The Duty to Listen

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Abstract: In philosophical work on the ethics of conversational exchange, much has been written regarding the speaker side—i.e., on the rights and duties we have as speakers. This paper explores the relatively neglected topic of the duties pertaining to listeners' side of the exchange. Following W.K. Clifford, we argue that it's fruitful to think of our epistemic resources as *common property*. Furthermore, listeners have a key role in maintaining and improving these resources, perhaps a more important role than speakers. We develop this idea by drawing from Hugo Mercier and Dan Sperber's "interactionist" picture of reason, which suggests that reasoning is essentially dialogical and relies on the epistemic vigilance of listeners. The paper defends an imperfect, *prima facie* duty to listen, one that is sufficiently strong to place substantial demands on individuals, but not so overly demanding as to be implausible.

1. Introduction

It is a familiar idea that, on the whole and for the most part, freedom of expression has benefits for both the individual and the society in which they are located. John Stuart Mill's *On Liberty* is perhaps still the best-known defense of this idea. For Mill, the benefits to the individual include the opportunity of "exchanging error for truth," testing and refining one's understanding of the issue in question, and perhaps even intellectual flourishing. The benefits to society include an increase in the "common store" of true beliefs and understanding of the relevant issues that is, at least in principle, available to everyone. One natural way of developing this Millian idea is to say that speaking one's mind contributes to a common good—a common store of true beliefs and ways of understanding the world that everyone can draw on (Joshi 2021). Let's call this common store the "epistemic commons." Mill's key idea then is that freedom to express our ideas is essential to the maintenance and upkeep of the epistemic commons.

However, as Mill himself recognized, merely permitting people to speak their mind is clearly not sufficient for producing the relevant epistemic benefits. For individuals to form their beliefs in an epistemically responsible manner, they also need to *listen* well. Mill writes:

> In the case of any person whose judgment is really deserving of confidence, how has it become so? Because he has kept his mind open to criticism of his opinions and conduct. Because it has been his practice to listen to all that could be said against him; to profit by as much of it as was just, and expound to himself, and upon occasion to others, the fallacy of what was fallacious (Mill 2011, 39).

Furthermore, for speech to have beneficial consequences, Mill suggests, it needs to receive critical uptake:

> [E]ven if the received opinion be not only true, but the whole truth; unless it is suffered to be, and actually is, vigorously and earnestly contested, it will, by most of those who receive

> it, be held in the manner of a prejudice, with little comprehension or feeling of its rational grounds. (2011, 95).

On this view, good listening is not merely a matter of hearing out or uncritically adopting the beliefs of the speaker. Indeed, what is said needs to be "vigorously and earnestly contested." This suggests that, if we are interested in the upkeep of the epistemic commons, we need to be interested in what happens *after* someone has spoken their mind.

In particular, we need to be interested in what we can do as listeners to contribute to the upkeep of the epistemic commons. Some have argued that we are under a (imperfect and *prima facie*) duty to speak our mind, as a way of contributing to the upkeep of the epistemic commons (Joshi 2021). We argue that, for similar reasons, we are under a (also imperfect and *prima facie*) duty to listen *critically*—to subject what is said to scrutiny, rather than to passively accept it. As we will argue, listening critically involves weeding out bad arguments, misinformation, and the like, but it also involves improving arguments (where possible) and giving appropriate uptake to good arguments and evidence when they are presented. While we will phrase our conclusions in deontological language, these claims could be made within alternative normative frameworks. For example, within a virtue-theoretic framework one could talk about the "virtue" of being a good listener and discuss what exactly manifesting this virtue involves in particular contexts.

Here is the plan for the paper. First, we say more about how we understand Mill's famous arguments for the value of freedom of expression, the idea that we all have a duty to contribute to the upkeep of the epistemic commons, and the implications this has for our duties as listeners (§2). Second, we provide some theoretical backing for our claim that listening critically is vital to the upkeep of the epistemic commons by using Hugo Mercier and Dan Sperber's (2017) interactionist model of reason and reasoning (§3). Finally, we discuss the various forms a "duty to listen" can take (§4) and address some objections (§5).

2. The Duty to Maintain the Epistemic Commons

We are, at least to some extent, responsible for our own "epistemic condition" (what we believe, how much we know, what evidence we have, etc.). We are all equipped with "on-board" resources (Craig 1990, 11) such as perception, memory, and reasoning which we can use to form beliefs and, all going well, gain knowledge about the world around us. But our epistemic condition is also tied up with that of our community. Most obviously, we gain all sorts of information via testimony. But the extent of our "epistemic dependence" on others goes beyond our mere reliance on testimony (cf. Goldberg 2018). What we can know depends on what kinds of information, perspectives, and ways of thinking are alive within our (epistemic) community. This "epistemic commons" can be thought of as a *common resource* (cf. Grimm 2009). And just as pollution can threaten a common resource when it comes to the atmosphere or the ocean, the epistemic commons can be threatened insofar as valuable information and good reasons are not shared or do not receive uptake.[1] Conversely, inaccurate information and bad reasons might receive too much uptake, creating a polluted epistemic environment, so to speak.

[1] The analogy is a rough one in that, typically, common pool resources (e.g., fish in a lake) exhibit *rival* consumption (cf. Ostrom 1990). For example, one's taking some fish from the lake leaves fewer fish for others. Information *per se* is non-rival in that one's accessing some piece information, or one's coming to believe some truth, does not in typical cases negatively impact anyone else's ability to access that same information. So, it would seem that knowledge in general is a public good (i.e., exhibits non-excludability *and*

W.K. Clifford (1877) emphasized this aspect of our epistemic lives in his classic defense of an ethical duty to believe only upon sufficient evidence. As Clifford famously put it, "[i]t is wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence" (1877, 295). Now, Clifford's primary concern was with epistemic duties (duties pertaining to our beliefs). What we want to highlight is that his picture suggests that we all have ethical, other-regarding duties with respect to the maintenance and upkeep of the epistemic commons. Clifford's key insight is that there are close ties between what we believe and what we do and say:

> No real belief, however trifling and fragmentary it may seem, is ever truly insignificant; it prepares us to receive more of its like, confirms those which resembled it before, and weakens others; and so gradually it lays a stealthy train in our inmost thoughts, which may someday explode into overt action, and leave its stamp upon our character forever (p. 292).

Beliefs are the sorts of things that influence actions and assertions. As Clifford puts it, they "lay a stealthy train in our inmost thoughts" until they "explode into overt action." Now, which action a particular belief will lead to depends on the believer's desires, intentions, means-ends beliefs, etc. And some beliefs bear a closer and more direct connection to actions than others. For instance, the belief that it is raining might lead someone to take an umbrella (if they don't want to get wet) or not take an umbrella (if they like getting wet), but either way it will directly inform their actions. In contrast, for most of us, it is rare for our scientific beliefs, or beliefs about abstract matters such as mathematics, to directly inform our actions. Some beliefs have (far) less "action potential" than others. But even about such beliefs, Clifford tells us:

> [N]o one man's belief is in any case a private matter which concerns himself alone … Our words, our phrases, our forms and processes and modes of thought, are common property, fashioned and perfected from age to age; an heirloom which every succeeding generation inherits as a precious deposit and a sacred trust to be handled on to the next one, not unchanged but enlarged and purified, with some clear marks of its proper handiwork. Into this, for good or ill, is woven every belief of every man who has speech of his fellows. An awful privilege, and an awful responsibility, that we should help to create the world in which posterity will live (p. 292).

Because our beliefs are part of an interconnected system, they are public properties. We can think of the system as producing a common store of information on which all can draw in deciding what to believe, assert, and act on—the epistemic commons. As Clifford emphasizes, we all need to do our bit to contribute responsibly to this common store. That is, we all have a duty to maintain the epistemic commons.

What are these duties? For starters, there is the duty to tell the truth and the duty not to lie, though there is disagreement about the strength and scope of these duties in a range of contexts (Kant 1996; Bok 1978; Shiffrin 2014). Recently, authors have analyzed a wide range of putatively objectionable speaker behaviors such as bullshitting (Frankfurt 2005), grandstanding (Tosi and Warmke 2020), and

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non-rivalry), rather than a common pool resource. Nonetheless, there are aspects of our epistemic condition that do exhibit rivalry. Insofar as which perspectives and ideas are alive in a community depend on what that community pays attention to and what is remembered, then there exists rivalry because time and memory are scarce resources.

gaslighting (Abramson 2014). While these authors might not put it this way, and there are many (moral and political) reasons for refraining from bullshitting, grandstanding, and gaslighting, in doing these things one fails in one's duty to preserve the epistemic commons. In other words, these behaviors degrade our common epistemic resources. For example, on Justin Tosi and Brandon Warmke's view, grandstanding effectively serves to undermine the value of moral talk, and turns what is meant to be an exchange of reasons and arguments into something more akin to self-promotion.

Most interestingly for our purposes, Hrishikesh Joshi (2021) has argued that speakers have duties to share their evidence even when there is temptation or pressure not to do so. His basic idea is that, sometimes, sharing evidence you possess but others don't (or that others possess but aren't considering for whatever reason) can be an important way of maintaining the epistemic commons. More broadly, Joshi argues that we have a duty to "speak our mind" because doing so is sometimes required to maintain the epistemic commons. This is particularly likely to be so when there exists social pressure to conform and so some viewpoints are under-represented in public discourse. Joshi's argument is something like this:

1. The epistemic commons is a common good—it benefits us all.
2. Because it is a common good, we all have a duty to maintain it.
3. To protect the epistemic commons, we (sometimes) need to speak our mind, even if there is social pressure to not do so and conform.
4. We have an (imperfect, *prima facie*) duty to speak our minds, even if there is social pressure to conform.

Of course, this duty to speak your mind is an *imperfect* and *prima facie* duty.[2] You are not required to speak your mind if doing so is likely to get you killed or otherwise result in severe harm. Moreover, much like the imperfect duty of beneficence, there is room for leeway and discretion when it comes to choosing how to fulfil this duty. Finally, this duty to speak your mind is other regarding because it serves our common interest in maintaining the epistemic commons rather than our own self-interest narrowly construed. Indeed, for Joshi the idea is that we should be willing to "lose some standing amongst [our] social group" to advance this common interest (p. 38).

At least in broad outline, Joshi's view that we have a duty to speak our mind is plausible. What we want to highlight is that, if this is a good argument for the existence of a duty to speak your mind, then the following is a good argument for the existence of a duty to listen:

1. The epistemic commons is a common good—it benefits us all.
2. Because it is a common good, we all have a duty to maintain it.
3. To maintain the epistemic commons, we need to be good listeners, even when we disagree—perhaps even strongly—with the point of view that has been expressed.
4. We have an (imperfect, *prima facie*) duty to be good listeners.

Where Joshi's argument for a duty to speak your mind appeals to the premise that speaking your mind is an important way of maintaining the epistemic commons, our argument appeals to the premise that

[2] See Lackey (2018) for a defense of an imperfect "duty to object," which, roughly put, is a duty to correct falsehoods. The difference between Joshi's duty to speak your mind and Lackey's duty to object is, roughly, one of scope: speaking your mind may involve correcting falsehoods, but it may also involve providing new or better information, identifying new reasons in favor of a view, and so on.

being a good listener is an important way of maintaining the epistemic commons. As with Joshi's duty to speak your mind, the duty to listen is imperfect and *prima facie*. We will say more about what being a good listener involves, and why good listening is so vital to the maintenance of the epistemic commons, in the following two sections. But, for now, the basic thought is that—as noted in the introduction—speaking your mind is not going to do much for the maintenance of the epistemic commons unless your audience listens to you. More generally, maintaining the epistemic commons is something we do together, in conversation with each other. Any conversation—at least, any *good* conversation—involves more than just someone saying something. It involves *interaction* between the speaker and their audience. One way in which we can contribute to the maintenance of the epistemic commons is by listening attentively and with an open mind, giving appropriate uptake to good evidence when it is presented, identifying bad arguments, and more importantly, helping speakers develop their arguments in the strongest form. This fits with Mill's idea that the benefits of freedom of expression will only be enjoyed if we engage "vigorously and earnestly" with what people say and the views they put forward.

In the rest of the paper, we offer support for the crucial third premise of this argument and say a lot more about what the duty to listen involves. The rest of this section contrasts our view with others that have been defended in the literature and addresses an initial objection.

While we do not know of anyone who has defended a "duty to listen" in the sense we intend here, it is worth noting that the duties of listeners have been explored in a range of more specific contexts. For example, the epistemic injustice literature describes the harms that can result from listeners exhibiting certain epistemic vices or prejudices. Notably, Miranda Fricker (2007) explains how someone can commit injustice as a listener when they deflate an individual's credibility due to an identity prejudice they have. José Medina (2013) explores the responsiveness and sensitivity we need to cultivate as listeners, especially with respect to dissenting voices, to resist epistemic injustice.

Additionally, some have argued that we we have duties to listen in the contexts of moral discourse and public political deliberation. Brandon Morgan-Olsen (2013) defends such a duty from the perspective of public reason liberalism, as formulated in Rawls (1993): his thought is, briefly, that we have a duty to identify public reasons within arguments that might initially seem nonpublic. More generally, deliberative democrats have long been interested in the duties of listeners within the context of well-functioning political deliberation.[3] Recently, Alexander Prescott-Couch (2021) has examined the normative problem of how best to accommodate "inchoate" political speech within public deliberation. Finally, Rini (2018) argues that we have a duty to be open to sincere persuasion in order to properly respect others as moral reasoners.

Our aims differ from those of these authors in two ways. First, we are interested in duties we might have as listeners in general, not just within the more specific contexts of epistemic injustice (as in Fricker and Medina) or public political deliberation (as in Morgan-Olsen and Prescott-Couch). Our duty to listen applies in a wide range of contexts, including deliberation about simple matters of fact (what is true?), ethical deliberation (what should we do?), and deliberation within specific fields of inquiry (scientific deliberation, philosophical deliberation). Roughly speaking, our view is that an imperfect, *prima facie* duty to listen exists in any context where the interlocutors are engaged in the collective endeavor of finding out what is true, and their contributions to the conversation are

[3] For some canonical treatments, see Gutmann and Thompson (1996), Habermas (1996), and Cohen (2009).

primarily designed to further this enterprise. To be sure, this does not cover all possible conversational contexts. We tell stories, tell jokes, mess about, and in various other ways depart from the philosopher's standard picture of what conversation involves. But our claim is that we are under an imperfect, *prima facie* duty to listen in the sorts of conversational contexts to which the Millian ideas about the value of freedom of expression that we discussed earlier plausibly apply in the first place.

Second, we aim to defend duties listeners have vis-à-vis the maintenance of our collective epistemic resources. The basic idea is that listeners play a key role in our community's maintaining a reasonably accurate picture of the world, which we all benefit from. Thus, listeners have a duty to be vigilant, appropriately open-minded, and discerning, quite apart from considerations of recognition respect owed to speakers, as in Rini. Furthermore, Rini focuses on specifically moral persuasion, because it is here that considerations of recognition respect à la Darwall (1977) kick in. As a result, her duty to be open to persuasion only applies when it comes to moral matters, whereas our duty to listen is far more general and applies to purely empirical matters as well.

Note that our claim is that we all benefit from our community's having a *reasonably accurate* picture of the world. This is compatible with the fact that some members of our community may benefit from our community's having a picture of the world that is inaccurate in certain specific respects. For instance, a military contractor might benefit from the community having inaccurate (i.e., exaggerated) threat perceptions because this means they can sell more weapons. But still, as social creatures who are dependent on reasonably well-functioning division of labor, they benefit from, indeed require for survival, the community having relatively accurate views of most other things. Thus, for example, it's in the individual military contractor's interest that doctors have an accurate view of what causes various diseases and how to cure them (given that we all get sick at some point in life). This type of example can be multiplied to other domains.[4] Indeed, we think this brings out an important collective action problem that faces the epistemic commons—while each (or most) of us might benefit from society having an inaccurate view of the world in specific (self-serving) ways, as a broader community, we benefit from society having a more or less accurate picture of the world.[5]

We are defending a duty that falls on individuals because of the importance of maintaining a *collective* resource. You might object that, if there are duties here, they attach to the collective, not to the individuals that comprise the collective.[6] We will introduce some important complications later, but for now we can work with a high level of idealization to illustrate the core point. Imagine a community with a shared interest in knowing what the world is like. This endeavor is importantly *collective* and involves a high level of division of labor. Just as individuals specialize in productive tasks (hunting, building, weaving, and so on), so do they specialize in epistemic tasks. And just as individuals rely upon others to satisfy much of their needs (food, shelter, clothing, etc.), so do individuals inevitably rely upon others for much of what they know. Division of labor thus inevitably brings with it the need

[4] More broadly, it can be the case that it's in the interest of a particular class of people that society in general accepts a false ideology. Thus, for example, on a Marxian view, the interests of the ruling class are served by an inaccurate picture of how society works—inaccurate because it does not reflect the oppressive nature of capitalism. However, presumably even in this case the distortion that is optimal from the point of view of the ruling class is limited—wholesale distortion would lead to chaos and collapse. Members of this class still have an interest in society in general having accurate views of a range of empirical matters, from medicine to car repairs, from geographical maps to bridge construction, and so on.

[5] We want to thank the editor for helping us to clarify this point.

[6] We thank an anonymous referee for urging us to consider this objection.

for *cooperation*. At a high level of abstraction, the needed cooperation here is simple to characterize: individuals need to share with the community new and relevant information, and on the other side, this information needs to receive the proper uptake.

Now, in this simple picture, the need to maintain and improve epistemic resources is a collective endeavor. Analogously, the need to maintain a common physical resource—say, the stock of fish in a lake—is a collective endeavor. It is collective in the sense that the resource can be adequately maintained only if a sufficiently high number of individuals cooperate. An individual, by herself, cannot unilaterally maintain the resource. However, we think it's plausible that, even so, each individual can have a *duty* to do her part to maintain the resource—say, by not overfishing and throwing back younger fish into the lake. This is not to deny that some "commons problems" will require certain essentially collective responses—the formal adoption of fishing rules, say. But, importantly for our purposes, it doesn't follow that individuals do not have any related duties. It's plausible that, for instance, they have a duty to advocate for such formal rules, and follow the rules once adopted. Thus, we think that even if the maintenance of the epistemic commons could be thought of as a collective duty, essentially requiring some collective action depending on the circumstances, there are still duties that fall on individuals to do their fair share within this collective endeavor.

While individuals cannot unilaterally maintain the epistemic commons, we think that in many cases, individuals can make a difference. This is true especially in what we might call "bottleneck" scenarios. Thus, for example, for whatever reason, you might be the only person that someone shares a particular piece of information with—and so, by giving uptake, you can make a difference. As depicted in the HBO series *Chernobyl*, or the movie *Titanic*, informational bottlenecks have a potential to lead to disaster, and individuals can make a significant difference.

In some cases, though, it's not obvious that individuals can make a difference (or that much of a difference): this might be true, for example, in cases of issues that are the subject of public debate. But nonetheless, we do not think this observation counts against a duty to listen of the form we defend here, for two reasons. First, because the duty is imperfect, what we ought to do depends on what others are doing. As Lackey (2018) emphasizes with respect to the duty to object, when we ought to object depends in part on whether and to what extent others are objecting. In a discursive context where lots of others have objected to some claim, it might not make much sense for us to pile on further (unless perhaps we have a new way of framing the objection). So, if lots of others are already listening and engaging with some argument, it might not make sense for us to do so as well, in addition. Once we keep in mind that the grounds of our duty to listen is the preservation of the epistemic commons, this becomes plausible—we should reserve our time and energy for situations where they are more useful.

Second, we don't think it's obvious that, if one can't make a difference with respect to X, one thereby does not have duties with respect to X. Some have argued, for example, that since we typically do not make a difference in the outcome of an election, we do not have a duty to vote (Lomasky and Brennan 2000). However, Julia Nefsky (2017) has recently argued that making a difference is not necessary for *helping* to bring an outcome about. For Nefsky, the crucial element is whether we add a non-superfluous causal contribution towards some outcome. In this sense, it can be the case that you helped elect candidate X rather than Y even if X received 7.3 million votes whereas Y received 6.8 million—so that had you not voted, X would still have won. Similarly, one helps bring about deleterious climate change if one drives a gas guzzling SUV. We think this analysis is plausible on its

face, but we invite the reader to incorporate whatever theory they think best explains our obligations in such "collective impact" cases. One might worry though, that the collective impact dimension might downgrade duties to mere reasons. We think this would prove too much however—it's plausible that there is a duty (not a mere reason) to vote (cf. Maskivker 2019), to help others, to preserve the environment, and so on, even if there can be a collective impact aspect to these cases.

Of course, the simple model sketched above is highly idealized. In reality, it's plausible that there isn't a single "epistemic commons" that we all have a roughly equal stake in. Rather, there are multiple epistemic commons, and furthermore, one individual might be a part of several distinct epistemic communities. However, we will argue later (in §4) that these necessary complications of the simple model do not vitiate the duty to listen. They call instead for attempting to work out how to modify the idealized model once we recognize the plurality of different epistemic commons.

3. Mercier and Sperber's Interactionist Picture

We think our argument that we have a duty to listen is plausible enough on its face. But in this section, we provide some additional theoretical backing for it. Our argument is based on Mercier and Sperber's (2017) "interactionist" picture of human reason and reasoning. Mercier and Sperber introduce their picture as an alternative to the "intellectualist" picture, on which the function of reason is to enable one to "think better on one's own." For Mercier and Sperber, the problem with the intellectualist picture is that it is unable to explain why human reasoning exhibits confirmation or "myside" bias. This bias is a pervasive feature of individual reasoners, yet it seems a poor way to get at the truth. If reason's function were to enable individuals to get at the truth by themselves, what we'd expect is for individuals to have a robust tendency to look for *disconfirming* evidence for whatever hypotheses they hold. But the opposite is true: generally, we look for evidence that *confirms* whatever hypotheses we happen to hold.

However, the prevalence of confirmation bias would make more sense if the function of reasoning were to allow us to come to the truth *together*. If we were "epistemically vigilant" (Sperber et al. 2010)—that is, careful in assessing the reasons of *others*, even though we are biased in assessing our own reasons—then the "selective laziness" of reasoning (Trouche et al. 2016) would be an essential part of a cognitive division of labor. Mercier and Sperber explain:

> The most difficult task, finding good reasons, is made easier by the myside bias and by sensible laziness. The myside bias makes reasoners focus on just one side of the issue rather than having to figure out on their own how to adopt everyone's perspective. Laziness lets reason stop looking for better reason when it has found an acceptable one. The interlocutor, if not convinced, will look for a counterargument, helping the speaker produce more pointed reasons (2017, 236).

Put simply, while we may be bad at spotting flaws in our own thinking, we are quite good at spotting flaws in the thinking of others. Put a little less simply, reason must solve two problems. The first is a problem of human coordination—how do we manage to cooperate with other human beings? Human cooperation is so complex because humans often violate social norms but offer *justifications* and *reasons* for having done so. Our susceptibility to myside bias and cognitive laziness helps with this problem because it makes the task of finding justifications and reasons relatively easy. We simply look for reasons supporting what we already think or have already done or want to do.

The second problem is a problem of human communication. While we often benefit from the honesty and sincerity of others, we need to be on the lookout for signs of dishonesty. More generally, we need to be alive to the possibility that others are trying to deceive us in some way.[7] We use the mechanisms of epistemic vigilance to avoid being deceived and exploited. We assess others for signs of benevolence towards us, trusting those who seem to like (or be like) us, and distrusting those who do not. Crucially, though, we do not simply trust people who like us. We also assess others for signs of competence and can be swayed by the power of a good argument (Mercier and Sperber 2017, 314). Indeed, this is precisely why Mercier and Sperber think reason works better in social interaction than on one's own. While we are lazy when it comes to scrutinizing our own arguments, we are scrupulous when it comes to arguments offered by others.

The core point for our purposes is that, if Mercier and Sperber are right in thinking that reasoning generally works better when we do it together than when we "go it alone," then successful reasoning relies as much, if not more, on how we listen to each other as on what we say to get a conversation started. When we listen, we are tasked with the key role in ensuring that good reasons get uptake and that bad or fallacious reasons are appropriately weeded out. Now, Mercier and Sperber do not themselves use moral language or talk about our duty to maintain the epistemic commons. But if we combine their interactionist model of human reason with our earlier idea that there is such a duty then we get the result that good listening plays a crucial role in the maintenance of the epistemic commons. On Mercier and Sperber's view, much of the epistemic work happens in interactions between people. It is through these interactions that good arguments are identified, bad arguments discarded, and we (hopefully!) arrive at the truth about the matter at hand. All of this happens in large part because of the work we do as *listeners*. To maintain the epistemic commons, we have a duty to be good listeners.

Of course, whether this happens in practice is another question. While Mercier and Sperber tend to strike quite an optimistic note about the "power of argument," in places they qualify this optimism slightly (see e.g., Mercier and Sperber 2017, 334). Put briefly, their view is that social interaction is epistemically productive when the participants start with different views but a shared goal. Problems occur when they start with the same views (this leads to "groupthink") or different goals (this leads to "group polarization"—the different groups end up more polarized than they were before). But the point is that, insofar as conversational exchanges serve to maintain the epistemic commons, on Mercier and Sperber's picture they do so in large part because of the contributions we make as listeners, and more generally as participants in a conversation.

We'll return to this point later (in §5). For now, we want to make things a bit less "high-level" and abstract. What, exactly, do these duties placed on listeners look like in practice? Put broadly, we contend that listeners are under a general duty to listen, where listening goes beyond merely paying attention to and trying to understand what speakers are trying to say. In the next section we discuss the various forms this duty to listen might take.

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[7] This is a perfect example of a standard problem: common resources are vulnerable to deterioration, because of the incentives they generate (Hardin 1968; Ostrom 2000). The atmosphere, for example, being a common resource, unfortunately gives rise to a "tragedy of the commons," wherein everyone has self-interested reasons to over-pollute, but collectively we are all worse off if we each act in this way. Similarly, it is sometimes the case that individuals have self-interested reasons to lie, but collectively we are all worse off if we regularly engage in lies and deception. For a detailed discussion of this problem in the case of testimony see Williams (2002).

4. A General Duty to Listen?

We claim there is a general, imperfect, *prima facie* duty to listen. However, the idealized model we presented earlier needs to be complicated in some significant respects, and this might raise doubts about whether any duty to listen could really be general. In this section we will discuss two objections you might make to our idealized model, before saying more about how we understand the general duty to listen.

First, the initial model assumes a rather basic division of labor—there are speakers and listeners. We could, however, imagine a more refined division, such that it would be hard to defend a general duty to listen. We could, for example, imagine the generation of epistemic resources on the model of a production line. For instance, we can imagine a community where group A comes up with new ideas, group B records these ideas uncritically, group C tries to critically scrutinize these ideas, D constructively engages with these criticisms, and finally group E determines how to disseminate the resulting knowledge.[8] If we imagine such a system working well, it seems that it would not be the case that each individual has some duty to listen. The first two groups, for example, do not have genuine listening as part of their job description, so it is unclear why members of those groups would be under any sort of duty to listen. Analogously, in a manufacturing production line, not everyone will have the job of quality control, except in a very thin sense.

We think that such a system is possible, and workable in specific scenarios. Indeed, some areas of scientific research seem to exhibit something like this division of labor—one group might gather the data, the next runs some tests, a third tries to understand the results within a particular theoretical context, and so on. That said, one would still expect that, within each group, there is space for dissent and debate, when that dissent and debate is tied to the task that the group has been allocated. For example, while the first group is tasked with gathering data, there must be space for members of that group to debate about data gathering methods, or about what the data are in the first place. Similarly, while the second group is tasked with running experimental tests, questions about how to run the tests must be raised and discussed. The fact that criticism "across" the different stages of this inquiry would run counter to the division of labor does not, and should not, entail that criticism within each stage would run counter to the division of labor. Indeed, one might think that criticism within each stage is essential to the eventual success of the inquiry. But if criticism within each stage is essential, then so is good listening, albeit good listening that is tied to the tasks assigned to that stage of the inquiry.

Furthermore, a rigid division of labor analogous to a production line is likely to run into severe problems, precisely because of its rigidity. Thus, imagine that as group A is sitting in a room, generating novel ideas, there happens to be a fire starting in the building, though the smoke is not visible yet. Someone comes and tells the group they need to evacuate, due to the fire. If the division of labor is meant to be so rigid that the duty to listen simply does not apply to them, then it's not clear how they can escape the situation. If it is less rigid than that—if the group is tasked with deciding what to listen to and what is relevant to their task—then our argument about the epistemic benefits of good listening starts to get a grip.

More generally, even if the production line model of the division of epistemic labor is appropriate in particular contexts, it is unlikely to work well more generally, given human tendencies and limitations.

[8] We thank an anonymous referee for suggesting this possibility.

Imagine some group of individuals whose sole epistemic job is to uncritically record what others say. Because such a group would lack *epistemic vigilance* of the sort discussed earlier, it would be highly prone to deception and manipulation, and thus its dispositions are unlikely to be evolutionarily stable. Part of the reason we invoke Mercier and Sperber's interactionist model of reason in §3 is that it is a plausible model of human reason, grounded in evolutionary considerations. A particular model of the division of epistemic labor—one that is deeply interactive, and so very different from the production line model—is part of this more general model. Of course, humans can innovate and adopt social arrangements very different from those arrangements that characterized our evolutionary history. But we do think this suggests that the production line model is not a good model of how humans typically divide cognitive labor. It is instead a model that is only appropriate in certain specialized contexts.

Second, our initial idealized model assumes there is one epistemic commons. Perhaps we could fruitfully think of a single commons in the case of a Neolithic hunter-gatherer tribe, but given the scale of modern society and the associated epistemic landscape, there are *multiple* epistemic commons and it's not obvious that each of us has a stake in all or most of them.[9] It also seems plausible that some of us have more opportunities to make use of the epistemic commons than others, and that, partly as a result, some of us may have more of a duty to contribute to its upkeep than others do. (The thought would be: why would you have duties to maintain a common good that you aren't able to make use of?). These observations might seem to undermine the idea that we have some general duty to listen.

While we recognize that our model is idealized in this (and other) respects, we claim that a general duty to listen is still part of a more realistic model. A more realistic model will incorporate the idea that there are many communities with somewhat different epistemic commons, though many of these may overlap.[10] Perhaps there are certain topics on which it is fruitful to think about one epistemic commons—in the context of internationally conducted scientific research on climate change, say—but there are some localized or community-specific issues that might not be usefully thought of as being part of the general commons. However, we don't think this undermines the existence of the general duty to listen that we defend. The basic idea is this: while not everyone will have an equal stake in each such commons, we all presumably have a stake in *some* epistemic commons, even if it is more localized. We are all therefore under this general duty to listen as a means of maintaining some epistemic commons or other, even though we are not necessarily all under the same duty as it pertains to the same epistemic commons. Analogously, even if a lake fisherman does not have a direct stake in the oceanic commons, he has a stake in maintaining the stock of fish at his particular location.

As deeply social creatures, none of us is epistemically self-reliant. Such self-reliance would involve, *inter alia*, never making use of the testimony of others—this might well be fine for creatures like turtles

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[9] We would like to thank an anonymous referee for urging us to say more about this objection.

[10] It may be instructive to consider the parallel between this issue and the debate in the epistemic injustice literature on how to develop the insight that, far from having a single and common set of hermeneutical resources, different communities have their own resources, and these need not overlap with each other (Mason 2011; Medina 2013). Medina in particular emphasizes the importance of what you might call virtuous listening, even though he also emphasizes that virtuous listening is difficult across communities with different hermeneutical resources. His attempt to resolve this involves the claim that those who occupy a relatively privileged position are (in our terms) under particularly onerous duties to listen to those who occupy a marginalized position. We defend a similar view in §5.

or octopi, but it's not feasible for humans. Each of us draws on and makes use of epistemic resources created and maintained collectively in some sense. Doing so is indispensable for our survival and flourishing. To be sure, given the scale of modern society and the scope of modern knowledge, none of us has an equal stake in every epistemic community out there. This is easiest to see when it comes to knowledge about localized particulars—if you never plan to visit Bogota, you will have little stake in preserving knowledge about the locations of good barbershops there. Moreover, which sorts of epistemic resources one is able to make use of will depend on one's particular social position and its constraints. A person who was never taught to read will have little stake in the quality of the latest issue of a specialized English literature journal, except very indirectly. Nonetheless, navigating life within any social position will involve making use of epistemic resources provided in part by others, perhaps of a similar social position. This indispensable reliance then generates a duty to do one's fair share to contribute to maintaining the quality of those epistemic resources—and this essentially involves listening.

One might wonder what generates the duty to listen as a means to preserving the epistemic commons. We think there can be several plausible ways of cashing out the underlying normative structure. First, as mentioned in §2, there are cases where we, as individuals, can make a positive difference—especially in "bottleneck" scenarios (scenarios where you are the only person that someone shares a piece of information with, and so by giving uptake you can make a difference). Here, simple consequentialism or a duty of beneficence can explain why we ought to listen in the way we discuss in this paper. But even in cases where one listener is unlikely to make a difference alone, we think there is an intuitive sense in which we ought not to free ride on the epistemic labor of others.

The question of what explains why we ought not to free ride (under certain suitable conditions) is a general one in political philosophy and there are several promising accounts that a view like ours is compatible with. For example, Christopher Heath Wellman (2001) defends a Samaritan duty individuals have to do their fair share to avoid a disastrous outcome—in the case of political obligation, the disastrous outcome is the state of nature. For us, this would involve individuals doing their fair share to avoid perils to the epistemic commons.

One question that arises in this context is why individuals must do their fair share by protecting the *epistemic* commons in particular. What if someone rarely listens in the way we describe but is a good neighbor or gives to Oxfam or similar charities? Brookes Brown (2020) has developed a promising response to this problem in the case of political obligation. On her view, reciprocity requires that citizens do their fair share of what she calls "civic work," given that (sufficiently many) others are doing the same. This involves individuals doing "their share of labor in creating and implementing our complex joint plan for generating public goods" (Brown 2020, 39). For Brown, this obligation cannot be carried out by simply, for instance, running a profitable business that provides useful services (cf. Schmidtz 2006; Brennan 2012). The analogue for our view would be that individuals ought to do their fair share of "epistemic work." Just as a citizen cannot simply avoid civic work by doing something else that benefits others, like running a business that employs several people, one cannot simply avoid epistemic work like listening by doing something else that benefits others.[11]

[11] You might ask: why should this epistemic work take the form of listening, rather than something else, like generating new knowledge? Our response is that we have, in §3, put forward a theoretical perspective (drawing on Mercier and Sperber's analysis) on which "epistemic advances" typically result from dialogue and interaction, and so typically involve listening. This of course does not entail that listening is the *only* valuable

A common way of understanding certain problematic cases of free riding is to appeal to the principle of fair play (Dagger 2018). Some have construed this principle as involving a requirement to play by the rules of a particular scheme. Justin Tosi (2018, 623), for example, writes that "[p]laying fair with others requires doing one's part to fairly distribute the benefits and burdens of cooperation within a joint enterprise. The principle claims that one must follow the scheme's rules in order to do one's fair share." Now, the rules pertaining to preserving the epistemic commons are bound to be more abstract and vague than, say, the rules of soccer. However, from this perspective, part of our project in this paper is to make these implicit rules somewhat more explicit, and to argue that they have a crucial listening component.[12]

To the extent that we understand the duty to listen as a means of doing one's fair share, though, the scope of the duty will be constrained by the demands of fairness. Doing too little would be unfair to others and doing more than one's fair share would be supererogatory. That said, we think the demands of fairness can allow for significant leeway and discretion as to how we contribute. This, for example, is brought out in Brown's (2020) point about *civic work*. So long as we are doing our fair share of the civic work, what your civic work looks like can be different from mine, especially given our different social positions, resources, and so on. Similarly, as we argue in more detail below, what you should do to maintain the epistemic commons may be different from what I should do, especially if we occupy different social positions.

However, if it is the case that nobody, or very few people, are doing the work required to maintain the epistemic commons, it is plausible that individuals might not have much of a duty to listen, as this would be in effect to require them to do all/most of the work—i.e., more than their fair share. Fortunately, though, we think that this situation is not that common. While there may rarely be a perfectly fair distribution of work within an epistemic commons, it is—we think—often the case that the distribution is fair enough such that all the work doesn't fall on one person or a small minority.[13]

Now, as noted earlier, rather than thinking of one global epistemic commons, it may be more realistic to think in terms of many commons, some of which overlap. The project of cataloguing all the different epistemic commons, and of giving an account of what is required to be a contributor to and beneficiary of a particular epistemic commons, is an important one. But this is not a project we can attempt here. The important point for our purposes is that, even within a more localized, community-specific context, the health of that epistemic commons will rely on individuals playing their part as good listeners. We are all under a duty to listen because we all contribute to and benefit from our

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form of epistemic work, but it is a particularly valuable form, and so it is unlikely that anyone will do their fair share of epistemic work without being a good listener in at least some contexts.

[12] Robert Nozick (1974) famously argued against the principle of fair play by suggesting that it would overgeneralize in a problematic way. In particular, the worry was that the principle would entail that benefits foisted upon us could generate corresponding obligations. Fair play theorists have responded by arguing, among other things, that the benefits must be voluntarily accepted, or they must be (presumptively) highly valuable. (For example, see Simmons (2001) and Klosko (2004). Note that while Simmons rejects fair play as an account of political obligation, he does defend the principle against Nozick's objections.) We think both these points apply to the case of benefits derived from a well-maintained epistemic commons. What's more, we all are *participants* in the general scheme of benefits provided by our epistemic community, in the way suggested by some fair play theorists in response to Nozick.

[13] We thank the editor for pressing us to be clearer about this.

membership in *an* epistemic commons, even if we are not all necessarily members of the *same* epistemic commons.

One might worry that, while this is fine so far as it goes, it doesn't provide answers to the sorts of questions we might ask as people who are (or who think we might be) members of this-or-that epistemic commons. One might ask: how do I determine whether I am a member of this particular epistemic commons? How do I know whether I really have a stake in this commons that I am, or am presumed to be, a member of? Are my duties as a member of this particular commons too onerous, so onerous as to make my continued membership of it into a burden? These are not questions we can answer in this paper. But we think our reasons for not being able to answer them are principled. They are just not the sorts of questions that can be answered purely on the basis of the sort of broad normative framework we are developing in this paper. This is in part because the answer depends on first-order normative debates. For example, imagine I start to worry that my continued membership in an online community is becoming a burden to me. I am doing a lot of work to ensure that the community is well-informed in matters that are of interest to the members of the community, but I am deriving no real benefit from this work. In fact, it has become a chore. Do I still have a stake in this particular community and its associated epistemic commons? Am I responsible for its upkeep? The answers to these questions depend, at least in part, on the value of the information that is maintained by this commons, and there may well be reasonable debate about the value of this information. They also depend on myriad contextual features, not to mention on what I personally value.

So far, we have defended the duty to listen in general terms. But, more specifically, what might this duty amount to? The simplest and least demanding form is simply to pay attention as much as is reasonable. Maintaining the epistemic commons relies on sufficient uptake of good evidence when it is brought to light and there can be no uptake if that evidence isn't even heard in the first place. However, uptake requires more than just paying attention (recall our earlier discussion of Mill). You can listen to someone yet still reject their arguments or claims out of hand or for bad reasons. Of course, some arguments or claims *should* be rejected, and we can't be expected to engage properly with everything. But, if well-grounded claims are rejected out of hand and good reasons ignored, the epistemic commons and the quality of the information contained in it will suffer as a result. Imagine a case where a community has unfortunately settled on a mistaken ethical view, so that the moral perspectives alive in the community are at odds with the truth on a particular matter (historical examples will be obvious to many readers). Now suppose that some speaker proposes an alternative way of seeing things that is closer to the truth. This can only improve the epistemic commons if her arguments receive uptake.

At this point it is tempting to conclude that, at least so far as the maintenance of the epistemic commons is concerned, the primary requirement on listeners is that they display open-mindedness—that they engage with an open mind, that they are open to persuasion (cf. Rini 2018). While we agree that open-mindedness is important, we want to draw attention to the fact that, at least so far as maintenance of the epistemic commons is concerned, *merely* listening with an open mind is not enough. To see why, let's go back to Mercier and Sperber's interactionist model. On their model, listeners are tasked with being *epistemically vigilant*. *Prima facie*, it might seem like this is not only different from listening with an open mind but indeed *inconsistent* with being open minded. Vigilance might be taken to involve something more like *closed-mindedness*—an attitude of suspicion towards new information and ideas. But this isn't how Mercier and Sperber understand vigilance. As they understand it, vigilance has both a critical and a constructive dimension. So far as the critical dimension is concerned, the idea

is that one must be "on guard" for bad reasons and misinformation of various kinds. But being epistemically vigilant also involves a willingness to revise one's antecedently held beliefs in light of good reasons and arguments. Vigilant listeners will be disposed to hear out good arguments and rethink some of their prior beliefs, rather than either avoiding such arguments or being dogmatic in response to hearing them.

Moreover, and most importantly, being epistemically vigilant involves a willingness to look for *new* arguments and reasons in support of the claims and views put forward by one's interlocutors. If speakers are inevitably prone to confirmation bias and lazy reasoning, then many of their arguments, especially when initially presented, are likely to be "half-baked." If we think of inquiry as a social or collective activity (as opposed to something chiefly conducted by individual thinkers working in isolation), then part of the task of listeners is to help speakers develop their arguments in the strongest form—even where the listener(s) might ultimately reject the conclusion. A simple model here would go something like this (the reader should bear in mind our earlier discussion of the ways in which the model is simple). The division of labor involved in conversational exchange places on speakers the task of generating or sharing reasons, in good faith (where the intention is not merely to troll or deceive or the like). On the flip side, listeners are tasked with evaluating these reasons, and insofar as they are able, extracting whatever valuable nuggets there may be in the speaker's arguments.

Mercier and Sperber's analysis therefore suggests a further dimension to the duty listeners might have in playing their role in maintaining the epistemic commons. This involved being what we might call a "good interlocutor" in service of the epistemic commons. By this we don't mean that we have a further duty, distinct from our duty to listen, but rather that, in addition to what we have said above, good listening has both a critical and a constructive dimension. The critical dimension is exercised when, for example, a listener points out that the speaker's argument is not valid, or that there is an alternative explanation of the speaker's observations and/or data. More constructively, a listener might explore, along with the speaker, alternative premises that might in fact make the argument valid. Perhaps the speaker's argument is invalid, but the key missing premise is easily supplied and is plausible. Perhaps they are relying on spurious or misleading evidence, but there is no need for them to do so—the evidence does in fact support their conclusions, though not quite for the reasons they think. Furthermore, the listener might help to extract an insight or good argument from inchoate nuggets the speaker might have offered. A good interlocutor will be on the lookout for these and other possibilities.

Good interlocution ought to be familiar to readers as a constitutive feature of good philosophical practice. A good interlocutor will listen open mindedly to arguments for, say, mind-body dualism even if she antecedently rejects the view. Further, even if her mind is not changed due to the conversational exchange, a good interlocutor will, where she can, try to help the speaker improve their argument—for example, by suggesting better alternate reasons in support of particular premises, or by helping to make the argument logically valid if it is not already so. Ideally, the good philosophical interlocutor helps the speaker develop their argument so that it is as strong as it can be.

These ideas apply more generally. In any sort of deliberative context where the deliberators are engaged in a collective enterprise of reaching the truth, we can characterize what is involved in being a good interlocutor in a similar way. This means that the duty to listen, understood as incorporating good interlocution, applies to a huge range of deliberative contexts—contexts of ethical as well as political deliberation, contexts of scientific deliberation as well as philosophical, contexts of deliberation about plain, simple matters of fact. It is in this respect that our account of the duty to

listen, and to be a good interlocutor, extends ideas that have been defended in the specific context of public deliberation by Morgan-Olsen (2013) and Prescott-Couch (2021).

We have sketched various forms the duty to listen might take. We think that even if there is a general duty to listen, its precise nature will depend on several factors, notably our own level of expertise. Thus, the duty on the part of a novice might largely involve listening closely, asking clarifying questions, and so forth. And, depending on aspects of the novice's social context, the duty might be fairly weak—if you are a philosopher, chances are you might not have much of a reason to listen when it comes to the specifics of steel manufacturing, except insofar as they touch on important social or economic issues. The duty on behalf of experts takes a more demanding form—a metallurgical engineer will have a much stronger duty to pay attention, and moreover it will involve her being vigilant and critical, as a good interlocutor. Thus, the duty to listen—being an imperfect, general one—shares important structural features with other similar duties, such as the duty to object, which as Lackey (2018) has recently emphasized, is going to be highly sensitive to the specific social context of the individual objector. It would of course be valuable to chart the various ways in which the duty to listen is sensitive to specific social contexts. What does it require of an educator, a doctor, a parent? Our aim in this paper is to establish a general framework within which these questions can profitably be answered, not to give answers to them. If the reader is convinced that there is a duty to listen, we invite them to consider how it plays out in the particular social contexts that interest them.

5. Demandingness and Related Issues

We want to finish by considering some more objections to our proposal. While we will consider a few different objections, they all revolve around the worry that our duty to listen is far too demanding. It is, after all, a duty that many of us will routinely fail to live up to. In this section we will argue that our duty to listen is demanding enough that it asks quite a lot of us, but not so demanding that it is implausible we are under it.

The first objection follows on from our discussion of Mercier and Sperber in §3. You might worry that, even construed as an imperfect duty, the duty to listen is problematic because psychology tells us that we are *bad* at doing what the duty requires of us—viz., engaging constructively with arguments and claims put forward by people with whom we might disagree about the issues in question. For example, a range of studies suggest that, on matters about which there is widespread partisan disagreement, or on matters which are integral to our social identities, we are reluctant to update beliefs appropriately in light of disconfirming evidence (Kaplan, Gimbel, and Harris 2016; Su 2022). Relatedly, there is a tendency not to draw appropriate logical or statistical conclusions when they might conflict with our antecedently held convictions on important moral or political matters (Kahan et al. 2017; Gampa et al. 2019). Other work suggests that we are liable to evaluate scientific evidence as stronger when it confirms antecedent socio-political beliefs, regardless of the independent strength of such evidence (Taber and Lodge 2006; Washburn and Skitka 2018).

By way of response, let us start by noting that, as Mercier and Sperber (2017) emphasize, and Mercier (2020) has argued in his most recent book, our failure to appreciate the force of what would normally be compelling arguments and reasons when it comes to areas of intense partisan disagreement or issues relevant to our social identities does not in any way mean that we aren't normally more than willing to be persuaded by compelling arguments, even when they run contrary to our existing beliefs. The fact that we might be bad at doing what the duty requires of us in certain situations (like areas of partisan disagreement) would in no way show that we are, in general, bad at doing what the duty

requires of us. To think otherwise would be to commit something close to a fallacy: from the fact that we are bad at doing something in certain situations (e.g., driving when intoxicated) it does not follow that we are bad at doing it in all situations (many of us are perfectly good drivers when sober).

That said, we grant that, to the extent that biases and motivated forms of reasoning are a pervasive feature of our psychology, actively combatting our biases while we evaluate others' arguments is going to be quite demanding. But it is independently plausible that we have duties to at least minimize the impact of our biases. Take, for example, the identity prejudices that on Fricker's (2007) analysis are responsible for the improperly deflated credibility judgments that lead to testimonial injustice. On some views, such as that defended in Medina (2013), we are responsible for these biases in the strong sense that we need to actively interrogate our often largely unconscious ways of assessing speakers and their credibility. More generally, we are surely responsible for minimizing the impact that prejudices have on our behavior. One way in which we might "live up" to such a responsibility would be by adopting a stance of being open to the possibility that our automatic credibility judgements are faulty. Similarly, one way in which we might "live up" to the requirements of the duty to listen, and specifically being a good interlocutor, would be by adopting a stance of being open to the possibility that our initial assessments of arguments are faulty, especially when those arguments pertain to issues about which there is intense partisan disagreement. At least to our knowledge, there is nothing in the literature on motivated reasoning which suggests we are incapable of adopting such a stance.

The second objection relates to our point that the duty to listen is an *imperfect* duty. There are lots of speakers out there, and there is a lot that's being said. A perfect duty to listen, one that did not allow significant leeway and discretion, would be too onerous to fulfil—it might require us to spend all our time reading internet fora for example. Construed as an imperfect duty, however, we might think of our job as listeners as requiring us to be attentive and open, particularly on matters that are significant to important human interests. The objection though is that, put like this, our claim seems to amount to a near-triviality: we are under a duty to listen when we want to listen, or it would be of some benefit to us to listen, but we aren't when it would be too inconvenient for us to do so, or we just aren't interested.

What we want to say in response to this is that, at least some of the time, the duty to listen is a good deal more onerous than this. Helpful, constructive engagement and vigilant listening requires effort. Readers who have actively listened to and engaged with a philosophy talk will be familiar with this. Furthermore, following on from what we have said earlier, it is plausible that the duty to listen requires us to pay special attention to speakers defending views that have been marginalized in public discussion. From the perspective of maintaining or improving the epistemic commons, there is likely to be a high upside to constructive epistemic engagement with such views. Now, depending on the specific context of the marginalization, there may be social costs associated with listening and giving uptake to particular perspectives. Thus, consider a society where members of group A are socially dominant and are prejudiced against members of group B. Here, it can be costly for an individual from group A to give uptake to the testimony of someone from group B, especially if it conflicts with dominant narratives. Nonetheless, so long as the costs are not *too high*, we contend that such individuals do have a duty to listen in these cases.

The reader might still want a little more detail. What, exactly, determines the "strength" of the duty to listen? Lackey (2018) has argued, with respect to the duty to object, that the strength of this duty can depend on your social standing. On Lackey's view, for example, other things equal, a tenured male professor might be under more of an obligation to object to a sexist remark than his junior female

colleague, especially when that junior colleague is even more likely to face costs for "speaking up" due to their race, or some other relevant aspect of their social identity. Similarly, someone with relevant expertise in a particular domain might have a greater duty to object to falsehoods that circulate with respect to that domain—a physician thus might have a weightier duty than an airline pilot to speak out about the effectiveness of vaccines.

In line with this, we contend that the "strength" of the duty to listen depends on your social standing. Just as a tenured male professor might be under more of an obligation to object than his junior female colleague, the duty to listen might be weightier for the expert than for the novice. Similarly, to the extent that you are an expert with respect to some domain, you might not have a duty to listen to novices who disagree with you with respect to that domain. Furthermore, it is plausible that novices in general might not be under a duty to listen to and draw conclusions based upon misleading evidence that has already been taken into account by the relevant experts (Begby 2021). That said, these observations are complicated by the fact that in some domains, it is difficult to reliably identify the experts.[14] On the flip side, experts can have a stronger duty, as compared to novices, to listen to and engage with countervailing evidence when it is produced by a reliable source. This is in part because, as experts, such individuals carry a special social status that comes with epistemic authority, and as such, they are in a stronger position to contribute to the epistemic commons by listening.

It is helpful here to note similarities with the imperfect duty of beneficence. First, those in a better position to help in a particular way have more of a duty to help in that way. Thus, a relatively affluent person plausibly has a duty to give more to charitable causes than someone working a minimum wage job. Second, there are many possible ways in which we can make a positive difference to the world by helping those in need. We might volunteer within our community, be a supportive friend or family member, or donate to charity. Even when it comes to charitable giving, there are a plethora of options. The duty of beneficence thus must allow for significant leeway and discretion. Nonetheless, recent authors have emphasized contributing in ways that yield the most "bang for the buck"—that is, to focus our altruism on the most effective channels (MacAskill 2015; Singer 2015). Analogously, to the extent we can, we might focus our listening and engagement in the most productive channels vis-à-vis the epistemic commons. However, there is likely to be some uncertainty as to what exactly these channels are (perhaps more uncertainty than in the charitable giving case).

So far, we have been arguing that our duty to listen is demanding but not overly demanding. In the process we have committed ourselves to some further claims that require some scrutiny. The first is our claim that we should pay special attention to marginalized voices. One might worry that some voices are marginalized because they offer poor quality evidence, or misleading evidence that has been *preempted* by experts (cf. Begby 2021). We happily grant this point, but our suggestion here is merely that this is a useful heuristic—insofar as good reasons fail to receive uptake, it is in such cases that they are most likely to be found.

Further, we want to emphasize that, especially given non-ideal circumstances, voices can be marginalized for bad reasons. As has been documented in the epistemic injustice literature, testimony can be unfairly discounted due to identity prejudices held by the listeners. Another type of case

[14] For example, one might reasonably think that within practical ethics, it is more difficult to find experts than it is in say, accounting or cardiology—for more discussion, see McGrath (2011). Another domain in which it's difficult to find experts is the prediction of the trajectories of complex systems such as international relations or politics over the medium to long run (Tetlock and Gardner 2015).

involves disconfirming scientific evidence that cuts against dominant scientific paradigms, social customs, or ideologies. Weatherall and O'Connor (2021) note that scientists can be subject to social pressures to conform with others in their communities, in epistemically counterproductive ways. They cite two examples from the history of medicine which bring this out vividly. In the mid-nineteenth century, Hungarian physician Ignaz Semmelweis observed that women were dying at high rates during childbirth at the Vienna General Hospital—much higher rates, in fact, than those giving birth with midwives or on the way to the hospital. Semmelweis posited that this could be due to doctors not washing their hands. However, doctors were offended by Semmelweis's suggestion that they had dirty hands and refused to give uptake and change behavior. Another case involves Lady Montague, an English aristocrat who traveled to Turkey in the early eighteenth century and encountered the practice of variolation for smallpox and observed that people who were variolated gained immunity to the disease. However, her attempts to bring the practice to England failed because British physicians did not take her testimony seriously, owing to various prejudices. The latter case suggests that even "novices"—defined as those without specific formal credentials or institutional posts—can sometimes provide useful evidence that merits consideration.

One might also worry that, in urging that special attention be paid to marginalized voices, we put all (or at least too much of) the burden of maintaining the epistemic commons on the marginalized. This might even qualify as a form of what Nora Berenstain (2016) calls "epistemic exploitation." Epistemic exploitation happens when the socially privileged expect or even compel the socially marginalized to educate them about their marginalization and oppression—its existence, its nature, etc. It is however important to note that our claim is that we have a special duty to *listen to* (in the sense of being a good interlocutor with) marginalized voices, including socially marginalized ones. This is different from claiming that the socially marginalized have a special duty to "speak up" or to educate anyone about the existence and nature of their marginalization. Our claim is more that, *when* we encounter marginalized voices, we (with the caveats noted above) have a special duty to listen to them. So, we are not saying that it is the job of the marginalized to educate everyone else about the existence and nature of their marginalization. We are saying that it is everyone's job to listen to the marginalized when they tell us about it.

Finally, notwithstanding the above considerations, many of the impediments to our collective ability to secure truth and objectivity are *structural* in nature. Indeed, it is plausible, as Helen Longino (1990) has emphasized, that inquiry can only be objective if it exhibits certain structural features—it is only as the product of a structured social processes that science can be objective at all. C. Thi Nguyen (2020) notes that echo chambers have certain structural properties that make it difficult for their members to have justified beliefs about certain matters, even if they individually exhibit epistemic virtue. It might then be thought that our analysis tackles the problem at the wrong level—we are suggesting individually focused remedies for essentially structural problems.

In response, we don't want to deny that many social-epistemic problems have structural dimensions. However, there are two points that are useful to note here. First, even when it comes to structural problems, it is plausible that individuals have certain duties to alleviate such problems. Thus, even as climate change is a global and structural problem, each of us plausibly has a duty to reduce our carbon footprint where it wouldn't be too costly to do so. We can have a duty to play our part by contributing to a collective effort that secures important goods (cf. Maskivker 2019). Second, even in the scenario in which we succeed in reforming various structural problems, a healthy epistemic commons would rely on individuals doing their part. Thus, imagine an ideally structured scientific environment. Even in such a situation, scientific progress would rely on individual scientists taking care to gather good

data, explore plausible hypotheses, do their part in helping with peer reviews, etc. Likewise, we think even an ideally structured epistemic environment relies on individuals playing their part by providing critical engagement and uptake as appropriate.

While we don't take these objections to exhaust the worries one might have about our defense of the duty to listen, we hope that the above helps give a sense of how further worries might be addressed. (In keeping with our main claims in this paper, we feel ourselves duty-bound to be on the lookout for good objections that we haven't yet considered!).

6. Conclusion

We started by noting that, while much has been written about the familiar Millian idea that speaking your mind can have beneficial consequences, merely speaking your mind need not have any consequences at all. Others need to *listen* to what you have to say. But they also need to *engage* with what you have said. Moreover, at least if we agree with Mercier and Sperber about the epistemic value of social interaction, the sorts of beneficial consequences that Mill adverted to typically result from a form of engagement that is both critical and constructive. Our preferred way of putting this point has been as follows: in engaging with what others say in a critical yet constructive manner, we contribute to the maintenance of the epistemic commons. Because the epistemic commons is a common good that we all rely on, and we have a duty to maintain it, we have a duty to engage with what others say, and depending on our expertise, in a way that is critical yet constructive. That is, we have a duty to listen, and good listening requires being a good interlocutor.

As we have emphasized, this is an imperfect duty that is sometimes outweighed in particular situations. Still, it is rather demanding. It requires us to be willing to work with our interlocutors to strengthen their arguments, even when they are defending views that run contrary to our own. But it is often the case that duties deriving from a need to maintain a common good are demanding. It is no surprise to learn that our duties to protect the physical environment are onerous. It should be no more of a surprise to learn that our duties to protect the epistemic commons require a lot of us as well.[15]

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