The Journal of Value Inquiry
https://doi.org/10.1007/s10790-024-10004-x

Doxastic Wronging, Disrespectful Belief, & The Moral Over-Demandingness Objection

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Accepted: 6 August 2024

1 Introduction

Many of us care about what others believe about us. As a consequence, we sometimes feel hurt or insulted by others' beliefs. For example, you might feel hurt by your friend's belief that you will not make a good parent or insulted by your partner's belief that your new haircut is unattractive. Some scholars working on the ethics of belief point to these feelings as *prima facie* evidence that our beliefs can wrong.[1] This thesis is known as *doxastic wronging*. A paradigm definition of doxastic wronging is as follows:

> A doxastic wronging happens if one person wrongs another in virtue of what she believes about him. There are three parts of this definition we want to emphasize. First, doxastic wrongs are directed. When you wrong someone, you don't merely do wrong, you do wrong to them. Second, doxastic wrongs are committed by beliefs. So in particular, the wrong in a doxastic wronging does not lie in what you do, either prior to, or subsequent to, forming a belief, but rather in the belief itself. And third, doxastic wrongs are wrongs in virtue of what is believed (Basu & Schroeder 2019: 181).

According to the first part of this definition, doxastic wrongs are directed. Assuming that these are like typical directed wrongs, then they correspond to directed doxastic duties.[2] Based on the other two parts of this definition, proponents seem to understand these as duties that we owe to particular individuals not to form beliefs with certain contents. Further, the second part of this definition states that doxastic wrongs are "committed by beliefs." It would be implausible to understand this as the claim that beliefs themselves *literally* commit wrongs because mental states

[1] See, e.g., Basu (2019a), Basu (2019b), Schroeder & Basu (2019a, b), Schroeder (2018), and Marušić & White (2018).

[2] For more on the nature of directed duties see Wallace (2019) and Jonker (2020).

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Published online: 27 September 2024

themselves do not have agency and, thus, cannot perpetrate wrongs. Accordingly, we should understand this as the claim that doxastic wrongs *consist in* our beliefs.

While proponents of doxastic wronging agree on its definition, they have different views about *when* our beliefs wrong.[3] Mark Schroeder (2018), one of the earliest and strongest advocates of doxastic wronging, argues that our beliefs wrong when they *falsely diminish*. Schroeder holds that beliefs need not be negative for them to diminish. Rather, a belief can diminish either by attributing a negative property to a person or by lessening their agential contribution, i.e., the extent to which their agency contributes to some property's instantiation (Schroeder 2018: 124). For example, a woman's false belief that her husband cheated on her diminishes by attributing a negative property to him, namely that of a cheater. Or, suppose that Phyllis forms the false belief that her Asian neighbor is good at math based on the common stereotype "Asians are good at math" (Schroeder 2018: 124). While she forms a positive belief about her neighbor's mathematical prowess and, thus, does not attribute a negative property to him, her belief diminishes by lessening the extent to which *his* agency contributes to how good he is at math.

This view of when our beliefs wrong provides us with information about the content of our directed doxastic duties. Presumably, if our beliefs wrong when they falsely diminish, then we commit a doxastic wronging against a person when we form such a belief about them. This implies that we have a directed doxastic duty not to form false diminishing beliefs about each other. That is, what we owe each other doxastically is to refrain from forming such beliefs. I call Schroeder's account of doxastic wronging the *false diminishment* account.

I have two main aims in this paper. The first is to argue against the false diminishment account on the grounds that it is morally overdemanding.[4] Nevertheless, I share the sentiment that our beliefs themselves are sometimes morally objectionable. Even though we do not owe it to each other not to form false diminishing beliefs about each other (and, as such, do not wrong each other when we form these beliefs), we should not throw out the baby with the bathwater: some of the beliefs we form about each other are *still* subject to moral scrutiny. Specifically, I suggest that they are sometimes disrespectful. By "disrespectful" I mean that our beliefs lead us to *undervalue* morally significant features of each other's personhood, such as our autonomous agency, character, intellect, dignity, identity, etc. Our beliefs can lead us to undervalue these aspects of each other's personhood *even if* it is not wrongful to form them. As such, my second aim is to defend an account of disrespectful belief which holds that our beliefs undervalue when they *falsely deflate*, i.e., incorrectly underestimate, morally significant features of each other's personhood.

One advantage of introducing the concept of a disrespectful belief is that we acquire a new hermeneutical and linguistic resource, one that we can use to help

[3] See, e.g., Schroeder (2018), Basu (2019a), Marušić & White (2018), and Fabre (2022).

[4] While I am generally skeptical that we can doxastically wrong each other and am sympathetic to arguments others have offered against this thesis (e.g., see Dandelet 2023 and Enoch & Spectre forthcoming) it is not my aim in this paper to argue against doxastic wronging. Rather, as suggested, it is to show why the false diminishment account is implausible.

understand, describe, and validate some of our negative emotional responses to what others believe about us. Another advantage is that the concept can help us salvage some of the compelling insights that proponents of doxastic wronging have even if it turns out that we cannot doxastically wrong each other. For example, even if I do not wrong you in virtue of falsely believing that you are not intelligent enough to succeed in a career in academia, I may nevertheless disrespect you in virtue of holding a belief that leads me to undervalue the worth of your intelligence. While I may not, strictly speaking, owe you an apology, it may still be the decent thing to do because I have undervalued something of moral significance. A third advantage is that the concept allows us to distinguish between disrespectful beliefs themselves and disrespectful belief formation processes. Being able to draw this distinction helps us take a step forward in understanding the whole of doxastic morality. A final advantage is that the concept of a disrespectful belief may enable us to offer a richer explanation of why certain paternalistic interventions are morally objectionable, specifically those that are motivated by or justified on the basis of beliefs which lead the paternalist to undervalue the worth of a person's agency.

I proceed as follows. In Section 2, I present the moral over-demandingness objection to the false diminishment account of doxastic wronging. In Section 3, I present my positive account of disrespectful belief. I conclude in Section 4.

2 The Moral Over-Demandingness Objection

Recall that the false diminishment account of doxastic wronging holds that we wrong each other in virtue of forming false diminishing beliefs about each other. An implication of this view is that in cases of mere epistemic bad luck – when I am justified in forming my false diminishing belief about you – I *still* doxastically wrong you.[5] But this implication is implausible because it is highly counter-intuitive to think that a person has done something wrong in forming a false diminishing belief that they otherwise have good reason to believe. To require that people suspend *all* morally risky beliefs except for the ones they know to be true renders the view morally overdemanding. People are imperfect reasoners as it is and, in light of this, we should already see it as an epistemic and (at least to some extent) moral victory when people form justified beliefs about each other. In support of this line of reasoning, consider the following two adaptations of Schroeder's (2018) cheating husband case.

[5] It is important to flag that those, like Basu & Schroeder (2019), who accept a theory of moral encroachment may reject the idea that it is possible to form justified beliefs which falsely diminish. While I do not believe that theories of moral encroachment correctly explain how moral and epistemic norms interact, I do not provide an argument in support of this claim in this paper. Rather, I am working on the assumption that we can form justified beliefs which falsely diminish, with the recognition that those who believe in moral encroachment may not be on board. For reasons to reject at least some forms of moral encroachment, see: Enoch & Spectre (forthcoming) and Fritz (2020). Additionally, while I do not believe it is incorrect to understand this as Schroeder's (2018) view of doxastic wronging (despite the fact that I am assuming a claim he would likely deny, i.e., that we can form justified false diminishing beliefs), I am open to thinking of it as "Schroeder's view of doxastic wronging absent the moral encroachment thesis."

Cheating Husband 1. Ava and Chris have been married for four years. They have had a relatively happy marriage – they raise two dogs together, travel frequently, and have a good group of friends. Ava decides to stop by Chris' favorite café to pick him up a mid-afternoon coffee. However, before entering, she sees that Chris is inside talking to an attractive woman. They seem to be getting along as they are both smiling at each other while they chat. Ava does not recognize this woman and can't think of any good reason why Chris would be at the café with her when he is usually at work. While Chris has never given Ava any reason to believe that he would cheat on her, Ava comes to the conclusion that this is what must be happening – why else would Chris be chatting with an attractive woman at his favorite café when he supposed to be at work?[6]

Cheating Husband 2. Ava and Chris have been married for four years. They haven't had the best marriage – Ava is aware that Chris has cheated on her on multiple occasions. Despite his cheating behavior, Ava has chosen to remain married to Chris in the hopes of working through it. Similar to the first case, Ava decides to stop by Chris' favorite café to pick him up a coffee and, before entering, sees Chris inside talking to an attractive woman. But unlike the first case, rather than jumping to the conclusion that Chris is cheating again, Ava decides, out of respect for their relationship, to suspend her judgment – she doesn't believe that she has enough evidence to risk falsely believing this of Chris. To help process what she's just seen, Ava calls her best friend, Sarah. Upon learning that Chris is talking to an attractive woman, Sarah asks Ava what this woman looks like. Ava reports "she's blonde, relatively tall, slender, and has a tattoo on the back of her neck." Sarah, upset to have learned this information, hesitantly informs Ava that while out to dinner with her husband two nights ago, she saw Chris with a very similar looking woman. She also shares that their banter seemed flirtatious. She didn't want to say anything to Ava in case it was nothing, but upon learning that Chris is with a very similar looking woman two days later, Sarah expresses her concern to Ava. Between Sarah's testimony and her own observation, Ava sadly comes to the conclusion that Chris is cheating on her again – the evidence, she believes, strongly supports this belief.

Suppose that Chris is not cheating on Ava in either case. The woman in the café (and at the restaurant) is a potential client and Chris' boss has asked Chris that he put in extra effort to try to secure her business. In order to satisfy this request, Chris decided to take her to dinner and buy her a mid-afternoon coffee.

I suspect that most of us share the intuition that Ava's doxastic behavior is morally objectionable in the first case. But it's not obvious that this is so in the second. In the first case, Ava clearly lacks sufficient evidence in support of the conclusion that Chris is cheating on her. Because Chris hasn't given her any independent reason to believe that he would cheat, we seem to think that, at the very least, she should have suspended belief about whether he is cheating on her. However, in the second

[6] This case is also similar to one that Dandelet (2023: 5) offers.

case, while it is unfortunate that Ava forms a false diminishing belief about Chris, it is reasonable to think both that she has strong evidence in support of it and that she has taken due care in forming it. While she may have been justified in believing that Chris was cheating when she initially saw him in the café (given his history of cheating), she decided to suspend belief instead, out of respect for their relationship. She only comes to believe that Chris is cheating after she is provided with additional (and otherwise reliable) testimonial evidence from her best friend in support of that conclusion. As such, it is reasonable to believe that, in the second case, Ava has discharged whatever doxastic duty she has to Chris, despite the fact that she ultimately forms a false diminishing belief about him.[7] To judge that she has wronged him despite her efforts to avoid forming such a belief would be overly critical.

The upshot is that if Ava has discharged whatever she doxastically owes Chris, then it follows that she does not have a directed doxastic duty not to form a false diminishing belief about him. I believe this point is generalizable: we do not owe it to each other doxastically not to form false diminishing beliefs about each other. To require this would be to ask too much of us. Thus, the false diminishment account of doxastic wronging is mistaken.

That this account is mistaken, however, does not preclude the possibility that we can doxastically wrong each other in virtue of forming beliefs with other contents.[8] It also does not preclude the possibility that we may wrong each other in virtue of performing (or omitting) certain epistemic actions – i.e., actions concerning how we come to form our beliefs – such as forming unjustified morally significant beliefs about each other.[9] While the paradigm understanding of doxastic wronging holds that doxastic wrongs consist in our beliefs, one might also think that we should broaden (or alter) the concept to include epistemic actions (or omissions).[10] That is, one might think that doxastic wrongs consist in the conclusions we draw based

[7] Even if one thinks that Ava is not justified in forming the outright belief that Chris is cheating (perhaps her evidence only permits her to be worried that he is cheating or to believe that he is probably cheating), my point remains if one thinks that it is *possible* for Ava to be justified in outright believing that Chris is cheating. That is, whatever further evidence one may think is needed for Ava to be justified in forming the outright belief that Chris is cheating, if one thinks that this scenario is possible, then one should agree that it is possible for Ava to discharge whatever doxastic duty she has to Chris, despite that fact that she forms a false diminishing belief about him.

[8] Though, views that require that we avoid forming certain true beliefs about each other are likely susceptible to the same worry. However, some, e.g., Fabre (2022) deny this and more would need to be said in order to extend the moral over demandingness argument to such accounts. I do not take on this task in this paper.

[9] Dandelet (2023) draws a similar conclusion on different grounds. She offers an interest-based argument against the view that our directed doxastic duties consist in our beliefs. She also seems open to the possibility that directed doxastic wrongs consist in our epistemic actions/omissions (e.g., the ways in which we gather and interpret the evidence). See also Enoch & Spectre (forthcoming) who suggest as much.

[10] Something worth mentioning is that those who offer Strawsonian or Kantian explanations for the wrong involved in a doxastic wronging (e.g., Marušić & White 2018 and Fabre 2022) seem to talk past Basu & Schroeder (2019). That we might owe some sort of mutual recognition to each other in forming beliefs about each other is a moral consideration that bears on the epistemic practices we choose to rely on. But, a failure to show each other mutual recognition (or a failure to collect evidence in a way that respects each other's autonomy) does not explain in virtue of what a person's *belief itself* is wrongful. However, according to a broader understanding of doxastic wronging which includes epistemic actions and omissions, these accounts are legitimate contenders when it comes to explaining the wrong involved.

on our total evidence, or the evidence we rely on in forming our beliefs, or the way we interpret our evidence, etc. Whether we broaden (or alter) our understanding of doxastic wronging or not, I do believe that appealing to these epistemic actions can help explain why we think Ava's doxastic treatment of Chris in the first case is morally objectionable. It is objectionable (at least in part) because she is too quick to form a negative, morally significant belief about him, i.e., that he is cheating on her. Thus, whether we classify Ava's behavior as a doxastic wronging or not, we seem to think that her doxastic treatment of Chris is objectionable at least in part because she forms an unjustified morally significant belief about him.

In partial defense of the false diminishment account, one might argue that it is not morally overdemanding to require that people avoid forming false diminishing beliefs which they are never justified in forming in the first place (i.e., on orthodox evidentialist grounds), such as racist beliefs. While this seems like a reasonable view, appealing to the epistemic actions that a person performs (or omits) can do all the work in explaining why forming these beliefs is morally wrong. For example, when someone forms the belief that another is morally inferior on the basis of their race, one plausibly wrongs them at least in part because one has formed a belief about them on the basis of bad evidence, e.g., false beliefs about the moral worth of their personhood, and has weighed these beliefs too heavily in one's deliberation, and not because one has formed a false diminishing belief about them as such.

Let's take stock. I've argued against the false diminishment account of doxastic wronging on the grounds that it is morally overdemanding to require that people never form false diminishing beliefs about each other. However, I share Schroeder's sentiment (and that of other proponents of doxastic wronging more generally) that some of our beliefs themselves are morally objectionable. For example, I agree that there does seem to be *something* morally objectionable about Ava's false belief that Chris is cheating. In the next section, I argue that some of our beliefs themselves are morally objectionable insofar as they are disrespectful. As stated in the introduction, this *does not imply* that they are wrongful. I defend an account of disrespectful belief and use it to explain why Ava's false belief about Chris is morally objectionable in both cheating husband cases.

3 Disrespectful Belief

The false diminishment account, as an account of doxastic wronging, provides us with the valuable insight that some of our beliefs are, in and of themselves, morally objectionable. But it incorrectly explains *why* this is. It is not because they wrong by falsely diminishing. Rather, it is because they disrespect by leading a person to *undervalue* the worth of a morally significant feature of another's personhood. Our beliefs lead us to do this when and only when they *falsely deflate*, i.e., incorrectly underestimate, the morally significant feature at hand.

Our beliefs must falsely deflate because only beliefs of this kind can lead a person to undervalue morally significant features of another's personhood. For example, Ava cannot undervalue the worth of Chris' loyal character if she has a true belief that he cheated on her. In this case, he wouldn't have a loyal character: he lowers his own

character by cheating and, as such, in believing that he cheated, Ava appropriately assesses the value of his character. Similarly, suppose Ava falsely believes that Chris *isn't* cheating on her, when he really *is*. Believing that Chris is more loyal than he really is does not lead her to undervalue the worth of his character. Rather, it is only when she underestimates Chris' loyalty that she undervalues it.

One might object to the proposed account on the grounds that true beliefs can also be disrespectful.[11] For example, suppose that Ava's belief that Chris cheated on her is true. This opponent may argue that if she forms this belief on the basis of insufficient evidence, then her belief undervalues the worth of Chris' character, despite its being true. However, there is an important distinction I suggest we draw between *disrespectful beliefs* and *disrespectful belief formation processes*. If Ava forms her true belief on the basis of insufficient evidence, mere statistical or demographic evidence, or a morally problematic generic (as I will discuss below), then, as I argue in Sheintul (2021), she forms her belief on the basis of a disrespectful belief formation process. Depending on the process she relies on, she may undervalue *different aspects* of Chris' personhood, e.g., his separateness of person or the extent to which facts about his agency contribute to his cheating behavior. But, the crucial point to make clear is that Ava's true belief *itself* is not disrespectful because it does not lead her to undervalue the worth of Chris' character as such. Because her belief is true, she has an appropriate assessment of his character: he is a disloyal cheater.

To head off another potential worry, I should also emphasize that I do not deny that false beliefs which overestimate can have negative downstream consequences (i.e., can indirectly cause harm). For example, suppose that a father consistently encourages his daughter to pursue a career in engineering based on a false belief that overestimates her aptitude for engineering.[12] Also suppose that his daughter takes his advice and comes to realize that she is miserable in her career. In this case, the father's belief indirectly causes his daughter harm by leading him to encourage her to pursue a career that she is not well suited for. Nevertheless, his belief *itself* is not disrespectful because it does not lead him to undervalue the worth of her aptitude.

Additionally, contra Schroeder (2018: 124), a person's belief must be *negative* for it to be disrespectful because only negative beliefs can deflate.[13] To see this, recall the case in which Phyllis believes that her Asian neighbor is good at math in virtue of believing the common stereotype that "Asians are good at math." Suppose Phyllis' belief about her neighbor is false. Phyllis' false belief cannot deflate because she overestimates, rather than underestimates, her neighbor's aptitude for math. In overestimating her neighbor's aptitude for math, Phyllis does not undervalue his intellect in any way and, as a consequence, her belief cannot be disrespectful.

Nevertheless, I share the sentiment that this case involves some form of disrespect. I suggest that we invoke the above distinction between disrespectful beliefs and disrespectful belief formation processes to help explain the source of

[11] E.g., see Fabre (2022) who defends the view that true beliefs can wrong and would, presumably, argue that true beliefs can be disrespectful on similar grounds.

[12] I draw from Schroeder (2018) in presenting this example.

[13] While Schroeder (2018) believes that a person's belief need not be negative in order for it to wrong, presumably he would also hold that it need not be negative to be disrespectful.

this disrespect. I suggest that it can be found in Phyllis' *belief formation process*, specifically her reliance on the stereotype "Asians are good at math." The stereotype "Asians are good at math," is a *generic*. According to Haslanger (2011: 183-84), a generic is a generalization that excludes quantifiers such as "all" or "some." The above generic takes the form "Fs are G," where F's stands in for "Asians" and G stands in for the property of being "good at math."[14] As Haslanger explains (2011: 189-90), when a speaker utters a generic statement of this form, they seem to imply that Fs are G *in virtue of what it is to be* F. Or, put differently, that G *essentially belongs* to F. For example, if Phyllis tells her friend that "Asians are good at math," she implies that Asians are good at math in virtue of what it is to be Asian. However, Phyllis' statement is misleading because, even if it is true that Asians are good at math, this fact is not explained by anything essential to being Asian. Rather, it is more likely explained by features of the social, cultural, or historical environment that many Asian individuals take part in.[15]

Not only is it misleading to *imply* that being good at math essentially belongs to being Asian, it is also disrespectful to *believe*, of any particular Asian individual, that they are good at math in virtue of being Asian. By engaging in this faulty process of essentialization, Phyllis undervalues her neighbor's agential contribution by underestimating (or flat out ignoring) the extent to which his agency contributes to his being good at math, e.g., the resolve he may continually exercise in developing and sharpening his math skills. As such, engaging in this process undervalues the contribution that her neighbor's agency makes to the development of his mathematical prowess and is therefore disrespectful. But, importantly, her true belief *itself* is not disrespectful because it does not lead her to undervalue his mathematical prowess.

Another morally relevant feature to call attention to is that Phyllis essentializes a *positive property*, namely "being good at math." However, suppose Phyllis were to essentialize a *negative property*, say that her Asian neighbor is bad at math, in virtue of believing that Asians, by nature, are bad at math. In this instance, not only would engaging in this faulty process of essentialization undervalue the extent to which her neighbor's agency contributes to his being bad at math, it would also undervalue the *equal worth of his intellect*. By essentializing this negative property, Phyllis conveys that her neighbor's intelligence is *inferior to* those who are not so constituted.

It is also worth mentioning that my account of what makes a belief disrespectful may also apply to other mental states, like hedged beliefs or credences. For example, suppose that instead of forming the belief that Chris cheated on her, Ava forms the belief that he probably cheated on her, or suppose she is ninety percent confident (i.e., she has a 0.9 credence) that he cheated. In my view, if it is false that Chris probably cheated on her, then her belief is disrespectful insofar as it falsely deflates, and thereby leads her to undervalue the worth of his character. The same is true of her high credence. However, if it were true that Chris probably cheated on her, but in fact he did not, then while Ava's hedged belief or high credence would not be

[14] For one of the earliest influential accounts of generics see Leslie (2008). For a concise explanation of three different kinds of generics, see Haslanger (2011: 184-85).

[15] I draw from Haslanger's (2011: 180) analysis of generics in making the former two points.

disrespectful, her outright belief would be. While it may still be practically wise to apologize for the hedged belief or high credence, on my account, neither of these mental states would be disrespectful.

To summarize, disrespectful beliefs are those which lead us to undervalue morally significant features of each other's personhood. Our beliefs lead us to undervalue these features when and only when they falsely deflate. For them to deflate, they must be negative. At the end of section 2, I claimed that this account can explain why Ava's false belief that Chris is cheating on her is morally objectionable in both cheating husband cases. We now have the resources needed to understand why this is. Her belief is objectionable because it disrespects Chris by falsely underestimating the worth of his character. So, while she does not doxastically wrong him in virtue of forming this belief (because she doesn't strictly owe it to him not to), she nevertheless disrespects him by undervaluing the worth of his loyalty. Additionally, there are at least two reasons why relying on a stereotype when forming a belief about a morally significant feature of a person may be disrespectful. First, when a person engages in a faulty process of essentialization they undervalue the extent to which facts about a person's agency contribute to the property's instantiation. Second, if the property they essentialize is negative, they undervalue the equal worth of a morally significant feature of another's person.

4 Conclusion

I have argued that while the false diminishment account of doxastic wronging is mistaken, we do sometimes form disrespectful beliefs about each other. As I mentioned at the outset, a theoretical upshot of this view is that we acquire a new hermeneutical and linguistic resource, one that we can use to help understand, describe, and validate some of our negative emotional responses to what others believe about us. It also allows us to explain why our beliefs themselves are sometimes objectionable even if we do not owe it to each other not to form them. As such, it can be seen as a compromising position between those who reject doxastic wronging altogether and those who accept it due to a strongly held intuition that our beliefs themselves – and not just what we do before or after forming them – are morally relevant.

A practical upshot of my view is that what we believe about each other really does matter from the moral point of view. As such, I agree with others who have suggested that morality might demand that we be cognizant of the beliefs we form about each other and the ways in which we come to form these beliefs.[16] Future research should aim to specify the doxastic duties that we may owe each other. It should also consider whether we can make sense of disrespectful belief by and toward groups. Pursuing these projects will continue to help us make progress on discovering and understanding the demands of doxastic morality.

[16] See Osborne (2020), Dandelet (2023), and Enoch & Spectre (forthcoming).

Acknowledgments I am indebted to Steven Norris for the many drafts he has read of this paper and for the helpful comments he has provided. I also wish to thank Rima Basu, Thomas Carnes, an anonymous reviewer, and audiences at the Central States Philosophical Association, The Ohio Philosophical Association, The Florida Philosophical Association, and the 14th Braga Meetings in Ethics and Political Philosophy for the challenging questions and thought-provoking feedback they've provided me with on the ideas presented in this paper.

Author Contributions Not applicable.

Funding Open Access funding enabled and organized by CAUL and its Member Institutions. Not applicable.

Data Availability Not applicable.

Code Availability Not applicable.

Declarations

Conflict of interest Not applicable.

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