Epistemic Blame isn't Relationship Modification

Abstract: Epistemologists have recently argued that there is such a thing as 'epistemic blame': blame targeted at purely epistemic norm violations. Leading the charge has been Cameron Boult, who has argued across a series of papers that we can make sense of this phenomenon by building an account of epistemic blame off of Scanlon's account of moral blame. This paper argues a relationship-based account of epistemic blame is untenable, because it eliminates any distinction between blameworthy and excused agents. Attempts to overcome this problem cannot succeed because of the important but unrecognised ways his account deviates from Scanlon's, and because of differences in how our moral and epistemic conduct are affected by our attitudes and expectations.

Keywords: blame; epistemic blame; Scanlon; relationships; doxastic responsibility.

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I. Introduction

A number of epistemologists have recently argued that there is such a thing as 'epistemic blame': blame targeted at epistemic norm violations qua epistemic norm violations (e.g. Brown, 2020a, 2020b; Piovarchy, 2021; Rettler, 2018). The existence of epistemic blame is thought to have implications for a range of debates, notably being used to defend externalist approaches to justification against charges of demandingness, by allowing proponents to argue that while subjects lack justification, they are blameless (Williamson, forthcoming, cf. Brown, 2020). Epistemic blame has also been thought relevant to thinking about the normativity of evidence (Schmidt, 2024), epistemic normativity more broadly (Boult, forthcoming), and identifying distinctly epistemic norms (Kaupinnen, 2018).[1]

Leading the charge has been Cameron Boult, who has argued across a series of papers (Boult, 2021a, 2021b, 2023, 2024a) and a monograph (2024b) that we can make sense of this phenomenon by thinking about the idea of epistemic relationships, building on Scanlon's (2008) account of moral blame and moral relationships. Though trying to understand epistemic blame in relationship-based terms is currently the most developed approach in the literature, and has interest from a number of other epistemologists (e.g. Greco, forthcoming; Schmidt, 2021, 2022), it faces important objections that have not yet been noticed. This paper provides a careful examination of a relationship-based approach to epistemic blame and various choice-points sympathetic readers face, showing that this approach is less appealing that it initially seems. In particular, it risks eliminating any distinction between culpable and excused agents. Attempts to overcome this problem are untenable because of the important but unrecognised ways this relationship-based account deviates from Scanlon's original formulation, and because of inherent differences in how our moral and epistemic performances are affected by our attitudes.

[1] Though Kaupinnen talks of holding people epistemically accountable, rather than blaming.

II. On Blameworthy vs Excused Agents

Boult proposes that we can understand epistemic blame by creating an account based on Scanlon's (2008) account of moral blame.[2] For Scanlon, a relationship is constituted by a set of expectations and intentions towards the other person, according to some normative ideal. To judge that someone has done something faulty by the standards of that relationship is to judge them blameworthy. To then modify one's relationship (understood as the set of intentions and expectations) in a way that said judgment would render fitting, marking the impairment, is to blame them.

Boult proposes there exists a general epistemic relationship between all agents, which has 'epistemic trust' as its normative ideal. To say that you are in a relationship of epistemic trust

> "…entails only that you have confidence that they are a reliable source of information—that believing what they say is a way of arriving at a favourable ratio of true to false beliefs, or knowledge, or understanding, etc.—and that you are willing to rely on them as such… When all goes well—that is to say, according to the normative ideal of this relationship of mutual epistemic trust—each member intends to epistemically trust another unless one has good reason not to."
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> Boult (2023, p. 816).

As an example, when someone believes badly against my expectations that they will be reliable, I recognise an impairment in my epistemic relationship with them. They have failed to conduct themselves according to the ideals of the relationship, so I adjust my attitudes (e.g. trust), intentions (e.g. to rely on them them) and expectations (e.g. that they will be reliable in the

[2] Scanlon's account faces other objections, namely that it is too 'wimpy' and leaves the affective tone out of blame (Wolf, 2011). Though Boult takes it to be an advantage that his account can avoid this objection, a unified account of blame which could account for both moral and epistemic blame seems preferable to requiring an independent story for each. Though not essential for my argument, I thus take objections against Scanlon's account to remain a point against relationship-based approaches to epistemic blame too.

future) towards them in a way that marks this impairment. This is what is involved in epistemically blaming them.

However, a significant problem arises when it comes to considering many cases of intuitively excused agents, such as someone who believes badly but is a child, or was raised in a cult, or is currently under the influence of drugs. Smartt (2024) points out "It still seems to me that I should lower my trust in each of these agents as potential informants, even though it wouldn't be appropriate to blame them for the attitudes in question" (p. 9). This is a worry that Boult has previously tried to ward off, briefly stating:

> "…the account requires that an adjustment of one's epistemic expectations be the result of a judgment: namely, the judgment that the target of blame has done something to impair the general epistemic relationship… For example, epistemic blamers tend to judge that someone has been intellectually irresponsible, or intellectually vicious, or reckless, or just plain "stupid". Those are the sorts of things I take the notion of a judgment of general epistemic relationship impairment to unify. Only when an agent modifies their epistemic expectations in a way made fitting by this sort of judgment do they count as epistemically blaming others."
>
> Boult (2023, p. 818).

This passage doesn't defuse the worry. If the expectation of our general epistemic relationship is that someone will meet certain standards, and a marginal agent fails to meet them, then they will have fallen short of the standards of the normative ideal, impairing the relationship. Boult notes that dogmatism, wishful thinking and hasty reasoning all tend "to give others good reason to suspend their presumption of epistemic trust in would-be targets of epistemic blame" (2023, p. 817). But many agents who intuitively occupy excusing conditions *also* give us good reason to suspend our presumption of epistemic trust, as they fall short of the relationship ideal. They cannot be relied upon. According to the account described thus far, this means that they have thereby impaired said relationship, and that by judging them to be unreliable (i.e. that it is fitting

to not rely on them) we thereby judge them to be blameworthy. Once we then revise our intentions and expectations towards them, we will count as blaming them. Avoiding this result requires additional resources.

Boult (2024a) tries to stave off the objection by later introducing a new distinction between exercised reductions in trust that accompany a judgment of culpability or blameworthiness, and those reductions that don't. He thinks the former is enough to turn an exercised reduction of trust into an act of epistemic blame. Though he presents this modification as intuitive and a relatively minor change (p. 393), it in fact has serious implications .

Note this modification builds lack of culpability *into* the expectations that we have of one another: "good epistemic relationships involve agents expecting others to avoid epistemic failings, unless they have a legitimate excuse, or perhaps some overriding reason not to" (p. 393).[3] But this means that rather than saying that an agent who (e.g.) excusably holds inconsistent beliefs has violated our expectation 'don't hold inconsistent beliefs' but has an excuse for doing so, we instead say that *they didn't violate our expectations*. This is not only revisionary, it maintains the distinction between blameworthy and excused agents only by threatening the arguably even more intuitive distinction between agents whose beliefs are bad but excused and agents whose beliefs are not bad at all because they are justified. Since *neither* of them violate our expectations, this simply shifts the bump under the rug.

Building 'lack of excuse' into the expectations also comes with another risk: it requires a wholly *independent* account of when agents are excused or blameworthy, which needs to deliver the right assessments about cases *and* have some theoretical motivation. But the worry is that once we have *that*, there will be little work for appeals to impaired relationships, intentions, or expectations to do. We can just say that agents are blameworthy for violating epistemic norms

[3] He also has excusing conditions built into candidate expectations, e.g. "A intends, for any intellectual act X of A's, to meet epistemic criteria Y, unless A has good reason, or an excuse, for not doing so" (2024b, p. 76).

whenever [whatever this independent account says], and that epistemic blame consists in certain reactions that Boult describes, such as a combination of feeling exercised, judging blameworthy, and reducing trust. Given the kinds of things that are often picked out as authoritative epistemic norms seem almost coextensive with the kinds of things that are plausible expectations in our general epistemic relationship,[4] the only clear work left for any references to 'relationships' to do would be to refer to our intentions. This is what we should expect: it's precisely because agents can violate norms without being blameworthy that Scanlon's appeal to a (moral) relationship does some explanatory work, as it's when agents don't have an excuse for their violation that they have thus impaired the relationship, and so we blame. But once we build the distinction between culpable and excused violations *into* the set of expectations, appeals to 'relationships' can no longer help draw this distinction: it is impossible for agents to violate our expectations but be excused for doing so.

Boult implies in a few places (e.g. 2024, p. 112) that we might salvage a distinction between agents who violate our expectations in a blameworthy fashion and those who don't by saying that the former consists of agents whose beliefs stem from criticisable intellectual character or epistemic vices.[5] However, developing this angle would face several hurdles. First, there's a significant risk of circularity. A very popular way of understanding what makes certain traits count as epistemic vices—rather than other qualities that happen to result in poor epistemic conduct or which get in the way of knowledge—is that epistemic vices are blameworthy (Battaly, 2019). Second, there's a worry about a lack of principled motivation. If the ideal of the epistemic relationship is 'reliability', why are *these* sources of unreliability are blameworthy, while others are

[4] It seems hard to think of many authoritative epistemic norms (the violations of which would intuitively warrant epistemic blame) that wouldn't also be expectations that form part of the general epistemic relationship, and vice versa. Indeed, in his book, Boult describes the expectations as "normative expectations" (p. 125), and the book's subtitle is 'The Nature and *Norms* of Epistemic Relationships'. Though I don't have space to argue for it here, this may be explained by the fact that norms *just are* reducible to sets of normative expectations and attitudes (see Brennan, Eriksson, Goodin, & Southwood, 2013, §2.3, for an influential treatment).

[5] Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for raising this.

not? Third, this seems to make our expectations simply variants of 'don't manifest epistemic vice', and leads to both false positives and false negatives. Some agents seem intuitively blameworthy even if their bad beliefs don't stem from any broad-based character trait, disposition or thinking style. Just as agents can act morally out of character while still being morally blameworthy, they can also sometimes believe 'out of character' while being blameworthy; if Einstein falls for an obvious scam, he's a fitting target of blame of epistemic blame despite his track record (cf. Amaya & Doris, 2015; Murray and Vargas, 2020). In the other direction, some agents might genuinely have vicious tendencies and yet may intuitively remain excused for their beliefs, such as those from poor formative circumstances or who have been brainwashed (cf. Wolf, 1990, Watson, 1996).[6]

III. On Meaning and Significance

Readers familiar with Boult's account may think there are resources available to him to overcome this objection; namely, the meaning of an agent's attitudes that make up the relationship, and the significance of their conduct for us. While he makes an appeal to such notions (2024a, p. 393), his account deviates from Scanlon's in important and currently unrecognised ways that limit its prospects for overcoming this objection. To see why, we need to take a step back and have a sustained examination of Scanlon's treatment of excused agents. While Boult (2024b, p. 102) is clear he is merely using Scanlon's account as inspiration, rather than using it as a basis or foundation for understanding epistemic blame, fans of relationship-based approaches need to make sure deviations from Scanlon's account aren't removing load-bearing components.

Suppose I expect that my friend will help me move house, having promised to do so. Suppose I now learn they have fallen into a coma. I revise my expectation that they will maintain their

[6] This topic mirrors the earlier (arguably unsuccessful) attempt in the moral responsibility literature to say that wrongs should be considered blameworthy only when they are attributable to an agent's 'deep self' or 'real self'.

promise. But does this revision mark an impairment (as judged by normative ideals) in our relationship? Clearly not. Scanlon (2008, p. 134–136) makes clear that what matters for our judgments of moral blame are our target's *intentions* and *attitudes* towards *us* and other moral agents. When one falls into a coma and fails to help me move, this indicates nothing about their attitudes towards helping me, and so we do not blame them, even if we modify our intentions and expectations. Note the way this excuse works is by *severing* the connection between the agent's actions and the attitudes we would normally infer the agent has on the basis of said action. It's *not* that they had the attitudes but don't count as violating our expectations because they had a good excuse for having these attitudes (unlike Boult's earlier modification), they simply *did not have* those attitudes.

Where Boult runs into trouble is that by making the general epistemic relationship's ideal be one of epistemic trust (rather than mutual concern), our intentions and expectations are no longer primarily concerned with others' intentions and attitudes towards *us* and other agents but instead with *their* reliability in forming beliefs or conforming to epistemic norms. He instead takes the attitudes and expectations that make up our "mutual epistemic expectation" to be "oriented around [each other's] epistemic agency" (2024b, p. 76) (rather than around other agents' attitudes towards us or norms themselves), which is in turn concerned with agents' "epistemic competence" (ibid.). The problem is there are simply too many ways ordinary agents can be epistemically blameworthy that do not result from criticisable attitudes or intentions about us, epistemic norms, or the importance of things like having true beliefs, and yet which still make them an unreliable epistemic agent. An intention to be reliable or to meet others' epistemic expectations, or to "do [one's] best (ibid., p. 78) and an attitude that (e.g.) being reliable and meeting such expectations is valuable, or that it's important to be a reliable informant for others, are far from necessary, sufficient, or sufficiently correlated to make someone in fact

reliable.[7] Many people are just plain silly or criticisably incompetent in their belief-forming, even when sincerely trying to get things right, and marginal agents are very capable of having bad beliefs come about in these ways, with said beliefs remaining fully reflective of their agency (cf. Arpaly, 2005).[8] In the other direction, agents can also be competent, reliable informants even while having objectionable attitudes about the merits of epistemic norms generally or their relations with others, and such agents don't seem blameworthy. Someone might be in a good position to give, and have a habit of giving, reliable information, and do so for bad reasons (e.g. personal profit) or even while exhibiting epistemic vice (e.g. arrogance) but nevertheless count as

[7] We might also add that plenty of agents who don't try their best are nevertheless able to be relied upon and meet our expectations, and many of our expectations only require sufficient compliance or effort. This creates a problem regarding whether agents are blameworthy in circumstances where they should try their best but it doesn't seem like one *needs* to (e.g. it seems like the matter is settled, or the (epistemic?) stakes are low). Agents could either be excused (because of how things seem) or blameworthy (because they should have realised that they ought to try harder, say, because they have good evidence of this). But distinguishing the two is challenging, and risks a well-known regress: we risk saying that agents who fail to realise they should try their best should have tried their best to realise they should try their best (Levy, 2009).

[8] What of the "modified in a way that this judgment of impaired relations *holds to be appropriate*" clause that Scanlon (2008, p. 128–129, emphasis added) mentions in a few places? Boult briefly expresses some interest in this line of thought, claiming that the relationship modifications need to be *fitting* in order to count as blame responses (2023, p. 823–824). But he ultimately explicates this fittingness condition by appeal to some "shared grasp of the sorts of things we typically associate with blame and relationship impairment" or "from the point of view of morality" (ibid.). There are a few issues here. The first is that reduction of trust in response to excused unreliable agents *is* fitting given their unreliability. If blame consists in reducing trust in response to impairment, we will count as blaming, even if we intuitively think that blame is unfitting. The second is that whether it counts as blame is arguably determined by *the agent's* judgment of what is fitting, not by morality's or everyone else's shared grasp of what is fitting. Scanlon (2013, p. 88) gives an example of a Mafioso who blames an associate for breaking the code of omertà. Even though the associate is not blameworthy (because following omertà is immoral) and thus blame is unfitting, the Mafioso counts as blaming, because the Mafioso's judgement is that revising the relationship in these ways on the basis of impairment would be fitting.

Doesn't this imply that almost any revision could thereby count as blame? Unfortunately, yes. There are a few issues with this aspect of Scanlon's account, compounded by exegetical difficulties in pinning down Scanlon's intended meaning. Depending on how one interprets such clauses, appeals to appropriateness or fittingness risk being trivial, inviting a regress, or failing to put any bounds on what kinds of reactions could count as blame. A full explanation is outside the scope of this paper, but for a very detailed treatment and exegesis, see (Chislenko, 2020).

rather reliable and thus not blameworthy.[9] In short, the problem is that if the analogue of lack of mutual *concern* is going to be lack of epistemic *competence*, many excused agents will be blameworthy because they are indeed not competent.[10]

Even if Boult were to revise his account and argue that epistemic trust is only impaired by certain kinds of attitudes (rather than consistent lack of reliability generally, or particular bad epistemic performances),[11] and that hasty reasoning, dogmatism etc. always stem from the relevant kind of impairing attitudes (such that any bad beliefs that don't result from these attitudes are always not blameworthy, which seems doubtful for reasons outlined earlier), he will still face the earlier problem: some agents, such as young children, are intuitively not

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[9] At least for their epistemic performances; they could be blameworthy in the attributionist sense for having such traits in the first place. Many agents may even be worth relying on *because* of their epistemic vices, cf. Astola, Bland, & Alfano (2024).

[10] Note also that if 'competence' is what matters, if this gets fleshed out in terms of 'capacity', such that many intuitively blameless agents are excused because they lack sufficient capacity to comply with epistemic norms (whereas other agents are blameworthy for failures to exercise the capacities they do possess), this would generate the independent account of blameworthiness referenced earlier. At that point it would seems like we should prefer a capacitarian-based account of epistemic blameworthiness on grounds of parsimony.

[11] Boult (2024b) later tries to thread the needle by claiming that we can distinguish between cases where an expectation or intention was violated due to the agent vs due to other factors, e.g. if an agent unknowingly swallows a pill that makes them unreliable, they won't be blameworthy because *they* won't have been the ones who impaired the relationship (while if they knowingly do it they will be blameworthy). This raises more questions. For one, I don't think agents are intuitively immediately epistemically blameworthy whenever they e.g. deliberately consume alcohol, even though this impairs many of their epistemic activities. For another, there's a worry that whatever criteria is used to sort the culpability-grounding cases from the culpability-undermining cases will generalise in problematic ways; e.g. agents may not be responsible for acquiring their moral/epistemic vices that make them act wrongly/believe badly or their disposition to enjoy alcohol, yet many people think constitutive moral luck makes no difference to said acts being blameworthy and thus by extension their beliefs being blameworthy. A third concern is that we seem to have switched from a conception of impairing relationships qua violating expectations to a conception of impairing qua doing things that make it likely one will violate expectations, but these are not the same. When the agent takes the drug, they haven't *yet* violated any expectations regarding their beliefs—it's at the moment of believing badly that they do so. Attempts to 'trace' responsibility to earlier actions such as deliberately ingesting pills face a number of objections that need to be grappled with. (Vargas, 2005; Shabo, 2015; Agule, 2016) (These can be avoided by endorsing a capacitarian account of blameworthiness (Piovarchy, 2022), which also happens to conveniently be a feature of my (2021) own competing account of epistemic blame). All of this again favours thinking that Boult has an unspecified and importantly *independent* account of when agents are epistemically blameworthy in the background, which, once spelled out, will leave little work for the relationship framework to do.

blameworthy (either morally or epistemically) despite being dogmatic, hasty, and having bad beliefs. How does Scanlon avoid this result regarding moral blame? Scanlon introduces a second means by which agents can do the wrong thing but be blameless, separate from his account of excuses described above. He proposes that the actions and attitudes of such agents, in virtue of their limited capacities and social status have a different *meaning* or significance for us.[12] He emphasises (2008, p. 156) that it is not the case that such agents are held to different standards, or that we expect different things of them; it is *not* permissible for children to harm us, for instance. Rather, their incapacity places them in a different relationship with us, changing the meaning of their attitudes.

Scanlon (2008, p. 54) understands the meaning of an agent's action as "the significance the person has reason to assign to [the action], given the reasons for which it was performed and the person's relation to the agent." The reasons for which we act, our intentions, and the attitudes we have, indicate something *about* how we regard *others*, and this is why others can find those attitudes objectionable. When I steal from you, much is revealed about my attitudes towards *you*, your interests, or our relationship. I manifest an attitude like 'my self-interest in having that item is more important than your interest in secure use of your possessions', or 'your right to your possessions is not a sufficient reason to not take it', or 'I am more concerned with my happiness than your feelings' or 'our friendship isn't important enough to me to warrant acting in ways that maintain our good relationship'. I act on reasons of self-interest. I probably also have intentions to steal from you when I can get away with it in the future, and lack intentions to take good care of your things if asked to do so. But despite titling one paper 'The Significance of Epistemic Blame', Boult (2023) doesn't establish that impairments to the epistemic relationship are

[12] A helpful example to understand significance concerns two equally reckless drivers, only one of whom kills a pedestrian. While the drivers are equally blameworthy, the latter's action will clearly have more significance for the affected family members, given the driver has killed their child, which makes it appropriate for them to respond differently than a family whose child has not being killed.

significant in *this* sense, or that agents who believe equally badly but in different ways can thereby have their beliefs acquire different significance. He establishes that agents believing badly is 'significant' in the sense of being important, and that bad beliefs or intellectual acts have implications for others e.g. causing others to end up with false beliefs, which warrants responding in a way that goes beyond mere evaluation. But such facts are true of the beliefs of intuitively excused gents too. And because many instances of others believing badly do not indicate anything *about* you, or anyone else, or your relationship with the agent, it is hard to see how they can acquire any analogous *meaning* for other epistemic agents.[13] Their beliefs—bad or otherwise—instead typically only reveal their attitudes about the merits of believing P (whether the sun will rise, whether all swans are white, etc.) and what sources of epistemic justification are available (that S is reliable, that Q is evidence for P, etc.).[14]

For Scanlon, children's attitudes don't have the same meaning as adults' attitudes because the former are unable to understand the consequences of their actions, or how these actions are significant for others (p. 156).[15] While Boult asserts (2024a, p. 393) that excused agents could have a different meaning for us too, there is no tenable analogy to be made here which can then separate intuitively excused agents from intuitively blameworthy agents. It is not the case that most blameworthy people who e.g. hold contradictory beliefs understand the effects of holding

[13] Boult also makes another modification to his account by saying "When someone genuinely impairs their epistemic relationship with another, they reveal themselves prone to culpably epistemically fail in a wide-ranging set of circumstances." But (a) we do seem to blame people for particular failures, not merely their underlying dispositions, (b) this constitutes yet another departure from Scanlon, who would say we blame the agent's attitudes and intentions, not their proneness to fail in a wide range of ways, and (c) this raises the earlier question about cases where agents e.g. believe carelessly or hastily without an excuse but wouldn't do so in a wide range of other cases.

[14] I've argued elsewhere such considerations pose a problem for attempts to explain how agents can be blameworthy for testimonial injustice (Piovarchy, 2020). A potential exception concerns motivated reasoning, where what someone cares about does influence how they believe.

[15] Additionally, "Our relationship with children is an unequal one because of the child's relative lack of development, including moral development. It is a tutelary relationship" (p. 156). The same cannot be said of our relationship with most excused agents. Note that while children will grow to understand the significance and consequences of their actions, the same isn't true of their beliefs, because, again, most beliefs are not formed on the basis of such considerations.

such beliefs and the significance this has for others, but simply go ahead and hold them anyway, while excused agents lack this understanding. Most epistemically blameworthy agents also don't have any intention to hold contradictory beliefs despite the importance of avoiding such beliefs. That a set of beliefs would be contradictory is generally not their reason for forming or holding onto those beliefs, or recognised as a reason against holding them at the time they are formed.[16] That it is bad to hold contradictory beliefs is not disregarded as a reason against adopting those beliefs, as one cannot disregard what one is unaware of. They don't manifest an attitude that holding contradictory beliefs is epistemically permissible, or practically justified given their circumstances, or the best way to achieve their ends.[17] They don't care about holding contradictory beliefs more than they care about holding consistent beliefs, or more than being a reliable agent. But such things are what would be needed for such beliefs to have an analogous meaning to moral expectation violations: the attitudes *about you* that are revealed by e.g. culpable stealing are not at all analogous to the attitudes that are 'revealed' by most blameworthy intellectual activities, which are primarily about P. In the overwhelming majority of cases, bad believers take *their* intellectual acts to perfectly justified, well-evidenced, in accordance with the relevant epistemic norms (etc.), and don't even notice any problem at all, just as children (and indeed, most agents) do. Further complicating this strategy is that most bad believers *do* have intentions to follow the evidence, to avoid inconsistent beliefs, to be a reliable source, to not fall for gullibility, among many other things. They probably also often have attitudes like 'gullibility and inconsistent beliefs are bad' and 'it is important to follow the evidence'. They are concerned with getting things right, and often take themselves to be doing quite well; that's part of the problem (cf. Levy, 2022, on the sincerity of conspiracy theorists' efforts). But such intentions and attitudes don't consistently get them off the hook.

[16] See Sandis (2015) for a useful treatment of the distinction between motivating and explanatory reasons, and ways they are commonly misinterpreted.
[17] Though there are exceptions, cf. certain politicians and presidents.

In making reliability the normative ideal to explain why we blame blameworthy agents, Boult opened the door to considering unreliable but intuitively excused agents to be blameworthy. Conversely, in arguing that intuitively excused agents' bad beliefs are blameless because they aren't significant for us (because they don't reveal attitudes *about* how the agent regards their epistemic relations with others), he instead opens the door to saying that almost no-one is blameworthy. This is because too many bad beliefs or intellectual acts of intuitively blameworthy agents don't reveal anything about such relations either: the bad beliefs simply aren't about such things, or formed on the basis of such considerations. By presenting both lines of thought together, it may seem like we've salvaged the distinction, but in fact each attempt to avoid the objection entails accepting the other unpalatable conclusion: either intuitively excused agents are blameworthy, or intuitively blameworthy agents are excused.

IV. Review

A relationship-based account of epistemic blame has a number of moving parts (relationships, ideals, impairments, modifications, meanings, bad beliefs, intentions, attitudes, as well as the corollaries of these in Scanlon's framework). A full understanding of its merits thus requires careful examination, without which important objections may be obscured for casual readers. Allow me to thus provide a recap of where we have come from, and some of the choice points defenders of a relationship-based approach to epistemic blame might be tempted to take.

For Scanlon, in the moral domain, the ideal of the moral relationship is mutual concern, and this is constituted by others' attitudes and expectations towards us and our interests. This creates a tight connection between one's status as excused or blameworthy for an act, and the intentions, attitudes, or expectations that one has: if one didn't manifest lack of mutual concern despite doing the wrong thing, one is excused.

In contrast, the epistemic relationship's ideal is epistemic trust qua reliability. Since reliability is wholly independent of culpability, proponents need additional resources to ground the

intuitive distinction between blameworthy and excused agents, as both fail to be reliable. One tempting move is to modify the epistemic ideal away from reliability and simply towards intentions to be reliable, or having favourable attitudes towards the kinds of things that get invoked as expectations in our epistemic relations with others. This risks the unintuitive consequence that mere intentions and attitudes are sufficient to make one blameless, regardless of how bad one's actual performance or reliability is, and that perfectly reliable agents with poor intentions or attitudes towards such things are in fact blameworthy. Both of these problems occur because attitudes regarding the contents of the expectations that constitute our general epistemic relationship are insufficiently correlated with how epistemically reliable an agent is, and isn't what we are interested in when we consider what makes someone epistemically blameworthy. If we instead maintain epistemic trust qua reliability as the ideal, an alternative move is to say that lack of culpability is built into the attitudes and expectations that make up the relationship. However, this requires an independent account of when agents are culpable, risks making any appeal to a 'relationship' an idle wheel, and removes any distinction between excused and justified agents, since neither count as impairing the relationship.

If we try turning to Scanlon's account for resources to maintain the distinction, there are two ways agents can do the wrong thing but be blameless: via a severed connection between the wrong act and the agent's attitudes, or by having the attitudes lack meaning due to a lack of understanding of their effects or significance of their expression. Neither of these options are viable when it comes to considering beliefs, because agents who believe badly generally do not form their beliefs on the basis of things like an intention to believe badly, attitudes that this instance of believing badly is permissible or valuable, a perceived unimportance of reliability or others' epistemic expectations or interests, the consequences of those beliefs, the significance of those beliefs, or their relations with others. Their beliefs are *about* and formed on the basis of things such as whether P, whether P is well-supported, whether Q is evidence for P, or whether S is in a good source of testimony on P. The things that would make agents morally blameless

(failure to have the relevant attitude, or failure to understand its significance) are true of most agents and their beliefs, regardless of whether those beliefs are bad or not.

Insofar as Scanlon's account can explain why children are blameless, and why other agents are excused, it is by using resources particular to moral relationships which cannot be transplanted to the epistemic domain.[18] If we want to be epistemic blame realists, it cannot be by appealing to marked impairments in epistemic relationships.

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[18] It is plausible that some agents are so impaired that they are simply not participants in the general epistemic relationship, similar to how Scanlon (2013, p. 95) suggests psychopaths may not be candidates for the moral relationship. While this will give a principled basis for considering some agents unreliable but blameless, it clearly will not apply to all marginal agents.

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