007), Nelson (2010), Whiting (2012), and Littlejohn (2012, pp. 46–8) contain commitments to this effect.

George gets a clear view of Thomas's five fingers, and counts them. Instead of taking that to settle the matter, he continues to wonder whether he has hands, entertaining various radical skeptical possibilities about how Thomas might be wearing clever gloves that disguise his extra fingers, or whether he might not have hands at all, with George's perceptual experience to the contrary being the result of a complex radical deception campaign.

Testimonial Injustice Al wants to know whether a certain office will still be open at 4:30, so he asks a Mitch, a stranger. Mitch is knowledgeable about the office and confidently informs Al that yes, it will be open. But when he hears Mitch's working-class accent, Al decides he's not sure whether to believe him, so he continues to investigate the question, ignoring Mitch's helpful testimony.[10]

Underconfidence Bea is shocked when her professor directs a racial slur at her during his office hours. She heard him clearly. In a perverse power play, he pretends he has said nothing out of the ordinary, and continues talking about the course material. She considers whether to complain about this racist abuse. But as she contemplates what such a process would involve, she comes to wonder whether she may have misheard after all, or even made up the slur in her imagination. She does not respond to his racist conduct, and spends the rest of the term wondering whether she really heard what she thought she did.[11]

Each of these cases, I think, involves suboptimal doxastic conduct that cannot be explained by the violation of any negative doxastic norm. In each case, the problem is that someone *doesn't* believe, when it would have been good for them to have done so. In Skeptical Perception, George gives into unreasonable and unmotivated skeptical doubts, apparently violating epistemic norms that require belief. In Testimonial Injustice, Al is also unduly skeptical, and may also violate epistemic norms for that reason; he also violates moral norms, by treating Mitch unfairly, which can lead to the various moral harms explored in the literature on testimonial injustice.[12]

It is less obvious how to categorize Underconfidence. In addition to the obvious badness of the racial slur, it's clear that this story represents a situation that is suboptimal from a doxastic point of view. But one might argue that Bea herself violates no norm when she succumbs to her professor's gaslighting. As Lauren Leydon-Hardy (2021) notes, a significant part of the harm perpetuated in such cases of "epistemic infringement" is that a bad actor recruits a subject's

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[10]This case is intended to be paradigmatic of Miranda Fricker's (2007) category of *testimonial injustice*. See Simion (2023, 204) for a similar discussion of testimonial injustice cases as the violation of a norm requiring belief.

[11]This case is similar to a central case in Dandelet (2021); my discussion of it is also inspired in part by Srinivasan's (2016, 377-78) discussion of a similar case. See also Ichikawa (2024, 117 and 158).

[12]For some discussion, see Fricker (2007, §2.3), Dotson (2014), or McGlynn (2021).

epistemic competences to further their own ends. There is some temptation to say, therefore, that Bea's morally unfortunate suspension of judgment is a normatively *appropriate* response to the bad situation that her professor has designed for her.

I agree with Leydon-Hardy that Bea's professor is making use of Bea's well-calibrated epistemic competences, in getting her to doubt herself; her doubt is the result of his nefarious infringement on her rational capacities. It would be a mistake to say that the main thing going on here is a failure on Bea's part to abide by the norms of belief. (Indeed, this would amount to victim-blaming.) But I do not go so far as to say that Bea does nothing wrong. I do think there are operative norms that call for Bea to believe that her professor used that slur at her, and that her suspension of belief on the matter, however understandable, is normatively incorrect. Indeed, I think this central to the distinction between epistemic infringement and run-of-the-mill deception; one of the distinctive ways in which gaslighting is harmful is that it doesn't merely result in false reasonable beliefs; it worsens one's ability to comply with doxastic norms.[13]

Here is a motivation for thinking of cases like Underconfidence in this way. Although I do think it would be inappropriate to focus blame on Bea, I think this is because the kind of normative failure Bea exhibits is one that we would expect of most normal people in such circumstances. It would take someone exceptional to remain steadfast in their belief in a situation like this, while still maintaining the proper epistemic humility that would motivate proper suspension of judgment in cases when one really did mishear. Doing right by the doxastic norms in a case like this would require exceptional epistemic courage. But someone who did have such courage—someone who was appropriately confident in their own doxastic abilities, and therefore less susceptible to gaslighting—would, in this respect, be performing better than Bea does with respect to their beliefs. This means, therefore, that Bea's (perfectly understandable and ordinary) dispositions leave room for improvement; in other words, they do not already satisfy the high standards of the normative ideals.[14]

I lack the space here to rehearse the reasons some epsitemologists have rejected positive epistemic norms, and how I think one ought to respond to their arguments.[15] For now, I'll just flag that there is controversy on the matter, and signal that I think there is good reason to endorse both negative

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[13]This, I think, is part of the reason why victims of gaslighting often feel retrospectively embarrassed by their errors. They were very understandable errors and the product of skillful manipulation, but they were errors. On this feature of gaslighting, see Abramson (2014, 16) and Pearson (2024, ch. 5). On broader epistemic issues about gaslighting, see Kirk-Giannini (2022), or Spear (2023).

[14]My argument here is quite parallel to the more general argument given in Ichikawa and Jarvis (2013) and Ichikawa and Jarvis (forthcoming) for the objectivity and demandingness of rational norms; we defend a rational norm, for example, that requires one to accept anything one is considering for which one's evidence is conclusive—this probably includes complex logical and mathematical theorems, even those which no human has ever yet managed to prove. Although we recognize this as a counterintuitive result, we think it is necessary to explain key normative facts about rational abilities.

[15]For skepticism about positive epistemic norms, see Nelson (2010), and Littlejohn (2012,

norms that sometimes forbid belief, and positive norms that sometimes requires it.

3 Epistemic Normativity?

A closely related question, central to the ethics of belief, concerns the interpretation of the normative language applicable to belief. If one accepts that there are some things that some people ought to believe, or ought not to believe, this leaves open the question of whether the obligation in question is a moral one, a pragmatic one, a *sui generis* epistemic one, or some other kind of obligation.[16]

Although he was not explicit about this interpretive question, Clifford's discussion of the ethics of belief largely evokes quite a moralized conception of the obligation against belief. He describes the ship owner in his story as "guilty of the death of those men," and argues that "he must be held responsible" for his frame of mind. (Clifford, 1879, 178) As we have already seen in §2.1, James sometimes emphasizes pragmatic norms in his own discussion of the ethics of belief.

Many epistemologists posit a distinctively epistemic form of normativity, to be distingushed from moral and pragmatic normativity. To see some of the motivation for this distinction, it is helpful to consider cases where there are reasons why one might prefer that people believe something, or not believe something, where those reasons don't have to do with the evidence for or likely truth of the relevant belief. To take an admittedly contrived example, suppose I offered you a million dollars if you believe that I have a pet parrot. You presumably don't have the kind of evidence that would make this seem like a the kind of thing it would be *epistemically* permissible to believe; but you might recognize a *pragmatic* permission, or even obligation, to form the belief if you could—such a belief would perhaps be pretty harmless,[17] and in general, if something pretty harmless would give you a million dollars, you should (pragmatically) do it.

This example is unrealistic, but there may well be more complex realistic examples that share the key features. Pascal (1670) famously gave a pragmatic justification to believe in God—even if there's only a small likelihood that such a belief would be correct, Pascal argued that the potential benefits of such a belief in that case (especially those in the afterlife) outweigh the potential costs (primarily some wasted shuffling on the mortal coil). Perhaps a similar argument could be made without even invoking the benefits of a possible afterlife;

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pp. 46–8). For commitments to them, see Pace (2011, p. 246), Miracchi (2019), Gardiner (2021), or Simion (2023). I give my own defense of postive epistemic norms, including my response to arguments to the contrary, in Ichikawa (2022) and Ichikawa (2024, ch. 2).

[16]The skepticism about positive norms I discussed in §2.2 above tends to be skepticism only about positive *epistemic* norms. Littlejohn, for example, is explicit in allowing that there may be *moral* reasons that require belief.

[17]However, Clifford would disagree that the belief is harmless: "no belief held by one man, however seemingly trivial the belief, and however obscure the believer, is ever actually insignificant or without its effect on the fate of mankind." (Clifford, 1879, 182)

some studies have indicated that in many communities, religious people tend to be happier than non-religious people. So perhaps (if religion is significantly a matter of belief) this provides pragmatic reason to have religious beliefs. But even so, many epistemologists think, such a *pragmatic* justification would not be an *epistemic* justification. Just as it may sometimes be pragmatically best to do something that is legally prohibited, perhaps this is a case where it is pragmatically best to do what is epistemically prohibited.

Similar prima facie potential conflicts come up in the moral realm. Some have argued that moral duties and epistemic duties can come apart when there is good evidence that one's friend or family member has done something bad; one (morally) owes it to them to believe well of them, even while one (epistemically) ought to believe according to the evidence. Some have argued for something similar in cases where following the evidence would lead to beliefs that tend to perpetuate oppressive systems. I'll discuss such cases further in §4 below.

In recent decades, many epistemologists have been interested in ways in which epistemic norms interact with and depend on moral, social, and political ones. Questions about how much evidence one requires before settling a question, for example, or how to decide which questions to pursue, seem deeply wrapped up in questions about value. This has tempted some epistemologists to deny that there is distinctively epistemic form of normativity at all; perhaps the question of what to believe is just a special case of the general ethical question of what to do, which is the topic of value theory generally.[18] But even setting aside that somewhat extreme stance, many epistemologists in recent years have wondered whether epistemic norms may depend on moral or pragmatic factors—this is the central idea in literature on pragmatic and moral "encroachment" in epistemology.

I myself firmly oppose the wholesale collapse of epistemic and practical normativity, and I have serious concerns about pragmatic and moral encroachment, at least as applied to the most fundamental epistemic norms. My reasons for both these stances derive from a (2012) paper in which Benjamin Jarvis, Katherine Rubin, and I argued that there are significant and underappreciated disadvantages to letting epistemic norms depend too much on practical considerations: doing so means that complex decisions about how to behave cannot be factored into more tractable and independent questions, which is the central advantage of a belief–desire psychology. If one has to answer complex moral and practical decisions in order even to decide what to *think*, then it's much harder for figuring out what to think can't be an important antecedent step to figuring out how to behave.[19] Our arguments suggest, then, that there is something important about understanding at least some parts of normative epistemology to be independent from moral and practical considerations.

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[18]See e.g. Rinard (2017, 2019). Compare also Wrenn (2007).
[19]For more discussion along these lines, see also Ichikawa (2024, 97–98).

4 Morality, Belief, and Society

Even if one accepts that epistemic norms are different from moral and other norms, this leaves open the many questions of how moral normativity relate to belief and to epistemic normativity. For example, can there *also* be *moral* duties governing belief? (Can it, for example, be *morally* required or forbidden, to believe something?) And if it can, can there be moral–epistemic dilemmas, where the demands of morality and the demands of epistemology come into conflict? The answers to both questions are controversial; rather than answer them, I'll try here to give a sense of the motivations that animate each side of the respective debates.

Some philosophical work in this area has been motivated by the thought that belief can be interpersonally, morally, and politically significant. People sometimes feel *slighted* by others' beliefs about them. Some have argued that certain relationships *entitle* one to have others believe well of them, or at least not to believe poorly of them. Doxastic conduct can also, it seems, contribute to structural harms; believing some things can be racist; being skeptical about some things can contribute to rape culture. This section explores some of the connections between these moral considerations about belief and epistemic norms.

4.1 Moral–Epistemic Conflicts?

Before getting into details about specific areas in which morality and epistemology might interact, I'll start by discussing a potential constraint having to do with their interactions. As discussed above, many epistemologists think that epistemic normativity is quite a different matter from moral normativity; but some have argued that there nevertheless important connections between the two.

Some symbols will help us consider these connections more precisely. Following standard conventions in deontic logic, I'll use $\Box$ to indicate requirements, and $\Diamond$ to indicate permissions. More specifically, let $\Box_e \Phi$ indicate that Φ is an epistemic requirement; $\Box_m \Phi$ says that Φ is morally required. Using these symbols, we can give a non-trivial interpretation of Clifford's principle thus:

(1) $\quad \forall p \big(\Box_e \neg B(p) \to \Box_m \neg B(p) \big)$

We can read this formalization as saying that for any proposition p, if believing p is epistemically prohibited (because there is insufficient evidence to epistemically permit believing it), then it is also morally prohibited.

A generalization of (1) is the thought that *everything* that is epistemically required is also morally required:

(2) $\quad \forall \Phi \big(\Box_e \Phi \to \Box_m \Phi \big).$

(2) says that one is morally required to fulfil *all* the requirements of epistemology, not merely those that prohibit beliefs. These principles are equivalent

on the assumption that there are no epistemic requirements other than those that prohibit belief, but as we have seen already, this assumption is controversial. If you follow me in thinking that sometimes belief is epistemically obligatory, (2) implies that in those cases it is morally required as well, but (1) does not. So likewise if there are epistemic norms that apply at a level other than evaluating beliefs.[20]

Some philosophers have also argued for connections in the opposite direction. Basu and Schroeder (2019) argue, for example, that epistemic permissibility implies moral permissibility, at least when it comes to belief. This statement is equivalent to the converse of (1) above:

(3) $\quad \forall p\big(\Diamond_e B(p) \to \Diamond_m B(p)\big)$

Bolinger (2020b, 10) uses the name 'no conflicts' for connection (3), and other authors have also adopted this label. But what (3) rules out is not strictly speaking a *conflict*—there is no conflict that arises when something is prohibited by one kind of normativity, but not another. (In many circumstances, it is legally permitted, but morally forbidden, to be mean to your friends. For many actions Φ, $\Diamond_l \Phi$ even though $\Box_m \neg \Phi$. This is not a *conflict* between law and morality; it's just an aspect of morality about which law is silent.) A conflict arises in dilemmas—when norms impose inconsistent demands. This would be the case, for example, if there were some beliefs that are *required* (not merely permitted) by epistemology, which were morally prohibited, or vice versa.

For logical completeness, it's worth mentioning a generalization of Basu and Schroeder's principle, that would say that *anything* epistemically permissible is morally permissible:

(4) $\quad \forall \Phi\big(\Diamond_e \Phi \to \Diamond_m \Phi\big)$

But (4) is not plausible, as epistemology is silent on (and so permits) many morally evaluable actions. There aren't epistemic norms that prohibit most murders, for example, but that doesn't make them morally permissible.[21]

The following two principles together imply that there can be no moral–epistemic conflicts. (5) says that satisfying the requirements of morality will always be consistent with the requirements of epistemology, and (6) says the converse.

(5) $\quad \forall \Phi\big(\Box_m \Phi \to \Diamond_e \Phi\big)$

(6) $\quad \forall \Phi\big(\Box_e \Phi \to \Diamond_m \Phi\big)$

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[20]Some possible norms along these lines include norms about evidence gathering (Miracchi, 2019), attention (Gardiner, 2022a; Saint-Croix, 2022), and inquiry more generally (Friedman, 2020).

[21]Although they sometimes state their view in more general terms (e.g., in describing their view as opposing "the bare assumption that morality forbids things that epistemic rationality does not" (Basu and Schroeder, 2019, 197)), it is clear in the context of their paper that Basu and Schroeder are restricting their claim to one about prohibitions on belief. They defend (3), not (4).

One could also consider versions of these "no dilemmas" principles restricted to prohibitions or requirements about belief:

(7) $\quad \forall p\big(\Box_m B(p) \rightarrow \Diamond_e B(p)\big)$

(8) $\quad \forall p\big(\Box_m \neg B(p) \rightarrow \Diamond_e \neg B(p)\big)$

(9) $\quad \forall p\big(\Box_e B(p) \rightarrow \Diamond_m B(p)\big)$

(10) $\quad \forall p\big(\Box_e \neg B(p) \rightarrow \Diamond_m \neg B(p)\big)$

These principles would be better labelled as "no conflict" principles. (7)–(10) imply that morality and epistemology never make inconsistent demands about whether to believe something. (5) and (6) together imply that the requirements of epistemology and morality never come into conflict at all.

The status of these connections is highly contested. Some, especially Basu and Schroeder, argue that a strong epistemic justification for a belief would ipso facto have to be a strong moral justification for it, which is why they think (3) must be true. Others posit greater independence between moral and epistemic norms. Some philosophers are also skeptical about whether moral norms can bear on belief at all, sometimes for reasons related to the discussion in §1. Even if doxastic involuntarism doesn't undermine the very idea of an ethics of belief, it might undermine a particularly moralized version of one. Philosophers with sympathies along these lines will typically deny that the beliefs themselves are morally evaluable, in the cases that follow—they will focus their moral evaluation on the causes or consequences of those beliefs instead.

Let me turn now to some of the cases that invite these questions about the moral status of belief.

4.2 Doxastic Wronging

Some philosophers—especially Rima Basu and Mark Schroeder, both in independent work and collaboratively—have argued that people can *doxastically wrong* people by believing certain things about them. Their discussion of this case has been influential:

Wounded By Belief Suppose that Mark has an alcohol problem and has been sober for eight months. Tonight there's a departmental colloquium for a visiting speaker, and throughout the reception, he withstands the temptation to have a drink. But, when he gets home his partner, Maria, smells the wine that the speaker spilled on his sleeve, and Mark can tell from the way Maria looks at him that she thinks he's fallen off the wagon. Although the evidence suggests that Mark has fallen off the wagon, would it be unreasonable for Mark to seek an apology for what Maria believes of him?[22]

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[22]Quoted from Basu (2019b, 917), adapted there from Basu and Schroeder (2019, 198).

Basu and Schroeder say that Mark would be right to feel morally wronged in this case, and that it is Maria's belief in particular that wrongs him. The idea of doxastic wronging is controversial.[23] Some have argued that putative doxastic wrongs typically actually involve wrongs of a different kind—wrongs about evidence gathering practices, perhaps, or wrongs about what actions one takes on the result of one's beliefs.

If one accepts doxastic wronging, this opens many more questions. Here are a few: which kinds of beliefs can wrong someone? Can true beliefs amount to doxastic wrongs?[24] How do doxastic wrongs relate to epistemic norms? As I discussed in §4.1 above, Basu and Schroeder think beliefs that are epistemically permitted can't be morally prohibited, which is why doxastic wronging leads them to adopt moral encroachment; but if one were open to relaxing the relationship between moral and epistemic norms, there would be a broader space of options here.

Another major question, for the proponent of doxastic wrongs, is the moral parallel to the question about positive and epistemic norms foregrounded in §2.2 above: in addition to wronging people by *believing* certain things about them, can one also wrong them by *failing to believe* certain things about them? To use Schroeder's (forthcoming) terminology, are there *agnostic* wrongs, in addition to *doxastic* wrongs? In Ichikawa (2024, 107), I argue that the intuitive case is symmetrical in this respect; although I am unsure what to think about doxastic wronging generally, I argue there that if we should think one can wrong people by believing, we should also think we can wrong them by failing to believe.[25] This is a plausible diagnosis of standard cases of testimonial injustice in general, and of the interrelated moral and epistemic considerations foregrounded in discussions of testimony and rape culture. On its face, #BelieveWomen looks like a moral exhortation to comply with a positive doxastic norm.[26]

4.3   Racist Beliefs, Stereotypes, and Oppression

There is a related discussion about the status of beliefs that reflect and/or reinforce harmful social norms. It is obvious that such beliefs are culturally harmful; the live theoretical questions concern the degree to which individuals are morally accountable for them, and, as in the case of doxastic wronging, how moral evaluations interact with epistemic ones.

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[23]It is controverisal in general, for reasons described in the main text; some have also challenged Basu and Schroeder's diagnosis of this case in particular; see especially Gardiner (2022b) for some discussion of the complex relationships between belief, love, loyalty, and alcoholism.

[24]Schroeder (2018, 124–5), (forthcoming) says that only false beliefs can wrong. Basu (2019b, 919) and Fabre (2022) argue that true beliefs can wrong people too.

[25]I was by no means the first or only person to notice this intuitive symmetry; for related discussion, see also Cassell (2022), Enoch and Spectre (forthcoming), von Klemperer (2023), Saint-Croix (2022, p. 502), or Gordon-Smith (2023). Compare also the related discussion of "robust" moral encroachment in Bolinger (2020b).

[26]For discussion, see Crewe and Ichikawa (2021), Gardiner (2021), Lloyd (2022), Bolinger (2021), Ichikawa (2024, ch. 7), Foster (2024), or Schroeder (forthcoming).

Tamar Gendler brought some of these questions into the contemporary philosophical canon in a (2011) paper called "The Epistemic Costs of Implicit Bias". Gendler suggested that there were examples of beliefs where the evidence in favour of them made belief epistemically appropriate, but which were nevertheless morally forbidden, due to their connections with oppressive social harms. (Gendler, then, denied many of the 'no conflict' principles discussed above.) As part of this case, Gendler discussed an anecdote from John Hope Franklin's (2005, 340) autobiography. Franklin is a distinguished African-American historian, and in 1995, in celebration of a major award, he hosted a dinner at an exclusive Washington club where he was a member. In his autobiography, Franklin discusses being mistaken for a staff member by a woman asking for her coat.

Gendler focuses on the woman's belief, that Franklin was part of the staff, rather than a member of the club. She suggests that this belief was racist and morally inappropriate, but also that it was well-supported by her evidence, since it was a statistically true generalization that Black people are quite unlikely to be members and quite likely to be staff, and thus epistemically appropriate.

Once again, nearly everything about this case is controversial.[27] For example, even granting the statistical facts laid out above, it's far from obvious that the totality of the woman's evidence really did epistemically justify her belief that Franklin was part of the staff. (As Gendler and Franklin both point out, in fact, staff members at the club were in uniform, and Franklin was dressed like a member.[28]) Other cases with similar structures are also often discussed in the literature, with some arguing that they support a category of morally problematic but epistemically appropriate belief, and others denying one or the other of those conjuncts. The dialectic in these cases plays out quite similarly to that at play in the discussion of doxastic wronging in §4.2 above.

(Indeed, the Franklin case is itself a plausible candidate for doxastic wronging; it is targeted at Franklin. But not all cases that have this profile are targetted in this way; we may imagine, for example, someone who has, on similar statistical grounds, the similarly racist belief that *someone's being Black is a strong reason to think they are a staff member rather than a guest*. This is not a directed wrong against anyone, but many of those impressed by the moral importance of doxastic conduct along these lines will, I expect, want to condemn it as similarly morally wrong.)

4.4 Partiality

Some philosophers have argued that there are moral duties governing belief attached to personal relationships. For example, Sarah Stroud (2006) argues

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[27] For some of the philosophical discussion, see Bolinger (2020a), Basu (2019a), Basu and Schroeder (2019), Puddifoot (2021, 90–91), Moss (2018), or Basu (2020).

[28] Gendler (2011, 35), Franklin (2005, 340). See Gardiner (2018) and Tilton (2024, 29) on the importance of this point in this context. It is an instance of one of the central insights in Munton (2019, 232).

that friendship requires a kind of epistemic partiality that is inconsistent with epistemic norms.[29] Such cases would certainly involve counterexamples to (5), and, depending on the specifics, probably to some of (7)–(10) as well.[30] Keller (2004, 330) and Rioux (2023) are more explicit: they hold that friendship requires violating epistemic norms. Jollimore (2011) defends a similar view about romantic love.

It is controversial whether friendship does create demands that are in tension with epistemic norms.[31] Arpaly and Brinkerhoff (2018) argue that friendship does not require particularly positive assessments of one's friends, suggesting instead that these merely tend to correlate. Goldberg (2019) argues that many of the cases that have motivated positing doxastic partiality as a requirement of friendship do not do so in a way inconsistent with ordinary epistemic demands. Friendship, for example, can generate *practical* reasons or even obligations to investigate questions and seek out evidence in different ways for our friends than we would for others. This can predictably lead to differences in what degree of evidence one has or would need to settle a question, even on ordinary evidentialist approaches to epistemic norms. Similarly, Hawley (2014, 2037) points out that it is quite ordinary to have more epistemic reason to trust one's friends than to trust strangers, both because one has more evidence about them, and because people tend to be likelier to fulfil their friends' trust.

Some philosophers have also disputed the idea that friendship does or should involve believing particularly positive things about one's friends. Mason (2020), for example, argues that most fundamentally requires an *accurate* perception of one's friends. A true friend *knows* one's friend, flaws and all.[32]

The considerations raised in §3 above in connection to Ichikawa et al. (2012) may point to further support for this point of view. In at least many cases, one's decisions about one's relationships can and should be based on one's information; one decides whether to befriend someone based in part on one's assessment of their character. This would be quite difficult to do well if this way in which one should make this assessment depends on what kind of relationship one has.

5   Conclusion

As I hope this chapter illustrates, the ethics of belief is a very broad, active, and growing philosophical subfield. There are many important and interesting questions I am unable to cover in this chapter, and among those questions I

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[29]Stroud herself (2006, 502) is circumspect about whether the 'demands' of friendship would correspond to moral requirements. Like many subsequent commentators, I assume here that they would.

[30]Stroud focuses primarily in her paper on examples of beliefs that would be epistemically permitted, but inconsistent with the requirements of friendship. (Her p. 514, however, suggests that she may think friendship also demands epistemically unjustified beliefs.)

[31]See Mason (2023) for a useful overview.

[32]For similar arguments, see Kawall (2013), Dormandy (2022), or Yao (2020).

did discussed, my treatment is by necessity superficial. Still, I hope that I have given a useful orientation to at least several central issues.[33]

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