

# TESTIMONIAL INSULT: A MORAL REASON FOR BELIEF?

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ABSTRACT: When you don't believe a speaker's testimony for reasons that call into question the speaker's credibility, it seems that this is an insult against the speaker. There also appears to be moral reasons that count in favour of refraining from insulting someone. When taken together, these two plausible claims entail that we have a moral reason to refrain from insulting speakers with our lack of belief, and hence, sometimes, a moral reason to believe the testimony of speakers. Reasons for belief arising from non-epistemic sources are controversial, and it's often argued that it's impossible to base a belief on non-epistemic reasons. However, I will show that *even if it is* possible to base a belief on non-epistemic reasons, in the case of testimonial insult, for many or most cases, the moral reasons for belief don't need to be the basis of our doxastic response. This is because there are, in many or most cases, either sufficient epistemic reasons for belief, or sufficient moral reasons for action that guide our response to testimony. Reasons from testimonial insult, in many cases, simply lead to overdetermination. Even if there are such moral reasons for belief, they are therefore practically unnecessary in many cases. There are, though, some cases in which they play an important role in guiding belief. This perhaps surprising conclusion is one unexplored way to defend epistemic over pragmatic reasons for belief.

KEYWORDS: belief, testimony, insult, reasons, moral, epistemic

## 1. Introduction

What should be our doxastic response toward someone's testimony? In other words, what normative reasons count in favour of belief, disbelief and suspended judgment concerning  $p$  when someone has told us  $p$ ? It's typical to focus discussion on this question around *epistemic* reasons, which bear on whether or not the testimony is, or is likely to be true.<sup>1</sup> Centring discussion on such epistemic reasons

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<sup>1</sup> Nishi Shah, "A New Argument for Evidentialism," *The Philosophical Quarterly* 56 (2006): 481-498. I follow Lord in defining epistemic reasons as "the reasons for belief, disbelief, and withholding that bear on *epistemic rationality or justification*, which is... constitutively tied to truth" (Errol Lord, "Epistemic Reasons, Evidence, and Defeaters," in *The Oxford Handbook of Reasons and Normativity*, ed. Daniel Star (Oxford University Press, forthcoming), n.8).

is relevant to epistemologists because it's thought that responding appropriately to these kinds of reasons is essential for knowledge.<sup>2</sup> However, epistemic reasons may not be the only reasons that bear on how we should respond to testimony. Some authors maintain that there are other norms in play too. Common amongst these are *pragmatic* reasons for belief, such as believing for instrumental gain. One widely cited example of a pragmatic reason is believing certain propositions in order to overcome illness.<sup>3</sup> So, whilst believing for pragmatic reasons may not be sufficient for knowledge, it may be sufficient for obtaining other desirable goods.

An important kind of pragmatic reason for belief comes from *moral* considerations. One such example is derived from the Kantian notion that theistic belief is required in order to wholly believe in a moral order, which is itself required to motivate people to contribute to the good in the world.<sup>4</sup> If this is so then one has a moral reason for belief in God. One moral example that connects directly with testimony is *testimonial injustice*.<sup>5</sup> If a kind of injustice is performed when a speaker is disbelieved purely on the basis of social identity prejudice, then the speaker's audience have a moral reason to revise their doxastic response to the testifier so as to correct the injustice.

This paper considers another possible moral reason for believing a speaker's testimony. The reason comes from recent reflection on the claim that not believing speakers can be insulting for the speaker. G. E. M. Anscombe once made a similar remark: "It is an insult and it may be an injury not to be believed."<sup>6</sup> There are

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<sup>2</sup> Mark Schroeder, "Knowledge is Belief for Sufficient (Objective and Subjective) Reason," *Oxford Studies in Epistemology*, 5 (2015): 225-252.

<sup>3</sup> Gilbert Harman, *Reasoning, Meaning and Mind* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999), 6.

<sup>4</sup> Robert Merrihew Adams, "Moral Arguments for the Existence of God," in *The Virtue of Faith and Other Essays in Philosophical Theology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 144-163; Michael Pace, "The Epistemic Value of Moral Considerations: Justification, Moral Encroachment, and James' 'Will To Believe'," *Nous* 45 (2011): 239-268. This is also related to J. L. Mackie's sentiments that "the abandonment of a belief in objective values can cause, at least temporarily, a decay of subjective concern and sense of purpose" (*Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong* (London: Pelican Books, 1977), 34).

<sup>5</sup> Miranda Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

<sup>6</sup> G. E. M. Anscombe, "What is it to Believe Someone?" in *Rationality and Religious Belief*, ed. C. F. Delaney (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1979), 150. I have attempted to give an account of Anscombe's claim in my paper "How to Insult and Compliment a Testifier," *Episteme*, 15:1 (2018): 50-64. For another account, see Allan Hazlett, "On the Special Insult of Refusing Testimony," *Philosophical Explorations*, 20 (2017): 37-51. Similar remarks to that of Anscombe

several ways in which philosophers have tried to elaborate on this claim, but I want to explore the following: Supposing that under certain conditions, it is insulting to reject a speaker's testimony (to disbelieve or suspend judgment about it). Call this a *testimonial insult*. Do testimonial insults give us a reason to believe the speaker as a means of avoiding paying her an insult?<sup>7</sup> The argument would then be:

- (1) If some action or attitude A is an insult against a person, then one has a moral reason to avoid A-ing,
- (2) Rejecting the testimony of a speaker is sometimes an insult against the speaker,
- (3) So, there is sometimes a moral reason to avoid rejecting a speaker's testimony.

What makes this particular moral reason arising from testimonial insult especially interesting and worth exploring is its social significance. Throughout this paper I will give certain examples of this significance, but suffice for now to say that testimonial insult is particularly important for the way we think of interpersonal trust, and certain relationship groups such as marriage and friendship.

This paper has two broad aims: first, to defend premises (1) and (2), and hence to try to establish (3); second, to explore the place of reasons for belief arising from testimonial insult alongside epistemic reasons for belief in order to identify what sort of functional role they occupy. In addressing this second aim, we will see an interesting and perhaps surprising result. In many cases where rejecting testimony gives one a moral reason to believe the testimony, there are other, non-moral sufficient reasons for the hearer to believe the testimony. Oftentimes these alternative reasons simply show that one does not need to believe the testimony on the basis of the moral reason one has: one can believe the testimony for the non-moral reason. In other cases, there are other, equally good means by which someone can avoid paying an insult that involve action rather

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have been made by J. L. Austin: "If I have said I know or I promise, you insult me in a special way by refusing to accept it" ("Other Minds," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society Supplement* 20 (1946): 171); and Adam Smith in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*. "It is always mortifying not to be believed" (VII.iv.24).

<sup>7</sup> Later in this paper I discuss the role that *accepting* a speaker's testimony can play in avoiding paying the speaker an insult. For now, though, I am focussing solely on doxastic means of avoiding the insult.

than belief. What I will conclude, then, is that even if, in theory, testimonial insults give moral reasons for belief, in practice, for many or perhaps most cases, one need not actually base one's beliefs on these reasons because there are sufficient or equally good alternatives. It follows that testimonial insult, as a moral reason for belief, does not need to actually play a functional role in guiding our doxastic response to testimony for many or most cases. I will also show, though, where moral reasons for belief deriving from testimonial insult do have an important bearing on what to believe.

I will begin in §2 by defending premises (1) and (2) by outlining how rejecting testimony is sometimes insulting for the speaker. Then, in §3, I will focus my defence on premise (1) by showing what reasons we have to avoid insulting others in general, and in testimonial contexts in particular. I will hence be favouring the view that there are genuine moral reasons for belief. However, in §4, upon close analysis of cases of testimony, I will show in which circumstances moral reasons that are grounded in avoiding insulting testifiers need not be the basis for one's belief. I will also show where they have an important bearing on what to believe.

There have been numerous attempts to reject the possibility of moral reasons for belief.<sup>8</sup> Rather than responding to these objections, I will present my argument as a conditional: *even if it is* possible to base a belief on non-epistemic reasons, in the case of testimonial insult, the arising moral reasons for belief do not in many or most cases need to be the basis for our doxastic response to testimony; there are, in many or most cases, sufficient alternatives in the form of epistemic reasons for belief, or moral reasons for action. I take this conclusion to be somewhat surprising, and to provide a unique strategy that others may find useful who would like to focus greater attention toward epistemic reasons for belief, and away from non-epistemic reasons.

## 2. Insult and Testimony

The simple claim made in (2) – affirmed by Anscombe and others – is that when some speaker *S* tells, or testifies to a proposition *p* to some hearer or audience *H*, if *H*'s doxastic response to *p* is one of non-belief, then this response of *H*'s – the doxastic attitude that *H* forms in response to *S*'s testimony – constitutes an insult against *S*. I shall attempt to bring a little more clarity to this claim.

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<sup>8</sup> Shah, "A New Argument."

What is meant by H's doxastic attitude being one of *non-belief*? Although there is usually thought to be just one kind of *positive* doxastic response, that of *belief*, there are two options when it comes to non-belief: *suspension of judgment*, and *disbelief*. In either case, the testimony of the speaker is resisted, rejected, or in some way not believed. A slightly simplified, but formal way to state the claim is that when S tells H that *p*,<sup>9</sup>

H forms D toward *p* → D is insulting for S.<sup>10</sup>

Why might D be insulting for S? Two points need to be addressed here. First, rejecting a proposition testified to by a speaker is tantamount to not believing the speaker herself.<sup>11</sup> Second, according to some accounts of testimony, when a speaker asserts *p*, she puts forward *p* as true and hence vouches for the truth of *p*.<sup>12</sup> In vouching for *p*, the speaker makes a reflexive remark about herself as a credible source of truth. She is saying that one may use her testimony to form a reliable belief concerning *p* under the confident assumption that she is a credible testifier. This may come in at least two forms. One could be credible with respect to speaking truly, or with respect to knowing competently. It seems that both of these are involved, to some extent at least, in the credibility one requires to properly vouch for the truth of a proposition.

Two recent papers have independently maintained that it's in the undermining of this credibility that the hearer's non-belief is insulting for the speaker.<sup>13</sup> When H does not believe S *because* she takes S to be either epistemically incompetent or dishonest, this reflects negatively, in an insulting way, on S's credibility as a testifier. Now, a characteristic of insults is that they are disparaging to the other person in some way,<sup>14</sup> and having your credibility as a testifier called

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<sup>9</sup> 'Tellings' are often performed by verbal, or spoken language, but can also be performed in written form, such as letters, and by hand gestures.

<sup>10</sup> As a key, D is a doxastic attitude covering disbelief and suspension of judgment, H is the hearer and S is the speaker, and *p* is the proposition testified to.

<sup>11</sup> Anscombe's own work addresses what it is to believe *someone*, rather than some *proposition*. But in cases of testimony, believing the testimony *p* amounts to believing the person, and not believing the testimony *p* amounts to not believing the person.

<sup>12</sup> Elizabeth Fricker, "Second-Hand Knowledge," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, LXXIII (2006): 594.

<sup>13</sup> Malcolm, "How to Insult;" Hazlett, "On the Special Insult."

<sup>14</sup> David Archard, "Insults, Free Speech and Offensiveness," *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 31 (2014): 129.

Finlay Malcolm

into question can be disparaging for a number of reasons.<sup>15</sup> Working on the assumption that something like this account of testimonial insult is broadly accurate, we can see under what conditions it is insulting to not be believed by someone. However, it looks like there will also be cases where lack of belief will *not* constitute an insult: when the reasons for this are unrelated to the credibility of the speaker. Suppose we are going for a meeting, and you tell me we are booked into room number 10. Unbeknown to you though, I have changed the booking from room number 10 to number 11. Even though I disbelieve what you tell me, I don't do so for reasons relating to your credibility – you aren't being dishonest or incompetent – I simply know something you don't, nor should you. This means the conditional above is too strong. Instead, when S tells H that *p*,

H forms D toward *p* for reason R → D is insulting for S

where R stands for any reason for not believing the testimony that reflects negatively on the credibility of S as a testifier. Only when the non-belief is for this reason will it be insulting.

One possible reason for thinking that the above conditional is too strong are cases in which the hearer is epistemically warranted in rejecting the speaker's testimony.<sup>16</sup> Anscombe herself appeared to defend such a position: "Compare the irritation of a teacher at not being believed. On the whole, such irritation is just... But if what was *not* believed should turn out to be false, his complaint collapses."<sup>17</sup> From this we might say that if someone disbelieves a speaker because she is justified in believing the speaker to be speaking falsely, then this is not insulting for the speaker. However, cases like this *are* still disparaging for speakers. To take Anscombe's example, say a science teacher is disbelieved by her students for the reason (R) that the students believe the teacher to lack credibility as a scientist. In addition, suppose that the students are correct in their assessment, and that what the teacher presents to them is not true. Regardless, the students' disbelief manifests an insult against the teacher. This is the teacher's livelihood, and it is

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<sup>15</sup> In Malcolm, "How to Insult," I offer several cases to explain why this carries negative implications for the speaker, some of which, for example, affect her social role as a distributor of knowledge.

<sup>16</sup> See, for instance, Hazlett: "refusing someone's testimony constitutes insulting her only when it manifests unreasonable (unjustified, irrational, unwarranted) doubt about her credibility" ("On the Special Insult," 43-44). See also Jeremy Wanderer, "Addressing Testimonial Injustice: Being Ignored and Being Rejected," *The Philosophical Quarterly* 62 (2012): 165-166.

<sup>17</sup> Anscombe, "What is it to Believe," 9.

being challenged, and rightfully so, on the basis that the teacher is incompetent as a scientist – in the very thing that the teacher is supposed to have expertise and competence in. Of course, the teacher cannot complain about being disbelieved, but it still follows that she's insulted because she is regarded as incompetent (see §4.3 for further discussion and defence of this claim).

Supposing that the above conditional holds, then the next feature to be noted is that the consequent does not maintain that S *is* insulted by D. Since D is an internal mental state, S might never become aware of D. We might wonder, then, why D is insulting for S on those occasions where S does not become aware of D. After all, insults are disparaging and hence cause offence to the insulted party. But insults can still be performed even if the insulted party is not aware that she has been insulted. It seems possible, for instance, to be insulted in a language one does not understand. Moreover, a person's internal racist attitudes would be insulting toward others if they became revealed. This suggests that insults merely have the *potential* to offend, and do not depend for their existence on causing *actual* offence.

Does it follow from this that if S becomes aware of the insult then S will be offended by it? It seems not. This is because someone might not regard an insult as offensive, despite the fact that when accusing someone of having a certain property that is tracked by the insult, this accusation ought to cause offence. Take, for instance, a newspaper reporter who thrives on spreading falsehoods to garner more attention for her journalism. If you accuse her of being a liar, you are attributing the property of being a liar onto the reporter that you take to be negative, which you intend to be an insult, and which, under normal circumstances, would be regarded as offensive. However, the reporter might appropriate this property in a positive fashion, and take your accusation as a compliment. Given this, she might become aware of your insult, and yet not be offended by it.

One way to make sense of this is in terms of the distinction between 'illocutionary act' and 'perlocutionary effect.'<sup>18</sup> The illocutionary command to 'shut the door' may be successfully performed in the sense that it's been spoken felicitously, whilst the perlocutionary effect of the command may be unsuccessful if the person commanded fails to actually shut the door. Similarly, an insult can

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<sup>18</sup> J.L. Austin, *How to Do Things With Words*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (London: Oxford University Press, 1962). For further discussion of Austin's distinction as it applies to insult see Jerome Neu, *Sticks and Stones: The Philosophy of Insults* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 164-170.

Finlay Malcolm

succeed in picking out some denigrating property of a person, and yet fail if that person is not offended by it. So, when S tells H that  $p$ ,

S becomes aware of D  $\rightarrow$  S is warranted in feeling offended by H.

This conditional can make sense of cases like the dishonest reporter. Importantly, though, it also has an ethical function of making sense of other cases, such as examples of injustice. Suppose you are brought up in a society in which it is customary to belittle people because of their skin colour, race, gender, sexuality, etc. (A society that does not, unfortunately, even require imagining). If you are belittled in virtue of any of these features in an unjust way, you may simply accept it without feeling offended. You might just agree that this is your status in society and live with it. Does it follow that you have not been insulted? I wouldn't say so. These kinds of cases of injustice look entirely insulting, and you are warranted in feeling offended, even if you never do feel offended.

A final issue I want to address at this stage is whether, despite appearances, one's doxastic response to testimony really ever can be insulting for people. Suppose we think of insults as being *intended* to denigrate and offend the other. Well, if we think that our doxastic states are not under our direct voluntary control, then it would follow that we can't directly adopt them with *any* intention in mind, let alone one to insult another person. This objection fails though because one's actions, words and attitudes can be insulting by accident or without any intention to insult. An innocent hand gesture in one culture is insulting to people in another, just as one's direct confrontational stance in an argument can be insulting in some cultures, and not insulting in others. And yet perhaps these culturally-sensitive acts are not, in fact, insults after all, but only bear the mere appearance of an insult. The person feeling insulted is actually unwarranted in this feeling for the very reason that insults must be intended, and sometimes we just aren't aware of a culture's systems. This may be correct for culturally-sensitive insults, but there are other unintended insults that are not culturally-sensitive. An overheard insult is one such case. I can say something denigrating of you to a friend without intending to insult you, but if you overhear what I say, then I will insult you, and moreover, you will be warranted in feeling insulted. Moreover, suppose I believe that some politician is poor at her job, through no direct choice of my own. Isn't this belief insulting to her? And if she became aware of this, wouldn't she be warranted in feeling insulted? Finally, I can insult someone unintentionally by insulting her intelligence with overbearing, protracted advice on straightforward everyday matters. If the culturally-sensitive examples are not



sufficient to show that insults can be unintentional, then I suggest these three cases demonstrate that insults needn't be intended to actually exist.<sup>19</sup>

Let's move now to consider ethical issues around insults, and how these apply to the specific case of testimonial insult.

### 3. Reasons Against Insulting

Given that various actions and attitudes constitute an insult, it seems plausible that this fact gives us reasons to refrain from performing such actions or holding such attitudes. I expect that there are several arguments that support this claim, but I will prioritise discussion of two.

First, insults may cause harmful effects against the insulted party. According to the above account, one of the causes of insults are offence. Joel Feinberg has claimed that "to be forced to suffer an offence...is an unpleasant inconvenience, and hence an evil."<sup>20</sup> This could be the case if the offence one suffers brings up certain reactive emotions such as anger, humiliation, fear and resentment.<sup>21</sup> These emotions can make it harder to live one's life and sometimes even to exist cooperatively with others in society. Consider a group of people living in a community who are consistently targeted by verbal pejoratives from those whom they come into contact with. Not only will offence and the emotions caused by it be the likely and justified outcome of the insult for the individuals of the group, but so will a lack of any feeling of trust, which in turn can cause one to feel isolated and unwilling to do kindness toward others.

Although this offence and emotional response is a possible, and perhaps in some situations, likely outcome of insult, insults are not sufficient to cause such a response. This is for two reasons that were given in the previous section. First, the insulted party might not become aware of the insult, and second, even if they do they might not feel offended. Therefore, the strongest claim that can be made here is that given the potential for insults to cause offence and other reactive emotions, we have a reason against performing them. For ease, I will refer to this as *the offence norm*. So, according to the offence norm, we have a *pro tanto* reason against insulting others because, if the person becomes aware of the insult, this can cause a particular harm against the insulted party – namely, they cause unpleasant

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<sup>19</sup> For further discussion see Neu, *Sticks and Stones*, 18-24.

<sup>20</sup> Joel Feinberg, *Offence to Others* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 49.

<sup>21</sup> Feinberg, *Offence to Others*, 13 & 21.

Finlay Malcolm

or undesirable emotions and reactive attitudes, such as offence, fear and resentment.

Even though the offence norm provides reasons against insulting others, these reasons can be easily outweighed. In particular, people usually *deserve* to be given the truth, even when this is insulting, and hence, they deserve to be insulted. Telling a political dictator who is responsible for the deaths of her own people that she is an evil monster might demand to be said *because of*, rather than *despite of*, the fact that it may cause insult. After all, helping words aren't always kind. There is also the issue of liberty and freedom of speech which itself involves the freedom to insult.<sup>22</sup> Hence the pro tanto reasons given by the offence norm can be, and often are, outweighed by other reasons.

Can this account of general reasons against insult be applied to the specific case of testimonial insult? For the offence norm at least, this appears to be the case. Just consider how important it can be, in some situations, for one person to be believed over another. Various interpersonal relationships appear to manifest this importance, such as that between spouses. Suppose one tells the other something of significance, say, that she's lost her job but was unfairly treated in this regard. To then have this testimony not believed by her spouse can be insulting. Moreover, it looks like it could cause offence leading to a negative emotional response. Her spouse won't side with her on a significant issue, and if the spouse doesn't believe her for the reason that she is thought to be a liar, this could easily cause a good deal of resentment and distrust. These, it seems, are the sorts of situations that can often cause interpersonal relationships to begin to degrade. Since *believing* the spouse in the first place would have prevented her from being insulted, and from feeling offended, it looks like the offence norm gives us a reason, in these kinds of situations, to believe what has been said. Indeed, not just any reason, but a *moral* reason, albeit one that is merely pro tanto.

But are there deserved or warranted cases in which a speaker *should* be disbelieved despite of, or even because of the offence this insult will cause? It looks like there are. Take the story of *The Boy Who Cried Wolf*. Refusing the Boy's testimony could be a valuable corrective to his behaviour. If nobody ever believes habitual liars like the Boy, then hopefully this will have a positive influence on their behaviour so that they will seek to become more reliable, and hence truthful testifiers.

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<sup>22</sup> See Neu, *Sticks and Stones*, Chapter 6.

We can see this issue more clearly by the way it connects with the debate over the norms of assertion. Given the obvious problems that arise when speakers mislead hearers into believing falsely, it is widely held that assertion is governed by a norm which instructs speakers on when one is warranted in performing an assertion. Leading candidates for this norm include knowledge,<sup>23</sup> justification,<sup>24</sup> and truth.<sup>25</sup> If a speaker is in clear violation of a norm such as one of these, insulting that person by rejecting her testimony could lead her toward sticking to the norm in future discourse. This may be so for the reason that if people adopt a policy of refusing your testimony because you are either a liar, epistemically incompetent, or perhaps even both, then this will cause you to feel shame and embarrassment. This will hopefully lead to change in the individual. The insult paid, in these cases, seems therefore to perform a certain rehabilitative function: if the speaker won't speak the truth more often, then no one will believe her anymore about anything, and this can be a socially isolating punishment. This can also be understood in terms of blame. By disbelieving someone, we blame her for not acting as she should, and this blame then becomes a reason for the person to act otherwise in future. Bernard Williams calls this rehabilitative concept a 'proleptic mechanism.'<sup>26</sup> So, it seems as though testimonial insults, when the testimony ought to be rejected, are not merely reasons that fail to count against believing the speaker, but actually look like reasons that count in favour of *disbelieving* her. In these kinds of cases, we have all-things-considered reasons to reject the testimony in the knowledge that it will insult.

Let's consider a second argument that gives us reasons against performing insults in general. It is sometimes argued that individual and collective flourishing is an ultimate, non-instrumental good.<sup>27</sup> By insulting others, we run the risk of undermining this good – we can make it more difficult for ourselves and for others

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<sup>23</sup> Timothy Williamson, *Knowledge and Its Limits* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), Chapter 11.

<sup>24</sup> Jennifer Lackey, "Norms of Assertion," *Nous* 41 (2007): 594-626.

<sup>25</sup> Daniel Whiting, "Truth is (Still) the Norm for Assertion: A Reply to Littlejohn," *Erkenntnis* 80 (2015): 1245–1253.

<sup>26</sup> Bernard Williams, "Internal Reasons and the Obscurity of Blame," in *Making Sense of Humanity: And Other Philosophical Papers 1982-1993* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 42-43.

<sup>27</sup> Miriam McCormick, *Believing Against the Evidence: Agency and the Ethics of Belief* (Oxford: Routledge, 2015).

Finlay Malcolm

to flourish. Why might this be the case? We can derive an answer from the following remarks made by David Archard:

There is something wrong with insulting another, namely the assertion or assumption of dominance, the aim or intention of disparaging and dishonouring the other. It is a failure of civility, a fall from the standards that should regulate the interactions of persons of equal moral worth and status.<sup>28</sup>

There are a few distinct claims being made here. First, in insulting others, the insulter assumes a position of dominance over the insulted. Second, insults, when intended, *aim* to disparage others or, at least, as we saw previously, they can cause offence and a negative emotional response, which will still be the case with unintended insults. Third, insults cause us to fail to meet social standards of civility. These standards of civility regulate our interactions with others to ensure that we treat them with equal moral worth and status, and therefore, we fail to treat people in this way.

Supposing that insults can lead to these outcomes, it would seem that by insulting others, we would not be flourishing as individuals, and we may prevent others from flourishing too. This is because we hardly encourage collective flourishing by assuming a dominant position over others, nor from disparaging them or treating them as having lesser moral worth and status. Rather, collective flourishing means trying to advance and encourage others in a positive fashion, instead of climbing over them with offensive remarks. Moreover, we may detract from ourselves as individuals. As great figures like Martin Luther King Jr. show, humility and respect leads to greater individual flourishing than arrogance and aggression. Rather than casting aspersions, one can grow in greater moral character, and hence individual flourishing, by resisting the urge to disparage others, and where necessary, to confront someone's misgivings with good example and understanding.

As with the prior issue of insults causing offence, simply resisting insult is not sufficient for human flourishing. Nor might it even be necessary, although it may well detract from it. What we see, then, is that if by performing insults we detract from our attainment of individual and collective flourishing, then we have a reason to refrain from performing them. We can refer to this as *the flourishing norm*, according to which, we have a pro tanto reason against insulting others because if the person becomes aware of the insult, then the insult can make it

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<sup>28</sup> Archard, "Insults, Free Speech," 137.

harder in some way or other for ourselves and others to attain the ultimate good of individual and collective flourishing.

This reason to avoid insulting others also seems to carry across into instances of testimony. One case in point comes when a person's intellectual arrogance fosters timidity in others as testifiers.<sup>29</sup> Suppose, for instance, that someone takes themselves to be intellectually superior to people compared with a certain social group. Furthermore, suppose this arrogant belief causes this person to disbelieve most of the things that are asserted from this social group. Not only do we appear to have an instance of epistemic injustice, but also an unwarranted insult in the form of a systematic rejection of testimony for the reason that the speaker(s) are thought to be of limited credibility as testifiers. This is damaging for the collective flourishing of this social group since it could foster timidity in them in the sense that they might become disposed to silence, rather than being disposed to share what they know.<sup>30</sup> Moreover, this is damaging for the individual's flourishing since a means of acquiring knowledge has been lost. As such, it seems as though considerations of collective and individual flourishing bear on the doxastic response people should give to testimony.

Despite the fact that the flourishing norm gives reasons, these can be easily outweighed by some of the similar considerations we found when addressing the offence norm. For instance, for those people who deserve to be given the truth, even when this leads to an insult for that person, it doesn't necessarily detract from human flourishing. If someone is abusive, informing that person in a way that can be insulting, whether intentionally or not, may be necessary for all the individuals involved to flourish.

This sort of example also has relevant application in cases of testimony. One particular kind of flourishing we can achieve is *intellectual*.<sup>31</sup> This might be compromised, though, if people are allowed to consistently violate the norms governing proper assertion. In that case, people would be spreading unwarranted assertions at best, or falsehoods at worst, and this will inhibit individual and

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<sup>29</sup> Alessandra Tanesini, "Calm Down Dear': Intellectual Arrogance, Silencing and Ignorance," *Aristotelian Society: Supplementary Volume* 90 (2016): 71-92.

<sup>30</sup> This is relevant to Kristie Dotson's notion of 'testimonial quieting' in her paper, "Tracking Epistemic Violence, Tracking Patterns of Silencing," *Hypatia* 26, 2 (2011): 236-257.

<sup>31</sup> Berit Brogaard, "Intellectual Flourishing as the Fundamental Epistemic Norm," in *Epistemic Norms: New Essays on Action, Belief, and Assertion*, eds. Clayton Littejohn and John Turri (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 11-31.

Finlay Malcolm

collective development. Hence, believing someone's testimony so as to avoid causing insult when that person is in violation of her duties as a speaker can actually *undermine* the flourishing of oneself and others. Just as with the offence norm, then, the flourishing norm merely offers a pro tanto reason for belief. This reason may be sufficient for responding to testimony in a particular way in some situations, but will be outweighed in others.

In this section we have looked at two pro tanto reasons we have to avoid insulting others, and applied this to instances of testimony. In these cases, it appeared that there are some pro tanto moral reasons that bear on the issue of what our doxastic response should be toward that testimony. These reasons fall out of general reflection on reasons against performing insults. In the next section, I will reintroduce epistemic reasons we have for responding to testimony. When we do so, we find that, perhaps surprisingly, the reasons discussed in this section do not need, in many cases, to be taken into practical consideration concerning whether one should believe a speaker to avoid insulting her.

#### **4. Testimonial Insult, Reasons for Belief and Reasons for Action**

##### 4.1 Comparing Reasons for Belief

To compare our various reasons for testimonial belief (those beliefs, including disbelief and suspension of judgment, that are formed on the basis of testimony), I want to simplify matters by introducing a taxonomy. One way to do this is in epistemic terms. So, we could say that for any set of testimonial beliefs a person has, each belief in the set is either epistemically warranted or is epistemically unwarranted. Working on the assumption that warrant can be defined in terms of one's reasons,<sup>32</sup> we could say that one is epistemically warranted in taking D toward  $p$  on the basis of testimony  $t$  provided one has responded sufficiently to the epistemic reasons one has for adopting D toward  $p$ . The view I am defending, then, claims that for any doxastic attitude D a person S holds on the basis of testimony  $t$ , D either responds sufficiently, in an *epistemic* sense, to S's *epistemic* reasons, or D does not respond sufficiently, in an *epistemic* sense, to S's *epistemic* reasons. One's

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<sup>32</sup> For more on this issue see Clayton Littlejohn, "Reasons and Belief's Justification," in *Reasons for Belief*, eds. Andrew Reisner and Asbjørn Steglich-Petersen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 111-130; and Kurt Sylvan and Ernest Sosa, "The Place of Reasons in Epistemology," in *The Oxford Handbook of Reasons and Normativity*, ed. Daniel Star (Oxford University Press, forthcoming).

testimonial beliefs can therefore be divided into two groups, determined by their responsiveness to the epistemic reasons a person has.

I noted briefly in the introduction that I take epistemic reasons to be the kinds of considerations that count in favour of truth. That is, having an epistemic reason for believing  $p$ , such as having evidence for  $p$ , is a reason that counts in favour of the truth of  $p$ . Suppose you have evidence that a friend stole your pen. This evidence counts in favour of the truth of the proposition that your friend stole your pen. Given this, you have an epistemic reason to believe that your friend stole your pen. Now, if the evidence is indeed strong enough to mandate belief, then responding to it with belief would be the correct response. You would be responding sufficiently to the epistemic reasons you have. In that case, we can say that your doxastic attitude is *epistemically warranted*. However, you could also respond insufficiently by either disbelieving or suspending judgment concerning whether or not your friend stole your pen. In either of these cases, your doxastic attitude would be *epistemically unwarranted*. These appear to be the only two options for evaluating each belief in your set in *epistemic* terms.

But what about other reasons that count in favour of taking D toward  $p$ ? Shouldn't we divide up our beliefs according to these reasons as well? For instance, the relationship you have with your friend might give you a moral reason to be partial in one's belief towards evidence concerning her.<sup>33</sup> Or consider that by believing she can overcome her illness, Jane has a greater chance of surviving it. It looks like, therefore, Jane has a pragmatic reason to believe that she can overcome her illness. Should we individuate the beliefs we have according to their responsiveness to pragmatic, as well as epistemic considerations?

It seems plausible that we *could* divide up our beliefs this way, but we *needn't*. This is because for each belief we hold for which pragmatic considerations bear on whether we should believe it, there are, in addition, always epistemic reasons that bear on whether we should believe it. Jane has a pragmatic reason for her belief. Let's suppose she does believe that she can overcome her illness, and that this really will help her to overcome it. Now, she might have evidence that warrants believing this proposition. For instance, she could be suffering from a disease that when treated early has a 90% survival rate, and she is having it treated early. So, yes, she has pragmatic reasons for belief, but she also has epistemic reasons too. In that case, even if she believes for pragmatic reasons, she is still epistemically warranted in believing as she does. Consider the same situation, but

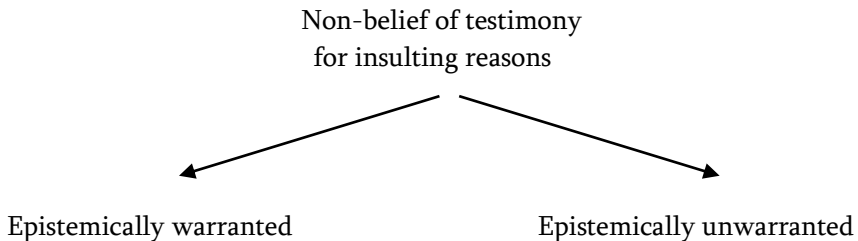
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<sup>33</sup> Sarah Stroud, "Epistemic Partiality in Friendship," *Ethics* 116 (2006): 498-524.

Finlay Malcolm

where the survival rate is 10%. Again, yes, she has pragmatic reasons for belief, but she also has epistemic reasons that bear on what she should believe, namely, that she should believe that she won't overcome her illness. If she believes that she will, perhaps to be explained by pragmatic considerations, her belief is epistemically unwarranted. Of course, sometimes the evidence is inconclusive, as Pascal believed when he formulated the Wager. However, even in this case, one has epistemic reasons that bear on what to believe, namely, that the evidence is inconclusive, so the reasons warrant suspension of judgment. So, it looks as though we can individuate our beliefs into two categories – those that are epistemically warranted and those that are epistemically unwarranted – and compare from here other non-epistemic reasons that bear on what one should believe.

We now have a taxonomy that enables us to fully address the second broad aim of this paper. To state this taxonomy explicitly, begin by noting that in §2, every instance of testimonial insult stems from the non-belief of the hearer for a reason that negatively reflects on the credibility of the speaker. These doxastic responses can then either be epistemically warranted or epistemically unwarranted. They are epistemically warranted if and only if they sufficiently respond to the epistemic reasons that count in favour of non-belief. They are epistemically unwarranted when they do not sufficiently respond to such reasons. We have, then, instances of non-belief that lead to testimonial insult that are warranted, and instances that are not warranted. Our taxonomy would then be as follows:



Now, a reminder that my second broad aim in this paper is to explore the place of reasons for belief arising from testimonial insult alongside epistemic reasons for belief in order to identify what sort of functional role they occupy. To address this aim, let's begin on the right-hand side of the taxonomy with cases of epistemically unwarranted testimonial insult.



## 4.2 Unwarranted Insult

A quintessential example of unwarranted insult is Miranda Fricker's notion of testimonial injustice. In these cases, negative stereotypes can embody prejudices that work against the speaker in a way that leads the hearer to make "an unduly deflated judgement of the speaker's credibility, perhaps missing out on knowledge as a result."<sup>34</sup> As an actual case in point, take those societies in which the testimony of women is disregarded out of hand by men because of a prejudice that deflates their credibility as testifiers. These cases meet Fricker's description and, as Fricker notes, also constitute a testimonial insult.<sup>35</sup> As we saw in §3, there are norms that appear to give moral reasons against insulting people through our non-belief. In this particular case, other norms will be in play too, such as those relating to justice and fairness. Does it follow, then, that testimonial insult gives us a reason to believe speakers in instances of testimonial injustice? I believe that the answer to this is 'yes,' but with the important qualification that there are always other sufficient reasons to believe speakers in these instances, which arise from epistemic, rather than moral considerations.<sup>36</sup> Let me explain why.

Consider the kinds of cases we're looking at as they map onto the taxonomy: they are epistemically *unwarranted*. This is what makes epistemic injustice a case in point. As Fricker describes it, the hearer's judgement 'unduly' deflates the speaker's credibility. This undue judgment is undue in an epistemic sense. We are saying that there are sufficient epistemic reasons for the hearer to believe the

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<sup>34</sup> Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice*, 17.

<sup>35</sup> Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice*, 44. Although testimonial injustice and testimonial insult appear to be similar, they are not the same phenomena. Testimonial injustices arise due to the hearer's prejudiced judgments of the speaker in virtue of the speaker's social identity. I expect, therefore, that all instances of testimonial injustice will be insults. However, not all testimonial insults arise due to the hearer's prejudiced judgments, and so not all testimonial insults are testimonial injustices.

<sup>36</sup> It might be objected that in cases of testimonial injustice the distinction between epistemic and moral reasons breaks down, such that it's simply moral requirement that people be responsive to truth. Whilst I accept that this may be the case, I have two points in response. First, the reasons don't have to be conflated in this way; I think that, conceptually speaking, we can always distinguish epistemic from moral reasons, even in testimonial injustice, although I grant that this is somewhat unnatural. Second, the distinction won't break down in less morally charged cases that aren't inflected by issues of injustice, and so for those cases at least, the distinction between the reasons needs to be retained, and the distinction is helpful for weighing the reasons together. Thanks to an anonymous referee for this objection.

speaker. However, the hearer does not believe the speaker, and so fails to respond sufficiently to the testimony given. This is because there is something defective in the hearer. The hearer has no epistemic reasons that warrant her deflating the credibility of the speaker, and yet she does, and in virtue of this, her doxastic outcome – disbelief, or at best, suspension of judgement – is unwarranted. What this means is that in these cases, the hearer in the exchange has sufficient epistemic reasons to believe the speaker, and without other pro-tanto reasons outweighing these epistemic reasons, then we might argue that, epistemically speaking, she *ought* to believe the speaker. To fail to do so would be a failure of epistemic competence by failing to respond sufficiently to the epistemic reasons one has for belief. So, when we ask whether there are moral reasons that bear on the hearer's doxastic response, the answer may be *yes*, but if we then ask whether she should base her decision over whether or not to believe the speaker on these reasons, then the answer is that *she does not need to* because she has sufficient epistemic reasons to do so. Basing one's action on an aggregation of both moral and epistemic reasons is not necessary when both kinds of reasons are sufficient. What we would have in that case would be an overdetermination of reasons.

My argument here might be more clearly seen in a more general context. Suppose someone has sufficient moral reason to volunteer at the soup kitchen this weekend, but that also, she will enjoy doing so because her friend is also planning to volunteer. So, she has two sufficient reasons to volunteer at the soup kitchen. She could base her decision to volunteer on both reasons, but she needn't: each reason is a sufficient basis for action, and so she has an overdetermination of reasons.<sup>37</sup>

Someone might wish to argue, however, that some reasons are a better basis for action than others, and that I should pursue this route to prop up my argument. For instance, it might be morally better for me to volunteer for moral reasons, rather than the reason that I want to spend time with a friend, and so it might be argued that the former, rather than the latter, is a better reason for action and should be the basis of my decision to volunteer. Comparably, in an epistemic sense, it might be thought impossible, or at best extremely difficult to base a belief on non-epistemic reasons.<sup>38</sup> Surely, then, this fact modifies the moral reasons arising from testimonial insult by either disabling them, or making them much less appealing as a reason for belief compared with epistemic reasons. The epistemic

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<sup>37</sup> Thanks to an anonymous referee for this example.

<sup>38</sup> Shah, "A New Argument."

reasons are better because they are more possible or likely reasons for belief. In that case, when I have both sufficient moral and epistemic reasons for belief, I should base my belief on the better, epistemic reason. This may be correct, and Shah and others who reject the possibility of non-epistemic reasons for belief may be right in what they say. However, undermining moral reasons for belief in this way is both a separate issue, and distinct from the conclusion I am looking to defend. What I am defending is the following conditional: *even if it is possible* to base a belief on non-epistemic reasons, in the case of unwarranted testimonial insult the arising moral reasons for belief do not need to be the basis of our doxastic response to testimony; there are always alternatives in the form of epistemic reasons for belief. So, the position I defend for unwarranted insult is consistent with the theoretical existence of moral reasons for belief, but one that is practically consistent with rationally ignoring such reasons. This middle route has not to my knowledge been previously defended, and does not rely on the deflation of non-epistemic reasons.

The conditional conclusion I am defending follows from *any* case on the right-hand side of the taxonomy of testimonial insult. The reason for this is, simply, that all cases on that side are epistemically unwarranted, and hence, there will always be sufficient epistemic reason to change one's doxastic attitudes from unwarranted non-belief, to warranted belief. The moral reasons I have considered thus far simply don't need to feature in our reasons for belief. Moral considerations in cases of epistemically unwarranted testimonial insult are non-required optional extras.

#### 4.3 Warranted Insult

Let's now move to the other side of the taxonomy to consider cases of epistemically warranted non-belief. These are cases in which one's doxastic response to testimony is either disbelief or suspension of judgment. The reasons one has for not believing the testimony will be epistemic, but in addition, I will only consider those cases in which the non-belief embodies an insult, i.e. when the testimony is not believed for reasons that negatively reflect on the speaker's credibility. One kind of example that meets this definition is the Boy Who Cried Wolf. What we saw earlier, though, was that rather than insults being a reason to believe the Boy, insults actually gave further reasons to retain one's non-belief. This was because such insults function as a valuable corrective to the liar's behaviour, which has a greater outcome all things considered.

In §2 I maintained that, contrary to Anscombe,<sup>39</sup> warranted non-belief can manifest an insult. If I am wrong then the ensuing discussion is unnecessary. Perhaps all cases are like the aforementioned Boy Who Cried Wolf and there really are no reasons for belief coming from insult along this side of the taxonomy. Since I suspect that view is mistaken, I will offer one line of example that I feel fits the picture of warranted non-belief that constitutes a testimonial insult.

What cases, then, from the left-hand side of the taxonomy do appear affected by moral considerations stemming from testimonial insult? One obvious candidate are cases of interpersonal relationship. The spouse example from §3 looks like a case in point. Suppose the spouse, who is acting as the hearer, has sufficient epistemic reasons to believe that his spouse was fairly treated in being fired from the job. When his spouse reports that she was treated *unfairly*, we could imagine, for the sake of the example, that even this testimony, which is itself an epistemic reason to believe, is not weighty enough to warrant the hearer in changing his attitudes from non-belief to belief. Perhaps this is because he thinks that his spouse is being untruthful. In that case, he testimonially insults his spouse by negatively judging her credibility as a speaker. The implications of this could be profoundly negative. The offence it can cause may drive a wedge between the two spouses, leading to the breakdown of trust. If the first spouse had simply believed differently, he could have avoided such negative consequences. And a similar story could be told of other kinds of interpersonal relationship too.

Might it be possible, though, to avoid this consequence through other means than simply believing the spouse? On further reflection on this sort of case, it looks like what the speaker is asking of the hearer is for *support* in the sense that the hearer *agrees* with her on a matter of importance. Certainly, by believing her we can agree with her in this matter. But, it could be argued, we can also agree with her by *accepting* what she says, even when we don't believe her. Accepting testimony involves taking the proposition you have been told as a premise in your practical reasoning. As such, even when you don't believe *p*, you act as if *p* by adopting a policy of going along with *p* in some or all of your deliberations.<sup>40</sup> The one spouse can then agree with the other by acting as though she has been served an injustice through his actions, even if he doesn't believe this. Therefore, although

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<sup>39</sup> Anscombe, "What is it to Believe."

<sup>40</sup> L. Jonathan Cohen, *An Essay on Belief and Acceptance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 4.

the lack of belief may embody an insult, one can make up for this with one's actions.

Is there any reason for thinking that this isn't sufficient for agreeing with another person? The problem is that the one spouse, when accepting-but-not-believing the testimony of the other, is involved in a clear case of insincerity. Of course, he is doing so in order to cloak his disbelief so as not to insult his spouse, but suppose she found out that he actually disbelieves her testimony. It seems highly implausible that his spouse would take his acceptance as a form of agreement. What she wants from him is for him to *believe* her, not to *pretend to believe* her. The latter involves a sort of well-meaning deception where the testifier does not get agreement, whereas the former is a genuine form of agreement, and one that would prevent a testimonial insult.

There may, of course, be forms of support that do not require agreement, and which I can be involved in through non-doxastic acceptance, or non-doxastic trust, that will suffice to offset any insult that arises from my non-belief. For one example, I can support someone in her attempts to become a better person without trusting that person, as when I mentor someone with a criminal background to help her settle into society. I may not believe her when she says she is committed to reform, but the insult this may cause can be offset by my acting contrary to what I believe. This show of faith on my part could go some way to compensate for any offence that my non-belief can cause. Moreover, there are kinds of trust that do not appear to require belief. For example, with 'therapeutic trust' one trusts someone 'with the aim of bringing about trustworthiness,'<sup>41</sup> as when a mother trusts her daughter to look after the house for the weekend.<sup>42</sup> The mother needn't actually believe the daughter when she tells her that the house will be well looked after in order to exhibit this trust. She might simply accept what the daughter says by acting as though what she says is true.

In these instances of support, my actions can offset any testimonial insult. However, in other cases, such as those requiring agreement, non-doxastic acceptance or trust will not be sufficient. What is required of me is *belief*. Here,

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<sup>41</sup> Karen Jones, "Trust and Terror," in *Moral Psychology; Feminist Ethics and Social Theory*, eds. Peggy Desautels and Margaret Urban Walker (Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2004), 5.

<sup>42</sup> Similarly, Karen Frost-Arnold claims that "one might choose to [therapeutically] trust in order to encourage, inspire, or motivate someone to live up to one's vision of the kind of person she could be" ("The Cognitive Attitude of Rational Trust," *Synthese* 191 (2014): 1960).

Finlay Malcolm

the moral reasons for belief arising from testimonial insult make for important considerations, and do genuinely count in favour of belief.

Where does this leave the moral reasons we have for belief that appear to come from testimonial insult that we saw in §3? On the unwarranted side of the taxonomy, epistemic reasons are sufficient to warrant belief, and so moral reasons are not required. On the warranted side, first, epistemic reasons are sufficient to retain non-belief in cases where the speaker deserves to be not believed, so again, moral reasons are not required. Second, in some cases, moral reasons for belief do not need to be the basis of our believing a piece of testimony since some actions are sufficient to offset the insult. In other cases, though, particularly those concerning our most important interpersonal relationships, moral reasons for belief play an important, albeit pro-tanto role in guiding what to believe. We can conclude, then, that even though testimonial insult gives us reasons that count in favour of belief, in many or most cases, one does not need to base one's belief on these reasons. Instead, in many cases, one will always have either sufficient epistemic reasons, or sufficient reasons that count in favour of action, and believing or acting on these can be the means by which we avoid or suppress the insult, and hence can be a sufficient response to the moral reasons given by testimonial insult. There are, though, some important exceptions to this claim, particularly those in which we are required to agree with someone in whom we have a close relationship.

## 5. Conclusion

In the current debate over reasons for belief, the claim that there can be pragmatic reasons that count in favour of belief remains controversial, despite there being some hope for the position.<sup>43</sup> In this paper I have supported the existence of pragmatic reasons for belief. However, I have also side-stepped their practical influence by claiming that in many cases such reasons need not bear consequence when it comes to determining what our doxastic response should be towards testimony. There are several ways to object to moral reasons for belief, and this looks to me to be an unexplored strategy for deprioritising pragmatic reasons for belief, and in effect, centring discussion on epistemic reasons. It would be interesting to see where this strategy could be employed further in the current lively debate over reasons for belief.

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<sup>43</sup> Andrew Reisner, "Weighing Pragmatic and Evidential Reasons for Belief," *Philosophical Studies* 138 (2008): 7–27; Andrew Reisner, "Pragmatic Reasons for Belief," in *The Oxford Handbook of Reasons and Normativity*, ed. Daniel Star (Oxford University Press, forthcoming).