

## Doxastic Harm

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In this paper, I will consider whether, and in what way, doxastic states can harm. I'll first consider whether, and in what way, a person's doxastic state can harm her, before turning to the question of whether, and in what way, it can harm someone else.

### 1 Can a belief directly harm the believer?

It seems obvious that a person's beliefs can be harmful to her. Beliefs can be painful, like the belief that your child is being bullied, or the belief that your partner is unfaithful. Beliefs can lead a person to act against their interests, as when a person's believing some conspiracy theory leads them to become violent and blow up their life, or when a person's believing that the glass in front of them contains lemonade leads them to drink poison.

These are cases in which a belief causes, or brings about, something that is harmful, like pain. But do beliefs ever *directly* harm the believer, in the way that hedonists believe that pain directly harms? Are there any beliefs that are among, as Kagan puts it, the "elements which themselves directly contribute to a life going badly"? (Kagan 2014:261)

Consider beliefs that are part of a pattern of self-disrespect—believing you are worthless or undeserving of love, for example. Or beliefs that partly realize unhealthy relationships—believing that your partner may permissibly control who you talk to or see, for example. Or beliefs that are a part of having an unhealthy body image—falsely believing that you are too fat, for example. These are, at first blush, beliefs that harm, not (or not only) by causing some further harm (as a person's belief that she is worthless might cause her to harm herself physically), but directly.

But are these really beliefs? Or, better, are they *merely* beliefs? These are evaluative judgments, which many people think are complex attitudes that comprise not only a belief or some belief-like cognitive aspect but also various non-cognitive aspects. On this view, a person's evaluative judgment that she is worthless, for example, is partly constituted by her feeling unimportant, or undeserving, or hopeless; by her failing to value herself; by her having lowered expectations regarding how others treat her; by her lacking motivation to advocate or care for herself; and so on. To the extent that the cognitive and non-cognitive elements of an evaluative judgment can be separated (assuming that this is even possible), we might suspect it is not the cognitive elements that are directly harmful, but the non-cognitive elements. If we could identify putative

examples of directly harmful beliefs that are merely descriptive, we could be more confident that these are genuine cases of directly harmful beliefs—or, at least, genuine cases in which the cognitive element of the belief is what is directly harmful.

To this end, consider beliefs that comprise misunderstanding. Many philosophers have found plausible the idea that there are epistemic goods that directly benefit a person.<sup>1</sup> Here are some passages from a few of them.

Knowledge and other positive epistemic statuses are worthy of pursuit by inquisitive creatures not (or not just) because they are instrumentally valuable...What makes them worthy of pursuit for inquisitive creatures like ourselves is that, like health, friendship, and love, their attainment is partly constitutive of our well-being. (Neta 2007: 352)

Simply knowing about oneself and one's world is part of a good life. We value, not as an instrument but for itself, being in touch with reality, being free from muddle, ignorance, and mistake. (Griffin 1986: 67)

It is obvious that those who are well informed, etc., simply *are* better-off (other things being equal) than someone who is muddled, deluded, and ignorant, that the state of the former is better than the state of the latter, not just in this particular case or that, but in all cases, as such, universally, and *whether I like it or not*. Knowledge is better than ignorance. (Finnis 2011: 72)

Having an understanding of the world seems good for a person—not merely instrumentally good, but good for its own sake, considered in itself. By the same token, having a deeply mistaken view of the world seems bad for a person, considered in itself. Consider some examples from fiction. In *The Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt*, Kimmy and three other women were held captive for fifteen years in an underground bunker, convinced by their kidnapper that there had been a nuclear apocalypse which they alone had survived. In addition to the clear harm of spending fifteen years in a bunker, Kimmy is worse off simply in virtue of having such a deeply mistaken view of what the world is like. In *The Truman Show*, Truman is the unwitting star of a reality TV show; in *The Matrix*, people are unwittingly being fed their experiences by machines who maintain their physical bodies in pods. In virtue of having such deeply mistaken views of what the world is like, these people are worse off. In *Blade Runner*, Rachael, a bioengineered humanoid, believes she is human. Her memories of the years before her creation—memories of playing with her brother, of watching a spider build a web—are entirely fabricated.

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<sup>1</sup>Non-philosophers have also found this plausible. Consider this quote from former Chief Economist of the World Bank Kaushik Basu: “I believe that the pursuit of knowledge and aesthetic beauty — in poetry, literature, mathematics and in many other fields — is an end in itself. Just harping on the utilitarian aspects of these branches is no good...”. (Basu 2012)

Rachael has a deep misunderstanding of herself. Whatever other harms (or benefits<sup>2</sup>) of this misunderstanding, the misunderstanding itself makes Rachel worse off.<sup>3</sup>

Examples like these suggest that a person's beliefs can constitute a direct harm to her. In the remainder of this paper, I'll consider whether a person's beliefs can ever constitute a direct harm to someone else.

## 2 Can a belief (or failure to believe) constitute a direct harm to someone else?

The question, to put it one way, is whether there are *doxastic harms*, where a doxastic harm occurs if B is directly harmed by A's believing or not believing something—by A's *doxastic state*, as I will say, to simplify presentation, trusting the reader to remember that I will use “doxastic state” to mean only these two doxastic states: believing, and not believing.<sup>4</sup> Can a person be directly harmed by another person's doxastic state?

To establish whether a putative case of doxastic harm is a genuine doxastic harm, we must establish, first, whether it is a genuine harm—i.e. whether B really is *harmed*, and, second, whether it is a distinctively *doxastic* harm—i.e. whether it is the doxastic state, rather than some other mental state, or something further ‘upstream’ or ‘downstream’ from the doxastic state, that harms. I'll take each point in turn.

There are a broad and a narrow sense of ‘harm’. In the broad sense, anything that reduces a person's well-being harms them. In this sense of ‘harm’, one can harm someone not only by inflicting a positive prudential bad, but by withdrawing a prudential good. For example, if pleasure directly benefits and pain directly harms, one can harm another by causing them pain—say, by telling filthy jokes that make them uncomfortable, or by doing a mean-spirited impression of them—or by ending some pleasure of theirs—by causing them to lose concentration when they're lost in a good book, for example, or by talking about subjects at the dinner table that cause them to no longer take pleasure in their meal. In the narrow sense of “harm,” merely withdrawing a prudential good is insufficient for harm. Harms, in this sense, are those that present as positive prudential bads, or what have been called intrinsic or robust bads (Kagan 2014).<sup>5</sup> In this discussion of doxastic harms, I am most interested in harms in this narrow sense.

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<sup>2</sup> In general, something can be harmful, even directly harmful, in some ways, while beneficial in others, as when an experience of intense pain leads a person to get a diagnosis that saves their life. Likewise, a misunderstanding can be both directly harmful and instrumentally valuable. For example, someone may have a deep misunderstanding of physics, but, not realizing this, take great satisfaction in their (presumed) understanding.

<sup>3</sup> This isn't to say that *all* misunderstandings directly harm the believer. Perhaps there are trivial things it would do a person little or no harm to misunderstand. However, examples like these suggest that at least some misunderstandings directly harm the believer.

<sup>4</sup> To keep the topic manageable, I restrict discussion to these two doxastic states—believing and not believing—though I expect that much of what I say about these states may also be said, *mutatis mutandis*, of certain other doxastic states, such as credences. I also restrict discussion to interpersonal doxastic harms, though if we allow that A and B could be the same person, the category of doxastic harms potentially includes intrapersonal harms.

<sup>5</sup> I say I'm interested in harms that “present as” positive prudential bads, rather than those that *are* positive prudential bads, because, for some goods and bads, the line between prudential bads and withdrawals of prudential benefit is vague, if it can coherently be drawn at all. I think there is a genuine difference here, but since I have yet to hear a clear account of it,

My question is whether there are distinctively *doxastic* harms. To establish whether a putative case of doxastic harm is a genuine doxastic harm, we must establish, first, whether it is the doxastic state (i.e. believing or not believing) that harms B, rather than some other mental state of the A (e.g. A's loathing of B). (Since, as discussed in Section 1, it's unclear that the harm of harmful evaluative judgments lies in the doxastic states involved, rather than the non-cognitive elements of the judgment, I will restrict my search to merely descriptive beliefs, rather than evaluative judgments or beliefs that partially constitute evaluative judgments.)

We must also establish that the harm lies in the doxastic state, as opposed to lying in something further 'upstream' or 'downstream'.<sup>6</sup> In some cases where we may be tempted to say there's a doxastic harm, the harm is located further upstream—say, in something harmful a person did that resulted in their forming the belief. For example, if I read your private diary and learn that you liked pickles—something I might have learned from your Facebook page—the harm in this case is not located in my belief that you like pickles, but in the violation of your privacy involved in reading your diary. This is not a doxastic harm. In other cases where we may be tempted to say there's a doxastic harm, the harm is further 'downstream'—say, in some harmful consequence of the belief. For example, imagine that I learn that you think my dancing is ridiculous and it hurts my feelings. This is not a doxastic harm; for this to be a case of doxastic harm, the harm must lie not (or not only) in my hurt feelings, but in the belief whose discovery caused them. (Recall that in doxastic harms the belief harms *directly*.)

I am looking, then, for harms that are located, at least in part, in the doxastic state; I'm not interested in harms that are exhaustively explained by appeal to things other than the doxastic state.

Recently there has been some interesting work on doxastic wronging, where "a doxastic wronging happens if one person wrongs another in virtue of what she believes". (Basu and Schroeder 2019:181)<sup>7</sup> I will not assume that doxastic harm implies doxastic wronging. Nor will I assume that doxastic harm implies moral or epistemic culpability on someone's part. Harm in general does not imply any of these things. I can be harmed by your involuntary actions, as when you kick me due to a muscle spasm. I can be harmed by actions of yours that are morally justified, as when you get me fired for embezzling from our employer. I can be harmed by a meteor falling on my head. Since harm in general doesn't imply wronging, moral culpability, or epistemic culpability, there is no reason to assume that doxastic harm implies any of these things. These things

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I'll generally rely on intuitions about what's a positive bad rather than a withdrawal of a good, and be especially keen on finding the former.

<sup>6</sup> I inherit the upstream/downstream language from Basu and Schroeder 2019.

<sup>7</sup> Basu and Schroeder actually say: "a doxastic wronging happens if one person wrongs another in virtue of what she believes *about him*." (Basu and Schroeder 2019:181, emphasis added). I think it is helpful to understand doxastic wronging, as a category, broadly enough to include cases where the wronging of B lies not in some individual belief A has about B, but in some other belief. Consider, for example, the cases of testimonial injustice due to credibility deficit to which Miranda Fricker and others draw attention. (Fricker 2007) In at least some such cases, when A fails to accept B's testimony, the wronging lies not in some belief A has about B, e.g. that B is unreliable, but in something else, e.g. in A's ignoring B altogether. (Wanderer 2012.)

may play a role in the explanation of the harm in some cases, but we shouldn't assume that they necessarily do so.

I also will not assume that doxastic wronging implies doxastic harm. Wronging in general does not imply harm; it seems possible for someone to wrong another person, even if that person is not harmed. For example, it seems a person can violate another person's rights—violating their property rights by trespassing or stealing from them, for example—even if this violation has no material impact on the person; in this case, it seems, the person has been wronged, though not harmed. Of course, sometimes the fact that someone has been harmed by an action is part of the explanation of why that person has been wronged by the actor. It is natural to explain the wronging involved in, for example, telling malicious lies about a person, or doxing them, or tripping them as they pass, by appeal to the harm (or risk of harm) these actions inflict on the wronged individual. Likewise, in putative cases of doxastic wronging, the fact that someone has been harmed by a belief is often a natural part of the explanation of why they have been wronged by the believer. (Indeed, harm is sometimes appealed to explicitly in discussions of doxastic wronging. (Basu 2019, Wanderer 2012.)) However, nothing I say here should be taken to preclude the possibility that there are cases of doxastic wronging that are not cases of doxastic harm.

This, then, is what I shall mean by 'doxastic harm'. My question is whether there are such harms. Before diving in, two comments about how I will proceed.

First, much philosophical work on well-being at the moment is theory-driven: philosophers defend and raise objections to theories of well-being, such as hedonism, desire satisfactionism, and value-fulfillment theory. One way to approach the question of whether there are doxastic harms, then, would be to run through the various philosophical theories of well-being and note the implications of each for the existence of doxastic harms. (If hedonism's true, there are no doxastic harms, since only pain directly harms. If desire satisfactionism is true, there are doxastic harms, since we can have an aversion to someone believing or not believing something.) This would not make for a very interesting paper. Instead, I will proceed by offering some examples of ways in which someone's doxastic state appears to directly harm someone else. In this way, I hope to give the reader at least *pro tanto* reason to believe that there are genuine doxastic harms. I will leave it to those who have independent theoretical commitments to decide how the points I raise bear on those commitments.

Second, some of the recent philosophical work on doxastic wronging (and doxastic harm, to the extent it is mentioned in that literature) concerns beliefs where the wronging derives from systemic or institutional racism, sexism, or other unjust social hierarchy. A paradigm example of this type of case is the incident described by Black historian and Presidential Medal of Freedom recipient John Hope Franklin, in which he was mistaken for a waiter at a club of which he was a member. (Franklin 2005; introduced to this literature by Gendler 2011.) Other ostensible examples of doxastic wronging are of a more personal nature, such as the case in which someone smells wine on her partner's sleeve and immediately concludes he's had a drink (Basu

2019, Basu and Schroeder 2019), or the case in which someone doesn't believe his spouse that he snores (Hazlett 2017). I think that the cases in which systemic or institutional injustice plays a key role in the explanation of why a belief harms someone require special treatment, and so I'll set these cases aside, in hopes that future research will give the opportunity to give them due consideration.

### 3 A putative case of doxastic harm

It will be helpful to start by considering a putative case of doxastic harm. Rima Basu offers the following as an example of a doxastic wronging and harm.<sup>8</sup>

Suppose that Mark has an alcohol problem and has been sober for eight months. Tonight there's a departmental colloquium for a visiting speaker, and throughout the reception, he withstands the temptation to have a drink. But, when he gets home his partner, Maria, smells the wine that the speaker spilled on his sleeve, and Mark can tell from the way Maria looks at him that she thinks he's fallen off the wagon. (Basu 2019:917; see also Basu and Schroeder 2019)

Basu claims that Mark is harmed by Maria's belief. Let's consider this as a putative case of doxastic harm, in the sense established above. Is Mark directly harmed by Maria's belief?

The first thing to note is that the case is under-described along several important dimensions. What is Maria's overall attitude? Is she, for example, disappointed, disgusted, sympathetic, supportive? What's the interpersonal backstory? Did Mark's drinking cause problems in their marriage? Did he promise Maria he wouldn't drink? What *is* Maria's belief? Is it, for example, that Mark drank wine, or that Mark broke his promise, or that Mark's a lousy drunk? What's the epistemic status of Maria's belief? Was it, for example, epistemically or rationally required, permitted, or forbidden? All of these are things that plausibly bear on whether there's a doxastic harm in this case. Our question, then, is not whether Maria's belief constitutes a doxastic harm, but rather: in what versions of this story, if any, does Maria's belief constitute a doxastic harm, and what explanation—or explanations<sup>9</sup>—can we give of that harm?

One important thing that must be determined is whether Maria's attitude is (merely) a belief (e.g. that Mark drank wine) or an evaluative judgment (e.g. that Mark's a lousy drunk). Mark apparently has alcohol use disorder; someone with an understanding of this disease wouldn't take the fact that he backslid to indicate something negative about his character—that Mark is weak, for example. But not everyone does have an understanding of this disease (and not everyone is consistent); perhaps we are to understand Maria as making

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<sup>8</sup> Basu's main focus is wronging, but she often says that Mark is harmed by Maria's belief (though she may at times be somewhat eliding the distinction between the two). (Basu 2019: 917-918)

<sup>9</sup> There's no reason to think that there must be one and only one explanation of doxastic harm. Different beliefs might be harmful in different ways, and the same belief might be harmful in more than one way.

an evaluative judgment—that Mark is pathetic or contemptible in virtue of trying and failing to maintain sobriety, for example.

Basu’s explanation of how Maria’s belief harms Mark suggests that this is indeed the way Basu is understanding the case. The central explanation that Basu offers of the harmfulness of Maria’s belief lies in Maria’s failure to adequately recognize Mark’s personhood. Citing a Kantian influence, Basu writes that there are cases in which, in having a belief, the believer fails to acknowledge or relate to another as a person, rather than as an object. (Basu 2019: 928, Basu 2021: 109.) In such cases, she writes:

[A]nger or dismay is an appropriate reaction to the beliefs in question because these beliefs express or betray moral indifference or insufficient regard. They are responses to a way of looking at another person not as a person, but as an object that is determined by causal laws, as something whose behaviour is to be predicted. It is to step back from seeing them as [a] person. (Basu 2019: 922-923)

According to this explanation, Mark is harmed by Maria’s belief because it expresses or betrays moral indifference or insufficient regard for Mark. Basu describes Maria’s attitude toward Mark in various ways. She says both that Maria sees Mark as an object, and that she sees him not as a person. (It is worth distinguishing the two because we might think it’s only the latter that is a harm, not the former.<sup>10</sup>) It’s said that she sees him as something determined by causal laws, something whose behavior is to be predicted.<sup>11</sup> Elsewhere Basu uses the language of respect. She notes that, as social beings, we “depend upon others for our self-esteem and self-respect”, and that “[r]espect and esteem...are not mere matters of how we’re treated in word or deed, but also a matter of how we’re treated in thought.” (Basu 2021: 109) She thinks that Maria’s belief amounts to a failure of esteem or respect, or perhaps a failure to adequately support Mark’s self-esteem or self-respect, or perhaps both of these.<sup>12</sup> None of these explanations of the putative harm in this case make sense if the belief in question is the merely descriptive belief that Mark has had a drink. To see this, consider two possible ways of fleshing

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<sup>10</sup> The Kantian view is that we may treat people as means, but that we may not treat them *merely* as means—that is, we may not use them without at the same time respecting their personhood. So too does it seem that what is morally problematic is not treating someone as an object, but treating someone *merely* as an object- objectifying them without at the same time recognizing and respecting their personhood—or, more modestly, if the objectification “does not take place in a larger context of regard for humanity” (Nussbaum 1995: 289). The same is true, it seems to me, for harm: it is not being treated as an object *per se* that directly harms, but being treated as a non-person. Likewise for being *regarded* as an object or a non-person, respectively.

<sup>10</sup> A central example she gives in explication of this point is that of Sherlock Holmes. The people Holmes meets are annoyed with him, Basu says, not only because the beliefs he forms about them are negative. What they are annoyed by (and rightly so, Basu thinks) is “the manner in which Sherlock Holmes forms beliefs about people. He observes everyone as objects to be studied, predicted, and managed.” (Basu 2019:920)

<sup>11</sup> A central example she gives in explication of this point is that of Sherlock Holmes. The people Holmes meets are annoyed with him, Basu says, not only because the beliefs he forms about them are negative. What they are annoyed by (and rightly so, Basu thinks) is “the manner in which Sherlock Holmes forms beliefs about people. He observes everyone as objects to be studied, predicted, and managed.” (Basu 2019:920)

<sup>12</sup> She also invokes the Strawsonian “participant stance” that Marušić and White (2018) argue is important for understanding doxastic wrongdoing.

out the case. Maria<sub>1</sub> forms the belief Mark has had a drink, and, upon forming the belief, forms the evaluative judgment that Mark's a lousy drunk and feels contempt for him. Maria<sub>2</sub> forms the belief that Mark has had a drink, and, upon forming the belief, feels nothing but empathy, compassion, and a renewed commitment to supporting him. Reflecting on Maria<sub>1</sub> and Maria<sub>2</sub> should prompt us to wonder whether simple descriptive beliefs, like the belief that Mark has had a drink, could really bear the kind of relationship to the disrespectful attitudes Basu describes. Could a merely descriptive belief, e.g. that Mark drank wine, express or betray moral indifference or insufficient regard? Such a descriptive belief might *lead* some people to have an attitude of disrespect, if they think that alcoholics are contemptible; if others' contempt harms us, then the belief would cause harm. However, in that case, the belief is merely a causal source of a downstream (putative) harm, rather than a genuine doxastic harm, in the present sense. Merely descriptive beliefs do not seem to be candidates for expressing or betraying (or, as I would put it, partly constituting) disrespect.

For Maria's belief in this case to plausibly constitute a direct harm to Mark, then, the belief must not be the merely descriptive belief that Mark has had a drink, but an evaluative judgment, e.g. that Mark's pathetic or a lousy drunk. However, for reasons explained above, evaluative judgments are problematic as examples of doxastic harm, since it is not clear that the harm lies in the doxastic state, rather than the non-cognitive elements of the evaluative judgment (e.g. the conative, affective, or motivational elements).

Are there any merely descriptive beliefs that plausibly constitute doxastic harms? In the next section, I will give *pro tanto* reason to think that there are by giving some examples of ways in which a person's doxastic state can apparently directly harm someone else.

#### **4. Genuine doxastic harms**

Here are some examples of ways in which, I propose, a person can be directly harmed by another's doxastic state.

##### ***Privacy infringements***

One way in which someone's believing something can directly harm someone else is by infringing on that person's privacy. The concept of privacy is vague and multifaceted. We can distinguish, for example, a number of different kinds of privacy, corresponding to a person's interest in control over information about herself (informational privacy), access to herself (accessibility privacy), and her ability to make important life decisions (expressive privacy). (DeCew 1997: 73-80, Inness 1992:9) We will be concerned with informational privacy. Privacy, in this sense, is "the control we have over information about ourselves... The person who enjoys privacy is able to grant or deny access to others." (Fried 1970: 140; see further Spinello 2010)

Each of us is morally entitled to a sphere that is protected from the gaze of those whom we do not willingly invite in. People differ as to how private they are and what they are private about. Most people expect—and, absent special circumstances, are entitled to—privacy concerning personal habits and preferences, such as their bathroom and bedroom habits. Many people are private about things that, in other people’s minds, would bear on their character—how much time they spend on personal grooming or luxury goods, for example. And many people are private about their personal moral, religious, and political views and commitments, for no other reason than that these are things that they prefer other people not know. When that sphere of privacy is infringed by someone who has not been invited in, it is a harm, and not (or not only) because of some further harm that results, such as feelings of embarrassment or damage to one’s reputation. (Indeed, for many of us, even when another’s knowing something private about us would instrumentally *benefit* us, e.g. by making them more kindly disposed to us, we still strongly prefer our privacy.) Privacy infringements are directly harmful.

When we think of privacy infringement, we most likely think of cases in which someone willfully and wrongfully acts in ways that violate another’s moral right to privacy—installing a hidden camera in someone’s home, for example, or hacking into their medical records.<sup>13</sup> We can distinguish such wrongful privacy-violating actions from privacy-infringing beliefs. Sometimes such actions result in a privacy-infringing belief, as when a person hacks into my medical records and learns something about me that I wish to keep private. But other times a wrongful privacy-violating action does not result in a privacy infringement in the present sense. Imagine that a person downloaded a file containing confidential medical records, but that the file was destroyed before anyone could open it. In this case, there is a privacy-violating action, but no privacy-infringing doxastic harm.

There can also be privacy-infringing doxastic harm even when there has been no privacy-violating action. We can learn private information about others in innocent ways—by accidentally overhearing a private conversation or happening to glimpse something through an open window, for example. These can still be doxastic harms, because it can be harmful to a person for someone else to know things that fall within that person’s sphere of privacy, no matter how they acquired the information. Indeed, it is, at least in part, the harm of having one’s privacy infringed upon that makes it wrong for people to intentionally infringe upon it.

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<sup>13</sup> Another way in which one person could wrongfully violate another’s privacy is by forcing them to reveal private information about themselves. Fried (1970) argues that it is, in part, because we value privacy that we recognize rights of individuals not to be forced to give self-incriminating testimony: “[I]t is the point of the privilege that a man cannot be forced to make public information about himself. Thereby his sense of control over what others know of him is significantly enhanced, even if other sources of the same information exist. . . . [A] proceeding in which compulsion is brought to bear on an individual to force him to make revelations about himself provides a striking and dramatic instance of a denial of title to control information about oneself, to control the picture we would have others have of us. In this sense such a procedure quite rightly seems profoundly humiliating.” (Fried 1970: 146)

To have even one person know something about you that you wished to keep private can be a harm, especially if you had a particular reason for excluding that person from your sphere of privacy.<sup>14</sup> I once had an administrator who looked up things about the faculty, such as their home addresses and what they had on their Amazon wish list, apparently just so she could mention these details in casual conversation, to show that she knew them—a way of trying to establish that she had some kind of power over us, I guess. Whether or not her actions count as wrongfully privacy-violating (the information was available on the internet, after all), her knowing specific things about me that I would never have shared with her, however innocuous (that I had *The Boxcar Children* in my wish list, for example), felt like a forcible intrusion into a part of my life I willingly share only with people I like and trust.

In some cases, not just one person, but millions of people, know information about a person that they wished to keep private. Consider the hacked voicemail messages from Prince William to then-girlfriend Kate Middleton, which revealed intimate details of their relationship, including pet names they used for each other, and from Prince William to Prince Harry, in which he teased Harry for being a “ginger” and did a joking impression of Harry’s then-girlfriend.<sup>15</sup> These are things one could reasonably wish to be kept private, not (or not only) because others knowing about them would bring some further harm, but simply because, well, they are private. After Naomi Judd’s death by suicide, her family filed a petition to prevent the police reports, including family interviews from the day of Judd’s death and details of the circumstances of her death, to be made public. In a guest essay for the *New York Times*, “The Right to Keep Private Pain Private”, her daughter Ashley Judd writes: “This profoundly intimate personal and medical information does not belong in the press, on the internet or anywhere except in our memories.”<sup>16</sup> Most of us are at little risk of having our private endearments, or intimate details about a loved one’s last moments, so widely shared, but reflecting on such cases can make salient how much we value our own privacy.

Of course, some people share information they are morally entitled to keep private. For example, in 2019, Michael Gerry live-streamed his life for the entire year to thousands of subscribers, including, at the end, his sexual encounters and bathroom breaks.<sup>17</sup> These subscribers learned things about Gerry that most of us would wish to keep private. This, however, doesn’t imply that privacy infringements are not harmful to those of us who do not voluntarily give up our privacy. (They may in some cases be harmful even to those who *do* voluntarily give up their privacy. Think, for example, of an immature student who shares personal details with their professors that are quite inappropriate for them to know.)

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<sup>14</sup> For convenience I use the word “know”, but I think people’s believing these (truth) things can constitute a harm, even if their beliefs fall short of full-blooded knowledge in the epistemologist’s sense.

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2013/12/19/255454404/jurors-hear-kate-middletons-voicemails-some-from-william>

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/08/31/opinion/ashley-judd-naomi-suicide.html>

<sup>17</sup> <https://michaelgerry.com/livestream>

One might argue that what harms us when other people know private things about us is not the fact that they know, but our *knowledge* that they know; if we never learned that they knew these things, we wouldn't be harmed. I think this is the wrong way to think about the harm involved in privacy infringements. Certainly learning that someone knows something private about me will often cause me further harm, by causing me distress or embarrassment. But the harm in that case lies not (or not only) in my learning what the other person knows, but in their knowing it. Consider: upon learning that someone knows things about me I wish to remain private, I would hardly think "I wish I didn't know about that; if only it had remained a secret, then all would be well." What harms me is *that they know*, not (or not only) my knowledge that they know.<sup>18</sup> By way of analogy: if I value fidelity, I am harmed if my partner is a serial adulterer, even if I never learn of their infidelity. Likewise, if I value my privacy, I am harmed by infringements on that privacy, even if I never learn about them.<sup>19</sup>

Why is privacy important? Many of us value it for its own sake. But a number of authors have offered deeper explanations of its importance.

One explanation of the value of privacy appeals to meaningful relationships, for which, it is argued, privacy provides the necessary context. (Fried 1970: 142-3, Rachels 1975:324-6, Inness 1992:79-84) Intimacy involves sharing information about oneself that one does not share with everybody. How intimate a friendship is depends, in part, on how much private information is shared; we modulate degrees of friendship, in part, by how much we share with others.<sup>20</sup> But in order to create and maintain intimacy, this information must be voluntarily and spontaneously relinquished. For outsiders to know things we wish to share only with intimates would "be seriously to impoverish the 'moral capital' upon which the relationship can draw for its sustenance." (Gerstein 1978:76). For a close friend to learn something private about their friend that their friend did not want them to know can harm the friendship by forcing an overfamiliarity. (Fried 1970:143) It also makes it

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<sup>18</sup> One may grant that the knowledge is in some sense the ultimate source of the harm, but think that I am harmed *only if* I learn what you know—that learning of the knowledge is, to put it one way, a condition of the belief's harming me. I won't argue the point; I will only note that even if I grant it, privacy infringements would still constitute doxastic harms, in the present sense. (Recall, I am looking for harms that are located, *at least in part*, in the doxastic state; I'm not interested in harms that are *exhaustively* explained by appeal to things other than the doxastic state.)

<sup>19</sup> Of course, experientialists about well-being—those who deny categorically that anything that makes no difference to our experience can make a difference to our well-being—will deny that another person's beliefs can harm me if I never learn about them (and those beliefs are not manifested in their behavior in some other way). As noted in Section 2, my method here is to offer examples of ways in which someone's doxastic state appears to directly harm someone else, and give explanations of this harm. If experientialism implies that these aren't doxastic harms, then, to the extent we find these examples compelling, this gives some reason to think experientialism is false.

<sup>20</sup> Fried illustrates this point as follows: "We may not mind that a person knows a general fact about us, and yet feel our privacy invaded if he knows the details. For instance, a casual acquaintance may know that I am sick, but it would violate my privacy if he knew the nature of the illness. Or a good friend may know what particular illness I am suffering from, but it would violate my privacy if he were actually to witness my suffering from some symptom which he must know is associated with the disease." (Fried 1970: 141)

impossible for the friend to *tell* their friend the private information, when, in many cases, telling the information is an expression of our caring for that person:

When we tell another about the deaths in the family, incidents in our love lives, or our innermost thoughts, the action of conveying this information usually indicates more than simply a desire on our part to inform the person. The fact that we are telling the other person these facts, facts we understand as personal, conveys something about our relation to the person, usually that we are in, or seek to be in, a close relationship with that person. (Inness 1992: 81)

When the friend learns the information from another source, or when it is generally known, the individual is deprived of the opportunity to convey their care for that person by telling them.

According to a related explanation of the value of privacy, respecting a person's ability to control personal information is an important part of respecting their autonomy. (Inness 1992:95-112) Individuals ought to have the freedom to decide whether, and how, to create relationships based on care, liking and love. "[T]he agent's sphere of autonomy with respect to her care, liking, and love is a sphere over which she has evident moral rulership, a rulership that deserves the respect and protection of society." (Inness 1992:112). We must respect others' capacity to form their own plans with respect to intimacy and its constitutive close relationships. For others to know private information about an individual that she does not wish them to know, then, deprives her not only of the opportunity to show caring for an intimate by telling them; it undermines their autonomy.

### ***Not being believed***

Consider now a kind of way in which a person's *failing* to believe something can directly harm another.<sup>21</sup> Recent work on epistemic injustice finds precedent in a provocative line near the end of G.E.M. Anscombe's paper "What is it to believe someone?". Anscombe writes: "It is an insult and may be an injury not to be believed." (Anscombe 1979: 150). In *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing*, Miranda Fricker identifies what she calls testimonial injustice, where "a speaker suffers a testimonial injustice just if prejudice on the hearer's part causes him to give the speaker less credibility than he would otherwise have given". (Fricker 2007: 4)<sup>22</sup> Fricker's work has invigorated discussion of whether it is ever a wronging (or injustice, or insult) to refuse someone's testimony, where "you refuse someone's testimony when someone tells you that p and you do not believe that p (on the basis of the fact that she believes that p)." (Hazlett 2017: S37). I'm interested in whether

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<sup>21</sup> One might question whether someone's *not* believing something can constitute a direct harm because one may think it is an absence, and that the absence of something can't constitute a direct harm. It seems to me, though, that an absence can constitute a direct harm, as, for example, when a person expresses their contempt for another by not reaching out to shake their proffered hand.

<sup>22</sup> A kind of testimonial injustice with which Fricker is especially concerned is what she calls identity prejudicial credibility deficit: cases in which the speaker receives deflated credibility from the hearer owing to identity prejudice on the hearer's part, as when the police do not believe someone because they are Black. (Fricker 2007: 1) As a reminder, I am setting aside cases in which systemic or institutional injustice plays a key role in the explanation of why a belief harms someone.

refusing another's testimony is ever an injury—a harm. Can a person's failure to believe someone constitute a doxastic harm?

Our perception of the threat of not being believed is evidenced in the way that stories of not being believed capture our attention. Actor Bill Murray is known for antics such as stealing fries off the plates of surprised diners as he passes by. The line he utters afterwards: “No one will ever believe you.”<sup>23</sup> In the myth of Apollo and Cassandra, Apollo gives Cassandra the gift of prophecy. When she spurns his advances, he curses her: what she prophesies will come to pass, but *no one will ever believe her*. A common plot in television fiction centers on a character's seeing something, and trying to tell others, only to have nobody believe them. It is a central feature countless science fiction plots, for example, such as the *Twilight Zone* episode “Nightmare at 20,000 Feet”, in which nobody believes a man (played by William Shatner) who claims that a gremlin is climbing around on the airplane. The person whom no one believes is a fictional trope because it resonates with us. We feel acutely how bad it would be to be in that position. As Adam Smith colorfully puts the point:

The man who had the misfortune to imagine that nobody believed a single word he said, would feel himself the outcast of human society, would dread the very thought of going into it, or of presenting himself before it, and could scarce fail, I think, to die of despair. (Smith 1790: VII.IV.26)

To have even one person fail to believe you can constitute a harm, especially if the person is close to you. In an episode of *Monk*, eleven-year-old Benjy witnesses a murder through a telescope. He tells others, but when no evidence can be found that a murder occurred, the people around him stop taking his claim seriously. At one point, Benjy asks his mom whether she, at least, believes him. She replies that he has a big imagination, and asks whether maybe he was using it when he ‘saw’ the stabbing. He says ‘I wasn’t. Why won’t *you* believe me!?’ In *iZombie*, Major tells Liv about all the bizarre things he’s been seeing lately. He says “I really need someone to believe me, and I’d really like that person to be you.” As bad as it is when other people don’t believe us, it is worse when those people are our friends.

It still worse when what you are telling is something extremely significant or deeply personal to you. Imagine telling your partner about a religious experience or a traumatic event that has happened to you, and not being believed. Even if they are as supportive as possible, the mere fact of their not believing you makes your life worse.

Why is it bad not to be believed? One possible explanation is that failing to believe someone implies a negative evaluative attitude about the teller: for example, that the teller is insincere, or incompetent, or both. Here is Hazlett’s explanation of the insult of refusing to believe someone in such cases:

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<sup>23</sup> <https://whalebonemag.com/bill-murray-rites/>

Refusing someone's testimony can manifest doubt about her credibility, which credibility she presupposed by telling you something in the first place. By refusing her testimony, in such a case, you reject her invitation to engage in a collective activity on the basis of doubt about her competence to engage in that activity. Whether or not doubt about someone's credibility is always offensive to her (as Smith suggests), doubt about someone's credibility, which she presupposed by telling you something, is always offensive to her. And so, when refusing someone's testimony manifests doubt about her credibility, refusing her testimony constitutes insulting her. (Hazlett 2017:S43)

It is worth highlighting the point about the exchange of testimony as a collective activity. Testimonial exchange is, indeed, among the most important collective activities we engage in as human beings. The activity of asking, and telling, is central to human life and human relationships. As children we learn a significant part of what we know about the world from the testimony of others. As we grow older, being a contributing member of this collective activity is a source of pride and self-worth. Think of the pleasure a young child takes in telling a parent something they learned in school that the parent didn't know, or the dejection of an elderly person whose family members have communicated to her, in words or by their actions, that she no longer has anything to tell them that is worth hearing. Participating as a full member in the cooperative activity of sharing information is an important part of living a full human life. (Craig 1990: 35-44) When we tell someone something, and are believed, we are included as full participants, with equal moral status, in a meaningful activity that is central to human life. When we tell someone something and are *not* believed, we are closed out of a type of exchange that is engrained in our social natures and makes up a good deal of the business of our daily lives.<sup>24</sup>

According to Hazlett's explanation, refusing someone's testimony can insult the teller by manifesting doubt about her credibility. I propose, though, that a person can *harm* another by not believing her, even when it does not imply a negative evaluative attitude about the teller. A person's failure to believe someone can be harmful even when their doing so is not unreasonable, irrational, or unjustified. Sometimes we are uniquely evidentially situated, such that nobody apart from ourselves can reasonably believe something that we know to be true, even after hearing our testimony. In the case of Benjy, for example, we can imagine that at some point the people around him would not have been justified in believing him—that no matter how far they looked, there was no evidence, apart from his testimony, that any violence had taken place. (We can also add that they found misleading evidence that Benjy was unreliable.) Sometimes, in the end, it is not reasonable—and may even be unreasonable—for someone to believe what someone else has told them. Yet even in these case, a person's failure to believe another can harm them nonetheless. (Recall that to say someone has been harmed does not imply they've been wronged, or that someone is to blame.)<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> This same reasoning, potentially, can help explain why the extreme skeptic, who categorically refuses others' testimony as a matter of principle, is, at least in one respect, worse off.

<sup>25</sup> Likewise, even when a person's failure to believe the teller is not due to a credibility deficit, as in cases of testimonial injustice, it can harm the teller. It may be even *worse* when someone's failure to believe you is due in part to a credibility deficit. In this event there seem to be multiple harms: the harm of not being believed, and the harm of not being properly acknowledged, or respected, or taken seriously (as well as harms related to the kind of systemic or institutional injustice I

Jeremy Wanderer gives an account of the harm of refusing someone's testimony in cases of testimonial injustice that can be adapted to explain the harm of not being believed even when there is no injustice.<sup>26</sup> Wanderer introduces the idea of a second-person address. To introduce this idea, imagine that during a classroom exchange of Valentine's Day cards, one child refuses another child's card—refuses it peremptorily, with a glance.<sup>27</sup> By extending her card to the other child, the first child addresses the other in a way that calls on her to recognize the request—it is, in Wanderer's terminology, a second-person address. The first child's handing the card to the second child was a second-person request for a particular response, i.e. accepting the card. Wanderer writes that

It both calls for her recognition of the second-person address, and provides her with good interpersonal reasons for responding as requested. She recognized the address: there was a 'peremptory glance'. The two are caught in this second-person arc; he holds her to responding, and whatever response she gives is thereby directed back at him. However, having recognized the addressed request, the girl...fails to heed the good interpersonal reasons proffered to her for acting in a certain manner. (Wanderer 2012:157).

Refusing the card is a *rejection*, where

rejection involves the recognition by the requestee A of an addressed request for a particular response directed by the requester S to A, and an act of response from A to S that is, *inter alia*, the refusal of the particular response requested. (Wanderer 2012:158)

In context, refusing the card is not just a rejection of the card, it is a rejection of the giver. The child who refuses to accept the card is excluding the other child from the collective activity the group are engaging in.

Likewise, when I tell you something, and you do not believe me, you are rejecting not only the information I offer, but *me*. In refusing my testimony, you exclude me from the collective activity of testimonial exchange. Even if your refusal is reasonable—indeed, even if you couldn't have done otherwise—I am excluded nonetheless. Given the importance of participating in this collective activity as a full member, this exclusion is a harm.

### ***Failures to corroborate***

In his discussion of the moral importance of apologies, Nick Smith introduces the idea of a corroborated factual record as one part of what he calls a categorical apology, "the most robust, painstaking, and formal of the varieties" of apology. (Smith 2008: 140)

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mentioned in Section 2). But even when your audience isn't doing you an injustice—even when they're giving you all the credibility you are due—it is bad not to be believed.

<sup>26</sup> I don't know whether Wanderer would agree that the points he makes about testimonial injustice can also be adapted in this way; the adaptation is my own.

<sup>27</sup> The example is an adaptation of Wanderer's example, which is from W.E.B. Du Bois's account of a child's refusing his visiting-card because he was Black. (Du Bois 1994 [1903]). I adapt the example to highlight the interpersonal harm, as opposed to the harm relating to systemic injustice.

A categorical apology will corroborate a detailed factual record of the events salient to the injury, reaching agreement among the victim, offender, and sometimes the community regarding what transpired. The parties will also agree regarding what amounts to such salient events, leading them to share an understanding of the relevant aspects of the context in which the injury occurs. Rather than providing general and vague descriptions of the events (“I acted badly”), the record will render transparent all facts material to judging the transgressions. Such a record will often include honest accounts of the mental states of the apologizer at the time of the offense when such information would prove relevant, for example by describing the offender’s intentions when committing the transgression.” (Smith 2008: 140-141)

I propose that, even if the offender fails to offer an apology, there can be prudential value, for the victim, in having a corroborated factual record of the events. The value of a corroborated factual record is not exhausted by the offender’s *statement* of the morally salient facts, but in their *acknowledgement* of the facts, i.e. in their knowing them. In some cases, for the offender to fail to acknowledge the facts constitutes a harm to the victim.<sup>28</sup>

Consider, for example, a mother and daughter, the latter of which was subjected to verbal abuse by the former as a child. Imagine that the mother simply does not believe that she said or did the things her adult daughter claims. For each incident the daughter recalls, the mother remembers it differently. For example, if the daughter tries to talk to her mother about the time she left her in a hot car for an hour as a punishment for backtalk, the mother says that it was the daughter herself who refused to come out of the car, and that it was in December so it could hardly have been hot. And likewise for each individual incident the daughter remembers. Assume that the daughter’s memory of events is, by and large, accurate, and the mother’s is inaccurate. (Perhaps the mother’s need to conceive of herself as a good person leads her to fill in the details in a way that represents her in a more positive light.) The daughter might reasonably want the mother to *know what she did*, and how it affected her.<sup>29</sup> Even if the mother is not capable of sincerely apologizing, or even of understanding that what she did was wrong, to simply have the events acknowledged by the wronging party can be important to the victim.<sup>30</sup> This is one of the things that is valuable about restorative conferencing, in which harmed individuals are brought together with those responsible for the harm. Ideally, such conferences also give the offender a chance to accept responsibility for causing the harm, and helps the victim recover from

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<sup>28</sup> One might argue that what is important for the victim in these cases is not merely that some party know the circumstances of their wrongful treatment, but that the victim *knows* that the other party knows. Certainly learning that the offender doesn’t know what they’ve done will upset the victim, and in that respect the victim’s knowledge will instrumentally harm her. But the reason the victim will be upset is that she objects to the offender’s not knowing. (Consider: upon learning that the offender didn’t know what’d she’d done, the victim would hardly think “I wish I didn’t know about that; if only it had remained a secret, then all would be well.”)

<sup>29</sup> The way in which the mother knows what she did might also be important to the daughter. It might, for example, be important for the daughter that her mother’s knowledge is based on her own memories of the events. It would not be the same if, for example, the mother had amnesia, and her knowledge of the events were based on others’ testimony.

<sup>30</sup> It can also be important to have the events acknowledged by someone else—a witness to the events, for example. For simplicity, I focus on the corroboration of the victim’s account by the offender, assuming it will be clear how what I say could be extended to other cases.

the harm. However, even if the conference falls short of this ideal outcome, it can be important to the victim simply that the offender know.<sup>31</sup>

What is the harm, to the victim, when her account of the circumstances of her treatment is not corroborated?

In some cases, a person's failure to corroborate another person's account can harm by undermining their shared relationship. Having a shared account of events provides the kind of common ground that is important for having a relationship with another person, rather than merely coexisting with them. In general, having a social connection with others requires an amount of agreement between the parties about basic facts of their shared lives. Imagine, for example, that you and a family member (perhaps because of some yet-undiagnosed condition that affects memory) often discover that you have conflicting memories of recent events—what you did over the weekend, what you what you had for dinner last night, or for what purpose one of you purchased a 100-cup commercial coffee maker. It would be impossible to maintain a connection of some intimacy with someone when you can't even agree on an account of events, at least without some explanation for the discrepancy. Discrepancies between your respective memories of events that were significant or morally salient events would be even more damaging. Imagine, for example, you disagreed about whether a neighbor assaulted one of you, or the circumstances of the death of a loved one. Without a relatively high degree of accord about such important events, it would seem impossible for two individuals to have the kind of mutuality characteristic of a personal relationship.

Setting aside the upshot of the failure to corroborate for the relationship (after all, not all relationships are worth preserving), the desire for interpersonal confirmation is simply engrained in our natures as social beings. As Abramson notes, in her discussion on gaslighting, "we all need interpersonal confirmation, especially in difficult situations." (Abramson 2014:4) One of the (many) harms of gaslighting is that the victim is denied that interpersonal confirmation. To adapt an example from Abramson to the present purpose:

Think about one of your worst experiences, an experience which either itself, or in its effects, went on months. Now imagine that while you were going through that, all or most of the voices around you either flatly denied that anything worth being upset about was going on, or radically minimized it, or reconceptualized the experience so that it was not so uncomfortable (for them) to live with.... [A]t no point during it did someone (or perhaps someone, but not enough, or perhaps just not the people most dear to you) look at you and confirm the reality of horror with which you were dealing." (Abramson 2014:5-6)

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<sup>31</sup> In some cases, it can be important to the victim that the truth be generally known. Consider truth commissions, such as the Yoorrook Justice Commission, tasked with investigating and documenting the wrongful treatment of First Peoples in Victoria, Australia, or the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, tasked with creating a historical record of the Indian Residential Schools system. Truth commissions are important, not only because learning the truth is an important step towards reconciliation, or recompense for the victims, but simply because it is important *that the truth be known*.

Even when the people who fail to corroborate your account aren't gaslighting you, their failure to corroborate your account can still harm you.<sup>32</sup>

We can further theorize this harm in terms of the victim's epistemic position. One way that gaslighting can undermine a person's epistemic position is by changing the evidential support for the gaslit person's beliefs, to such an extent that it is no longer reasonable to rely on those beliefs, for purposes of action.<sup>33</sup> For example,

Suppose [a] wife initially believes *p*, 'My sister visits frequently because of sisterly affection'. Her husband might continually raise error possibilities, such as 'Your sister only contacts you when she wants something', 'She is stealing money during visits', 'She only likes to spend time with her nephew and cares little for you.' By repeatedly raising such possibilities, the husband can eventually cause them to become relevant where previously they were not. This is because the husband's intimations can provide evidence for error possibilities such as *q*, 'The visits are financially motivated'."(Gardiner 2021:503)

In fact, in this example, the husband is not merely raising possibilities to the wife ('Are you sure she isn't only visiting in order to steal money?'); he is *telling* her things ('She is stealing money'). Assuming he is generally reliable, and appears to be well-situated to determine whether the things he is saying is true (or, at least, as well-situated as the wife is), in telling his wife these things, he gives his wife evidence that they *are* true, namely, *that he believes them*. As Gardiner writes,

People are not epistemic islands, and it can be irresponsible to wholly ignore others and retain conviction despite others' doubts.... And arguably trusting the motives of kin despite monitions from spouses is a common source of error. His gaslighting exploits the fact that, as a social pattern, his warning has good pedigree which should not be disregarded. (Gardiner 2021: 504)

Assuming that the wife's sister really is visiting from sisterly affection, the husband's gaslighting makes her worse off, epistemically. If sufficient doubts are raised about her sister's motives, the wife can no longer rely on her belief that her sister is benevolent. (If she isn't sure her sister isn't merely feigning affection, is she willing to trust her to babysit her children, for example?) There are, then, cases in which gaslighting can make it the case that a person is no longer justified in relying on beliefs for the sake of action. In such cases, it is not only the person's epistemic position that is undermined, but her autonomy. In this way (among others) gaslighting is harmfully disabling.

I propose that, in at least some cases in which a victim's account of the circumstances of her treatment is not corroborated, the harm is the same as that just described. Consider the case of the mother and daughter.

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<sup>32</sup> It is important, in Abramson's example, that what the other party fails to confirm is the person's account of personal experiences that are significant to her. We needn't say that *any* failure to confirm a person's account of events is a harm, only that *some* are.

<sup>33</sup> We needn't accept this as the correct analysis of *all* cases of gaslighting. There may be multiple ways in which an instance of gaslighting undermines the gaslit person's epistemic position, and different kinds of cases may admit of different analyses.

Imagine that, in general, the mother is about as good at evaluating evidence and forming true beliefs on its basis (that she is, in general, an “epistemic peer”; her relationship with her daughter is a ‘blind spot’). The mother is also as well-situated evidentially as the daughter to know the circumstances of her treatment. In general, the fact that a well-situated epistemic peer has a different account of events would rightly reduce your credence that things happened as you remember. To the extent that the other person’s memories are inaccurate and yours are accurate, this weakens your epistemic position. If it weakens it to the point that you are no longer justified in relying on beliefs for the sake of action (‘If I’m wrong about mom, then I’m doing her a grave injustice by not letting her babysit her grandchildren’), your autonomy is undermined as well. Others’ failure to corroborate your account, can, like gaslighting, be harmfully disabling.

One might object that the fact that someone else, even a well-situated epistemic peer, remembers things differently should not be enough to give reason to doubt your *own* memories of the events. Yet although our memories may, intuitively, seem like a strong source of evidence, it is well-established that our memories are far from infallible. In the initial encoding of our observations or experiences, our preferences make a difference to what we actually encode. For example, sports fans will be more perceptive of fouls committed by an opposing team than of fouls committed by their own team. (Hastorf and Cantril 1954). Loftus (2005) reviews the substantial body of work exploring ways that new input can change or add details to our memories, so that the next time we recall it, the memory itself has been altered. One study that is especially relevant here is Loftus and Pickrell (1995). In this study, subjects were given short descriptions of four events that they were told happened in their childhood. Three of these events really had happened (researchers got the details from the subject’s family members), but one event—being lost in a mall—was fabricated. Five days in a row, subjects were asked to recall each of the events in as much detail as possible. Some people ‘remembered’ the fabricated event, even adding details that were not given in the description, such as that it happened in a toy store, and that the person who found them was wearing a blue flannel shirt. When told that this event hadn’t really happened, some people had difficulty believing it. Even after they were convinced it hadn’t happened, some still struggled with the persisting memory. One person said “...I totally remember walking around in those dressing rooms and my mom not being in the section she said she’d be in. You know what I mean?” (Loftus and Pickrell 1995: 723) Studies like this suggest we should temper our confidence in memory as a source of evidence. Indeed, we should be especially wary of memories that we’ve discussed with others. When someone tells you things about the event you recall—that it happened in December, for example—it may, in some cases, not merely give you *reason* to think you misremember; it may, in some cases, *make* you misremember. This effect can be compounded over time: the more the alternative version is proposed, the more firmly those details can be lodged in the memory. In the example of the mother and daughter, if the mother repeatedly and consistently says that the daughter is misremembering, and backs this up with details from her own memory, it may be that she not only gives the daughter reason to doubt her memories, but changes the memories themselves. In this case, the daughter’s epistemic position is undermined in an even more fundamental way.

## Conclusion

These are some examples of ways in which a person can be directly harmed by another person's doxastic states.

Recognizing the category of doxastic harms can help us see harms that we might otherwise have missed or misdiagnosed. Consider, for example, the harm of being misgendered. Often accounts of the harm of misgendering focus on the impact of verbally misgendering someone. (Kapusta 2016, Jenkins 2018) But the harm of being misgendered lies not only in the verbalization of the misgendering, but in (what we might call) the doxastic misgendering: in the belief that we are of a different gender than we are. This, indeed, seems to me the deeper harm in (at least many) cases of misgendering. What is most deeply harmful is not that someone speaks or acts *as if* you are of a different gender than you actually are, but that they actually believe it. Recognizing the category of doxastic harms helps us capture this aspect of the harm of misgendering.

Different examples of doxastic harm admit of different explanations. Yet the explanations have a common thread: they appeal to our natures as social beings. There are ways in which others' believing, or failing to believe, something can strip us of things that, as social beings, we all need: of intimacy, reciprocity, mutual understanding, autonomy, or recognition, for example. In such cases, there are doxastic harms.

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