

Agnostic Wrongs and Pragmatic Disencroachment

The last two decades have stood witness to a quiet revolution in epistemology. We used to think of ethics and epistemology as quite distinct areas of inquiry – ethics concerned with action, and epistemology concerned with belief. While ethics is the domain of values, epistemology is the domain of facts – the facts that we must get right, and get right first, in order to know how to pursue our values in ethics. The only competing values in epistemology, we were taught, were those of acquiring truth and avoiding error. But proponents of the revolution have pushed us to find values in the stronghold of truth. They have argued that rationality, justification, and even knowledge can depend on what is practically or even morally at stake, so that we can't do epistemology without thinking about values. And some have gone further, arguing that ethics is not just about action, after all, but also includes distinctively moral, and not just epistemological, questions about what to believe. The revolution in our understanding of the relationship between ethics and epistemology is well underway.

Yet as in all revolutionary movements, there comes a moment when the revolutionaries must decide amongst themselves whether what they seek is reform or annihilation of the received world order. The reformists seek calculated interventions in the order of things. But the radicals want to go farther. They believe that more of the old must be thrown out, before the new can be ushered in. This is a chaotic period, when the revolution can yet be lost, if and as the alternative begins to look like total anarchy. And many possible visions of the future remain in play. This paper is a contribution toward working through these issues amongst the revolutionaries in epistemology. Let there be no surprises in this paper: I am of a reformist mindset, and the aim of this paper is to hold the line on calculated intervention.¹

The structure of the paper will be simple. In section 1 I will review some of the shape of the twin challenges to orthodoxy about the relationship between epistemology and ethics, which arise in the form of the theses of *pragmatic encroachment* and of *doxastic wrongs*, respectively. In section 2 I'll review some of the commitments of the conservative, *reformist*, strategy that I have advocated for accommodating these important

¹ At the least, let there be no surprises about the general aims of the paper. I did end up surprising myself a little bit about where I have ultimately ended up.

developments without throwing out the baby, and show how the resulting framework, which I call *Pragmatic Intellectualism*, deals with some of the most familiar pressures to go further and become more radical.

Then in section 3 I'll survey a set of challenges to this reformist strategy, each of which invites us to go further in some distinct way, some of which are offered by genuinely sincere revolutionaries, and others of which are trojan horses offered by the orthodoxy as warnings against the anarchy to which revolution must (or so they contend) inevitably lead. I will lay out a general, two-pronged strategy for responding to each of these leftist challenges. But in section 4 I'll consider what I take to be the *most* forceful argument that the revolution must go farther – an argument grounded in considerations about victim testimonies. And finally, in sections 5 and 6 I'll try to look at what it looks like to try to carry out each of the prongs of my response strategy. We'll discover that when it comes to the problems raised by victim testimonies, things are not as straightforward as with our other challenges. But true radicalism can still be headed off.

I Twin Challenges

The conventional wisdom at stake in the current revolution concerns two central theses about the relationship between ethics and epistemology. According to the first of these theses, which I'll call *Morality Assesses Action*,

Morality Assesses Action: Morality is about action, not belief. It can be wrong to collect evidence in different ways, or to act on what you know, but it can never be morally wrong to believe or not believe anything.

And according to the second leg of orthodoxy, which we may call *Purism*,

Purism: Belief is governed by a distinctive set of *epistemic* norms, and these norms are only affected by connections to truth such as reliability, evidence, safety, and the like.

Together, these two theses carve out a distinctive domain for epistemology. *Morality Assesses Action* tells us that moral assessments don't apply directly to belief, and *Purism* tells us that morality doesn't matter for the distinctively epistemic assessment of belief, either. Or putting it another way, *Purism* tells us that there is a special, morality-free, topic that can be investigated in epistemology without having to pay attention to moral philosophy, and *Morality Assesses Action* tells us that in fact this is all that there is when it comes to assessing belief.

It is a familiar observation by now that each of these pillars of orthodoxy is challenged by one of a pair of important developments in the last two decades. The first such development is the advent of *pragmatic*

encroachment, a thesis that began to garner proponents in mainstream analytic epistemology in the early 2000's, and challenges the thesis of *Purism*:

Pragmatic Encroachment The epistemic norms that govern belief are not only affected by connections to truth. They can also be affected by what is practically “at stake” in the believer’s situation. When more is “at stake”, it becomes *harder* for a belief to be epistemically rational or justified or to amount to knowledge.²

And in the last decade this challenge to Purism has been joined by a distinct but related challenge to Morality Assesses Action, which comes from the thesis of *Doxastic Wronging*:

Doxastic Wronging Morality *does* govern beliefs as well as actions. Sometimes it can be morally wrong to believe something.³

If both of these challenges to orthodoxy are correct, then the relationship between epistemology and ethics may potentially be much more complicated than orthodoxy makes out. It may still be that there is a distinctive mode of properly *epistemic* assessment that is distinctive to epistemology, but it will no longer be safe to assume either that we can determine this assessment without considering moral issues, nor that what it tells us can serve as a clean answer to the question of what to believe.

Of course, there are different ways of defining each of these challenges. I have tried to characterize the thesis of Pragmatic Encroachment, for example, without saying what “stakes” are or what makes them “high”.⁴ This is intended to be ecumenical – inclusive of fellow travelers who want to define these things in different ways, and intended, through the obviousness of its ecumenicism, to be interpreted in whatever way makes this characterization the most inclusive. In contrast, I have built it into my characterization of Pragmatic Encroachment that high stakes make it *harder* to know or be justified, but not that low stakes make it easier (except of course, insofar as they reveal things not to be harder). This is deliberately non-ecumenical and reflects one dimension of the kind of conservative, reformist, outlook that I aim to defend in this paper. As we will see, there are ways of taking this thesis further than I have stated it and am willing to take it.

Similarly, the kind of challenge to Morality Assesses Action posed by the thesis of Doxastic Wronging could have been defined more broadly. We could have included the idea that the management of

² Some of the highlights of the development of Pragmatic Encroachment are Fantl and McGrath [2002], Hawthorne [2004], Stanley [2005], and Fantl and McGrath [2011]. I didn’t get into the action until Schroeder [2012].

³ Basu [2018], [2018] deserves much of the credit for pushing this thesis forward. I contributed in Basu and Schroeder [2018], Schroeder [2018], and in chapter nine of Schroeder [2021].

⁴ Compare Anderson and Hawthorne [2019], Russell [2019].

beliefs can itself be the locus of moral and not just epistemic *virtue*.⁵ I have no qualms with this idea but am going to focus on the idea of doxastic wrongs for concreteness. Or we could have included the idea that other doxastic states, such as credences, withholding, or the bare absence of belief, could also be morally wrong.⁶ These, as I will indicate later, take the challenge posed by Doxastic Wronging further than I am willing for it to go. I will later argue that these ideas are fodder for anarchy, and so my delineation of the thesis of Doxastic Wronging to not include them is deliberate.

Let there be no confusion: I accept both the theses of Pragmatic Encroachment and of Doxastic Wronging. This paper will not offer any new arguments in favor of either of these theses. Indeed, it will not even offer any old arguments, so much as mention them incidentally. My interest in this paper is over whether the same kinds of considerations that lead us to endorse either or both of these theses need or even should take us further, to endorse even stronger challenges about the role of ethics and the practical in epistemology and in the assessment of doxastic states.

2 Pragmatic Intellectualism

In past work I have been concerned to defend the theses of Pragmatic Encroachment and of Doxastic Wronging in large part by making room for them – by making sense of how they could be true in a relatively conservative way. This work is inherently reformist in character. Just as in the last section I introduced these theses without arguing for them, in this section my aim is to introduce the framework that I prefer for making sense of both of these theses while emphasizing but not arguing for its conservative, reformist, character. In the remainder of the paper we will turn to the question of whether this reformist character is or is not a virtue. The combination of ideas that constitute this approach for making sense of our two theses, I call *Pragmatic Intellectualism*.

As laid out in chapters six to nine of my book *Reasons First*, Pragmatic Intellectualism consists of several layers.⁷ I won't be concerned here with every aspect of this framework, since not every detail is relevant for the question of how Pragmatic Intellectualism places limits on the scope of our revolution in epistemology. But even so, for our purposes we can think of Pragmatic Intellectualism as composed of five principal ideas or theses.⁸

⁵ Compare Foster [ms].

⁶ Compare von Klemperer [2022], Lloyd [2023], Gordon-Smith [2023], Fabre [2022], and Enoch and Spectre [ms].

⁷ Schroeder [2021].

⁸ In *Reasons First* I define Pragmatic Intellectualism to only include the first three of these theses, but in this paper I need a name for the combination of these commitments with the theses about doxastic wrongs that I argue for in chapter 9 of that book, and it's inconvenient to have to introduce a new name for this combined view. If this bothers you, come back and read this footnote again.

The first and foundational thesis of Pragmatic Intellectualism is that there is a special domain of distinctively epistemic reasons for and against belief, and that it is only these reasons, and no others, that matter for distinctively epistemic rationality, justification, and knowledge, as traditionally studied in epistemology. Moreover, the distinctive character of epistemic reasons derives from the fact that they are special to belief, and derive from what is distinctive about belief. In short, epistemology truly is distinctive and special and fundamentally and centrally about belief in a way that nothing else is, even though the orthodox theses did not successfully characterize this distinctiveness, specialness, fundamentality, or centrality quite correctly. For purposes of this paper, I'll call this first thesis PII, for Pragmatic Intellectualism One:

PII The epistemic rationality of belief is wholly determined by the competition of epistemic reasons for and against that belief. We can give a principled explanation of which kinds of things are epistemic reasons for and against belief by extracting it from the nature of belief.⁹

Thesis PII is not ecumenical, but it is conservative. It is not ecumenical because it is a reasons-based account of the nature of epistemic rationality, and on many views in epistemology, epistemic rationality does not have centrally to do with reasons. So PII involves substantively rejecting many views about epistemic rationality. But despite its lack of ecumenicism, it is fundamentally conservative, because it is potentially common ground between orthodox and revolutionary accounts of the inputs to epistemic rationality.

According to the orthodox reasons-based account of epistemic rationality, the only properly epistemic reasons for or against any belief are truth-related. Anyone who accepts this thesis can endorse PII while rejecting Pragmatic Encroachment. So PII is not, all by itself, a new and revolutionary way of thinking about the connection between ethics and epistemology. It is just a way of characterizing a substantial part of orthodoxy that leaves open, rather than closing by fiat, the possibility that some distinctively epistemic reasons are practical or even moral in nature. And it structures how we should expect to think about this question: we should adjudicate it by thinking hard about the nature of belief and seeing whether that lends itself to there being belief-specific reasons either for or against belief that are practical in nature.

The second thesis of Pragmatic Intellectualism goes even further in its concessions to conservatism. According to this thesis,

PI2 The only epistemic reasons for any belief consist in evidence for the content of that belief.¹⁰

⁹ Schroeder [2021], chapters six and seven.

¹⁰ Schroeder [2021], chapter six.

The thesis PI2 concedes to orthodoxy one half of what is required to turn PII into an endorsement of purism. As we have seen, you can get purism out of PII by endorsing the thesis that all epistemic reasons for *and* against belief are truth-related. And PI2 concedes that all epistemic reasons *for* belief are truth-related, because they are all evidence for the content of the belief in question. As a result, endorsing PI2 allows the Pragmatic Intellectualist to say many more conservative things. We can say, for example, along with evidentialists, that no belief is ever epistemically rational unless its content is supported by adequate evidence. This follows from PII and PI2, because PII tells us that for a belief to be epistemically rational it must be supported by adequate epistemic reason to believe, and PI2 tells us that the only epistemic reasons to believe are evidence for the content of the belief.

The discerning reader will by now have identified the loophole through which Pragmatic Intellectualism seeks to drive its train. Although all reasons *for* belief are truth-related, the Pragmatic Intellectualist denies that all reasons *against* belief are truth-related. Indeed, as I contend and argue in chapter six of *Reasons First*, they couldn't be. For if the only reasons in favor of belief were evidence for its content and the only reasons against belief were evidence against its content, then when the evidence for and against *p* is tied, the reasons for and against believing that *p* should be tied.¹¹ But that is patently not the case. If the evidence for and against *p* is tied, the only reasonable thing to do is to withhold judgment about whether *p*. So once we start to think about epistemic rationality in terms of the balance of reasons, we *need* there to be more epistemic reasons against a belief than we can get from evidence against the belief's content.

On my favored development of Pragmatic Intellectualism, there are actually two important sources of distinctively epistemic reasons against belief that do not consist in evidence against its content. But as one of those is orthogonal to our purposes here, for these purposes I want to single out as the third key commitment of Pragmatic Intellectualism the thesis that:

PI3 Among the properly epistemic reasons against belief that are not evidence are costs of error.¹²

Costs of error are not truth-related. They do not consist of evidence for or against the content of a belief. And they can be affected by practical considerations. Dying is a high cost. Making a blunder in print is a medium cost. Having to wait five minutes in line is a small cost. And in principle, costs of error can include moral costs. Killing someone else is a high cost. Leading them on is a medium cost. Making them wait five minutes unnecessarily is a small cost.

¹¹ Compare Harman [2002], whose *modus ponens* I *modus tollens*.

¹² Schroeder [2021], chapter eight.

So PI3 is a relatively conservative way of validating the thesis of Pragmatic Encroachment. The combination of theses PII-PI3 is also conservative in other ways. For example, these theses suggest that if we are interested in whether pragmatic encroachment applies to the rationality of credence as well as the rationality of belief, then we should pay attention to the difference between belief and credence, and try to extract from the nature of credence whether we should expect there to be non-truth-related reasons that would count as properly epistemic reasons for or against a certain credence, or for having higher or lower credence in general.

But I have argued elsewhere that the difference in how all-or-nothing belief and credence relate to action makes all the difference in the world for whether we should expect this to be true.¹³ Whereas deciding on the basis of belief involves taking the risk that you are wrong, deciding on the basis of credence doesn't involve taking any risks of being wrong at all – all of the risks are dealt with by the fact that we consider expected utilities, accounting even for very unlikely possible bad outcomes in a way that weights them by the low probability that we attach to their eventuating. The reason why costs of error are a properly epistemic reason against belief is precisely that in reasoning on the basis of belief we *ignore* the possibility that we are mistaken.

So because it is precisely this difference between belief and credence that makes the costs of error important for belief, we should not expect there to be error-related costs of credence that matter for the distinctive epistemic rationality of credence. This makes Pragmatic Encroachment conservative once more, for it allows that Purism correctly characterizes some important topics within epistemology, including questions about the rationality and justification of credence.

So far I have been focusing on the relatively conservative way in which Pragmatic Intellectualism makes sense of the thesis of Pragmatic Encroachment. But I have also argued that Pragmatic Intellectualism allows us to make sense of the thesis of Doxastic Wronging. And at the core of that idea is what we may for these purposes call the fourth thesis of Pragmatic Intellectualism:

PI4 Believing something false about someone commits a directed wrong against them when this belief diminishes them.¹⁴

Thesis PI4 is not quite the same as the thesis of Doxastic Wronging. As I have characterized the general thesis of Doxastic Wronging, it is the thesis that some beliefs are morally wrong to hold. PI4 does not say

¹³ In particular, in chapters seven and eight of Schroeder [2021].

¹⁴ Schroeder [2021], chapter nine.

that, exactly, because being wrong *simpliciter* and constituting a directed wrong against someone are not the same thing. Some actions may be morally wrong without violating anyone's rights, or failing to comply with what is owed to anyone. And sometimes it is justifiable (that is, not morally wrong) to perform an action that wrongs someone, because the alternative is so much worse for so many people.

Nevertheless, the thesis of PI4 is the right kind of thing to explain why the thesis of Doxastic Wronging would be true. Some beliefs, according to this view, are morally wrong to hold precisely because they wrong their subjects – they fail to accord to their subjects what we owe to them, which is not to believe falsely diminishing things about them. And so because these directed wrongs are not justifiable by some further benefit, these beliefs are wrong *simpliciter*.

For purposes of this discussion, I want to isolate one more thesis of Pragmatic Intellectualism. And this is the thesis that

PI5 The risk of believing something false about someone that wrongs them counts as a cost of error.¹⁵

There is much more to be said about why we should expect this to be true, given as I believe that not all bad consequences of believing something false do count as relevant costs of error for purposes of thesis PI3. So by my lights thesis PI5 is, though true, a non-trivial truth. I try to say some of those things in chapter nine of *Reasons First*. But the important thing for our purposes is that PI5 implicates the moral assessment of belief directly into the properly epistemic assessment of belief. It is a consequence of PI5 that more evidence is required, in order to believe something about someone that if false would diminish them, than to believe other things about them. So it is not just pragmatics that encroaches on epistemology, but morality itself.

This thesis, too, is conservative. Although it does not protect epistemology from the intrusion of ethics, it does protect the ultimate importance of epistemological assessment. Given that beliefs can be assessed morally as well as epistemically, as claimed by thesis PI4, that leaves open the question of whether moral and epistemic assessments of belief might ever conflict – whether it might ever be morally wrong to believe the truth, or blameworthy to believe something even though it is best supported by the evidence, or wrong to believe what you know to be true. If any of these things were possible, then the verdicts of epistemology would in an important way leave open what to believe.

But I believe that none of these things are true. True beliefs are never morally wrong, because only false beliefs can constitute directed wrongs. Knowledge never wrongs, because knowledge is true. And beliefs

¹⁵ Schroeder [2021], chapter nine.

that are supported by the evidence are never blameworthy because being supported by the evidence requires that the evidence in favor of their content outweighs the reasons against them, which by theses PI3 and PI5 already account for the moral risks of the belief. In these ways, the epistemic and moral modes of assessment of belief harmonize with one another. So despite the fact that beliefs can also be assessed morally, the allowance that the same things that matter for the moral assessment of belief also allow morality to encroach on epistemic assessment preserves the consequence that positive epistemic assessment is guaranteed to leave you morally in the clear – again, one of the central pieces of the orthodox way of thinking about the relationship between epistemology and ethics and hence a kind of conservative commitment to preserve.

3 Challenges from the Left

Because Pragmatic Intellectualism is reformist rather than radical in these ways, it is subject to challenges from the left – susceptible to the accusation that it does not go far enough in upsetting the status quo, that it is holding on to too much of orthodoxy. These challenges can take many forms. They can push us to allow that true beliefs, as well as false beliefs, can be morally wrong, that agnosticism, as well as positive belief, can wrong, that credences as well as beliefs, can wrong, and that modalized beliefs, such as that someone *may be* or *is probably* the murderer, can wrong.

In each case, the radical challenges us to see that there is something *parallel* about the intuitive force of some idea that goes further than I have been willing to go, and alleges therefore that if we are willing to go as far as I have gone, then there is equally weighty evidence that we should go further. But in each case, the structure of my response looks the same. Whatever the intuitive force of cases, we can *use* the departures from orthodoxy that I am willing to accept in order to add to our explanation of the intuitive force of these further cases, *without* adopting even more radical commitments. That means that even if the cases are equally intuitively compelling, the marginal evidence to go further is *weaker* than the evidence to come as far as I have. But more: each of these proposed extensions raises deep and puzzling problems that are not raised by my conservative reform measures. So not only is there less marginal reason to go further in these ways than to come so far, but there are deep and general reasons not to go further than I have gone. On balance, therefore, the evidence supports holding the line.

Let's start by seeing what this looks like in the case of my claim that only false beliefs can wrong. A paradigmatic example supporting this view is that of a newly married young woman interviewing for a job. Suppose that the interviewer considers her age, newly married status, the attractiveness of the company's leave policies, and concludes that this woman is interested in this job primarily so that she can go immediately

onto maternity leave. But this is false – like the vast majority of women applying for jobs, she is merely looking for fulfilling work that will advance her career and pay her bills, in a supportive work environment, ideally with a reasonable commute. I say: this interviewer has wronged this interviewee – even if he manages to successfully bracket this belief in his hiring decision and not be influenced by it or discriminate against her as a result. The mere fact that he presumes this of her is insulting. It wrongs her, because it falsely diminishes her.¹⁶

The radical loves this case, but thinks that the falsity of the interviewer’s belief has nothing to do with it. Even if the job applicant *is* applying for this job solely in order to qualify for the company’s generous maternity leave benefits for her already ongoing pregnancy, the interviewer is *still* wronging her to believe this about her (says the radical). So my conservative reform has not gone far enough.

But we should distinguish two things: whether the interviewer’s belief constitutes an objective wrong, and whether it is *subjectively* wrong – blameworthy, given the interviewer’s evidence at the time. I agree that whether the interviewer’s belief is blameworthy or not is independent of whether it is true. What it is subjectively wrong for you to do always depends on your available information, and in both cases the interviewer has the same information. So I agree that the interviewer who happens to be right is blameworthy. They are like someone whose negligence happens through luck not to result in an accident. This is enough, I think, to address the feeling that these two cases are the same, because it is a respect in which they *are* exactly the same, and now the radical must prove that their intuitive judgment concerns the objective wrongness of the interviewer’s belief, and not just their sense that the interviewer has behaved poorly.

At any rate it shows that the marginal force of this case is less than the marginal force of allowing that false beliefs can wrong, because the fact that I can use the claim that false beliefs can wrong to explain the subjective wrongness of even true beliefs means that there is less to be gained by going farther than by coming this far to begin with. And worse: arguing by example that there are true things that it is wrong to believe requires identifying such examples. But to believe that you have identified just an example is to believe that something is true while simultaneously alleging that it is wrong to believe it. And by your own lights it is wrong to do that. But there are no such problems with identifying false beliefs that wrong.

And as I have already shown, if we allow that true beliefs can wrong, then we are going to threaten the finality of epistemic verdicts. My explanation of why it is always okay to know is that knowledge entails truth, and true beliefs cannot wrong. But if true beliefs can wrong, then it may turn out that our very best, most careful inquiry attentive to all proper epistemic norms may lead us into moral hazard. And this, I

¹⁶ Compare Schroeder [2018].

believe, would be anarchy. So in addition to being supported by less forceful marginal evidence, this extension of the doxastic wronging thesis comes with steep costs of its own. We can and should hold the line, and these kinds of cases should neither make us think that we must go further, or that resisting going further requires admitting on grounds of parity that we did not have great reasons to have come so far.

David Enoch and Levi Spectre have argued that the same cases that support the view that beliefs can wrong also provide equally good intuitive support to the claim that *credences* can wrong, and that if you can wrong someone by believing that *p*, then you can also wrong them by believing that *probably p*, or that *most likely, p*, or the like.¹⁷ I'll treat these together, because 'probably' beliefs either fall under the heading of ordinary beliefs, in which case what I have already said about false but not true beliefs wronging applies to them as well, or they are not really binary beliefs at all, but just a matter of having or being committed to having a credence in some range – in which case this issue is covered by the claim that credences can wrong.

Enoch and Spectre frame their argument in the context of another example, originally used by Rima Basu and I to illustrate the thesis of doxastic wronging.¹⁸ In this case you are a recovering alcoholic who has been doing really well, and tonight is the crowning achievement of your progress, as the visiting colloquium speaker spills wine on your sleeve and still you somehow manage to make it through the whole evening even with that smell on your sleeve without giving in and having a drink. But when you get home, your partner smells the alcohol on you and, knowing that you have fallen off of the wagon in the past, concludes that you have fallen off of the wagon again. Your partner wrongs you, we claim, and this makes sense of why it makes sense to be hurt by this belief, and why it seems inadequate if they apologize for letting you find out that they drew this conclusion, but not for the conclusion itself.

Many readers of this case have wondered, however, whether it isn't also hurtful to learn that your partner's credence that you have fallen off of the wagon has moved up considerably, so that, though still reserving judgment, they are now, say, 98% confident that you have fallen off of the wagon. If this can be wrongful, however, then we need a much more radical revision of orthodoxy than the thesis of doxastic wronging – it must also turn out that credences can wrong. And so if epistemic and moral norms are to be reconciled, then it would have to turn out that there is moral – and therefore pragmatic – encroachment on the rationality of credence, as well as of binary, all-or-nothing, belief. Enoch and Spectre allege that this is the case, and as a result, that we should hold the line against doxastic wrongs in the first place, since as they argue there is no way to resist anarchy once we go down this path.

¹⁷ Enoch and Spectre [forthcoming].

¹⁸ Basu and Schroeder [2018].

But again my answer is that the question of whether the evidence that pushes us down the path as far as I have come must inevitably take us further is not exhausted, even if we grant this much, by the claim that the examples have equal intuitive force. For the argument never rested on the intuitive force of the examples alone – and it should not. Allowing that beliefs wrong and for moral encroachment on the epistemic rationality of belief gives us tools that we would not otherwise have for helping to address the intuitive force of cases involving credence that orthodoxy does not have. And so the *marginal* support provided by these additional cases is less than the marginal support that the original cases provide for coming as far as I have.

In this case, this is simply because it is easy to misunderstand the vast difference between having a high credence in something and believing that it is true. High credences are often accompanied by belief, but not always. So I contend that it is possible that if you feel equal intuitive force in each of these cases (which I do not, but that is not the kind of response on which I'm trying to focus in this paper), then one contributing factor toward that could be that high credence is often associated with belief, or more specifically with the failure to focus specifically on the fact whereas belief amounts to a commitment to the truth of what is believed, no level of credence short of one amounts to a commitment to truth.

It is of course also important to remember that even though on the view of Pragmatic Intellectualism pragmatic features do not encroach on the rationality of credence, it is still very well possible that people can manage their credences irrationally. And just as Pragmatic Intellectualism insists that sometimes when your belief is epistemically irrational it is also blameworthy, it leaves open the possibility that sometimes when your credences are irrational, they are also blameworthy. And, although I have not offered an explanation of this, I do personally find it plausible that it could be blameworthy to hold credences that depart from rationality precisely in how they give someone else the opposite of the benefit of the doubt. So it could well be that there are also cases in which it genuinely is blameworthy for your partner to be so confident that you have fallen off of the wagon – and that means that it takes some care to isolate a version of this case that even could be probative.

Nevertheless, even if there is some intuitive force to the claim that credences can wrong, there are excellent reasons to resist this conclusion that do not apply to the claim that beliefs can wrong. For in the case of belief, harmony between the moral and epistemic norms on belief can be maintained through moral encroachment on the rationality of belief. But to apply this strategy to the claim that credences can wrong requires endorsing pragmatic encroachment on the rationality of credence. And that, I believe, though others have flirted with it, is a disaster.

If the stakes can affect the rationality of credence, then we can Dutch Book you by moving you in and out of high stakes contexts. You may also easily fail to respect the principle of Reflection, whenever you are aware that you will move in or out of high stakes situations.¹⁹ These are, I believe, disastrous consequences for the rational management of credence. So even if the positive marginal intuitive evidence that credences can wrong was on a par with the positive intuitive evidence that beliefs can wrong (which I have argued it is not and cannot be), the contrary evidence is so much more forceful in the case of credences that it is very easy to hold the line at the claim that beliefs wrong and their rationality is pragmatically encroached on, without allowing this for credence.

4 Agnostic Wrongs

But there is one more challenge from the left that I take much more seriously than these others, and on which I want to focus for the remainder of this paper. And that is that in addition to the fact that we can sometimes wrong people by what we believe, and therefore it is sometimes wrong to affirmatively believe something, we can also sometimes wrong people by what we do *not* believe, and therefore it is sometimes wrong to *fail* to believe something.²⁰ If ‘doxastic wrong’ is our name for the wrongs of belief, we may say that according to this form of leftist challenge, we must also go in for *agnostic* wrongs – wrongs of failure to believe.

This is not a new challenge; I knew of this challenge, in a way, before I ever began constructing the central tenets of Pragmatic Intellectualism fifteen or more years ago. For even before I was persuaded by Basu that beliefs themselves can wrong, I always saw Pragmatic Intellectualism as a way of reconciling moral with epistemic constraints on belief through the acknowledgement of some kinds of moral or social costs of belief.²¹ And some of the most prominent places where moral constraints on belief were visible in the literature (at least from my vantage point) before I began thinking about these issues concerned the importance of believing good things about other people.

About two decades ago, both Simon Keller and Sarah Stroud argued that managing belief is part of friendship, and that part of what we expect from our friends, is that they believe good things about us – that they have a higher opinion of us than other people might.²² This sounds on its face like the view that we owe positive beliefs to our friends – and hence that we can wrong them, not only by believing false negative things about them that diminish them, but by *failing* to believe *positive* things about them. So when I first

¹⁹ Compare Reed [2012]. For full versions of each of these arguments, see Schroeder [2021], chapter eight.

²⁰ For direct versions of this challenge, see von Klemperer [2023], Gordon-Smith [2023], and Enoch and Spectre [forthcoming].

²¹ Contrast MacFarlane [2005], whose “knowledge laundering” argument against pragmatic encroachment depends on the assumption that only the believer’s personal costs can matter for the relevant stakes.

²² Keller [2004], Stroud [2005].

began thinking about which kinds of phenomena Pragmatic Intellectualism might help us to be able to explain, I was worried about whether it had the wrong shape to be able to explain the kinds of things that Keller and Stroud were discussing in the context of friendship.

But the conclusion that I came to was simple, and follows the structure of the answers that I have given to the other challenges from the left in section 3. It is that all that Pragmatic Intellectualism needs in order to explain why we owe more favorable beliefs to our friends is the claim that whereas we wrong anyone by believing something falsely diminishing about them, we wrong our friends *more* by such beliefs. Because we have *stronger* duties not to believe negative things about our friends, being a good friend requires taking greater care not to believe negative things about them. So good friends *will* have overall more positive views about one another than strangers will, but not because they believe more *good* things about one another – just because they believe fewer *bad* things.

So as before, we can use the departures from orthodoxy that I have already embraced in order to explain a great deal of what has been contended to be an extension. And that means, I believe, that these cases do not provide equal marginal evidence that we need to become even more radical. On the contrary, becoming more radical along this dimension threatens us, I believe, with total anarchy.

The way that Pragmatic Intellectualism protects the finality of the positive verdicts of epistemology is that it says that beliefs are only objectively morally wrong when they are also false, and hence already objectively epistemically incorrect. And likewise, Pragmatic Intellectualism insists that beliefs are only subjectively morally wrong when they are epistemically irrational. So morality, on this view, only ever allows us to say *extra* bad things about beliefs (though it does affect *when* we get to say the other bad things). It never condemns beliefs that are epistemically okay.

But if the lack of belief can also constitute a wrong, then that would deeply mess with this picture. We would have to either admit that perfectly epistemically impeccable beliefs can be morally wrongful, or we would have to give up on principle PI2, and posit a class of properly epistemic moral reasons in favor of belief, that make beliefs credible even in the absence of evidential support. This would amount to a kind of pragmatic “Disencroachment”, whereby some kinds of practical features make beliefs admissible even without evidence, or even in the face of counterevidence. I’ll return to these issues in the next section, but suffice it to say that all of these consequences strike me as deeply problematic in ways that I believe that Pragmatic Intellectualism is not. So as with the other challenges from the left, I believe that even if we grant that there are also forceful intuitive reasons to want to go further, there are even more forceful new reasons not to.

So for a long time, that is pretty much the way that I thought about the challenge of agnostic wrongs – framed by the examples posed by Keller and Stroud, I saw it as similar in shape and force to the leftist challenges concerning whether true beliefs or credences can wrong. And a similar strategy can be used, I believe, for many other kinds of cases that might putatively push us towards accepting practical or moral considerations in favor of belief, and not just against it – cases like those used by Berislav Marusic to argue that we need affirmatively to be able to believe in ourselves in order to achieve difficult things, and those highlighted in Jennifer Morton and Sarah Paul’s discussion of *grit*, which they argue requires maintaining your confidence in yourself even at low points along the journey.²³ Similarly, I have believed that this response is adequate in order to acknowledge Jennifer Foster’s forceful arguments that it is just as important to pay attention to the virtue manifested by believing in the face of the costs of error as it is to pay attention to the virtue manifested by holding off on belief given the costs of error.²⁴

In each of these cases we need to not be too down on ourselves, or perhaps not too down on those who are close to us, but this can be accommodated, I believe, by appeal to an alternative in which you are even more down on yourself. It is the avoidance of the affirmative belief that you won’t succeed that is important for achieving difficult things or for sticking with them through low points on the path to ultimate success – not the affirmative belief that you really will succeed.

But despite this wide range of cases in which I think it does pretty well, the challenge of agnostic wrongs has continued to perplex me in ways that the other leftist challenges have not. And at the heart of that complexity is the slogan ‘Believe Women!’ and its dialectical role in public discussion of accusations of sexual assault. This slogan helps to bring out in a forceful way how victim testimonies can provide a powerful kind of pressure toward acknowledging some kind of wrongs of agnosticism that goes well beyond the force of other kinds of example.

The central problem posed by victim testimonies – and by ‘victim testimonies’ I am thinking, in particular, about accusations of sexual misconduct – is that a proposition has been put forward that implicates two different people. In saying that two people are implicated I want to insist on being careful to avoid the implications of “he said, she said” ways of framing such accusations that encourage seeing them as symmetric. The best available evidence about rates of false accusations of sexual assault makes it clear that these situations are far from symmetric and “he said, she said” framing trivializes the vast and important differences that

²³ Marusic [2012], Morton and Paul [2019].

²⁴ Foster [ms].

come from base rates, let alone other kinds of asymmetries. Nevertheless, the fact remains that two people are implicated – an accuser and the one who is accused. She says that he did it, and he says that he did not.²⁵

Part of the problem is therefore that the claim that he did it is one that, if false, would greatly diminish him. The stakes are therefore high for believing that he did it, and so by the lights of Pragmatic Intellectualism it should take an even larger preponderance of the evidence in favor of the conclusion that he did it in order to make it epistemically rational to believe this, than to believe other, morally indifferent, things about him. Likewise, the claim that he did not do it is one that, if false, would greatly diminish her. For if he did not do it, then since obviously she has said that he did, it follows that she has misrepresented him in a deeply harmful way. And so if that were false, then that would falsely diminish her. So again, by the lights of Pragmatic Intellectualism it should take an even larger preponderance of the evidence in favor of the conclusion that he did not do it to make it epistemically rational to believe this, than to believe other, morally indifferent, things about him.

This reasoning is, of course, taking us along a very familiar path. The kinds of things that it is encouraging us to pay attention to are precisely the kinds of things that people encourage us to pay attention to in public discussions of accusations of sexual assault immediately before going on to conclude that therefore we should withhold judgment about whether this or that accusation is in fact true. The slogan, ‘Believe Women!’ has gained prominence precisely as a response to exactly this dialectical situation – one in which reservations about the risks of believing a false accusation about someone are offered as grounds for withholding judgment about the accusation altogether. And it captures something deep and general about the injustice of the failure of accusations of sexual assault to gain traction – and of the epistemic injustice against women who are victimized all over again by skepticism about their testimony.

Alexandra Lloyd has argued, along precisely these lines, that the correct way of making sense of what we owe to women who claim to have been sexually assaulted or who accuse specific men is outright belief. According to Lloyd, the slogan ‘Believe Women!’ is just an imperatival articulation of moral duty.²⁶ And as Jonathan Ichikawa has noted, this problem is especially bad for Pragmatic Intellectualism and in general for other forms of moderate reformism in the direction of moral and pragmatic encroachment in epistemology.²⁷

²⁵ It is important to emphasize that victims of sexual misconduct come in all shapes and sizes and that one of the social risks of discussing cases of accusations by women against men is that it reminds other victims of the fact that their claims are often overlooked. Nevertheless, as I am especially interested in a particular line of thought that has arisen in the context of prominent public discussions of accusations by women against men, I am going to continue to focus attention on these kinds of cases, without presumption over whether what I say about them should be limited to such cases.

²⁶ Lloyd [2022]. Lloyd does say, though I have not, that the role of ‘women’ in this slogan is restrictive, and not just a way of calling attention to the fact that victims are often women.

²⁷ Ichikawa [2024].

For the challenge is that these forms of moderation are conservative not only with respect to commitments within epistemology, but politically as well, for they make the challenge of rationally believing women who come forward with accusations of sexual assault *even harder* than it would have been, in the face of orthodoxy, by raising the stakes for believing the accusation.

And this leads us to the acute form of the challenge of agnostic wrongs. If doxastic wrongs make it *harder* to rationally believe accusers because they raise the stakes for believing the content of these accusations, the suggestion is that we need to posit agnostic wrongs to counter this. The slogan ‘Believe Women!’, on this reading, is an assertion that there is at least sometimes an affirmative moral duty to believe what women accusers say, and that this pragmatically disencroaches on the epistemic rationality of belief, making it more rational to believe what women accusers say than it otherwise would be, in light of the costs of error and the evidence either way.²⁸

This case troubles me, as I think that it should trouble you. There is tremendous richness and tremendous complexity in the issues surrounding accusations of sexual assault, and there is much to be learned by reflecting on this complexity with care and sensitivity. And I have far too little space even here to reflect in any kind of adequate way over the rich range of such issues. For example, I am going to stay far away from taking any kind of stand on whether if there is a duty to believe victims, it is in fact gender-neutral and only connoted by the phrase ‘Believe Women!’ because victims are often women, or it is in fact gendered, as Lloyd [2022] argues, and applies specifically to accusers who are women. And I’m only going to brush askance across many other topics that deserve much more exploration and which some others have begun to explore in much greater depth. Still even in the limited way in which I am able, I feel compelled by the contrast between this case and the others that I have considered to pause over whether cases involving testimony of sexual offenses pose a special challenge to the ambitions of Pragmatic Intellectualism to offer reform without radicalism. In what remains of this paper I will do my best to try to grapple with this serious challenge.

5 Believe Women!

In the last section I suggested that Pragmatic Intellectualism is almost certainly going to be committed to holding that the stakes are high both for believing that he did it, and for believing that he didn’t. Each belief

²⁸ Lloyd [2022] defends a sweeping version of this thesis, claiming that this is an absolute duty to all women who make accusations, apparently committed to the view that it doesn’t even matter if these accusations are true or how much specific evidence we might have that some particular person is likely to make false accusations based on her personal track record. In work in progress, Nadja Winning [ms] defends a far more restricted version of this thesis, restricted to cases in which you have a close interpersonal relationship with the accuser. And there is great room for many versions of the thesis lying between these two.

entails, given fixed common ground, something very negative about someone – the former about him, and the latter about her. So although I have tried to avoid digressing in his paper over what it takes for a belief to count as “diminishing” someone, it is going to be hard to avoid the conclusion that these beliefs are candidates for beliefs that “diminish”.²⁹ This makes especially salient the possibility that the right response is to believe neither – to withhold judgment. And as I characterized it, the slogan ‘Believe Women!’ comes in precisely as an answer to the response of withholding judgment.

But of course in real life cases of accusations of sexual assault, the defenders of the accused are not simply proposing to withhold judgment over whether their (for example) son, or boyfriend, or supreme court nominee has ever committed sexual assault. After all, before the accusation has been made, they were likely not merely agnostic over whether he had ever committed sexual assault – on the contrary, they likely affirmatively believed that he had not. And so if the accuser’s allegation is enough to get them to give up that belief and merely withhold judgment over whether their son (or boyfriend or supreme court nominee) has ever committed sexual assault, then it is very powerful indeed. And of course in real life cases, the defenders of the accused are often just as likely to be upset that an accuser can have this kind of power over the life and perceptions of the accused, as by its power to affirmatively convince anyone of her allegation. This is why they say things like, “innocent until proven guilty” and not just “let’s not all rush to judgment, here”, and also why they are often interpreted as meaning things like the former, when all that they have said explicitly is the latter.

So one thing that it is important to acknowledge about the kinds of real-world contexts in which the slogan ‘Believe Women!’ arises, is that despite their pretensions to neutrality, people who argue that we should not rush to judgment about someone who has been accused often *are* believing affirmatively that the accusation is false, or are implicating in context that it can be reasonable to see it in that way. And that does make comparing the recommendations of Pragmatic Intellectualism to this dialectic a bit unfair.

This leaves open the possibility that ‘Don’t Disbelieve Women!’ might be a much less catchy way of capturing at least one important layer of the key complaint, and that it is only presented as ‘Believe Women!’ for some combination of the reasons that this is catchier and that the people who are in fact disbelieving women are passing themselves off as merely not believing the women. But while I think that this pragmatic feature of public discussions of accusations is important to keep cognizance of, I doubt that it gets to the heart of the problem.

²⁹ For more on how beliefs diminish, see Schroeder [2018], [2020].

Renee Jorgensen [forthcoming] has argued that one of the things that the slogan ‘Believe Women!’ enjoins is not the propositional attitude of believing the content of accusations, per se, but rather a kind of person-directed attitude toward the accuser – of believing *her*. On Jorgensen’s rendition, believing a person is not quite the same thing as believing everything that they say. But it does require giving them the same kind of credibility as a source of evidence about what they say as you would grant to anyone else and to other sources of evidence. There is more (and more that I like) to Jorgensen’s overall subtle treatment of the social meaning of the slogan ‘Believe Women!’, but if she is right, then the person-directed attitude of believing the accuser is something that can be called for – and even morally obligatory – without there being moral wrongs of affirmative propositional belief.

So Jorgensen’s proposal offers something positive that is called for that is distinct from belief in the content of the accusation. Another possibility in a similar space also has, I believe, at least some limited potential. Sometimes in conflicts it is helpful, in order to get people over the threshold of listening to one another, to separate claims about what actually happened into separable, and therefore not logically incompatible, claims about each person’s *experience* of what happened. It is less threatening to listen to, and to try to understand, someone’s “me” report about their own experience, than to listen to their charged claim about you. So another way in which it is easy to grant the affirmative value of believing someone that goes beyond Jorgensen’s characterization of believing the person, is to believe the part of what they say that concerns their own experience, setting aside the part that says anything specific about the other person.

By detaching what someone is telling you from what it says specifically about the other person, we can eliminate everything that is high stakes about the accusation. There are very low risks of being wrong when trusting someone’s reports of their own experiences, because what you would do with those beliefs is mostly to sympathize with her, and the costs of sympathizing with someone who does not deserve sympathy are relatively low, at least when not taken cumulatively. So separating reports of personal experiences from content about other people allows us to fixate on something that you can believe about someone’s experiences about which problems of stakes do not arise. This thought takes seriously the “Me” in “#MeToo”, and why this slogan is not “#HeToo”.

Moreover, not only are the stakes lower for believing someone’s report of their personal experiences, but even more importantly, the reliability of these reports is going to be strictly higher. While of course many, *many* cases of sexual transgressions involve no ambiguity or confusion whatsoever, there are still cases that involve confusion, complications, alcohol, misunderstandings of cues, and bad communication. There have to be such cases for the same reason as there can be confusion over whether someone has wronged you in the many other kinds of ways that make it helpful to use “me” language when working through other

kinds of conflicts. And importantly, cases in which you believe yourself to have been wronged, whether sexual in nature or not, can be just as hurtful, or even more hurtful, than some cases in which you have actually been wronged, and so the other person is still deeply implicated in an important and likely deep harm in your life. So in short, since everyone is strictly more reliable about their own experiences than about how other people contributed to those experiences, the purely evidential case for taking accusers at their word about their own experiences is almost always going to be compelling, even if there are no special moral reasons to believe them.

I don't want at all to suggest that believing someone's claim about their own experiences is all that the slogan 'Believe Women!' calls for – it can't be remotely close to it. Many of the accusations offered in public contexts in the course of the #MeToo movement that have been the occasion for the dialectic about 'Believe Women!' are far too stark. They concern bald quid pro quo transactions over casting decisions in Hollywood or rapes after being deliberately drugged into nonresistance. It's not realistically possible to believe the content of these experiences without believing something about the accused. So this can't be what is being called for in these kinds of public contexts.

Nevertheless, in work in progress Nadja Winning has argued that the most forceful cases for the claim that affirmative belief is what is morally required of us come from contexts in which the accuser is not just a stranger, but a friend – even if the accused is also, as is so often the case in such situations, a friend.³⁰ And cases in which you are close to both the accuser and the accused are I suspect particularly likely to be cases in which taking the accuser's experiences at face value can be a really important step as you continue to work out what this means about the accused.

So far, all of this discussion has taken for granted the worry that because Pragmatic Intellectualism makes it *harder* to epistemically justify belief in the content of an accusation, we might actually be at risk of it *not* being rational to believe this. And I've been putting off returning to the question of how to think about this, because accusations of sexual misconduct come in all different sorts of shapes and forms. They can be made by people we know well, or by strangers. They can be made about people we think we know well, or about strangers. They can come to light at suspiciously politically opportune moments, or be made by people with a known track record of false (or true!) such accusations in the past. And when these accusations are public, different people will come to the case with different sorts of evidence. So I've put off returning to the question of what the evidence actually does support because it is likely to be possible to say more general things about the things that I've been discussing so far.

³⁰ Winning [ms].

Nevertheless, it is impossible to put off this question for too long. And here are some of the things that we know. We know that the base rate for false accusations of sexual assault is very low. We know this both because the best available data studying past accusations consistently finds false accusation rates of between 2% and 8%.³¹ But we also know it because the reputational and mental health costs of making even true accusations are so high and obvious that the incentives lie heavily against making such an accusation regardless of whether it is true or not. We also know that the motives for defending oneself against such an accusation by denying it have an impeccable pedigree. Absolutely no one responds to such accusations by allowing that they are true, and with good reason. So the mere fact that the accused says that he didn't do it should carry absolute no evidential value whatsoever, in and of itself. So in the absence of any further considerations, it makes sense to be highly confident of accusations of sexual misconduct – even when offered by someone you know little or nothing about against someone you know little about. This level of confidence often suffices for rational belief in the absence of high stakes. So it is reasonable to think that in many, many cases, it *would* be epistemically rational to believe the majority of accusations if pragmatic encroachment were *not* true.

The problem, as I've noted, is that since I endorse Pragmatic Intellectualism, I believe not only that pragmatic encroachment is true in the abstract, but that it infects cases like this one. Because the accusation would diminish the accused if it *were* false, it is the kind of thing for which we should require greater evidence than for other things. Still, I think, there is room to think that for many people and many accusations, the evidence may still be enough. After all, I have already allowed, in my response to Keller and Stroud, that we wrong our loved ones more by believing false diminishing things about them than we wrong total strangers. And many of the accusations of sexual misconduct that have captured the public eye in the conduct of the #MeToo movement and the context of the slogan 'Believe Women!' concern public figures with whom most of the audience has no special relationship that would make falsely diminishing beliefs an especially great wrong.

And in addition, in many such cases we have additional reasons to suspect that some of the possible motives for false accusations are especially unlikely to apply. For example, there may be many other accusers of the same accused, making it especially unlikely that their motive is to harm someone. The accuser may already be in the public eye, making it especially unlikely that this is a way of getting attention. Or they may be your friend and you know them well. Or you may be a victim yourself and so you understand and can recognize exactly the symptoms of the emotions that they are going through and hence have above-average

³¹ Surveying this evidence is beyond this paper, but compare Lisak, et al [2010].

judgments about whether the accusation is likely to be false. Or for whatever your favorite hypotheses about why there is any positive rate of false accusations at all, we can have concrete evidence in many specific actual cases that we are even more unlikely than usual to not be facing a false accusation. In contrast, it is much more difficult to have special evidence that someone is especially unlikely for accusations about him to be true, because there is a strong track record of people being mistakenly confident in such judgments.

So in many cases it *is* going to be epistemically rational for people to draw the conclusion that someone committed a sexual offense on the basis of victim testimony. In some of these, of course, this conclusion will be wrong. But taking precaution over the costs of error doesn't require eliminating any possibility of error, or it would never be rational to believe anything. It follows from Pragmatic Intellectualism that this won't be true of everyone, all of the time. But *no one* should think that it is true of everyone, all of the time. A false accuser could have written her plan to make the false accusation into her diary, or accepted a payment to make it. You could have read the diary or been the one who paid her. No matter how strong the presumption of truth on the part of the accuser, and no matter how obvious it is that the exceptions aren't in play in paradigmatic cases in which we are having different forms of this discussion, there *have* to be possible exceptions, and those exceptions have to be sensitive to whether you have particular evidence that goes beyond the base rates. No one should think that the same conclusions are appropriate for everyone, no matter what their relationships are to the accuser and to the accused. The interesting questions all concern how unusual we should expect these exceptional circumstances to be.

But of course one of the salient features of the dialectic in which the slogan 'Believe Women!' has functioned is often that we are having public discussions about accusations. And it's an inevitable feature of such public discussions that they proceed as if we all have available to us similar evidence. But some of the people participating in these discussions have extra evidence. They know more about the accuser, or they know more about the accused. And relevantly, I think, some of the people participating in these discussions have higher stakes on believing the accusation than others, because of their relation to the accused.

This means that as different people are having these discussions together, there may in fact be no single answer to what the evidence makes it rational to believe – it could very well be that it makes it rational for strangers to believe the accusation, but not for people who are close to the accused. And it may well be that this difference in stakes within a single contentious conversation helps to make sense of what is so difficult about conversations of this kind. I would never want to claim that conversations of this kind are such beacons of rational discourse that we need a *rationalizing* explanation of their dynamics, but at the same time it doesn't strike me as a *bad* thing to be committed to the ingredients of a partial rationalizing explanation of why it can sometimes seem to each side like the other side is asking too much of them.

In earlier sections of this paper, I offered strategies for how Pragmatic Intellectualism's conservative reform measures can help to provide the ingredients of offering more to explain the intuitive force of cases that might otherwise be thought to provide evidence in favor of more radical revisions to orthodoxy. Because these explanations help to blunt the intuitive force of these cases, they help us to resist going further, and because they turn on accepting Pragmatic Intellectualism or at least some of its claims, they specifically establish that the *marginal* evidence for going further is less.

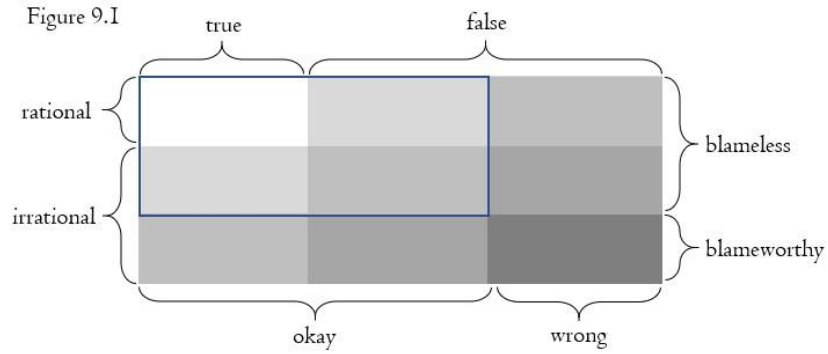
But the kinds of considerations that I've been considering in this section aren't like this at all. The observation that public discussions of accusations are often pragmatically about protecting the belief in innocence and not just resisting the belief in guilt, the idea that we can believe *people* without believing each thing that they say, the idea that we can separate claims about experience from claims about the accused, and the observation that on realistic assumptions there will in many, many cases be ample evidence to believe the content of accusations are all independent of Pragmatic Intellectualism. These are all things that could capture part of the rightful force of the slogan 'Believe Women!' even if Morality Assesses Action and Purism are both true. Pragmatic Intellectualism doesn't do anything to make it easier to give any of these responses – on the contrary, it only makes it harder.

So all of these things leave me with the feeling that although I am not quite persuaded that accommodating what is true and right about the slogan 'Believe Women!' requires going in for agnostic wrongs, the answers that I have given are also less satisfying than some of my answers to some of the earlier leftist challenges.

6 Moderate Radicalism

In the case of the other challenges, of course, I argued not only that there is less marginal reason to go further than to come so far, but also that there are substantial reasons to stop without going further, for disaster awaits those who go in for other kinds of wrong or other kinds of pragmatic encroachment. In this final section of this paper, I'm going to explain why I am also a little bit less satisfied with how to extend this other half of my responses to the earlier challenges, in the light specifically of victim testimonies and their social consequences.

Central to the delicate balancing of moral and epistemic norms on belief, in my view, is the fact the only epistemic reason to believe something is evidence that it is true, and the only moral considerations bearing on whether to believe something require it to be false. Because of this combination, I claim that the assessment of belief should look something like this depiction from chapter nine of *Reasons First*:



To read this diagram, you have to see the horizontal divisions as divisions in how to objectively (or “fact-relatively”) assess a belief, with the epistemic assessment corresponding to the division marked at the top, and the moral assessment corresponding to the division marked at the bottom. Similarly, the vertical divisions correspond to how to subjectively (or “evidence-relatively”) assess a belief, with the epistemic assessment corresponding to the division marked on the left, and the moral assessment corresponding to the division marked on the right.

In this picture, morality and epistemology are aligned because belief is never morally or epistemically required, but only either permitted or forbidden, and because morality only ever forbids more things than epistemic norms do. If some beliefs are ever morally required, then this picture is going to have to look much more complicated.

Of course, the proponent of agnostic wrongs may not care whether the moral and epistemic norms on belief are harmonious in this way. They may think that there are simply conflicts between what morality requires and what epistemology allows. But I think that there are special dialectical reasons not to expect the proponent of the argument for agnostic wrongs from the case of victim testimonies to want to adopt this strategy. For that is like winning the conclusion of getting to say that we morally ought to believe accusations even though it is sometimes epistemically irrational to do so. But it is barely a concession to the experience of testifying victims to insist that we morally owe them belief, if we allow in the next breath that it may be epistemically irrational of us to do so.

So for this reason I think that even the proponents of agnostic wrongs should want it to turn out that the moral reasons in favor of belief that come from the way in which the failure to believe would wrong, can themselves lift this belief up into epistemic rationality. I cannot rule out that there is some way of doing this, which accepts that there can be moral reasons in favor of belief as well as against it. But I am baffled at what it would look like, or what could secure us from conflicts if it were so.

But there is a quite different way of taking the thesis of agnostic wrongs. So far I have been assuming that if there are wrongs of agnosticism, then they must occupy the same place in our theory – a *symmetric* place, in the words of Caroline von Klemperer, who has argued for this conclusion – as doxastic wrongs.³² And so if epistemic and moral norms are to be harmonious, then they will have to also be epistemic reasons in favor of belief, just as the risks of doxastic wrongs are epistemic reasons against belief. This is what I contended seems to me to be a dangerous mess. But what I have not so far explored, is whether there is a different and more conservative place in which we can locate wrongs of agnosticism.

And in fact I think that there is. And the feature that gives me optimism that cases of victim testimony do not have to open a box of worms about moral reasons in favor of belief, is that victim testimonies are all cases of *testimony*. So as long as we can tailor our treatment of the moral issues surrounding victim testimonies to be specific to issues surrounding testimony *in general*, we may be able to carve off an admissible space in which moral issues can make it easier to rationally believe something without letting the rot spread and things get out of hand. And I think that this is possible to do.

Consider again thesis PI2, which says that the only properly epistemic reasons in favor of any belief consist in evidence for the content of that belief. Nothing about this thesis tells us what counts as evidence, or under what conditions something is part of an agent's evidence. But much of my discussion of victim testimony tacitly relies on a certain way of thinking about how it is that victim testimonies provide evidence – namely, that you learn that the accuser has said something about the accused, and come to have the proposition *that she said that he did it* as part of your evidence. This proposition, together with background evidence that you have about how likely it is that she would misrepresent this about him, together constitute your evidence that he did it, at least insofar as that evidence comes from her testimony. This treatment of the epistemological significance of testimony is sometimes called 'Humean'.

The Humean view of testimony is much like what we might call the phenomenalist view of basic perceptual evidence. According to this view, the evidence that you acquire about the world when you have perceptual experiences is entirely consistent with vastly different scenarios about the external world. For example, on one such view, your evidence is that *it looks to me like there is something red in front of me*, which of course is consistent with their actually being something red in front of you, and also consistent with it looking so because you are wearing rose-colored glasses, and even consistent with your being an algorithm in a simulation with nothing in front of you at all.

³² Von Klemperer [2023].

In the case of basic perceptual evidence, I reject this picture. According to the view that I defend in *Reasons First* – what I call the *non-factive attitude view* – your basic perceptual evidence consists in propositions about what factive perceptual relations you stand in to the world.³³ So when it looks to you like there is something red in front of you, what is going on is that it seems to you like *you see that there is something red*. This makes *I see that there is something red* part of your evidence, and that *entails* that there is something red. On this view, we don't need to overcome any skeptical gulf in order to rationally form beliefs about the external world on the basis of our evidence – we only need to take our evidence at face value and believe what it entails.

There are other, similar, views in this vein, but in *Reasons First* I argue that the non-factive attitude view does better than other views of this broad kind at explaining both the contrast between knowledge and evidence, and the defeasibility of perceptual evidence. If it is really true that you see that there is something red, then this is an excellent *objective* reason to believe that there is something red – unbeatable. And that is why it is a great source of knowledge. But even if it is not true, the proposition that you see that there is something red in front of you still entails that there is something red, and so it is excellent *subjective* reason to believe that there is something red – unbeatable. And that is why it is equally rational to believe that there is something red, whether you are in the good case or the bad case.

The important point is that although I did not endorse this in my book, it is possible to make the same move with respect to testimonial evidence as I advocate for basic perceptual evidence. On such a view, in core cases of testimony – what we might call *proper* testimony – your evidence doesn't come from the fact that someone *said* something, or that they *told* you something, but that they *informed* you of it. So if someone really did inform you of it, then you have the very best sort of objective reason to believe it – entailing reason – and this evidence doesn't depend in any way on what you know or have reason to believe about how likely they are to be telling the truth, any more than basic perceptual evidence requires background knowledge about the reliability of perception. And even if they have not actually informed you of it – perhaps even because it is false – if it seems from your point of view that they have, then you can still have the very strongest kind of *subjective* reason to believe it – unbeatable subjective reason.

If what I've called proper testimony is possible, therefore, then there are cases in which it is compatible with the pragmatic encroachment of costs of error on belief that the costs of error are irrelevant – just as no costs of error can make it irrational to believe what is right before your eyes, similarly and for the same reasons, no costs of error could make it irrational to believe what you've been told. So if *proper*

³³ Schroeder [2021], chapter five.

testimony is possible, then some things really are properly taken at face value in what other people say, and stakes has nothing to do with it. Doing so is still believing only what is supported by the evidence, and it is still being sensitive to the costs of error – it merely turns out that when your evidence entails your conclusion, it is easy to do believe what is supported by your evidence while being sensitive to the costs of error – you just take your evidence at face value.

I am not sure whether I believe in the possibility of proper testimony, so understood. I've gone out of my way in the past to try to avoid taking on any commitments about how to think about the epistemological role of testimony. But Berislav Marušić and Stephen White, in their account of doxastic wrongs, argue that proper testimony has its home within what Strawson calls the *participant stance* – the distinctive perspective from which we regard one another as persons, and which opens up treating the reasons offered by their testimony in the same way as we treat the reasons given by our own reflections. And I want to explore for a moment the idea that what Marušić and White say about doxastic wrongs is something like the right story to about *agnostic* wrongs – that whether or not it is correct to identify this with what Strawson calls the 'participant perspective', there is a stance or way of relating to someone which makes available propositions such as *that they informed me that p* when they tell you that p.

On this picture, wrongs of agnosticism are constituted by moral failures to relate to someone in this distinctive interpersonal way that makes propositions to the effect that they have informed you of something part of your evidence when they tell you something. If we are ever morally required to take this distinctive stance toward someone and yet do not, then our being agnostic over what they tell us will be a symptom of the fact that their telling us does not thereby make *that they so informed us* part of our evidence. We can't, of course, be expected to take this stance toward someone all of the time – sometimes we simply learn too much about their track record to sustain it. But if it is possible to take this perspective, and if it is ever wrong not to, then it might very well be the case that we owe this to victims who come forward with some of the most devastating experiences of their lives. Indeed, it is hard to think of what other kinds of cases could be even close to as good of candidates for this stance being a matter of obligation. If so, then there would be a very strong sense indeed in which what we owe is to believe these victims – women or otherwise. We would owe them the strongest kind of consideration for what they say, without any prior knowledge of their reliability and without any regard for the costs of error.

We might not owe this to absolutely every victim. Maybe taking this stance toward someone who is accusing our brother, or our son, asks too much of us for us not to have a moral permission to hold back from it. And maybe the moral considerations in favor of taking this stance toward someone can be countered by specific evidence that they in particular are not reliable witnesses, or not, at least, about this in particular.

Maybe it is too easy to shake us out of this way of relating to someone, and hard enough to get back into it that we can't blame people who have been so shaken. But we could owe it to very many people, very much of the time – and all consistently with the heightened stakes provided by the context of the accusations.

As I said, I do not know whether this is true. But its being true would not, in my view, be the same kind of chaos as a free-for-all in which there can be moral reasons both for and against belief. On this view, there are strictly speaking no moral reasons in favor of belief, but rather just moral reasons to relate to someone in such a way that what they tell you gives you reasons to believe that you would not otherwise have. And these reasons that they give you are just the ordinary kind of properly epistemic reasons for belief – they are evidence. Likewise, *holding fixed* whether you relate to someone in this way, moral considerations can still only make it more epistemically rational to believe by *lowering the risk* of diminishing someone wrongly by believing something false about them – they can never affirmatively raise the epistemic credibility of belief beyond its support by evidence. But moral reasons *can* tell you whether to enter into this kind of relation toward someone, and when it is okay to leave it.³⁴

This, I think, would not be such a bad way of extending Pragmatic Intellectualism to endorse new and more radical claims about the relationship between ethics and epistemology. Though I am not yet there, I could be persuaded to go further, if it would look something like this. But then, this is a cautious, conservative sort of extension, and I have already revealed my hand as being a cautious, conservative sort of revolutionary. We need to keep listening to the radicals, because sometimes they are right that we need to go even further. But the right way of going further will still be just one more step on the path of reform.³⁵

³⁴ Notably, this opens up this view to the risk of either Dutch Book-ability or of failures of Reflection, each of which I argued earlier are terrible problems for allowing pragmatic encroachment on credences. Part of what I would need to be convinced by, in order to fully embrace the view that I am now considering, is that we shouldn't be able to easily predict when it will be right to go in and out of the perspective that enables proper testimony, and I feel like I need to understand the mutuality involved in this perspective much better before I can be ready to understand its predictability.

³⁵ Thanks to Juan Comesaña, Nadja Winning, Jen Foster, Jonathan Ichikawa, Beri Marušić, Sophia Dandeleit, Renee Jorgensen, Elise Woodard, Massimo Renzo, Benjamin Kiesewetter, and to audiences at King's College London and Bielefeld University. All errors of judgment and perception are my own.

References

- Anderson, Charity, and John Hawthorne [2019]. 'Knowledge, Practical Adequacy, and Stakes.' *Oxford Studies in Epistemology* 6: ***-***.
- Basu, Rima [2018]. *Beliefs That Wrong*. University of Southern California.
- [forthcoming]. 'The Wrongs of Racist Beliefs.' Forthcoming in *Philosophical Studies*.
- Basu, Rima, and Mark Schroeder [2018]. 'Doxastic Wronging.' In Brian Kim and Matthew McGrath, eds., *Pragmatic Encroachment in Epistemology*. New York: Routledge.
- Burge, Tyler [1993]. 'Content Preservation.' *Philosophical Review* 102(4): 457-488.
- Enoch, David, and Levi Spectre [forthcoming]. 'There is No Such Thing as Doxastic Wronging.' Forthcoming in *Philosophical Perspectives*.
- Fabre, Cecile [2022]. 'Doxastic Wrongs, Non-Spurious Generalizations, and Particularized Beliefs.' *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 122(1): 47-69.
- Fantl, Jeremy, and Matthew McGrath [2002]. 'Evidence, Pragmatics, and Justification.' *Philosophical Review* 111(1): 67-94.
- [2010]. *Knowledge in an Uncertain World*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Foster, Jennifer [ms]. *Doxastic Courage*. USC Philosophy Dissertation, in progress.
- Gendler, Tamar [2011]. 'On the Epistemic Costs of Implicit Bias.' *Philosophical Studies* 156(1): 33-63.
- Gordon-Smith, Eleanor [2023]. *The Ethics of Disbelief*. Princeton University PhD Dissertation, <https://dataspace.princeton.edu/handle/88435/dsp01sb397c57f>.
- Harman, Gilbert [2002]. 'Practical Aspects of Theoretical Reasoning.' In Al Mele and Piers Rawling, eds., *The Oxford Handbook to Rationality*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 45-56.
- Hawthorne, John [2004]. *Knowledge and Lotteries*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Ichikawa, Jonathan [2024]. *Epistemic Courage*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Jorgensen, Renee [forthcoming]. '#BelieveWomen and the Ethics of Belief.' Forthcoming in *NOMOS LXIV: Truth and Evidence*.
- Keller, Simon [2004]. 'Friendship and Belief.' *Philosophical Papers* 33(3): 329-351.
- von Klemperer, Caroline [2023]. 'Moral Encroachment, Symmetry, and Believing Against the Evidence.' Forthcoming in *Philosophical Studies*.
- Lisak, David, Lori Gardinier, Sarah Nicksa, and Ashley Cote [2010]. 'False Allegations of Sexual Assault: An Analysis of Ten Years of Reported Cases.' *Violence Against Women* 16(12): 1318-1334.
- Lloyd, Alexandra [2022]. '#MeToo and the Role of Outright Belief.' *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 25(2): 181-197.

- MacFarlane, John [2005]. 'Knowledge Laundering: Testimony and Sensitive Invariantism.' *Analysis* 65(2): 132-138.
- Marušić, Berislav [2012]. 'Belief and Difficult Action.' *Philosophers' Imprint* 12(18): 1-30.
- Marušić, Berislav, and Stephen White [2018]. 'How Can Beliefs Wrong?: A Strawsonian Epistemology.' *Philosophical Topics* 46(1): 97-114.
- Morton, Jennifer, and Sarah Paul [2019]. 'Grit.' *Ethics* 129(2): 175-203.
- Reed, Baron [2012]. 'Resisting Encroachment.' *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 85(2): 465-472.
- Russell, Jeffrey [2019]. 'How Much is at Stake for the Pragmatic Encroacher?' *Oxford Studies in Epistemology* 6: ***-***.
- Schroeder, Mark [2012]. 'Stakes, Withholding, and Pragmatic Encroachment on Knowledge.' *Philosophical Studies* 160(2): 265-285.
- _____ [2018]. 'When Beliefs Wrong.' *Philosophical Topics* 46(1): 115-127.
- _____ [2020]. 'Sins of Thought.' *Faith and Philosophy* 37(3): 273-293.
- _____ [2021]. *Reasons First*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Stroud, Sarah [2006]. 'Epistemic Partiality in Friendship.' *Ethics* 116(3): 498-524.
- Winning, Nadja [ms]. '#BelieveThem: Accusations of Sexual Assault and the Ethics of Non-Belief.'