# A Prudential Argument for Lexical Sovereignty

*Abstract. This paper argues that it is prudentially wise to defer to groups about how they are essentially constituted and defined. After a few words situating the paper in my greater research project (§1), I articulate the kind of deference I have in mind (§2). Then I offer two conditional arguments on why it is epistemically desirable to let other people tell you how they ought to be identified (§3). The first argument is that people are owed lexical sovereignty because denying it is absurd; the second is that modest skeptics ought to agree with it on the basis of some relatively anodyne and plausible epistemic considerations.*

It is often said that one ought to ‘stay in their lane’ – to mind their own business, stay in their epistemic territory, stick to the rivers and lakes that they’re used to.[[1]](#footnote-1) The metaphor implies a tacit recognition of a division of epistemic labor, a signalling problem, and cost-consequences attached to venturing beyond their role – hence, you imagine an angry driver yelling ‘stay in your lane’, a felt sense of needing to signal your lane change, and potentially incurring the wrath of a honk. Border policing is a familiar feature of academic life, as it captures the same sort of facts that go into policing boundaries of disciplines, each supposedly based on an epistemic community that can be relied upon to generate accurate beliefs and predictions through the development and use of intellectual and empirical tools. But it is far from being limited to academia; when it comes to interactive or social kinds, these categorizations often have the force that they do because there are heartfelt questions of personal identity at stake.

It is easy to be suspicious of borders, limits, and so on – it always hits a nerve to encounter claims of territoriality, and not always in a productive way. In questions about social kinds, the act of border patrolling hits the nerve that it does for a variety of reasons. In part, it is because we have a desire to defer in a serial hyperspecialized workforce in which certain personal orientations thrive at the expense of others. (Millgram, 2015) The hyperspecialized division of labor takes on epistemic dimensions because in our interconnected world, with our growing circle of concern, it is harder for us all to walk on the same factual common ground – and so it is convenient to defer. As a result of our sociological situation, there is an overwhelming temptation to take part in ‘stay in your lane’ talk – which makes it all the more tragic when that talk is transparently groundless, as it sometimes is.

Still, I want to focus on one particular kind of case where deference is prudentially welcome, where the trope really does have good sense to it. I want to say that a particular kind of belief is unwise to hold all by yourself: namely, beliefs about how other people are properly identified.[[2]](#footnote-2) The resources already exist to tend to the question on a moral level, due to the recent explorations of moral deference.[[3]](#footnote-3) But I would also like to say that beliefs of this kind are unwise to hold all by yourself, *morality aside* – it is the incorrect strategy to use even when global considerations of virtue and justice are postponed.[[4]](#footnote-4) I refer to those conditions where intellectually responsible people have good reason to feel the pressure to defer as ‘wedge conditions’, as the exterior beliefs by others ‘wedge’ into one’s own beliefs. These are particular and highly contextual wedge conditions, sufficient but non-necessary conditions for deference -- cases where ‘stay in your lane’ really is sensible patter, owing to the need for lexical sovereignty of social groups.

Here’s what to expect. After a few words situating the paper in my greater research project (§1), I articulate the modest kind of deferential belief I have in mind (§2). Then I will offer two conditional arguments on why it is epistemically desirable to let other people tell you how they ought to be identified (§3). The first argument is that people are owed lexical sovereignty because denying it is absurd; the second is that modest skeptics ought to agree with it on the basis of some relatively anodyne and plausible epistemic considerations. Though I mean for these observations to coincide with (and enrich) the demands of morality, equity, and dignity, the sort of deference in play does not depend upon such connections -- prudential wisdom is enough.[[5]](#footnote-5)

## Motivation and presuppositions

This essay is a part of a larger manuscript in social epistemology which runs parallel to my past work on legal promulgation, so I need to say something about what motivates it. As a preview, my concern in that manuscript is with explaining *theoretical disagreements* betweenepistemic peerswith respect to interactive kinds. The problem of peer disagreement is hard enough; made harder in the context of social kinds; and harder still when we focus on theoretical disagreements – and especially those connected to law.[[6]](#footnote-6) My approach is to develop an account of good faith exchange (typically argument) where ‘good faith’ is something more substantive than mere sincerity.

Now for a few assumptions which are developed in greater detail in elsewhere.

At the core of my account is the notion of prudence. It is roughly that provided by Aquinas, broken into four categories of traits: comprehension, vigilance, integrity, and humility.[[7]](#footnote-7) Supplemented by the virtue of candor, these exemplify the virtues of good faith exchange, and are pivotal to figuring out what to do about theoretical disagreement. The notion of prudence is wide-spirited, and modulated by different philosophical orientations. It is also marked by the idea that some theories and descriptions are more desirable than others for purposes of explanation and prediction, or ‘epistemic desirability’.[[8]](#footnote-8)

I take it that the limits of deference are set by pragmatic maxims that guide interpretation during cooperative exchange, and especially which set the limits on the theoretical imagination when developing a theory of what the other person is trying to say and what they do say -- insofar as they are speaking in good faith.[[9]](#footnote-9) In that spirit, I shall assume a *prudentialized principle of charity*, which is put forward and developed in the book. By a ‘prudentialized principle of charity’, I mean the idea that we cannot judge people to be irrational unless we have a justifiable account of their errors when they violate normative standards, and *on the assumption that those standards are prudent*. If you require other resources to interpret someone (e.g., the standard conception of charity), I suggest that you will have gone beyond the remit of what can be *interpreted in good faith* – which is to say, beyond any rational hope of reconciliation of opinion. Donald Trump’s suggestion that bleach and sunshine are a cure for COVID-19 is not recoverable as an expression of good faith, for example, because it is difficult to imagine any prudential standard that would make the claim worth saying or affirming.

One can only defer to other *agents*, not to patients; a recognition of the agency of the other person is a minimally decent basis for deference. So, I have to make assumptions about *what counts as an agent* (i.e., the source and object of action). They are, roughly, these: an agent is a *person* capable of at least *de re* (unsophisticated) intentions.

I shall assume a kind of constrained bundle theory about personhood.[[10]](#footnote-10) The concept of an actor is a *syndrome* (akin to a Wittgensteinian family resemblance concept, or Searlean cluster concept), not a classic concept with tight-and-tidy boundaries and parsimonious necessary and sufficient conditions. So, the identification of an agent can only happen if we appeal to a small set of overlapping, disjunctive criteria. *Psychological continuity* is one such criterion – Locke’s psychic temporal chain, made most poignant in a continuity of aspiration and belief. Another is *somatic continuity*  – i.e., the fact that we are the same living organism with past and future ‘selves’. Another is *niche presentation* – that some person is socially identified with a particular continuity of features that have the right fit to their environment, e.g., a particular self-presentation or effective ongoing narrative.[[11]](#footnote-11) An agent is an entity that possesses two out of three of these qualities, and has the power to come up with intentions in action.

The result is that personhood can be rendered in at least four ways, per (Fig 1):

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| *Continuity*  | *Rendering of agency* *[\*: classical autonomy]* |
| *Somatic* | *Psychological* | *Niche presentation* |
| Yes | Yes | Yes | Full agent [\*] |
| Yes | No | Yes | Segmented agent[[12]](#footnote-12)*(e.g., person survives despite amnesia)* |
| Yes | Yes | No | Classical agent [\*] *(e.g., person survives change in environment, misadventures)* |
| No | Yes | Yes | Role agent*(e.g., person survives despite physical trauma)* |

Why at least *two* criteria? The idea is just that it will not suffice for us to select a single criterion and hold to it with no independent means of calibrating the expressions to be identified – not if the hope is to have stable categories that play a proper role in the production of true beliefs, anyway. If agency were a realist sort of thing, occurring out there independently of the mind, then perhaps the need for multiple criteria would not be necessary; all we would need to say about my agency are bio-essentialist facts, say. But I think the past century of philosophy (and science fiction) has gotten us to wise up on all that -- the prince and the cobbler, *Star Trek* teleporters, *Swamp Thing*, *Trading Places*, twin studies, and so on.[[13]](#footnote-13)

Relatedly, I assume that the joint continuity of psychological and somatic features is what makes us autonomous in the classical sense of ‘self-rule’. The two remaining incomplete renderings of agency are, from a classical point of view, heteronymous -- but they are agents all the same, and it is to them that we devote our attention. If anyone would like to argue that the shoe is on the other foot, that the classical view of the agent is heteronymous, or if it turns out the classical view of autonomy is unfairly limited, then I’m open to it (with some caveats). I only make this assumption because the question of whether or not to defer to segmented and role agents is on the face of it more perplexing.

As an anti-realist of this attenuated sort, I am free to assume there are at least some collective agents, too, though with slightly modified variations on the above-mentioned conditions. The first thing I have to do is supplement and clarify that our concern with continuity, in the study of social units, has got to do with the factors that make *solidarity* continuous for the plurality in question. The approach to characterizing collective agents is something quite like the one we used to characterize individual agents, with two out of three criteria demanded. But instead of somatic continuity, we may now refer to a shared space of members; instead of psychological continuity, refer to a shared organization; and concern ourselves with fitness to niche as the third criterion instead of presentation. These are the physical, organizational, and niche aspects of a given social unit, resulting in different renderings, per Fig (2):

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| *Continuity*  | *Rendering of plural agency* |
| *Proximity of**place* | *Organizational**centrality* | *Niche fit* |
| Yes | Yes | Yes | Plurality as a total system*(e.g., a nation-state, a community)* |
| Yes | No | Yes | Plurality as distinct cluster of behaviors*(e.g., a movement, a culture, an ethnicity)* |
| Yes | Yes | No | Plurality as locus of power over bodies*(e.g., a group, people on a walk together)* |
| No | Yes | Yes | Plurality as a tendency of associations*(e.g., a network, a coalition)* |

So, for example, the ship of Theseus can be remade plank by plank or person by person, but if so then it had better stay under the same organizational structure, and sail under the same mast and name; else it be the ship of Theseus no more.[[14]](#footnote-14) [[15]](#footnote-15)

As before, the hardest criterion to characterize is the idea of ‘fitness to niche’. By this, I mean the idea that a social unit is in some way crucially or vitally connected to the ways they ‘fit’ into their environment, including in the ways that they are perceived. So, for instance, a pair of people on a walk together do not need to raise a banner and trumpet their intentions to go on a walk together to qualify as engaged in a joint action; they only need to go on the walk. But there is a sense in which a movement or a network has to characterize itself in terms of the ways it adapts to the world in order for anyone to be able to account for its character.

Importantly, the disjunctive account of the metaphysical underpinnings of aggregates is modest, and consistent with a plurality of potential views on various social kinds. Each rendering is directed towards a certain specialized form of coordinated action with its own style of persuasive effects on individuals which compel them to play their respective parts. Admittedly, the agency of aggregate-like collectives may be very thin at times; e.g., when we say “the market rallied behind Apple today,” we are speaking of an emergent plural action that is somewhere between a networked and movement action.[[16]](#footnote-16) But what matters, for my purposes, is that speech must be made intelligible enough for us to be able to talk about ‘speaking for’ plural agents engaged in concert. And without some kind of criterion for social action, we end up with speech that is essentially pretentious: e.g., saying “Canadians enjoyed the frigid weather today” without any evidence of bodies moving outdoors or some prior assumption that Canadians enjoy being frostbitten.

A few final assumptions, relating prudence to closely related matters of manners and morality. I assume that the connection to manners is tenuous; one may be prudent and civil, but nevertheless (relative to a set of customs) rude – provided that one is aware of the norms they are breaking. The connection between prudence and morality is far more plausible, but somewhat indistinct. The ideas of ‘right’ and ‘duty’ belong to those areas of practical reason which supply *ultima facie* reasons for action – i.e., most distinctively to morality, with forceful connections to the deliberation and advice of the virtuous reasoner. It is unclear whether having a reason to defer to some, or (in a sense) the idea that we ought to defer to someone, implies that one has a duty to defer, and is blameworthy for not doing so. It is possible that more relaxed and liberal usage of rights/duties talk is acceptable (i.e., Ross’s *prime facie* duties), but I won’t assume it, because my mind is somewhat unsettled on the issue. But this point will matter less to the essay here than to the greater project.

## 2. Scope and limits of assent

It might seem initially puzzling how a deferential wedge could ever be admitted into the mind of an autonomous reasoner. Even among social epistemologists, it is reasonable to start inquiry from a perspective you find most compelling or resonant – that is, a standpoint. Admitting an alien perspective into your first approximations of what plausible reasons during the course of exchange is to give up on any serious idea of intellectual discretion. But that just is what is at stake in wedge conditions.

In fact, the degree to which a relatively independent reasoner should be hostile to wedges will really depend on certain aspects of the content involved: e.g., levels of credence in the belief or claim, and the nature of the belief or claim under investigation. So, there are at least three different kinds of ‘wedges’, or situations where an agent encounters weighty outside opinion (put in degrees on a scale of 0-1):

1. **Dull wedge**. Suppose that I, a novice to physics, believe the activity of quantum particles involve non-local hidden variables (0.2). That is to say, I assent to the nonlocal Bohmian theory far more than I assent to any other first-order theories – it is my entrenched pet theory (indicated by \*). For the sake of illustration, imagine the only other theory is the multiverse theory, with credence 0.1. The remaining bulk of my credential state -- 0.7 – is reserved for a catch-all hypothesis, reflecting my initial recognition that I (or we) do not know the correct answer.[[17]](#footnote-17)

I think it is sensible in this case to say that I may defer to physicists about the state and credibility of theories in their field (10%). However, I may also autonomously and explicitly leave them in charge of what I’m supposed to do with the unknown (i.e., the bulk of 0.7). So, if they achieve consensus on some theory at a future time, I can offer them 0.8 credence to do with whatever they like. Remarkably, though, regardless of expert opinion, my original credence in my pet theory (Bohmian mechanics) has not been affected one jot – indeed, there’s a sense in which I haven’t *really* given anything up. My pet theory is as entrenched as it always was, to the degree that it always was, illustrated in yellow (Fig.1). My deference is a phony redescription of what I already believed.

1. **Minor wedge**. In the alternative, deference might involve a genuine change in my sense of the proprieties of assent. For while I am initially skeptical of some hypothesis (p), and intuitively favor an alternative view (q), after deference I will assent to the conviction that (p) conditional on its being endorsed by the experts. So, using the same example: suppose I believe in non-local hidden variables at 0.2, and multiverse theory 0.1, and the catch-all at 0.7. But now suppose I discover that the physicists say that the multiverse theory is correct. One might wonder what else I might be able to do with my credential state.

On the assumption that the activity of deference to experts is decidedly more epistemically desirable than the activity of nursing a novice pet theory that I just so happen to favor (under those conditions where I don’t know what the right answer is myself), I might *transfer* much of my prior credence in the catch-all hypothesis over to the multiverse theory.[[18]](#footnote-18) After deference, my belief-state has been genuinely altered, as a certain amount previously found in the catch-all hypothesis moves over to the multiverse theory. Again, the level of credence I placed in my pet theory hasn’t changed; but, among first-order theories, it is no longer the front runner.

1. **Sharp wedge**. Suppose I strongly believe in a theory at 0.9, and grant an alternative explanation that happens to be favored by experts 0.1. But somewhere along the line, the scales fall from my eyes, and my original credence-state flips, so that the catch-all hypothesis is at 0.9, and my favored hypothesis at 0.1. In this case, I have gone through a radical conversion, something like a religious conversion.

From what has been said so far, (3) is harder to explain rationally than (1-2). For it seems that nothing apart from updating my priors through overwhelming evidence will lead to (3): truly conceptual change, or alteration of priors, cannot be done rationally and in good faith. Still, a change in evidence does have the potential to change the mind – you can wash out the priors by updating. It’s just that the evidence has to be overwhelming in its availability and accessibility in order to do it.

When we consider the possibility of a sharp change in opinion among epistemic peers, it will have to be the kind of change in evidence that is propelled by genuine discovery, the rare instances where vital experiments are conducted that alter the shape of our beliefs. I think, absent empirically-driven revolutions, the possibility of a sharp wedge is inconsistent with the attitude of a prudential reasoner. Excepting truly wild circumstances, (3) is beyond what we can account for by appealing to notions of good faith exchange mediated by prudential wisdom. Further, when thinking about peer disagreements, (1) is not interesting enough to provoke philosophical curiosity. For I have not given up space in my epistemic life, in that condition, so much as I stood idle while the experts took up unclaimed territory, the area covered by the catch-all hypothesis. In contrast, in (2), I actually start to participate and invest in the change that my peers had instigated. It is a case where it was intuitively rational for me to stay in my lane. So, whenever I speak of ‘deference’ in what follows, you may assume I am speaking of cases of (2).

And then we must ask: when are minor wedges *prudent*? When is it wise to defer?

## 3. Social jurisdiction

I think deference is prudentially warranted in the discussion of social kinds. It is a truism of criminology and sociology (and suspected in social psychology) that negative labelling or stereotyping has a negative influence on how people act and think. And though this is an empirical question, I think labelling is obviously one mechanism that explains how people end up in different places in life through its role in sustaining prejudice. But to those sciences, I would like to add that inattention to legitimate labelling practices is a failure of rational deference -- a violation of the wedge-conditions, which are at the origin point of any conversation we would like to have about epistemic territory or authority. And (I argue) it is especially a shame when it comes to a specific question, i.e., the way a group is meaningfully constituted.

I have two arguments about why we ought to defer to other people when it comes to their own group identity. In the first, I argue that heteronymous renderings of agency, including plural agency, are better dealt with by deferring to the social unit on their own affairs because it produces fewer absurdities. Second, I argue that the reason for deference is based in some wholesome facts about how we novices relate to experts, which a moderate skeptic should be able to accept.

### Argument 1: From Absurdity

Deference on matters of identity can be motivated in at least three ways.[[19]](#footnote-19) Either we foist constitution upon people against the metaphysical grain, or we say that the membership of the social unit is determined by a full body of facts, or we adopt a hybrid theory based on principles of equity. To be more precise about it:

1. **Projectionism**. In the first case, we defer to the members of a social unit in the hopes of encouraging them into claiming the freedom that is theirs. That is, we leave it to the individual to determine who they are.
2. **Structuralism**. In the second case, facts about agency are just made up by interconnected facts about the world, and our deferential practices should reflect that. On this view, what ‘counts as’ x is partly made up of what y thinks about x; there is no special deference to x on questions related to their own agency.
3. **Equitarianism**. A third possibility is that we need to distinguish between two classes of agents: there are those who have historical advantages, and those who lack those historical advantages, and deference of self-constitution should be granted to those with the disadvantages.

I want to say projectionism is the best account, at least under the eyes of prudence.

Now, if we think agency implies the possession of autonomy, then it just follows that structuralism is false. The autonomous agent will already have earned a kind of deference as a kind of metaphysical mandate – how they fit in the niche won’t make a difference one way or the other. It is mainly just if we think about heteronymous agents that it is an open question whether or not structuralism is a live option – that is, only if we think the agent satisfies one of the other three renderings.

There are clear and potentially disturbing applications of the structuralist doctrine to social philosophy and to civic life in general. For if this doctrine were true, then it would turn out that what ‘counts as’ a person of color depends on what white people say about it (and vice-versa), and what ‘counts as’ a woman depends on what men say about it (and vice-versa), and what it means to be a socialist is determined by what right-wing libertarians have to say about it (and vice-versa). [[20]](#footnote-20) Indeed, some of those writing in the literature on race do see ‘white’ and ‘black’ as metaphysical opposites (albeit usually on historical and social constructionist grounds as opposed to biological ones), which, if true, would entail that a change in the meaning associated with one class would have an equal and opposite effect upon the meaning properly attributed to the other.[[21]](#footnote-21) So, at least so far as the scholarship is concerned, structuralism is a live option.

When it comes to plural agents, it is not a terrible idea to examine the etymology of the chosen label, insofar as the label reflects the actual living interaction rituals of the agent. That is, the descriptive contents of an etymological label are a useful, but highly defeasible, clue to what makes for membership. Examples. “Islam” means (roughly) ‘submission to God’, and “Catholic” (roughly) ‘seeing things on the whole’, and these are indeed interesting and important facts about those social kinds – but it is not enough to begin to figure out the conceptual limits of their epistemic territory. But while this is first step, it is rarely sufficient or necessary. In many cases, one does not need to have to rely on etymology, or even the naming convention itself, in order to figure out that minimally decent basis for deference. You only need enough factual information as is required to tell what is salient about the somatic-ecological, behavioral, and/or organizational conditions attached to the label, such that they form a social agent.

An approach to deference can only be defended as prudent so long as it treats the social agent as antecedently legitimate.[[22]](#footnote-22) If you believe the Freemasons must be dismantled ‘brick by brick,’ so to speak, then (prudentially speaking) you’re not likely going to be amenable to defer to them on anything at all – you will only have something like the sharp wedge to offer. To such a mindset, both the costs and the rewards of good faith exchange are out of reach.

The refusal of deference implicates (but does not entail) a potential for defiance. Indeed, any comprehensive refusal of deference even on matters of basic politeness or honorifics (or, in the past decade, pronoun usage) is tacitly understood as a signal of pre-emptive defiance. Absent context, this reaction – effectively, inferring group threat from an act of invalidation -- might seem like a strange *nonsequitur* if itwere not for the fact that *people already do and have tacitly recognized* that social legitimacy entails a minimal degree of deference throughout history (and that absence of deference implies absence of legitimacy).[[23]](#footnote-23) For instance, if an atheist spoke of “the man Jesus” in the company of religious evangelicals, I may be speaking quite properly, gently, truthfully, and reasonably, playing the game of social manners right -- and yet nevertheless (all other things equal) be regarded as imprudent, if not rude. The reaction is unjustifiable, but it is understandable, and the force of the push-back deserves an explanation.

By legitimacy, I mean the recognition of a minimal rationale upon which the existence of a social unit can be understood as a going concern, i.e., whatever it is that satisfies two out of three of the criteria for agency we talked about in the preamble. That legitimation can be on any number of grounds, prudential or moral or otherwise; it does not matter for our purposes. But whatever the choice, it must be more than fiat or convention. It must be grounded in *reasons*. And in the context of the present discussion, those grounds will have to be related to how we think of the plurality as an agent according to some rendering.

As mentioned above, there are good reasons for choosing to only attribute social agency under the disjunctive theory: we need both a criterion for identifying a social agent, and also a closely related criterion that forms a basis for auditing the individual agent’s competence in speaking for the greater whole. Example. Even though “brown-haired people” marks out a population with shared physical traits, there is no social group of brunettes, because there are neither any general expectations of nor organizational aspirations in the use of the label. Anyone who tried to say, “We brown-haired-people think that (p)”, would be immediately (and correctly) called out for being essentially pretentious.

A minor wedge involves borrowing resources from what you know to help others guide you in learning more about it. So, for instance, I recognize that a ‘physicist’ is a legitimate social agent when I know a few things about what it is like to study physical things, and how physicists are organized, and so on; and I can recognize that ‘Christianity’ is a legitimate social agent because I know a bit about what behaviors to expect from a follower of the teachings of Christ, typical forms of Christian organization, and so on. Too many surprises to our antecedent knowledge will lead to something more like the sharp wedge situation. Minimal knowledge – that is, its basic legitimacy -- already gives you the initial sense of what the collective is supposed to be up to, so far as you know anything about it.

It is plausible enough to think that the grounds for legitimation can be upset by discoveries of radical matters of fact. If I discover that a local group of self-identified physicists are fully uninterested in the physical world, or that self-identified Christians despise Christ and all he stood for, then that is reason to stop assuming that self-identified members of that group are legitimate members as opposed to grifters. There is nothing paradoxical about saying that those American Protestants who advocate usury and scorn taxes and mercy are not Christians at all (for example), though they would doubtless not want to hear it.

I would like to think that radical cases where a movement is co-opted by their opposites do not happen very often – or, at least, that the co-optation leads to the extinction of the group. In part, that is because the bare amount of information required to recognize the face-value legitimacy of a group is pretty thin, easy to satisfy and hard to subvert. But it does sometimes happen. For example, if I discover that Canadian law refers to Aboriginal persons as “Indians” in spite of the fact that this group has nothing whatsoever to do with the continent of India (except the fact that the original colonizers were ignorant of their global position and our cultural institutions are too lazy and stupid to change a convention), then my inclination might be to recognize the group on another basis while refusing to acknowledge them as “Indians”. The epistemic veto potentially holds in full force if the group themselves identified with an erroneous body of factual information. For example, though followers of QAnon identify with a rambling science fiction espionage story, the legitimacy of that group is not something it makes any sense to defer to; hence, if there were a self-styled Pope of QAnon (i.e., Q), I would not recognize their ability to say who counts as a member of their club, and who among their self-identified tribe gets to speak for what. It is all pretentious and in bad faith; prudence shrugs.

I take it that these extreme ‘veto’ cases are sufficiently pressing that projectivists will need to make some concession, and that the intuition generated from this example is the crux of the sort of argument that one might make for the structuralist account. They key is to pay close attention to the requirements of agency, and especially the disjunctive account. For the force of the epistemic veto is reserved only for *gross cases of self-misunderstanding*, and not to do with the fact – and it is a fact – that agents are differently rendered. For example, if a conservative were to say that trans-men are ‘*not really men’* because (in their opinion) being a man means having certain morphological/somatic characteristics (chromosomes, genitalia, or whatever), then it is perfectly legitimate to ask (among other things) whether that person has misunderstood the kind of rendering that is in play, e.g., by wondering if they are speaking of ‘male’ as sex as opposed to gender. They may try to exercise an epistemic veto -- but it is not done in good faith if they are proceeding from a confused rendering in the first place.

But while the projectivist has to make a modest concession when it comes to cases where a group agent has properly grounded but massively ignorant self-concept, the structuralist theory fares worse. If the structuralist were correct, then we would also not face any prudential pressure in identifying the Baker family who lives down the street by their name, once we find out that they have no interest in or ancestral relation to merchants of baked goods. From a structuralist point of view, prudence is silent, and tells us nothing about whether to honor their namesakes. But this seems massively wrong, and reveals something wrong with the structuralist approach: by design, it does not give any priority or weight to the self-conceived nature of the solidarity of the collective agent, and, in maddening fashion, feels the need to foist itself in every area uninvited. The structuralist could respond by biting the bullet and saying that families are indeed defective cases of social kinds, but this inference is at least unobvious, and probably absurd.

Regardless of the approach one takes, the criterion you use to evaluate the legitimacy of membership has the seeds of the information that can be used to figure out whether a self-identified group member has a sense of resonance required to speak provisionally on the group’s behalf. The Scotsman who says, ‘no true Scotsman wears yellow on Tuesdays’, might be right; though I wouldn’t know it offhand, I at least have some of the resources I need to find out (i.e., by FaceTiming Scottish relatives on a Tuesday). My knowledge is too imperfect to rely on, since I am not a citizen of Scotland and not an expert in historical sociology of the Scots. But it is enough to know how to defer, and what the epistemic point is in deferring. The structuralist runs with this insight, and runs it into the ground; the projectionist treats it as an interesting but ultimately secondary point, which is that we ought to be asking the self-identified members of the group what they want and what they’re up to, and letting them sort it out.

The third possibility, equitarianism, is largely moral in nature; and if it were then it would be outside of the scope of this inquiry. Actually, it does not need to be cast in this way: prudentially, there is nothing wrong in distinguishing between groups and treating one group in a different way from another, for the sake of affirmative action (for instance), so long as it is a matter of proportion and degree and not an absolute (and insofar as prudence demands justice or equity, this or something like it is obligatory). We only leave it aside because the scope of the discussion is limited, and not because the position is unavailable to the prudential reasoner.

### Argument 2: Identified Experience as Provisional Expertise

It is the skeptic that we are now concerned with, albeit the Humean kind of skeptic who knows his or her own nature as a social animal. I would like to say that the chastened skeptic, mugged by social reality, has good reasons to be a projectivist instead of a structuralist. To see why, let’s first consider three hypotheses related to deference that are specially related to social kinds:

1. *Expert semantics*. The meanings of words are fixed by authorities who are well informed about a subject.[[24]](#footnote-24)
2. *Weak standpoint theory*. An individual’s membership in a (legitimate) group grants them *prime facie* credibility to speak truthfully about the affairs of that (legitimate) group.
3. *Lexical sovereignty*. Hence, outsiders of a group ought to defer to insiders of the group on matters relating to how group is defined.

I think (a) is not terribly controversial, and issues straight out of Hilary Putnam’s ‘oak and the elm tree’. So, for instance, we strongly defer to the international community of physicists to tell us what counts as *mass*, and we defer to them whenever they should like to redefine their terms of art. On matters of substantive definition, all other things equal, we owe the testimony of these authorities greater weight than our own because they have presumptively superior theories. Whether or not Pluto counts as a full planet or a dwarf planet depends on what astrophysicists say, not astrologers or cultural critics.

I think (b) is even less controversial. So, if I am speaking to physicists about their experiences as physicists, then all other things equal I will provisionally assume that they are better placed to know about their subject than I am. The reason is imposed by the nature of the assumption that there is some such group, unified by nerve and resonance. Of course, for all I know, a particular physicist, Jones, might be a complete buffoon, or deeply out of touch. Yet Jones is a physicist all the same, and this places him or her in a position of presumptive advantage over Smith, a non-physicist – at least, so long as we assume that the group is legitimate.

To be sure, (b) is nothing other than a variation on the basic good sense that is at the root of the tradition of standpoint theory in epistemology.[[25]](#footnote-25) However, standpoint theorists also seem to argue for a more thoroughgoing sense in which social groups have epistemic privilege – one which necessarily reflects their relationships to the system conceived as a whole. There is some sense to this view, too: ideological and institutional capture are real problems. But (b) does not commit to that thesis.

These norms, (a) and (b), strike me as eminently reasonable, since they both follow directly from the assumption that your interlocutor, whoever they are, have to be interpreted charitably. Prudential charity, as a heuristic, demands that people should be understood as prudential reasoners on first blush, and that any apparent deviation from that norm also be understood as a prudential deviation. We must counterweigh the need for brute charity with a need to acknowledge the proprieties of prudence to settle what standards are in play.

The truth of (c) follows directly from (a) and (b). (a) says experts make meaning; (b) says insiders are experts about self-meaning. Conclusion: on the assumption that experts are authorities, it follows that (c), we owe insiders provisional deference on what makes them *them*. For example, if an epistemologist lectures the scientist about what counts as science, then it is time to make a soft exit on the philosopher. This, I think, is largely the drift of opinion in modern-day philosophy of science, which acknowledges the pointlessness of philosophical interventions into the ontology of science unless they are seconded by scientific authors. It is also, in my view, sensible, and consistent with the humility of honest inquiry.

And now let’s consider (d):

1. Members of privileged groups ought to defer to marginalized groups on matters relating to how the marginalized group is defined.

(d) is clearly a logical instantiation of (c). And it seems rather sensible. For example, if a man gives a woman a lecture on what counts as being womanly, or who counts as a woman, then the man is acting in an absurd way, and it is time for an exit from cooperative conversation.

But as it turns out -- when I first started floating this thesis back in 2014 -- (d) is either a controversial claim, or is a claim that is so close to being controversial that it reliably provoked some pretty strange reactions. But I think it should not be controversial when it is understood properly: if you accept (a-c), there is no space to disagree with (d). It is a matter of logical closure. As it happens, I think it is fine if people want to deny closure if they really want to (if they have the right context); I don’t care about that debate. But they bear the burden of being candid about it. I have seen arguments, but have yet to see an argument that shoulders that burden.[[26]](#footnote-26)

#### Objections

There are at least five potential objections one might make to this argument.

First, it might seem as though I have given short shrift to standpoint theory in the discussion of (d), having not myself done enough due deference to that literature. For standpoint theory asserts that privileged groups are often epistemologically inferior with respect to issues related to knowledge of the oppressed group. Actually, I think that might be true – it is an empirical question, and depends on what the evidence says. But the issue is not decisively refuted or confirmed one way or the other in the preceding remarks on (a-c), which are confined to issues of group membership and their constitution. I leave this aspect of standpoint theory in the capable hands of social scientists and experimental philosophers.

Second, there is the worry about morality. Doesn’t this approach force us to defer to immoral groups in certain circumstances? For example, if a racist restaurant refuses to serve potential customers who are of a certain ethnicity, and claims the right to choose its own membership, then doesn’t the theory oblige us to say that says that the potential customer is rationally obligated to defer to the will of the restaurant?

I think the answer is no, on prudential grounds, from what I have said above: if a group is a nullity or illegitimate, then nothing follows. Garbage in, garbage out.

Third, to revisit the cases that the projectivist had to accommodate: what happens if a legitimate group’s self-definition is *essentially fantastic* -- e.g., what if tomorrow, all physicists decided that their occupation was actually the study of the supernatural world? Or what if those who study law come around to the opinion offered by a confused musicologist who argues that law is nothing but a note on the harmonic scale between ‘ti’ and ‘so’? As I suggested above, I think in these radical cases that deference is not required for good faith exchange – it isn’t sociologically determined in ways that are irretrievably outside of the jurisdiction of personal theory. But I think this proviso is only available in cases of genuine face-value category error, a failure to meet the minimal standards of deference according to some stable rendering of a group agent. So, they ought to be comparably rare.

A fourth objection is that the left-humanist politics that are implicit in this account can be hoisted on their own petard. For example, it follows from the doctrine stated above, all other things equal, that a person of color who sets out to regulate the boundaries of what it means to be white is putting themselves at risk of error. Is that really what I am saying?

Perhaps there are ways to evade the implication (e.g., by denying that ‘whiteness’ is a social kind). But such counter-arguments would seem *ad hoc*. I prefer to just accept the inference as correct. On a prudential level (keeping equity aside), that is an inference I must acknowledge.

But then, for my part -- speaking now as a leftist entering into a hard conversation -- would like to offer something by way of an explanation. I am concerned that the refusal to acknowledge the dignity of self-determination to any group amounts to a co-optation of leftist thought by alt-right agent provocateurs that have far more to lose by respecting the principle than they have to gain. For the solidarity of the left is enhanced, not damaged, by the admission of respectful diversity in civic life; while the admission of the same amongst the authoritarian right is fatal to its aspirations. It is my view that much ground can be made by refusing to take the bait, recognizing these relatively banal terms of engagement for what they are, and freeing up that time to address issues of identity and political economy that reflect actual existential stakes. And, of course, the concession is limited in scope to prudential concerns, not moral ones – a point I have endeavored to keep at the forefront, even while the focus of this paper is artificially restricted.

A fifth point relates to our friend, the Scotsman, who says that all true Scotsmen wear yellow on Tuesdays. Suppose he even insists upon it, a matter of persuasive definition, and does so reliably. Wouldn’t it follow from the previous remarks that we are obliged to defer to the Scotsman? And if so, isn’t that absurd?

Well, assuming I think ‘being Scottish’ is a legitimate group, and that I am not an expert about Scotland, it *does* follow that I ought to defer. Indeed, that is the whole point of this argument -- the “No True Scotsman” fallacy was not quite a fallacy after all, so much as it rested on a truism. It is only a fallacy when you assume (contrary to hypothesis) that the critical reasoner knew enough about the situation to know that the Scot was bullshitting or pranking – that he had no sense of resonance, and was not hitting the Scottish nerve. But that would imply that either we did not have a disjunctive rendering of Scottish agency available, or that the would-be Scot failed one of its conditions.

A sixth and final worry is that the kind of deference going on here is without any substance – that we have been doing a ‘dull wedge’ in disguise. For if I already have substantial criteria (the renderings), then what else is there for me to defer to about? And the answer has to do with borderline cases of the class, its extension. Suppose, for instance, I successfully identify a social movement, and suppose I can find all the people who self-identify as members of that movement. Suppose that it occurs to me that some of these self-identified members might not actually be members of the movement – some are agent provocateurs. Now, a question: how can I bootstrap my way to figuring out the real membership list *without* asking people who identify with it about who they think is a member? The only possibility I can think of is ‘genealogy’ or ‘history’, deferring to historians – which is fine, except that the amount of resources that the historian requires to speak credibly is far in excess of those required by the insiders who participate in the group that bears the label.

**Conclusion**

This argument is a very strange one for me – or, a *special kind* of strange.[[27]](#footnote-27) From the above argument, maybe you can see why, when in 2017 Rebecca Tuvel suggested an equivalence between transgender debates and the position of transracialism, I did not see any merits to her argument -- for I think it obvious that the difference would come down to self-identification practices of the group. At least in North America, the majority of self-identified women identify trans-women as women, so trans-skeptical men would be wise to defer. Meanwhile, the majority of self-identified black people do not accept trans-racialists, so white people would be wise to defer. This follows, not just from an arbitrary game of manners (though it may), and not just from morality (though it generally does), but from what prudence recommends on a first pass or default.

I can see why some might not like the conclusion. As one excellent Oxford jurist asked, not long ago, why young people are so obsessed in speaking about how they expressly identify. For this philosopher, verbal preambles like, ‘as someone who presents as a man…’, sound like idle performative wokeness. (Green, 2018) And, to be sure, *mere* performative grandstanding is pretentious. But I also think there ought to be a level of consciousness and care around how people explicitly identify -- a standard that the same philosopher acknowledges as legitimate case-intuitions in other contexts. (Green, 2019) ‘Presentation as’ is a stand-in for how you present to your niche, and while it is only one factor, it is also (for heteronymous cases of group agency) a necessary constraint.

And I think we are healthy for acknowledging this, one of many unwritten rules -- and healthier still for observing the limits of the burden, the ways that it can be exploited by bad faith actors. For the sake of public philosophy, my hope is we can just take the lesson on board, and then take steps to revisit the issue of group legitimation -- the need for any unpretentious plural assertions of ‘We-‘, in reference to an aggregate, to be buttressed by reasons found at the many intersections of political economy.

If I am being very forward and polemical, I could put my worries like this. I think it is possible that, when we stick our fingers in the middle of how people conceive of themselves, the result is a fractured and distorted division of epistemic labor. People are owed this deference prudentially, not just evidentially or as a matter of epistemic justice -- not just because you have greater access to evidence concerning you-like things, and not just because it is cruel to lecture people about who they are, but also because you are the first person to look to when it comes to the task of deciding what frames and descriptions are epistemically desirable. The result is – I think -- a principle that is potentially as large-spirited and consequential to the modernist political project as the principles of tolerance and freedom of speech were. But whatever one says, one ought not overstate the strength of deference required, or the authority implied, by the doctrine of lexical sovereignty.

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1. One discussion of epistemic territory is in (Nagel, 2019). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. On the empirical side, one might very well describe a large swath of social psychology as dedicated to the project of making sense of self-identification practices related to group membership. For a discussion of the many elements that go into self-identification with groups, for example, see (Leach, Colin Wayne, and Martijn van Zomeren, Sven Zebel, Michael L W Vliek, Sjoerd F Pennekamp, Bertjan Doosje, Jaap W Ouwerkerk, and Russell Spears, 2008). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. For a discussion of the puzzling features of moral deference, see (McGrath, 2009), (Lewis, 2020a), (Lewis, 2020b). For a defense of moral deference, see (Enoch, 2014). For connections between the epistemic and moral aspects of deference, see (Driver, 2015) and (Davia, Cory & Michele Palmira, 2015).

Interestingly, (Fletcher, 2016) questions whether prudential deference is any better than moral deference. However, the argument he makes there is little more than a bald assertion that prudential deference is problematic, with nothing provided by way of an argument. Indeed, he even uses an example that seems to admit that prudential deference is unproblematic: i.e., when asking a person on the street for an address and following their answer. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. I used to believe otherwise, thinking that the argument of lexical sovereignty was based on the value of dignity. However, it now strikes me that sovereignty implies agency, while dignity can apply to mere patients capable of being subject to harm. So, the argument is too specific to be fixed on dignity. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. This argument is the sort of thing that centrist advocates of ‘political correctness’ are trying to say, though: (a) I think they are ill-advised in attempting to put that particular term of art in an uncritical and ahistorical light (Moller, 2016); (b) the normative lesson in the present account falls far short of what we get from political correctness norms; (c) my account of deference demands implicit reliance on political economy in ways that advocates of political correctness may or may not find embarrassing. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. For context, I ask these questions in order to help address and resolve certain difficult issues that arise in a theory of promulgation of law that is based on chains of deference, per an earlier CS-IVR paper of mine (2018). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. I referred to vigilance in an earlier paper at CS-IVR as ‘fidelity’, but have changed the term to eliminate the redundancy in an account of ‘good faith’. ‘Candor,’ which appeared as a virtue in an earlier draft, is now reconceived as a feature of the ways that prudence is reflected in good faith exchange, not a part of prudence itself. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. I would associate this view with Mill’s competent judges and Kuhn’s criteria for theory choice. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. The maxims of cooperation are articulated in (Grice, 1975), and charity initially derives from (Wilson, 1959), later repurposed by Davidson and Quine in the discussion of radical contexts of interpretation/translation. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Bundle theories owe in large part to the work of Derek Parfit, though the details of this account are mine. We could easily replace the concept of a person with talk about ‘personal identity’ on the assumption that there is such a thing as contingent identity. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. On a pure niche view, there is nothing to a ‘group agent’ other than the fact that some people present as members of that name or label -- there are no further facts, no teleology which needs to be established. This notion appeals to those who find philosophical nominalism attractive. Perhaps there is some sense in this approach; but it is my view that this cannot be a minimally sufficient condition for deference, because it does not and cannot be both distinctive as a position while also distinguishing a group agent from a patient. The ship of Theseus in drydock has no agency. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. For a defense of the idea of a segmented agent, see (Millgram, 2015). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Body-swap examples are the most philosophically difficult of the bunch for the disjunctive approach, intuitions are admittedly not on our side. For these ‘Freaky Friday’ type situations do not involve the preservation of agency, since if they did, it would mean the psychological condition was sufficient for agency. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. I believe plural agency (and accompanying unpretentious “We-“ statements) can be attributed to aggregates (i.e., demographics; e.g., race, class, sex, gender) only when those conditions are further supplemented by techniques of political economy; nothing else will work in setting out the nerve and resonance required to rubber-stamp a sense of ‘We’ are acting and experiencing something together. In contrast, Margaret Gilbert’s model of social ontology is best seen as a special or limiting case of social ontology. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. If this is too much to swallow: the task of speak of whether or not something is as it was before, or metaphysically identical to as it was before, is put to one side by this analysis; the various renderings are contingently identical, in a peculiar sense. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. If these examples of plural-talk still seem essentially pretentious to the reader, perhaps consider that they may be instances of unsophisticated intentions, sometimes referred to as *de re* intentions. (Roth, 2000) In other words, perhaps the actions of markets are the collective version of the actions of babies. In contrast, attempts at market manipulation (e.g., the Reddit/Gamestop affair of early 2021) are much more like sophisticated or adult collective intentions, breaking free of an artificially imposed state of arrested development. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. The ‘catch-all hypothesis’ is a second-order theory, a characteristic of so-called ‘open-minded’ Bayesianism. (Wenmackers, Sylvia & Jan-Willem Romeijn, 2016) For some of the background work on Bayesian inference I owe thanks to remarks by Brendan Fitelson and a manuscript by Michael G. Titelbaum. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. We can get away with fiddling with Bayesian priors in a sneaky way by saying that the renewed reasons favored by the community amount to the introduction of a new multiverse theory, and then we redescribe the existing partitions in a way that groups the old and new multiverse theories together. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. These might not be the only options that people would hold. So, for instance, it is entirely possible that someone might argue for a contextualist approach to the question: we defer when the context requires it. Yet the face value difficulty with that view is that it pretty clearly collapses into structuralism, having the same commitments and vulnerabilities. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Hacking’s canonical example of an interactive kind, “refugee women”, implicitly recognized the dangers of being other-defined. (Hacking, 1999) [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. For his part, Frantz Fanon describes this Manichean or oppositional thinking about race as part of a servile or “Antillean” state of mind. (Fanon, 1952, p. 149) [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. I owe this point to conversation with Carla Fehr. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. To be sure, the idea that the threat to the group implies or entails a physical threat to the individual is a bit more like a *nonsequitur,* but the issue is sufficiently complex that there is no hope of working through it without the help of critical morality. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. There is a bit more to this than I indicate here, once we consider various kinds of qua-meanings. But elaborating on this point would not improve the argument in the paper, so much as add an additional wrinkle that the reader may or may not find interesting. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. For a summary, see (Wylie, 2011). [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Clearly, the thesis (d) hits a nerve for some people. For it seems to me that (c) and (d) are close to a different kind of claim, a caricature of standpoint theory:

(e) *Members* of g*roup (x) ought to defer to group (y) on any matters relating to group (y).*

And plainly (e) cannot be right when considered on its face. I ought to trust a female doctor to tell me more about my health as a man than I ought to trust myself on the issue. The difference between (d) and (c) is that (c) is about *definitions* (‘what counts as so-and-so’), while (d) is about *any old claim whatsoever*. Charity has a central place when it comes to a discussion about what counts as what, but charity is ultimately beholden to prudence, and this will not pass the test. So, for the purposes of my argument, one might have any opinion at all about (e) while still endorsing (d). [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. In my experience so far, it is rare for audiences to come away from it disagreeing with everything in it; and also, rare to find people agreeing with everything in it. But the seeds of the argument were there in 2013, when I first introduced a version of it at the *Talking Philosophy Magazine* blog. (Nelson, 2013) Though I am not aware of any literature which defends something quite like lexical sovereignty, I would not be surprised if it had been treated elsewhere. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)