

Evidence in a Non-Ideal World: How Social Distortion Creates Skeptical Potholes

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Abstract

Our evidential environments are reflections of our social contexts. This is important because the evidence we encounter influences the beliefs we form. But, traditional epistemologists have paid little attention to the generation of this evidential environment, assuming that it is irrelevant to epistemic normativity. This assumption, I argue, is dangerous. Idealizing away the evidential environment obscures the ways that our social contexts distort its contents. Such *social distortion* can lead to *evidential oppression*, an epistemic injustice arising from the ubiquity of ideologically-inflected portrayals of oppressed social groups. In some cases, this distortion can be so pervasive as to create a skeptical pothole in agents' epistemic environments—a limited region in which a skeptical scenario obtains.

The skeptical challenge of social distortion is important because it suggests that prejudice and irrationality alone may not be enough to explain many harmful beliefs. Where justified belief is merely a matter of responding well to one's evidence, the ubiquity of ideologically-inflected evidence may impel a matching doxastic state, even for exemplary epistemic agents. Nevertheless, there is an asymmetry in blameworthiness between the Cartesian victim and someone laboring under evidential oppression. This asymmetry reveals the need for distinctively non-ideal epistemic norms. I offer a characterization of one such norm: the internalist practice of self-stewardship.

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We encounter an enormous amount of information every day. Some of it we seek, but much of it we don't. This is important because the evidence we collect, intentionally or otherwise, influences the beliefs we form. Our evidential environment is the cradle of our beliefs. But, traditional epistemologists have paid little attention to the generation of this evidential environment, assuming it is irrelevant to epistemic normativity.² This assumption, I'll argue, is dangerous.

In idealizing away the evidential environment, we obscure the ways our social contexts influence its contents. This *social distortion* of our evidence is important because it can lead to what I'll call *evidential oppression*. Arising from ideologically-inflected portrayals of oppressed social groups, evidential oppression refers to the distorted availability of evidence that coheres with an oppressive ideology. Evidential oppression is the rearticulation of oppressive ideology within our evidential environments. Section 1 explains this idea and how it works to push individuals toward oppressive beliefs.

But, there is one major exception to traditional epistemologists' lapse in considering agents' epistemic environments: Cartesian skepticism.³ In Section 2, I argue that social distortion can generate skeptical potholes—limited regions in which a skeptical scenario obtains. The difference is that, where skeptical scenarios (brains in vats and such) are totalizing and fantastical, the skeptical potholes created by social distortion are local and mundane. As a result, many of the usual responses to Cartesian skepticism fail. This analogy between social distortion and skeptical scenarios is particularly strong within the confines of ideal epistemology.

The skeptical challenge of social distortion is important because it suggests that prejudice and irrationality alone may not be enough to explain many harmful beliefs. When encountering individuals who cling to the stereotypes of sexism or carelessly proclaim racist dogma, it's tempting to dismiss them as malicious, irrational, or both and, as a result, to dismiss their beliefs as unjustified. But, where justified belief is merely a matter of responding well to one's evidence, the ubiquity of ideologically-inflected evidence impels a matching doxastic state, even for exemplary epistemic agents.

Nevertheless, there is an asymmetry in blameworthiness between the Cartesian victim and someone laboring under evidential oppression. Section 3 argues that this asymmetry reveals the need for distinctively non-ideal epistemic norms—epistemic norms that are responsive to the non-ideal circumstances of epistemic practice. Section 4 offers a characterization of one such norm: self-stewardship. Agents who engage in self-stewardship monitor the fit between their epistemic practices and their epistemic environments. This norm retains an internalist epistemic normativity, while still offering a way to mitigate the effects of social distortion. The argument of this paper is that the framework of ideal epistemology obscures both the problems of social distortion and their solutions. In particular, it obscures the skeptical potholes generated by social distortion and the solution of non-ideal norms like self-stewardship.

² Little, but not none. Social and socially-informed epistemologists such as Nguyen (2020), Munton (2017), Kornblith (1994), and others have discussed the impact of our environments on our epistemic practices, as have many feminist epistemologists (Mills, 2007; Medina, 2012; Gendler, 2011).

³ Descartes' original discussion appears in the *Meditations*, and remains widely discussed across epistemology (Pryor, 2000; Stroud, 1984; Moore, 1959).

1. Scarcity and Surfeit

“He was a 20-year-old man who, by multiple accounts, was incredibly smart and quiet.” (Yan, 2012)

“At the University of California, Riverside, where he graduated with honors in neuroscience in 2010, he's remembered as brilliant.” (Whitaker, 2012)

“...A picture began to emerge of the 29-year-old killer as a quiet, devout person who in recent years displayed a hateful and violent streak.” (Fagenson, 2016)

“...An Army veteran and a `loner' who had no criminal record but a pile of weapons and bomb-making materials in his house, officials said.” (Arkin et al., 2016)

Adam Lanza, perpetrator of the Sandy Hook massacre, is the subject of the first quote. The second describes James Holmes, who carried out the Aurora, Colorado shooting, in which 12 theater patrons were murdered during a showing of *The Dark Knight Rises*. These introductions are surprisingly sympathetic. Both murderers' actions are presented as out of character and unexpected. By contrast, the portraits of Omar Mateen, who attacked the Pulse nightclub in Orlando, Florida, and Micah Johnson, who shot police officers at a Black Lives Matter rally in Dallas, Texas, are far more sinister. In the third quote, any positive connotation of 'devout' is erased by descent into violence, while Johnson's positive traits are overshadowed by an ominous characterization.

What's important for our purposes is this: Lanza and Holmes are white, while Mateen is an American Muslim of Afghan descent and Johnson is black. These depictions, each of which appeared in major media outlets in the United States, carry inescapable echoes of the stereotypes that dominate our public consciousness: black men are dangerous, Muslims are violent extremists, and white men are neither. These cases are striking on their own, but the broader trend in media coverage is especially troubling. Looking at samples of Chicago media's crime coverage in 1990-91 and 1993-94, Entman and Rojecki (2010) found that the humanizing effect of including a suspect's name was afforded to white suspects far more often than black suspects. Similarly, Chiricos and Eschholz (2002) found that black suspects were far more likely to be shown in threatening ways than their white counterparts. Black suspects, for example, were depicted in mugshots significantly more often than white suspects (p. 411). More broadly, they conclude,

...in qualitative terms, the racial and ethnic typification of crime is presented in ways that show Black suspects and, to some degree, Hispanic suspects in a negative light, especially when compared to Whites. (p. 412)

Distortion of this kind occurs in other aspects of criminal reporting as well. Comparing data collected from the Los Angeles police department with media portrayals over the same time period, Dixon and Linz (2000, p. 147) found that black and Hispanic individuals were over-represented as perpetrators of crimes while whites were somewhat underrepresented. In these studies, it's clear that the dominant, oppressive ideology surrounding black and Hispanic

peoples is reflected in their portrayal in the media, inflating the availability of negative evidence concerning those groups.

Media bias like this is an example of what I'll call *social distortion*:

Social Distortion is present in an epistemic environment with respect to a particular proposition when and to the extent that social factors, such as ideology or institutional policy, influence the prevalence of evidence in that environment in a way that impels agents to take up a particular doxastic attitude toward that proposition.

This is the process whereby our social environments are engineered to draw us toward particular beliefs. On this understanding, social distortion is quite common and is often for our benefit: We do not “teach the controversy” over intelligent design vs. Darwinian evolution in public schools because we want children to form accurate beliefs about the world. By teaching only evolution, we create an environment that greatly favors the formation of one belief over the other.

But, social distortion can easily bend toward *evidential oppression*:

Evidential Oppression. A social group is affected by evidential oppression in an epistemic environment when social distortion causes the available evidence to disproportionately reflect an oppressive ideology with respect to that group.

I choose the term ‘oppression’ because the subtle ubiquity of this phenomenon echoes Marilyn Frye’s (1983, p. 4) influential characterization of oppression. Frye points out that oppression is not a matter of some single, obvious constraint on one’s freedom. Rather, she likens oppression to a birdcage, in which the structure of the cage restrains, but no single wire would have such power. Evidential oppression is both a wire in the broader social structure of oppression and a kind of epistemic cage in its own right, corralling us toward particular beliefs. Media environments like those discussed above exemplify this by sensationalizing and centering black and Hispanic crime while leaving other violence to fleeting, monotone snippets. In virtue of this, they favor forming beliefs that emphasize the “dangerousness” and “criminality” of these groups. As Bierria (2014, pp. 129-130) points out in their discussion of social authoring, similar distortion was evident in the coverage of social disarray following hurricane Katrina, during which newspapers described black people taking what they needed from flooded stores as “looting”, while neglecting that descriptor for their white counterparts. In the remainder of Section 1, we’ll take a closer look at the nature of evidential oppression and how it affects individual agents.

1.1 From Ideology to Evidence

Evidential oppression is an epistemic rearticulation of the structural oppressions that pervade our social contexts. Such structural oppression is generally accompanied by an ideology that masks the harm it causes. By rendering it invisible, deserved, or otherwise unworthy of serious scrutiny, such ideologies free those who benefit from that oppression from the cognitive load of justifying their privilege.

But what is an ideology? And why is ideology important to understanding evidential oppression? For present purposes, I’ll take an ideology to be a mutually supporting, self-sustaining network of beliefs, attitudes, values, social meanings, scripts, and so forth that

serves to stabilize certain social practices, institutions, or relations.⁴ On this view, ideologies may occur at the grand scale of civilization, but also the humbler register of schools and workplaces. What's central about ideology is its self-perpetuating, stabilizing function.

The common thread connecting the cases of Lanza, Holmes, Mateen, and Johnson with the empirical data is representation. Throughout, we see the ideological structures associated with each social group reflected in the representation of individuals. Black men and Muslims are represented as dangerous, while white men's involvement is portrayed as surprising and strange. Like wage inequality and residential segregation, these representations are part of the broad, societal-level ideological formation of racism. They are created and sustained by the social meanings attached to the social groups that are the subject of those ideologies. To wit, the depiction of Mateen mentioning that he is both devout and violent is not an accident. Rather, this depiction coheres with ideological schemas interpreting Muslims as violent extremists. Similarly, the depiction of Lanza as "smart and quiet" appears to benefit from the opposite—an interpretive scheme for white men that includes rationality and safety. Of course, it is difficult to ascertain whether any particular depiction is the result of ideological pressures. What's important for our purposes is that each ideologically consistent portrayal is a source of evidence about its subject in the same way that any representation of a subject provides evidence.

'Evidence', for present purposes, is meant in a fairly intuitive sense. Having evidence for p makes it more reasonable to believe p . So long as instances like those mentioned above either constitute evidence themselves or provide evidence, we can move forward. This still leaves us with the question of what it means for some piece of evidence to make it more reasonable to believe p . Since we're interested in how individuals respond to their evidence, we'll take a subjective interpretation on which evidence that supports p increases your confidence in p —it is more reasonable to believe p from the agent's own perspective, p seems more likely to be true to the agent.

In less morally significant cases, the sort of evidence provided by representation is uncontroversial. A National Geographic documentary presenting lions as vicious predators and cunning hunters provides evidence not only in the form of its narration, but also in the observations it curates for the viewer. The cameraperson's choice to follow the hunt to its grisly conclusion, lingering on the aftermath, shapes your evidence, as does the editor's choice to leave out footage of the lioness peacefully grooming her cubs. In this case, the cameraperson's decisions mean that the evidence you're provided will likely increase your confidence that lions are dangerous predators.⁵

But, ideologically inflected racial representations do the same. By presenting a Muslim man's violent crime as unsurprising, a news article provides evidence for the proposition that Muslims are violent. By presenting a white man's violent crime as shocking and unbelievable, a news article fails to provide that same generalizing evidence. As Mills (2007, pp. 62-63) notes, this phenomenon is not new: Thomas Jefferson's description of Native Americans as "merciless

⁴ This is similar to the functionalist, descriptive notion of ideology offered in Geuss (1981) and echoed by Mills (2005, p.172), though I do not mean to suggest a single, overarching ideological system. Rather, I mean to offer a thin, functionalist account that echoes these.

⁵ This is not to suggest that there are no cases in which, say, someone suspicious of National Geographic's motivations or who has strong antecedent views about lions might not respond differently to this evidence. Rather, the idea is that without undermining or rebutting evidence, the representation provided supports a particular understanding of the demeanor of lions for most consumers.

Indian Savages" in the Declaration of Independence serves the same purpose. These portrayals provide evidence in line with the ideology that shapes them.^{6,7}

While local crime reports are rife with ideologically inflected representations, they come from many sources. For example:

- In the early weeks of the Trump administration, the President vowed to publish a weekly list of crimes committed by illegal aliens through a new agency, the Victims Of Immigration Crime Engagement office (Kopan, 2017).
- The film industry's focus on men and their stories suggests that women's stories are less important and less interesting. This is evinced by the long list of films failing the Bechdel-Wallace Test.⁸
- Well-meaning charities whose advertisements use images of sickly, starving African children reinforce the notion that African countries are universally poor, incapable, and uncivilized.

There are two important features of these ideologically-inflected portrayals. First, while the evidence they provide misleadingly supports the false beliefs associated with the ideologies that produce them, they need not involve direct misrepresentation. For example, the critical difference between the presentations of Johnson and Holmes is that, while both *in fact* had weapons stores in their homes—Johnson the bomb-making materials mentioned in the article and Holmes several thousand rounds of ammunition—Holmes' cache was *omitted* from the initial characterization. Similarly, in the data we examined on mugshots (Chiricos and Eschholz, 2002), the choice to use the mugshot matters because it represents the individual in a particular way. Fabrications are not necessary for creating evidential oppression. Second, ideologically inflected evidence need not be maliciously or even intentionally created. While publishing only a list of alien crimes is difficult to interpret otherwise, films that fail to include women or show them only as relevant in virtue of their sexual interests seem oblivious rather than malicious. The fact that a particular portrayal is ideologically inflected is not, in and of itself, the problem that gives rise to evidential oppression and the resulting epistemic and moral harms. The problem is the systematicity of such portrayals.⁹

2. Skeptical Potholes

Pernicious social distortion creates a kind of skeptical pothole—a topically or ideologically limited region in which a skeptical hypothesis prevails. Where Cartesian skeptical hypotheses

⁶ Not all rational agents would take such evidence as support for the relevant ideologically consistent propositions. As we'll see in Section 2, there is plenty of room for alternative interpretations. Here, the thought is that instances tend to be taken as confirming their generalization absent further evidence to the contrary, and accounting for societal influence.

⁷ This coheres with Munton's (2017) empirically-backed argument for her conclusion that such environmental distortions can shape our perceptual faculties as well.

⁸ A film passes the test just in case it (1) has at least two women in it, (2) those women talk to each other, and (3) they talk about something besides a man. The test originally appears in the comic *Dykes to Watch Out For* (Bechdel, 1986) and is widely regarded as a tongue-in-cheek way of demonstrating the sexism of the film industry. See www.bechdeltest.com (July, 2023) for an active database of films passing the test and Appel and Gnamb (2022) for empirical research.

⁹ This has significant ramifications for responsibility. While social distortion *may* be intentionally carried out by individuals or groups, as in the case of educational policy, it need not be.

are totalizing and fantastical scenarios, such as being a brain-in-a-vat or the victim of some nefarious demon's deceptions, we're interested in a much narrower kind of skeptical scenario. The idea is this: Cartesian skeptical scenarios propose that the connection between the world and the evidence is uniformly faulty in a way that undermines the support that evidence provides for *any* external world hypotheses. By contrast, in skeptical potholes this connection is faulty only with respect to the topic in question, but with similar undermining force. If Cartesian skeptical scenarios posit that the bridge between evidence and justified beliefs has collapsed, skeptical distortion hypotheses instead suggest that the road is pitted with potholes—some worse than others.

Consider the following example. In the opening scene of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, Rosencrantz catches the glint of a coin in the dirt and stops his horse to pick it up. He tosses the coin and announces "Heads." Tossing it again, he gets the same result. A third toss, "Heads." And a fourth. This continues for another fifteen tosses before Guildenstern catches the coin mid-toss, snatching it away from Rosencrantz, to examine whether it actually *has* a tails side. Finding that it does, he tosses it back to his companion with a look of suspicion. Rosencrantz catches it on the back of his hand and declares, "Heads," (Stoppard, 1994). Supposing that the coin is fair, the pair is having remarkably bad epistemic luck when it comes to learning the coin's bias.

Now, suppose that rather than snatching the coin away from Rosencrantz, Guildenstern smirks to himself. He has secretly, through mysterious means known only to him, altered Rosencrantz' perceptions so that no matter how the coin lands, Rosencrantz *sees* heads. Everything else is just as it was for Rosencrantz prior to Guildenstern's intervention. In this case, Guildenstern has engineered a tiny space of social distortion for Rosencrantz—because of the socially-mediated manipulation of Rosencrantz' epistemic environment, his evidence will almost inevitably lead him to believe that the coin is biased toward heads. Thus, the idea that Guildenstern, rather than a Cartesian demon, is manipulating Rosencrantz' evidence acts as a skeptical hypothesis in this case, but only with respect to the coin's bias and related propositions. In this way, social distortion can break the presumed connection between truth and indications of truth within its domain of influence. It creates a skeptical pothole. This is especially so in pernicious cases, such as those fuelling evidential oppression.

Amia Srinivasan (2020, pp. 398-399) offers an example of this kind of scenario in the case she calls *domestic violence*:

Radha is a woman who lives in rural India. Her husband, Krishnan, regularly beats her. After the beatings, Krishnan often expresses regret for having had to beat her, but explains that it was Radha's fault for being insufficiently obedient or caring. Radha finds these beatings humiliating and guilt-inducing; she believes she has only herself to blame, and that she deserves to be beaten for her bad behaviour. After all, her parents, elders and friends agree that if she is being beaten it must be her fault, and no one she knows has ever offered a contrary opinion. Moreover, Radha has thoroughly reflected on the issue and concluded that, given the natural social roles of men and women, women deserve to be beaten by their husbands when they misbehave.

There is no totalizing Cartesian scenario here. The vast majority of Radha's evidence—the pain she feels, the sight of clear blue skies, and so on—operates faultlessly, drawing her toward true beliefs. But, she is subject to evidential oppression: the sexist ideology surrounding her has

overwhelming influence on her evidential environment with respect to relevant propositions. Just like a Cartesian skeptical scenario, this one distorts the evidence in a way that leaves little or no trace in the agent's epistemic environment.

Justification is valuable because it is truth-directed.¹⁰ Without this feature, justification is not a marker of epistemic success. In the case of evidential oppression, the social distortion involved alters the likely composition of one's body of evidence, thereby making it more likely that indicators of truth lead to false beliefs that conform with the relevant ideology.¹¹ This, in turn, prevents normal justification-conferring practices of gathering and responding to evidence from being truth-directed. In such cases, then, justification is no longer epistemically valuable—it does not mark epistemic success. There is real epistemic harm here: the subject of evidential oppression (or other pernicious social distortion) faces systematic undermining of the practices we normally take to serve the central epistemic aim of forming true beliefs.¹² Evidential oppression, like many skeptical scenarios, demonstrates that there are circumstances in which an individual pursuing justified beliefs will be systematically drawn away from the truth rather than toward it. This is particularly worrying because it means that agents whose beliefs are consistent with oppressive ideologies may not be echoing a prejudice that brought them to their beliefs. Rather, they may form those beliefs merely by responding to the evidence available in their epistemic environment. For theories of justification on which justification is little more than rationally responding to one's evidence, then, those racist or sexist beliefs turn out to be justified—they are epistemically justified in just the same way that Rosencrantz's belief about his strange coin is justified.

2.1 The Asymmetry Objection

At this point, one might object: This is not an actual skeptical scenario! Unlike the victim of an actual Cartesian demon, Rosencrantz has a way out: there is, in fact, evidence Rosencrantz *could* obtain that would reveal the truth. Perhaps by examining his coin and finding it precisely similar to other non-biased coins or by paging through Guildenstern's diary and coming across his wily plans, Rosencrantz would come to realize he'd simply been deceived. Even if he doesn't find his way to the correct answer, there is nevertheless an epistemically accessible difference between the Cartesian scenario and this one.

The same thing, an objector might continue, is true in the case of evidential oppression. Yes, there is distortion of evidence, but we can't think of this as a genuine skeptical scenario because there is available evidence that would reveal the operative social distortion. In this case, the agent could take up a study of media bias, go to University and learn about ideology, and so on.

¹⁰ See e.g. BonJour (1985) for discussion of this view. There are many thorny issues around the value of justification, as Zagzebski (2003) points out, but addressing these is beyond the scope of the present work. Moreover—and most importantly—this view (or something close) is central to intuitions driving worries about Cartesian skepticism.

¹¹ The 'more likely' is relative to a world that is otherwise similar, but for the fact that social distortion influences the relevant epistemic environment.

¹² Other pernicious social distortion might include, e.g., an epistemic environment that conceals evidence in favor of one scientific theory, thereby favoring a false one.

This is true. But, it's also beyond the capacities of most agents. Not because they are intellectually lazy, but because they are non-ideal agents in a non-ideal world. They are non-ideal agents for many reasons, but relevantly: they lack time.¹³ Given enough time and the luxury to attend to such a silly question, Rosencrantz might come to realize that his "biased" coin is exactly like his other coins. But, he almost certainly has other things to attend to—Does his horse need food? Where will they camp for the night? Our limitations as human agents with human needs limit our epistemic capacities. So, we are non-ideal epistemic agents. And, we are in a non-ideal world because our epistemic environment is afflicted by pernicious social distortion. Moreover, evidential oppression can exacerbate the effects of agents' natural limitations: those who are in the grip of an oppressive ideology may lack motivation to uncover the reality of their situation (Mills, 2007). Once we set aside the idealizations of agents and their environments, and consider the consequences of pernicious social distortion, we see that these near-skeptical scenarios can function in the same way as a skeptical scenario: From the perspective of a non-ideal agent, detecting the skeptical hypothesis may be nigh-impossible. Despite lacking a demon, these skeptical potholes create *effective skeptical scenarios*. Put simply, the issue is not that agents *can't* discover the truth, but that they *won't*.

2.2 No way out?

Under many of ideal epistemology's internalist theories, such agents' beliefs turn out to be straightforwardly justified. On evidentialist or Bayesian grounds, for example, these agents seem to perform well: they encounter evidence and update their beliefs accordingly. There's nothing more to the story.

Worse yet, traditional responses to Cartesian skepticism do not always seem to mitigate the threat posed by pernicious social distortion. For example, while relevant alternative theorists can argue that Cartesian skeptical scenarios are not relevant alternatives to ordinary justified beliefs (Dretske, 1970), it's difficult to make that claim in the case of e.g., Radha's experience or the historical portrayal of Native Americans.¹⁴

Nevertheless, when we compare the Cartesian victim with the victim of evidential oppression, an asymmetry remains: the "rational racist"'s excuse is less convincing.¹⁵ This observation, I suggest, points toward a non-ideal norm that complicates internalist justification, but mitigates the threat of pernicious social distortion.

3. The Need for Non-Ideal Norms

Much of epistemology uses extensive idealizations in order to develop and justify epistemic norms. But, as Mills (2005) points out within political philosophy, focusing on ideal theory risks neglecting the real problems faced by unjust societies. Ideal epistemology suffers from the same

¹³ Wimsatt (2007) and Nguyen (2023) emphasize this limitation of non-ideal agents as well.

¹⁴ Contextualists such as DeRose (1995) and Cohen (2000) face very similar worries. Nevertheless, there are *many* responses to Cartesian skepticism and a full accounting of those responses is well beyond the scope of this article.

¹⁵ I borrow this moniker from Basu (2018), though Basu uses it to refer to the particular case of Richard Spencer, who may not be drawn to his beliefs through social distortion alone.

blind spot: by ignoring the social situatedness of epistemic agents, it risks developing epistemic norms that are inapplicable at best and harmful at worst.¹⁶ If the foregoing discussion is correct, social distortion draws us out of the ideal. And this departure is evident in our differing reactions to cases that—at least from the perspective of ideal epistemology—deserve the same evaluation. While both victims offer the excuse that they are simply responding to their evidence, the "rational racist" who labors under evidential oppression has a less convincing excuse. But what does that amount to? There is an obvious moral complaint here, but there seems to be an epistemic difference as well. This section argues that the epistemic difference lies in what could have been.

To see this, let's begin with the difference between our victims. For the demon's victim, there is no plausible alternative means of responding to the evidence that would serve him better. So, he is at a sort of global maximum in terms of his epistemic practice. The rational racist whose beliefs are the product of evidential oppression is in a very different situation. Different evidential support relations, different evidence-gathering practices, or different patterns of attention might lead him to very different beliefs. While his epistemic practices look best from where he is, there are other epistemic practices that would serve him better. The rational racist, in other words, is only at a local maximum. But, since much of ideal epistemology idealizes away the epistemic environment and agents' relationship to it, that normatively important difference is invisible from the perspective of ideal epistemology.

Consider the example of Derek Black, a former white nationalist leader. Nguyen (2020) points out that Black was able to step outside of the echo chamber that distorted his epistemic environment and, over the course of several years, dramatically changed his beliefs and his identity. Notably, this change was precipitated by an unplanned change in his epistemic environment: he began attending an acquaintance's weekly Shabbat dinners. This experience exposed Black to different ways of interpreting the same evidence and brought new evidence into his epistemic environment. While Black's transformation began with an initial stroke of luck, he did make the choice to continue with those weekly dinners and the friends they included (Saslow, 2016). In making this choice, he actively changed his epistemic environment. This choice is an example of the kind of intentional shift in epistemic practice that is necessary to combat evidential oppression. But, from the perspective of ideal epistemology, Black is no better justified for his exploratory practice than he would have been had he declined the invitation to continue to host his racist radio show. The version of Black who never takes up the invitation is blameless for this refusal and equally justified in his beliefs.

This suggests that norms developed in idealized epistemic contexts do not uniformly serve their epistemic goals in non-ideal contexts. Black's journey out of white nationalism suggests a fruitful direction for developing non-ideal norms: agents themselves can, to some extent, guide and assess the relationship between their practices and their epistemic environment.¹⁷ We might call such practices *self-stewardship*.

¹⁶ In this regard, see McKenna (2023) for a recent, broad treatment of non-ideal epistemology.

¹⁷ Many such norms have focused on evidence-gathering, such as Flores and Woodard (2023) and Hughes (2021). Worsnip (2019) argues for the need to diversify news sources specifically—a practice very closely related to the self-stewardship discussed in Section 4.

4. Self-Stewardship

Self-stewardship norms concern taking stock of one's own epistemic practices and the extent to which they fit their environment. In the case of someone like Derek Black, this is a matter of seriously entertaining the possibility of being at a local, rather than global, maximum—asking whether their epistemic practices may be self-serving and pursuing that question genuinely. Self-stewardship requires attending to one's epistemic practices *as such*—as the ways we try to learn what the world is like. This is important because we often develop these practices unconsciously and seldom monitor their success.¹⁸

However, two worries immediately arise when it comes to self-stewardship: the detection worry and the paucity worry. The detection worry concerns how well self-stewardship norms will work. Can we really know that we are in the grip of social distortion? If social distortion is so systemic as to create skeptical potholes for otherwise well-functioning epistemic agents, why think that self-stewardship practices will reveal it? To see a way out, recall that social distortion is a particular kind of skeptical hypothesis: it concerns how our epistemic environments are shaped by social forces. So, unlike the Cartesian victim, when the victim of social distortion entertains the skeptical hypothesis, she has options. She might:

- Adopt different evidence-gathering processes that might reveal the distortion, if it exists,
- Engage with evidence or arguments that have been (or would have been) minimized through social distortion,
- Where interpreting her evidence as if it is the result of social distortion results in different conclusions about the world, suspend judgment until she is able to gather more direct evidence about the world, or
- As a last-ditch effort, perform the kind of "Cartesian reboot" suggested by Nguyen (2020).

Granted, pursuing these options does not guarantee that an agent will detect and appropriately respond to social distortion. This is certainly the case for Srinivasan's Radha, from Section 2. In fact, Srinivasan takes this case to illustrate that Radha's beliefs are *not* justified. Radha's situation, she argues, motivates externalism about justification in non-ideal circumstances (Srinivasan, 2020).¹⁹ But, this analysis shortchanges the connection between our epistemic agency and our capacity for improving our lives. By taking an internalist approach, we retain that connection. Moreover, the internalist norm underscores an important point: The epistemic tragedy Radha faces is far greater than a counterpart of hers who never investigates or reflects on those beliefs. Radha's self-stewardship deepens her justification as it crystallizes the injustice she faces—she not only believes it, but believes it with the force of her curiosity, her careful investigation, and her thoughtful reflection. She is justified in her beliefs—better justified than most—and all the more oppressed by the sexist ideology surrounding her as a result. This internalist perspective gives due gravity to the epistemic injustice suffered by Radha.

¹⁸ This illustrates one of the ways such norms are non-ideal: one may not believe their epistemic practices are in need of such amelioration.

¹⁹ Munton (2017, pp. 156-157), too, takes the fact that our epistemic intuitions may be insensitive to such distortions to support an externalist view of justification.

Even so, social distortion is far less hopeless than the Cartesian demon's scenario. Sometimes, in fact, it's quite straightforward to detect and respond to social distortion. For example, in the case of the beneficial social distortion that goes on in primary science education, an American who learns about state and federal requirements on the content of primary school science texts thereby learns about the social distortion of their primary science education. She might, upon learning this, choose to engage with Flat-Earthers and consider the evidence and arguments they provide. Supposing that she comes out of that evaluation affirming her views about the shape of the Earth, this provides evidence that the social distortion involved in her primary science education is not pernicious. Thus, when she encounters the Young Earth Creationists, who offer a very similar story about why she ought not to trust her primary education, she has already carried out the relevant self-stewardship.

This leads to the second worry, however, which concerns how few beliefs turn out to be justified on this view. Call this the paucity worry. If self-stewardship is an epistemic norm, and failing to adhere to epistemic norms means one's beliefs are unjustified, it follows that many of our everyday beliefs are unjustified—or at least less justified than we might have thought. After all, self-stewardship may be a time-consuming process and, as we noted in moving toward a non-ideal framework, time is a limited commodity. For example, since many people have failed to engage in self-stewardship with respect to their science education in primary school, this suggests that such individuals' belief that the Earth is round is unjustified. And, while the rational racist is unjustified, so too is the unreflective anti-racist. There are two main lines of response to this worry. First, it is mitigated by theorizing justification and blameworthiness as degreed rather than binary.²⁰ On this view, agents who do not take this meta-cognitive approach to their epistemic practices will still have justification for their beliefs—just less than their more fastidious counterparts. Second, to some extent, I think we ought to bite the bullet. Justification is harder to come by than ideal epistemology would suggest. In the case of primary school science, this self-stewardship is relatively easy to practice. For cases that run into deep questions of morality and identity, however, it may be more challenging. But, this is fitting. We often argue that there is a close connection between epistemic justification and moral blameworthiness.²¹ Given that justified belief plays this exculpatory role, it is fitting that achieving epistemic justification ought to require more than responding well to the evidence one just happens to encounter. As a result, there is a balance to be struck: We do not have time to get this kind of justification for all of our beliefs. But, where our beliefs justify actions that impact others, securing their justification is deeply important.²² So, we must balance the need to find new

²⁰ For discussion of degrees of justification see Schulz (2022), Hawthorne and Logins (2020). See Boulton (2023) for a degreed account of epistemic blameworthiness.

²¹ There is rich debate on this topic. Rosen (2004) argues that ignorance always excuses, while Harman (2011) responds that only descriptive ignorance does. Levy (2009) argues that ignorance excuses except when epistemically culpable—there is much debate about what epistemic culpability involves.

Self-stewardship characterizes a way agents can be epistemically culpable and thereby helps to account for many (though not all) cases in which agents' evidence seems to justify their beliefs, despite their seeming blameworthy. For example, self-stewardship helps to show how Mills's (2007) white ignorance is a culpable form of ignorance, in addition to Mills' own explanations.

²² This is a significant point of difference between the view suggested here and Basu's (2019, 2021) view of moral encroachment. On Basu's view, the moral stakes make achieving epistemic justification more difficult. On my view, epistemic justification is generally difficult to obtain, and the moral stakes make it morally important to obtain.

evidence and gain new beliefs with the need to monitor our practices of doing so. Where those beliefs affect others, that epistemic obligation takes on moral import as well.

Conclusion

Social distortion of evidence is common. It has wide-ranging effects on our epistemic states and, in some cases, gives rise to epistemic injustices such as evidential oppression. Moreover, such distortion can be so pervasive as to create a kind of skeptical pothole in agents' epistemic environments. I have argued that the lens of ideal epistemology obscures both this epistemic injustice and its remedies.

Observation of the difficulty of forming true, justified beliefs under conditions like evidential oppression has led some theorists, such as Srinivasan (2020) and Munton (2017), to argue that justification ought to be given an externalist treatment. In contrast, I have argued that agents who follow a non-ideal internalist norm like self-stewardship may evade some of the effects of social distortion. Moreover, understanding self-stewardship as an epistemic norm helps to highlight the depth of the epistemic injustice suffered by those for whom no amount of careful investigation will reveal their circumstances. Nevertheless, much work remains to be done on the nature of self-stewardship and related non-ideal epistemic norms.

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