THE ETHICS OF BELIEF

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Most problems in philosophy start from a familiar place: we do not have direct access to what is true about the world. The tools we have for accessing the world, i.e., our senses, frequently deceive. Often enough, there is nothing to distinguish the false beliefs from the true ones from our internal experiences alone. There is no special feeling that accompanies true beliefs. No bell rings in congratulations when you avoid falsehood. Instead, we are at the mercy of the world. Worse still, whether due to evil demons or structural racism, the world itself may actively deceive us about important matters. Skeptical doubts like that we could be brains in vats might be outlandish enough a possibility to set aside for ordinary life, but other ways the world deceives may not be so easy, or even moral, to set aside.[1] For example, there's good reason to think that a racist world stacks the evidential deck in favor of immoral racist beliefs.[2] Figuring out rules and norms for navigating all the traps laid out to lead us astray morally and/or epistemically, is the task of an ethics of belief.

To understand the ethics of belief, we must first understand what we mean by *ethics* and what we mean by *belief*. Starting with ethics, ethics is the study of when things are right or wrong. We can easily make sense of the subject of various 'ethics of' topics as the study of the norms and rules governing permissible practices in those domains. The ethics of war considers what actions are permissible in the context of warfare. The ethics of artificial intelligence, the ethics of climate change, the ethics of sex, all likewise consider our moral obligations in each domain. You might worry that the ethics of belief doesn't seem to fit amongst this list. Maybe you think that belief is not an applied domain of human life in the same sense as war or sex. Neither war nor sex just happen, humans and all the messiness that they bring along are involved. Importantly, in these applied domains choices are made, choices that can be evaluated as permissible or impermissible, moral or immoral. Belief, however, seems a different kind of thing, or so it has (wrongly, as I'll suggest) been traditionally argued.

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[1] See Saul (2013) for more on how we not only have more evidence for the moral skeptical challenge than global skepticism, but also how that gives rise to a call for action that the purely epistemic variety does not.

[2] Munton (2019) refers to this as a kind of gerrymandering. See also Basu (2019b), Mills (2007), and Srinivasan (2020) for similar arguments for how a racist world supports racist beliefs. For this problem as it relates to emerging technology in the form of machine learning, see Johnson (2020).

Many who hold this position regard belief as something that happens involuntarily, like a mental reflex in response to stimuli. This view is known as *doxastic involuntarism*. According to this view, there is no real range of options available to you when it comes to belief. Because we exercise no control over our beliefs, there is no open question about what one should believe. At least, no question that goes beyond what the evidence supports. A consequence of taking this view seriously is that if there is anything to be called an ethics of belief, it is ethics *only in the barest sense*. If you see a white wall, you should believe the wall is white, not red. You've done something wrong, in this most minimal sense, when you don't believe in accordance with the evidence before you. There are no further questions about whether you are obligated to believe something, or whether it would be immoral to believe something. Notions such as *obligation* and *morality* only apply to those things we have control over.

To understand the ethics of belief in any deeper sense, the doxastic involuntarist challenge is one that will need to be answered. However, many agree that the doxastic involuntarist challenge has been overstated, for at least three reasons. First, for reasons introduced by the problem of skepticism more broadly, it's not entirely clear that the dictum to believe in accordance with the evidence provides any substantive constraints. There are many possible beliefs that are in accordance with the evidence—both my belief that there's a white wall in front of me and my belief that I'm merely being deceived into thinking there's a white wall in front of me (when in fact there isn't) are in accordance with the evidence my senses present to me. Second, even if we grant the doxastic involuntarist's dictum, it arguably lacks a well-defined target. This is because there's a range of attitudes that might fall under the heading of *belief*, and there are important differences between them. As Van Leeuwen and Lombrozo (2023, 3) argue, "there is no guarantee that believing will be one thing." Of course, belief itself seems a familiar enough attitude, and it has a familiar mode of evaluation. But belief's familiarity hides an oddity. We use the term 'belief' to capture an attitude that could be as a weak as your beliefs about the color of the wall in front of you or as strong as your most deeply held convictions. To capture what seems like an important distinction between beliefs that seem like mere mental reflexes to stimuli versus beliefs that hold deeper commitments, Van Leeuwen and Lombrozo contrast mere matter-of-fact beliefs with those that are more explicit, reflective, and sometimes more ideological. To further complicate matters, it seems beliefs often serve multiple functions. Beliefs (both superficial and deep) aim at truth, but they also serve inter- and intrapersonal aims. Third, given this variety, it seems plausible that the doxastic involuntarist neglects possible routes of control we have over our beliefs. To say that not a single one of this broad range of attitudes that we call "belief" is under even our *indirect* control seems a stretch. All this suggests that the doxastic involuntarist seems to rely on an impoverished picture of belief and evidence. *Not only evidence determines belief. Not all beliefs function similarly. And not all beliefs are mere reflexes.*[3]

It is from these considerations that an imperative for an ethics of belief blossoms. In what follows, I'll explore these themes in greater detail. I start with the debate as it emerges in the foundational dispute between W. K. Clifford and William James. I then turn to how the debate rages on amongst contemporary theorists, touching on topics such as pragmatism, whether we should believe against the evidence, pragmatic and

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[3] For more arguments against doxastic involuntarism see Adams (1985), Smith (2005), Basu and Schroeder (2019), Basu (2019b, 2023b).

moral encroachment, doxastic partiality, and doxastic wronging. Finally, I end by noting both the shortcomings of this chapter, i.e., all the further topics there's simply not space to explore, and the final lesson we should take away from the debate between Clifford and James.

1. The Debate

Discussion of the ethics of belief tends to begin with W. K. Clifford's (1877) essay, "The Ethics of Belief" and William James's (1896/1937) response, "The Will To Believe". The debate between the two centers on whether it is ever permissible to believe on the basis of insufficient evidence. Clifford answers that it is never permissible, whereas James seeks to carve out exceptions.

To make his case, Clifford begins with a story: imagine a shipowner who has some doubts about the seaworthiness of one of his vessels. The ship is old, it was never particularly well-built in the first place, and it has constantly been in need of repairs. Despite all this, the shipowner convinces himself that the ship will be fine. The ship has, after all, made many successful journeys in the past. So, he sets aside his doubts. As Clifford (1877, 1) writes, the shipowner acquires

> a sincere and comfortable conviction that his vessel was thoroughly safe
> and seaworthy; he watched her departure with a light heart, and
> benevolent wishes for the success of the exiles in their strange new
> home that was to be; and he got his insurance-money when she went
> down in mid-ocean and told no tales.

Clifford argues that the shipowner is guilty of the death of all the people aboard his ship because of his irresponsible behavior in stifling his doubts. As Clifford (ibid.) proclaims, the shipowner "*had no right to believe on such evidence as was before him.*" Furthermore, Clifford argues that the shipowner would be just as guilty even if the ship had made it safely to its destination. That is, the safe journey of the ship would diminish his guilt "not one jot".

You might respond that the issue is not with the shipowner's *belief* that the ship is seaworthy, but with his *actions* of allowing the ship to sail. Clifford, however, rejects the idea that anything in this case hangs on this distinction. Yes, the shipowner is guilty of his actions, but he is also guilty of his beliefs. Namely, he is guilty for believing that the ship was seaworthy when he had no right to believe that. However, it is right that the grounds for Clifford's ethics of beliefs is premised on a tight connection between belief and action—for Clifford, our beliefs inevitably express themselves in actions.

Clifford (1877, 3) writes that "it is not possible so to sever the belief from the action it suggests as to condemn the one without condemning the other." Clifford here seems an early proponent of a *dispositionalist theory of belief*.[4] Insofar as one believes *p,* one is disposed to act in ways consistent with believing *p*. That is, beliefs naturally make themselves apparent in our behavior. Although we might know many people who act

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[4] For an overview of different accounts of the nature of belief, including dispositionalism, see Schwitzgebel (2021).

counter to their professed beliefs, there is something odd about that. If someone says that they believe there's milk in the fridge, then when they need milk we can predict that they'll go to the fridge. Of course, Clifford doesn't think that every belief you hold will be realized in action *right away*. Rather, Clifford (1877, 3) writes, "if a belief is not realized immediately in open deeds, it is stored up for the guidance of the future." It is for this reason Clifford thinks that no belief is trivial or insignificant. Because the beliefs we store may guide our actions either currently or in the future, we have a moral obligation with regard to *all of our beliefs* to make sure that they are formed in a responsible way.

Furthermore, given their propensity to be expressed in our actions, beliefs are not entirely a private affair either. Clifford (1877, 3) writes that our beliefs "are common property, fashioned and perfected from age to age; an heirloom which every succeeding generation inherits as a precious deposit and a sacred trust to be handled on to the next one, not unchanged but enlarged and purified, with some clear marks of its proper handiwork." That is, we must be careful with regard to our beliefs because our beliefs aren't just our own. Our beliefs are a common shared property, passed down and inherited by future generations. We cannot go blithely into the world believing whatever we want on whatever grounds we choose, because belief is a communal object. According to Clifford, every belief we accept prepares us for beliefs of the same kind. If we're lazy and believe on the basis of insufficient evidence, that laziness leaves a stamp on our character that makes us more susceptible to poorly formed beliefs in the future. That laziness is not just a personal failing, as we also fail others who rely on us. The problem is not just that you might believe falsehoods, but that others may come to believe those falsehoods too, and others may lapse into epistemic laziness as a result of your laziness. As a result, Clifford (1877, 4) notes, no one "can escape the universal duty of questioning all that we believe."

With all of this in mind, we can now see why Clifford would opt for the following quite severe requirement on belief formation. Clifford's (1877, 5) strict evidentialist requirement on belief is as follows:

> It is wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence.

This position is called *strict evidentialism* for two reasons. First, evidentialism is the view that what you should believe is a function of the evidence.[5] Returning to the fundamental problem outlined at the start of this chapter, we may not have direct access to true beliefs but evidence is our best guide to true beliefs. If we at least make sure that our beliefs are in accordance with the evidence we will thereby have a decent guide to true beliefs. For example, if you have evidence for *p* then that raises the likelihood (but does not guarantee) that *p* is true. Strict evidentialism is *strict* precisely because it allows no exceptions. As Clifford makes clear, this principle applies to *every* belief. More moderate evidentialists allow that it is *not* wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone, to believe upon insufficient evidence. For example, there might be some beliefs trivial enough it doesn't matter if the evidence for the belief isn't that strong.[6] Or as we'll now see in turning to William James's response to Clifford, there might be some beliefs that

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[5] See Feldman and Conee (1985) for the canonical statement of the view.
[6] This strict vs. moderate distinction comes from Chignell's (2018) overview.

we can hold on the basis of no evidence at all; instead we can believe for purely *pragmatic* reasons.

In his response essay to Clifford, James (1896/1937) is incensed by two consequences of Clifford's view. First, that it is almost impossible to ever believe. Second, that any sort of religious faith is automatically irrational. After all, there is insufficient evidence to believe that God exists; therefore, according to Clifford, it would be a grave sin to believe that God exists. This can't be right, says James, and he sets out to prove why.

James argues that when faced with a *genuine option* we can choose what we believe even if the evidence is insufficient. What makes an option genuine? Genuine options are those that meet the following criteria: they are *living*, *forced*, and *momentous*. To spell these out, James draws the distinction between live and dead hypotheses. A hypothesis is live if it's a proposition that it's possible for you to believe, and it is dead otherwise. A live option is then one where both hypotheses are live; a dead option is where one of the choices is dead to you. Options can also be forced or avoidable. As the distinction suggests, forced options are when you have no possibility of not choosing—you must choose something—and avoidable options are avoidable. And finally, options can be momentous or trivial. Momentous options have great stakes; trivial ones don't. Genuine options then are those where both hypotheses are possible for you to believe (living), where you have to choose something (forced), and the choice is momentous (momentous). In such cases, you may believe even if there's insufficient evidence. Beliefs in deities tend to fit these criteria. However, each of these features—the liveness of an option, whether it's momentous, etc.—isn't intrinsic to the proposition being considered. Rather, these features vary from thinker to thinker. There are hypotheses that are dead for me that could be live for you or things that are genuine options for me that aren't genuine options for you. Most importantly, unlike a consideration like evidence, these options that James outlines are *non-epistemic*. Momentous options aren't more likely to be true than trivial options. What James allows, that Clifford does not, is a way for our *passional nature* to decide wherever the evidence cannot.

James also criticizes the picture of evidence that Clifford presents. James (1896/1937, 15) notes that the kind of absolutist picture present in Clifford, one in which we conform our minds to the fact, is chasing an ideal that is nowhere to be found "on this moonlit and dream-visited planet." Returning to our opening problem, there exists a gap between us and the world and any certitude that our minds conform to the world exactly as it is is one that James (ibid.) considers "a tremendously mistaken attitude." It is not fair of Clifford, James argues, to paint everyone who doesn't subject every single one of their beliefs to a high level of scrutiny as lazy, as letting down the entirety of the human race. There are many legitimate demands on us, and sometimes they are in conflict.

One such conflict arises when our would-be believer cares both about gaining true beliefs and avoiding error. As James writes, both laws—Believe truth! Shun error!—legitimately govern our intellectual lives In cases of conflict, there's not clearly a right way to decide between them. How much we desire one over the other then determines the character of our intellectual life. As James (1896/1937, 18) writes:

> We may regard the chase for truth as paramount, and the avoidance of
> error as secondary; or we may, on the other hand, treat the avoidance of

error as more imperative, and let truth take its chance. Clifford, in the instructive passage which I have quoted, exhorts us to the latter course. Believe nothing, he tells us, keep your mind in suspense forever, rather than by closing it on insufficient evidence incur the awful risk of believing lies. You, on the other hand, may think that the risk of being in error is a very small matter when compared with the blessings of real knowledge, and be ready to be duped many times in your investigation rather than postpone indefinitely the chance of guessing true.

Crucially, logic alone won't help you choose between these two epistemic duties. Rather, it is up to each individual how much they value having many true beliefs (at the risk of letting some false ones slip in) over having no false beliefs whatsoever (at the risk of having very few total).

Going further still in his criticism of Clifford, James argues that in addition to genuine options, there are two more cases where we may believe at will: relationships and self-fulfilling hypotheses. With relationships, James notes that we have to take something like a leap of faith. When we like someone we don't always know if they like us back. If one were to follow Clifford's advice, and "stand aloof, and refuse to budge an inch until [one has] objective evidence […] ten to one your liking never comes" (James 1896/1937, 24). If one were to follow Clifford's advice they'd end up as poor Mr. Stevens in Kazou Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day*. Mr. Stephens is a tragic character in many ways. In this case, he is tragic because he never lets himself believe that Miss Kenton likes him. He never has never enough evidence that he would risk letting himself believe she ever thought of him as more than just a colleague. The risk of being wrong is just too high. Eventually he lets himself reciprocate her feelings, but it is too late. Miss Kenton has moved on. Mr. Stephens and Clifford share something in common: they're both afraid of being duped. When it comes to love, James tells us we have to take the chance. We have to let the belief get ahead of the evidence.

Self-fulling hypotheses are another case where we are permitted to believe at will. As in the case of relationships, a certain faith is required. But, the guarantee of truth is tighter in the case of self-fulfilling hypotheses. For example, James asks us to consider a train that is about to be robbed. No one is willing to stand up to the robbers for fear of being shot. However, "if we believed that the whole car-full would rise at once with us, we should each severally rise, and train-robbing would never even be attempted" (James 1896/1937, 25). These cases are those in which faith helps create a fact.[7] As James writes, where truths depend "on our personal action, then, faith based on desire is certainly a lawful and possibly an indispensable thing" (ibid.). In sum, contra Clifford, it is not wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence. If one really thought that, one would live a sad life indeed.

II. Some Contemporary Debates

One natural place many contemporary theorists start when it comes to the ethics of belief is by noting all the parallels between ethics and epistemology. For example, a

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[7] Famously Pascal argued that one could eventually make themselves believe in God's existence simply by acting as though God exists. Here too, faith would create the fact.

central question in ethics is whether we should do the things that promote the most value. This debate, between consequentialists on the one hand and deontologists on the other, also shows up with regard to belief. But unlike the classic hedonist who at least attains some pleasures, the epistemic hedonist's life is quite sad. If we measured how well someone lived their epistemic lives by how many true beliefs they gained, then what we should really do is sit and count blades of grass all day until we die. Don't even think about going into something as intellectually laborious as philosophy—instead, look for the easiest beliefs to acquire and maintain. The same criticisms raised against consequentialism in the moral sphere can be raised again here in the epistemic one.[8]

Further, going from normative ethics to meta-ethics: every question about the nature of morality and ethical properties can itself be asked about the ethics of belief and epistemic properties. For example, when we say someone should believe *p,* is that a categorical claim or an instrumental one? That is, are we saying that there's some independent authoritative reason why someone should believe *p*, or should they only believe *p* insofar as it's in their practical interests, e.g., because believing *p* helps them achieve some further goal?[9] If we think the epistemic domain is normative, i.e., subject to norms, where do epistemic norms get their authoritative force? Is epistemic normativity the same thing as moral normativity?[10] However, to keep the scope of this chapter manageable, we'll follow the lead of Clifford and James and focus on the question of when it's permissible to believe against the evidence. As we'll see, the debate about what kind of wiggle room is permissible with regard to the relationship between belief and evidence is one that continues to rage on.

First, there are contemporary pragmatists who follow James's lead and argue that *all* reasons for belief are pragmatic reasons. For example, Susanna Rinard (2017, 2019) argues that the rationality of epistemic states is just the same as any other state. For example, if the belief *p* has the highest expected value, then one should believe it even if there's no evidence for *p*. Rinard argues that this approach, which she calls *equal treatment*, has a number of benefits over both strict and moderate forms of evidentialism.[11] Most notably, it's simpler. There are no longer multiple standards of evaluation, only the one. Further, we need not contort ourselves into knots to explain the exceptions to evidentialism. And despite appearances, this doesn't mean belief is completely untethered from truth. After all, we generally can achieve our goals better if we believe true things

That said, the pragmatist position does face opposition. Notably, some target the main motivating premise of pragmatism, i.e., that there's no difference between epistemic states and other states. To establish a difference, objectors usually adopt one of two strategies. First is to argue that beliefs are governed by a distinct standard of correctness, one that makes belief the kind of attitude that it is.[12] The attitude that we call "belief" is the attitude that aims to represent the world. It then is claimed to follow that it is constitutive of belief that it has a standard of correctness unique to it. Beliefs are correct if and only if they are true. Other attitudes, like desires and imaginings, do not aim to

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[8] For example, see Berker (2013a, 2013b) and Sylvan (2018, 2020).
[9] For example, see Kelly (2003).
[10] For example, see Cuneo (2008), Steglich-Peterson (2018) and Sharadin (2022). See also Flores and Woodard (forthcoming).
[11] See also Maguire and Woods (2020) for a similar approach.
[12] See Velleman (2000) and Wedgwood (2002) as key proponents of this line.

represent the world. A desire is not any less apt because the world doesn't conform to the desire. A belief, however, does seem inapt when it doesn't match the world. A second strategy is to argue that it is not psychologically possible for someone to believe *p* for reasons not connected to whether *p* is true, again distinguishing belief from other practical attitudes.[13] In defense of pragmatism, Rinard (2017) argues that the first strategy is question-begging against the pragmatist as it proceeds by simply asserting that correctness is constitutive of belief. Leary (2017) additionally charges that the second response is wrong because practical considerations can provide motivating reasons for belief. Against both strategies, Nolfi (2021) argues that belief's proper function isn't to represent the world, but rather to enable or facilitate action. On such a view, some false beliefs are correct because of the actions that they enable and that they'll enable those actions can be the reasons for which to believe. And so, the debate goes on.

Another contemporary view stops short of the more radical pragmatist claim that all reasons for belief are practical reasons. It emerges instead from a more modest response to both James's advocating for practical reasons for belief and an unclarity in Clifford's formulation of strict evidentialism. Recall that Clifford proclaims that it is wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence. But, how do we determine when evidence is sufficient? Consider the following two scenarios.[14]

> LOW: It's Friday and Hannah and Sarah have just been paid. On their drive home from work they pass the bank and they're about to pull in to deposit their pay checks when they see the long line. Hannah asks Sarah whether they should stop in at the bank or come back tomorrow. Sarah says she's pretty sure the bank will be open on Saturday and they should just come tomorrow when it'll be less busy.

> HIGH: Everything is the same except Hannah and Sarah have a mortgage payment that'll be automatically withdrawn from their bank account on Monday. If their pay checks aren't deposited before Monday, their account will be overdrawn.

According to defenders of the view known as *pragmatic encroachment*, what Hannah and Sarah are justified in believing is different in the two cases.[15] Epistemically, Hannah and Sarah are in the exact same situation in both HIGH and LOW. That is, the evidence available to them is exactly the same. What changes, however, is what is *practically* at stake for them. This mere pragmatic difference seems to affect our intuitions about whether either is justified in believing that the bank will be open on Saturday. Although it might be the case that it is wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence, these kinds of cases suggest that what it takes for evidence to be sufficient can vary from person to person, and from context to context, for non-epistemic reasons.

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[13] See Kelly (2002), Shah (2003), and Shah and Velleman (2005) as key proponents of this line.
[14] The first version of these cases in epistemology are introduced by DeRose (1992). However, see footnote 16 for the origination of encroachment in philosophy of science. The set of cases here most closely resembles the cases as presented in Stanley (2005) and Schroeder (2012).
[15] Defenders of pragmatic encroachment include Fantl and McGrath (2002, 2007, 2009), Hawthorne (2003), Stanley (2005), Schroeder (2012), and Ross and Schroeder (2012).

Unlike the pragmatists, defenders of pragmatic encroachment can maintain the anti-pragmatist position that one shouldn't believe on the basis of practical reasons. According to pragmatic encroachment, evidence should still be your primary guide for belief. The practical stakes for the agent, however, simply changes the threshold the evidence must cross for the agent to be justified in holding that belief. That is, you cannot go through the world believing what you want, your beliefs should still be constrained by the evidence. What can shift, however, is how much evidence is required to believe. In high stakes cases, more evidence is needed.

Extending the view, pragmatic considerations are not the only thing that can affect our judgements about the sufficiency of evidence. According to some, myself included, moral considerations also affect our judgements about where the appropriate threshold for high stakes beliefs should be placed.[16] Beliefs can not only be high stakes because a lot depends on those beliefs for ourselves—i.e., whether we'll deposit a check before our account is overdrawn—but also because they affect others. That is, when it comes to what we should believe, we should sometimes take into account not only the practical cost of error, but also the moral cost or risk of error.

Theories of moral encroachment tend to begin with the following sort of cases. Imagine an environment shaped by morally pernicious forces such as racism or sexism. Now imagine the judgements that are often licensed in such environments. Examples include mistaking a woman faculty member for a receptionist or a black member of a country club for a staff member. The issue here is not that there's something inherently wrong with someone thinking that someone is a receptionist or a staff member, but rather that doing so in such environments leads to racist or sexist beliefs. From *Madame Butterfly* to *Slumdog Millionaire*, being mistaken for a staff member is a canonical example of a racist or sexist belief. Crucially someone following the evidentialist dictum to believe in accordance with the evidence will arrive at those beliefs in such environments precisely because the evidence will be stacked in favor of them. To avoid racist beliefs the answer from moral encroachment is that where the moral cost of the belief is high, more caution is required. The amount of evidence that would ordinarily be sufficient is no longer sufficient because of these features of the environment.[17]

Jason Kawall (2013) also uses an encroachment framework to make sense of Sarah Stroud (2006) and Simon Keller's (2004) arguments for why we should believe well of our friends, i.e., *doxastic partiality*. Arguments for doxastic partiality start with the observation that being a good friend can come into conflict with our epistemic obligations. For example, if you should believe in accordance with the evidence, then there's no question of what you should do when someone tells you your friend took the last bite of food without asking if anyone else wanted it first—you should just believe what was said. This just is the default response to testimonial evidence. Intuitively, while this might work had you heard the story about a stranger, when you hear that story

[16] I say "extending pragmatic encroachment" but the first argument for encroachment was moral and presented by Rudner (1953) in "The Scientist qua Scientist Makes Value Judgements". For more on the development of these views in philosophy of science and feminist philosophy before similar views were presented in epistemology, see Kukla (2015). Contemporary defenders of moral encroachment include Pace (2011), Fritz (2017), Moss (2018a, 2018b), Basu (2019c), Basu and Schroeder (2019), and Bolinger (2020).
[17] There is debate about whether it's the moral cost of *error* or the moral cost more generally that raises the stakes, see Bolinger (2020) and Basu (2021).

about your friend—your good and kind friend—surely you should take pause. Crucially, the pause here is not one that comes from any concern about making sure you have a true belief, or of making sure that you believe in accordance with the evidence. The pause comes entirely from the relationship you have with the person the story is about. It is because they are your friend that you pause. As Sarah Stroud (2006, 499) notes, "friendship places demands not just on our feelings or our motivations, but on our *beliefs* and our methods of forming beliefs […that is] contrary to the standards of epistemic responsibility and justification held up by mainstream epistemological theories." This suggests a clash between friendship norms and epistemic norms. But as Kawall suggests, an encroachment framework can get rid of the clash. Friendship, as moral encroachers argue with respect to racism and sexism, can increase the threshold for justification that our evidence needs to pass.[18]

Challenges abound for both pragmatic and moral encroachment, but the intuitions motivating the views seem empirically well substantiated. For example, in one study Cao, Kleiman-Weiner, and Banaji (2019) presented participants with vignettes that pitted statistical accuracy against morality. To illustrate, imagine that you have just heard that Alex just performed surgery. Is Alex more likely to be a man or a woman? If one reasons in accordance with the evidence, given the statistical likelihoods, Alex is more likely to be a man. However, just as in the sorts of cases discussed above used to motivate moral encroachment, this kind of judgement is in tension with our moral commitments. What Cao, Kleiman-Weiner, and Banaji (2019, 22) found is that "a majority of participants (93%) agreed with the egalitarian judgment that the man and woman are equally likely to be a doctor, whereas 7% agreed with the Bayesian judgment that the man is more likely to be a doctor." Further, participants asked to evaluate someone else's judgements about the case viewed those who followed the evidentialist dictum as unfair, unjust, and most importantly, as inaccurate and unintelligent. This is most surprising given that, as Cao, Kleiman-Weiner, and Banaji (2019, 22) stress, that person's "judgement was statistically accurate."[19]

In addition, studies by Cusimano and Lombrozo (2021, 2023) have provided further support for what they identify as the evidence shifting hypothesis at the heart of moral encroachment.[20] That is, participants in their studies were presented with vignettes reminiscent of the classic cases in pragmatic encroachment, moral encroachment, and doxastic partiality, and they found that "participants reported that the main characters were licensed to evaluate the evidence differently from the perfectly impartial, but equally informed, observer (the AI)" (Cusimano and Lombrozo 2021, 8). Further, participants also tended to indicate that people ought hold inaccurate beliefs where "the degree of inaccuracy positively related to the moral benefit of holding the inaccurate belief" (ibid., 9). Of course, more empirical work is needed. Not only is it hard to isolate exactly what is affecting participants intuitions in these cases, we might also wonder how much weight we should put into people's judgements about what one ought to do in these cases. Human beings' track record with what the right moral judgements are is

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[18] Against this, see Rioux (2023). For an overview of the debate surrounding doxastic partiality, see Mason (2023).

[19] For more on this conflict between accuracy and morality, see Basu (2020). For more on stereotype accuracy, see Tetlock et al. (2000), Gendler (2011), and Jussim, Crawford, and Rubinstein (2015).

[20] This is also known as the threshold shifting view of encroachment. See Worsnip (2021) for more.

historically pretty poor. All that said, these are at least early promising results in support of morality bearing on belief.

Affecting the threshold for epistemic justification is not the only way that morality bears on belief. Another way that morality might bear on belief stems from the central role that beliefs play in constituting our relationships with one another. Recall that James argued that there are some beliefs over which we exercise voluntary control: genuine options, self-fulfilling hypothesis, and (now of particular importance for our discussion) relationships. Over the course of several papers, I've argued that beliefs have moral weight because they mediate our interpersonal relations with others.[21] That is, our beliefs about people are ways of representing those people, and as such they are a constitutive part of our relations to them. Our beliefs commit us to content that represents "perspectival claims about that individual's status in the world" (Basu 2021, 107). It is this commitment to a way of representing that makes some beliefs hurt, e.g., a mother's belief that her daughter has wasted her degree (Basu 2021, 108), or a father's belief that his daughter stole money from the cash register (Basu 2023a, 3-4). In these cases, I say that these beliefs hurt precisely because belief is the attitude that commits. A father merely wondering whether his daughter stole money isn't doing something as morally objectionable as when he *believes* it. Belief, as I've noted earlier in this chapter, is a tricky attitude. But that said, the beliefs central to our relationships certainly seem apt for moral evaluation.[22]

For example, take the belief that serves as the foundation for a monogamous marriage: that one will be forever faithful. Marušić (2015) asks us to imagine that we are standing at the altar, about to make our wedding vows. These vows include the promise to spend the rest of your life with your spouse-to-be. However, here's the sad fact about marriage: 50% end in divorce.[23] That puts your odds of spending the rest of your life with your spouse-to-be *at chance*. You've no reason to think you two are any different from any other couple that has stood where you stood and made similar vows. You, by stipulation, have no previous track record of marriage from which to draw on either. You are in every way, *just plain ordinary*. So, now what should you do? Can you make a sincere promise to your spouse-to-be that you'll spend the rest of your life with them?

As Marušić (2015) notes, it'd be somewhat perverse to say, "I'll be with you the rest of my life, but there is a significant chance I won't", even though saying that does accurately reflect the weight of your evidence. A sincere promise in this case seems to require believing against the evidence. Further, Marušić notes that your spouse-to-be should also believe against the evidence. However, the justice of the peace or the wedding photographer are under no similar obligation to believe against the evidence. Other well-informed observers should not believe that you two will spend the rest of your lives together, but both potential-spouses should. If you are unconvinced of this case, consider other difficult actions such as the intention to give up smoking or the intention to run a marathon. These are very difficult things to do. But, if you are sincere in your promise to give up smoking or to run a marathon, you and your loved ones should believe you'll succeed despite the evidence to the contrary.

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[21] See Basu (2019a, 2019b, 2021, 2023a, 2023b).

[22] For more on doxastic wronging in particular, see Schroeder (2018), Basu and Schroeder (2019), Basu (2020), Fabre (2021).

[23] The statistics are more complicated, but let us assume they are as stated for the simplicity of the case.

Marušić's (2015) general argument is that when we make these sort of interpersonal (and also intrapersonal) commitments, these things are *up to us*. A purely scientific view, one akin to Clifford's strict evidentialism, distorts our agency by eliding the fact that what we do is up to us. That is, even if our predictions are grounded on the best available evidence, predictions can only take you so far. In the end, what you do is up to you, and you do a disservice to yourself to reason about yourself as though you are a thing that is determined. Similarly, we distort our relationships to others if we think about them in this way. For these reasons, not only are we licensed in disregarding the very strong evidence that we might fail, so too are those partial to us.[24] That is, there is a certain mode of engaging with persons we are close to that requires asymmetrical responses to the evidence about what one should believe.

III. The Ongoing Debate

There are other topics still unmentioned, so let me briefly mention them here at the end. For example, there are numerous issues concerning the nature of evidence that arise in the context of the ethics of belief. For example, sometimes we forget the evidence for our beliefs—do we thereby lose the justification for our beliefs? If so, given the limits of human memory, we must have vastly fewer justified beliefs than we thought![25] Relatedly, in addition to the evidence we have, what about evidence we ought to have or ought not to have?[26] There is also a vast literature on epistemic injustice that intersects with issues in the ethics of belief, giving rise to unique research questions. For example, testimony is one of the primary means by which we get evidence for many of our beliefs; but sometimes, due to structural reasons and private prejudices, we unfairly discount some people's testimony. How should we then, or should we even, adjust our default entitlement to believe what others say?[27] Further still, maybe the focus on the ethics of belief is too myopic. Maybe we should expand our focus to pay attention to acceptance,[28] or salience,[29] or even, attention itself.[30] Maybe what we really need is a holistic ethics of inquiry.[31]

I'll close by reiterating something of central importance from the debate between Clifford and James. James criticizes Clifford for being too worried about being taken for a fool, for being duped. But now we see that what Clifford is fundamentally guilty of is a certain naïveté. For thinking that one can avoid all the pitfalls, all the traps, by just making sure that one's beliefs are formed only on the basis of sufficient evidence. Responsible belief formation requires a lot from a person. The world we live in is a

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[24] If you are skeptical that practical or ethical considerations can serve as grounds for belief, see Morton (2021) and Morton and Paul (2018, 2019) for an alternative explanation of these sorts of cases. Their focus tends to be on the phenomenon of grit, i.e., of when you should persevere despite the evidence strongly suggesting that you'll fail. Pragmatic and ethical considerations enter into the picture by shaping the standards by which you're permitted to reason about your evidence, not as the grounds for the beliefs themselves.

[25] See Dogramaci (2015), and McCain (2015).

[26] See Goldberg (2017) and Basu (2022).

[27] See Fricker (2007) and Marušić and White (2018).

[28] See Soter (forthcoming).

[29] See Munton (2021) and Whiteley (2022, 2023).

[30] See Saint-Croix (2022), Gardiner (2022), and Wu (2023)

[31] See Friedman (2019), Palmira (2020), Thorstad (2021), Basu (2023c), McWilliams (forthcoming), Quanbeck (forthcoming).

difficult one to traverse. It is one full of traps and risks, and there may be no path—no single set of non-contradictory norms—that will keep us entirely safe from those pitfalls. As James instructed, it is up to each of us to choose between competing demands. How we choose to balance these competing demands shapes who we are. Most importantly, despite all the attendant risks, we must take responsibility for our choices. Beliefs don't just happen to us. We make choices about how we wish to conduct our epistemic lives and those choices affect not just ourselves, but also those around us. Believe well.

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