

# Shared Epistemic Responsibility

Boyd Millar

## Abstract

It is widely acknowledged that individual moral obligations and responsibility entail shared (or joint) moral obligations and responsibility. However, whether individual epistemic obligations and responsibility entail shared epistemic obligations and responsibility is rarely discussed. Instead, most discussions of doxastic responsibility focus on individuals considered in isolation. In contrast to this standard approach, I maintain that focusing exclusively on individuals in isolation leads to a profoundly incomplete picture of what we're epistemically obligated to do and when we deserve epistemic blame. First, I argue that we have epistemic obligations to perform actions of the sort that can be performed in conjunction with other people, and that consequently, we are often jointly blameworthy when we violate shared epistemic obligations. Second, I argue that shared responsibility is especially important to doxastic responsibility thanks to the fact that we don't have the same kind of direct control over our beliefs that we have over our actions. In particular, I argue that there are many cases in which a particular individual who holds some problematic belief only deserves epistemic blame in virtue of belonging to a group all the members of which are jointly blameworthy for violating some shared epistemic obligation.

## 1. Introduction

Individual moral obligations and responsibility entail shared moral obligations and responsibility. If either you or I come across someone drowning in a lake, you or I have an individual moral obligation to save him, and either of us is morally blameworthy if we choose not to do so. As such, if you and I come across someone drowning in a lake, and neither of us can save him on our own (e.g., the drowning man is unusually large), then we have a shared moral obligation to save him together, and we are jointly blameworthy if we choose not to do so. Similarly, you and I each have an individual moral obligation to refrain from pushing someone into the lake, and either of us is morally blameworthy if we choose to do so. And as such, you and I have a shared moral obligation to refrain from pushing someone into the lake together, and we are jointly blameworthy if we choose to do so.

These features of morality suggest an important but rarely discussed question: do individual epistemic obligations and individual epistemic responsibility entail shared epistemic obligations and shared epistemic responsibility? The answer depends on the nature of epistemic obligations. If an individual has only synchronic epistemic

obligations, then the answer would seem to be “no.” For instance, if our only epistemic obligation is to have whatever doxastic attitudes fit the evidence each of us has at a given time, then our epistemic obligations aren’t the kind of thing that we can fulfill or violate together.<sup>1</sup> However, according to a standard view, many of our epistemic obligations are obligations to perform or omit certain belief-influencing actions; if this standard view is correct, then the answer would seem to be “yes.” For instance, if you and I are both individually epistemically obligated to investigate some topic in order to correct our false beliefs, and neither of us can conduct the required investigation except by cooperating, then presumably we have a shared epistemic obligation to investigate together, and we are jointly epistemically blameworthy if we fail to do so.

If, then, we have epistemic obligations to perform or omit certain belief-influencing actions, shared epistemic obligation and responsibility is a central aspect of epistemic normativity. I maintain, first, that the epistemic realm is like the moral realm in that shared obligation and shared responsibility is widespread. I argue that we have epistemic obligations to perform actions of the sort that can be performed in conjunction with other people (§2), and that consequently, we are often jointly blameworthy when we violate shared epistemic obligations (§3).<sup>2</sup> Moreover, second, I maintain that shared responsibility is especially important to doxastic responsibility due to the fact that we don’t have the same kind of direct control over our beliefs that we have over our actions.<sup>3</sup> Because your actions typically only ever influence what you believe indirectly, groups you belong to often have more influence over what you believe than you do yourself. Accordingly, I argue that there are many cases in which a particular individual who holds some problematic belief only deserves epistemic blame in virtue of belonging to a group all the members of which are jointly blameworthy for violating some shared epistemic obligation (§4).<sup>4</sup>

## 2. Epistemic obligations and blame

For an individual to be epistemically responsible for some belief is for that individual to deserve epistemic praise or blame (or neutral appraisal) for that belief.<sup>5</sup> According to a standard view, whether an individual deserves epistemic praise or blame for some belief

<sup>1</sup>The distinction between synchronic and diachronic epistemic obligations is emphasized, for instance, by Alston (1985: 65–6), Feldman (2002: 371–2), and Nottelmann (2007: 178). The claim that our only epistemic obligation is to have whatever doxastic attitudes fit our evidence at a given time is defended, for instance, by Feldman (2002) and Dougherty (2010).

<sup>2</sup>Some philosophers defend related claims: Miller (2008, 2015) claims that groups can be jointly *morally* responsible for “joint epistemic actions,” such as jointly arriving at false conclusions and communicating information that has bad consequences. Fricker (2016) suggests that in some cases a society is epistemically responsible as a collective for some individual’s problematic implicit attitudes, even though that individual is wholly blameless. Palermos and Pritchard (2016) maintain that sometimes groups of individuals deserve credit as a collective for the true beliefs of their members. Similarly, Green (2017) maintains that groups deserve shared credit for knowledge in cases of information transferred via testimony. Finally, Levy (2018: §3) claims that individuals are often not epistemically blameworthy for believing falsehoods widespread in their communities, and that sometimes the blameworthy entity will be a group such as a media company or corporation (like Fricker, he thereby assigns blame to a group *rather* than to the individual who holds the problematic belief).

<sup>3</sup>For the sake of simplicity, I will often use “belief” to cover belief, disbelief, or suspension of judgment.

<sup>4</sup>“Problematic belief” rather than “false belief” since, depending on the case, one can deserve blame for having either true or false beliefs, and can deserve praise for having either true or false beliefs. For discussion, see Nottelmann (2007: Ch. 5).

<sup>5</sup>Peels (2017: 20–2) emphasizes the importance of including neutral appraisal in this context. For the sake of simplicity, I will typically focus on blame.

is determined by that individual's epistemic obligations: in order to be epistemically blameworthy for forming or maintaining some belief, an individual must violate some epistemic obligation by (or in the process of) forming or maintaining that belief; and in order to be epistemically praiseworthy for forming or maintaining some belief, an individual must fulfill her epistemic obligations by (or in the process of) forming or maintaining that belief.<sup>6</sup> What makes an obligation an *epistemic* obligation is not simply that it concerns beliefs – after all, you might have a moral obligation to maintain some belief. Rather, as Feldman (2002: 376) emphasizes, epistemic obligations are obligations you must fulfill in order to achieve epistemic success. (Epistemic success might be understood in terms of truth, justification, knowledge, or some combination of these – for present purposes, we don't need to adopt a specific view on this question.)

When an individual is blameworthy for holding some belief, it is rarely if ever the case that she can do anything at present to eliminate the problematic belief. You can't manipulate your beliefs at will the way that you can raise your arm at will.<sup>7</sup> However, while you can't manipulate your beliefs at will, you have direct control over a wide-range of actions that will *influence* your beliefs. A natural proposal, then, is that when an individual is blameworthy for holding some belief she is blameworthy in virtue of the fact that there were steps she could have taken that would have prevented her from forming or maintaining her problematic belief. This proposal suggests that such an individual ought to have performed or omitted certain belief-influencing actions precisely because doing so was required for her to achieve epistemic success – that is, she had an epistemic obligation to perform or omit these belief-influencing actions. More generally, according to this widely held view, (at least very often) when an individual is epistemically blameworthy for holding some belief, she is blameworthy because she holds this belief in virtue of violating an epistemic obligation to perform or omit certain belief-influencing actions (and has no excuse for violating this obligation).<sup>8</sup> Importantly, in such cases, individuals are epistemically blameworthy *both* for violating their epistemic obligation to perform or omit certain belief-influencing actions and for the beliefs they form or maintain in virtue of violating that obligation.

It's not plausible that individuals are epistemically obligated to perform or omit any action whatever that would contribute to epistemic success; instead, for a belief-influencing action to constitute an epistemic obligation it must be the case that a given individual could reasonably have been expected to perform or omit that action under the relevant circumstances.<sup>9</sup> Accordingly, the actions that individuals are epistemically obligated to perform or omit will be highly diverse and depend on the characteristics of those individuals and their circumstances. Some of these actions – such as searching your memory, or focusing your attention – will be the sort that individuals perform on their own. Other belief-influencing actions – such as scrutinizing arguments, or seek-ing information – will be the sort that individuals sometimes perform in groups.

For present purposes, it will be helpful to focus on two general belief-influencing actions of the latter sort. First, individuals often have an epistemic obligation to seek

---

<sup>6</sup>While this account of epistemic responsibility is a standard such account, there are alternatives. For instance, according to Hieronymi (2008), to be responsible for a belief is to be "answerable" for that belief; and to be "answerable" for a belief is to be such that one can rightly be asked for one's reasons for that belief. The notion of epistemic obligations plays no role in Hieronymi's account of epistemic responsibility.

<sup>7</sup>For defenses of the claim that individuals do not possess direct voluntary control over their beliefs see, for example, Alston (1988), Nottelmann (2007: Ch. 8), and Peels (2017: 61–6).

<sup>8</sup>Views of this sort are endorsed by, for example, Kornblith (1983), Alston (1985), Kim (1994), Leon (2002), Nottelmann (2007), Axtell (2011), Hedberg (2014), Meylan (2015), and Peels (2017).

<sup>9</sup>Alston (1988), Tidman (1996), and Hedberg (2014) make similar points.

information.<sup>10</sup> In particular, when you recognize (or ought to recognize) that the evidence that constitutes the basis of some belief of yours is problematic – perhaps your evidence is meagre, or biased, etc. – often you can reasonably be expected to search for additional evidence. In such a case, if you don't search for additional evidence and you form or maintain a problematic belief as a consequence, then you are blameworthy for failing to do what is required for epistemic success. You are blameworthy both for violating your epistemic obligation to seek information and for the problematic belief you hold in virtue of violating that epistemic obligation.

Second, individuals often have an epistemic obligation to avoid being exposed to information that they recognize (or ought to recognize) will likely result in problematic beliefs.<sup>11</sup> (Typically the relevant information will be inaccurate information, but in some contexts it will be accurate information.) In particular, when you recognize (or ought to recognize) that some source of information is problematic – perhaps it regularly contains false claims, or relies on poor standards of evidence, etc. – and you recognize (or ought to recognize) that information from this source is likely to influence your beliefs, often you can reasonably be expected to avoid this source. In such a case, if you consult this source and you form or maintain a problematic belief as a consequence, then you are blameworthy for failing to do what is required for epistemic success. Again, you are blameworthy both for violating your epistemic obligation to avoid being exposed to dubious information and for the problematic belief you hold in virtue of violating that epistemic obligation.

One might object that whenever we have an obligation to perform or omit some belief-influencing action, that obligation is always moral or prudential rather than epistemic.<sup>12</sup> For instance, Feldman (2002) claims that you only ever have a moral or prudential obligation to seek information. In cases where acquiring certain information is necessary to bring about some morally good outcome or avoid some morally bad outcome, you have a moral obligation to seek the relevant information; in cases where it's in your best interest to acquire certain information, you have a prudential obligation to seek the relevant information. But, suppose, Feldman says, that a penny falls out of my pocket, and I suspend judgment regarding what side it landed on. According to Feldman, “unless I'm curious about this, or something else turns on it, I do not see that I have a duty of any sort to find out the truth about this” (Feldman 2002: 382). And so too for any other case where I'm in a position to seek additional information.

To defend the claim that we have purely epistemic obligations to perform or omit belief-influencing actions, we can focus on cases where epistemic considerations are at odds with moral and prudential considerations.<sup>13</sup> Suppose a patient comes to believe that positive thinking can cure his illness on the basis of a single person's testimony. Because the patient recognizes that testimony from a single person is not terribly strong evidence, neither is his resulting belief terribly strong; nonetheless, the belief is sufficient to motivate him to practice positive thinking, and this behaviour improves the quality of his life even though it has no hope of curing his illness. Suppose, further, that if the patient were to search for any additional information he would undermine his belief; so, from a moral and prudential perspective, no good can come from the patient conducting any such research. Yet, it's still the case that the patient ought to seek additional

---

<sup>10</sup>This claim is endorsed by, for example, Hall and Johnson (1998), Nottelmann (2007: 174), and Peels (2017: Ch. 3).

<sup>11</sup>This claim is defended by, for example, Nottelmann (2007: 174–5), and Levy and Mandelbaum (2014).

<sup>12</sup>See Feldman (2002) and Dougherty (2010).

<sup>13</sup>Hedberg (2014: 3629) employs a similar strategy. Neither Feldman (2002) nor Dougherty (2010) discuss purported cases of this sort.

evidence – the patient is still blameworthy for settling for evidence that he recognizes to be weak, for simply accepting what he is told and making no effort whatever to look into the matter. Even though his behaviour is neither prudentially nor morally blameworthy, he deserves blame in virtue of the fact that this kind of intellectual passivity is incompatible with epistemic success.

Similar examples could be constructed focusing on the obligation to avoid being exposed to information that is likely to result in problematic beliefs. For instance, we can imagine a situation where the patient asks a particular individual about the effectiveness of positive thinking – someone he knows in advance will tell him what he wants to hear. Again, even though this behaviour is sure to produce good outcomes from a moral and prudential perspective, it's still the case that the patient is blameworthy for consulting what he recognizes to be a dubious source. We should conclude, then, that we have purely epistemic obligations to perform or omit certain belief-influencing actions; more specifically, we should conclude that we sometimes have a purely epistemic obligation to seek information, and to avoid being exposed to information that is likely to result in problematic beliefs.

### 3. Shared obligations and blame

According to the standard view of epistemic obligations and responsibility outlined above, individuals have epistemic obligations to perform and omit certain belief-influencing actions; they are blameworthy for omitting or performing such actions, as well as for the problematic beliefs they form or maintain as a result. Crucially, at least some of the belief-influencing actions that constitute epistemic obligations are the kind of actions that can be performed in conjunction with other people – for instance, we frequently conduct research in groups in order to improve the basis of our shared beliefs. This fact suggests that we will often have epistemic obligations to contribute to the performance or omission of certain belief-influencing joint actions, and that, consequently, we will often share epistemic responsibility with other people.

It is uncontroversial that individual moral obligations and responsibility entail shared (or joint) moral obligations and responsibility. Here, it's important to distinguish *shared* (or *joint*) responsibility from *collective* responsibility.<sup>14</sup> For instance, shared moral blame arises when every member of a group has a moral obligation to perform or omit some joint action, and that obligation is violated. The relevant joint action will be something that no individual group member can perform in isolation, and so no individual group member controls whether the action occurs; but each group member controls whether he contributes or fails to contribute to that action.<sup>15</sup> Accordingly, each individual group member is morally blameworthy when the moral obligation to perform or omit the joint action is violated (though each member may not be equally blameworthy). In contrast, collective moral blame arises when a group of individuals has moral obligations as a collective entity (over and above those of its members) and violates those obligations – in such cases, the fact that the group deserves moral blame does not entail that any individual group members deserve moral blame. Whether any group is ever collectively morally responsible for its acts and omissions in this sense remains controversial, at least in part because it's not clear that groups

---

<sup>14</sup>This distinction is common: see, for example, Fienberg (1968: 683–8), Sverdlik (1987: 62–3), and May (1992: 38–9).

<sup>15</sup>In cases where a joint action doesn't occur because enough group members haven't made the requisite contribution, what each individual member controls is whether he contributes what he ought to the *potential* action (or, whether he *attempts* to participate in some joint action).

as such possess the requisite agency.<sup>16</sup> However, there is nothing similarly problematic regarding the notion of shared moral responsibility.

Individual moral obligations and responsibility entail shared moral obligations and responsibility precisely because some of our individual moral obligations are obligations to perform actions of the sort that can be performed in conjunction with other people. For instance, each of us has the capacity to cause physical harm to innocent people either individually or in groups. So, if each member of some group has a moral obligation to refrain from harming innocent persons individually, then these individuals also have a shared moral obligation to refrain from harming innocent persons via joint actions. Accordingly, if the group members participate in a joint attack on some innocent person, each member is blameworthy, not only for the specific harm that he caused directly, but also for the overall harm the group caused. For example, a particular group member who only shoved the victim once is not responsible only for the direct harms caused by that specific shove. In virtue of playing a lesser part in the attack than other group members, this particular member may be less blameworthy than some of those other members; and he might have excuses for his actions that other members do not (perhaps he was non-culpably ignorant of what he was doing). However, in neither case is he responsible only for the specific harm to the victim that he caused directly.

Similar points apply to joint omissions. For instance, if each member of some group has a moral obligation to prevent innocent persons from being harmed, then these individuals also have a shared moral obligation to perform those joint actions that are required to prevent innocent persons from being harmed. Accordingly, in a situation where the only way to prevent some innocent person from being harmed is for the group members to work together, then each member is morally obligated to cooperate with the other members to prevent this harm; and if the group fails to perform the requisite joint action, each individual member shares in the moral blame for failing to prevent this harm.<sup>17</sup> (Although, again, every member of the group need not be equally blameworthy, and some group members might possess excuses that others do not.)

In cases involving larger groups and more complex joint actions or omissions, the degree of blame that individual group members deserve might vary a great deal. For instance, when a democratic state harms innocent persons via some illegal military action, not every citizen of that state is equally blameworthy: citizens who provided financial support or actively campaigned for the relevant military action deserve more blame than citizens who merely voted for the politicians who ordered the action.<sup>18</sup> And some citizens who voted for the politicians who ordered the action might be excused from blame altogether because they could not have been expected to know that these politicians would order the action in question. Similarly, when a democratic state fails to intervene to prevent some harm, how much blame a particular citizen deserves may depend on the role she could and should have played in preventing that harm, and whether she has excuses for failing to do so. However, the sheer size of the group and the complexity of the joint action has no tendency to eliminate individual blame: each individual who contributes to violating a shared moral obligation (and has no excuse for doing so) shares in the blame.

<sup>16</sup>See, for example, Narveson (2002) and Miller and Makela (2005).

<sup>17</sup>Similar claims are defended at greater length by, for example, Held (1970), May (1992: Ch. 6), and Miller (2001).

<sup>18</sup>For extended defenses of the claim that shared moral blame varies with one's contribution to a joint action, see Beerbohm (2012: Ch. 9), and Mellema (2016).

Since, then, the fact that we have individual moral obligations to perform actions of the sort that can be performed in groups entails that we have shared moral obligations (which we are jointly blameworthy for violating), presumably the fact that we have individual epistemic obligations to perform belief-influencing actions of the sort that can be performed in groups entails that we have shared epistemic obligations (which we are jointly blameworthy for violating). Again, this conclusion is not that groups have *collective* epistemic obligations and are sometimes *collectively* epistemically blameworthy. The latter claim might be problematic for a number of reasons. For instance, if groups lack the agency necessary to perform collective actions, then groups won't be obligated to perform collective belief-influencing actions. More importantly, it's not clear what beliefs groups would be collectively obligated to influence via collective action. In order for a group to be collectively obligated to influence its own beliefs, the group as such would have to possess collective beliefs – but it's controversial whether any groups literally possess beliefs.<sup>19</sup> Alternatively, in order for a group to be collectively obligated to influence its members' beliefs, the group as such would have to be obligated to influence the beliefs of some entity distinct from itself – but while it's plausible that we are often morally obligated to prevent others from suffering harm, it's controversial whether we are ever epistemically obligated to prevent others from forming problematic beliefs. However, the notion of shared epistemic responsibility does not face similar potential difficulties.<sup>20</sup>

We can illustrate how shared epistemic obligations and responsibility arise from individual epistemic obligations and responsibility by focusing on the epistemic obligations to seek information and to avoid being exposed to dubious information. First, as noted above, when you recognize (or ought to recognize) that the evidence that constitutes the basis of some belief of yours is problematic – perhaps your evidence is meagre, or biased, etc. – you have an epistemic obligation to take reasonable steps to search for additional evidence. Imagine a case where multiple individuals hold similar beliefs on the basis of similarly problematic evidence, and where the search for additional evidence won't occur unless those individuals cooperate (perhaps because searching for the relevant evidence would be too difficult a task for any one person working alone). This scenario closely mirrors cases in which individuals have a shared moral obligation to work together to prevent some innocent person from being harmed when that harm can't be prevented except via joint action. In the present case, because each individual has an epistemic obligation to seek information, and because the only way to do so is to cooperate, each individual has an epistemic obligation to contribute to a joint search for additional evidence. As such, if these individuals fail to perform the obligatory joint action, each shares in the epistemic blame for that failure – just as each would share in the moral blame for failing to act to prevent some innocent person from being harmed. In other words, if these individuals violate a shared epistemic obligation they are jointly blameworthy.

(With regards to assigning blame for the problematic beliefs that result from a violation of a shared epistemic obligation, there are two options. First, we might say that all group members are jointly blameworthy for all of the false beliefs held in virtue of the relevant epistemic obligation being violated. By analogy, if I'm a member of a group that

---

<sup>19</sup>For instance, one might argue, as Huebner (2014) does, that the only plausible cases of collective beliefs would involve highly cohesive groups with complex information processing structures – groups that would be quite rare at best.

<sup>20</sup>Consequently, the present article's treatment of groups is distinct from that which is common in the field of "collective epistemology" – where groups are typically treated as collective entities. See, for example, the essays collected in Lackey (2014) and Brady and Fricker (2016).

can stop some threat from killing all of its members via some joint action but which fails to perform that joint action, then plausibly I am jointly blameworthy for every group member's death – I am not blameworthy only for my own death. However, one might think that there is a fundamental disparity between moral and epistemic responsibility: one might think that while I am often individually morally blameworthy for the harms suffered by other people that I can prevent, I am never individually epistemically blameworthy for the problematic beliefs that others form or maintain that I can prevent (even if I am a parent or teacher, one might think that my obligation to prevent problematic beliefs in my children or students is a moral rather than epistemic obligation). If so, then because our obligations to perform joint actions are grounded in our individual obligations, each of us will be obligated to contribute to some joint belief-influencing action in virtue of the influence this action will have on our own individual beliefs; and, consequently, when some epistemic obligation to perform a joint action is violated, we should say that while all group members are jointly blameworthy for violating this epistemic obligation, each member is only epistemically blameworthy for her own resulting problematic beliefs. For present purposes, we needn't endorse one or the other of these options.)

In fact, there are good reasons to think that this type of shared epistemic blame is widespread. Any time that a belief common amongst the members of some group is based on evidence the members recognize (or ought to recognize) to be problematic, and when accumulating further evidence requires group members to cooperate, the group members share an epistemic obligation to cooperate. Presumably most of us belong to groups – teams, departments, companies, states, etc. – where members must form beliefs based on poor evidence, and where individual members could not reasonably be expected to improve the situation significantly by conducting research on their own. For example, in a democratic state, the citizenry has the capacity to work together to instigate and fund large-scale research projects that will not be conducted without public support (or, that will be conducted, but will be funded in ways likely to bias the results). The citizens of such states commonly hold beliefs on a variety of scientific, medical, and public policy questions, regarding which very little research has been conducted. So, in any such case, the citizens of these states have a shared epistemic obligation to instigate and fund the relevant research; when they fail to fulfill their joint epistemic obligation, they are jointly blameworthy. Moreover, individual citizens are epistemically blameworthy for the problematic beliefs that are formed or maintained because this shared obligation has not been fulfilled. Of course, in a democratic state the contribution that any given individual could have made to the relevant research will vary considerably; so, how much blame a particular individual deserves will vary as well. Nevertheless, the sheer size of the group and the complexity of the requisite joint action has no tendency to eliminate individual blame: each individual who contributes to violating the shared epistemic obligation shares in the blame.

Next, consider the epistemic obligation to avoid being exposed to information likely to result in problematic beliefs. As noted above, when you recognize (or ought to recognize) that some source of information is problematic – perhaps it regularly contains false claims, or relies on poor standards of evidence, etc. – and you recognize (or ought to recognize) that information from this source is likely to influence your beliefs, you have an epistemic obligation to take reasonable steps to avoid being exposed to this source's dubious claims. Imagine a case where the individual members of some group recognize that some source of information is both problematic and likely to influence their beliefs, and yet continues to rely on the relevant source either due to some joint decision or via some joint action. In such a case, the shared epistemic obligation to avoid being exposed to dubious information via some joint action follows directly



from each individual's epistemic obligation – just as a group of individuals has a shared moral obligation not to harm innocent persons via joint action. As such, if these individuals violate their shared epistemic obligation via some joint action, each shares in the epistemic blame – that is, these individuals are jointly blameworthy.

Again, there are good reasons to think that this type of shared epistemic blame is widespread. Many different groups – families, religious organizations, businesses, governments, etc. – regularly make joint decisions to consult dubious sources, or actively accumulate or circulate dubious information via joint actions; whenever the members of such groups recognize (or ought to recognize) that the relevant information is both problematic and likely to influence group members' beliefs, these group members are jointly epistemically blameworthy. Crucially, we often have more control over the information we're exposed to via joint action than via our own individual efforts. For instance, citizens in democratic states make joint decisions regarding whether to permit or prohibit dubious claims to be circulated – in the form of libel law, restrictions on medical claims, regulations on commercial and political advertising, etc. Plausibly, no particular citizen has an epistemic obligation to avoid, say, all forms of commercial and political advertising, since no particular individual can reasonably be expected to take the steps that would be necessary to do so. Conversely, the citizenry as a group can reasonably be expected to take the steps that would be necessary to restrict the spread of false claims via commercial or political advertising. So, when the citizens of a given democratic state fail to support laws that include such restrictions, they violate their shared epistemic obligation to avoid being exposed to dubious information. As such, they are jointly blameworthy both for violating this epistemic obligation and for the problematic beliefs that are formed or maintained as a result.

#### **4. The importance of shared epistemic blame**

We have epistemic obligations to perform actions in virtue of the fact that those actions will influence (rather than directly control) our beliefs. Yet, very often we're able to exert greater influence over our beliefs by contributing to joint actions than by any individual effort. The groups we belong to have more control over the information available for us to seek out, as well as the information to which we're passively exposed. The groups we belong to also have greater time and resources to dedicate to epistemic matters, and so more can reasonably be expected of groups than of any particular individual. Taken together, these facts suggest that we should regard our epistemic obligations to perform and omit joint actions as members of groups to be central to doxastic responsibility.

We can illustrate the importance of shared epistemic obligations to doxastic responsibility by considering cases in which the only epistemic blame some particular individual deserves is shared epistemic blame. The foregoing arguments suggest that when we focus on individuals in isolation we are likely to assign blame where it isn't deserved and fail to assign blame where it is. For instance, it is quite common for a given individual to form a problematic belief in virtue of the belief-influencing actions he performed or omitted, even though he has done everything he could reasonably be expected to have done on his own. Considered in isolation, such an individual does not deserve epistemic blame either for violating epistemic obligations or for his problematic beliefs; yet, he might still be blameworthy for failing to contribute to joint actions that constitute joint epistemic obligations under the circumstances. More generally, there are good reasons to think that in many cases a particular individual who holds some problematic belief only deserves epistemic blame in virtue of belonging to a group all the members of which are jointly blameworthy for violating some shared epistemic obligation.

Consider, for instance, cases of what Alston (1985: 67) calls “cultural isolation.” Imagine some ordinary individual – call him Heinrich – who lives in an isolated European community a few hundred years ago where everyone believes there is such a thing as witchcraft.<sup>21</sup> Over the course of his life, Heinrich has heard quite a number of stories about witches practicing witchcraft, and has never encountered evidence that casts doubt on these stories; so, like everyone else in his community, he believes in witchcraft. According to Alston (1985: 68), given that the stories at issue concern events that occurred in the distant past or in faraway places, Heinrich can’t reasonably be expected to conduct an investigation on his own. Someone who had heard just as many witchcraft stories but who didn’t live in a similarly isolated community would have easy access to counter-evidence, and so could reasonably be expected to seek out such evidence. But Heinrich hasn’t failed to perform some relevant belief-influencing action that he could reasonably be expected to perform; that is, he doesn’t believe in witchcraft in virtue of having violated some epistemic obligation, because he hasn’t violated any relevant epistemic obligations. As such, he is not blameworthy for maintaining this problematic belief.<sup>22</sup>

The widespread assumption that culturally isolated individuals are not epistemically blameworthy for problematic beliefs of this sort appears much less plausible when we stop focusing exclusively on what individuals can reasonably be expected to do on their own.<sup>23</sup> While no particular member of the isolated community may have the time and resources required to investigate whether popular stories about witchcraft can withstand scrutiny, presumably all the members of the community taken together do. So, given that the belief in witchcraft is universal in the community, and given the weakness of the testimonial evidence supporting this belief, the members of this community can reasonably be expected to take some joint action to seek additional evidence. (The nature of this joint action could, of course, take any number of different forms – one particularly straightforward action would be for the community to pay some competent person or group to look into the matter.) Consequently, while Heinrich does not have an epistemic obligation to seek additional evidence on his own, he does share an epistemic obligation with every other member of his community to contribute to a joint search for additional evidence. Now, if Heinrich were non-culpably ignorant of the fact that his community’s evidence for the existence of witchcraft is weak, then he would not deserve blame for failing to contribute to this joint action. But, plausibly, even an ordinary person such as Heinrich ought to recognize that the available evidence – stories of extraordinary events that occurred in the distant past or in faraway places – is problematic. If so, then along with every other member of his community, Heinrich is blameworthy for failing to contribute to a joint search for additional evidence. Other individuals may deserve more blame than Heinrich – perhaps the community’s leaders; still, Heinrich shares in the epistemic blame. Moreover, assuming that he believes in witchcraft partly in virtue of violating this epistemic obligation, Heinrich is epistemically blameworthy for his problematic belief.

Next, consider cases of what Alston (1988: 290) calls “irresistible beliefs and belief tendencies.” For instance, our brains are all riddled with a wide variety of cognitive

<sup>21</sup>Steup (1988) introduces the witchcraft example when discussing Alston’s view of cultural isolation.

<sup>22</sup>See also Alston (1988: 286–7).

<sup>23</sup>The claim that individuals are not blameworthy for their problematic beliefs in cases of cultural isolation is also defended by Goldman (1988: 51–2), Russell (2001: 36), Nottelmann (2007: 209–11), and van Woudenberg (2009: 382). Levy (2018: §3) defends a similar claim. Steup objects on the grounds that, even in such circumstances, there is “no reason at all to believe in witchcraft” (1988: 78); however, as Nottelmann notes, this claim “fails to acknowledge the importance of testimony as a source of evidence” (2007: 209).

biases that influence our beliefs in “irresistible” ways – irresistible in the sense that we are typically unaware of their influence, and the effects of these biases are difficult or impossible to counteract even when we happen to be aware of them.<sup>24</sup> Imagine, then, that some ordinary individual – call her Claudia – is a member of a committee currently in the process of hiring a violinist for the local orchestra. The committee is considering two candidates, one male, and one female. Claudia has no overt sexist attitudes, but over the course of her life she has passively absorbed many of the gender prejudices prevalent in her culture; consequently, she has a tendency to judge that male musicians are superior to female musicians. However, she is aware that most members of her community are prejudiced in favour of male musicians, and so she takes every reasonable precaution to ensure that such prejudice does not influence her judgment – for instance, when she listens to each candidate play, she closes her eyes and tries to concentrate on the quality of the playing and ignore everything else. Nonetheless, even though the female violinist is an objectively more skilled musician, Claudia comes to believe that the male violinist is superior thanks to her cognitive bias.<sup>25</sup>

Alston’s (1988: 290) point is that when there’s nothing a particular individual can do to modify some problematic belief, she can’t be blamed for it. In the present case, it would seem that Claudia has taken every reasonable precaution, but her efforts have had no effect. Presumably Alston would claim, then, that Claudia deserves no blame for believing the male violinist is superior, since her belief does not result from a violation of some relevant epistemic obligation.<sup>26</sup> However, once again, the conclusion that such an individual is not epistemically blameworthy for her problematic belief appears much less plausible when we stop focusing exclusively on what individuals can do to influence their beliefs on their own. While there’s nothing Claudia can reasonably be expected to do on her own to shield herself from information regarding the candidates’ gender, the same is not true of the hiring committee members taken together. Since the committee members recognize (or ought to recognize) that gender information can precipitate false beliefs about an individual’s musicianship, the members have a shared epistemic obligation to work together to ensure that the hiring process is conducted blindly – for instance, by reaching a joint decision to have the candidates perform behind a screen. Along with every other committee member, then, Claudia is blameworthy for failing to fulfill this shared epistemic obligation. Moreover, because she believes that the male violinist is superior in virtue of violating this epistemic obligation, Claudia is also epistemically blameworthy for her problematic belief.

It would be a mistake to think that these particular cases are anomalies; rather, cases in which the only epistemic blame a given individual deserves is shared blame for violating shared epistemic obligations are extremely common. There are many problematic beliefs widespread throughout our communities that could only be remedied via costly research. In such cases, no particular individual can reasonably be expected to conduct the necessary research acting alone; yet, the members of the community taken together can reasonably be expected to instigate and fund that research. Under these circumstances, no particular individual has an epistemic obligation to seek additional evidence on their own; yet, every member of the community has a shared epistemic obligation to contribute to a joint search for additional evidence. Accordingly, when the relevant research is not conducted, any particular individual is only epistemically blameworthy

---

<sup>24</sup>For a recent overview of the relevant empirical research, see the papers collected in Rüdiger (2016).

<sup>25</sup>Fricker (2016) discusses a similar case.

<sup>26</sup>Fricker (2016: 43) agrees that such an individual is epistemically blameless. However, Fricker (2016: 47) also claims that such an individual may still be “responsible” in a certain sense.

in virtue of belonging to a group every member of which is jointly epistemically blameworthy.

In addition, our cognitive biases (over which we have little influence) make it impossible for individuals to avoid forming and maintaining a wide variety of problematic beliefs given the nature of the current information environment. On her own, a given individual can't do very much about the information environment she happens to occupy; but the citizens of democratic states taken as a whole can. For instance, given how frequently false claims are repeated via popular sources of information – television, radio, the internet, etc. – no particular individual who relies on such sources can reasonably be expected to avoid forming problematic beliefs.<sup>27</sup> Neither can any particular individual be reasonably expected to avoid turning on the television or radio, or using the internet. However, the citizens of democratic states have the capacity to work together to shape the information environment – for instance, by using some combination of laws, regulations, and incentives, to minimize the spread of dubious information. As such, while no particular individual has an epistemic obligation to avoid being exposed to the dubious claims repeated throughout popular media, the citizens of democratic states taken together do have such an obligation. Accordingly, when the necessary steps aren't taken, each member of such a state is epistemically blameworthy, but only insofar as each individual shares in the blame for violating a joint epistemic obligation.

## 5. Conclusion

If we ignore shared epistemic blame, then, we ignore a fundamental element of doxastic responsibility. In this respect, there is a close analogy between doxastic responsibility and moral responsibility. Any discussion of moral obligations and blame that focused exclusively on individuals acting alone would be obviously inadequate. Because many of our moral obligations concern actions that can either be performed individually or in groups, our individual moral obligations entail shared moral obligations and shared moral blame. So too, many of our epistemic obligations are obligations to perform the sorts of belief-influencing actions that can either be performed individually or in groups. And, consequently, our individual epistemic obligations entail shared epistemic obligations and shared epistemic blame.

In fact, as we've now seen, there are good reasons to think that shared epistemic obligations and shared epistemic blame are widespread. In particular, situations in which all the individual members of some group have an epistemic obligation to perform or omit joint actions to either seek information or avoid being exposed to dubious information are common. Situations in which individuals fail to fulfill their joint epistemic obligations are also common; so, situations in which epistemic blame is shared amongst all the members of some group are common as well.

Moreover, we've also seen that cases in which the only epistemic blame some particular individual deserves is shared epistemic blame are similarly widespread. Because we're often better able to influence our beliefs by contributing to joint actions than by our own individual efforts, and because more can reasonably be expected of the groups we belong to than can be expected of us individually, in many circumstances our only epistemic obligations are shared epistemic obligations. Ultimately, then, focusing exclusively on individuals in isolation leads to a profoundly incomplete picture of what we're epistemically obligated to do and when we deserve epistemic blame.

---

<sup>27</sup>For an extended defense of this point, see Levy and Mandelbaum (2014) and Levy (2017).

## References

- Alston W.** (1985). 'Concepts of Epistemic Justification.' *The Monist* **68**, 57–89.
- Alston W.** (1988). 'The Deontological Conception of Epistemic Justification.' *Philosophical Perspectives* **2**, 257–99.
- Axtell G.** (2011). 'Recovering Responsibility.' *Logos and Episteme* **3**, 429–54.
- Beebohm E.** (2012). *In Our Name: The Ethics of Democracy*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Brady M. and Fricker M.** (eds) (2016). *The Epistemic Life of Groups: Essays in the Epistemology of Collectives*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Dougherty T.** (2010). 'Reducing Responsibility: An Evidentialist Account of Epistemic Blame.' *European Journal of Philosophy* **20**, 534–47.
- Feldman R.** (2002). 'Epistemological Duties.' In P. Moser (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Epistemology*, pp. 362–84. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Fienberg J.** (1968). 'Collective Responsibility.' *Journal of Philosophy* **65**, 674–88.
- Fricker M.** (2016). 'Fault and No-Fault Responsibility for Implicit Prejudice: A Space for Epistemic 'Agent-Regret'.' In M. Brady and M. Fricker (eds), *The Epistemic Life of Groups: Essays in the Epistemology of Collectives*, pp. 33–50. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Goldman A.** (1988). 'Strong and Weak Justification.' *Philosophical Perspectives* **2**, 51–69.
- Green A.** (2017). *The Social Contexts of Intellectual Virtue*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Hall R. and Johnson C.** (1998). 'The Epistemic Duty to Seek More Evidence.' *American Philosophical Quarterly* **35**, 129–39.
- Hedberg T.** (2014). 'Epistemic Supererogation and Its Implications.' *Synthese* **191**, 3621–37.
- Held V.** (1970). 'Can a Random Collection of Individuals be Morally Responsible?' *Journal of Philosophy* **67**, 471–81.
- Hieronymi P.** (2008). 'Responsibility for Believing.' *Synthese* **161**, 357–73.
- Huebner B.** (2014). *Macrocognition: A Theory of Distributed Minds and Collective Intentionality*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Kim K.** (1994). 'The Deontological Conception of Epistemic Justification and Doxastic Voluntarism.' *Analysis* **54**, 282–4.
- Kornblith H.** (1983). 'Justified Belief and Epistemically Responsible Action.' *Philosophical Review* **92**, 33–48.
- Lackey J.** (ed.) (2014). *Essays in Collective Epistemology*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Leon M.** (2002). 'Responsible Believers.' *The Monist* **85**, 421–35.
- Levy N.** (2017). 'The Bad News About Fake News.' *Social Epistemology Review & Reply Collective* **6**, 20–36.
- Levy N.** (2018). 'Socializing Responsibility.' In K. Hutchison, C. Mackenzie and M. Oshana (eds), *Social Dimensions of Moral Responsibility*, pp. 185–205. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Levy N. and Mandelbaum E.** (2014). 'The Powers that Bind: Doxastic Voluntarism and Epistemic Obligation.' In J. Matheson and R. Vitz (eds), *The Ethics of Belief: Individual and Social*, pp. 15–32. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- May L.** (1992). *Sharing Responsibility*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Mellema G.** (2016). *Complicity and Moral Accountability*. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press.
- Meylan A.** (2015). 'The Legitimacy of Intellectual Praise and Blame.' *Journal of Philosophical Research* **40**, 189–203.
- Miller S.** (2001). 'Collective Moral Responsibility for Omissions.' *Business and Professional Ethics Journal* **20**, 5–24.
- Miller S.** (2008). 'Collective Responsibility and Information and Communication Technology.' In J. van den Hoven and J. Weckert (eds), *Information Technology and Moral Philosophy*, pp. 226–50. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.
- Miller S.** (2015). 'Joint Epistemic Action and Collective Moral Responsibility.' *Social Epistemology* **29**, 280–302.
- Miller S. and Makela P.** (2005). 'The Collectivist Approach to Collective Moral Responsibility.' *Metaphilosophy* **36**, 634–51.
- Narveson J.** (2002). 'Collective Responsibility.' *Journal of Ethics* **6**, 179–98.
- Nottelmann N.** (2007). *Blameworthy Belief: A Study in Epistemic Deontology*. Dordrecht: Springer.
- Palermos O. and Pritchard D.** (2016). 'The Distribution of Epistemic Agency.' In P. Reider (ed.), *Social Epistemology and Epistemic Agency: Decentralizing Epistemic Agency*, pp. 109–26. London: Rowman and Littlefield.
- Peels R.** (2017). *Responsible Belief: A Theory in Ethics and Epistemology*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

- Rüdiger P.** (ed.) (2016). *Cognitive Illusions: Intriguing Phenomena in Thinking, Judgment, and Memory*, 2nd edition. London: Routledge.
- Russell B.** (2001). 'Epistemic and Moral Duty.' In M. Steup (ed.), *Knowledge, Truth, and Duty: Essays on Epistemic Justification, Responsibility, and Virtue*, pp. 34–48. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Steup M.** (1988). 'The Deontic Conception of Epistemic Justification.' *Philosophical Studies* 53, 65–84.
- Sverdlik S.** (1987). 'Collective Responsibility.' *Philosophical Studies* 51, 61–76.
- Tidman P.** (1996). 'Critical Reflection: An Alleged Epistemic Duty.' *Analysis* 56, 268–76.
- van Woudenberg R.** (2009). 'Ignorance and Force: Two Excusing Conditions for False Beliefs.' *American Philosophical Quarterly* 46, 373–86.