

## Epistemic Blame

**Abstract:** This paper provides a critical overview of recent work on epistemic blame. The paper identifies key features of the concept of epistemic blame and discusses two ways of motivating the importance of this concept. Four different approaches to the nature of epistemic blame are examined. Central issues surrounding the ethics and value of epistemic blame are identified and briefly explored. In addition to providing an overview of the state of the art of this growing but controversial field, the paper highlights areas where future work is needed.

**Keywords:** epistemic blame; epistemic blameworthiness; ethics of belief; standing to blame; ethics of blame; epistemic normativity; testimonial injustice.

### 1. Introduction

Blame is a central part of our moral and practical lives. Negative emotional responses, reproach, and demands for apology are all typical features of our blaming practices. We are perhaps most familiar with the idea of blaming people for their *actions*. For example, if your friend shows up late for a meeting and explains that they simply felt like arriving late without informing you, it might be a fitting response to blame them for being late. In addition to one's actions, a person can be the target of negative emotional responses, reproach, and possibly even demands for apology for their *beliefs*, or intellectual conduct more broadly. For example, when an employer forms a belief about an employee's job performance on the basis of socio-economic stereotypes, it may be fitting to reproach or in other words blame the employer for forming a belief on such a basis. Or if your friend forms their beliefs about politics solely on the basis of their Facebook feed, there may be conditions under which it would be fitting to reproach or in other words blame them for forming beliefs on such a basis. In epistemology, this sort of response is increasingly understood as a kind of "epistemic blame."

While moral philosophers have developed a wide range of theories about the nature of moral blame, the nature of our practice of responding to one another for epistemic failings has

only recently seen detailed exploration. What exactly is epistemic blame, and what is its relation to moral blame? When is it appropriate to epistemically blame another person? Should we engage in a practice of epistemically blaming one another? What, if anything, can the nature of epistemic blame tell us about epistemic normativity? This article surveys the state of this increasingly active, yet controversial area of study. It also highlights areas where future research is needed. Section 2 begins with preliminaries, articulating a way of understanding what it means for an instance of blame to be *epistemic*. Section 3 outlines some prominent ways of motivating the idea that there is a distinctively epistemic kind of blame. Section 4 surveys four different views about the nature of epistemic blame. Section 5 explores issues surrounding the ethics and value of epistemic blame. Section 6 concludes.

## **2. Preliminaries**

What makes an instance of blame epistemic as opposed to moral or something else? Some philosophers have defined epistemic blame as a kind of blame for *belief*, or other doxastic states, such as disbelief, or suspension of belief (Rettler 2017; Nottelmann 2007; van Woudenberg 2009). In the present context, this can lead to confusion since there seem to be cases of blame for doxastic states that are primarily moral in nature. Tara believes there is no point in respecting other people's feelings, simply because she's had enough with the world and doesn't care anymore. She hasn't acted on this belief, and has no plans to. But in conversation, her sister Toni learns about this unsettling turn in Tara's moral outlook, and blames her for even thinking this way. It is natural to think of Toni's reaction as a kind of moral blame, as opposed to, or perhaps in addition to, something deserving the title "epistemic blame".<sup>1</sup> Conversely, there may be cases of epistemic blame that do not target a person's

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<sup>1</sup> See Begby 2018 and Basu 2019 for helpful discussion of morally blameworthy belief.

doxastic states, at least not directly, or primarily. For example, epistemic blame may target an *assertion*, an action of *inquiry*, or a particular *inference* someone makes.

On a wider usage, epistemic blame is not merely blame for belief, though beliefs may be paradigm targets; rather, epistemic blame is a kind of blame directed at someone for an epistemic failing. Susan blames her colleague Max for inquiring about Prince Harry's love life, merely by consulting unreliable tabloid magazines. In this case, an epistemic norm has been violated, the target of blame has epistemically failed in some way. The idea is that an epistemic blame response is a response to *that* failing. There are at least two ways of understanding this wider view. First, we might take it to entail simply that people can be morally blamed for epistemic failings.<sup>2</sup> Perhaps blame for epistemic failings is the same sort of thing as moral blame, even though what is at issue is a distinctive kind of failing. One challenge for this approach is that it seems we can blame people for epistemic conduct that is not immoral. As Qassim Cassam argues, it seems overly moralistic to maintain that all epistemically blameworthy conduct is also worthy of moral blame (2019, 18). The example of Max is a potential case in point.

An alternative approach holds that epistemic blame is a distinctive form of blame for epistemic failings. One way to articulate this idea is in terms of the kinds of goods that epistemic blamers, as such, are in some sense concerned with. We might say that epistemic blame is a kind of blame for epistemic failings oriented distinctively around the promotion of epistemic goods such as believing truly and avoiding believing falsely (Boult 2020, 2021; Brown 2020a, 2020b; Piovarchy forthcoming; Schmidt 2021).<sup>3</sup> On this approach, many targets

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<sup>2</sup> Or blamed in some other practical way, such as professionally.

<sup>3</sup> I leave the connection between epistemic blame and the promotion of epistemic goods purposely imprecise. It is difficult to say anything more precise without taking on theoretical commitments about the function of epistemic blame. However, note that I do not mean to imply here that a person must *consciously endorse* epistemic norms in order to count as epistemically blaming someone. A more plausible way of understanding the connection might

of epistemic blame may also be fitting targets of moral blame, but they need not be. Unless stated otherwise, I shall have this conception of epistemic blame in mind in the remainder of this article.

A final preliminary point to emphasize is the following. Rather than merely negatively evaluating—for example, by forming a judgment that someone is epistemically unjustified, or perhaps even epistemically *blameworthy*—epistemic blamers, like their moral-blaming counterparts, are in some way *engaged* by their negative epistemic evaluations. As Pamela Hieronymi says, blame has a characteristic “sting”, “force”, and “depth” (Hieronymi 2004, 116-117). Presumably, if there is a distinction to draw between moral blame and negative moral evaluation, something similar holds true of epistemic blame. A central task in developing a better understanding of epistemic blame is explaining what this engagement consists in. We will return to an exploration of such options in Section 4.

### **3. Motivating Epistemic Blame**

Not everyone is convinced that there is such thing as epistemic blame. Reasons for skepticism include worries about the kind of control we have over doxastic states (Alston 1988),<sup>4</sup> the relationship between ethics and epistemology (Zagzebski 1996, xiv, 6; Roberts and Wood 2007, 60), and the idea that blame just is a moral concept, not an epistemic one (Kauppinen 2018). Rather than directly engage with these skeptical outlooks here, I will instead present a couple of ways of *motivating* the idea that there is a distinctively epistemic kind of blame.<sup>5</sup>

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go via a causal-historical story about the *practice* of epistemic blame, connecting this practice to the needs that an epistemic community has for the acquisition and maintenance of epistemic goods (see Sections 4.4 and Section 5 for more discussion).

<sup>4</sup> Alston’s is the classic discussion of this worry. There are many others, including: Chuard & Southwood 2009; Chrisman 2016; Nolfi 2014; Owens 2000; Ryan 2003. See Rettler 2017 for a recent response.

<sup>5</sup> See Boulton (2020) for further discussion of epistemic blame skepticism. Other prominent skeptics include Dougherty (2012, 2014), Schleifer-McCormick (2020), and Skorupski (2010).

These lines of thought feature prominently in the literature, whether implicitly or explicitly. The first appeals to normative parallels between ethics and epistemology; the second appeals to the role that the concept of blame plays in a number of contemporary epistemological debates.

### **3.1 Normative Parallels**

It has become commonplace in philosophy to treat ethics and epistemology as importantly related to one other. They are often both regarded as normative domains, in the sense that ethics is about what we ought to do, and epistemology is about what we ought to believe. This is a large oversimplification. But it is a useful starting point for illuminating some ways ethics and epistemology seem to parallel one another. Epistemologists interested in drawing such parallels typically focus on claims about reasons, justification, virtues, obligations, permissions, norms, and so on. In each case, there seem to be both moral/practical and epistemic varieties of these phenomena. More recently, we have also begun seeing epistemologists draw attention to things like epistemic dilemmas (Hughes forthcoming; McCain, Stapleford & Steup forthcoming), epistemic rights (Watson 2020), and epistemic injustice (Fricker 2007; Pohlhaus 2014; Wanderer 2012, 2017) in drawing or presupposing parallels between the epistemic and moral domains.

What relevance do any of these parallels have for epistemic blame? Proponents of epistemic blame can make at least two key arguments here. The first is the following:

- i)** Blame is a central concept of ethics.
- ii)** There are many parallels between ethics and epistemology.
- iii)** So, we should expect there to be a kind of blame in epistemology—perhaps a distinctively *epistemic* kind of blame.

Taken on its own, this is perhaps not an especially strong argument. After all, there might be an important difference between blame and other normative phenomena which renders all these parallels an unrepresentative basis upon which to reason inductively like this. However, and this is the second key argument, rather than simply being a random collection of similarities, most of these parallels are systematically interconnected. For instance, the concept of a reason is connected to the concept of rationality; the concepts of permission and obligation are connected to the concept of justification; and so on. Perhaps we should expect these parallels to tell us something about epistemic blame, because they concern an interrelated web of concepts.

This leads to a key insight: “ought”-judgments, reasons, and many other normative concepts in the moral domain stand in an intimate relationship with blame. For instance, a minimal condition on being the appropriate target of blame is that you’ve done something you ought not to have done, or that you weren’t permitted to do. Also, it seems one cannot be blameworthy for doing something that one had no reason not to do. Given that “ought”-judgments, reasons, and permissions clearly seem at home in the epistemic domain, perhaps we should expect there to be an epistemic kind of blame. Perhaps we should expect the parallel concepts of the epistemic “ought”, epistemic reasons, and epistemic permissions to bear a family connection to epistemic blame and blameworthiness.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Some theorists see the relationship between ethics and epistemology as more intimate than one of parallel. For example, Linda Zagzebski has argued that “epistemology is a *branch* of ethics” (Zagzebski 1996, xiv, 6). Others say things that seem to imply the two domains are not really distinct at all—perhaps one is simply a sub-domain of the other, or perhaps all evaluative claims in one are grounded in or in some way reducible to claims in the other. Such theorists will likely be skeptical of the idea of a distinctive form of epistemic blame; indeed, this is one of the sources of skepticism about epistemic blame mentioned above. Notice, however, that this simply reinforces the claim being made here: namely, that drawing *parallels* between ethics and epistemology is a way motivating epistemic blame. See Baehr (2012, 206-220) for helpful discussion of ways of understanding the relationship between ethics and epistemology (albeit one that is focused primarily around the distinction between intellectual and moral virtues).

### 3.2 The Role of Epistemic Blame in Epistemology

The argument from parallels concludes that we should *expect* there to be such a thing as epistemic blame. In line with this expectation, epistemologists do increasingly deploy the notion of epistemic blame in debates about other epistemological issues. Jessica Brown is one of the leading theorists to point out the fundamental role that appeals to epistemic blame, blameworthiness, and blamelessness play in epistemological theorizing. She highlights the importance of blame-talk for the epistemic *norms* debates (Brown 2017, 1). She also argues that blame-talk is important in debates about epistemic justification. Regardless of whether one is a radical externalist,<sup>7</sup> a standard reliabilist, or an internalist evidentialist about epistemic justification, it seems one must draw a distinction between justified and merely blameless belief in order to account for a fundamentally diverse range of cases (Brown 2020a; Boulton 2019, 2017a, 2017b; see also Williamson forthcoming; Littlejohn forthcoming).

For instance, given that radical externalists maintain that epistemic norms are factive, it seems there can be pairs of cases in which agents are unjustified with respect to a factive norm, but where there is nevertheless an intuitive normative difference between the cases. Perhaps agent A formed a false belief by wishful thinking, and agent B was carefully deceived. A and B both have unjustified beliefs by radical externalist lights; given the intuitive normative difference between the cases, we might worry whether radical externalists have a correct understanding of the nature of justified belief. In order to respond to this sort of worry, radical externalists typically appeal to the idea that the difference here comes down to a difference in blamelessness/blameworthiness. Agent A is unjustified and *blameworthy*, while agent B is

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<sup>7</sup> A radical externalist endorses a *factive* conception of epistemic justification (Littlejohn 2012; Sutton 2007; Williamson forthcoming).

unjustified but blameless. Similar points can be made about internalist evidentialism and views that fit somewhere between these two extremes, such as simple forms of reliabilism.<sup>8</sup>

In addition to playing this role in debates about epistemic norms and epistemic justification, the concept of epistemic blame appears centrally in the large debate about the kind of *control* we have over our doxastic states. The main driver of that debate is the question of how, given the seeming lack of voluntary control we have over our doxastic states, people can ever be appropriate targets of blame, or other “deontological” forms of evaluation, concerning their doxastic states. A related literature directly explores the concept of “blameworthy belief”: theorists have developed complex accounts of the conditions under which someone *counts* as blameworthy for their doxastic states. There is a firm connection here with the doxastic voluntarism literature, insofar as theorists have typically sought to find conditions on blameworthy belief that do justice to the kind of control (or lack thereof) people seem to have over their doxastic states (Peels 2017; Nottelmann 2007; Montmarquet 1993, 2008).<sup>9</sup>

The amount of work that has been done in this area might make it seem as though the topic of epistemic blame is well-worn. But this would be a mistake. There are many philosophical issues surrounding blame and blameworthiness. Two importantly different questions are: what *is* blame? And when is blame *appropriate*? Answering the first question requires articulating the nature of blame, explaining what attitudes, actions, feelings, or dispositions make it the sort of thing it is. Answering the second question requires developing an account of the *norms* governing blame. It requires developing an “ethics of blame”. Under what conditions is it appropriate to blame someone? Should we ever epistemically blame

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<sup>8</sup> See Brown (2020, 4-5) for discussion.

<sup>9</sup> Contributors to these debates about doxastic control and blameworthy belief do not always seem to be interested in the conception of epistemic blame I narrowed discussion down to in Section 2. In many cases, I find it somewhat unclear what conception of blame is at issue in these debates.

others? These sorts of questions obviously give rise to a wide range of further issues, many of which comprise distinct areas of study in their own right, including issues surrounding the standing to blame, the nature of excuses and forgiveness, and the value of our blaming practices.

#### **4. The Nature of Epistemic Blame**

The most detailed theorizing about the nature of epistemic blame has proceeded by drawing on existing work on the nature of moral blame and extending it to the epistemic domain. There are at least *four* main views in the literature: the emotion-based view (Rettler 2017; Nottelmann 2007; McHugh 2012), the desire-based view (Brown 2020a), the relationship-based view (Boult 2020; 2021), and the agency-cultivation view (Piovarchy forthcoming). In this section, I briefly outline the main idea behind each of these approaches to the nature of epistemic blame.

##### **4.1 The Emotion-Based View**

According to the emotion-based view, epistemic blame is the manifestation of reactive attitudes such as indignation and resentment, directed towards a target as a result of the judgment that the target has (culpably) violated some epistemic norm. While few authors have spent time defending this idea explicitly, it is presupposed in a wide range of discussions in epistemology. For example, Nikolaj Nottelmann says: “It seems highly plausible that an agent’s epistemic blameworthiness may sufficiently justify attitudes such as resentment or indignation taken towards her, at least mild degrees of such attitudes” (2007, 3). Conor McHugh says, “We blame and even *resent* people, when, for example, they form foolish or hasty beliefs on matters of importance, and when they fail to believe what they should” (McHugh 2012, 66 (my

emphasis)).<sup>10</sup> In a third example, after presenting three paradigm cases of epistemic blame, Lindsay Rettler says “...[the] blame specifically targets the faulty belief of another agent. The blaming agents hold others responsible for their beliefs by feeling resentment, indignation, and guilt, respectively” (Rettler 2017, 4).

It is fair to say that this way of understanding of the nature of epistemic blame has been the dominant view in epistemology until relatively recently. Perhaps one reason it has enjoyed this prominence is because emotion-based views of *moral* blame are highly prominent. Indeed, many seem to regard emotion-based views of moral blame as most closely aligned with our common-sense understanding of blame (Menges 2017; Strawson 1962; Wolf 2011; Wallace 1994, 2013).

Emotion-based approaches to moral blame have come under fire in recent years with powerful counterexamples. Many find it obvious that there are instances of “affectless blame”, cases in which we blame someone but do not feel any negative emotion. Sher offers examples of blaming dead people in the distant past, blaming one’s child for a relatively innocuous lie, or blaming a criminal for committing a burglary one casually reads about in the Saturday morning paper (2006, 90).<sup>11</sup> It is interesting to note that, if the emotion-based account of moral blame faces challenges here, it seems—on the face of it, anyway—that an emotion-based account of epistemic blame is even more problematic. This is because an emotion-based approach to epistemic blame seems to be even more at odds with our actual normative practices: it is far from clear that reactive attitudes such as indignation and resentment are appropriate responses to the typical sorts of epistemic failings that many epistemologists use in their examples of epistemically blameworthy failings.

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<sup>10</sup> McHugh here appears to treat blame as its own sui generis attitude, alongside resentment. I leave to one side the question of whether this excludes him from the emotion-based camp.

<sup>11</sup> See also Fricker (2016, 170) and Scanlon (2008, 128).

There is room for debate here. Some may find it plausible that indignation and resentment are just as at home in the epistemic domain as they are in the moral domain, and may be willing to defend an emotion-based view against apparent counterexamples accordingly.

#### **4.2 The Desire-Based View**

Recently, Jessica Brown (2020) has drawn on work from George Sher (2006) to defend a desire-based account of epistemic blame. Sher argues that moral blame consists in a characteristic set of dispositions—dispositions that we ordinarily associate with blame, such as dispositions to reproach, feel anger, verbally request reasons, and apologize (in the case of self-blame)—unified in their causal connection to a certain belief-desire pair. The belief in question is that an agent has “acted badly” (a technical term, roughly referring to a culpable violation of a moral norm), and the desire is that they not have acted badly. According to the account, the dispositions characteristically associated with blame just are the sorts of things we should expect to result from the *frustration* of a person’s desire that the target of blame not have acted badly. Blame is what happens when our desire that people not culpably violate moral norms is frustrated.

Brown argues that this framework smoothly extends to the epistemic domain. Epistemic blame consists in a characteristic set of dispositions—dispositions that we ordinarily associate with epistemic blame, such as dispositions to reproach, feel upset, and verbally request reasons—unified in their causal connection to a certain belief-desire pair. According to Brown, the belief in question is that an agent has “*believed* badly” (a technical term roughly referring to a culpable violation of an epistemic norm), and the desire is that they not have believed badly. On this account, epistemic blame is what happens when a person’s desire that someone not have culpably violated an epistemic norm is frustrated.

This account has a variety of advantages. For example, for those who worry about the awkwardness of indignation and resentment in the epistemic domain, the account does not require the manifestation of such attitudes in all cases of epistemic blame. Indeed, a virtue of the account is its flexibility: epistemic blame is plausibly a highly *variable* response; the account nicely accommodates this because there are many different behaviours and attitudes that we can expect the relevant desire frustration to give rise to.

Still, we might be worried about whether all cases of epistemic blame involve the desire that someone not have believed badly. Is it not possible to epistemically blame someone for an epistemic failing and nevertheless be *glad* of their mistake (consider epistemically blaming a rival)? While Brown has responses to such worries, it seems fair to wonder whether epistemic blame bears as intimate a connection to desires about bad beliefs as her account requires.<sup>12</sup>

### **4.3 The Relationship-Based View**

We might agree with Brown that some kind of motivational component is necessary for epistemic blame. But precisely for reasons surrounding difficulties with the desire component, we might attempt to connect epistemic blame to a different kind of motivational component altogether.

According to Boulton, epistemic blame is constitutively connected to a kind of *relationship-modification*. Drawing primarily on the work of T.M. Scanlon (2008; 2013), Boulton argues that members of an epistemic community stand in an “epistemic relationship” with one another. This relationship consists in a reciprocal set of intentions and expectations that are oriented towards one another’s epistemic agency. When A epistemically blames B, A judges

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<sup>12</sup> See Piovarchy (forthcoming) and Boulton (2021) for critiques of Brown’s account. See Brown (2020, 12-13) for her discussion of these issues.

that B has done something that falls short of the “normative ideal” of this epistemic relationship, and modifies certain intentions and expectations that are partially constitutive of A’s epistemic relationship with B, in a way made fitting by that judgment. In a bit more detail, the idea is that when all goes well, members of an epistemic community expect of one another that they will meet certain epistemic conditions in the general running of their intellectual lives. Other things being equal, they also intend to trust one another’s word, unless they have good reason not to. On the relationship-based view, a paradigm form of epistemic blame consists in modifying one’s intention to *epistemically trust* the word of another upon judging that they fall short of certain epistemic expectations. For instance, if A reveals to B that A has a strong tendency to think dogmatically about human impact on climate change, B might modify her intention to epistemically trust A’s word on matters concerning human impact on climate change. Under certain conditions, this just is what epistemic blame consists in.<sup>13</sup>

One advantage of this approach is that it may avoid the controversy surrounding whether epistemic agents generally *desire* that people not culpably violate epistemic norms. It can also account for the variability of epistemic blame. According to the account, there are as many ways of epistemically blaming someone as there are ways of adjusting the intentions and expectations that comprise one’s epistemic relationship with that person. Additionally, the account strikes an ecumenical stance on indignation and resentment: manifesting such attitudes is *one* way of responding to a judgment of epistemic relationship-impairment, but there are many other ways that do not involve these attitudes.

A potential disadvantage of this approach is that it may inherit worries faced by Scanlon’s own account. A number of authors have accused Scanlon of “leaving the blame out

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<sup>13</sup> How does this paradigm extend to cases of epistemic self-blame? We can simply countenance the idea that one has certain intentions and expectations oriented towards one’s own epistemic agency, and that one can judge oneself to fall short of the relevant normative ideal, and modify one’s intentions and expectations towards oneself in a way that is in some sense made fitting by this judgment. Perhaps the relevant modifications concern the degree to which one intends to epistemically trust oneself in the future, though other possibilities may be more fitting in the case of epistemic self-blame.

of blame” (Wallace 2013, 349). The account strikes some as too permissive when it comes to classifying cases. We might be worried that the same is true of an epistemic extension of the relationship-based framework. For example, we might worry whether intending to suspend one’s presumption of epistemic trust in the word of another is a robust enough response to count as a kind of blame response. That said, just as Brown has responses to the central worries for her account, Boulton too has argued that such worries can be accounted for (Boulton 2021, 16-21). Indeed, in light of the apparent inappropriateness of indignation and resentment in the epistemic domain, it may be the case that what some regard as disadvantages of the framework in the moral domain are actually *advantages* for its epistemic extension.

#### **4.4 The Agency-Cultivation View**

For those skeptical of the idea that we can successfully theorize about epistemic blame by starting directly with questions about epistemic blame’s nature, recent work by Adam Piovarchy will be of interest (forthcoming). Piovarchy turns to a prominent defender of “forward-looking” approaches to moral responsibility—Vargas (2013)—and, extends Vargas’ ideas about moral blame to the epistemic domain.<sup>14</sup>

According to Vargas, blame-reactions discourage certain kinds of behaviour while praise-reactions encourage others. Blame thus functions in a moral agent’s development as a kind of external motivator to behave in certain ways. This motivation gradually becomes internalized by the agent in the form of responsiveness to moral reasons. In a word, blame functions as a vector for moral agency cultivation: by internalizing the expectations and demands encoded in the blame responses of members of the moral community, agents become

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<sup>14</sup> See McGeer (2013, 2014, 2015) and Jefferson (2019) for other influential forward-looking approaches to responsibility and blame.

sensitive to moral reasons.<sup>15</sup> Similar to Sher, what blame *consists* in is a judgment that someone is blameworthy—meaning they are an appropriate target of certain interpersonal reactions, such as resentment and indignation—which in turn creates a disposition to engage in blame-reactions—things like verbal condemnation, calls for censure or shame, avoidance, emotional distance—the expression of which communicates to the target of blame dissatisfaction with their violation of moral standards. According to the account, this sort of response is particularly well-suited to play the functional role of blame.

Extending this idea to the epistemic domain, Piovarchy argues that epistemic blame functions as a kind of vector for epistemic agency cultivation. Just as members of the moral community have an aversion to moral blame-reactions, so do members of the epistemic community have an aversion to epistemic blame-reactions. As a judgment connected to a set of negative interpersonal reactions, epistemic blame functions to discourage certain kinds of epistemic behaviours, and this in turn cultivates their epistemic agency, a kind of responsiveness to epistemic reasons.

This approach would seem to enjoy a number of the benefits of Brown’s account (the story about the actions and attitudes typical of epistemic blame is very similar). And it has the added bonus of being naturally connected to a story about the value of epistemic blame. But the account also inherits a general set of worries faced by forward-looking approaches to blame. For example, blame may have many functions; one job is to explain why the particular function focused on by a given forward-looking account is the most central or important one. Another worry is whether *blame* is really the best means for performing that function (e.g. promoting

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<sup>15</sup> To avoid objections to forward-looking accounts of blame, Vargas draws the following important distinction. He points out that his view is not that *individual blame-reactions* have the function of cultivating agency; rather, his view is that the *practice* of blame has the function of cultivating agency. On this picture, individual instances of blame can be justified by backward looking considerations, such as the judgment that a person is blameworthy. See Piovarchy (forthcoming, 18) for helpful discussion.

the uptake of epistemic agency), or whether there might be other, better ways to strive for. I return to a brief discussion of the forward-looking dimension of Piovarchy's view below.

## 5. The Ethics and Value of Epistemic Blame

In addition to questions about the nature of epistemic blame, a number of important questions arise when thinking about the *ethics* and *value* of epistemic blame.

Regarding the first set of questions, perhaps most central are issues surrounding the “standing to blame”. In order for one's blaming another person to be justified, not only must the target of blame have done something wrong, and be blameworthy for doing so, it seems certain facts about the *blamer* must obtain as well. A large literature has developed around questions about what these conditions on standing to blame are (Bell 2013; Fritz & Miller 2018; Seim 2019; Radzik 2012; Todd 2017; Smith 2007). Some of the most prominent candidates include the idea that the blamer must not be guilty of committing the same wrongdoing as the target of blame (“hypocrisy condition”), or be complicit in that very wrongdoing (“complicity condition”); some have argued that the target of blame must in some sense belong to the same moral community as the blamer (“contemporary condition”), and, perhaps relatedly, that the target of blame's wrongdoing must in some sense harm or affect the blamer or others close to them (“business condition”).<sup>16</sup>

To give a sense of the issues that may arise when thinking about epistemic blame in this context, consider just one example. We might wonder whether, or to what extent, epistemic norm violations really affect or harm anyone beyond the violators themselves. The question seems especially apt if we bear in mind that—as I indicated in Sec 2—epistemic blame as I

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<sup>16</sup> Not everyone is convinced that “standing” is an important consideration when it comes to determining the appropriateness or justifiedness of blame. See Bell (2013) for a general critique. See also Dover (2019), for a critique of what I'm calling the hypocrisy condition.

understand it here concerns the violation of epistemic norms *as such*. Again, the idea is that this is part of what sets epistemic blame apart from moral blame; epistemic blame qua distinctive kind of blame-response does not concern the practical or moral consequences that may result from epistemic norm violations. Is a person's violation of an epistemic norm, *as such*, really the business of anyone else? If so, what makes this the case? If the business condition is a bona fide condition on standing to blame, then these sorts of questions would seem to take on a considerable degree of importance (Boult forthcoming). Absent answers, we may be left wondering how it is possible for anyone to have the standing to epistemically blame anyone else, which may in turn be tantamount to a kind of skepticism about the very idea of epistemic blame. Room for future research in this area includes addressing whether the business condition applies in the epistemic domain. If it does, then future research could also aim to provide a more detailed understanding of whether and why epistemic failings can count as the business of others.

A different set of questions concerns the value of epistemic blame. What is the utility or value of our epistemic blaming practices? Should we epistemically blame one another? Or might we be better off replacing epistemic blame with something different? This area intersects with our understanding of the nature of epistemic blame. Views about the value of epistemic blame have differing degrees of plausibility depending on whatever it is we think epistemic blame consists in.

For example, going Brown's route—and drawing on some further ideas from Sher (2006, 116-138)—we might argue that epistemically blaming others has value insofar as it reflects one's care and concern for epistemic normativity. Recall, on this view, epistemic blame consists in dispositions caused by the frustration of a desire that people not believe badly. This desire, we might think, is reflective of one's care and concern for epistemic normativity. Since caring about epistemic normativity seems to be something of value—perhaps both intrinsically

and instrumentally speaking—and epistemic blame reflects that caring, perhaps epistemic blame inherits value as a result. The desire-based view may be compatible with other stories about the value of epistemic blame, including ones that ground its value in more starkly instrumental considerations. But the foregoing is a possibility that bears a tight connection to essential commitments of the desire-based framework.

Going the relationship-based route, perhaps the value of epistemic blame consists in its role in facilitating cooperation amongst members of the epistemic community. Again, epistemic blame, according to this view, consists in certain modifications to the intentions and expectations that comprise one’s epistemic relationship with others in the epistemic community. So long as the modifications underpinning epistemic blame correspond to adjustments in one’s epistemic relations with others that are themselves epistemically advantageous—for example, intending to rely less on the word of someone one has realized is not epistemically trustworthy on a certain matter—then epistemic blame may be constitutively related to the epistemic value of a well-functioning epistemic community.

Piovarchy is perhaps most overtly concerned with the connection between his account of blame and the value of epistemic blame (what he refers to as the “justification” of epistemic blame). After all, he defends a functional approach that orients itself around considerations about what epistemic blame is *for*. Since a story about blame’s function is built into the account, what remains is an evaluation of whether that function is—in some sense—a good thing or not. As we’ve seen, according to Piovarchy, the function of the *practice* of epistemic blame is to bring people into the realm of epistemic agency, and to reinforce their capacities as epistemic agents (see fn.11). It seems hard to deny that such a practice has value. However, what does seem open to scrutiny is whether the specific behaviours and attitudes involved in our epistemic blaming practices are the best way to achieve this aim.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> For helpful discussion, see: Fricker 2016, 174; Queloz 2021; Coates 2020.

## 6. Conclusion

Epistemic blame is an important concept in a wide range of epistemological debates, including debates about doxastic voluntarism, epistemic justification, epistemic norms, and the “ethics of belief”. But only recently has it begun to be explored at the level of detail found in research on the nature and ethics of moral blame. These developments promise to be fruitful in a variety of ways. First, a better understanding of the nature of epistemic blame may have implications for our understanding of the nature of epistemic *normativity*. For example, the more closely related epistemic blame is to moral blame, the more vindication we might find for approaches to epistemic normativity that understand it as sharing interesting and important features with practical normativity. Conversely, the more disparate these kinds of blame are, the more reason we may have to question analogies that are sometimes drawn: to what extent are epistemic obligations like moral obligations? When we epistemically “ought” to  $\phi$ , how similar is this to when we morally ought to  $\phi$ ? What are the fundamental differences? Comparing kinds of blame invites us to think about these questions in a way that moves beyond the platitude that epistemology concerns the evaluation of belief, while ethics concerns the evaluation of action. A more nuanced understanding of the nature of the *responses* appropriately directed towards normative failings in these respective domains may contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the nature of the normativity governing those domains.<sup>18</sup>

Second, there is promise in connecting work on the *ethics* of epistemic blame to other increasingly active areas of epistemology, such as testimonial injustice and political epistemology. To take just one example, the common range of shortcomings for which people are typically regarded as appropriate targets of epistemic blame includes things like biased

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<sup>18</sup> See Kauppinen 2018 for a discussion of how to identify different kinds of norms by connecting violations of them to the appropriateness of different kinds of reactive attitudes. See also Schmidt 2021 for an application of Boulton’s relationship-based account of epistemic blame in this context.

cognition, ignoring the evidence, and wishful thinking. But we might wonder whether people can be appropriate targets of epistemic blame for a wider range of actions or attitudes, such as the perpetration of *testimonial injustice* (Fricker 2007; Maitra 2010; Pohlhaus 2014; Wanderer 2012, 2017). Moreover, expanding this thought to the intersection of epistemic injustice and political epistemology, we might wonder whether and how epistemic blame can be assigned to individuals or collectives in cases of *hermeneutical injustice* (Hänel 2020; Jackson 2019; Medina 2012; Pohlhaus 2012; Fricker 2007). Answers to these questions have the potential to enrich debates about the nature of the harm that attends epistemic injustice,<sup>19</sup> as well as the social dimensions of epistemic responsibility.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> There is live debate about the nature of this harm. For example, some maintain it is best understood as a kind of “epistemic objectification” (Fricker 2007, 132-3; McGlynn forthcoming a, forthcoming b); others argue it should be understood as a kind of “epistemic othering” (Pohlhaus 2014, 102-4; Medina 2012, 203-4).

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