**Epistemic Oughts of Attention**

Mona Simion

**1. Introduction**

In previous work (Simion 2023, 2024), I defended the following principle:

**Ought to believe** (**OTB**): A subject S (epistemically) ought to form a belief that *p* if S has sufficient and undefeated evidence supporting *p*.

In previous work, Stew Cohen (2016a) has defended the following principle:

**Conditional ought to believe (COTB)**: A subject S (epistemically) ought to form a belief that p only if (S has sufficient and undefeated evidence supporting p and S attends to p).

Cohen and I both agree that there are such things as epistemic oughts governing doxastic attitudes: this places our views squarely within positive epistemology - an epistemology that breaks with tradition in that it deals in epistemic obligations rather than mere epistemic permissions.

Alas, this is where our agreement ends: his COTB implies my OTB is false, in that it is too strong: in cases in which I have sufficient and undefeated evidence supporting p but I don’t attend to p, OTB predicts and COTB denies that I am epistemically required to form a belief that p.

OTB predicts there are epistemic oughts of attention: since, plausibly, forming a belief that p implies (at least in a minimal sense) attending to p, in cases in which I have sufficient and undefeated evidence supporting p OTB predicts that I (epistemically) ought to attend to p.

Which is it? Cohen’s COTB has a few good things going for it (1) non-negligeable prior plausibility: the literature overwhelmingly describes the normativity of attention in moral and prudential terms (e.g. Sosa 2021): the normativity of attention is the stuff of intellectual ethics. Furthermore, even optimists about there being instances of epistemic norm violation via attending/failing to attend to a particular subject matter describe such instances in terms of other, more familiar epistemic norms, having to do with the impermissibility of biased belief formation (Siegel 2017), problematic salience structures (Munton 2021, MS), or epistemic character (Watzl 2022). (2) prima facie naturalistic respectability: we are cognitively limited creatures. How plausible is it that we ought to form beliefs e.g. about everything that’s going on in our visual field? (3) prima facie extensional adequacy: there’s nothing (epistemically) wrong with me zoning out and thereby not paying attention to what’s going on around me.

In what follows, I first review the extant case in favour COTB and dismiss it (Section 2). I then offer several reasons to believe COTB is false (Section 3), and put forth a new proposal for epistemic norms of attention, in line with OTB.

**2. Cohen on Ought to Believe**

In his (2016a), Stew Cohen forcefully argues that a unified account of reasons to act and reasons to believe is not forthcoming. His main motivation for this has to do with what he takes to be insurmountable difficulties in offering a structurally symmetric reasons-based normative picture for both. For instance, Cohen argues, very plausible link principles for reasons to act and permissible and required action fail for belief. To take just the clearest example, it is permissible to perform act A when you have equally strong reasons for A and not-A, but it is not permissible to believe that p when you have equally strong reasons in favour of p and non-p.

In the same vein, Cohen argues, a crucial disanalogy occurs at the level of requirement link principles: first, in the case of action, it can happen that both A and not-A are (prudentially, morally etc) permitted. In the case of belief, however, on the standard view (upholding the uniqueness thesis[[1]](#footnote-1)), one’s evidence can support one and only one doxastic attitude towards p: belief, disbelief, or suspension. Second, and most importantly, in the case of action, a plausible link principle predicts that if only one course of action A is permitted, then A is obligatory. Generalising this link principle for belief, Cohen argues, would suggest that the epistemic normativity of belief is an epistemic normativity strongly populated with oughts: whenever a doxastic attitude (belief, disbelief, or suspension) is permitted, it is also required. This is a direct result of the uniqueness thesis in conjunction with the generalised link principle that turns unique permissions in obligations.

Cohen rejects this result: belief is different, he argues. And that is because, while in the case of action one does not have the option to not perform any of the alternatives, in the case of belief that is false: belief, disbelief, and suspension are not the only options: not forming any doxastic attitude is also an available option. In fact, it is the attitude that we have towards the vast majority of propositions, in virtue of our cognitive limitations. Here is Cohen:

[I]f you do not know me well, before I mentioned it, you had no attitude toward whether I have a sister. If you are rational, you have now suspended on whether I have a sister. So you went from not having any attitude toward the proposition that I have a sister, to suspending judgment on whether I have a sister. What was rational for you to believe concerning whether I have a sister prior to my raising the issue? Your evidence uniquely supports suspending judgment. So you were uniquely permitted to suspend. But given that you had never considered the question, you were not irrational for not having taken that attitude. That is to say, you were not required to suspend (2016, 433).

In turn, Cohen takes this case, together with the intuition that, given our cognitive limitations, we cannot possibly be required to have attitudes towards all myriads of propositions we have never considered, to motivate a restriction of epistemic oughts governing belief and suspension to facts that one has considered:

If we were required to have attitudes toward propositions we had never considered, we would all be massively irrational. Thus, before I raised the question, there was a unique rationally permitted attitude for you to have toward the proposition that I have a sister. But you were not required to have that attitude (2016, 433).

According to Cohen, then, the crucial reason why uniquely permitted beliefs differ from uniquely permitted actions, in that they don’t map on to obligations, has to do our cognitive limitations; epistemic ought implies can: since we cannot attend to all propositions, for the vast majority thereof it is permissible to have no attitude whatsoever. Oughts to believe (or suspend) only arise in cases in which two conditions are met: the subject’s evidence supports believing that p (or suspending on p), and the agent attends to p.

Here is a first pass at a reconstruction of Cohen’s argument:

1. A subject S can only attend to a limited number n of propositions at one particular point in time.
2. Ought implies can.
3. For any subject S, the number of propositions that S has sufficient and undefeated evidence for is higher than n.
4. It is false that S ought to attend to all propositions that S has sufficient evidence for (from 1-3).
5. S ought to believe p implies S ought to (at least in a minimal sense) attend to p.
6. It is false that S ought to believe all propositions that S has sufficient and undefeated evidence for (from 4 and 5).

(6) is the denial of the principle I started this paper with – OTB. If the argument works, OTB is false. At this point in the paper, the reader will not be surprised to find out that I don’t think the argument works. The culprits are (2) and (3). I will take them in turn.

*Epistemic Ought Does Not Imply Can*

A lot of ink has been spilled on the plausibility of ‘ought implies can’ in ethics,[[2]](#footnote-2) and if there is one result that is robustly evidenced is that ‘ought implies can,’ if unrestricted, is false. To see why, note that on all understandings of ability modals (modals such as ‘can’ ‘is able to’) in the literature, at a minimum, it being true that a subject S can phi implies that phi-ing is compatible with S’ properties.[[3]](#footnote-3) However, often, agents have properties they shouldn’t have, which limit their abilities: in many cases of this sort, ought-implies-can breaks down. Talbot (2016) offers a useful pair of cases to illustrate this:

*Ordinary racist:* Duke unjustly and intentionally discriminates against members of other races. This discrimination is endorsed by Duke. He is able to act otherwise.

*Uncontrollable racist:* Duke unjustly and intentionally discriminates against members of other races. This discrimination is endorsed by Duke. But his actions are due to facts about his character which he cannot change, nor has ever been able to change.

Uncontrollable racist is a straightforward case in which Duke cannot stop discriminating against other races in his actions, by any way of unpacking can: after all, by the description of the case, Duke has a property – internalised racism – that renders him unable to stop. Also, there is an important sense in which the cases are mis-named: uncontrollable racist Duke, is, actually, the more ordinary sort of racist than Ordinary Racist: those raised in societies with a long history of racism will often internalize and act on racist views (Gendler 2008; 201). Crucially, intuitively, both cases are cases of breaches of moral obligations not to act in racist ways – in spite of the difference in ability facts: the agents have similar reasons to apologize or make reparations for failing to *ϕ* in both (Talbot 2016). The fact that Uncontrollable Racist’s racism is more entrenched does not exempt him from moral obligations: one cannot be morally better off by tuning up one’s racism.

Importantly for our purposes here, epistemic ought follows suit: to see this, note that one result no epistemological theory should want is that one can be justified to believe or suspend based on sexist or racist bias. Consider, for instance, the following case:

**The Doctor Has the Flu**: Anna is an extremely reliable testifier and a medical expert in infectious diseases. She tells her colleague George that she has the flu. Due to sexist bias against women’s medical expertise, George doesn’t attend to what Anna says and continues believing she’s in good health.

George’s belief is not justified – and no reasonable epistemological theory should predict otherwise: one cannot be justified in bias-maintained doxastic attitudes (no matter whether the bias is part of the basis for belief formation, or merely the explanation as to why some evidence is not part of the basis for belief formation: one cannot be justified to believe that p simply by hiding from sources that support not-p). To see this further, note also the comparison between George and an ordinary case of epistemic injustice, where a slightly-less-sexist hearer does attend to Anna’s testimony, but dismisses it due to sexist bias. The latter is uncontroversially a case of lack of justification. But if so, so is the former: after all, just like one cannot be morally better off by tuning up one’s racism, surely our theories shouldn’t predict that one can be epistemically better off by tuning up one’s sexism.

Here is also a fairly uncontroversial link principle between justification and permissibility that both Cohen and I endorse:

Deontic Thesis: A belief that p/suspension on p is permissible only if it is justified.[[4]](#footnote-4)

From this it follows that George’s belief is not permissible. But ‘is permissible’ is the dual of ought: S ought not phi is equivalent to it is not the case that it is permissible for S to phi. Therefore, in the case above, George ought to revise his belief that Anna is in good health in light of her defeating testimony. But George, like Duke before him, cannot help it: he cannot but believe, by stipulation, in virtue of his deep-seated sexist bias. Unrestricted ‘epistemic ought implies can’ is false.

One might wonder whether these cases aren’t really cases of moral failure rather than cases of genuine epistemic failure to begin with. On this account of the data, the intuition of impropriety in *The Doctor Has the Flu* has a non-epistemic normative source: we think that George is doing something wrong because he’s doing something morally wrong in not attending to the female doctor: epistemic injustice, the thought would go, is the stuff of intellectual ethics, not of theory of knowledge proper. However, our intuitions are not fine grained enough to see the difference: theory is needed. Here is Ernie Sosa on this topic:

[T]he theory of *knowledge* […] is the department wherein we find the core issues of knowledge […] in the history of epistemology, by contrast with the wisdom of inquiry, and with the intellectual ethics wherein we find issues of epistemic justice and epistemic vice, broadly conceived. (2021, 71)

Here also is Richard Feldman:

It’s surely true that there are times when one would be best off finding new evidence. But this always turns on what options one has, what one cares about, and other non-epistemic factors. As I see it, these are prudential or moral matters, not strictly epistemic matters. (Conee and Feldman 2004, 190)

I don’t find this move particularly plausible: George’s failure is a genuinely epistemic failure. Furthermore, it is hard to see how, in the cases that exhibit morally problematic features, these could be instantiated without bad epistemic underpinnings. After all, one thing that the vast majority of the theorists of blame strongly agree with is that there is an epistemic condition on moral blame: very roughly, moral blameworthiness implies that one is not epistemically blamelessly ignorant that one is doing something wrong. But this suggests that in the case above George the sexist is doing something epistemically wrong as well. Otherwise, if he were epistemically blameless, he could not be morally blameworthy. But he is.

*Having Evidence*

Recall premise (3): where n stands for the maximum number of propositions a subject S can attend to at one particular point in time, for any subject S, the number of propositions that S has sufficient and undefeated evidence for is higher than n. Why should we think (3) is true? Here are a couple of relevant passages where Cohen writes in support of this:

No matter how strongly my evidence supports believing p, I am not irrational for not believing p, if I have not considered whether p. Suppose p is an obvious consequence of my evidence? I am clearly rationally permitted to believe p. Am I irrational for failing to believe p? Surely I am not. There are indefinitely many propositions that are obvious logical consequences of my evidence. Again, if we were required to believe all the obvious logical consequence of our evidence, we would all be massively irrational (2016a, 435).

Suppose I read a weather report that says there is a massive cold front moving through the upper Midwest. I am rationally permitted to believe that it is cold in Chicago. Am I required to so believe? Suppose I were in a rush and so distracted that I never considered whether it is cold in Chicago. Surely I am not irrational for failing to so believe (2016a, 436).

The problem in these passages is the underlying view of the evidential having relation: at several junctures, Cohen seems to assume that just because I am aware of p, and q obviously follows from p, I have evidence for q. In this, Cohen takes the evidential having relation and the evidential support relation to be independent: a subject S can, on this view, have evidence for p without appreciating the support relation between the relevant evidence and p. However, the having relation and the evidential support relation are not plausibly independent: one does not have evidence for p if one does not, in a sense to be specified according to one’s theoretical preferences, appreciate the evidential support relation. I don’t have evidence for all arithmetical truths just because I know the Peano axioms. My 8-year old daughter Mia doesn’t have evidence that the closure principle for knowledge fails when I read Dretske’s ‘Epistemic Operators’ to her. Say that, by a strange coincidence, and unbeknownst to anybody, whenever you wear read in Glasgow it rains in Spain. Do I now have evidence that it rains in Spain whenever we meet in Glasgow and I see that you’re wearing red? The answer is clearly no.

*Epistemic Cans and Epistemic Oughts*

Recall my reconstruction of Cohen’s argument:

1. A subject S can only attend to a limited number n of propositions at one particular point in time.
2. Ought implies can.
3. For any subject S, the number of propositions that S has sufficient and undefeated evidence for is higher than n.
4. It is false that S ought to attend to all propositions that S has sufficient evidence for (from 1-3).
5. S ought to believe p implies S ought to attend to p.
6. It is false that S ought to believe all propositions that S has sufficient and undefeated evidence for (from 4 and 5).

I have argued that – at least in this reconstruction – the argument doesn’t go through: 2 is false and 3 is false.

One might wonder at this stage, if there isn’t a better way to unpack Cohen’s argument that might go through more straightforwardly: after all, isn’t it intuitive, and didn’t we start by acknowledging that, since average adult human cognizers can’t uptake everything that’ is happening around them, any epistemological view that predicts that they ought to is problematic? Didn’t we also start by acknowledging that there’s nothing wrong with zoning out and not paying attention to any of the facts around one? And if so, doesn’t all this seem to suggest that one only has obligations to update on the subset of things that one actually does attend to?

It does not: first, it is true, of course, that any naturalistically respectable epistemological view will shy away from predicting epistemic oughts beyond human capability. Compatibly, it is open to any such view to predict that there are epistemic oughts that map on to human epistemic cans; that one ought to take up a humanly manageable subset of the large amount of things that are happening around one. Simply put: Just because you don’t have to pay attention to everything, it doesn’t follow that you don’t have to pay attention to anything. Let’s call this type of view a Subset View.

Second, note that permissibly ‘zoning out’ is not a counterexample to a Subset View more than doing mental math or sleeping are: depending on what one means by ‘zoning out’, it can be that either one is permitted to do so because what it involves is attending to a subset of facts withing one’s mind rather than in one’s visual field – which, all else equal is, of course, permissible on the Subset View. Or, alternatively, if zoning out just means shutting down in one form or another, it will come out just as permissible as sleeping on the Subset View: plausibly, epistemic norms only govern cognitive systems when they are ‘online’.

To sum up: our cognitive limitations don’t deliver the result Cohen wants: it is compatible with our cognitive limitations that we ought to pay attention to a particular set of facts that is manageable – quantitatively (they’re not too many), qualitatively (they’re not too complicated or otherwise hard to access or process), or environmentally (they don’t outstrip our physical reach capacities).

*Justifiers as Oughts*

I have started this paper by saying that I like the following principle:

**Ought to believe** (**OTB**): A subject S (epistemically) ought to form a belief that *p* if S has sufficient and undefeated evidence supporting *p*.

I then argued that Stew Cohen’s case for his favourite principle – COTB, according to which a subject S (epistemically) ought to form a belief that p only if: S has sufficient and undefeated evidence supporting p and S attends to p (and which implies that OTB is false) – gets in trouble at several junctures.

One might wonder at this stage whether there isn’t a simpler case to be made against OTB than the case in favour of COTB. After all, note that OTB, together with a moderate evidentialist assumption that one’s belief that *p* is propositionally justified to believe p if and only if there is sufficient and undefeated evidence for S supporting *p*, straightforwardly implies that epistemic justification is epistemic obligation (and, more generally, that justifiers are obligations). One might worry, at this stage: is that right? After all, the vast majority of the literature assumes that epistemic justification is mere epistemic permission.

A few things about this: first, I take it that what evidence resistance cases show is that this assumption was wrong all along. Mere epistemic permissions cannot, in virtue of their weak normative force, explain why the main characters in cases like *The Doctor Has the Flu* (epistemically) *ought* to take up some evidence that they fail to take up.

Second, there are in-principle theoretical reasons for which we should be suspicious of the thought that epistemic justification is mere epistemic permission. Here it goes: Note, first, that defeaters constitute epistemic obligations – when our justification is defeated, by definition, it is impermissible to ignore defeat and hold on to the corresponding doxastic attitude. Since it is impermissible to ignore defeaters, it follows that they constitute epistemic obligations (i.e., one epistemically ought to update on them), since it is always permissible to ignore facts that constitute mere permissions.

Note, second, that there is such a thing as merely partial defeat: these are garden variety cases in which the epistemic agent needs to weigh their evidence in favour of *p* against their evidence against *p*. If, at t1, Mary tells me that the train comes at 8 (granted that all good things epistemic are in place: she’s reliable, I trust her etc – plug in your preferred view of testimonial entitlement), I am justified to believe that the train comes at 8. If, next, you tell me that the train comes at 7 a.m., and Mary and you are, for all I know, equally reliable testifiers, my justification to believe that the train comes at 8 a.m. is partially defeated – I should lower my confidence in this being the case, but I don’t have sufficient epistemic support to move to outright believing that the train doesn’t come at 8 a.m. Similarly, I don’t have enough epistemic support to believe or disbelieve what you said either: it is impermissible both to form an outright belief that the train comes at 7 a.m. and to form an outright belief that it does not. Justifiers and defeaters can outweigh each other.

However, if defeaters constitute epistemic obligations, and if defeaters and justifiers can outweigh each other, it follows that justifiers constitute epistemic obligations as well: otherwise, if they were merely constituting permissions, they would be normatively inert against defeaters, since permissions are normatively inert against obligations. As such, it seems as though the mere possibility of partial defeat implies that justification maps on to epistemic obligation, rather than mere permission.

**3. Oughts to Attend**

If OTB is right - and COTB is false – there are such things as epistemic oughts to attend to propositions that one has sufficient evidence for. How does this work?

*Oughts to Attend to Evidence One Has*

On the account I favour, epistemic oughts to attend are delivered by the epistemic function of inquiry – that of generating knowledge. Since they are involved in generating moves in the practice of inquiry – such as beliefs, suspensions, credences and so on - our cognitive systems have the function of generating knowledge.[[5]](#footnote-5) Suppose you are attentively looking at a blue dot and form a belief that the dot is blue. We can now ask whether your cognitive system fulfilled its function. The answer to this question is yes if and only if your belief that the dot is blue qualifies as knowledge. We can also ask whether your belief forming system was functioning properly. And here the answer will be yes if and only if it is functioning in the way it does when reliably enough fulfilling its function in normal environmental conditions.[[6]](#footnote-6) producing the functional effect in the feedback loop, under normal conditions. In this way, functions give us two norms for assessing your belief: your belief is a good token of its type if and only iff your belief forming capacities have fulfilled their function of generating knowledge: a belief is good iff it is knowledge. In turn, your belief is justified iff it is the product of properly functioning cognitive capacities that have the function of generating knowledge.[[7]](#footnote-7)

The proper functioning of our cognitive system plausibly involves proper sensitivity to triggering conditions. After all, if that hadn’t been the case, it could not have generated knowledge in normal conditions to begin with, and would thereby fail to have the function to do so. It could not have generated knowledge that p without properly uptaking the information that p from the world, and even most importantly for our present purposes, it could not have generated knowledge that p without proper uptake of available *p-relevant* information from the environment: after all, were it not for proper such uptake, just like in The Doctor Has the Flu, the justification for the belief that p would have suffered from defeat.[[8]](#footnote-8) This suggests that the proper functioning of our knowledge-generating cognitive system is input dependent, in that it implies proper trigger response.

In our toy case above, the trigger condition is that there is a blue dot in plain view right in front of you. One important way in which your cognitive system can malfunction is by failing to take up the information when the triggering conditions obtain: by not taking up the information that there’s a blue dot right in front of you when the trigger conditions obtain – when there’s a blue dot right in front of you.[[9]](#footnote-9)

It is exactly this form of malfunctioning that allows my account to make crucial progress towards making room for epistemic norms of attention in our epistemology. It is not hard to see how: In cases of failures to attend to facts one has sufficient and undefeated evidence for, the problem lies with lack of information uptake. George the sexist falls short in that he fails to respond to epistemic triggers – i.e. testimonial information – in the proper way – i.e. by uptake and subsequent updating. George’s cognitive system, when properly functioning in normal conditions, takes up the relevant testimonial evidence and updates accordingly. When he fails to do so (e.g. as a result of the identity prejudice, but this need not be the case, what matters is the failure rather than its cause), his cognitive system is malfunctioning. And when the information that he fails to take up constitutes evidence against holding some doxastic attitude – in our case, belief - , we have a case of defeat.

Of course, there are limits to our trigger-responsiveness, since there are quantitative, qualitative, and environmental limitations on our information accessing and processing (Simion 2023, 2024): I lack the power to process everything in my visual field, or all the logical consequences of my beliefs, it’s just too much information. These limits will correspond to limitations of our obligations to attend, and, correspondingly, to the information that has defeating power for our justification. This is perfectly compatible with OTB: As I have argued in previous work (Simion 2023, 2024), these limits will also correspond to limitations to my body of evidence: a fact is only part of my body of evidence if it is part of the subset of facts that I am in a position to know. i.e. that my cognitive limitations allow me to take up at one particular point in time. In turn, this subset of facts will be delivered by an availability ranking: the more available n facts (most easily accessible for me) will be part of my body of evidence in cases in which my cognitive limitations only allow me to take up n facts. In other words, the evidential having relation corresponds to the being in a position to know relation, and it delivers the subset of facts that I ought to attend to, take up, and update on.

Finally: Sometimes, the information that should have been attended to, taken up, and updated by delivers full justification defeat. This is the case of sexist George: the doctor’s testimony is a decisively weighty reason against his belief on the issue. Other times, though, defeat is merely partial: in these cases, properly functioning cognitive systems will attend to, uptake, update, and correspondingly lower one’s confidence in the target proposition. When this doesn’t happen, we have a case of malfunction, and justification loss.

One might worry[[10]](#footnote-10) here that, while the view explains what goes wrong in the case at hand, it will not have the resources to explain all the relevant cases. Suppose that, in the doctor case, George started taking up lots of evidence, just not what the doctor says. For instance, George started doing math problems, noting the exact shades of colours in his environment, etc. Surely, this wouldn’t be good enough to get him off the hook. But if the norms are purely epistemic, as the view put forth claims, then presumably it’s ok for George to just to attend to enough available evidence; it doesn’t matter which. If it matters which, it starts to seem that something moral or practical might be going on – or so the objection goes.

A few things about this: first, recall that the account does not predict that just any subset of available facts constitute the evidence that George should take up: the most available n facts (most easily accessible for George) will be part of his body of evidence. In other words, the evidential having relation corresponds to the being in a position to know relation, and it delivers the subset of facts that George ought to attend to, take up, and update on. As such, insofar as Anna’s testimony does meet the availability conditions (it belongs to the most available subset of facts), George is subject to an epistemic ought to attend to it, take it up, and update on it – no matter what other facts he might be attending to.

Second, it is true that, should this not be the case – i.e. should the case be one where facts about maths and colours in the environment be more readily available for George, and surpass the number of facts he can attend to – *ceteris paribus*, the view will predict that it is not the case that he (epistemically) should attend to Anna’s testimony. But, I submit, that result is the correct result, in that as soon as we describe the case accordingly, the intuition of lack of justification disappears as well: if I am busy writing a philosophy paper, which takes up all of my cognitive resources, and I thereby fail to attend to what you’re saying, while I may be impolite, I remain epistemically justified in believing whatever I believe: after all, there is only so much I can do at one time.

Of course, the intuition will change in a case in which I should direct my attention to others’ testimony rather than my philosophy paper – maybe because e.g. the testifier is my kid asking me for lunch. In other words, cases in which it should be the case that I situate myself such that my most available set of facts includes my kid’s testimony. The next section will deal with exactly such cases.

*Oughts to Attend to Evidence One Should Have Had*

This concludes my account of epistemic obligations to attend to propositions that one has evidence for. At this stage, one important question arises: can there be epistemic obligations to attend to propositions that one does not have, but one should have had evidence for? In other words, obligations to attend to facts that one is not in a position to know, but in a position to (easily) come to know, by gathering further evidence? The answer is yes. First, here is a (painfully familiar) case that confirms this hypothesis:

**Climate Change**: Margaret believes anthropogenic climate change is not happening. The evidence that she bases her belief on strongly supports this: everyone she has talked to about this issue– her old neighbor Alice, and her cousin Julie from Texas – says that climate change is a hoax. Whenever the topic comes on TV, Margaret changes the channel: ‘after all,’ she thinks to herself, ‘she knows enough about the topic to know that there’s nothing to worry about’

Margaret is not justified to believe that climate change is not happening. That is because she ought to attend to expert testimony on the issue. Even though the evidence that she bases her belief on strongly suggests climate change is not happening, overwhelming amounts of evidence that she easily could have had, and should have had suggests otherwise.

Note, also, that since this normative failure on Margaret’s part intuitively affects her epistemic justification, it is a breach of an epistemic norm. Conversely, the ought to attend that applies to Margaret in this case is an epistemic ought. How should we understand what is going on here, theoretically?

Sandy Goldberg (2016, 2017, 2018) has championed, and I have, in previous work (2024), endorsed a (version of a) view according to which what is going on in these cases has to do with epistemic obligations sourced in the social roles occupied by these agents. I have argued that we can explain what is going on in cases like Climate Change in terms of justification defeat sourced in a breach of a constitutive epistemic norm, borne out by the constitutive function of Margaret’s social role as citizen. Since Margaret occupies the social role of citizen, she violates an epistemic norm of proper functioning for this role when she fails to maintain a minimal up-to-date understanding of facts that bear on her responsibilities as a citizen, by not attending to expert testimony that indicates that anthropogenic climate change is happening.

My version of the view (in contrast to Sandy’s) was epistemically purist, in that norms constitutive of social roles that I took to affect epistemic justification were norms that are generated by purely epistemic functions – such as generating knowledge or understanding. Social norms constituting social roles that are not conducive to epistemic function fulfilment are not epistemic norms, on this picture, and thus cannot affect epistemic justification. In this, on my version of the view (but not on Sandy’s) the social does not encroach on the epistemic, and epistemically bad social norms are not justification-affecting.

While I remain convinced that epistemic norms often constitute social roles, and that they often trigger obligations to inquire, I am not convinced anymore that this is the source of justification defeat in cases of failures in evidence gathering. A case from Matt McGrath[[11]](#footnote-11) convinced me social-role-constituting epistemic norms cannot be the source of defeat:

**Matt Does Not Watch Sports**: Consider a (very close possible) society where there is a social role ‘man’ which is constituted such that occupants of this social role should inquire and learn about the results of sports’ games. Our subject – call him Matt – however doesn’t care and doesn’t conform to it and so doesn’t take up the relevant easily available evidence.

Is Matt going wrong epistemically? One wouldn’t think so. What is, then the difference with Margaret’s case – other than the moral, prudential factors involved? And if it is the moral and prudential factors that make the difference, doesn’t this suggest that a purist view will not be able to explain justification-affecting failures of evidence gathering? And doesn’t this observation, in turn, suggest epistemic justification is pragmatically encroached? It turns out that, while my old view deals well with epistemically-bad (non-knowledge conducive) social norms, it struggles to explain non-justification affecting epistemic norms that are social role-constitutive.

Matt’s case has convinced me that the purist should not look for the source of defeat from failures in evidence gathering in norms constituting social roles. That being said, in what follows, I will argue that the purist has an easier resource at hand: once more, it is available evidence.

Recall Margaret’s case once more: Margaret believes anthropogenic climate change is not happening, based on evidence that she has and strongly supports this belief: everyone she has talked to about this issue says climate change is a hoax. As a result, whenever the topic comes on TV, Margaret changes the channel. Note, however, that, as it stands, the case under-describes Margaret’s epistemic situation; to see this, consider the following two variations of the case:

**Climate Change\***: Margaret\* believes anthropogenic climate change is not happening. The evidence that she bases her belief on strongly supports this: everyone she has talked to about this issue– her old neighbor Alice, and her cousin Julie from Texas – says that climate change is a hoax. Furthermore, Margaret\* grew up and lived her entire life in a remote village where all the people she trusts – and that proved reliable and sincere in the past on all kinds of topics – told her mainstream media and scientists are not to be trusted, because of their financial incentives. As a result, whenever discussions of climate change come on TV, Margaret\* changes the channel: ‘after all,’ she thinks to herself, ‘she knows enough about the topic to know that there’s nothing to worry about’

**Climate Change\*\***: Margaret\* believes anthropogenic climate change is not happening. The evidence that she bases her belief on strongly supports this: everyone she has talked to about this issue– her old neighbor Alice, and her cousin Julie from Texas – says that climate change is a hoax. Margaret\*\* grew up and lived her entire life in a big city, with plenty of access to evidence that suggests that one should listen to expert testimony before making up one’s mind on a topic that one is not a specialist in, and that mainstream media is a reliable source of information. Nevertheless, Margaret\*\* doesn’t care enough about the topic to investigate further: whenever discussions of climate change come on TV, Margaret\*\* changes the channel: ‘after all,’ she thinks to herself, ‘she knows enough about the topic to know that there’s nothing to worry about’.

I submit that Margaret\*, but not Margaret\*\*, is justified to believe anthropogenic climate change is not happening: she relies on reliable (albeit not infallible) testimony that provides her, on one hand, with evidence that climate change is not happening, and, on the other hand, with undercutting defeaters[[12]](#footnote-12) to expert and media testimony. In contrast, Margaret\*\* should have inquired better, and her belief that climate change is not happening is unjustified. But note that the salient difference between Margaret\* and Margaret\*\* is not one in social role 9norin practical or moral stakes), but rather one in evidential situation. Margaret\*\* could have done better, given her evidence: as opposed to Margaret\*, she is in a position to know that she should listen to expert testimony before forming beliefs on topics she is not a specialist on, and she has no undercutting defeat to mainstream media and scientific testimony. In contrast, Margaret\* is justified to dismiss expert and mainstream media testimony, due to undercutting defeat. The difference in justification, once more, boils down to a difference in available evidence.

**4. Conclusion**

Ought does not imply can anywhere in the normative landscape. In ethics, prudential normativity, and epistemology alike, one cannot hide from obligations by just putting themselves in a position not to be able to fulfil them: locking myself in the room and throwing away the key doesn’t excuse me from breaking my promise to meet you for lunch at 12, even though, strictly speaking, now that I have thrown away the key, I cannot keep my promise anymore. Spending all my money on expensive clothes does not excuse me from paying my mortgage, even though, now that I spent it all, strictly speaking, I can’t pay my mortgage anymore. Finally, switching the channel whenever evidence against beliefs that I hold dear may be presented on TV does not make me justified to continue holding these beliefs. I ought to come for lunch at 12, I ought to pay my mortgage, and I ought to attend to issues that my evidence suggests I should investigate further.

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1. For an excellent overview, see e.g. Kopec and Titlebaum 2016. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See also e.g. (Ryan 2003) for excellent work on this. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. For the existential account see (Kratzer 1977, 1981), for the universal account see (Brown 1988), and for the conditional account see (Cross 1986). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Or ‘rational’, to use Cohen’s preferred terminology (2016b). I don’t like to distinguish between these notions, and it will be of no consequence for this paper to do so. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. I have defended this claim extensively in previous work (e.g. Kelp & Simion 2017, 2020, 2023, Simion 2024, 2023, 2021a,b,c,d, 2019a,bc, 2018, 2016, Simion & Kelp 2018a,b), rehearsing these arguments falls outside the scope of this paper. See also Williamson 2000. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. For etiological theories of function, see e.g. Milikan 1984, Neander 1991a,b, Godfrey-Smith 1994. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. This kind of view has a number of noteworthy theoretical advantages, including that it is naturalistically respectable, and that it solves some longstanding problems for justification externalism: it allows us to accommodate the presence of justification in Gettier and new evil demon cases (since these are cases where beliefs are formed by properly functioning cognitive capacities that have the function of generating knowledge); it also explains the absence of justification in clairvoyant cases and lottery cases (clairvoyance lacks the function of producing knowledge). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Note, crucially, that this gives my knowledge-first view a strategic advantage over a truth-first functionalist view (a la Millikan 1984). A truth-function, even a reliable-truth function, does not guarantee that proper functioning in normal conditions involves defeat sensitivity. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Not all proper functioning is input-dependent in this way: it will depend, of course, on whether the trait (artefact etc) in question has a function that involves particular targets of uptake or not. The proper functioning of the heart is independent on whether it uptakes blood or orange juice, insofar as it pumps it well. In contrast, lungs placed in normal conditions that fail to uptake oxygen are improperly functioning. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Thanks to Matt McGrath for pressing me on this. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. In his comments on an earlier version of this paper. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. See Pollock (1987) for the classic unpacking of undercutting defeat, and McGrath 2021 for recent discussion. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)