

MORALLY RESPECTFUL LISTENING AND ITS EPISTEMIC CONSEQUENCES

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ABSTRACT: This paper focuses on the phenomenon of morally respectful listening. I defend a specific requirement for respectful listening in the context of disagreement. According to it, when listening occurs in the context of disagreement, the morally respectful listener must be open to the possibility that the speaker will surprise the listener with her positive epistemic qualities. That is, the listener must be open to what I call “epistemic surprise.” I also argue for a specific interpretation of this openness: to be open to epistemic surprise is to be open to unexpected changes in confidence levels concerning the proposition in question. I close by arguing that respectful listening is incompatible with a listener’s being certain, and I apply this conclusion to three recent debates in epistemology to show that the phenomenon of listening has potentially far-reaching consequences for epistemology.

One of the distinctive features of the current political climate is tendency to demonize one’s opponents. For example, progressives and conservatives regularly view each other as both morally and epistemically vicious. This phenomenon is also increasingly found in professional philosophy. For example, recent debates surrounding the nature of gender or the justice of affirmative action prove to be especially polarizing, and with this polarization has come demonization. It is in this context of polarization and demonization that some—both within the profession and outside of it—have emphasized the need to engage respectfully with the other side, to listen to one’s opponent even when one disagrees vehemently with the content of their claims. I agree with this sentiment, up to a point. But that is not the

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purpose of this paper. Rather, its purpose is to examine the concept of respectful listening itself.¹

To start, there are at least two distinct kinds of respectful listening and it is important to distinguish them. The first is what we might call *epistemically* respectful listening. It consists in the respect that one gives the speaker in virtue of the speaker's perceived positive epistemic qualities. For example, when I listen attentively to an expert, I do so primarily with epistemic respect—I think highly of the speaker given her greater knowledge on the issue in question. The second kind of respectful listening is what we might call *morally* respectful listening. This kind of listening consists in a respect that one gives the speaker in virtue of some perceived morally relevant quality that she possesses, such as the fact that the speaker is a moral agent. The two kinds of respectful listening might come apart. For example, one might want to listen respectfully to a friend or family member out of a sense of loyalty even though the friend or family member is seen to lack positive epistemic qualities. So, there is an important difference between listening with epistemic respect and listening with moral respect. The former intends to track a speaker's qualities as a knower, while the latter intends to track a speaker's qualities as a member of the moral community.²

This paper will focus exclusively on the phenomenon of morally respectful listening (“respectful listening” hereafter).³ There are of course many components of respectful listening. First, there are behavioral components. For example, a respectful listener does not check her phone, interrupt frequently, or whistle show tunes while listening. Second, there are attentional components. Even if a listener is outwardly well behaved, he falls short of respectful listening if he is mentally compiling a grocery list while the speaker is speaking. Third, there are judgmental components. For example, even if a listener is outwardly well behaved and attending to the speaker's utterances, she is plausibly not listening with respect if she is thinking to

¹ It is, after all, difficult to decide whether one should listen respectfully without first knowing what it involves.

² The two kinds of respect can overlap, for example, in the case of listening to a perceived moral authority.

³ Discussions of listening often occur in the context of political listening. Mill (1859), for instance, argues that a duty to listen can protect against tyranny. See Day (1996) and Heldke (2007) for discussion. The issue also arises in discussions of public reason and deliberative democracy. Morgan-Olsen (2013), for instance, argues that there is a civic duty to listen to others which should be understood as a duty to seek public justifications in their political arguments. Recent defenses of listening as a moral virtue include Notess (2019), Beatty (1999), and English (2016).

herself the whole time that the speaker is an absolute idiot.⁴ Instead of trying to account for all the possible components of respectful listening, I will defend a specific requirement for respectful listening: what I call the *Openness Requirement*. It is a requirement that applies to listening in contexts of disagreement, which is any context in which the listener's confidence level in a given proposition differs from that of the speaker.⁵ According to the Openness Requirement, when listening occurs in the context of disagreement, the morally respectful listener must be open to the possibility that the speaker will surprise the listener with her positive epistemic qualities. The Openness Requirement, as we will see, is open to interpretation. I will argue for a specific interpretation: in the context of disagreement, the respectful listener must be open to unexpected changes in her confidence levels concerning the proposition in question. A quick preview is in order. In section 1, I argue that part of what is involved in being worthy of respect, qua person, is having the capacity to surprise others in good ways. I then defend a specific kind of surprise, which I call "epistemic surprise." It involves the capacity of a person to unexpectedly cause others to think more highly of her epistemic qualities. I argue that respectful listening must track the capacity a speaker has to epistemically surprise the speaker. In section 2, I defend the specific interpretation of the Openness Requirement mentioned above. In section 3, I argue that respectful listening is incompatible with a listener's being certain. So, in cases of certainty there can be a moral reason not merely to be open to changes in confidence levels, but to actually lower one's confidence levels. Finally, in section 4, I apply the conclusions surrounding respectful listening to three recent debates in epistemology to show that the phenomenon of listening has potentially far-reaching consequences.

1. EPISTEMIC SURPRISE AND THE BASIS OF RESPECT

The kind of respect I have in mind throughout this paper is what Darwall (1977) labels "recognition respect."⁶ Recognition respect "consists, most generally, in a disposition to weigh appropriately in one's deliberations

⁴ This is why merely entertaining a speaker's utterances is plausibly insufficient for respectful listening. See Kriegel (2013) for an in-depth discussion of entertaining as an attitude. See Notess (2019) for an account of listening as a virtue of attention.

⁵ I frame disagreement in terms of differing confidence levels because disagreements can occur even when two people have the same beliefs toward the proposition in question.

⁶ It is essentially a moral attitude (40). See Cranor (1975,1982), Rawls (2000), Dillon (2018) Wood (2010), and Birch (1993) for discussion of recognition respect and cognates.

some feature of the thing in question and to act accordingly” (38). In other words, respect involves tracking some respect-worthy feature of a thing or person. Of course, this respect need not occur only in deliberation. It can occur in the attitudes one holds, such as how one views a thing or person.⁷ But in both cases, respect tracks a feature of the thing or person owed respect. So, we should expect that respectful listening will track some respect-worthy feature or other of the speaker; constructing an account of respectful listening requires identifying those features which the listening tracks.

I will focus on what I take to be two features of speakers that are worthy of respect: their autonomy and their potential for valuable uniqueness (“uniqueness” hereafter).⁸ The first feature is well known as a basis of respect: a person is owed respect because he or she is an autonomous being with control over many of aspects of their actions and mental life. The second feature, however, is less discussed.⁹ The basic idea is that a person is owed respect because his or her mental life potentially differs in valuable ways from that of other people. For example, a person might have a novel perspective on a thing or an activity, or feel certain emotions that others do not feel (or feel them more intensely), or value a thing or activity for reasons that others do not, and so on. Of course, the *mere* fact that someone is unique might not be a sufficient basis for respect. A person or thing, after all, might be uniquely *bad*. What I am claiming is that a basis of respect is the potential a person has for valuable uniqueness. No doubt the first basis of respect—autonomy—has played a more central role in the history of philosophy, but the role that uniqueness plays in grounding respect can be seen in at least two ways. First, consider how uniqueness functions in concerns about conservation. For example, the fact that an artwork, or ecosystem, or historical artifact, is unique gives us more reason to weigh it in our deliberations than if it were just one of many like it. Artworks, ecosystems, and historical artifacts are not autonomous, so if there is a need to respect these things, then it cannot be due to their autonomy.¹⁰ Furthermore, it is not the mere possession of valuable features that explains the drive to

⁷ Murdoch (1970, ch. 1) contains a classic defense of the moral importance of perception of others.

⁸ Rini (2018, 5) uses the notion of reciprocity to defend an imperfect duty to be open to moral persuasion. On her account, we have a duty to listen to others (some of the time) because we stand in a relation of reciprocity.

⁹ See Zagzebski (2001) for discussion of uniqueness. Citation: Zagzebski, Linda. “The Uniqueness of Persons.” *Journal of Religious Ethics* 29 (3) (2001): 401–23.

¹⁰ It is of course controversial whether nonautonomous things are deserving of respect. See Birch (1993) for a case that nature deserves respect.

conservation—if it were, then we would expect similar levels of conservation efforts to be aimed at things with equal value, regardless of their uniqueness. Instead, we see that unique things are prioritized, other things being equal. The second way to see the role that uniqueness plays in respect is to consider how dismissal of others' uniqueness suffices for *disrespect*. For example, imagine dismissing a person's preferences for being different from your own. It is natural, I believe, to think that this dismissal involves a disrespectful attitude (we can imagine that the dismissal does not harm the person). But the dismissal is a dismissal of uniqueness: to assume that people have roughly identical inner lives precludes the possibility that a person might actually be unique in some way. For the sake of this paper, I will assume that autonomy and uniqueness are adequate bases of respect.

I want to argue that autonomy and uniqueness involve a special capacity to *surprise* others. It is this capacity to surprise that will form the backbone of my account of respectful listening. One person surprises another, in the sense meant here, when the following three conditions are met:

1. he/she does something that is, given the available evidence at the time of the act, *unexpected*;
2. the act leads an observer to think more highly of him/her, in the relevant respect; and
3. that the act was unexpected cannot be explained entirely by a lack of familiarity with the person in question.

The basic idea behind (1) and (2) is that autonomous and unique creatures can do the unexpected, and it can make one think more highly of them as a result.¹¹ That is, autonomous, unique creatures are potentially unexpected sources of good things, whether those are actions, perspectives, emotions, etc. After all, an autonomous creature's activity is not simply the outcome of a causal process the way that a machine's activity is, and so it might do something that is not expected on the basis of causal processes. Similarly, a unique creature's activity will sometimes have a source that an observer does not have access to, and so it will do something unexpected on those occasions. The basic idea behind (3) that there is an important distinction between (i) acts that are unexpected due to something merely accidental and (ii) those that are unexpected due to something essential about the agent. Consider a case of playing basketball with someone for the first time. You might think, because of the person's weight and age, that he is not a particularly good

¹¹ A person might also do something unexpected, which makes others think less of them. But that is a separate phenomenon.

player. If he turns out to be quite good, then his play was unexpected given the evidence, and you think more highly of his basketball-playing abilities. But the fact that you did not expect him to be good was merely because you did not know him very well. You never played basketball with him, and so did not know of his abilities. Condition (3) is meant to rule out cases like these as cases of surprise in the sense I am after. The kind of surprise I am trying to capture is possible no matter how familiar one is with the person in question. One way that the capacity to surprise can persist in the face of familiarity is if the capacity arises out of the person's autonomy and/or uniqueness. That is, no matter how well one knows an autonomous or unique individual, they might still do something unexpected.

Surprise can also take on different forms and need not occur in the context of listening. First, there is *conceptual* surprise. This kind of surprise occurs when a person does something unexpected that induces in one the realization that the concepts one uses to capture one's own life (one's activities, experiences, and so on) are not adequate to capture those of the other person. Conceptual surprise involves, to co-opt the words of D. W. Winnicott, the "recognition of an outside reality that is not one's own projection, the experience of contacting other minds."¹² A second form of surprise is *moral* surprise. Moral surprise occurs when the unexpected act causes an observer to think more highly of the person's moral qualities.¹³ Moral surprise often occurs in cases of redemption. For example, a person who has lived his whole life in a consistently selfish way—using others when it suits him, with little independent regard for their welfare—might nonetheless unexpectedly alter his path later in life and start to put others first.¹⁴ A third kind of surprise is *emotional* surprise. It occurs when one does something to cause another to think more highly of his or her emotional capacities. For example, all evidence might point to a friend's being emotionally

¹² Quoted in Benjamin (1988, 37). Many so-called "continental" figures seem to have something like conceptual surprise in mind when they speak of encounters with the "Other." For example, Levinas says that "the Other as Other is not an alter ego" (1987, 83), while Marion (2002) talks about the phenomenon of conceptual saturation that occurs when the experience of another person goes beyond the concepts we have. See Gordon (2011) for a discussion of "listening to the Other" in Buber.

¹³ An openness to *moral* surprise is similar in ways to Preston-Roedder's (2013) notion of "faith in humanity." Two differences, however, are worth noting. First, his notion of faith in humanity seems to lack anything analogous to epistemic surprise. Second, the attitude of openness is plausibly less committal than that of faith.

¹⁴ Some cases of moral surprise are internal insofar as the surprising "act" is a mental one. For example, one might come to see something in a more morally appropriate light. An interesting case of this occurs in the documentary *The Act of Killing* when a particularly glib individual who had helped in the Indonesian genocide experiences an epiphany and comes to see that what he had done was deeply evil (that he had "sinned").

superficial and yet she might do something that reveals real emotional depth. There are probably many other kinds of surprise that can be traced to the autonomy and/or uniqueness of persons. But the one I want to focus on is what I call *epistemic* surprise. It occurs when the agent does something unexpected that causes others to think more highly of the agent's specifically *epistemic* qualities, such as his habits of mind, possession of evidence, or intuitive capacities (to name just three epistemic qualities).¹⁵ For example, a student whose work you have grown familiar with over several semesters might surprise you with a paper; for example, it goes well beyond the mediocrity you had come to expect. In such a case, all three conditions of surprise are met: he did something that was unexpected given the evidence, you think more highly of his epistemic abilities (e.g., his ability to craft an argument), and the unexpectedness was not due to insufficient familiarity with the student (perhaps he has taken multiple classes over several years with you).

It is possible that one person could surprise another without the observer conceiving of it as arising out of a person's autonomy and/or uniqueness. For example, the observer could be surprised by a person's epistemic qualities, but conceive of it as due to unexpected cleverness of the sort one could replicate in a machine. His surprise in this case is not conceived of as arising from the bases of respect. This is possible because the notion of surprise is not defined in terms of its conceived cause. But surprise, including epistemic surprise, can be conceived of as arising from a person's uniqueness or autonomy. One conceives of the student's unexpected act as arising out of his autonomy when, for example, he is conceived of as freely deciding to put in the intellectual legwork for the first time. Likewise, the surprise is conceived of as arising out of his uniqueness when, for example, the paper's thesis is conceived of as the result of a unique perspective that he has.¹⁶ To use another example, a relative whom you have come to doubt can contribute to a productive conversation might nonetheless offer an insightful comment at a holiday dinner, and the insightful comment could be conceived of as a result of her unique perspective on the issue, a perspective which provided her with new sources of relevant information on a topic. Or perhaps the surprise is conceived of as the result of a free decision to pursue a line of reasoning for longer than she usually does. One conceives of an

¹⁵ Epistemic and conceptual surprise can at times overlap, for example, if the conceptually unique perspective is epistemically relevant.

¹⁶ The diversity trumps ability theorem is controversial, but, if true, it plausibly works on the basis of diversity offering additional information on the basis of additional unique perspectives. See Anderson (2006) for discussion.

instance of surprise in a respect-relevant manner when one conceives it as arising out of the bases of respect.

Let us return to the issue of respectful listening. Respectful listening, I have argued, is a recognition of those features of a person that ground her respect-worthiness, namely, a person's autonomy and uniqueness.¹⁷ Furthermore, autonomy and uniqueness ground a capacity to surprise others, so respectful listening requires tracking that capacity. Different contexts of listening make salient different kinds of surprise.¹⁸ For example, listening to a prisoner's appeal for parole requires attending to his capacity to morally surprise others. In the context of disagreement, one's epistemic qualities become salient. Insofar as the speaker's epistemic qualities are salient, respectful listening in that context requires that one track a person's capacity to epistemically surprise. This is the Openness Requirement. In the next section I will argue for a particular interpretation of it.

2. THE OPENNESS REQUIREMENT

In this section I will defend a specific interpretation of the Openness Requirement on listening. Independent of context, a person might epistemically surprise another in all sorts of ways. For example, a child might surprise a parent with the concepts she has, a student might surprise an instructor with his work, an elderly person might surprise her kids with her memory, and so on. The list is as long as the list of epistemic qualities. But in the context of disagreement, a speaker is offering arguments, making objections, asking questions, and so on, regarding the appropriate confidence toward some proposition *p*. So, the respectful listener must track the capacity of the speaker to offer an unexpected argument, ask an unexpected question, make an unexpected objection, and so on, regarding the appropriate confidence toward *p*. Furthermore, the listener must be open to the possibility that the unexpected thing—argument, objection, etc.—leads her to think more highly of the speaker's epistemic qualities. What precisely this openness involves is unclear, at least at this stage. It will help to start with an example that is plausibly *disrespectful* despite the listener being open to some sort of epistemic surprise. Once it becomes clear why the example involves disrespect, we can better understand what openness to epistemic surprise involves.

¹⁷ Technically, respectful listening is the attribution of those features. But for ease of style, I will write as if those features are in fact instantiated in the speaker.

¹⁸ See Rice (2011) for a discussion of some different listening contexts.

Suppose you are an advisor of a thesis and you are about to meet with the student to discuss his work. As the meeting is about to start, you think the following to yourself:

James is *really* unimpressive as a thinker. I expect that I'll leave this meeting with the same impression. I'm willing to bet on it, if necessary. But I want to give him a chance. So, I will open myself up to the possibility that he will do something that, contrary to my expectations, will prove him to be a *merely* unimpressive thinker rather than a *really* unimpressive one.

In this example, you are tracking his capacity to do something unexpected such that you think more highly of his epistemic qualities as a result. But it seems unlikely that you are preparing yourself to listen with respect. Why? Because what you are open to is an insufficient improvement, namely, an improvement *from* seeing him as being really unimpressive *to* seeing him as just run-of-the-mill unimpressive. The notion of epistemic surprise was intended to capture the idea that a person has something that makes him or her worthy of respect (their uniqueness and autonomy). But in the example above, the range within which you are willing to move your evaluation is an entirely negative range: you are willing to change your initial negative evaluation to a slightly less negative evaluation. Insofar as you remain in the negative range, you have not yet tracked anything worthy of respect. For example, one would never cite *being a bad x* as a reason that a person ought to be respected, even if *being a bad x* is a better quality than *being a really bad x*. So, being open to a person's being a bad thinker (rather than being a really bad thinker) is insufficient for respecting them.¹⁹ Autonomy and uniqueness are worthy of respect only insofar as they ground potentially *good* things—interesting perspectives, freely chosen good acts, and so on. By keeping your range of possible evaluation entirely in the negative—even if you are open to improvements—you have not tracked anything worthwhile about James. So, your attitude is morally disrespectful (even if epistemically justified).

What can we glean from this example of disrespect? At least this: respectful listening requires an openness to the possibility not only that you will think more highly of the speaker in unexpected ways, but that the range of possible improvement extends into the positive realm. For example, you must be open to the possibility that James will not only unexpectedly cause you to think more highly of him, but he will unexpectedly cause you to

¹⁹ Consider analogies of other kinds of surprise: being merely kind of glib, being merely kind of selfish, and so on.

think he is a *good* thinker, or that he has something *interesting* to say, or that he is *insightful*, or that he is *careful*, and so on. Tracking the capacity to surprise must therefore involve an openness to an unexpected improved *and* overall positive evaluation of a person's epistemic qualities. Call this the *Positivity Requirement* on respectful listening.²⁰

With the Positivity Requirement in mind, we can return to the Openness Requirement. I offer the following interpretation: respectful listening requires an openness to the capacity to surprise and, in the context of disagreement, this requires an openness to unexpected changes in one's own *confidence levels* concerning the proposition in question.²¹ In other words, to be open to being epistemically surprised by what someone you disagree with says, you must be open to having what they say change your confidence levels in unexpected ways. More precisely:

for any listener A and speaker B who differ in their confidence that p , A listens respectfully to B only if A is open to the scenario in which the difference between A's and B's respective confidence levels that p is less after listening to B than the difference which A expected on the basis of what A knew about B prior to listening.

Two quick points of clarification are in order. First, someone is open in this sense only if (i) the scenario of unexpected confidence change is consistent with everything the listener knows at the time of listening, (ii) the listener knows this, and (iii) the listener *would in fact* change his or her confidence levels if the speaker says the appropriate things. Some dogmatic thinkers are open in the sense of (i) but not in the sense of (ii) or (iii). Some formerly dogmatic thinkers were, in their state of dogmatism, open in the sense of (i) and (iii), but not (ii). Second, my interpretation of the Openness Requirement does not require that one *expect* to change his confidence levels. Rather, all it says is that one must be *open* to unexpected changes in confidence. Of course, this assumes that we enter a context of disagreement with expectations, perhaps imprecise, about how our confidence levels will change as a result of what the other person says. But I do not think this assumption is

²⁰ It is in fact a requirement for any attitude that tracks respect-based surprise.

²¹ The notion of a confidence level is usually understood in terms of degrees of belief or credence. For example, the typical person has a credence of 0.5 on a given coin flip that it will turn up heads. Their confidence in a heads result is no greater than their confidence in a tails result. Descartes's meditator has a credence of 1 that he exists and a credence of 0 that he does not. I will sometimes talk about confidence levels in terms of credence, but this is only for the sake of simplicity. If one prefers a merely *qualitative* notion of confidence, then what I have to say for the rest of the paper still stands *mutatis mutandis*. See Horgan (2017) for a recent critique of the notion of a credence.

problematic. Sometimes we expect no changes in confidence. For example, when a stranger comes to my door to discuss religion, I expect that my confidence will not change even if I give him a chance to make his case. Sometimes we expect the confidence to shift in the direction of the speaker's confidence. For example, if I am only mildly confident that one of the fundamental physical forces is the weak nuclear force and I go down the hall to ask a physicist, I expect that my confidence level will move in the direction of hers after listening to her (though maybe not to the exact level of hers, since I realize I might not understand the terms I am using or I do not have access to her evidence). There might even be cases when we expect our confidence to move *away* from that of the speaker. For example, if there is a person who is known to believe false things, then we should expect that sometimes our confidence will move in the opposite direction of his after conversing with him.²²

I offer an argument by analogy in defense of this interpretation of the Openness Requirement. Suppose that you wronged your friend and are attempting to redeem yourself. Specifically, you work to improve on those qualities whose deficiency was the cause of your wronging your friend. For example, you work to increase your compassion and decrease your selfishness. Now suppose that your friend is expecting you to attempt to redeem yourself, but she has put a cap on what she thinks you are capable of with regard to improvement. Namely, she expects that any reduction in selfishness will be only temporary and that you will return to your old ways in short order. As a result, *any* attempt you make to show her that your changes are actually more permanent gets interpreted by her as just more quick fixes by you. What can we say of her? At the very least, we can say that her attitude is dismissive; specifically, she is dismissing your capacity to redeem yourself. It is not that she thinks the act you committed is irredeemable. Rather, she thinks *you* cannot redeem yourself for it, at least not fully. Furthermore, it is not merely that she does not *expect* you to redeem yourself; rather, she has dismissed the *possibility* out of hand. But by dismissing your capacity for redemption, she has precluded the possibility

²² There is at least one kind of limit case to my interpretation of the Openness Requirement: omniscience. First, an omniscient listener likely cannot be surprised by anything, let alone surprised in such a way that it changes its confidence levels in unexpected ways. Second, a person who perceives the speaker as omniscient, at least on a given topic, cannot be open to unexpected changes in confidence. After all, such a person will expect to change their confidence levels to meet exactly those of the speaker, as long as they are perceived as omniscient. I do not think either of these involves disrespect, however. Rather, listening in cases involving omniscience is likely just very different from cases involving fallible creatures.

that you will morally surprise her. After all, unexpected redemption is a cause of moral surprise: it causes one to unexpectedly think more highly of the redeemed person's moral qualities. Insofar as she has closed herself off to moral surprise, she fails to fully recognize the respect-worthy feature(s) of you that gives rise to the capacity to moral surprise. A failure to recognize a respect-worthy feature is disrespect, and your friend therefore disrespects you.

Now consider someone who fails to meet the Openness Requirement when listening to you. He has closed himself off to the possibility of unexpected confidence changes. This closure does not mean that he is not open to changes in his confidence levels—he may or may not be. But he is at least closed to *unexpected* changes in confidence. I think that this person has dismissed you in a way similar to your dismissive friend. If he is not open to adjusting his confidence more than he expects to, then when he listens to you, he is essentially saying that your epistemic abilities are just what he says they are. You have no more to offer him regarding the truth of *p* than what he has bookmarked you as offering him. As such, he has dismissed any unexpected contributions you might make. This dismissive attitude is an instance of disrespect, for the same reason the friend who dismisses your redemptive capacities counts as disrespecting you. Namely, they both have closed themselves off to surprise. One cannot close oneself off to surprise without thereby ignoring the features of a person that lead to a capacity to surprise: autonomy and uniqueness. A person who thinks you cannot epistemically surprise him cannot think, for example, that your autonomy led you to pursue a line of reasoning that he did not pursue or that you have a unique take on the issue that he has not considered. So, failure to be open to unexpected confidence change entails disrespect.²³

One might object at this point that it is possible to be open to epistemic surprise without being open to unexpected changes in one's *confidence*. Suppose, for instance, that the speaker says something unexpected which makes the listener reevaluate the speaker's *reasons* for believing differently than the speaker does. The listener comes to think that the speaker has better reasons for her belief than the listener had anticipated. If the reasons are judged to be overall good reasons—so as to satisfy the Positivity Requirement—then the listener looks to have unexpectedly come to think more highly of the speaker's epistemic qualities. After all, the speaker is now seen by the listener to have good reasons for her belief when beforehand she

²³ In the next section, I will consider one exception, that is, a case where closing oneself off to unexpected changes in confidence does not suffice for disrespect.

did not. In this case the listener looks to satisfy the Openness Requirement without necessarily being open to unexpected changes in her *confidence* levels. Call this interpretation of the Openness Requirement the *good reasons* account: one tracks the capacity for epistemic surprise by being open to hearing unexpected good reasons in support of the speaker's views.

Whether the good reasons account succeeds depends on the relationship between good reasons and confidence levels. That is, it succeeds only if there can be good reasons that do not affect the confidence levels of those who see the reasons as good. The account can, of course, admit that *sometimes* there is a connection between attributing a good reason to someone and changing one's confidence level on the basis of that attribution. Consider evidential reasons. Good evidential reasons that p are reasons to think that p is true or likely to be true.²⁴ So, if the listener unexpectedly attributes to the speaker a good evidential reason that p , then the speaker must change his confidence level regarding p from what it was prior to listening. After all, he now recognizes new evidence and evidence has a direct bearing on truth. What the good reasons account needs, then, is to highlight a nonevidential reason that fulfills three conditions: (i) the listener is open to attributing it to the speaker, (ii) the attribution leads the listener to think more highly of the speaker's epistemic qualities, and (iii) attributing it to the speaker does not require lowering one's confidence that the speaker is wrong.

Here is the problem. The possession of nonevidential reasons for a given doxastic attitude, such as pragmatic or moral reasons, are not *epistemic* qualities of a person. Rather, they are pragmatic or moral qualities. For example, if you have a moral reason to believe that your friend did not commit the crime he is accused of, then possessing that reason is a moral quality you possess, not an epistemic quality. Similarly, if you have a pragmatic reason to believe that you will defeat cancer in order to maintain the will to fight the cancer, then possessing that reason is perhaps an importance feature of you, but not an epistemic one. As such, nonevidential reasons of the moral and pragmatic variety cannot be used to explain a case of *epistemic* surprise—they at most explain some other variety of surprise, such as moral surprise. Unless there is some other variety of nonevidential reason that fulfills the three conditions in the previous paragraph, the good reasons account fails: attributing a good *epistemic* reason to a speaker requires changes one's confidence that the speaker is wrong.

²⁴ Consider the Bayesian conception of evidence: E is evidence for hypothesis H if and only if $P(H/E) > P(H)$.

The natural strategy for the defender of the good reasons account is to try to argue that there *are* nonevidential epistemic reasons. This strategy is not entirely unpromising. Nowadays, many philosophers grant that there are at least nonevidential epistemic *factors*. These nonevidential factors fall into two broad categories: truth-relevant and truth-irrelevant factors. In the truth-relevant category are those factors that have some bearing on the truth of a doxastic attitude, but that do not qualify as evidence. For example, the reliability of a person's belief- and confidence-forming processes have some bearing on the truth (more reliable processes produce more true attitudes), and yet they are nonevidential.²⁵ In the truth-irrelevant category are practical factors that do not have a bearing on the truth of an attitude, but instead affect the threshold for whether the attitude is justified. For example, on some pragmatist accounts higher stakes raise the threshold for when a belief is justified.²⁶ In other words, that a lot rides on whether a belief is true raises the threshold for its justification. More recently, some philosophers argued that *moral* considerations are relevant in the same way.²⁷ That is, if a belief has potentially immoral content, then more is required to justify it. For example, that a belief represents people of different races as being cognitively unequal raises the threshold for its justification. If these nonevidential factors qualify as epistemic in nature—and I will assume that they do—then they might be used to defend the good reasons account.

I do not think this strategy is promising, however. Let supporters of the good reasons account countenance any of the nonevidential factors from the previous paragraph. Either the nonevidential factor is truth-related, or it is not. If it is truth-related, then attributing it to the speaker will inevitably change one's confidence. For example, if you attribute to the speaker a reliable belief-forming process that you did not think she had before you listened to her, then your confidence that *p* will inevitably shift towards her confidence that *p*. After all, reliable representation-forming processes tend to produce true attitudes, or at least raise the likelihood of a true attitude. The strategy fares no better if the attributed feature is a truth-irrelevant factor. First, if the nonevidential factor is not truth-relevant, then it cannot be a good reason *for* the speaker's confidence level.²⁸ Non-truth-relevant

²⁵ Facts about reliability are not evidential, since a person might not have access to facts about reliability and yet they have access to all their evidence (by definition).

²⁶ Stanley (2005) is the classic piece representing this position.

²⁷ See Gardiner (2018) for a good overview of this "moral encroachment" view.

²⁸ See Grimm (2011) for a defense of the distinction between goal-oriented and threshold-oriented epistemic factors.

factors, such as the high stakes of a situation or the potentially immoral content of an attitude, function only to raise the threshold for justification. They do not function as a reason *for* doxastic attitudes themselves.²⁹ For example, the fact that a scenario is high stakes does not function as a reason to believe anything, or to disbelieve anything, or to have confidence in anything. Rather, it functions only to raise the bar for the attitude's justification. So even if one attributes to the speaker the nonevidential epistemic factor that she is in a high (or low) stakes situation, it will be irrelevant in itself to your evaluation of her reasons *for* her confidence level. The same is true of moral considerations. That a proposition has moral content might affect whether an attitude is justified. For example, if you are wondering whether a suspect committed a crime, the fact that she is your friend might raise the bar for justification.³⁰ But the fact that she is your friend is not, by itself, good reason to be less confident that she is guilty (though the fact that she is your friend might serve as a proxy for *evidence* that she is innocent). Second, it seems rather odd to think of these sorts of nonevidential epistemic factors as *good qualities* of a person of the sort that are involved in surprise. They are often just neutral qualifies. Furthermore, they are not even qualities of a person in most cases. For example, high stakes are features of situations and not of persons. So even if one recognizes the presence of these factors when listening to a speaker, it is difficult to see how they could cause the listener to think more highly of the *speaker's* epistemic qualities.

So, the good reasons account fails. If the reason for *p* that one attributes to the speaker on the basis of listening is recognized as a good epistemic reason, then the confidence level of the listener requires changing. The general challenge for those who accept the Openness Requirement but who deny my interpretation of it is as follows. They need to describe a scenario where the speaker does something unexpected which causes an the listener to think more highly of her epistemic qualities, the epistemic quality is overall positive and not just less worse than the previously attributed qualities; and yet the good epistemic quality has no bearing whatsoever on the truth of the proposition in question.³¹ Absent meeting this challenge, it seems that

²⁹ Nonepistemic factors might *indirectly* lead one to suspend belief about the truth or falsity of the proposition. For example, they might lead one to recognize that the belief is not justified, due to a higher threshold for justification, and that the rational thing to do is to suspend belief.

³⁰ See Baker (1987) and Stroud (2006) for discussion.

³¹ Even virtue epistemologists, who treat epistemic qualities as broadly moral qualities tend to construe epistemic qualities in truth-related terms. For example, Zagzebski (2003) claim the chief epistemic virtue is the love of truth.

the Openness Requirement is best understood as openness to unexpected changes in confidence.

3. THE OPENNESS REQUIREMENT AND CERTAINTY

Respectful listening requires openness to unexpected confidence change. But a requirement to be *open* to unexpected confidence change is not itself a requirement to *change* one's confidence when listening. So, the Openness Requirement does not, by itself, provide any reason to change one's confidence levels. In this section, I argue that there is at least one scenario in which respectful listening requires a change in a confidence: when the listener in a context of disagreement is psychologically certain. In the next section, I outline the significance of this scenario for several debates in epistemology.

Consider a person who is psychologically certain that p . That is, he is so convinced that p that he is psychologically incapable of doubting that p , at least at the time of his certainty. One interesting consequence of psychological certainty is that it involves the belief that there are no conceivable scenarios consistent with the person's current beliefs in which p turns out to be false rather than true (at least not without altering the world in the relevant respects). After all, if one believes that there are scenarios in which p turns out to be false, then p can be doubted.³² Furthermore, if the person believes that there are no scenarios in which p turns out to be false, then he will not think that there are any scenarios in which he would unexpectedly lower his confidence that p .³³ For to countenance those scenarios, even if he could not describe them ahead of time, is to admit that there is a chance that p is not true, thus undermining psychological certainty that p . Now suppose that this person is listening to a speaker who is less than fully confident that p . Can he satisfy the Openness Requirement? That is, can he maintain his certainty and simultaneously be open to unexpected confidence changes that occur on the basis of what the speaker says? The answer is plausibly "no." For to be open to such unexpected changes in confidence is to admit that there are scenarios in which he would become less confident that p . Insofar as he is psychologically certain that p , he cannot admit any such scenarios. Rather, listening to his interlocutor is, from his perspective, *necessarily* going to be an epistemic waste of time. After all, he thinks there

³² This is one of the lessons of the First Meditation.

³³ According to Bayesianism, for instance, if a person is certain that p , then they cease to contemplate the possibility that p is false. See, for example, Frankish (2009, 79).

is nothing to learn that could change his confidence that p . Compare his attitude to that of your friend when you try to redeem yourself: “your attempt at redemption is necessarily a waste of time—you are guaranteed to remain what you are.” Both are inherently dismissive attitudes. This person therefore cannot listen with respect. And the reason he cannot listen with respect is because he cannot satisfy the Openness Requirement.

What can we glean from the fact that psychological certainty is incompatible with respectful listening? Most obviously, we can infer that—with one exception discussed below—if you want to listen with respect in the context of disagreement, you cannot be certain about any of the propositions that constitute the disagreement. This of course does not mean that respect is inconsistent with certainty. There are many things we are certain of that nobody disagrees about. For example, I am certain that I am not a two-dimensional entity, but I know of nobody who thinks that I am one.³⁴ Furthermore, many cases of apparent disagreement often are not cases of genuine disagreement. For example, many of my introductory students claim to believe that the proposition $2 + 2 = 4$ is possibly false. But it inevitably turns out that what they *really* believe is that “ $2 + 2 = 4$ ” might be used to express something besides $2 + 2 = 4$. If a disagreement is merely verbal, then certainty does not preclude respectful listening. Less obviously, we can infer that sometimes we can have a *moral* reason not to be certain, namely, when we listen to someone we disagree with (with one exception discussed below). By being certain, we close ourselves off to another person’s capacity for epistemic surprise. By closing ourselves off in this way, we fail to fully recognize that feature of a person which grounds their capacity to surprise, namely, their autonomy and uniqueness.

One might wonder that this result—that we can have a moral reason to lower our confidence—proves too much. After all, it seems that we sometimes have a moral duty *not* to be open to the possibility that we are mistaken. For example, it seems we have a moral duty not to be open to the possibility that the neo-Nazi is right in the views that earn him the name.³⁵ So an account of respectful listening would be suspect if it required that one be open to unexpected confidence changes when listening to a neo-Nazi. While I agree that such an account would be suspect, there are at least two

³⁴ Thanks to Jamie Fritz for this example.

³⁵ The duty to not be so open might arise from a sense of self-respect, or respect for others, or potentially other sources. See Fritz (2018) for an argument in favor of nonopenness in these kinds of cases.

reasons why my account is compatible with being steadfast in certain circumstances, including those involving neo-Nazis.

First, there is an important distinction between the following two questions: (i) What does respectful listening involve? and (ii) When are we required to listen to another person?³⁶ We might make an analogous distinction in the context of basketball: (i) What does respectful playing involve? and (ii) When are we required to play basketball? Suppose I have a duty to play basketball respectfully anytime I play basketball. It does not follow that I have any reason to play basketball in the first place.³⁷ The duty to play respectfully is a merely conditional duty. Likewise, suppose I have a moral reason to listen respectfully to anyone I listen to. It does not follow that I have a moral reason to listen to anyone. Maybe I do, but maybe I do not.³⁸ So, the following two claims are compatible: (i) one has moral reason to avoid certainty when listening in the context of disagreement and (ii) nobody has a reason, moral or otherwise, to listen to neo-Nazis.

This first response has its limits, however. Suppose that someone freely chooses to listen to a neo-Nazi, perhaps in an attempt at changing the neo-Nazi's mind. Does *this* person have a moral reason to be open to unexpected confidence changes? The first response is impotent here, because the person has freely chosen to listen. The second response involves pointing out that some acts of respectful listening are self-undermining. Consider a person who asserts that she has no moral worth. If I were to listen respectfully to her, I would need to be open to unexpected changes in confidence with regards to her epistemic qualities. But in this case, that means being about to the possibility that she might be *right*, that she in fact has *no* moral worth. But the whole basis for my being open to this possibility lies in the fact that I think she *does* have moral worth. It is her moral worth that grounds her capacity to surprise, a capacity that grounds the need to be open to unexpected confidence change. Respectful listening in this case is self-undermining: by being open to the possibility of her being right, I undermine the very basis for being open to that possibility. The upshot is that I do not need to satisfy the Openness Requirement when I listen to her

³⁶ I have focused on the first question. Potential answers to the second include: that the person promised the speaker they would listen, that they stand in a relationship of reciprocity to the speaker, or that they stand in a special relationship with the speaker (such as being their parent).

³⁷ One might make an analogy to *jus in bello* and *jus ad bellum*. Thanks to Justin Steinberg for this point.

³⁸ Rini (2018) defends an imperfect duty of listening, for example. Heldke (2007) offers a Millian defense of the value of listening.

assert that she has no moral worth. The same is true of the neo-Nazi. If he is asserting, as neo-Nazis are wont to assert, that some groups of people are less valuable than others, then he is making a claim that is at odds with the grounds of respectful listening: that people are autonomous and unique individuals worthy of respect. By being open to the possibility that the neo-Nazi is right, the listener undermines the whole basis for listening in the first place. So, even if one opts, for whatever reason, to listen to a neo-Nazi, he is not required to be open to unexpected confidence change.³⁹

So, while certainty generally leads to disrespectful listening, there are circumstances in which it is not disrespectful. Certainty in the face of the neo-Nazi, for instance, is not disrespectful. But many of the people we disagree with are not neo-Nazis. The religious person on the floor below me is not a neo-Nazi, though I disagree with her about what the appropriate confidence is regarding God's existence. The same is true of metaphysicians who believe that debates about material objects are worthwhile philosophical debates. I disagree with them, but I do not think they are neo-Nazis. The same is even true of many (though not all) people I disagree with on political matters. We disagree, but neither of us is a neo-Nazi. The Openness Requirement says nothing about whether I should or should not listen to any of these people. But it does say that when I *do* listen to them, for whatever reason, I need to open myself to the possibility that they surprise me with their epistemic qualities—even if I think those epistemic qualities are unimpressive at the time of listening. That is, I need to open myself up to unexpectedly coming my confidence.

Even this might worry some people, however. Are we really required to be open to the possibility that a flat-earther is right and Earth is not in fact round? Isn't that deeply morally and epistemically irresponsible? At this point, we need to remember two things. First, questions about Earth's shape are empirical questions. Most people are not certain about answers to empirical questions, and probably rightly so. So, there is no need to lower one's (high) confidence that Earth is round when listening to a flat-earther because it is already low enough to leave room for epistemic surprise. The same applies to debates about most (or all) empirical questions. Second, the account I have defended is a pragmatist one insofar as it posits a nonepistemic reason for a given attitude: namely, it says that there can be a moral reason, arising out of the need to respect others, to be less than fully certain. So, in a sense it *is* recommending something epistemically

³⁹ This is compatible with the idea that nobody should attempt to listen respectfully to a neo-Nazi. See Fantl (2018) for arguments to this effect.

irresponsible because it is offering a nonepistemic reason for attitude change. This is a feature it shares with other varieties of so-called “classical” pragmatism, and a feature that distinguishes it from “intellectualist” positions that posit only epistemic factors as support for a given doxastic attitude.⁴⁰ Some will of course reject my account for that reason. But that is nothing specific to my account, but a feature of pragmatism more generally.⁴¹

4. THREE DEBATES

I want to end by highlighting three potential consequences that the Openness Requirement has for debates in contemporary epistemology. The first debate involves the relationship between moral and epistemic considerations for belief. There are times when epistemic rationality seems to require one doxastic attitude toward a particular proposition p , whereas morality seems to require an altogether different doxastic attitude toward p that is inconsistent with the first attitude. To use an oft cited and real life example described in Gendler:

Historian John Hope Franklin hosts a party at his Washington D.C. social club, The Cosmos Club. As Franklin reports, “It was during our stroll through the club that a white woman called me out, presented me with her coat check, and ordered me to bring her coat. I patiently told her that if she would present her coat to a uniformed attendant, “and all of the club attendants were in uniform,” perhaps she could get her coat.” Almost every attendant at the Cosmos Club is black and few members of the club are black. This demographic distribution almost certainly led to the woman’s false belief that Franklin is an attendant. 2011, 33

The woman seems to have *epistemic* reason, grounded in demographic distributions, to believe that Franklin is a coat attendant, but insofar as that belief is racist, she seems to also have *moral* reason not to believe that Franklin is a coat attendant. There are at least three kinds of positions on the interaction between these apparently competing epistemic and moral considerations. The first position—intellectualism—denies that there are any nonepistemic considerations for belief: if the evidence (or other truth-conducive considerations) supports a belief, then one ought to hold it.

⁴⁰ Classical pragmatism is here distinguished from varieties of pragmatic and moral encroachment views discussed above, which allow nonevidential considerations to affect thresholds for justification without thereby functioning as reasons for a given attitude.

⁴¹ It might be important to point out that my account only posits reasons for confidence change and not for outright belief. Insofar as outright belief stands in a more direct relationship to action, my account is not as vulnerable to claims of moral irresponsibility as other classically pragmatist positions are.

The second position—classical pragmatism—allows that sometimes there are moral reasons to believe that p , which override any epistemic reasons not to believe that p .⁴² In other words, morality can require that we believe the irrational. The third position—the moral encroachment view—claims that epistemic reasons themselves can be altered, rather than merely trumped, by moral considerations (we discussed this view briefly in section 2).⁴³ But despite their differences, proponents of each position agree that moral considerations do not justify an alteration in one's *confidence*, even if they affect whether a *belief* counts as justified.⁴⁴ Confidence levels, in other words, are an entirely nonmoral affair.

But let us return to the psychologically certain person. Setting aside self-undermining cases like that of the neo-Nazi, our psychologically certain person has a moral reason to be open to epistemic surprise when he listens in the context of a disagreement. Openness to epistemic surprise requires an openness to unexpected changes in confidence. But he cannot be open to such changes so long as he is psychologically certain. So, he has a moral reason to lower his confidence level to below full certainty. If all this is right, then we have a moral consideration that is not merely a reason that affects a *belief* (e.g., a reason to withhold or initiate belief), but instead is a reason to lower one's *confidence* level. To be clear, the reason to lower his confidence level is *not* an epistemic reason (though he might have those as well). It is not as if the Openness Requirement is an inductive notion: "I've been surprised by people before, so there's a chance that this person will surprise me—I better be prepared." Rather, one can have all the epistemic reason to think that a particular person is not capable of causing an unexpected confidence change. But one cannot listen respectfully to such a person while at the same time maintaining their certainty.⁴⁵

This consequence—that we can have a moral reason to lower confidence levels—extends to a second debate in epistemology: the debate over whether

⁴² See James (1896), Baker (1987), Stroud (2006), Aiken (2008), and Preston-Roedder (2013) for examples.

⁴³ See Moss (2018) and Gardiner (2018) for overviews of the moral encroachment debate. Recent defenses of moral encroachment include, but are not limited to, Basu (2019), Schroeder (2018), Basu and Schroeder (2019), Pace (2011), Bolinger (2018), and Fritz (2017). Gardiner (2018) lists a potential fourth account, namely, one which denies that there is, in cases of conflict, an all-things-considered reason for belief. Gendler (2011) plausibly falls under this heading.

⁴⁴ Much of the literature is framed in terms of the threshold of belief. Moss (2018), however, argues that moral encroachment might affect when a credence is justified (though without affecting the credence itself).

⁴⁵ There is of course the issue of whether a person can control her doxastic attitudes, including credence levels. But I set that issue aside here.

the fact of disagreement with an epistemic peer ought to diminish one's confidence in the relevant propositions.⁴⁶ So-called "steadfasters" say no: disagreement is consistent with maintained confidence. So-called "conciliationists" say yes: disagreement requires a revision in the direction of the peer's confidence. But the debate centers on whether disagreement provides an *epistemic* reason to adjust one's confidence, for example, whether the fact of disagreement is *evidence* that one's opponent is right. If the Openness Requirement holds, then the fact of disagreement can require a *moral* reason to adjust one's confidence. More specifically, the fact that another person—even someone who is not an epistemic peer!—disagrees with you can give you a moral reason to lower your confidence, so long as you are certain that you are right. For example, if I am certain that utilitarianism is false and I choose to listen to my utilitarian colleague, then I have a moral reason to adjust my confidence level toward hers. The Openness Requirement therefore provides some unexpected moral support for conciliationism.

Finally, there is a debate about whether it is possible for a belief to be epistemically faultless and yet morally blameworthy. Classical pragmatists—who believe that moral reasons for belief can trump epistemic reasons—admit that the epistemically faultless person can be morally blameworthy. For example, the spouse who believes her partner is cheating might be epistemically faultless but nonetheless morally blameworthy for not giving her partner the benefit of the doubt.⁴⁷ But others deny this possibility. For example, supporters of moral encroachment argue that the spouse is not epistemically faultless because the fact that the supposed cheater is her partner raises the threshold for the belief's justification, a threshold she has not reached in this case.⁴⁸ If the Openness Requirement holds, then there is at least one situation in which a person can be epistemically faultless and yet morally blameworthy. Namely: the *epistemically* certain person who in virtue of her certainty is also psychologically certain. A person is epistemically certain when her doxastic attitude has the highest possible epistemic status.⁴⁹ But if the epistemically *and* psychologically certain person listens to a person she disagrees with and yet *does not* lower her confidence, then her confidence is morally blameworthy despite its impeccable epistemic status.

⁴⁶ See Frances and Matheson (2018) and Christensen (2009) for overviews of the debate.

⁴⁷ The example of from Schroeder (2018).

⁴⁸ See, for instance, Schroeder (2018) and Basu and Schroeder (2019).

⁴⁹ Depending on one's view of certainty, not all cases of epistemic certainty will involve psychological certainty. See Reed (2011) for discussion.

5. CONCLUSION

Let me remind the reader what I have argued for in this paper. First, I argued that respectful listening must track the bases of respect in a person and that two bases of respect—autonomy and uniqueness—involve a capacity for a person to surprise others in myriad ways. Second, I argued that one important form of surprise is epistemic surprise, namely, the unexpected improved evaluation of a person's epistemic qualities. Respectful listening must therefore track this capacity for epistemic surprise. This was the Openness Requirement. Third, I argued for a particular interpretation of the Openness Requirement: a listener can track the capacity for epistemic surprise only by being open to unexpected changes in her confidence levels that result from what the speaker says. Fourth, I argued that the Openness Requirement entails that a psychologically certain person cannot listen with respect. Finally, I argued that the Openness Requirement has consequences for at least three debates in epistemology: the debate over the relationship between moral and epistemic considerations, the disagreement debate, and the debate over epistemic blame and its connection to moral blame. I admit that I might be wrong about some, or all, of these conclusions. Regardless, I hope to have shown that the phenomenon of listening has potentially important consequences for epistemology.⁵⁰

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