

There Is No Such Thing As Doxastic Wrongdoing

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You've been battling a drinking problem, and – in the last few months – successfully. At a departmental reception, you show strength of will and again drink nothing, but a colleague accidentally spills some wine on your sleeve. When you're back home, your partner – smelling the alcohol – believes you're drinking again. Naturally, you are offended: Not necessarily by something your partner does or says, or will do, or is even disposed to do, but by their *belief* about you, it's their belief that hurts you, that you may resent, that you may be expecting an apology for¹.

You are the only non-white guest in an up-scale social gathering, where almost all of the catering staff are non-whites. Some other guest takes a look at you, and asks for a drink, clearly taking you to be working for the caterer, because of your race. Naturally, you are offended. And it's not the action – asking for a drink – that offends you so much as it is the belief, and the inference on which it is based. *That* is what wrongs you, *that* is what they should be apologizing for².

In these examples, then, it seems that beliefs wrong. And the booming literature on doxastic wrongdoing (and on moral encroachment) attempts to better understand how it is that beliefs can morally wrong. In this paper, though, we argue that the appearances here should be resisted. Some neighboring thoughts can be saved. But defenses of the full thought that beliefs in themselves can be a form of wrongdoing cannot at the end of the day be defended. There is no such thing as doxastic wrongdoing.

In section 1 we do some cleaning up – precisifying both the examples and our thesis. In that section we also discuss – if in a somewhat preliminary way – the relation between doxastic wrongdoing and moral encroachment. In section 2 we argue against a fairly modest version of doxastic wrongdoing – focusing on Basu and Schroeder (2019). We argue that even if everything they say is correct, still they can't accommodate crucial features of the underlying intuitions, and this gives reason to reject their account. We then proceed to discuss a more ambitious kind of (purported) doxastic wrongdoing – exemplified by some (but not all) of Basu's relevant texts. We note some of the theoretical prices of going down that road as well, concluding that it too is indefensible. This leaves us with the task of explaining – indeed, explaining away – the intuitive force of the examples we started with. This is the task of the following two sections.

1. Cleaning Up

More than one thing may be problematic with the beliefs in the guiding examples (that you are back drinking, that you work for the caterer), and not all of the ways in which they may be problematic are a matter of what is now often called doxastic wrongdoing. So we need to say

* For relevant correspondence, we thank Rima Basu, Jamie Fritz, and Mark Schroeder.

¹ Basu and Schroeder's (2019) example.

² The example is based on Gendler's (2011) Cosmos Club example.

more³.

One important point has already been hinted at above. What we want to focus on is *the belief itself* and whether it wrongs you. So we want to rule out all sorts of things that are related to the relevant beliefs in all sorts of ways, and that may wrong you. So: Perhaps some of the relevant *actions* wrong you (like if your partner ends the relationship because of (what they think is) your drinking). Perhaps some *attitudes* wrong you – either upstream from the relevant belief (like perhaps some racist attitude of the guest) or downstream from it (like if your partner blames you⁴ or even just expresses the belief). Perhaps some of the *epistemic practices* involved are wrong, and indeed wrong you: Perhaps, for instance, your partner owed it to you to hear your explanation before forming a belief, perhaps the guest owed it to you to keep an open mind about a non-white being another guest, perhaps both had an obligation to invest more resources (time, attention, etc.) into evidence-gathering. All of this may be true, and we revisit some of these options below. But the underlying doxastic wrongdoing intuition – the one doing work in the examples above – is not exhausted by such options. That intuition is about *the belief itself* wronging you.

Another important point about cases of (purported) doxastic wrongdoing is that the problems with the relevant beliefs are not *merely* that they are epistemically unjustified. This may be because some of the (purportedly) morally problematic beliefs are in fact epistemically (or if you prefer evidentially) justified. But even if this cannot be the case, even if morally problematic beliefs are guaranteed to be epistemically problematic as well, the moral problem is not exhausted by the epistemic one. Beliefs that are epistemically (or evidentially) on a par with those need not, in other words, also be morally problematic.

Relatedly, the duty arguably violated in cases of doxastic wrongdoing is a *directional* one: It is owed *to someone*. Your partner owes it *to you* not to believe that you're back drinking, perhaps, and the other guest owes it *to you* – and maybe to other non-whites, and maybe to all non-whites – not to take it for granted that they are not guests when present in a specific kind of social event. In both cases there is something *personal*, exemplified by the fact that your partner should arguably apologize *to you* for having wronged *you*. At least typically, a violation of an epistemic duty does not have similar consequences: If I proceed to commit an inferential fallacy, my belief in the conclusion is epistemically unjustified, and may be criticized. But typically there's no one whom I wrong by committing the fallacy, and no one to whom I owe an apology for this violation.

Finally, it's important to distinguish here between doxastic wrongdoing and moral encroachment. Moral encroachment – at least in its most plausible form – is the view according to which the moral stakes may affect the degree of evidential support needed to secure a specific epistemic status for an attitude – typically, the status of justification or knowledge for all-out

³ Much of what we say here follows, at least to an extent, points made by Basu and Schroeder (2019).

⁴ Though there are, of course, interesting relations between believing and blaming. For some discussion see Enoch and Spectre (2021).

bivalent beliefs⁵. According to such a view, for instance, the significance of the question whether you're drinking again to your relationship with your partner raises the epistemic bar,⁶ so that the evidence they must have to be epistemically justified in believing that you're back drinking is stronger (perhaps much stronger) than the evidence that would suffice for them to justifiably believe, say, that you're back biting your fingernails (where the moral stakes, presumably are much lower).

We will not in this paper argue against all forms of moral encroachment⁷, and as is clear even just from the last paragraph, accepting moral encroachment can go at least some way towards accommodating the intuitions we started from, so it's important to see how doxastic wrongdoing goes further than (at least this kind of) moral encroachment⁸. First, in cases of doxastic wrongdoing (if there are any), the relevant wrong is, as noted above, directional. But the standard way of thinking of moral encroachment – certainly the way that ties it most closely to pragmatic encroachment⁹ – is not similarly directional. What the high (moral) stakes do is make it the case that more by way of evidential support is needed for (e.g.) justified or rational belief. This story is not directional. Second, if all the high moral stakes do is raise the needed evidential bar, then it's possible that the available evidence is good enough to clear even this higher bar. Perhaps, for instance, the evidence your partner needs in order to justifiably believe that you're back drinking is stronger than the evidence they need to justifiably believe that you're back biting your nails, but still, the available evidence may be strong enough even for that¹⁰. In such cases, a moral encroachment view may not fully accommodate the intuition we started with. A doxastic wrongdoing view may go further, insisting that *regardless* of the strength of the evidence, your partner ought not believe that you're back drinking (because they owe it to you not so to believe). For these reasons – and for others as well – we tend to agree with Bolinger (2020) when she says that moral encroachment (at least the more standard

⁵ Or trivalent, in case you think that withholding is a third attitude. For details, distinctions among different kinds of moral encroachment, and many references, see Bolinger (2020).

⁶ There are other mechanisms that can be posited to reach similar epistemic results. See, for instance, Lewis (1996, 555-6) subject-sensitive "Rule of Belief".

⁷ For some thoughts in this general direction, see Enoch and Spectre (2021) and Enoch (2016; 2017).

⁸ For discussion of the relation between the two, see Basu and Schroeder (2019), Bolinger (2020), and Basu (forthcoming).

⁹ For the claim that moral encroachment is a particular instance of pragmatic encroachment, see, for instance, Fritz, 2017; Worsnip (forthcoming). Fritz and Jackson (forthcoming) make a similar point restricted to just what they call moderate moral encroachment.

¹⁰ Unless, that is, there's room for an encroachment view that allows the stakes to raise the threshold all the way to infinity. We think there is room in logical space for such a view, but we're not sure how plausible it is or how well it coheres with the motivations underlying moral encroachment, and anyway, we don't know of anyone pursuing this kind of view.

Views according to which rationality or justification – as applied to beliefs – is factive can also accommodate the point in the text, by insisting that no false belief (like the belief that you're back drinking) can be justified or rational, whatever the evidence. See the debate between Williamson (2013) and Cohen and Comesaña's (2013). We find the thought that a justified or rational belief cannot be false highly implausible. Some of what we say below will also be relevant to this kind of view.

versions thereof) and doxastic wrongdoing are logically independent – neither entails the other. There will be more about the relation between doxastic wrongdoing and moral encroachment below. For now, though, this will do.

We are now better placed to be more specific and precise about what it is exactly that we'll be arguing for when we argue for the claim that there is no such thing as doxastic wrongdoing.

First, it is important for us to emphasize that we fully feel the force of the intuitions that push in the direction of recognizing doxastic wrongdoing¹¹. We agree with Basu and Schroeder (2019) that there's something commonsensical about such thoughts that beliefs can and do wrong people; that people do and should apologize for beliefs; that people do and should expect such apologies. In other words, we concede that if two theories are equally good in other terms, and only one of them accommodates doxastic wrongdoing, this is a reason to accept that theory rather than the one that doesn't. What we will be insisting on, however, is that other considerations make it the case that these intuitions – to the extent that they cannot be accounted for with deflationary explanations – should at the end of the day be discarded.

Second, by denying doxastic wrongdoing we do not deny, of course, that the host of actions and attitudes in the vicinity of beliefs – some of which mentioned above – may be governed by moral norms, and may therefore constitute wrongs. We agree that there may be circumstances in which one is morally required to make it the case that one is disposed to be less epistemically rational. We agree that the relation between epistemic rationality (more narrowly understood) and the good life is contingent – it's not a priori that being epistemically rational is always conducive to (or partly constitutive of) leading a good life¹². If virtue is constitutively tied to having a good life, this means that we are also willing to accept that the relation between virtue and epistemic rationality more narrowly understood is contingent¹³. We agree, of course, that moral norms – including directional ones – may govern actions in the vicinity of beliefs, such as duties to invest resources in finding more evidence, or to act as if one does or does not believe¹⁴. In fact, not only are all of these points compatible with denying doxastic moral doing – they are instrumental to arguing for this claim, because as much of the relevant literature notes, they offer at least partial alternative explanations of the relevant intuitive data. We return to this below.

Third, if you want to attribute wrongdoing to beliefs as shorthand for attributing wrongdoing to something in the vicinity of the belief – if you think that beliefs wrong *in virtue of* something else wronging – we have no objection to this way of speaking. If you want to say, for instance, that the wrongness of a failure to live up to one's evidence-gathering duties transmits to the formed belief and makes it wrong (and indeed, makes it the case that it wrongs the

¹¹ We presented the initial examples in the second-person because this emphasizes, we think, their intuitive appeal.

¹² In the opposite direction, we agree with Keller (2018) that on plausible conceptions of wellbeing, what others believe of you may constitutively contribute to your wellbeing.

¹³ Preston-Roedder (2018) puts forward such claims in terms of virtue, the good life, and epistemic irrationality, Arpaly and Brinkerhoff (2018) voice some relevant doubts.

¹⁴ A point emphasized in Enoch (2016). See also Bollinger (2020).

relevant person), we have no objection to this way of speaking. What we deny is that beliefs themselves can non-derivatively wrong, that beliefs can wrong no in virtue of something else wronging.

Fourth, our discussion does not challenge doxastic wrongdoing from the outside, as it were, by insisting on doxastic involuntarism and that such involuntarism entails that there is no doxastic wrongdoing¹⁵, or by giving very general reasons to believe that there can be no practical reasons for belief¹⁶. Rather, our discussion will be almost entirely more internal, engaging the proponents of doxastic wrongdoing on their own terms, showing that they cannot plausibly get what they want.

Lastly, our discussion will not, of course, be terminological. We will have little time for wondering whether some considerations merit the label “epistemic” or not.¹⁷ And for the most part we won’t even bother with the question whether a relevant consideration amounts to being a reason of the right kind or of the wrong kind for a belief (though there will be exceptions below). Surely, the discussion of doxastic wrongdoing is more interesting than *that*.

What *are* we insisting on, then, when we’re insisting that there’s no doxastic wrongdoing? Well, that there is a distinct, important, privileged mode of evaluation that applies to beliefs (and credences, and withholding of belief, and maybe inferences); that this mode of evaluation does not manifest the standard features of moral evaluation (re directionality, for instance, and the relation to rights and duties and apologies); that this mode of evaluation is indispensable from our theorizing about beliefs¹⁸; and that moral norms apply to beliefs, if at all, only derivatively¹⁹, in virtue of applying to other more practical things in the vicinity of the relevant beliefs.

2. Against Modest Doxastic Wrongdoing

It will be useful to distinguish between what we will call *modest* and *ambitious* doxastic wrongdoing views. Ambitious views accept – and modest ones do not – the possibility of a moral duty to believe contra to evidence²⁰. In other words, views that accept modest doxastic wrongdoing agree that beliefs can wrong, and furthermore that such wrongness can be directional, but they insist that whenever they do, they are also epistemically unjustified “ –Doxastic wrongs are all

¹⁵ See, for instance, the discussion in Basu and Schroeder (2019) and the references there.

¹⁶ See, for instance, Berker (2018, and the references in footnote 22), Arpaly and Brinkerhoff (2018, and the references in footnote 40).

¹⁷ But see Cohen (2016) for the importance of being clear that “epistemic” is a technical term and that being clear on what it refers to can be important.

¹⁸ Such an indispensability claim is central to Christensen (forthcoming). See also his comment on terminology in footnote 33.

¹⁹ Though not put in those terms, we believe that Nolfi (2018) at the end of the day defends only this kind of derivative wrongness for beliefs.

²⁰ Bolinger (2020) suggests that the hope to avoid such a conflict between moral and epistemic duties is a central motivation for moral encroachment. If she’s right about this, this means that the gap between ambitious doxastic wrongdoing and moral encroachment is even more significant than noted in the previous section.

epistemically impermissible” (Basu and Schroeder 2019)²¹. The more ambitious views allow for the possibility of an epistemically permissible, perhaps even epistemically required, doxastic wrong. They can allow, for instance, for a moral duty for your partner not to believe that you’re back drinking, *even if that belief is epistemically justified*. We discuss modest doxastic wrongdoing in this section, and ambitious doxastic wrongdoing in the next one²². We first focus on Basu and Schroeder’s (2019) modest view, and then generalize.

How do Basu and Schroeder, then, explain the fact that your partner is wronging you by believing that you’re back drinking? First, they accept moral encroachment, so that the high moral stakes make it the case that the evidence needed for your partner to be justified in having that belief is extra strong. Second, they think that your partner has a strong reason – grounded in the moral significance of your relationship – not to form that belief. Now, you may think that this kind of account allows for this moral reason – not to form a belief – to conflict with the epistemic duty to form this belief (if the evidence is sufficiently strong, perhaps strong enough to clear the higher bar in virtue of moral encroachment). But this, Basu and Schroeder insist, is not so. The moral reason not to form this belief is – so they say – a reason *of the right kind*²³ not to form a belief. Here they rely on claims defended by Schroeder in earlier work (e.g. 2012), according to which some reasons to withhold a belief – or not to form a belief – are not guilty of being reasons of the wrong kind. Schroeder believes, for instance, that the fact that more evidence is coming soon is a reason of the right kind not to form a belief right now. If the moral reason your partner has not to form the belief that you’re back drinking is a right-kind reason to withhold that belief, then the doxastic wrong (believing that you’re back drinking) is also epistemically impermissible. And, of course, if your partner commits this doxastic wrong, then given what makes it a wrong – say, something about your relationship – your partner is clearly wronging *you*. No wonder, then, that you expect an apology, precisely for the violation, that is, the belief.

A similar story can be told regarding the other leading example. The moral features of the case – the history of racial oppression, the wrongness of the economical and occupational inequalities race is still correlated with, the harms of racial stereotyping – raise the threshold for justified belief (that this person is a waiter, say, and not a guest). And all of these considerations also give a moral reason – of the right kind – not to form that belief. So forming that belief is both morally and epistemically wrong.

For the sake of argument, we are going to grant Basu and Schroeder all of the details here – the moral encroachment line, even the claims about the reasons to withhold beliefs here being

²¹ Gardiner (2018, 191-2) also accepts that “if there is a moral mistake there is also an epistemic mistake”. But she rejects moral encroachment (and also, presumably, doxastic wrongdoing), because, as she explains, on her view in such cases the moral mistake is grounded in the epistemic mistake, and not the other way around.

²² It would be natural to think also that on modest views, true beliefs never amount to a doxastic wrongdoing, whereas ambitious views leave room for true beliefs to amount to doxastic wrongdoing. But to derive this from the distinction as it is put in the text auxiliary premises will be needed.

²³ For general discussions of the wrong-kind-of-reasons problem, see, for instance, Rabinowicz and Rønnow-Rasmussen (2004) and Hieronymi (2005).

reasons of the right kind²⁴. Still, the modest view gives us much less than we are intuitively after.

Suppose that you come home smelling like red wine, and your partner – while falling short of believing that you’re back drinking, still proceeds to become much more confident that you’re back drinking. Suppose that before tonight, their credence that you’re back drinking was very low, around .1, but that now, smelling the wine, they’re about .8 confident that you’re off the wagon. How much better do you feel? Perhaps the situation is not *as* bad as in the case in which your partner believes that you’re back drinking, but it’s still pretty bad. You may, for instance, expect them to apologize even just for this significant change in credences²⁵. Indeed, it seems to us clear that the objection to the rise in credence is just the same objection (though perhaps somewhat attenuated in force) to the belief that you’re back drinking. So an adequate account of doxastic wrongdoing must accommodate this case as well. But it’s hard to see how Basu and Schroeder’s account can do that. It’s very hard to find support in the pragmatic and moral encroachment literature for encroachment *on credences*, and with good reason, it seems²⁶. So it doesn’t seem that the first part of Basu and Schroeder’s apparatus – moral encroachment – can help with the credence version of the case. Nor is it clear that the second part – the right-kind-reason not to form a belief at all – applies to the credence case. It’s not at all clear that a plausible case can be made for a right-kind-reason *not* to update credence in the face of probabilistically relevant evidence: It’s one thing to say that there’s a moral reason not to form a belief, quite another to say that there’s a moral reason to stay with a credence that fails to take into account relevant evidence²⁷.

Or suppose that your partner, while falling short of forming the belief that you’re back drinking, nevertheless forms the hedged belief that you’re *probably* back drinking. Again, the intuitive objection seems to be the same one as in the original case (won’t you expect an apology? If the guest at the social gathering only believes that you *probably* work for the caterer, is everything ok?)²⁸. But it is again not clear that Basu and Schroeder’s account can accommodate this: Given some plausible assumptions about the relation between credences regarding *p* and belief

²⁴ It is quite a lot that we’re granting here for the sake of argument. In particular, Schroeder’s account of the distinction between reasons of the right and of the wrong kind is far from obvious or uncontroversial. If it fails, Basu and Schroeder’s modest view falls along with it.

For the claim that what he calls radical moral encroachment lacks the resources to distinguish between the kind of moral considerations it declares epistemically relevant and paradigmatically wrong-kind reasons for belief, see Fritz (forthcoming).

²⁵ We here develop themes we initially discussed in Enoch and Spectre (2021). See also Fritz and Jackson (forthcoming), who develop in more details very similar themes. Their discussion is couched in terms of moral encroachment rather than doxastic wrongdoing, but the main point is the one we’re making here.

²⁶ For a similar characterization of the literature, and for many references, see Bolinger (2020), Worsnip (forthcoming) and Fritz and Jackson (forthcoming).

²⁷ In correspondence in a related context, Moss suggested that going for imprecise credences can be of use in some such cases. We are skeptical that imprecise credences can give the modest theorist all that she needs here.

²⁸ For similar points see Gardiner (2018, 179), Fritz and Jackson (forthcoming).

that probably p²⁹, the discussion from the previous paragraph applies.

Finally, note that you may want more from your partner than merely not to believe that you're back drinking. You may want them to positively believe that you're *not* back drinking³⁰. And if they don't, the phenomenology is again similar: You may be offended, you may seek an apology (for the failure to believe that you're not back drinking), and so on. Again, the intuitions underlying the thought that your partner is wronging you by failing to believe you're still strong are the very same intuitions underlying the initial thought, namely, that they're wronging you by believing that you're off the wagon³¹. But Basu and Schroeder's account cannot accommodate the intuitions in this case: the thought about right-kind reasons to withhold beliefs is clearly irrelevant, and while it's not entirely implausible to think that your partner has a moral reason to believe you're not back drinking (in virtue of the value of the relationship, say), it would be a huge stretch to declare *those* reasons of the right kind for that belief. In that case, all the weight is placed on the moral encroachment part of the view, but this gives rise to two problems. First, as noted above, it's not at all clear that moral encroachment can ground the full (purported) phenomenon of doxastic wrongdoing. For instance, directionality may be lost. Second, it's not clear that moral encroachment can work here either. Usually, moral encroachers think of the high stakes of believing falsely as raising the relevant epistemic threshold. Whether they are – or should be – willing to think of the high stakes of *failing to believe truly* as *lowering* the relevant epistemic threshold is highly controversial³². If there are powerful reasons not to go down that road, then, nothing about moral encroachment can save the thought that your partner owes it to you to believe that you're not back drinking (and indeed, maybe to believe *you*, a point we return to below).

Basu and Schroeder's modest view, then, can't accommodate cases in which what seems intuitively wrong is not just having the relevant belief, but also raising the relevant credence, having the hedged belief (that *probably* so-and-so), or failing to have some other belief. And while we don't have an argument clearly establishing that this result generalizes, this does seem like a plausible hypothesis at this stage. Because some of these other responses (the credence, the hedged belief, the absence of a belief) seem very well supported by the evidence, it's hard to see how any modest doxastic wrongdoing view – that asserts the impossibility of an epistemically

²⁹ Dorst (2019), Hawthorne, Rothschild, and Spectre (2016), Rothschild (2020). For the contrary view, see Moss (2019) and Williamson (forthcoming).

³⁰ There are structural similarities between the move in the text here and Worsnip's (forthcoming) version of a Pascal Wager case where what leads, if God exists, to eternal damnation is not failing to believe in Him, but positively believing that He doesn't exist.

³¹ If you're not convinced, suppose that your partner is "on the fence" regarding whether or not you're off the wagon, not in the sense of not having considered the issue, but in the more active sense of having thought about it and come down, as it were, equi-distant from a positive and a negative judgment here. Surely, the intuitions about the appropriateness of apology etc. at least carry over to this case, right? But Basu and Schroeder seem unable to accommodate this case either.

³² See Bolinger's (2020) distinction between robust and cautious moral encroachment, and the references there.

permissible doxastic wrong – can accommodate these other cases³³.

Now, merely not accommodating some cases need not be a fatal flaw in a theory, if it accommodates some other (central) cases. But the situation for modest views is more serious than mere incompleteness, for a reason we've been emphasizing throughout: The intuitive data is not just that your partner seems to be wronging you in all these cases (the credence case, the hedged belief case, the positive belief case). Rather, the intuitive data is that it's the same thing that's going on in all of these cases. So we seek a unified explanation for all of them. At the very least, a theory that offers a unified explanation of all these cases is much better for it. So the fact that Basu and Schroeder's explanation – and perhaps any other modest one – cannot be applied to these other cases is a strong reason to think that it's not the right thing to say even about the limited scope of cases to which it does apply.

Perhaps the way forward, then, is to go ambitious.

3. Against Ambitious Doxastic Wrongdoing

The more ambitious – and in a way, also more straightforward – way of accepting doxastic wrongdoing is by allowing for the possibility of conflict between what is epistemically required and what is morally required³⁴. Such a view can allow for the thought that your partner ought not to believe that you're off the wagon – that they owe it to you not so to believe – even if the evidence epistemically calls for such a belief. It will allow for the thought that, say, the moral duties of friendship sometimes require that friends be epistemically irrational (say, in responding to evidence that their friend has behaved shamefully)³⁵. Also, at least on the face of things, ambitious doxastic wrongdoing can apply – unlike its modest counterpart – to the cases of credences, hedged beliefs, and a purported requirement to believe (rather than just to avoid believing).

Still, we think that the ambitious view too ultimately fails. It has, we proceed to argue, problematic implications having to do with the moral-epistemological conflict, with a failure of transparency, and with self-defeat and contingency.

3.1. The Moral-Epistemological Conflict

³³ Paul and Morton (2018a) put forward a kind of modest doxastic wrongdoing view, though one focusing on beliefs about oneself. Paul and Morton (2018b) extend their account to the case of beliefs about others. The central role epistemic permissiveness plays in their account means that our objections in the text do not, as stated, apply to their view. In terms of their account, what our points in the text show is just how (implausibly) wide the permissiveness they are committed to is.

³⁴ Basu endorses ambitious doxastic wrongdoing in some – but not all – of her texts on the topic. See especially Basu (forthcoming). Marusic (2015) endorses an ambitious view, though somewhat restricted in scope to the special cases of beliefs about one's own future actions when one promises or resolves to act in some way, and the evidence shows it's unlikely that they will. We will be focusing on inter-personal cases, so we won't be discussing Marusic's view further. But the arguments we present against Basu-style doxastic wrongdoing apply, *mutatis mutandis*, to Marusic's as well.

³⁵ Stroud (2006) mentions this possibility, though she stops short of endorsing it. See also Keller (2003). These papers were written long before moral encroachment and doxastic wrongdoing became a thing, so the terms are somewhat different. But they clearly anticipate many of the moves in this literature since. Keller (2018) revisits these issues.

The first thing to note here, of course, is that accepting a conflict between moral and epistemic duties is already a cost. Perhaps at the end of the day – on the strength of other evidence – we’re going to have to live with this cost. But at the very least, when two theories are equally good in other terms, the one that does not invoke such a conflict should be preferred to the one that does. (Surely, it is not coincidence that some people friendly to doxastic wrongdoing try to avoid such conflict by going modest.)

More needs to be said here, because not all conflicts between norms are problematic in this way. We are accustomed to conflicts between *prima-facie* or *pro-tanto* duties, or to different values and reasons pulling in different directions. It is not a shortcoming in a theory that it allows for such conflicts. Also, we’re quite accustomed to conflicts between *systems* of norms: Perhaps, for instance, in some circumstances it’s legally required that I obey my officer’s order, and it’s morally required that I disobey³⁶. Or perhaps there are circumstances in which the rules of baseball require that the umpire call a runner safe, but some other norms require that the runner be declared out³⁷. But the case of the moral-epistemological conflict to which the ambitious view is committed seems importantly different from both of these mundane cases. Both moral and epistemic judgments seem to be all-things-considered-ish judgments. There may, of course, be conflicts of the first kind, between different *pro-tanto* moral duties, or between pieces of evidence pulling in opposite directions, within each of the two domains. But once all of those are factored in, both morality and epistemology seem to claim all-things-considered authority. So modeling the conflict between moral and epistemic norms on the conflict between *pro-tanto* duties or reasons or values does not seem promising. And what allows the second kind of conflict – between morality on one side, and the law or the rules of baseball on the other – is the fact that the law and baseball are (arguably) normative only in a minimal, institutional sense. In terms that are sometimes used in the literature, they are merely *formally*, not *robustly* normative³⁸. But both morality and epistemology are (arguably) robustly normative, they are

³⁶ On some jurisprudential theories, this is not possible. So much the worse, we think, for those theories. For some relevant discussion, see Enoch (2011).

³⁷ “It’s fair to say my umpiring beginnings were modest. My first game was a Little League contest; I was on the bases. And my first call of any consequence I got wrong on purpose. The team at bat had scored a dozen or so runs in the third inning, largely because the first baseman had dropped three perfectly good throws, and with the score something like 20-1, the poor kid finally held on to one. The runner, however, had beaten the throw by a stride and a half. I did my job. ‘He’s out’ I bellowed. The reactions were interesting... My partner, one of the league’s regular umpires, stared daggers of disgust in my direction and didn’t talk to me for the rest of the game... Afterward, the coach of the winning team came over and shook my hand and winked at me. ‘Nice job on that call,’ he said.” Weber (2009, 113-4). We thank Mitch Berman for help in finding this reference.

³⁸ See McPherson (2011), Enoch (2019) for the distinction in the text. Parfit (2011) calls formal normativity “normativity in the rule implying sense” and robust normativity “normativity in the reason implying sense”.

Formal normativity has to do with criteria of correctness. Pretty much any system of rules can generate formal normativity – like the rules of games, even silly games no one has a reason to play (“From now on, all sentences must have a prime number of words.”). One can recognize that the rules of such a silly game are formally normative without in any way endorsing them or the game. And it’s no criticism of someone’s actions that they violate those rules – unless, that is, that person

genuinely reason-giving or reason-stating, they are not institutional. Again, then, this model won't save the ambitious theorist from the costs involved in accepting a moral-epistemological conflict.

Of course, what we just said about these two models of mundane conflict may be contested, so that perhaps they can help the ambitious theorist after all. Or perhaps there are also other models of acceptable conflicts between norms, models that more closely resemble what the ambitious theorist wants to defend. So we don't pretend the argument here is conclusive. Still, the ambitious theorist at least owes us more details, and seems to be paying a price in plausibility here.

3.2. Transparency³⁹

Suppose you are the friend from Stroud's (2006) example⁴⁰. Suppose you are conscientious and reflective, so you reflect not just on whether or not your friend behaved shamefully, but also on whether or not you should believe that they did. What story should you be telling yourself? The point we want to highlight here is that it's going to be *very* hard to tell yourself the story that the ambitious theory says is true here. Try thinking "Well, clearly the evidence shows that they behaved shamefully, and epistemically this is what I should believe. Still, I refuse to do so, on moral grounds." It's not clear that this is even a possible thought for you to think – it gives a feel of incoherence, perhaps of the kind involved in (some versions of) Moore's paradox. And the following is even worse, indeed quite clearly Mooreanly incoherent: "Well, I believe they didn't act shamefully, but my evidence clearly says I'm mistaken."⁴¹ So on an ambitious account, it's going to be very hard – perhaps impossible – to both believe as one morally ought,

has a reason to play that game. Robust normativity is different: It's not just a matter of criteria of correctness, but roughly, the kind of correctness conditions that merit our allegiance, and furthermore that their meriting our allegiance does not depend on our wanting or having a prior, independent reason to engage the relevant "game".

³⁹ A terminological clarification: The term transparency is sometimes used to pick out a general property of beliefs – namely, roughly, that when one asks oneself whether one should believe *p*, one immediately asks oneself whether *p*. Sometimes, this kind of transparency is invoked in arguments for evidentialism or against any practical reasons for belief. See, for instance, Shah (2006). Our use of the term "transparency" is more restricted – as we proceed to explain in the text, it applies specifically to the question whether the relevant believer can coherently believe the ambitious doxastic wrongdoing story.

⁴⁰ Of course, friendships come in different shapes and forms, and this applies to their (purported) epistemic significance as well. We don't think that friends are in general required to believe their friends, or to resist evidence of their wrongdoing. What we're going along with Stroud about is that there are some friendship cases that intuitively fit her characterization, not that all are.

⁴¹ A related problem: Suppose your partner is a philosopher. If they say "Look, the evidence clearly supports the belief that you're back drinking, and epistemically this is what I should believe. But because of the value of our relationship I believe that you're not back drinking.", are you happy? Won't you be expecting an apology for the first part of this statement (and belief)?

See also the discussion of wishes and what it is we really want when we want our loved ones not to believe of us, below in section 5.

and to be fully reflective (and correct) about the epistemic and moral status of one's belief⁴². Notice that the problems gets worse still if the ambitious theorist wants to accommodate the points about credences from the previous section. Depending on the details of the view, the ambitious theorist may find herself committed to such clearly Moorean judgments as "My evidence requires that I be confident they behaved shamefully, but I insist on being confident they did not."

This too is not a conclusive objection, because the ambitious theorist may reject transparency as a desideratum here. The ambitious theorist may, in other words, accept the result that believing as one morally ought to requires not being fully reflective (and correct) about the nature of what one is doing. And we want to concede that this is a possible move. But if this is the only way an ambitious theorist can avoid Moorean incoherence, the stakes have certainly been raised.

Now, it's not as if the friend from Stroud's example *has* to be incoherent. Perhaps they should be understood not as believing or attempting to believe directly for moral reasons, but rather as responding to the friendship-related moral reasons in other ways. Perhaps, for instance, they can – and are morally required to – leave the room when someone starts speaking ill of their friend. Perhaps they can even try to make themselves less epistemically rational (by conditioning themselves to uncritically believe whatever their friends tell them). Such indirect measures may, of course, be governed by moral considerations⁴³, and agents may respond to them in a fully transparent, reflective way, without any incoherence (Moorean or otherwise). But even if a belief that results from a violation of such moral considerations amounts to a wrong, it does so in a merely derivative way, and so does not give the ambitious theorist what she wants.

3.3. Self-Defeat and Contingency

In a telling moment in her (forthcoming), Rima Basu engages a criticism from Jennifer Saul. Saul (2018) argues that accepting conflicts between the epistemic and the moral (and so, in our terms, accepting ambitious doxastic wrongdoing) is counterproductive politically, because (perhaps among other things) it plays into the hands of unfair criticisms of political correctness⁴⁴. Suppose that Saul is factually right in her warning. Still, a natural reply, we would have thought, would be to insist on the *reality* of ambitious doxastic wrongdoing, on the *truth* of the thesis that it is real, on the strength of the *arguments and evidence* for this thesis. Even if it is politically counterproductive to believe a thesis, it seems natural to respond to Saul, this is no (right-kind) reason at all not to believe it (it may be a reason not to shout the thesis from the

⁴² On some views of the distinction between right-kind and wrong-kind reasons, this alone may show that the moral reasons for belief are not of the right kind. Joseph Raz (2009) suggests (using somewhat different terminology) that what is characteristic of right-kind reasons to phi is that it's possible to phi for those reasons. The transparency failure in the text here shows, it seems, that one cannot believe for the moral reasons. (One can, of course, indirectly respond to such reasons, as is the case with wrong-kind reasons in general, a point we return to in the text.)

⁴³ A point emphasized in Enoch (2016).

⁴⁴ See also Gardiner (2018, 187, fn 37).

rooftops, or even not to publish the papers arguing for it, but this is different, of course). Yet Basu does not respond in this way. Instead, Basu claims that Saul's warning is exaggerated, that the danger she sees is not real.

It's no coincidence, of course, that Basu avoids the natural response. Given her endorsement of ambitious doxastic wrongdoing, she cannot consistently respond in that way. True, that accepting doxastic wrongdoing is counterproductive politically (if it is) is not *evidence* that doxastic wrongdoing isn't real. But it may still be a moral reason to believe it isn't real, and this, on this view, may be enough. In other words, accepting ambitious doxastic wrongdoing turns out to be contingently self-defeating. If Saul is factually right in her warning – clearly a contingent matter – then Basu's own ambitious theory entails that we should not (all things considered) believe her theory. While this falls short of logical self-defeat (the theory entails not its falsity but rather that it shouldn't be believed), it is still an unwelcome result.

Of course, Basu may insist – as she does – that Saul's contingent warning is not actually true. In that case, her theory does not defeat itself in the actual world (at least not as far as Saul's warning is concerned). But it remains self-defeating in fairly close worlds, and this seems bad enough. Basu may proceed to bite the bullet, conceding that her theory shouldn't be believed in those worlds, and indeed, that it remains open whether it should be believed in the actual world – this depends on other possible consequences of believing this theory, as well as on other (not consequences-based) moral characteristics of so believing. But this makes the answer to the question whether we should accept Basu's theory (according to Basu's theory itself!) highly contingent, and furthermore contingent on what seem to be the wrong things.

This concludes, then, our direct argument against doxastic wrongdoing: Theories supporting doxastic wrongdoing are either modest or ambitious, and there are strong reasons to reject each of these two options. But this leaves the initial cases – where it does seem like your partner wrongs you by believing that you're back drinking, and that the guest wrongs you by believing that you work for the caterer (based on your race) – unaccounted for. We are committed to rejecting these intuitions, for the reasons in this section and the previous one. Given the strength of those intuitions, though, a debunking explanation is called for. It is to this that we now turn.

4. Debunking the Underlying Intuitions: Statistical Generalizations

We start with cases based on statistical generalizations, because those seem easier to explain. The reason for this, at a first approximation, is that probabilistic reasoning is tricky⁴⁵.

Distinguish the following propositions:

- (i) Almost all guests here are white. Almost all employees here are non-white.
- (ii) For an arbitrarily picked non-white here, it's unlikely that they are a guest.
- (iii) *This* person (pointing at you, a non-white) is unlikely to be a guest.

⁴⁵ Similar lines of criticism are developed in Gardiner (2018), Begby (2018), and Osborne (forthcoming). See Basu (2019) for attempts at rejecting accounts of statistical generalizations cases that avoid a commitment to doxastic wrongdoing.

(iv) *This person (pointing at you, a non-white) is not a guest.*

Now, we're going to be *assuming* the truth of (i). Furthermore, we're going to assume that there need be nothing problematic in believing (i), when the evidence clearly indicates its truth, and that such a belief may very well amount to certainty or (common) knowledge. (If convincing is needed – think of those who may be committed to changing this situation. They must first believe that the situation calls for change, precisely because of the fact captured in (i)⁴⁶.) As for (ii): At least on one reading of “arbitrarily” and “unlikely”, (ii) trivially follows from (i). Thus read, then, there's no problem either with (ii)'s truth or with justifiably believing (and indeed knowing) it⁴⁷. The crucial thing for our purposes is to see how even on these assumptions – and even restricting ourselves to purist, traditionally epistemological considerations – it is very hard to justify a belief in (iv), or even in (iii).

In order to move from (ii) to (iii), what is needed is the thought that you are a typical member of the relevant reference class, or that you have been chosen not merely arbitrarily, but randomly. But it is usually very hard to establish such a claim, and very easy to challenge it⁴⁸. The mere absence of information indicating *a*-typicality falls far short of establishing typicality.⁴⁹ And the belief that you *are* a typical member of the relevant reference class typically does very poorly in terms of *stability* or *resilience* – it is hyper-sensitive to possibly incoming countervailing evidence⁵⁰. What this means is that it is going to be very hard to justify – in traditional, purely epistemic terms – a belief such as (iii), even assuming (i) and (ii)⁵¹. And even assuming a justified belief in (iii), the inference to (iv) is anything but trivial, and will often be unjustified (again, even on a traditional, purely epistemic conception of justification). One clear way of seeing that the move from (i) to (iv) is epistemically problematic – wherever exactly the problem occurs between (i) and (iv) – is to notice that it doesn't seem to transmit knowledge (even when (iv) is true), as the literature on lottery paradoxes and on statistical evidence makes rather clear⁵².

⁴⁶ A consideration emphasized by Gardiner (2018, 182).

⁴⁷ There may be a different reading of (ii) that renders the transition from (ii) to (iii) close to trivial. But on such a reading, the transition from (i) to (ii) is anything but trivial.

⁴⁸ Even an initially random procedure fails to guarantee randomness. Think of telephone polling where 500 numbers were randomly selected from a database. Still, in many cases the responses will not have been chosen randomly – say, depending on the time of day in which calls are made (and who is more likely to pick up at that time), who has more than one number in the database, and so on.

⁴⁹ There are well known problems with unrestricted versions of a principle of indifference of the kind needed for no evidence of *a*-typicality to suffice as evidence here.

For some puzzles having to do with this epistemological phenomenon see Karlander and Spectre (2010) and references there (e.g. the “Two Boys” problem).

⁵⁰ For discussion in a relevant context, see Bolinger (forthcoming). See James Joyce (2005) and references there as well as Leitgeb (2017).

⁵¹ This is an important result, seeing that believing (iii) – or its cousin “This person is probably not a guest” – is already arguably offensive.

⁵² Further conditions may also be needed for a justified transition from (ii) to (iii) and (iv). Perhaps,

What this means is that in order to explain why beliefs like (iii) and (iv) are problematic, there's no need to go further than good, old-fashioned purist epistemology. Basu (2019) sometimes writes as if the more traditional, morality-free epistemology doesn't have the resources to reach such a conclusion, but she may have this impression because of a failure to clearly distinguish between (i) and maybe (ii) – on which purist epistemology may look favorably but which are not intuitively problematic either, and (iii) and (iv) – which *are* intuitively problematic, but which are (often) condemned by purist epistemology as well⁵³.

Still, this may not be enough to fully explain (even debunkingly) the intuitions about the case. For these intuitions seem to indicate that beliefs such as (iii) and (iv) are *morally* problematic, not (or not merely) epistemically problematic, and furthermore, in a directional way.

What gives rise to the strong feeling that there's something morally (and not merely epistemically) problematic about such beliefs is, we want to suggest, the racist attitudes that often partly explain the relevant epistemic failure. Why is it, it is natural to ask, that the guest was so quick to take it for granted that you're a typical member of the class of non-whites here? Why is it this feature – rather than many others – that was so salient to him or her? Why didn't they invest more time and attention into getting more information? Often, what explains all of this are some racist attitudes – even if somewhat subtle or implicit – that the guest has. Their sensitivity to some kinds of evidence and less to others may be explained by being disposed to believe, say, in a way that justifies, or anyway takes for granted, racially biased division of labor. Such attitudes, of course, *are* morally problematic. And the fact that the guest comes to believe as they do *in virtue of* such morally objectionable attitudes explains why the belief itself seems immoral⁵⁴.

Which leaves directionality. What explains the strong intuition that when the guest infers that you work for the caterer from your being non-white, they are not just inferring and

for instance, it's also necessary that the reference class be projectable. We seem to take such inferences more seriously when the relevant class seems projectable, or to capture something of significance (say, about the chances of the obese to suffer from serious CoVid-19 symptoms) than when they seem random (say, about the chances of people born on weekends to suffer such symptoms).

⁵³ In other examples (though less so in the example based on Gendler's Cosmos Club) yet another type of judgment is relevant. Consider, for instance, "Ashkenazi Jews are poor tippers" Enoch and Spectre (2021); Basu (2019) discusses the judgment that blacks are poor tippers). This is a generic statement, and it's not at all clear how best to understand generics, or – consequently – what is needed to justify them inferentially. Because what is said in the text suffices to show how epistemically problematic (iii) and (iv) will usually be, we think we can avoid discussing here the further complications introduced by generics. Note, though, that for many of the cases of racist (and similar) generalizations, the case of generics is going to be highly relevant, and the epistemic problems with justifying generics will then be able to accommodate at least to an extent the problematic nature of those beliefs.

For discussions of generics in our context, see Begby (2018).

⁵⁴ What about cases – surely possible – where the epistemic mistakes highlighted in the text occur without the causal influence of the moral failures in the text? In those cases, we submit, the thought that there's something morally problematic about the relevant beliefs loses much of its intuitive force.

believing problematically, but also wronging *you*?⁵⁵ We want to offer here two related points. First, the duties in the vicinity of belief may be straightforwardly directional. Thus, in Stroud's example, it seems clear that a friend may owe it *to his friend* to listen to him, to invest resources in coming up with exonerating explanations, indeed to leave the room when people start reporting the friend's shameful behavior. The same seems true, suitably qualified, for the case of statistical generalizations. Perhaps the guest owes it *to you* not to stop their evidence-gathering too soon. In such cases, if a violation occurs, it's not the believing itself that is a directional wrong. But it's close – something epistemic leading up to (and maybe also following) the belief is, and this explains, at least in part, the tendency to see the belief itself as not only wrong, but also wronging *you*.⁵⁶ Second, and relatedly, even if the problematic nature of the belief itself is not directional, still its potential harm may affect some more than others. Thus, while epistemic failures (say, proceeding uncritically from (ii) to (iii)) are not directional, the belief reached in this epistemically indefensible way may be more harmful, or more potentially harmful, for you – a non-white guest – than for others: It may humiliate you, or embarrass you, or diminish you.⁵⁷ If so, even though the belief itself doesn't wrong you (because there's no such thing as doxastic wrongdoing), still something close is going on – the belief harms you, and is (independently) unjustified.⁵⁸ And the two points in this paragraph are related because if a negligently formed belief is expected to harm someone specific, the believer may owe it especially to them to conduct their epistemic affairs in a more careful way.

Now, had we offered these explanations as an attempt to fully vindicate the intuitions about doxastic wrongdoing, they would not have sufficed. But it is not in this spirit that we offer them, for there is no such thing as doxastic wrongdoing, as we've argued. We offer these as explanations of why it is that we seem to have – to the extent that we do – the doxastic wrongdoing intuitions.⁵⁹ And with this in mind, the explanations in this section pull enough weight, we submit: They save something close to the phenomenon of doxastic wrongdoing, and explain why we seem to have the intuitions that want more, in a way that takes away these intuitions' probative value.

⁵⁵ For the record, we're not sure that in cases of beliefs based on statistical generalizations it's as clear that the relevant duties are directional as it is in cases of interpersonal relations (which we proceed to discuss in the next section).

⁵⁶ And following our promise in section 1, if you want to describe this situation in terms of the belief being directionally wrong in virtue of something else being directionally wrong, we won't fight you over these words.

⁵⁷ Schroeder (forthcoming) talks in terms of diminishing in order to motivate thoughts of moral encroachment and (modest) doxastic wrongdoing. We reject doxastic wrongdoing, of course, but we can still accept Schroeder's normative intuition here, and accommodate it in the way in the text, without endorsing doxastic wrongdoing (or his interpretative account of persons).

⁵⁸ At one point Basu (forthcoming) seems to conflate the question whether something wrongs you with the question whether something harms you: "It seems odd to say that no moral wrong is done, after all, people have died."

⁵⁹ Some of Osborne's (forthcoming) points are close to the ones in this section (we don't endorse, though, his expressivist notion of regard). But note that he thinks his explanations suffice to fully explain and vindicate the doxastic wrongdoing intuitions. We offer them in the more modest spirit described in the text.

5. Debunking the Underlying Intuitions: Interpersonal Relationships⁶⁰

But the case of interpersonal relationships and their epistemic significance runs deeper, it seems. This is because within the context of interpersonal relationships, denying doxastic wrongdoing introduces a disturbing mismatch between what (if anything) is problematic in the interaction, and some of our deepest relevant concerns.

To see this, think again about Stroud's example of friendship and epistemic partiality: Your friend may, of course, want you not to act on a belief that he has acted shamefully. But even if no such action is relevant, it may very well be deeply important to him that you not *have* that belief – just like it's important for you that your partner not believe that you're back drinking. So the thought that in the relevant case there's nothing morally wrong with the belief itself creates a mismatch between moral norms and what we care most deeply about⁶¹.

At the end of the day we insist that this is a result we're just going to have to live with. What we do in the rest of the section is to show how this result is less troubling than may have been thought. We do this, first, by showing how a deeper phenomenological characterization of the concerns here may lead to questioning their coherence, and second, by commenting on the relation between believing something *of* the relevant person and believing *them*.

Return, then, to the friend from Stroud's example: Damning evidence about his shameful behavior starts to accumulate, and it seems that he can quite sensibly care not just about what you do about it, but also about what you believe of him. But: what *exactly* does he care most about here? Suppose you avoid believing that he behaved shamefully by ignoring all the evidence. Is he likely to be satisfied? In some cases, of course. But in more typical cases, we think, a negative answer is much more plausible⁶². In more typical cases, he seems to want more: He seems to want that you believe well of him *based on the evidence*. We can even imagine him saying something along these lines: "I don't want you to just ignore the evidence out of loyalty. What I really want is for you to have a hard look at the evidence, and then see that I did not act shamefully!" At least in cases in which he did not in fact act shamefully⁶³ (and knows as much), he is unlikely to be satisfied with you ignoring the evidence. This is a phenomenological point, so play along: What would you have wanted your friend to do and believe had the false suspicion of shameful behavior been about you? Would you have been satisfied with them ignoring the evidence?⁶⁴

⁶⁰ This section draws rather heavily on Enoch (2016) "What's Wrong with Paternalism: Autonomy, Belief, and Action", 40-43.

⁶¹ This is a consideration emphasized by Marusic and White (2018). What we proceed to say in the text, we think, can be seen as a reply to them as well.

⁶² For related ideas see Kawall (2013, 358 and on).

⁶³ In cases in which the suspicions is true, the point in the text may not hold. Then again, in those cases, it's not clear that the intuitions about doxastic wrongdoing are present either. See Moss's (2018) related distinction between the costs of belief (applying whatever the belief's truth value) and the risks of belief (applying only if the belief is false).

⁶⁴ The point in the text here is not just phenomenologically loyal. It is also a matter of charitable interpretation. Reading the friend's concern (that their friend not believe they behaved shamefully)

As a phenomenological characterization, then, this seems rather robust. But at this point it's not clear how this concern can be made rational: If your friend wants you to believe well of him *based on the evidence*, then a part of what he wants is that *the evidence support* the belief that he did not act shamefully. And while it makes sense to have an attitude of this kind, this attitude is not one that is directly about you and your friendship, or even about your belief, nor is it clear that it is a practical attitude – a serious desire or preference – at all. Rather, at this point it looks like a *mere wish* – the practically irrelevant relative of a desire or a practical concern.

A comparison may help. Many people deeply want to be found attractive by others (or by some specific others). If they are not, this may be deeply disappointing for them, it may have considerable effects on their wellbeing, and so on. And notice that this is not just about actions. It's not just that people may want others to behave as if they are attracted to them – though they may want that as well. Many people care deeply about others *being attracted* to them, independently (to an extent) of implications to actions. But this doesn't mean that there's any moral flaw in not being attracted to them⁶⁵. And while it makes perfect sense for them to *wish* things would have been otherwise, this is all it would be – a mere wish, not a serious desire or preference or practical concern⁶⁶.

In this case, then, what we most care about is divorced from what amounts to a moral wrong, and this seems entirely acceptable⁶⁷. Perhaps this is so at least partly because the relevant care or concern is a mere wish. We want to suggest that something similar is going on in the case of purported doxastic wrongdoing (at least in the personal relationship examples): True, what you care about, perhaps more than other things, is that your partner not believe that you're back drinking. But this is consistent with them not wronging you by so believing (when the evidence supports that belief), perhaps partly because your caring here amounts to a mere wish – wishing that the evidence didn't indicate that you're back drinking, so that your partner could – consistently with the evidence – continue believing that you're still strong.

The analogy between the different cases is not perfect, of course. One important difference is that in the case of your partner's belief – and maybe also in Stroud's friend case – an apology may be called for if the relevant belief is nonetheless formed. Not so in the attractiveness case

as insensitive to the question whether the evidence supports this belief presents that concern in a less favorable light than the reading in the text.

⁶⁵ There may be moral flaws in the vicinity, analogously to the moral flaws in the vicinity of beliefs. Perhaps, for instance, sometimes there's something wrong about not even allowing oneself the opportunity to be attracted to someone (say, on morally objectionable grounds). But this is different.

⁶⁶ There may be more practical desires – not mere wishes – to be found more attractive in the future, and such desires may motivate action (say, to work on one's sense of humor). But if someone I care in this way about doesn't now find me attractive, the wish that she did is a mere wish.

⁶⁷ Another example: Perhaps I speak to you (or in some other way act towards you) in a way that discloses absence of warmth that was once there. Perhaps my action, for whatever reason, is wrong. But perhaps what you regret most about it is that we are no longer as close as we once were. Surely, though, this can't be what makes my action wrong. And indeed, at this point, your relevant concern looks like a mere wish (though perhaps an intensive one) – the wish that we hadn't drifted apart.

(“I’m sorry, I’m just not attracted to you” is not exactly an apology, of course)⁶⁸. We do not belittle this difference. This is why we think of the explanation here offered not as a vindicating account of the intuitions underlying thoughts about doxastic wrongdoing, but rather as a debunking explanation of sorts.

There is another concern that seems to be doing important work in personal relationships examples of (purported) doxastic wrongdoing. We’ve been emphasizing that the phenomenologically more credible concern, the one that is seen in a more rationally favorable light, is the wish that the friend or partner believe well of me *on the evidence*, not ignoring it. But there are cases – perhaps the one we started with is one – where this is not the full picture. Perhaps, having told your partner that you’re not back drinking again, what you want and expect them to do is not just to believe that you’re not back drinking, but to believe *you*⁶⁹, to believe that you’re not back drinking *simply on your say-so*. Perhaps you even think that they owe it to you to take your word for it, ignoring all other evidence.

Whether this description – phenomenologically accurate though it is – can be made sense of depends on deeper issues we cannot get into here, like the epistemology of testimony, whether there is sense to be made of requests to believe, and more⁷⁰. Some of the complications discussed throughout this paper may resurface: What, for instance, if inductive evidence suggests that your testimony on such things is far from reliable? Should your partner trust you *against the evidence* of your unreliability? And what if all the evidence including your fairly reliable testimony, considered together, still supports the belief that you’ve fallen off the wagon again. Are you then entitled to an apology?⁷¹ Furthermore, to an extent this story can be accommodated without accepting doxastic wrongdoing – perhaps, for instance, the requirement to be believed is at least partly about your partner not continuing to seek further evidence after you spoke up, and a moral requirement not to seek more evidence is consistent with denying doxastic wrongdoing – it doesn’t place the wrongdoing *in the belief itself*. We also want to note that this story – in terms of believing the relevant person – can certainly not account for all of the cases that seem to exemplify doxastic wrongdoing. In many of those, the question of believing the person doesn’t even arise. So the answers to the questions about believing the person, while both interesting and relevant, cannot be the full story here.

6. Politics, and the Epistemological Tradition: Conclusion

Doxastic wrongdoing must be either modest (insisting that any morally unacceptable belief is

⁶⁸ Basu (forthcoming) emphasizes the role of beliefs in partly constituting our relationships with others as an explanation of how it is that beliefs can wrong. Note, though, that how attractive we find each other also plays an important role in partly constituting our relationships with others. But no one wrongs another by failing to be attracted to them. So Basu’s explanation here fails.

⁶⁹ This takes center stage for Marusic and White (2018). We do not, however, accept their Strawsonian understanding of this and related phenomena.

⁷⁰ For testimony, see, for instance, Adler (2012). For requests to believe, see McMyler (2015).

⁷¹ Notice that the relevant question here is whether you are entitled to an apology now, not whether you can expect one in the future, when more evidence is in. Seeing that we often see an asymmetry between real-time and retroactive knowledge-attributions (think of “I knew my team would lose!”, when knowing that they’re going to lose would be strongly denied), this is not the same thing.

also epistemically impermissible) or ambitious (accepting the possibility of morally wrong yet epistemically permissible or even required beliefs). Both alternatives face serious, perhaps insurmountable problems. And the cases that serve to motivate thoughts about doxastic wrongdoing can to a large extent be otherwise explained. We conclude, then, that beliefs do not in themselves wrong, that there is no such thing as doxastic wrongdoing. So your partner does not wrong you when they believe you're back drinking.

This is counterintuitive, but with the following points in mind, not *too* counterintuitive (given the problems with doxastic wrongdoing): While your partner doesn't owe you not to believe that you're back drinking, they may have a host of duties in the vicinity (like the duty to hear your out, to seek some evidence, not to continue seeking for evidence after you've denied, and so on). They may owe it to you not to be epistemically negligent. And while the wish that they believe otherwise (on the evidence) makes perfect sense, it is a mere wish that things were otherwise. The belief itself does not wrong you, but it may harm you, and other things in the belief's vicinity may wrong you. This means that in some contexts there need be nothing problematic about putting things in terms of the belief wronging you, in virtue of something else wronging you. Beliefs do not in themselves wrong you, and whatever is wrong with the belief is traceable to more purely epistemic problems (failures in the response to evidence, most clearly) and moral failures in the vicinity of the belief.

And so, we find ourselves on the side of the epistemological tradition⁷². Beliefs are governed by epistemic considerations. Though for anything said here epistemology may be morally encroached on, still beliefs do not wrong. On this matter, no revolution is called for.

The literature on doxastic wrongdoing and on moral encroachment often gives the feeling that it is politically motivated: That, say, there's no way of fully understanding racism and accounting for its wrongness without deserting the more purist epistemological tradition. But this is not so, we think. There is a rich menu of other ways to understand – consistently with denying doxastic wrongdoing – what is going on with morally suspicious beliefs, and we've mentioned several in previous sections. Whether accepting doxastic wrongdoing helps with some important social struggles is, of course, an interesting (and empirical) question, one about which we do not have a view⁷³. Even if there are moral advantages to accepting doxastic wrongdoing, though, this is not a reason – certainly not of the right kind – to believe that it is real. That, after all, is precisely the point.

⁷² As characterized by those rejecting it. See Basu and Schroeder (2019).

⁷³ Though recall Saul's warning (discussed in section 3.3 above), which we would advise not to set aside too quickly.

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